Occultism in Robertson Davies’s *The Deptford Trilogy*

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Abstract

Through an examination of Robertson Davies’s *The Deptford Trilogy*, this thesis analyses the influence of the international Theosophical movement (with close attention to the Toronto Theosophical Society) and psychoanalysis to the moral world presented in these three Davies novels. Chapter One outlines the context of nineteenth-century Western belief in Theosophy, the most powerful occult movement in the world at the time, with special attention to Toronto as the center for Theosophy in Canada. Chapter Two looks at the occult influence of psychoanalysis, specifically Freud’s uncanny, in *Fifth Business*, Jung’s theory of individuation in *The Manticore* and Davies’s growing understanding of Gnosticism in *World of Wonders*. This second chapter is supported with reference to Davies’s personal library, now housed at the W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library at Queen’s University. I conclude by arguing, with evidence from the novels, that Davies was aware of and influenced by the teachings of the Theosophical Society, which along with his study of Jung, brought him into sympathy with modern Gnosticism. I present evidence that Davies placed numerous hidden references to occult themes within *The Deptford Trilogy* for the enlightened reader to discover, and that these references offer a new perspective on Davies analysis not yet part of the critical record.
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To my dear husband, Michael I credit a charmed life that makes the good times so much fun and all the hard work endurable.
Wisdom begins in wonder.
Socrates

The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.
Eden Phillpotts

Yes, the master is magic, the master is wonder,
Take a look at the mask he is still hiding under,
Now you see, now you don’t, is the single condition,
But only the magic unMASKs the magician.
Robert Finch
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Robertson Davies’s *The Deptford Trilogy* was published over five years, premiering with *Fifth Business* in 1970, *The Manticore* in 1972, and finally *World of Wonders* in 1975. Early criticism of the novels focuses on Davies’s conservative writing style; that is, a style that affirms the values of the past, and is seen to be similar to that of the nineteenth-century novelists Davies loved. Robert Cluett’s 1977 digital humanities project utilizes computer-assisted textual analysis to compare Davies’s works to those of a number of nineteenth-century novelists and asserts that the results prove Davies’s writing was in the “Tory mode” (13). As well as Davies’s lexical choice of “Anglicanisms” associated with an earlier age, Cluett also finds evidence of a general conservatism in the syntax, which locates Davies with other Balliol College-educated authors such as Sir Harold Nicolson (1886-1968). These sympathies and his affinity for the comic are reflected in Davies’s library, which includes works by P.G. Wodehouse, William Makepeace Thackeray, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Charles Dickens and Ben Jonson.

John Irving (1995) memorializes Davies as “the greatest comic novelist in the English language since Charles Dickens” (90). However, Davies’s satirical quality is seen alternately as both a strength and weakness by other critics. While some find Davies’s satire liberating, Joyce Carol Oates (1978) believes his parody of colonial and parochial Canadian attitudes serves to entrench Canadian stereotypes. Oates dismisses Davies’s work as “possibly the very last image in Canada's collective dream of an older English tradition: a Floating Head whose allegiance is with the Queen (that is, the one who died in 1901), a symbol of all that younger Canadian writers and artists have been struggling to accommodate or repudiate, or transcend or forget” (Oates 22). While fellow Canadian John Kenneth Galbraith (1991) locates Davies amongst “the very best
work of this century” (41), Davies’s conservative style, it can safely be said, is not everyone’s
cup of tea.

The type of literary criticism most frequently applied to his trilogy is psychological
type, with several writers focusing on Davies’s method of assimilating his characters’ layers of
consciousness in order to achieve peak psychic integration. Gordon Roper (1972) views
Davies’s writing as heavily influenced by Jungian theory and speaks of Dunstan Ramsay’s
journey in Fifth Business as being “at once an inner and outer one” (35) in which he must
reconcile himself with his Jungian shadow. He credits Davies’s use of Jungian archetypes as
providing the book with “an authority arising from a brilliant performance and from a wisdom
that is old and forever new” (39). Wilfred Cude (1977) traces Ramsay’s search for meaning and
notes the persistence of spiritualism within the West’s most materialistic concepts, admiring how
“Davies with wonderful clarity sees the beauty of a human striving heroically for the good” (50).
Samuel Macey (1980) notes that it is through clockwork and romance that Paul Dempster as
Magnus Eisengrim is able to come to terms with both "the diabolism of time" and his own
diabolism (35). Paul Davy (1977) compares the structure of The Deptford Trilogy to Richard
Strauss’s tone poem Heldenleben wherein the hero is able to transcend his “time-ridden state”
and become a “subject” of life rather than its object (125). John Dean (1978) argues that
Davies’s location of his trilogy in a historical time “is actually a firm narrative frame ironically
used to bind the internal illogicalities” of the plot (68). However, Dean goes on to say that
despite making these contortions work, Davies “can be nostalgically tedious or over-indulgent
with his own intellectual gamesmanship” (68).

Patricia Monk’s Smaller Infinity: the Jungian Self in the Novels of Robertson Davies
(1982) is characterized by Melvin Friedman as “the best book written about Davies’s work” (56).
Monk asserts that Davies "stands revealed as the supreme artist, the naked magician who fascinates us with his sheer skill" (181). Surveying Davies’s work from Tempest-Tost (1951) to World of Wonders (1975), Monk argues that while Davies might once have been able to rely on broad recognition of the language of faith and mythology, these systems are increasingly in need of decoding. Emphasizing Davies’s debt to Jung, she argues that he has learned in World of Wonders to place the Jungian myth among other elements in a complex brew of myth and legend. Monk focuses on Davies’s concern for “how the individual self is crucial to the map of humanity” (184); this is the “smaller infinity” referred to in the title of her work. Despite Monk’s painstaking research, she does not integrate the work of Roper, whose article anticipates her explication of Davies’s Jungian framework.

Monk follows up Smaller Infinities with Mud and Magic Shows: Robertson Davies’s “Fifth Business” (1992). Her careful analysis of the complex book argues that its central concept is Davies’s dualistic worldview in which the quotidian and the mythic are entwined. Monk is primarily concerned with how Davies’s characters function in both of these worlds: as participants in a moral and Canadian landscape, but within a Jungian context. Monk, like many of her contemporaries, stresses the psychological aspects over the literary. She identifies three areas of Jung’s psychological theory addressed in Davies’s novels: the role of the analyst, dream interpretation, and the theory of functions. However, she also finds that some events conflict with traditional Jungian psychology: "My contention is that Davies, far from committing himself to Jungian theory in the novel [The Manticore], in fact reveals a profound ambivalence about its value” (Monk, “Psychology and Myth” 1977). W. J. Keith (1978) responds by suggesting that Liesl Vitzliputzli functions as a shadow, not as a contradiction to Jungian theory as Monk had
proposed. Keith’s greatest praise for Davies is his belief that Davies is successful in being “both profound and extremely funny at the same time” (*The Manticore* n. p.).

Carole Gerson (1977) asserts that “Christian, Jungian, and Freudian elements all converge in a complex pattern of anality, diabolism, misogyny, sexual repression, and guilt which constitutes a subtext for Dunstan Ramsay’s autobiography” and carefully unscrambles these religious and psychological themes (100). In contrast, Linda Lamont-Stewart (1991) simply sees Davies as conservative, elitist and sexist (291). This assertion remains largely unchallenged until Marlene Goldman (2009) upsets the notion by affirming that Davies presents a much more nuanced view of “hysterical women” and “sheds light on the lesser-known form of male hysteria” in the figures of Ramsay and Eisengrim who secure their mental health by “performance of heterosexuality” (991).

W.F. Hall (1971) sees the strength of *Fifth Business* in the “projection of Ramsay’s self and in a number of other characters . . . all of whom inhabit psychically . . . the border areas between the real and the marvellous” (80). However, Hall identifies a major weakness in “the pattern of incident and action”; “they appear arbitrary and unconvincing” as real events (81). Hall ultimately finds Davies unable to sustain the marvellous as an aspect of the real. Nancy Bailey (1984) concurs, concluding that *Fifth Business* is a failed attempt at individuation. Bailey does not believe that Ramsay proves himself more self-aware or more enlightened than the character of Percy Boyd ‘Boy’ Staunton, but “remains in the same darkness of illusion” (38). Dennis Duffy (1988) is perhaps the most perplexed of Davies’s critics, asking “How can *Fifth Business* hold, on one hand, a view of truth so relative and so inextricably bound up in praxis, and on the other, usher readers into a chamber filled with Jungian archetypes visible only to the elite?” (10). Duffy poses an unanswered question, to which I can only offer an answer relying on
the themes within the trilogy: the multiplicity of truths and troubled certainties. I intend to show that through experience and reflection, Davies’s characters discover their way into the chamber where their relevant Jungian archetypes reveal themselves as spectres to those able to divine their presence. I believe that Davies’s interest in the occult leads him to this seeming contradiction. Despite these criticisms there is general agreement that *Fifth Business* is the most successful book of the trilogy (Morley 51, Baxter 112).

Many reviews of *The Manticore* focus on David Staunton’s Jungian analysis, allusions to Biblical Absalom-ism (in which an errant son rebels against the kingdom built by his father) and hero worship, but also on myths and archetypes (French 15, Morgan 20). Critics diverge on the style of the novel, with William French (1972) finding it “tedious”, and John Ayre (1972) describing the “protagonist’s [David] habit of patching together unrelated anecdotes and personalities from his memory that are only occasionally bound together in symbolic terms by his psychiatrist” as confusing, stating that “As a result, little of the magic and mystery of *Fifth Business* comes through” (50). In stark contrast, William Morgan (1972) exalts *The Manticore* as “compelling, exciting and moving”, and applauds the “great poetry and power attached to the myths and archetypes of Jung’s method” (20). Where Ayre finds implausible plot occurrences, Brian Moore (1972) praises Davies for his “Dickensian coincidences” and names him custodian of “the old Novel House” (8).

*World of Wonders* is reviewed with the same ambivalence as *The Manticore* and Davies’s earlier novels. Michael Taylor (1977) describes the novel as demonstrating malevolent exuberance and flashy rhetoric “worthy of Jonson” but afflicted with “an unseemly, self-satisfaction” (123). French (1975) criticizes the cohesiveness and logic in Davies’s prose, declaring that “some of the parts don’t fit, and that the mechanism sometimes seems out of
whack” (34). However, other reviewers find that Davies brings the trilogy to a “triumphant and controversial conclusion” (Keith, “World of Wonders” 1976).

The first collection of essays, *Studies in Robertson Davies’s Deptford Trilogy* (1980), edited by Robert Lawrence and Samuel Macey, compares the trilogy with Davies’s earlier works and concludes with a close consideration of the trilogy itself. In their essays, Terry Goldie stresses the folkloric background of the trilogy, Peter Brigg unearths the use of the law and archaeological knowledge in *The Manticore*, and Robert G. Lawrence considers the use of Canadian theatrical history in *World of Wonders*. While these three essays may be seen as presenting a plaudit to Davies, David Monaghan’s essay censures Davies for failing to integrate the private and public parts of Ramsay’s life. He points to Davies’s claim that Ramsay experiences “deep delight and such an aftermath of healing tenderness” after making love to Liesl, suspecting that this cannot be the same man who immorally stands by at the ruinous meeting of Boy Staunton and Magnus Eisengrim (47).

By 1977, Stephen Bonnycastle found the time ripe to re-examine *Fifth Business* and its “cultural value” (20). He locates the “roots of its power . . . in moral concerns”, and states that it is exciting partly because “it seems to give access to a new world of the spirit” (20). He argues that previous criticism was unquestioning in its acceptance of Ramsay as an unambiguously moral character, challenging critics who proposed Ramsay as “a model of conduct for Canadians” (20). Bonnycastle tackles four moral problems in the trilogy: first, that despite Davies’s seeming endorsement of “relational identity” as conceived by Alfred North Whitehead, the relationships between characters suggest absolute identities; second, that although Ramsay is presented as an admirable scholar and teacher, some details suggest he is not; and third, that the characters’ attitude to awe is always precious, whereas Bonnycastle sees it as dependent on the
source of inspiration and the state of mind of the inspired. Finally, he disputes the many statements “exalting feelings over thinking,” which he calls misleading or even harmful. Bonnycastle’s greatest condemnation comes where he finds that *The Deptford Trilogy* “promotes a fierce aristocracy of the spirit” and sets itself against liberal education: “This is why the books suggest that real education is a matter of rising into a tiny elite which possess great authority and power” (38). Bonnycastle asserts that from a stylistic point of view Davies’s penchant for monologue, lectures and drama reflects his elitism and preference for having an audience over having a partner in dialogue. He proposes that Davies diminishes the “dialectical processes of an evolving world” (39) with language and form that is haughty soliloquy.

Bonnycastle was prescient in identifying Davies’s moral position, a post Davies acknowledged and defended in 1989:

> I was once accused by the chaplain of Massey College of being a gnostic. He was very angry with me indeed. But part of being gnostic was using your head if you wanted to achieve salvation or even a tolerable life . . . I think that civilization - life - has a different place for the intelligent people who try to pull us a little further out of the primal ooze than it has for the boobs who just trot along behind, dragging on the wheels. This sort of opinion has won me the reputation of being an elitist. Behold an elitist. *(Paris Review)*

Bonnycastle anticipates my concern with the occult in the form of Davies’s interest in Theosophy as modern Gnosticism. I will extend Bonnycastle’s argument that the moral world in this trilogy is a fierce aristocracy of the spiritual taken to the limits of the knowable.

