

Gardnerian Wica as Theurgic Ascent

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Program Description: Neoplatonism was the final synthesis of all of the philosophical systems of the pre-Christian Mediterranean world. It combined aspects of philosophical, magical, and religious thought from Egypt, Greece, and Rome into a school of thought that embraced diversity and promoted magic as a means of uniting with the One. This program will present the history of Neoplatonism, its core ideas and proponents (ancient & modern), and its unique applicability to the intellectual and spiritual life of the modern Pagan, focusing especially on Neoplatonism's role in the origins and philosophy of modern Wica.

Presenter Bio: Don Frew is an Elder in both the NROOGD & Gardnerian Craft traditions, and is HP of Coven Trismegiston in Berkeley CA. He has been investigating the origins of modern Wicca for over 15 years and has traveled the ancient world in search of the texts & artifacts that illuminate our past. He has been doing ongoing interfaith work on behalf of the Craft for over 23 years, serving as a Nat. Interfaith Representative for the Covenant of the Goddess, on the Board of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, on the Global Council of the United Religions Initiative, & in the Assembly of the Parliament of the World's Religions. He is the founder & Director of the Lost & Endangered Religions Project, a non-profit group aiding marginal religious communities around the globe.

Introduction

Hello and welcome. My name is Don Frew. As many of you know, I have been researching the origins of the modern Craft movement for almost 20 years.

I have noted with some pleasure in the last few years that many scholars within the Neopagan community have independently rediscovered the rich Hermetic, theurgic, and Neoplatonic heritage that underlies virtually *all* of our practices. Accordingly, my presentation will cover the basics of Neoplatonism for the folks who are hearing all this for the first time and then head off into new areas directly relating to the origins and understanding of Gardnerian Craft as a living tradition of Neoplatonic theurgy.

The chronological ordering of our presentations means that I can skip the Hermetic, Greek Magical Papyri, and Chaldean material, saving us some time, just as those who follow me will be able to skip the basics of Neoplatonism. So... thank you, Tony and Brandy, for your earlier presentations.

“What is Neoplatonism?”

In a nutshell...

*** Neoplatonism was the last great school of philosophy to come out of the Pagan Mediterranean world.

*** It was the final synthesis of over 3000 years of unbroken Pagan philosophical thought stretching back to the beginnings of writing.

*** It combined:

- elements of Early and Middle Platonism
- the Hermetic teachings of the Egyptians
- the theurgy of the Chaldean Oracles
- Gnosticism
- the spells & rituals of the Greek Magical Papyri
- the number mysticism of the Neo-Pythagoreans
- and more.

*** Its proponents were initiates of all of the major Mystery Cults:

- Demeter of Eleusis
- Isis
- Mithras, etc.

*** It was an urban Pagan philosophy that combined a Pagan understanding of the Divine in the natural world with an urbane life lived in the most advanced cities of the Ancient World.

*** It was a cosmopolitan Paganism that sought out, embraced, and incorporated the expressions of the Divine and magical understandings of *all* the cultures surrounding and touched by the Roman World.

*** It stressed a Divine Unity that is both immanent and transcendent.

*** It was a Paganism that stressed the importance of traditional ritual practice as well as the contemplative life of the mind.

*** And, unlike virtually all other Pagan schools of its day, it valued women not just as abstract goddesses, but as living teachers, authority figures, and individuals of deep learning and insight.

“Cool!” you might say.

But why should WE care? Here. Today. Almost a thousand years later and on the other side of the world?

At least four reasons that I can think of...

*** Neoplatonism is a philosophical and cosmological framework that can provide a structural underpinning to the Neopaganism we practice today.

*** Its understanding of theurgy – the combining of spirituality & magic – is a precedent for our own “Witch” - “craft”, and as such can provide practical advice for our spiritual practice.

*** Its influence on the formative periods of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought – as well as that of tantra and other Eastern schools – provides a point of common ground for dialogue and understanding with those faiths, while its grounding in traditional nature-based ritual practice maintains the connection with indigenous practitioners.