Dave Little (1996) addresses the complications of Davies’s portrayal of evil (and its comic resolution) and the relationship between the theological devil and the Jungian shadow, as
well as the spiritual elitism and subjectivism of Davies’s Jungian/Gnostic doctrine of salvation. Little also answers Davies’s feminist critics by pointing to his inclusion of the Christian Virgin Mary, Catholic female saints, Gnostic Sophia, and Jungian Anima. Little is perhaps too forgiving on this last point, as none of these examples supplies a believable portrait of a corporeal woman.

Judith Skelton Grant's *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth* (1995) is essential reading for those who wish to understand Davies and his place in Canadian cultural history and literature. Grant reveals a piece of hidden knowledge in the naming of the first book of the trilogy, where the narrator claims that ‘fifth business’ was an old theatrical term identifying a character who was essential to the plot's resolution but was not a hero, heroine, villain or confidante. According to Grant, the term was actually an invention that Davies used to destabilize the certainty of fact and fiction. This is but one of many ‘Easter eggs’ or inside jokes Davies hides in the text. Undoubtedly Davies was pedantic and elitist, but also a keen observer of people, and his vision provided him with material for his acclaimed wit. Grant, with Davies’s co-operation, provides a full record of his career with many new insights into Davies’s legacy as a great Canadian author; yet, Davies, aware of the elusive nature of biography, ruefully said of her book: “It’s an excellent biography of someone else” (Lowenthal 145).

With the passage of time and distance from his celebrity it was fitting that Davies be reconsidered again. Camille La Bossière and Linda M. Morra edited a volume in the *Reappraisals: Canadian Writers* series in which the proceedings of the University of Ottawa’s annual literary conference were chosen for publication. The result, *Robertson Davies: A Mingling of Contrarieties* (2001), is one of the first discussions devoted to Davies’s work since his death in 1995. *Mingling of Contrarieties* considers disguise, irony and paradox not only in Davies’s works, but also in his persona. Mark Silverberg’s essay considers the topic of Jungian
doubling in the content and structure of World of Wonders and argues that doubling is a key conceptual point of entry into the trilogy as a whole. Michael Peterman’s essay recalls the Davies “phenomenon” describing a man who was both dazzling and desirous of control over his image. Peterman remembers Davies as “genial and gracious” (15), but also demanding “appropriate attention or due homage” (18) and likely to succumb to mean spiritedness when it was not paid.

In a special issue of the University of Toronto Quarterly, Russell Morton Brown and Donna Bennett present eight papers, Robertson Davies Reconsidered (2009), originating in a Massey College symposium called “Reconsiderations of Robertson Davies.” The 2006 conference met ten years after Davies’s death to reassess the writer and gain new perspectives on his work. Brian Johnson’s essay begins by recalling some of Oates’s most damning comments and asserting that “almost thirty years later, this scathing assessment of Davies’s relevance appears to describe the fortunes of Davies scholarship as well, for in a disciplinary context conditioned by the lessons of post-colonial analysis, to study Davies is to risk appearing reactionary, or at least quaint…” (1012). Johnson aims to situate Davies’s contemporary relevance in terms he calls “Canadian post-colonialism’s ‘gothic turn.’” Johnson proposes a mode of literary study and cultural analysis that interrogates myths of national unity by viewing Canada as an uncanny nation whose theoretical borders are haunted by its original tyrannies and ongoing miseries. While Johnson focuses mainly on Davies’s High Spirits, he does claim that Ramsay’s mockery of Canadian pragmatism and spiritual narrowness exemplifies a Eurocentric post-nationalism that rejects the more traditional discourse of Canadian nationhood (as imagined by Northrop Frye in “Where is here?”) in favor of private Jungian mythology in relentless pursuit of the supernatural (1014). Johnson cites one of Davies’s short stories, ‘The Great Queen Is Amused,’ in which Aleister Crowley’s book of spells is used to conjure up the ghosts of Sara
Jeannette Duncan, Susanna Moodie, Ralph Connor, and Nellie McClung in the stacks of the Massey College library, all of whom materialize ‘stark naked’ and float absurdly about the room. Davies calls on the Queen (“the one who died in 1901,” recalling Oates) to quiet the rebellious spirits, an act Johnson characterizes as “a symbolic act of imaginatively reasserting British cultural authority over Canadian literary production” (1019). It is also, I think, a symbolic act in which the Anglo-Saxon monarchy is summoned as the only qualified authority able to exert a higher dominion over the occult and keep wayward ghosts from frightening mere mortals in public spaces. Deference, decorum, and dignity win the day where Robertson Davies is the master.

This thesis reconsiders *The Deptford Trilogy: Fifth Business, The Manticore* and *World of Wonders*, a set of novels as varied in scope as Davies’s interests, in light of the W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library’s acquisition of the personal library of Davies. Davies’s previously unstudied library points to his sources of inspiration which explore the nature of good and evil, action and consequence, truth and illusion, myth, and magic. Davies’s personal library offers valuable proof of the influence of occultism as he wrote *The Deptford Trilogy*. Davies’s marginalia show how his careers as journalist, playwright, critic and professor equipped him with the mind of an objective, rigorous skeptic who could nevertheless appreciate the mystery and possibility of the occult.

This thesis considers *The Deptford Trilogy* with an eye to two specific aspects of the occult that influenced Davies. Chapter Two discusses Theosophy and Davies’s interest in portraying occult practice in *The Deptford Trilogy* as a means by which exceptional characters reach the divine, while Chapter Three considers psychoanalytic approaches to these novels via Sigmund Freud in *Fifth Business*, Carl Gustav Jung in *The Manticore*, and Gnostic principles in
the conclusion, *World of Wonders*. Wherever practical I have used Davies’s own copies of the books I am quoting, and this is indicated in the parenthetical reference with an asterisk (*) after the page number. I have not used this system when quoting from books in the Davies Library where I have used my own working copies of the books, including *The Deptford Trilogy*, and the complete works of Jung and Freud, to allow the handling and underscoring which facilitates research. On the Works Consulted page you will find a separate list indicating the books held in the Davies Library consulted for this thesis.
Chapter 2: Theosophy

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Madam Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), an eccentric Russian of noble parentage who immigrated to America after extensive travels in the East. She was an autodidact who had read broadly from her grandfather’s library, including works of the ancient Gnostic, Hindu and Buddhist religions, and of the English novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton\(^1\). Theosophy is a belief system that holds that wisdom and contact with the divine are available through intuition.\(^2\) The basic tenets of the Theosophical Society are: “to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color; to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; and to investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity” (B. Campbell 78). While the first two of these clauses suggest little more than a benevolent book club, the last clause suggests a focus on the occult, magic, and the uncanny. In addition to these objectives, Theosophy identified certain laws of nature, evil and karma, which will be discussed later in describing Davies’s use of occult philosophy.

Bulwer Lytton is best remembered for his novels *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story*, each featuring characters capable of controlling others using telepathy. While thought control is not uncommon in Romantic literature, according to Washington, Bulwer Lytton “weaves these themes into a dense tapestry of learned allusion to occult and philosophical traditions, providing them with an air of authority which is not entirely spurious” (38). Blavatsky was to share

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1 Peter Washington, unlike most academic writers, sees the Bulwer Lytton connection as part of Blavatsky’s eccentricity, not as proof of her charlatanism. Most other writers are typically Theosophists and show deference to Blavatsky as a genuine spiritual leader.

2 Theosophy is used here to mean the nineteenth-century movement, distinct from its ancient origins; the word theosophy (“divine wisdom”) was first used in writing during the third century by the Alexandrian Neo-Platonic philosophers.
Lytton’s literary legacy by traversing the ridiculous and the sublime. There is no record to say if it was a dark and stormy night, but in 1875 Blavatsky joined American newspaperman Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Irish lawyer William Quan Judge (1851-1896) to found the Theosophical Society in New York City. Blavatsky and Olcott moved into rooms where she kept a large, stuffed, formally dressed, spectacle-wearing baboon that carried a lecture on Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* under its arm. This mascot signified that Theosophy offered its followers a spirituality that rejected the Darwinian idea of evolution of man from animal but instead offered an evolution of the spirit over the course of centuries leading to ever higher forms of mystical perfection. Fortunately for her followers, Blavatsky was in contact with these perfected forms and willing to act as the conduit for their wisdom. Theosophy, as Blavatsky synthesized it, was a Gnostic-derived religion that took increasing influence from its Indian home base and from Blavatsky’s eccentric personality.

To her critics, Blavatsky is the most influential fraud of the modern esoteric movement and a sham medium given to proving her spiritual authenticity with self-made miracles. Her success in producing marvels was often matched by her doubters’ success in disproving them. Possibly because of this censure, Olcott and Blavatsky left New York for Bombay three years after the Theosophical Society's founding, arriving there in 1879. Blavatsky was well received in India for her ability to materialize objects and communicate with the great spiritual teachers or Adepts.³ Her years in India were unquestionably profitable, and she established ties to political movements in India, Ceylon and Ireland that were campaigning for independence from their colonial rulers. This compound interest in spirituality and national independence helped cement Theosophy’s appeal amongst many in the artistic classes of these countries and increased its lure.

³ Robert Carroll writes that Blavatsky had faked a materialization of a teacup and saucer as well as written the letters received from her Masters.
for Canadians, like Davies, who wished to establish a strong national identity while maintaining international interests. In India, Blavatsky’s popularity again proved her weakness when two of her closest confidants at the Theosophical headquarters threatened to publish letters that would “reveal that the Blavatsky phenomena were the trumped-up tricks of a performing magician” (Smith 1006).

This combination of success and scandal no doubt brought Blavatsky to the attention of the London-based Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The Society’s mandate was to investigate psychic phenomena without bias but with a scientific mind. Its membership, over its long history, included Charles Dodgson, W. B. Yeats, C. G. Jung, William James, Arthur James Balfour and Arthur Conan Doyle (Gauld 147). An investigation of Blavatsky by one SPR staff member resulted in an 1885 report labeling her an impostor. Although the report was later shown by another member of the SPR to have been prejudiced and Blavatsky to have been unjustly condemned, the damage was done (Harrison 9). Blavatsky departed India for good, and returned to London where she spent the last years of her life explaining her beliefs in The Secret Doctrine (1888). While one might imagine that a chastened Blavatsky languished in exile in London, instead she found wealthy patrons plus many eager readers and admirers of The Secret Doctrine, a multivolume work that Irish poet George Russell (A.E.) in a millennial mood called “the most exciting book in a century” (Smith 1004).

The Secret Doctrine is a magnum opus on Theosophy, covering cosmic and human evolution, as well as science, religion, and mythology. For our purposes here in relation to The Deptford Trilogy, the most important chapters are those on cyclic evolution and karma. Blavatsky explains the Theosophical Society’s understanding of karma as an “effect-producing
cause.” She crescendos into bombastic use of all capitals when she warns: “It is the unerring LAW OF RETRIBUTION” (451):

> Those who believe in Karma have to believe in *destiny* which, from birth to death, every man is weaving thread by thread around himself, as a spider does his cobweb; and this destiny is guided either by a heavenly voice of the invisible *prototype* outside of us, or by our more intimate astral, an inner man, who is but too often the evil genius of the embodied entity called man … When the last strand is woven, man is himself completely under the empire of this *self-made* destiny. It then either fixes him like the inert shell against the immovable rock, or carries him away like a feather in a whirlwind raised by his own actions, and this is -- KARMA. (453)

Blavatsky condenses her theory of self-made destiny, the struggle between man’s better external guide and worse inner self, and man’s complete lack of agency in the face of the divine law of retribution into one paragraph of text. These are three concerns Davies will address using Boy Staunton, Dunstan Ramsay, and Magnus Eisengrim in *The Deptford Trilogy*.

Blavatsky’s expulsion from the Theosophical Society’s central base in Adyar, India, required her to pass its administrative duties to Annie Besant (1847-1933). Besant, often referred to by her followers as “supreme mother,” was a British activist with many careers. She was at various points in her life an Anglican, atheist, socialist, educator, reformer, women’s rights activist, writer and promotional agent of a messiah. During her executive term as the second president of the Theosophical Society (1907-1933), Besant was a popular lecturer who drew large audiences and was able to popularize Theosophical concepts by summarizing Blavatsky into less obscure language, so much so that some journalists reviewed her lectures as “milk for
babies” (Stead 266). Besant believed artists and writers would be our contact with the divine spirit who would speak for us at the cosmic United Nations, where the word God wrote over the cradle of every nation would be spoken to all humanity (Besant *Ancient Wisdom* 45). Under Besant’s leadership, Theosophy’s reach continued to expand with 45,100 members worldwide by 1929.

In 1908, shortly after becoming President of the Theosophical Society, Besant and her colleague in psychic investigations, Charles W. Leadbeater (1854-1934), began lecturing on the imminent appearance of the Master, or World Teacher, who was said to hold the office of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is a Buddhist term for an enlightened one who will bring benefit to others through self-sacrifice. Leadbeater claimed that his clairvoyant powers enabled him to recognize young Jiddu Krishnamurti’s potential for spiritual greatness when he observed the boy's aura as he played on the beach near the Theosophical Society estate in Adyar. Where some saw a “dreamy, motherless boy” (Roe 149), Leadbeater and Besant saw the World-Teacher. Besant adopted the twelve-year-old boy against his father’s wishes, and she and Leadbeater smuggled him out of India to England where he was educated to be the World-Teacher or the second coming of Christ. Leadbeater, however, would complicate matters by aggrandizing his claims to clairvoyance and by engaging in chronic pedophilia. Although he was eventually removed from his seat of power in Adyar as a result of a scandal in Chicago involving his masturbation before boys, he soon quietly returned to administrative duties and was sheltered by Besant until her death in 1933, all despite his acknowledged sexual relationship with Jiddu Krishnamurti.

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4 Krishnamurti would famously reject the Theosophical Society in his adulthood, releasing his followers and encouraging all who followed him to think and know for themselves.
The Leadbeater affair is important in our consideration of *The Deptford Trilogy* as it reflects the larger issues of Victorian social sexual mores regarding sodomy, homosexuality, spirituality and the abuse of vulnerable boys, suggesting how Davies came to regard Gnosticism as a true path to enlightenment and Theosophy as new-age charlatanism. Leadbeater’s biography is difficult to establish, because like so many Theosophists, he was given to self-mythologizing; consequently, establishing fact from fiction has proven difficult for historians. What is known is that he had a “life-long fascination with ritualism, spiritualism, elitism, and adolescents” (Washington qtd. in McCann 34). So much so, that even fellow occultist Aleister Crowley, vigorously establishing himself as the “wickedest man in the world,”⁵ called Leadbeater out as a “senile sex maniac” bent on “claiming his catamite as a Coming Christ” (qtd. in Dixon 109). Thus Leadbeater, and by association Theosophy, became tainted by what German psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing would call, in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a ‘religious mania’ manifest as perversion of sexuality (7). Nevertheless in Davies’s well-notated copy of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, he chides such “men of science” for their “ignorant” views of religion and sexuality (underscored, 63*).

The Leadbeater affair resulted in a weakened Theosophical Society and renewed interest in Gnosticism amongst an influential London literary set (Goodrick-Clarke 24). Some within the Theosophical Society saw homosexual activity as part of human reincarnation, with each soul experiencing male and female incarnations in alternating life cycles, while others could not abide homosexuality. Joy Dixon frames this dynamic and its repercussions, quoting G.R.S. Mead who argued against the influence of “effete” elements within Theosophy and for the fundamental necessity of heterosexual union, as “the high Mysteries have to do chiefly with the Mystery of

⁵ *John Bull Magazine* 1923.
Regeneration” (qtd. in Dixon 107). In 1909, this estrangement led to the Theosophical Society and Mead parting ways, with Mead taking a sizable portion of the English lodges with him to the newly formed Quest Society, which identified closely with Gnosticism but without the dogma or carnal blemish of the Theosophical Society (Goodrick-Clarke 20).

The Toronto Theosophical Society (TTS) was chartered in Canada in 1891 and owed much of its success to the fact that it was sheltered from attack due to the prominence of its members amongst Toronto’s wealthiest families. Theosophists presented a sustained critique of secularism, while offering an alternative elitist cosmology that did not require the denouncing of the Protestant religions that were the birthright of so many prominent Toronto families. The Leadbeater sex scandal and other disagreements over the direction of the international Theosophical movement led to a “Back to Blavatsky” movement spearheaded by Albert Smythe, who took exception to the growing cult of personality around Krishnamurti.⁶

Smythe was a newspaper editor who had met William Quan Judge, president of the American Theosophical Society, by chance on a cross-Atlantic voyage in 1884. The meeting with Judge began Smythe’s lifelong devotion to Theosophy and the spread amongst Canada’s creative and social elite of interest in Eastern philosophy in an age of disillusionment with Victorian rationality, Darwinian theories of evolution and Western materialism. “From a divinely directed cosmos, the world became an automated, directed machine,” Stephan Hoeller asserts; “anthropomorphism was replaced by mechanomorphism” (211). Instead Theosophists turned to karma, reincarnation and self-redemption as the central concerns of the TTS. Less is written about the TTS members’ interest in the tarot, alchemy, astrology, black magic, and necromancy.

⁶ Albert Smythe is the father of Conn Smythe, gravel pit owner, soldier, builder of Maple Leaf Gardens, and owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs from 1927 – 1961.
While Gillian McCann’s *Vanguard of a New Age* offers a rare and welcome academic consideration of this cultural milieu in Toronto during the zenith of the Theosophical movement, it neglects these more exotic elements of Theosophical practice in an attempt to showcase the considerable contribution of Canadian Theosophists to a cultural legacy of a forward-thinking and internationally engaged Canada.

Although membership in the Toronto Lodge reached only 844 at its peak in 1922, what it lacked in numbers it made up for in sheer influence on Canadian culture. Amongst its followers were Lawren Harris and Arthur Lismer, art critic Frederick Housser, and theatrical visionary Roy Mitchell. Mitchell and Harris founded the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto (ALC) in 1908 to provide “a retreat from the humdrum of a growing metropolis in an everyday mélange of all the arts” (Bridle 10*). Davies was a member of the Arts and Letters Club from 1951 until his death in 1995 (James). He owned Bridle’s history of the club and wrote in it: “The spirit of the club was as he describes it, but its pseudo-Bohemianism could be embarrassing. Nevertheless, it was an oasis in the cultural desert of early 19th [sic] cent. Toronto” (title page). The ALC fostered a community which would go on to found lending libraries, the Group of Seven, and, with the financial backing of future Governor General Vincent Massey, Hart House at the University of Toronto. Other members of the TTS included Sir Edward Walker, responsible for creation of the Royal Ontario Museum, and A.H. Robson, art director at the Art Gallery of Ontario. It was through the camaraderie of these artists that a new appreciation grew for Canadian art that valued the native land but was informed by world philosophy.

Whatever else the TTS was or became, it clearly contributed to a distinctly Canadian cultural scene in Ontario. In the words of exiled American anarchist Emma Goldman, who lectured at the Toronto Theosophical Hall during the years of her expulsion: “Both Catholic and
Anglican churches hold the city by the throat and mold the habits and opinions of the people of Toronto” (McCann 92). Religion in *The Deptford Trilogy* represents a repressive, persecuting force that stifles individual freedom and achievement.

A history of the serious interests of the TTS members can be found in the published notices of lectures offered at the Theosophical Hall. *The Globe and Mail* and the Society announced lectures on Walt Whitman delivered by Albert Smythe, on Dionysius by Roy Mitchell, and on free will by George Kinman (McCann 158). Theosophy attracted many Torontonians interested in modern Canadian life through their shared interest in literature. The Whitman Club of Bon Echo, founded in 1916 by Theosophists Flora MacDonald Dennison and Albert Smythe, considered Whitman a “spiritual prophet of the ‘new age.’” McCann explains: “One of the reasons for Whitman’s appeal was his continentalism, and confident espousal of a separate identity for the New World, one equal to yet different from that of Europe” (80). This affirmation of the New World encouraged Housser to propose a break with the rigidity of European art and to embrace a Canadian sense of art that focused on the present and future that would make the world anew. This movement within the TTS had a liberating effect on Canadian artists and writers.

Where Blavatsky filled the void left by materialism and Darwinism with Eastern philosophy, Besant and Leadbeater created artwork attempting to illustrate what the human aura looked like to the clairvoyant eye. These works were published in *Thoughtforms* (1901), and they can be aligned with the Symbolist movement whose members took inspiration from the freedom of its forms. Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky were lifelong promoters of Theosophical ideals and were mystical painters from whom Lawren Harris took inspiration for his Canadian landscapes. Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald and Arthur Lismer all embraced a
patriotism that demanded change. Harris lamented that his fellow Canadian artists still imitated the ways of Old World artists, saying “They did not think of the arts as a living creative force in the lives of the people” (qtd. in McCann 81). Fellow Group of Seven member and TTS supporter Arthur Lismer expanded on the proper role of the creative mind: “the artist is making us nationally conscious with our environment setting a stage for true nationality” (qtd. in McCann 81).

While Canadian art is part of a greater global environment, faithful to universal truths, it is distinctly its own, formed from the native landscape and confident of its message expressed in our native geography. McCann points to “Revelation of Art in Canada,” in which Harris asserts that a sense of inferiority had hindered the development of a distinct Canadian art form and insists that art had to have “its roots in the very soil” of a people and in “their emotional and imaginative life” (qtd. in McCann 81). McCann further quotes Harris imagining a northern soul that he credits with imbuing genuine Canadian art with a quality that reflects the northern landscape while expressing timeless archetypes:

> It seems that the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow . . . and we Canadians being closest to this source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our Southern fellows — an art more spacious, of a greater living quiet, perhaps of a more certain conviction of eternal values (qtd. in McCann 167).

McCann describes the prevailing disposition in southern Ontario: “This belief that artists were vital to the larger culture was no doubt a potent corrective for those living in southern Ontario in the early part of the twentieth century, where the overarching ethos was utilitarian and pioneer” (84). The appeal of Theosophy to Canadian, Irish and Indian Theosophists is in part credited to its support for a separate political identity from their British forefathers, and the conviction that
artists were spiritual leaders. Not coincidentally some of the greatest artists and writers of each country were attracted to Theosophy from 1885 - 1930.

The Theosophical Society acknowledged the value and legitimacy of all nations and spiritual traditions, which made it attractive for artists who recognized universal truths and wanted to express them in the unique language of their homelands. According to Larisey, “Harris saw art as the link between the world of vision and ecstasy and the development by Canadians of their culture” (59). The artist, at best, is the conduit for the creative spirit, and the audience, at best, desires to commune with that spirit. Theosophy promoted the notion of the artist as a fearless transcendental being, while lesser mortals vicariously experience his or her divinity. Each of the novels proposes that the role of the artist is to make wonder available to the rest of us. Ramsay experiences awe in saints and miracles, then makes a living writing about them; Dr. von Haller (then Liesl) reveals wonder in dreams and myth; Eisengrim the Magician creates wonder in spectacle. I will return in the next chapter to the notion of the artist as conduit for personal and collective unconscious that Davies developed while at Oxford through his exposure to the writings of Jung.

Larisey quotes Harris’s obituary of Sir Edmund Walker, in which Harris praises Walker’s patronage of the Group of Seven and rebukes opposition to artists and their patrons as originating from “the well-nigh ineradicable notion” of Canadians “that nothing worthwhile” could be created in Canada. The artist and his patron believe “it is spiritual suicide to import designs and works in lieu of creating them ourselves and to import individuals to succeed for us where we

7 There can be made a compelling case that rebellion of sons against fathers is a strong theme throughout this essay: on a political scale, and also between Jung and Freud; Houdini and Robert-Houdin; Paul and Reverend Dempster; David and Boy Staunton.
should succeed for ourselves” (Harris qtd. in Larisey 60). Although an international movement, Theosophy is tightly entwined with nationalism and promotion of the artist as medium.

The Theosophical Society’s understanding of karma and evil link *The Deptford Trilogy* and gnostic beliefs. Karma’s centrality to the Theosophical movement is evident in Annie Besant’s *Karma* (1897), in which she proposed that this natural law affects individuals and nations and is the immutable edict that determines all other laws. Evil was: “that which prevents a living creature from completing its life-cycle, from passing through the normal processes of gestation, growth, maturity, and old age. On a deeper level, it cuts the creature off from enjoying the unbounded fullness of life which all living things desire and which lies behind their need to eat, rest, mate, and play” (qtd. in Ellwood 145). The nature of evil and karma are essential to understanding the occult philosophy within *Fifth Business, The Manticore* and *World of Wonders*. Karma is the law governing the snowball thrown by Staunton that, in turn, results in Mrs. Dempster’s madness and Paul Dempster’s uncanniness. Ramsay knows this concept by a different name in another language: Highland Scots, the people who settled the fictional Deptford, Ontario, would say “dree his weird” (*World of Wonders* 308), which translates to ‘submit to his fate’ in English. The universality of this concept supports the Theosophist’s claim of similarities amongst all world religions and commonalities amongst all people.

Furthermore, Ramsay’s belief in supernatural causality and the power of the stone to enact karma fuses him to the stone and to the other two boys involved. This return of the repressed, thought to disrupt the restrictive doctrine of rationalism, mirrors the nature of the novel itself. Davies presents an essentially Freudian style return of the uncanny in reaction to Deptford’s over-reliance on Scotch Protestant rationalism. Throughout the trilogy Ramsay carries this dynamic with him in the symbolic form of the rock, representing Deptford itself
despite his worldly wanderings. While he may want to escape his home, he carries the stone like a paradoxical talisman representing both the rational hometown and his irrational belief in the magic or karmic powers of the object.