*** I would argue that every Craft tradition today either descends from *or has been significantly influenced by* Gerald Gardner and his writings. Gardner reports to us that the coven he joined were practicing Neoplatonists. To this extent, Neoplatonism is where *all* of us come from and an understanding of Neoplatonism can help us understand both the origins of who we are and the meaning of what has been passed down to us.

Knowing where we came from helps us understand where we are and why, and so helps us decide where we want to go from here. Understanding the Neoplatonic context of inherited lore can turn meaningless gibberish into meaningful ritual material.

A Short History of Late Classical Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism as such is usually considered to have begun in the 3rd century CE.

The name “Neoplatonism” is actually a misnomer. The teachers we now call “Neoplatonists” would have just called themselves “Platonists”, since by this time the title had become synonymous with “philosopher”. It is only modern scholars, looking back, who distinguish the beginnings of a discrete school of thought with the teachings of Plotinus and call it “Neoplatonism”.

Plotinus lived from c. 204 to 270 CE. He grew up in an Egypt that had been Hellenized and then ruled by the Romans for centuries. He was educated in Alexandria, but at the age of 38 he joined the campaign of the Roman Emperor Gordian III to the East, hoping to learn more about Persian and Indian philosophies. The campaign was a failure, however, suffering a critical defeat near modern Fallujah in Iraq, leaving Plotinus to make his own way back to Antioch. At the age of 40, Plotinus traveled to Rome, where he started to teach philosophy.

Beginning with the Middle Platonic concept of the Divine Creator of the universe, or Demiurge, Plotinus introduced three radical concepts...

First, he postulated the existence of a divine, ineffable unity more fundamental than the Demiurge. This he called “the One”, although it was also sometimes called “the Good”, “the True”, and “the Beautiful” (akin to the “Dryghtyn” of contemporary British Traditional Craft). He stressed that the One was ultimately indescribable by the limitations of language and that these terms only described our relationship to it. I.e. the One is “Good” in that in its constant overflowing and giving of itself it creates all things. The One is “True” in that it is the ultimate

reality and all things are measured against it. The One is “Beautiful” in that all things aspire to be closer to it and become it.

Plotinus used an interesting image to help convey this limitation of language. He said that it was akin to the experience of being possessed by the gods. We can describe *our* experience of possession, but this does not describe the essential nature of the gods *themselves*. This image is interesting since it strongly suggests *both* that Plotinus had experienced Divine possession himself *and* that he expected his audience to have done so as well.

Second, Plotinus argued that all Being emanates from the One through a hierarchy of realities consisting of: the One → Mind (the Gods & the Demiurge) → Soul (the Daimons) → Matter, and at the same time returns to the One.

The Natural World, as we experience it, is the interaction of the organizing properties of Soul with the chaotic properties of Matter.

Third, Plotinus explained that while this hierarchy is ontologically true, emanation (*prohodos*) and return (*epistrophe*) are neither temporal nor spatial. In other words, all things are *always* both emanating from and returning to the One and exist *simultaneously* at all levels of the hierarchy.

Plotinus died at the age of 66. Due to infirmities in his later years, he tended to focus on a contemplative, ascetic approach to union with the One, as did his student **Porphyry of Tyre** (c. 234 - 305 CE), who is responsible for organizing Plotinus’ oral teachings into the text known as The Enneads (six groups of nine essays each).

Porphyry was also famous for his essay “Philosophy from Oracles” in which he asked all the major oracles of his time – the oracles of Delphi, Siwa, Dodona, Cuma, etc. – the same questions about the philosophy and the world. The Christians were not pleased that when asked about Jesus all of the oracles replied, if I may paraphrase, that “Jesus is cool. He’s one of us, but his followers are full of it!”

It may be no coincidence that Porphyry was also the author of “Against the Christians”, a series of arguments against the veracity of Christianity based on its logical flaws and internal inconsistencies, contradictions between the Old and New Testaments, and the “virtues” of the contemporary Christian community, whose members were constantly and violently at each other’s throats. These arguments were collected in 14 volumes (!), which were later condemned by Church authorities as the most dangerous books ever written and burned wherever possible. Only fragments of the text survive in the form of quotes in the writings of Christian authors rebutting Porphyry’s arguments. (Note: What *does* survive is Contra Galileos, or Against the Galileans, by the Emperor Julian. He read Porphyry as a youth as part of his Christian education and it had a serious impact on his conversion to Paganism. He later wrote his own Contra Galileos as a summary of highlights of Porphyry’s work.)

We’ll come back to Julian (since he was a Neoplatonist), but let me add as a personal note that if you can find a copy of Against the Galileans – perhaps in a Loeb edition – it’s well worth the

read. Julian is a very funny writer and there is something refreshing about reading a “Pagans vs. Christians” text where the Pagan is the highly educated Emperor of the known world and the Christians are mostly a bunch of hicks in a backwater part of the Empire.

While both Plotinus and Porphyry stressed the importance of turning away from material things and avoiding the traps of the material world, it’s important for *us* to understand that this was *not* the rejection of Nature that later Christian Neoplatonists inserted into Neoplatonism. Plotinus, Porphyry, and all of the Pagan Neoplatonists were *absolutely clear* that the material world is a fundamentally good emanation of the One. While Christian Neoplatonists would seize on a statement saying that we should “avoid entanglement with Nature”, they would conveniently ignore the following, explicating statements to the effect that “we should avoid drunkenness, licentiousness, greed, etc.”, in other words, situations in which the Material World dominates us and lures us away from the spiritual.

Porphyry’s student, **Iamblichus of Chalcis** (c. 245 - 325 CE), favored an approach to the One that was known as “theurgy” or “god-making”. “Iamblichus” is a Latinization of the Syriac *ya-mlku* (“he is king”) and is believed to refer to Iamblichus’ descent from a line of priest-kings of Syria. He was born in Chalcis in Syria, studied under Porphyry in Rome, but returned to Syria around 304 to found his own Neoplatonic school in Apamea.

If the One is immanent in all of the Natural World, reasoned Iamblichus, then not only is the Natural World inherently good, but all things in the Natural World are paths to the One. This led to the use of ritual as part of his mystical practice.

Iamblichus also introduced a concept now called “the law of mean terms”. This stated that for there to be any communication between any two things or concepts there had to be a third thing in between that partakes of both. Since this idea can be applied *ad infinitum*, it meant that there could be no gaps between the levels of reality. The spiritual universe of the Neoplatonists, therefore, became fluid and continuous, without defined boundaries between its many constituent parts and levels. As a result, the Neoplatonists were *monistic polytheists*, understanding and relating to the many gods and goddesses of antiquity as multiple faces or manifestations of a singular, all-encompassing Divine concept or principle – the One.

Neoplatonic theurgy used techniques that we would recognize as “natural magick” in rituals designed to facilitate union with the One.

Iamblichus’ main text on this is called De Mysterijs, or “Concerning the Mysteries”, and was written as a response to his teacher Porphyry questioning his insistence on the importance of traditional ritual.

The source material of **theurgy** consisted of:

- the writings of Iamblichus, Porphyry, and Plotinus, (as well as earlier Platonists)
- the *Hermetica* – Egyptian writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, divided (by modern scholars) into:
 - philosophical Hermetica, dealing with theology, cosmology, etc.
 - technical Hermetica, dealing with magic, alchemy, astrology, etc.