By contrast Paul’s desire to flee his uncanny home makes running off with a sadistic sodomizer comparably better. Milo Papple “abject-ifies” the Dempster home as the “bughouse” (*Fifth Business* 25), and the taunting can be silenced only by Ramsay’s threat to sodomize Milo with a cork (*Fifth Business* 25). Dunstan wields the sexual taboo expertly, warning Milo that such a violation would ensure that “nobody would ever laugh at you again” (*Fifth Business* 25). This violation would deliver Milo to the far side of the familiar, to the dark and the strange. As we saw with Mrs. Dempster the same act of degradation makes her an outcast. That Ramsay responds to taunts with threats of sexual violence is unsurprising as violence is the ultimate answer to a world that does not respond to one’s pain and also raises the possibility, however obliquely, that Ramsay has committed buggery at the “bughouse.” Perhaps Willard is not the first magician to take advantage of young Paul.

The backstory to the name Paul takes (Magnus Eisengrim) is another source of uncomfortable laughter for the reader. Albertus Magnus is the name of a bishop who achieved fame for his comprehensive knowledge of science and religion and advocacy for their peaceful coexistence. Albertus is also believed to have made a mechanical automaton in the form of a brass head that would answer questions put to it. Such a feat was also attributed to thirteenth-century philosopher and friar Roger Bacon (Butler 157*). However, both Albertus and Roger Bacon were thought to have been unable to make it speak without the assistance of

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8 Davies’s copy of *Myth of the Magus* by E.M. Butler traces the role of the magician from antiquity through the eighteenth and nineteenth-century occult revival to modern fraud.
the Devil (Butler 157*). The use of automata will be investigated further in the chapter describing Eisengrim’s magic performance. Moreover, Paul’s mythologized namesake is recorded as a dullard who achieved greatness through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, only to be turned into an ass. 9 Ramsay and Paul are mocked and savaged and no one seems to care, suggesting to the boys a universe indifferent to their pain. This condition is certain to alienate the boys from what was once home, family and the faith of their childhood traditions.

Knowledge or “gnosis” comes to Ramsay through both book knowledge and experience. He imagines Mary Dempster as the Virgin Mary, and Eisengrim rejects divinity as does the historical Magnus. Davies’s reference to being made an ass is a cruel, bawdy joke on the much-abused Paul, but it also suggests that the author is aware of his own donnish extravagances. Despite his schoolyard bravado, Ramsay is pushed with the Dempsters into greater isolation and finds liberation in magic. Davies shows occult practice to result from man’s need to believe in his own belonging to a sympathetic universe. Books on magic find their way into Ramsay’s hands through donations to the public library by family members of the deceased who donate such exotic items as magic manuals, gynecological medical texts, and illustrated deliberations on venereal disease (Fifth Business 27). It is through this inheritance that essential occult topics, such as magic, regeneration and knowledge of dangerous sexual congress, fall into Ramsay’s hands. The mix of taboo subject material supports both Mead’s claim that “the high Mysteries have to do chiefly with the Mystery of Regeneration” (qtd. in Dixon 107) and Ramsay’s sense of sexual shame, which is shared by Deptford’s citizenry. As these books come from the libraries of

9 “The Holy Virgin asked him in which he would choose to excel, in philosophy or divinity; that he made choice of philosophy, and that the Holy Virgin told him he should surpass all men of his time in that science, but that, as a punishment for not choosing divinity, he should before his death, relapse into his former stupidity.” The Boke of Secretes of Albritus Magnus 181.
the dead, there is a strong sense of necromancy about them, as if the dead speak through these once-held objects. Ramsay initiates Paul into this occult knowledge and practice, which will, in turn, draw Paul to the circus. Where this accident might be thought too coincidental had it happened in everyday life, Freud argues that “in the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in real life” (248). The manner by which Ramsay receives knowledge from these dead hands suggests both a belief in the uncanny on Davies’s part and, in the comic diversity of reading material, a simultaneous refusal to participate in this suspect economy of belief.

Death and doubt mingle again in Ramsay’s choice of the alien rite of cremation, causing one to question his motives and religious allegiances. Can Ramsay, for all his saint wanderlust, be a secret occultist? Doubts about the sincerity of his devotion to Mrs. Dempster are reinforced in the passage where Ramsay visits the fragile Mrs. Dempster who has been moved from the city asylum to an ostensibly more humane country hospital. Ramsay reveals he resents the cost of her care and attempts to interfere with the doctor’s prescriptions. He also recounts how he foolishly disturbed her with a “well-meant” conversation in which he tells Mrs. Dempster of Eisengrim’s life in Europe (*Fifth Business* 233).

Mrs. Dempster is the mad woman aggrieved, manipulated and aware that in some way Ramsay is karmically responsible for having taken Paul from her many years back, even before his birth. Of course she cannot be certain of the stone’s origin, but she is right in suspecting that Ramsay is obliquely responsible. It is this irrational knowledge that requires her to be kept in a hospital that is little more than a prison, complete with barred windows. Perhaps most tellingly, upon her death, Ramsay opts not to provide Mrs. Dempster a Christian burial, but chooses cremation instead. Mrs. Dempster dies in March of 1959, and Canadians had only been
performing cremations since 1902. The nation in 1959 had a cremation rate of only 2.93%, making Ramsay’s choice of incineration highly unusual, especially for a parson’s wife.10

For Theosophists cremation is the link that circles birth, death and rebirth. For Theosophists, the twinned notion of karma and reincarnation controls the cyclical passage of the life force in terms of a system of cause and effect grounded in a moral code. It is believed that a life lived according to religious and social laws that are based on the human affinity for reciprocity brings about an accrual of positive moral power or merit leading to a better future existence, whereas a negative position in accordance with this code has the opposite effect. These positive or negative effects are handed across multiple life spans by means of reincarnation. Canadian Christians remained staunchly opposed to cremation on the basis that Christ had been buried and resurrected and was the model for all Christian believers, with Roman Catholics remaining in strong opposition well into the 1960s.

Roman Catholicism and Theosophy were unable to resolve the fundamental tension between the law of karma and the Christian necessity of free will.11 There is some archaeological evidence of cremation amongst ancient Anglo Saxons limited to Pagan rites, but otherwise is


11 In fact the Roman Catholic Church remains one of Theosophy’s (and Gnosticism’s) greatest critics: “Its appeal to the spiritual in man, and its striving after union with the Divine are based upon a contradictory metaphysic, an imaginary psychology, a system of ethics which recognizes no free-will, but only the absolute necessity of Karma. No evidence or proof is given for its teaching except the simple statements of its leaders. The denial of a personal God nullifies its claim to be a spiritualistic philosophy. Judging it as presented by its own exponents, it appears to be a strange mixture of mysticism, charlatanism, and thaumaturgic pretension combined with an eager effort to express its teaching in words which reflect the atmosphere of Christian ethics and modern scientific truths” (Catholic Encyclopaedia).
deeply foreign to the community to which Ramsay and Mrs. Dempster belonged (Wilson 130). As McCann points out, Canada in the early 1900s was overwhelmingly Christian, with 97.9% of its citizens clustered in Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Anglicanism (14). While the TTS members chose cremation, the topic never appeared publicized in the bimonthly lecture series (Index to The Canadian Theosophist). This may reflect the longstanding taboo around the topic and the desire of TTS members to avoid further scandal after the Leadbeater affair.

Catholicism and the uncanny are particularly strange bedfellows that Ramsay finds separate him from society: “My preoccupation with saints was such that I could not keep it out of my conversation, and Boy was concerned for me. ‘Watch that you don’t get queer, Dunny,’ he would say, sometimes; and, ‘Arthur Woodiwiss says that saints are all right for Catholics, who have so many ignorant people to deal with, but we’ve evolved far beyond all that’” (Fifth Business 120). To his ostensibly Anglican friend, interest in saints endangers one’s reputation for rational, evolved thought. Catholicism is too primitive and “queer” for Anglicans and Theosophists.

Although Davies places oblique reference to Theosophy in Fifth Business, in World of Wonders he explicitly names the Society as a cultural force in Toronto. In describing the reception that Eisengrim’s travelling company of actors were given once they reached Toronto, Eisengrim remembers a group of journalists who were the acknowledged tastemakers in Canada. He recalls “a stout little man, rumored to be a Theosophist, from the Globe” amongst them (World of Wonders 253). Here Davies borrows from life. ¹² Albert Smythe, President of the TTS, who worked for the Globe, the Daily Star, Toronto World, and The Hamilton Herald proclaimed

¹² Davies had a long and intimate knowledge of newspaper business as he and his father, William Rupert Davies, also shared ownership of the Kingston Whig Standard until Davies senior retired to accept an appointment to Senate on the recommendation of William Lyon Mackenzie King.
in his letters: “one editor has more influence than a score of parsons” (qtd. in McCann 134). Smythe pithily summed up the importance to the Theosophists in getting their philosophy distributed in writing. The early nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in readership, and newspapers and journals abounded to circulate ideas to a growing public. Newspaper men (and women) like Smythe, Olcott, and Besant were crucial to spreading the influence of Theosophy amongst influential members of society and reaching a readership previously inaccessible.

The new commercial periodical publication in Britain and America is responsible for spreading Theosophy into a worldwide movement amongst those readers seeking a corrective to scientific materialism and a life without spirit. Mark S. Morrison credits this readership, along with the need to defend against rival ideologies and the desire to “legitimate occult knowledge” in quasi-scientific terms, as the reason for the flourishing occult periodical press from 1879 to the 1920s (3).

Davies grew up in the newspaper business and said he modeled Deptford on his own birthplace of Thamesville, southwest of London, Ontario (Maes 175). In Thamesville he knew not only “all the news that’s fit to print, but all the news that is not fit to print and [in a newspaper family] you acquire an insight into human nature and the essence of a community…” (The Paris Review 1989). The Deptford Trilogy, naturally enough, begins here. If we pause on the name, it is an amalgam of ‘Dept’ and ‘ford’. Dept suggests depth as in Depth Psychology, which is concerned with the psychology of the conscious and unconscious and a ‘ford’ is a shallow body of water that may be crossed by wading. Depth psychology peers into what resides below the surface expression of our behaviours, interpersonal dynamics and dreams, and it recognizes myth as a storehouse of recurring human situations. The language of depth psychology reflects the understanding of the unconscious as a psychic region ‘below’
consciousness that can be described in language suggesting layers of consciousness in the same way that we conceive of layers of topography. Joseph Campbell, whom Davies read reservedly, writes that “Underlying this field of multiplicity, then, there is mystery. And this is the mystery of our being, the mystery of the being of the universe, the mystery of being of all things. It is hidden. And the word for “hidden” is “occult”” (qtd. in Frank 4).\(^{13}\) Home for these characters is a mixture of geography they can leave and psychology they carry with them.

The birthplace of Ramsay, Staunton, and Eisengrim remains with them although they leave for international exploits. They are, after all, from Deptford: a place of the unconscious, which is easily accessible to those willing to wade in. Deptford is a backwater, and a haunted one in adherence to the Gothic convention of the ancestral curse. Ramsay, Staunton and Eisengrim are more immediately burdened with the oppressive guilt and fear of their Christian tradition and the repercussions of the thrown stone. Over the course of the three novels, this tension causes them to rebel against traditional Christian values, de-centers their morality, releases guilt and adherence to religious authority, and replaces it with meaning found in the individual spiritual journey to psychic wholeness founded on the principles of Eastern occult mysticism and depth psychology.

Deptford is a turn of the century village in which narrow-minded Christians of all denominations, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, think themselves superior to the others. Each man abandons the church of his baptism to allow himself to be made over in his own idealized image: Dunstan Ramsay who like his namesake, Saint Dunstan, stood accused of “studying the vain poems and futile stories of the pagans and of being a magician”

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\(^{13}\) See Davies’s marginalia indicating where he believes Campbell reaches too far in his occult mysticism, declaring Campbell has “gone soft,” in The Power of Myth (title page*).
(Clarke 138*) thus delving into occult knowledge; Boy Staunton to the more rarefied high Anglicanism of his hero, the Prince of Wales, after flirtations with Omar Khayyam; and Magnus Eisengrim to a form of atheism that can quote chapter and verse but without conviction or compassion which gives way to magic and mysticism. Like many Theosophists, the men identify themselves as Christian but use it as a cloak to conceal occult beliefs.

Fifth Business is, at its most basic, the story of a boy who throws a snowball. It becomes under Davies’s hand a deeply moral tale, questioning man’s (and child’s) responsibility for the multitude of subsequent events that follow from a simple thoughtless act. Ramsay is not the boy of action, but the other boy, the ‘fifth business’ in Davies’s invented language, who skips out of the way of the fate-ferrying stone wrapped in a snowball. Philosophically, what is suggested in the act of the thrown object is principally an existential dilemma. Davies underscored the following sentence in his own copy of On Divination and Synchronicity: “Hit or miss is the basic idea of all divination but in different civilizations there are different techniques by which to read the situation better at a certain time moment” (von Franz 10*). These central characters are like the stone, thrown into a world they have not made and do not control, but inheriting a collection of circumstances. Davies, in the simple image of a stone concealed in a snowball, gives us an enigma wrapped in a metaphor: the quintessential Canadian object, a snowball, that sets in motion a timeless story but a plainly Canadian one, with occult possibilities. Davies achieves the goal Harris set for Canadian artists when he called for ageless art with “its roots in the very soil.” The snowball symbolizes the truism that not everything is as it seems, and also that the most important things are multi-layered and mysterious.