- the texts collected as the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM), consisting of what survived of the magical & liturgical texts of the Egyptian temple priesthood after the decline of the temple system. (I'd like to thank Tony for covering Hermeticism and the PGM earlier, in his talk.)
- the Chaldean Oracles – collected teachings “channeled” from Hekate and other deities by two 2nd century Roman theurgists (the Julianii). (And I'd like to thank Brandy for covering the *Chaldean Oracles* in her presentation.)
- Neo-Pythagorean number mysticism – a 1st century CE revival of the number mysticism of Pythagoras. Incorporating elements of astrology and Eastern magical lore, it was very popular with Iamblichus and was eventually subsumed into Neoplatonism.
- their own shared experimental results

With these texts as guides, and with an attitude that emphasized sharing the results of their inquiries rather than enforcing doctrinal agreement, Neoplatonic theurgy focused on two forms of “god-making”: deity possession and the creation of animated statues. The former was very similar, if not identical, to the practice modern Witches know as “Drawing Down the Moon”, and indeed this phrase was used in antiquity to describe something similar. The second form of “god-making” involved techniques that we have all but lost, but vestiges of which remain in the Craft tradition passed to Gerald Gardner.

The Neoplatonists considered themselves to be part of a “Golden Chain” of transmission from teacher to student, from Pythagoras through Plato down to Plotinus and the Neoplatonists. That “Golden Chain” extended from Iamblichus through his student Plutarch of Athens through the teacher Syrianus to the last “great” Neoplatonic teacher, Proclus.

Proclus of Athens (412 - 485 CE) was the last major Neoplatonic writer before the closing of the School at Athens and the flight of the surviving Neoplatonic theurgists to safety in the Persian Empire. He was born in Constantinople – the precise date is preserved by a horoscope in the biography written by his student and successor Marinus. He studied in Alexandria before going to Athens and studying with successors of Iamblichus, eventually becoming head of the School at Athens, Plato's Academy. He wrote extensive commentaries on earlier Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic writers – always in pursuit of the Neoplatonic goal of reconciling Plato and Aristotle. His major works include The Elements of Theology and The Platonic Theology.

Unfortunately, little of the writings of the female Neoplatonic teachers survive – possibly just by chance or possibly because succeeding generations of Christians weren't as interested in preserving the writings of Pagan women. However, we know from the way that their male peers wrote *about* them that these women were held in equal esteem as teachers.

- **Hypatia** is probably the best known of the Neoplatonic woman teachers. She lived in Alexandria from c. 360 – 415 CE and was martyred by a Christian mob. Her life story was recently made into the movie *Agora*, starring Rachael Weisz.
- Eunapius, in his Lives of the Sophists, tells the story of the teacher **Sosipatra** of Ephesus a woman who taught Neoplatonism in the 4th century CE.

- From the same period, surviving correspondence between the early alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis (in Egypt) and a Hermetic & Neoplatonic teacher named **Theosebia**, indicates that she led a circle of philosophy students on her own.

In addition to their emphasis on philosophy and theurgy, the later Neoplatonists also stressed the importance of traditional Pagan popular religion. The continued performance of time-honored rites formed a necessary foundation to the more intellectual pursuits of Neoplatonic philosophy. The Neoplatonists sought to incorporate and synthesize the practices of all Pagans known to them, believing that *all* were divinely inspired. In this, they were in tune with the syncretic nature of their age, in which composite, cross-cultural deities such as Serapis and Jupiter-Ammon came to predominate. Accordingly, most Neoplatonists not only continued to practice traditional popular Paganism, but were also initiates of the mysteries of Mithras, Isis, and others.

The 4th century Neoplatonist, Macrobius (writing in *Saturnalia*), reconciled the mythologies of the many Pagan traditions by asserting that all Gods were actually aspects of a single Sun God, and all Goddesses aspects of a single Moon Goddess, and that really there was just the God and the Goddess – and beyond them, of course, the One, which transcended gender. For the Neoplatonists, this Goddess and God were most often depicted as Hekate and any of her various male counterparts: especially Helios, Hermes (both Chthonic & Psychopompos), and Aion – often fused together as Hermes Trismegistus or other figures.

By the 6th century CE, Paganism in the Roman Empire was fighting a losing battle for survival. Pagans had been forbidden to teach, and finally, to sacrifice. Temples were being closed, if not destroyed, all over the Empire. In 529 CE, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian ordered the closing of the Academy at Athens, the last true bastion of Pagan learning in the Empire. In response, the last teachers of the Academy, including the Neoplatonists Damascius and Simplicius, invited by a Persian monarch who knew the value of philosophers, fled “to the East”, specifically, to Harran in what is now Eastern Turkey. There, they founded a Neoplatonic academy that survived at Harran up into the 11th century. (I’ve written and presented at PantheaCon on my ongoing research at Harran several times and won’t repeat that material here for the sake of time. A summary is appended.)