14 Heidegger’s theory on “thrownness” can be read in Being and Time. Heidegger does not assign us responsibility for our thrownness, but only for how we live in and with it.
At the time of the snowball fight, Mrs. Dempster, who sacrificially takes the blow of the stone instead of Ramsay, is the mild wife of a country parson, but she will soon be the biblical woman “taken in adultery” (*Holy Bible*, John 8:7*). What follows is a biblical story retold of a town full of ‘good’ folk who do cast the first stone, and so begin the reverberations of an evil act. The anti-hero Eisengrim will come to define throwing the stone in such a way as to link it incontrovertibly to Theosophy. The central moral question emerges quickly as one of the nature of karma and the role of free will, and it is maintained until the third book, in which Ramsay claims that he kept the stone not only for spite but “also as a continual reminder of the consequences that can follow a single action” (*World of Wonders* 309).

The nature of karma, consequences and even reincarnation are summarized in the words of Eisengrim as he describes the quality of Great Justice and Great Mercy: “it’s rough and tough and deeply satisfying. And I don’t administer it. Something else – something I don’t understand, but feel and serve and fear – does that. It’s sometimes horrible to watch … But part of the glory and terror of our life is that somehow, at some time, we get all what’s coming to us. Everybody gets their lumps and bouquets and it goes on for quite a while after death” (*World of Wonders* 307-308). Eisengrim has clearly left behind the Christianity of Deptford for spirituality better aligned with Theosophic notions of karmic retribution and cyclical reincarnation.

The first suggestion of an awareness of the occult or any religion beyond Christianity comes late in *Fifth Business*, when a twenty-six-year-old Ramsay finds Staunton and Leola travelling to Europe on the same C.P.R. ship. It is 1924, and the wealthy newlyweds are travelling first-class, thus having opportunity to circulate with a better class of people than Ramsay, who has second-class passage. Staunton does condescend, however, to share with Ramsay an encounter he has had with Reverend George Maldron Leadbeater, “a great prophet
from a fashionable New York church” (112). While the Reverend’s name is not exactly that of the Reverend Charles Leadbeater, the similarities between Rev. George Leadbeater and the Theosophist are communicated by a smitten Staunton: “George simply loves beauty” (Fifth Business 113). Leadbeater enchants Staunton when he shows him the “dazzling semi-precious jewels he carries with him” (113), possibly a reference to gem divination practiced by Eastern mystics, or a knowing allusion to Theosophy’s Leadbeater playing with “the family jewels” in front of a Boy/boy.

Leadbeater also insists that Leola read If Winter Comes by A.S.M. Hutchinson, a book detailing an unhappy marriage, divorce, and a mother’s suicide. His motives are questionable and even the possibility of thought-transference arises as Leola grows increasingly unhappy and ultimately commits suicide. This notion is not so contrived when we read of Staunton and Ramsay’s other book discussion: Dr. Emile Coué’s handbook in hypnosis How to Practice Suggestion and Autosuggestion. Coué popularized optimistic autosuggestion in the 1920s, and Staunton wanted to use autosuggestion in his project of improving Leola’s “energy” by having her repeat: “Every day in every way, I am getting better and better” (Fifth Business 146). Not to be outwitted and also to challenge his rival, Ramsay dismisses Dr. Coué’s book and proposes a better one: Charles Baudouin’s more technical Suggestion and Auto-Suggestion*. Each traveller invests psychic energy and reading time in the myth of the self-made man. This competitive reading shows the men dabbling in psychoanalysis more as a means of controlling others than as an instrument of self-knowledge. Whatever else it establishes about Staunton and Ramsay, clearly they are interested in popular psychology related to harnessing the power of one’s unconscious in aid of thought-transference. This exchange foretells an enduring lack of self-knowledge that will be the undoing of one of these men before Fifth Business ends.
In Ramsay’s resentment of Staunton’s wealth and possession of Leola we have explicit evidence that Ramsay, too, has a dark side that he keeps hidden. Not surprisingly, the increasingly pedantic Ramsay had read the potboiler recommended by Leadbeater, Hutchinson’s bestselling novel *If Winter Comes*, as “it had been the extravagant encomium from Lyon Mackenzie King” (*Fifth Business* 114). Ramsay dismisses both the esteemed Prime Minister and George Maldron Leadbeater with the declaration: “It seemed to me that Mr. King’s taste in literature, like Leadbeater’s in religion, was evidence of a sweet tooth, and nothing more” (*Fifth Business* 114). In linking the three, Mackenzie King, Canada’s most famous closet necromancer; the character Leadbeater, inspired, I suggest, by the Theosophist and pederast of the same surname; and Boy Staunton, beet king of Southern Ontario, Davies points to common superficial tastes that may attract the birds and bees but soon lead to cavities. For each man, we understand, there is the respective public persona of respectable politician, religious authority and successful businessman, but all hold unconventional ideas, tastes and proclivities hidden lest they spell an end to worldly success.

Although Ramsay rejects King’s and Rev. Leadbeater’s mawkish tastes, he shows himself to be subject to the same occult leanings when, in the next chapter, he returns to the site in Passchendaele of his visitation from the “little Madonna” who took the form of Mrs. Dempster. Ramsay says his visit “confirmed my childhood notion that religion was much nearer in spirit to the *The Arabian Nights* than it was to anything encouraged by St James’s Presbyterian Church” (*Fifth Business* 116). He describes himself as “a happy goat who had wandered into the wondrous enclosed garden of hagiology, and I grazed greedily and contentedly. When the time

15 See *William Lyon Mackenzie King: Dreams and Shadows* by Lian Goodall, for a description of Mackenzie King’s séance room at Laurier House, which, was literally located in King’s closet and used to communicate with his beloved mother and his predecessor Wilfrid Laurier.
came at last for me to go home, I knew I had found a happiness that would endure” (*Fifth Business* 116). The pilgrimage back to the site of his wounding confirms his lusty and animal nature, as signified by the reference to *The Arabian Nights* and the goat.

Ramsay’s simultaneous attraction to saints, identification with goats and discovery of *The Arabian Nights* indicates an indiscriminate appetite searching for satisfaction in the opposite of what is familiar, that is the uncanny. Although I do not pursue the idea here at length, there is a strong case that Ramsay is interested in destroying both Mrs. Dempster and Boy Staunton and that he is successful on both counts. Perhaps they must be destroyed as symbols of his home in Deptford with Mrs. Dempster representing a mother figure and Staunton representing an Oedipal figure father. The influence of Eastern mythology brings Davies to offer the events of *The Deptford Trilogy* as originating in karma with the possibility of resolution through reincarnation. Davies admires Eastern literary influence in the form of *Arabian Nights* (fellow Gnostic Joseph Campbell edited his version*); however, he also shows us unscrupulous figures such as Leadbeater easily insinuating themselves into private lives while powerful men such as Mackenzie King fall under the spell of Spiritualists. Davies is clearly skeptical of the unscientific inquiry into man’s psyche, yet returns to the notion of the characters seeking knowledge through experience, or gnosis.
Chapter 3: Psychoanalysis

Davies’s deep interest in Freud and Jung is evident in the trilogy and supported by the presence of many individual titles as well as complete works by each man in his library. The basic tenets of psychoanalysis influenced Davies’s plot construction and bind the trilogy together. Freud (1856-1939) and Jung (1875-1961) believe that a person’s development is determined by events in childhood; that human behavior, experience and cognition are determined by irrational drives of the unconscious; that conflicts between conscious and unconscious material can result in mental illness; and that the skillful balance of unconscious and conscious material creates healing and wholeness (Elliott 3). Davies’s use of these theories shows how deeply his writing was influenced by his reading and understanding of psychoanalysis.

The progression of the plot over the three novels reveals Davies’s knowledge of psychoanalysis and Gnosticism. The term gnostis has been associated with the quest for divine knowledge since antiquity. Throughout its many manifestations since the first century C.E. to modern Gnosticism it has been characterized by its syncretism and the belief that the material world should be shunned and the spiritual world embraced. To do so successfully is to achieve salvation by breaking the dualism of life to share the secrets of history and the universe. Gnosticism is characterized by a profound suspicion that reality is an illusion which can produce cosmic despair until the Gnostic embraces the spiritual home beyond the darkness of this world. In the modern age the definition of gnosia or Gnosticism has come to describe a religious or philosophical movement intent to find an answer to the human condition which is compounded by evil. “Its central core is a mysterious gnosia conveyed to a spiritual elite who are equipped to comprehend its origin, nature and purpose (Harris 5).” There is a strong connection between
psychoanalysis and Gnosticism stemming from Jung writing Gnostic texts and citing Gnostic texts as confirmation of his theories.\textsuperscript{16} Davies employs a variety of psychoanalytic theory culminating in a Jungian and Gnostic understanding of events. In Fifth Business he turns away from a conventionally Christian sense of good and evil by employing Freudian theory in portraying Eisengrim and Ramsay in an uncanny world; The Manticore renders good and evil redefined by Jungian psychoanalysis whereby David saves himself from his father’s fate through individuation; and World of Wonders finishes with Eisengrim revealing himself as a mixture of both good and evil in which Gnosticism is the dominant philosophy.

Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche”) is his most literary. In it he contends that the uncanny is something uncomfortably familiar that arouses dread and horror. Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (340). Freud begins his discussion with a lengthy philological study describing unheimlich, the German for uncanny literally translated as “unhomely”. Freud goes on to state that for something new to be frightening it must also seem familiar, or heimlich: “In general we are reminded that the word heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (223). The

\textsuperscript{16} In addition to Davies’s avowal of being a Gnostic in response to the charge of the Massey College chaplain, Davies’s engagement with Gnosticism is suggested by the presence of Hoeller’s The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead and the Jung Codex in his library. The former was published by the Theosophical Society and the Codex is a facsimile of one of the Nag Hammadi volumes of Gnostic literature smuggled out of Egypt and sold to various groups, including the Jung Institute in 1951.
Oxford English Dictionary confirms that a similar ambiguity attaches to the English word “canny” which may mean not only “cozy” but also “endowed with occult or magical powers.”

Freud forms his thesis of the uncanny around Ernst Jentsch’s interpretation of the story “The Sandman” by E.T.A. Hoffman.17 Freud writes of Hoffman’s skill in the use of automata to create doubt as to the psychological agency of an actor:

Jentsch has taken as a very good instance “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate”; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata. To these he adds the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity. (224)

Not only is Eisengrim metaphorically stripped of his identity throughout The Deptford Trilogy, but he also comes to revel, through magic, in precisely those uncanny elements Freud singles out in “The Uncanny”: “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny” (243). Eisengrim’s tendency to become another’s shadow is the source of his ability to move beyond being something merely frightening and into something uncanny. He becomes so knowledgeable of these hidden things that he becomes master of the uncanny. Eisengrim’s adoption by older men whom he eventually destroys forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable where otherwise we would

17 The Davies Library holds multiple copies of Hoffman’s short story: some are well-annotated paperbacks, and others elaborately illustrated presentation copies.
have spoken of “chance” only. Perhaps this is already the world into which Eisengrim is thrown when Ramsay describes the “strange and unchancy world of the Dempsters” (*Fifth Business* 26). The concept of fate or the lack of any control over our destinies suggested in the hard determinism of “thrownness” contradicts the illusion of free will and explains Eisengrim’s sympathy with that other figure of the uncanny in the novel: the automaton. The presence of automata asks if we are not the cause of our actions, who or what is? If it is God, then where is our agency in a system that imagines us as little more than toys with moveable parts? This is one of Davies’s existential dilemmas, resolved by Christians in free will and answered by Theosophy with karma resolving itself through many cycles of reincarnation.

Reincarnation can be viewed as occult repetition, something both uncannily familiar and hidden. Ultimately, reincarnation is a returning in search of perfecting oneself. Freud suggests that this desire to return home is the cause of much male discomfort. While “The Uncanny” curves back to consideration of the clinical care of patients, Freud unwittingly summarizes the nature of occult literature that, like the uncanny, is a marriage of horror and romance:

It often happens that male patients declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This ‘*unheimlich*’ place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a humorous saying: ‘Love is home-sickness’ and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, “This place is familiar to me, I have been there before”, we may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body. In this case, too, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, home-like, familiar; the prefix ‘*un*’ [‘un-’] is the token of repression. (“The Uncanny” 244)
I believe that Davies draws on Freud’s theory to describe Eisengrim’s home-sickness which will give him no peace, but makes him an uncanny figure unable to forgive the accident which resulted in his premature birth and forever cleaved him from his now mad mother.

Eisengrim concentrates *catheisis*, or great emotional energy, in the mother, which reveals itself in his speech and stage performance. The pain of being robbed of his final months of growth in his mother’s womb is a wound Eisengrim carries to his adulthood and provokes his malevolent acts toward Stanton, whatever they may be, as Davies leaves uncertain just what Eisengrim really does to Stanton. In the closing chapter of *World of Wonders*, Eisengrim reveals the debt he feels he would be owed to make him equal to others who while fetuses were safe in the primordial cave of the mother’s womb: “I was born eighty days before my time. Poor little Paul. . . . Warm, protected, bouncing gently in [my] beautiful grotto light. Perhaps it is the best existence we ever know, unless there is something equally splendid for us after death – and why not?” (*World of Wonders* 308). This interruption of his development is an act of evil as defined by Besant in *Karma*.

Gestation and childbirth are acknowledged as the supreme mystery in the occult, a secret unknown and unknowable to man. Ramsay refers earlier to Leola’s “biological trick” (*Fifth Business* 145) in birthing Staunton’s children. More impressive to Ramsay is Eisengrim’s grand illusion imitating this essential mystery of birth in three tricks of alchemy:

He invited members of the audience to have a drink with him before he began his serious work, and poured red and white wine, brandy, tequila, whiskey, milk, and water from a single bottle; a very old trick, . . . He borrowed a dozen handkerchiefs . . . and burned them in a glass vessel; then from the ashes he produced eleven handkerchiefs, washed
and ironed; when the twelfth donor showed some uneasiness, Eisengrim directed him to look toward the ceiling, from which his handkerchief fluttered down to into his hands. He borrowed a lady’s handbag, and from it produced a package that swelled and grew until he revealed a girl under the covering; he caused this girl to rise in the air, float out over the orchestra pit, return to the table, and, when covered, to dwindle once again to a package, which, when returned to the lady’s purse, proved to be a box of bonbons. (*Fifth Business* 193)

Eisengrim conjures a vessel that produces a variety of life, eleven souls represented by handkerchiefs reincarnated through cremation in an urn (a symbolic womb) along with a twelfth for the hesitant Christian who prefers to see the divine as an outside force descending from the heavens; and most spectacularly, he materializes a handbag, doubling as a womb, that inflates to produce a child that levitates (or “astral projects,” 18) and reincarnates as a box of candy, symbolic gifts of love and life-after-death on Valentine’s Day and Easter. Eisengrim follows up these feats with a dignified display of hypnotism and a “culminating escape [that] was a variation of one Houdini originated and made famous” (194). It is the milk-can escape that Houdini promoted using posters illustrated with images of himself tucked in a fetal position inside a milk can bathed in red light, declaring: “Failure Means a Drowning Death” under a banner proclaiming “Houdini’s Death Defying Mystery.”

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Eisengrim and Houdini reenact their triumphs of survival as if to reassure an anxious ego: Yes, I am here safe with my mother, yet able to escape and return at will. The magicians seem to perform and repeat this ritual to satisfy themselves that they have achieved full autonomy as subjects. Throughout *The Deptford Trilogy* each of the central male characters strives to discover if there is something after death that equals the comfort of the womb. This is the same impulse that drives Spiritualists and Magicians to try to communicate with the dead or to recreate the buried-alive trick. It is Eisengrim who quests most ardently for the lost comfort of “home” which drives him increasingly into the realm of the uncanny.
Both Ramsay and Eisengrim are creatures of the uncanny, who have not successfully resolved their oedipal desires. Boy Staunton explains to Ramsay why he will not rise beyond a teacher at Colborne College: “Women hate anything that’s uncanny about a man if they think of entrusting a son to him” (Fifth Business 187). Sadly for Eisengrim, Mrs. Dempster was not so wary as the mothers of Colborne College. Eisengrim, too, is often described as uncanny, even to the point of becoming synonymous with it in one of the names he takes: Mungo Fetch (World of Wonders 186, 205). A fetch is a noun which means both “bringing from a distance” but also “an apparition, double, or wraith of a living person” (OED). Freud writes in “The Uncanny”: “We can also speak of a living person as uncanny, and we do so when we ascribe evil intentions to him. But that is not all; in addition to this we must feel that his intentions to harm us are going to be carried out with the help of special powers” (242). Both Ramsay and Eisengrim are suspected
of hidden motivations empowered by occult knowledge used for malevolent purposes. It is natural that Ramsay and Eisengrim, expelled from the company of other boys, would retreat to occult knowledge, which cloaks “the secret intention of doing harm” (239). Concerned at the level of plot to reestablish “good,” the text is marked by an obsession with darkness, death and evil as a supernatural force. A magician is able to make things happen that resist the laws of science, and this makes Eisengrim an irrational, disturbing being to others. If Ramsay covertly continues to practice magic is unclear.

In “The Uncanny,” Freud also discusses his Viennese colleague Otto Rank's concept of the "double." Rank’s Der Doppelgänger (1914) is a psychoanalytic classic that interprets narcissism through literary works and anthropological data. Rank introduces us to a German silent horror film, The Student of Prague (1913), in which a man surrenders his mirror image to a demonic antagonist in a Faustian pact. Eisengrim repeatedly assumes the role of a double throughout his life, most formatively as a defensive coping mechanism in response to being kidnapped by the lascivious and drug-addled Willard. Like his sinister mentor, Eisengrim inhabits a liminal world replacing his birth family with a world of circus carneys, dwarfs, actors, magicians, and outsiders. Eisengrim’s ambiguous state allows him to repeatedly reject and overcome his birth father and to actuate the potential of his archetype, the Magician.

In his transformation from Paul Dempster to Magnus Eisengrim, he reinvents himself with many borrowed names, including an inanimate object, Abdullah. Where Abdullah might seem to present a crude attempt at Orientalism, on closer inspection Abdullah is the Eastern face of Davies’s consideration of the developing occult identity of Eisengrim and the displacement of Paul and his Christian father’s God. Paul deserts himself in the interior mechanism that causes the machine to act and deals cards to deceive the “rubes” who visit the circus. His internment in
the “smelly bowels of Abdullah” (*World of Wonders* 56) leads him to abandon his status as a subject with full personhood. Julia Kristeva aptly describes the relationship of the object to the subject in *Powers of Horror*: “An ego, wounded to the point of annulment, barricaded and untouchable, cowers somewhere, nowhere, at no other place than the one that cannot be found. Where objects are concerned he delegates phantoms, ghosts, ‘false cards’” (47). Paul’s wounded ego, coupled with the shame of the sexual assaults he endures, creates the splitting of his identity that will continue throughout his life, just as Kristeva describes.

Inside Abdullah, his first automaton, Paul becomes the very definition of the uncanny, both the German “heimlich”, “hidden or concealed” and English “canny”, “endowed with occult or magical powers.” He is impenetrable in his wooden womb, his ego safe for the duration of his time spent inside the dark, magic security of his “fortified castle” (Kristeva 47). Kristeva describes the abject as that which causes retching repugnance, as sewage or muck, the very conditions inside Abdullah (2). “I cried out of the belly of hell, and nothing whatever happened. Indeed, the belly of hell grew worse and worse, for the stink of the dwarf gave place to the stink of Cass Fletcher, who was not a clean boy and ate a bad diet; we can all stand a good deal of our own stink … but after a few years Abdullah was a very nasty coffin, even for me” (*World of Wonders* 106). Paul’s desolation imagines Abdullah as a hell for his other self, Cass Fletcher (the name Willard gives him), and finally sees the automaton as a coffin he must escape. With this magic trick he will escape being either Paul Dempster or Cass Fletcher again.

Kristeva uses the skin that forms on warm milk as an example of nausea-inducing otherness. She locates the prototypical state of non-identity (or abjectness) to be that moment of birth when the child is half inside and half outside the mother – half dead and half alive from the start, and thus indeterminately in motion between paradoxical states. Consequently, the mother
through childbirth is the original bridge between the things of this world and the other. If the child is unable to make the mother’s body abject, he fails to identify her as other and so never achieves the full autonomy of a subject.

Throughout the novels, we see Eisengrim’s authentic self obscured and wonder how he maintains a sense of self behind the mask of Abdullah or the impersonation of Sir John Tresize. Davies shows his mastery of the uncanny in likening Eisengrim’s body to an automaton, which Freud recognizes as one of the “most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects” (“The Uncanny” 266). The question of automata is essential to understanding the moral world of Davies’s trilogy: the word automata derives from the Greek, meaning “acting of one’s own will” (OED). The question of free will is essential to the sense of agency enjoyed by Davies’s central characters. Are they independent actors capable of expressing their free will, or are they bodies considered as the sum of their physical functions acting out the motions of fate, absorbing the reverberations and repercussions of karma? Do we ever act of our free will or are we compelled by destiny? Eisengrim’s actions suggest a limited humanity that mechanically takes pleasure in humiliating those who have wronged him, such as Willard and Roly. Eisengrim intends to use the dark arts to take revenge on those who have harmed him, which suggests Davies’s distrust of the motives of occult practitioners.

Magnus Eisengrim is clearly inspired by magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) and his greatest imitator, Harry Houdini (1874-1926), two magicians who used automata in their magic. Davies acknowledges Freud’s theory of the uncanny and references Hoffman’s “The Sandman” as he describes Liesl’s attraction to the window through which she could see Eisengrim repair the automata she had rent. Freud links mutilation with dis-member-ment:
Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves - all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, … they prove able to move of themselves in addition. As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its association with the castration-complex. To many people the idea of being buried alive while appearing to be dead is the most uncanny thing of all.

(“The Uncanny” 243)

Robert-Houdin had an extensive collection of automata, and Houdini performed the trick of being buried alive three times. The first time he nearly died; the second, he rebuked the Egyptian Rahman Bey who had accomplished the same trick but credited assistance from supernatural forces; and the third time, he simultaneously escaped from a coffin and a straitjacket. With these three tricks, Houdini respectively slipped the bonds of mortality, Spiritualist superstition, and the most potent symbol of institutionally enforced rationality. There can be little doubt that Houdini’s act capitalized on the theme of liberation and held a compelling mythic significance: Houdini would die and be reborn to repeat the feat again. Houdini embodied Christ-like passion, and he enacted and re-enacted reincarnation for throngs of admirers. The bronze casket created for the buried-alive spectacle was also Houdini’s final resting place after he died in Detroit on Halloween, 1926 (Gresham 278*).19

I am suggesting that the tension arises in our “magicians” (Eisengrim, Houdini and later Jung20) in the liminal territory between the rational and irrational, life and death, consciousness

19 Davies’s Library also contains Greshams’s Monster Midway: An Uninhibited Look at the Glittering World of the Carny. This account of midway life describes how a morphine addict can be manipulated to become a circus geek, presumably the model for Willard.

20 Jung tells of his spirit guide, Philemon, an ancient magician with a flowing white beard, a kingfisher’s wings, and the horns of a bull in The Red Book 2009,.]
and unconsciousness. This spectacle of being in the midway position, neither one thing nor the other, describes the territory these men inhabit, which certifies their uncanny status. The spectre of death and the desire to cheat it was near at hand to Houdini, both professionally and personally. Houdini’s great love of his mother unhinged him after her death in 1913. He sought solace in cemeteries, lying next to her tombstone to “speak with her,” and finally he began visiting insane asylums convinced that his sorrow would drive him to madness (Bragman 406). Houdini’s undying love led him to investigate the possibility of psychic contact with her, but he was disillusioned by séances and by the chicanery of mediums who claimed to be able to contact the dead (Bragman 403). Consequently, he devoted a great deal of his energy to disproving the claims of mystics and necromancers, all to the great dismay and eventual alienation of his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, who maintained a firm belief in Spiritualism after the death of his son in the First World War.

Houdini advertised his lecture at the Orpheum Circuit with the words “It is against all ethics to expose legitimate mysteries, but it is the duty of every citizen to expose cheats and frauds, and the most despicable cheats are the fraud mediums who use Spiritualism as a cloak to prey on the gullible.”\(^\text{21}\) Houdini authenticates mystery and certifies the sacred in the world without losing his allegiance to rationality.\(^\text{22}\) Throughout his novels, Davies’s characters reflect this tension of primitive beliefs which he thought a modern, rational society had surmounted, but which, in Freud’s words, “seem once more to be confirmed” (“The Uncanny” 248) in everyday

\[^{21}\text{Announcement of Orpheum Circuit Houdini lecture about mediums, April 27, 1923. From the Oscar Teale Houdini scrapbook viewed at The Library of Congress 6 Nov. 2012.}\]
life. Certainly the huge crowds drawn to Houdini’s appearances spoke to the human capacity to believe and to doubt simultaneously.

The second book of The Deptford Trilogy is principally Jungian. The Manticore is concerned with the psychoanalysis and rebirth of David Staunton after the death of his father. Only by embracing his primitive self is David delivered from certain madness or death. There is something essentially occult and gothic about Jungian psychoanalysis itself as it aims to make the hidden visible by uncovering buried trauma, or resurrecting it, and bringing the pain to the surface where its source can be defeated through the power of speech.

David’s rebirth happens with the guidance of a Jungian analyst who directs him to record his dreams and conscious and unconscious developments while undergoing analysis. According to Jungian theory, humans share a collective unconscious that holds the experiences of our dead ancestors. Jung claims that proof of this can be seen in mythology, which shares similar themes across many cultures (Walker 4). Davies’s authorial control is demonstrated in the movement between the mundane and the fantastic in imagining David’s parents: two unassuming characters
from the Canadian backwater of Deptford who are presented in the fabulous mythic proportions of Candaules and Gyges. David is the inheritor of the Candaules and Gyges types, and, as such, he bears the burden of uncertainty about the true identity of his father. Eisengrim, too, adopts myths to sustain him in his dreadful life inside Abdullah when he imagines himself as Jonah inside the whale who will someday be saved, and David dreams of himself in the form of a man-eating manticore.

Although David goes to Switzerland for analysis with the famous Dr. von Haller, the intellectual psychologist can only bring him so far to full health. It is the corporeal Liesl who leads him to spiritually reincarnate himself in the physical performance of canal rebirth by connecting him with animism through his troglodyte ancestors who worship bears in the mountain passages of Switzerland. She leads him away from the comforts of Sorgenfrei (“sorrow free”) to the caves, where David says, “I was in terror, but somehow I kept on wriggling forward” (World of Wonders 246). Liesl brings David through this abject terror (with initiation in his own bodily waste) and asks him to embrace a shared Indo-European history of ancestors who worshiped in these abject spaces: “There are such caves as this all over Europe and Asia, and they have found some in America. How far is Hudson Bay from where you live?” (The Manticore 248). The mention of Hudson Bay evokes the northern spirit Davies and Harris referred to earlier. In pointing David northward, she sets his internal compass to truth and to the spirit behind his lawyerly persona. David truly seems to personify Canada in Davies’s quip, “I see Canada as a country torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary, mystical spirit which it fears and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scotch banker” (Enthusiasms 314*).

Only in accepting the imperfect but authentic figure of Maria Dymock and her bastard son can David claim her authenticity to birth himself again. At the end of David’s journey, Liesl
offers the Great Mother’s love: “I’ll love you, Davey. I’ll take you into my heart, and you shall take me into yours. I don’t mean bed-love, though that might happen, if it seems the right thing. I mean the love that gives all and takes all and knows no bargains” (*The Manticore* 251). From this point, David the “poor Canadian bear choker” (*World of Wonders* 254) as Ramsay calls him, releases his grip on the neck of the spirit bear, and both he and Ramsay come to release the Deptford stone by throwing it away. Davies blends Christian and Eastern traditions with a prayer to God that the stone not hit anyone: an ironic gesture in recognition of the mechanisms of karma, fate and repetition.

David describes his Canadian Staunton family as “everything that is emotionally dowdy and unaware” (*The Manticore* 210). David’s willingness to claim Dymock in his circle allows his escape from the fate of his father, Percy “Boy” Staunton, who dies, buried alive in a lake, still unaware and spiritually still just a boy. One is reminded of Houdini’s assertion, “Failure Means a Drowning Death.” This failure to become self-aware, or to individuate in Jungian terms, is a failure that results in death, and not a metaphorical death of the soul but a literal, physical death. Jung writes:

If the demand for self-knowledge is willed by fate and is refused, this negative attitude may end in real death. The demand would not have come to this person had he still been able to strike out on some promising by-path. But he is caught in a blind alley from which only self-knowledge can extricate him. If he refuses this then no other way is left open to him. Usually he is not conscious of his situation, either, and the more unconscious he is the more he is at the mercy of unforeseen dangers: he cannot get out of the way of a car quickly enough, in climbing a mountain he misses his foothold somewhere, out skiing he thinks he can negotiate a tricky slope, and in an illness he suddenly loses the courage to
live. The unconscious has a thousand ways of snuffing out a meaningless existence with surprising swiftness. \((\text{Collected Works 14, 474}*\))

This passage vividly illustrates how tightly aligned Jung is with the Gnostic quest which provides the reason for living for those worthy of the challenge.

Before David leaves Toronto for Switzerland, we find evidence that he is his own man and not simply a shadow of his stifled father. He has an opinion of William Lyon Mackenzie King as “a political genius of extraordinary order” \((\text{World of Wonders 90}\)). This independence of thought leads to thunderous fights with his father, in which Staunton would boil over: “‘[King] talks about reason and necessity on the platform, while all the time he is living by superstition and the worst kind of voodoo,’ he would roar. ‘Do you realize that man never calls an election without getting a fortune teller in Kingston to name a lucky day?’” \((\text{World of Wonders 90}\)).

King did, in fact, consult a Kingston medium, Rachel Bleaney (1877-1934), who helped him contact his departed mother \((\text{LAC}\)). Ramsay sums up the relationship between King and Canada itself: “Mackenzie King rules Canada because he himself is the embodiment of Canada – cold and cautious on the outside, dowdy and pussy in every overt action, but inside a mass of intuition and dark intimations” \((\text{World of Wonders 91}\)). The notion of dark intuition and an interest in the night side of consciousness is deep in \(\text{The Deptford Trilogy}\). Women, like Mrs. Dempster for Ramsay, like Bleaney for King, are the intermediaries with the spiritual. Liesl too stands in for the Great Mother figure that Jung describes: “He shall call spirituality Mother, and set her between heaven and earth” \((\text{Memories, Dreams, Reflections 352}*\)). However, Jung’s gnostic text warns us not to lust after the abyss of the unconsciousness lest we lose our individuality and autonomy as conscious beings.
The role of automata as a metaphor for the objectified and dehumanized returns in *World of Wonders*, in which Eisengrim is seconded to Sorgenfrei from his work fixing watches and clocks to repair Liesl’s Grandfather’s 1790s-1840s automata. The work Eisengrim undertakes creates a gnostic balance in him for the first time. Eisengrim is now not simply uncanny, but also life-giving, as he embodies both good and evil aspects of creation. Eisengrim represents a teleological argument, as he becomes not the watchmaker but the magician as the ghost in the machine who both humanizes an ape-like Liesl with speech (where medical doctors had failed) and resurrects the lifeless toys. Viewing Eisengrim (the Magician) and Liesl (the Great Mother) as their archetypes, the Magician provides the mysterious animating force to the Great Mother’s offspring, without which they are merely unconscious puppets.

The presence of automata poses questions that require philosophical answers to spiritual matters. In his groundbreaking 1964 article “Automata and the Origins of Mechanism and Mechanistic Philosophy,” historian of science Derek J. de Solla Price proposes that mechanistic philosophy leads to the deep desire to make automata to satisfy man’s urge to simulate the world around him, and that automata are the beginning of the industrial revolution. I suggest that the parallel move from an age of poets and thinkers to an age of merchants and industrialists is not coincidental and explains the missing Magician World View lamented by Eisengrim - or gnosis as early mystics knew it. De Solla Price proposes that in the successive improvements in automata from Descartes to modern computers, “we see the prime tangible manifestation of the triumph of rational, mechanistic explanation over those of the vitalists and theologians” (Price

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23 *The Deptford Trilogy* is replete with embodied ghosts in various forms. Ramsay is ghostwriter for Eisengrim’s mythologized autobiography. Eisengrim, Liesl and Ramsay supernaturally inhabit each other’s body and lives through language.
Where people in the medieval period would credit God for the vital spark of human life, modern people credit evolutionary biology.

De Solla Price identifies parallel developments of mechanistic philosophy and automata: “From the Lascaux caves to the Strasbourg clock, to electronic and cybernetic brains, the road of evolution has run straight and steady, oddly bordered by the twin causes and effects of mechanistic philosophy and of high technology” (Price 23). Eisengrim, described as “Medieval” (World of Wonders 293), works his magic on these lifeless things restoring their vitality and disproving De Solla Price’s thesis that living things are like machines that lack a soul. Eisengrim embodies a medieval sense of the world that enlivens objects, whereas the automata threaten to destroy the Magicians World View. However, the pendulum has swung and where the vitalists and theologians once required devoted belief, now scientists demand rational explanations.


Figure 4. Advertising poster for The Master Mystery, 1919. McManus-Young Collection, Library of Congress.
Jung’s reputation as a scientist continues to suffer as a result of his more esoteric writings, with current assessments of his legacy especially harsh in some scientific quarters. Clinical psychologist Richard Noll goes so far as to promote his own work as an attempt to “unravel the lies” Jung told to glorify his charismatic psychoanalytic movement:

He took the psychiatry of his day, the dissociationist model, hooked it up with German romanticism, this idea of the archetypes, these organising forces in the world, and merged that with Hellenistic cosmology which was also polytheistic. He blended these things together. His psychology is a synthesis, with a little bit of everything in it, and it attracts people one way or another (The Therapist, 1996).

Noll offered a criticism of Jung similar to the one that had been applied to Blavatsky, that of “most influential liar in the twentieth century” (Aryan Christ 160). Similarly, Anthony Daniels has called Jung “the Madame Blavatsky of psychotherapy” (23). As Noll sees it, analysis offered “cultural revitalization through its core Nietzschean themes of uncovering, bond-breaking, irrationality and sexuality” (Jung Cult 44). While Jung was strongly in favor of self-realization, there is no proof that he promoted self-deification. Certainly in the language of Jungian analysts we hear familiar phrases of elevation and worship, but Jung himself never accepted this mantle of Enlightened Being.25

As early as the 1950s, Henri Ellenberger noted: “The adversaries of Jung accuse him of having revived old gnostic or theosophical systems under a psychological disguise” (qtd. in Shamdasani 151). Sonu Shamdasani, editor of Jung’s The Red Book, went on to defend Jung

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25 Stephen Martin, head of the Philemon Foundation, which helped bring The Red Book to publication enthused, on the book’s release: “This guy, he was a bodhisattva,” in an interview with Sara Corbett of the New York Times Magazine.
against these controversial claims by explaining the split between Theosophy and Gnosticism and clinical care, quoting Jung’s defense of psychoanalysis:

In 1918 Jung stated that “development of reactivated contents of the unconscious” at the end of the last century represented by mesmerism and spiritualism led to Anthroposophy and Theosophy on the one hand, and on the other laid the foundations for French psychopathology and especially the school of hypnotism. It was from the latter that analytical psychology emerged. He contended that it: “seeks to grasp scientifically the phenomena of the unconscious—the same apparitions which the theosophical-gnostic sects made accessible to the simple-minded in the form of portentous mysteries.” (qtd. in Shamdasani 155)

What brought analytical psychology into proximity with the Theosophical-Gnostic sects was a concern with similar phenomena; what differentiated them was their mode of approach (Shamdasani 83). While Freud maintained allegiance to scientific rationalism and the libido-theory, Jung risked his reputation and legacy on the investigation of unexplained metaphysical phenomena. Jung’s Red Book is the result of twelve years of introspection during his psychic break with reality or “descent into the underworld” depending on your orientation to the psyche. In the book one can see the commonalities with Theosophy or the mystery cults that might have made him vulnerable to accusations of occultism. However, Jung never endorsed occult methods, offered himself as a shaman, or identified himself with any occult movement - on the contrary he often disavowed identification with any occult crusade. Jung explains his orientation to the occult: “if you call me an occultist because I am seriously investigating religious, mythological, and philosophical fantasies. . . . then you are bound to diagnose Freud as a sexual
pervert since he is doing likewise with sexual fantasies” *(Letters II 186*). However, many did find Freud to be a pervert for formulating his childhood seduction theory in 1896 which proposed that neurotic and hysterical behavior was the result of repressed memories of sexual abuse by a trusted adult, most often the father (Freud 1896, 203).  

Davies recognized in Jung an observer, not a prophet or scientist. Reviewing *C.G. Jung: Letters* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Davies called him a “daring speculator about parapsychology and the occult” (340). Davies read the uninhibited letters of Jung, and rather than seeing science compromised by mysticism, Davies’s esteem of the man grew:

One of the many admirable aspects of Jung's approach to life was his refusal to assume that all psychological speculation before his own time was the work of unevolved or deluded people. His comments on the Gnostics, the alchemists and the astrologers all spring from his assumption that they knew in some measure what they were talking about, and that our task is to probe the subtleties of the almost forgotten language in which they talked and to sift what is durable from the dross inseparable from all speculative thinking that seeks to provide an unassailable explanation of the complexities of the human psyche. (rev. of *C. G. Jung: Letters* 340)

Jung came by speculative thinking honestly. His father, Paul Achilles, was a Calvinist pastor and his mother, Emilie Preiswerk, a neurotic and deeply superstitious woman who

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26 See Dufresne *Killing Freud* for a history of anti-Freud studies which proposes that while Freud’s work is a monumental achievement of philosophy and literature it fails as an empirical science of the mind. Freud’s acceptance of thought-transference as explained in “Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy” may have sealed his fate amongst clinicians.
retreated to her bedroom at night to commune with the dead. Jung biographer Frank McLynn writes that “Jung imbibed superstition almost literally with his mother’s milk, for Emilie Preiswerk was a psychic and an ‘uncanny’ to the point where her son was afraid of her at night” (21). Her psychic visions persisted to the point of requiring hospitalization in a mental institution. Jung recalled her as a person of split personality who at dawn was a rational woman but at dusk was able to recover the extra-rational with each phase eclipsing the other:

By day she was a loving mother, but at night she seemed uncanny. Then she was like one of those seers who is at the same time a strange animal, like a priestess in a bear’s cave. Archaic and ruthless: ruthless as truth and nature . . . I too have this archaic nature and in me it is linked with the gift -- not always pleasant -- of seeing people and things as they are . . . This “insight” is based on instinct, or on “participation mystique” with others. It is as if the “eyes of the background” do the seeing in an impersonal act of perception.

(Memories, Dreams, Reflections 50*)

Jung struggled throughout his life with the inheritance of his mother’s uncanny nature. Freud, who called Jung his “beloved son” until their bitter split in 1913, could not abide Jung’s unscientific inquiry, just as Jung could no longer abide Freud’s reductive psychosexual theories. Davies was struck by the words of Jung: “Archetypes speak the language of high rhetoric, even bombast” (Memories, Dreams, Reflections 178*, underscored in red pen). Some of this grandiloquence may be seen in the appendix to Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1963), in which Jung appends a Gnostic credo called The Seven Sermons to the Dead (1916), which refers to Abraxas, a God higher than the Christian God and Devil, that combines all opposites into one Being. Amongst its many opposing definitions is included this one: “It is the son’s horror of the mother. It is the mother’s love for the son” (Sermo 3). I believe Eisengrim is a Gnostic figure
representing Abraxas, one who is beyond good and evil, but who contains both light and darkness. The word Abraxas itself may be related to the stock evocation of magic: ABRACADABRA. Psychoanalysis as verbal magic, and magic as occult practice, share a belief in the power of words to heal or transform.

To draw parallels amongst Jung, Eisengrim, and Houdini is not so fantastic as it first may seem. Both Jung and Houdini had assisted women with séances as young men, which attuned them spiritually to an alternative feminine mysticism that contrasted with the paternalistic religions of their fathers. In addition to Jung being the son of a country pastor, as was Paul (Eisengrim), Erik Weisz (who renamed himself Houdini in homage to the man he most admired: Robert-Houdin) was the son of a rabbi. Each was raised in a deeply religious home where the mother figure was a madwoman, a mystic, or in Houdini’s case a mother who inspired flights of madness and necromancy in her son. Each of these men found a second “father” only to reject him in a public and traitorous manner. Jung had Freud, Eisengrim had Willard and Sir John Sir Tresize, and Houdini had Robert-Houdin. Each father figure was first idolized, then imitated and finally dethroned by the “son” who consumed him like the man-eating manticore. This is very typical of the Gnostic rejection of the material father in pursuit of the spiritual father. The parallels among Jungian analysis, Theosophy/Gnosticism and magic are striking. Each is concerned with revealing the truth of things probably better left concealed, and seeing through

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27 Jung’s dissertation On the Psychology and Pathology of So-called Occult Phenomena was an account of his maternal cousin Helen’s séances and mediumistic ability, although he obscured his involvement as an assistant to the fifteen-year-old medium. Houdini, early in his career, travelled with an old-time medicine show performing as a spirit medium.

28 Erik Weisz went so far as to adopt the name Houdini in homage to his idol, but once he became disillusioned with the older magician’s Spiritualism, he wrote The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin to discredit him.
veils perhaps best left in place. However, the intensely independent Gnostic spirit rejects this as anti-intellectual and is obsessed with uncovering Truth.

While the body of the present work points to commonalities amongst prophets, physicians and protagonists, there is a danger in forcing significance on coincidence. Magic, symbols and superstitions were considered primitive forms of understanding by Freud, and yet psychoanalysis is replete with each. Freud noted the connection between magic and the talking cure in the 1890 essay “Psychical (or Mental) Treatment”:

A layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and mind can be eliminated by “mere” words. He will feel that he is being asked to believe in magic. And he will not be so very wrong, for the words which we use in our everyday speech are nothing other than watered down magic. But we shall have to follow a roundabout path in order to explain how science sets about restoring to words at least a part of their former magical power (285).

Spiritualism and psychoanalysis also shared a belief that ghosts or personal demons might be contacted and pacified to allow the seekers or patients to find peace with the other world that haunts them, thus providing them with a sense of control over the areas where they have the least amount of control: death and the unconscious. Parapsychology will remain disagreeable to science for the same reasons that another Victorian taboo (homosexual acts) is controversial, as it proposes the loss of accepted notions of ego boundaries. Theosophists, psychoanalysts, sexologists (Richard von Kraft Ebbing, Havelock Ellis) all explore the complicated relationship between subjectivity and sexuality, and this is what attracted Davies to them. Like psychoanalysis, spiritualism and magic all rely on elites to make sense of the hidden
world in order for the naive to approach the level of understanding of the initiated. This creates awe but also anger. With David Staunton and his father arguing over the legitimacy of Mackenzie King, Freud and Jung splitting over the place of the occult and parapsychology in psychoanalysis, and Houdini rebelling against his namesake’s spiritualism, each is striking out for new ways of locating himself spiritually in relation to the unknowable.

Although the trilogy ends with some vindication of Eisengrim as one who “illuminated” (a power ascribed to Willard World of Wonders 25) Liesl’s life (World of Wonders 310), not an absolute devil but a light-bringing Lucifer, we are left puzzling over the sleeping arrangements of an old man, his sometime lover, and a magician.29 Davies does not come forth and declare the relationship platonic; rather he chooses to leave it undefined. Davies may be at his most mysterious here, attempting to create his own mythic secret. He gives us the Wise Old Man, the Great Mother, and the Magician who share a nighttime world of dreams, oedipal repetition, and possibly “sex magic” practice.30 Davies resists normal characterization by refusing to enclose these disruptive characters that defy definition. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). This ambiguity places this trio outside objective reality. Ramsay, Liesl and Eisengrim redefine sexual, familial and national ties by rejecting the traditional family home for this unconventional mélange in phantasmatic space.

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29 Lucifer was the original title of The Theosophical Review under Blavatsky until G.R.S. Mead took over as editor in 1897. She claimed to choose the title in answer to 1st Epistle to Corinthians “It is to “bring light to the hidden things of darkness.”” Lucifer Vol. 1 No. 1 Sept. 15th 1887.

30 Sex magic refers to sexual rituals (often homosexual) undertaken to transcend normal perception, first described by Paracelsus and popularized (in theory if not practice) by Aleister Crowley in 1912 (Urban 47, 109).
Chapter 4: Conclusion

The nineteenth-century fixation on psychic phenomena inundated Victorian literary and scientific culture and helped seed the new science of psychoanalysis. The cultural transmission of these concepts from British to Canadian literary circles can be traced directly to Davies through his familial vocation of newsman, his Oxford education, and inheritance of the culture of Theosophical Toronto. For Davies the opposition of religion to science is intolerable, and like many authors before him he turns to esotericism to bridge this divide. His identification with Gnosticism is the natural result of his knowledge encompassing the rational and supra-rational and his abiding interest in nineteenth-century literature and psychoanalysis. In *The Deptford Trilogy*, Davies investigates the big questions of life including what separates man from woman, what separates individual consciousness from the collective consciousness and what separates the living from the dead. Davies writes in the tradition of great British social commentators and satirists, but innovates by considering the occult side of life as well.

Davies’s trilogy shows the occult and psychoanalysis sharing a territory of blurred boundaries and the tension between what is logical and what is wishful thinking. The supernatural initially attracts us but also drives us to reject that we deem uncanny. The occult is not marginal in *The Deptford Trilogy*, but present in the mundane. Davies writes of the synchronicities that demand to be noticed, and asks whether we should dismiss them as a vestigial part of primitive reasoning that has been supplanted by scientific logic or stop and wonder at them? If, as Socrates said, wisdom begins in wonder, Davies proposes the modern era is in danger of becoming unbalanced by losing its wisdom to scientific rationalism.
That is not to say that Davies entertains deep nonsense. Instead he balances his approach to life maintaining “skepticism of everything with credulity about everything” (Living Philosophies 131*). Davies begins his trilogy listening for the jests of God, devotes the middle to wrestling a mythic man-eater, and finishes by saying yes to wonder in the world. He asks us to suspend disbelief and entertain all manner of chance meetings, accidents of time and place, and twists of fate. He is a spectator with a clear eye and a sensitive ear for the moments of spiritual punning when a joke, like an unconscious slip of the tongue, speaks the truth. Some of us have a great capacity to perceive that occasionally leads others to think the act of insight comes from without rather than within. Davies’s insights are a product of home, education and experience, not the result of external forces, spirits and divine interventions.

Davies does not give himself over completely to any system: he rejects the Calvinist Presbyterianism of his youth for Anglicanism, and then commits himself to Gnostic inquiry without abandoning his chosen religion. Davies is able to balance his rationality with his wonder, quoting Chesterton late in the trilogy: “Coincidences are a spiritual sort of puns” (The Manticore 281). Davies may be most widely remembered for his elitism and his humour, but to those who look beyond the veil of these two tendencies Davies offers a balanced view of the world: both receptive to magical possibilities and judicious in discerning “the durable from the dross.”

Whether in the magical realism of fiction, magical thinking of the patient, or magical performance of the illusionist, many experience the awe available in the irrational. Each of these modes of perception imagines the material world and ways of permeating through to another hidden world. It is the discrepancies between the mundane realism of southern Ontario and its strange occurrences that create the occult landscape that makes The Deptford Trilogy both a detective story and a ghost story. Davies spins a tale of a murder and asks us to solve it, but not
before complicating it with all manner of chance occurrences and strange characters whereby readers are faced with assessing their own allegiance to reality or fantasy. Davies asks: Are you Sherlock Homes equipped with finely honed perception and scientific skill or do you believe in magic like the Great Houdini? Yet, in a paradoxical turn the creators of Holmes and Houdini each believed the opposite of his creation. Conan Doyle was intent to prove the validity of necromancy, and Houdini was committed to revealing that Spiritualist and magicians were empowered only with artful tricks. This is just the type of ironic turn that Davies enjoys.

The evidence of this thesis supports further research into Davies’s familiarity with Theosophy beyond the oblique references in this trilogy, and to his later works as well. I see The Deptford Trilogy as the beginning of Davies’s fascination with the occult that later matures into an unabashed allegiance to Gnosticism. Unfortunately the Davies collection offers no proof that Davies read Blavatsky or Besant, but an investigation into Davies’s exposure to famous Canadian theosophists such as Albert Smythe, Roy Mitchell, the Group of Seven, and organizations replete with Toronto Theosophists such as Hart House and The Arts and Letters Club may provide more solid evidence of a direct connection with Theosophy. We know that Davies read about Houdini enough to write precisely about his magic and use of automata, but whether he knew of Houdini’s extensive collection of Theosophical journals and Blavatsky’s books is unproven. I conclude that Davies considered occult themes well before his use of them in The Cornish Trilogy, which is the common starting point for studying Gnostic themes in his work. One particular avenue of occult inquiry might be to investigate his copy of Richard Cavendish’s The Black Arts, a work in which Davies left extensive handwritten notes enclosed with a key to the chapter on Gematria: a cabbalistic substitution code which allows words to be translated into numbers and the exchange of another word worth the same total in the original
word’s place.\textsuperscript{31} Computer-aided humanities research could advance the 1977 work of Cluett, who established by computer algorithms Davies’s use of “Anglicanisms”, to prove Davies’s use of numerology as occult practice in \textit{The Deptford Trilogy}.

Most reviewers have asserted that Davies writes in an archly conservative, Anglo-Saxon, androcentric voice. I seek to disturb this notion by offering the occult as a point of departure, thwarting the certainty that Davies’s influences are within “the Tory mode.” Davies’s reputation will be spared the ignominy of being labeled, as Johnson suggests, “quaint” so long as we see past the image of Davies as an anachronistic product of a rural Canadian upbringing in the Presbyterian Church, British education system and cloistered life in the University, but instead look to the work which reveals a much more complex understanding of human spirituality, sexuality, and understanding of the soul.

Davies’s fascination with the occult is not a remnant of an era less scientifically sophisticated than ours.\textsuperscript{32} Every current form of communications offers a kind of Spiritualism, or endorses the notion of supernatural powers. We have telephone psychic readings, a boom in Internet psychics, television mediums offering to contact the dead, and popular music as replete with occult themes as ever, all because we survive our loved ones never to see and speak with them again in this world or die alone doubtful of our fate in the next world. Often it is said a loved one has “passed on” or to hear “in my next life” implying a belief in the next world or in

\textsuperscript{31} “Gnostics equated the two holy names Abraxas (\’Αβράξας) and Mithras (Μίθρας) on the basis of the equivalent numerical value of their letters (365, corresponding to the days of the solar year).” Derovan and Gershom.

\textsuperscript{32} The early twenty-first century offers pay-per-call psychic service provider Miss Cleo, television’s \textit{Long Island Medium} Theresa Caputo, and popular musicians since the 1960s have been suspected of occult practice. The BBC and CBS have popular versions of Sherlock Holmes in production, and CBS is in the fifth season of \textit{The Mentalist} in which a former psychic medium uses his skills of observation and his understanding of the psyche to solve crimes.
reincarnation with the final terminus often called “home”. The fear that comes with death may be a form of that “home-sickness” Freud explained as a longing for the body of one’s mother. Equally it may be born of the fear that we can never go “home” again. The certainty that we don’t know what awaits us in death is a condition neither theologian nor therapist, nor magicians nor mystics can dispute.
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Poster depicting Houdini's collection of international manacles, ca. 1908.

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