From Harran, Pagan Neoplatonism reentered Europe in the 11th century CE, becoming the basis for centuries of Renaissance “Christian” Neoplatonism (that often was not so “Christian”), but our concern stays with the avowedly Pagan stream of Neoplatonism. BTW, this Pagan stream passed from Harran through the *Picatrix* into the writings of Agrippa and eventually into the ritual forms of Gardnerian Wica.

When the Roman **Emperor Julian** attempted his revival of traditional Paganism in the 4th century, he asked his friend and confidant Sallustius to write a “catechism” of Paganism from a Neoplatonic point of view. Both men were initiates of the Mysteries and practitioners of Neoplatonic theurgy and these views are reflected in the text. This text, *On the Gods and the World*, survives (the best published version is translated by Arthur Nock, 1926, although I have made my own, more Pagan-friendly translation).

Neoplatonic Roots of Gardnerian Craft

It is my belief and contention that the texts and traditions of Gardnerian Craft can best be understood in the context of its roots in the Neoplatonic / Hermetic syncretism of late antiquity.

Gerald Gardner himself said as much in Chapter XIII of *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, where he spent several pages quoting and discussing Sallustius' On the Gods and the World.

Gardner ended his discussion of Sallustius with:

Now, the thing that will, I think, strike most the consciousness of the reader who is well versed in the teaching of the higher types of spiritualist and occult circles generally is not the antiquity of this teaching of Sallustius, but its startling modernity. It might have been spoken yesterday. Further, it might have been spoken at a witch meeting, at any time, as a general statement of their creed ... the spirit of his [Sallustius'] teaching, the spirit of the Mysteries of his day, which is also the spirit of the beliefs of the witch cult, is timeless. (Gardner 1959: 188-189)

In other words, Gardner specifically stated that this text from the ancient world might be understood as explaining the theology of the Craft as he discovered it in 1939. This statement alone should engender interest in Neoplatonism on the part of contemporary Witches.

Speaking purely to the earliest forms of Gardnerian Craft as ancestral to most, if not all, of modern Craft (in one way or another), its Neoplatonic origins lend new depth to traditional material. Some of the relationships are obvious – such as focusing on a Goddess / God pair or employing a hybrid of magic and religion as a spiritual path – while others are more subtle.

I know that talking about the “Neoplatonic origins of Gardnerian Craft” may sound absurd to those who are only familiar with the prevailing view in academia that Gerald Gardner “invented” Wicca in the mid-20th century.

“Everybody knows that Gardner made it all up.” However, “everybody” is usually just repeating what someone else told them.

Only a handful of scholars have actually *examined* any of the surviving source documents. Those who have published so far have looked only at “ye Bok of ye art Magical” – Gardner’s oldest magical workbook – or the Weschcke documents – typed copies of ritual texts once in the possession of Carl Weschcke of Llewellyn Publications, or sometimes both.¹

However, there are *thousands* of pages of other documents containing information about, and teachings from, the group of Witches that Gardner joined, including

- “ye Bok of ye Art Magical”
- the Weschcke documents

¹ The inadequacies of many of the “leading” theories of Craft origins are addressed in Frew (1998) and in Whitmore (2010).

- three Books of Shadows (known as Texts A, B, and C)
- over 500 pages of surviving correspondence
- 18 notebooks
- two drafts of published works, before revisions and sections removed
- unpublished manuscripts of three essays and one book
- marginal notations in scores of books
- handcopied magical manuscripts (including a Grimorium Verum entirely in Theban!)
- from Doreen Valiente: three Books of Shadows, correspondence, notebooks & journals (covering almost 30 years)
- from the OTO's files: Crowley's daily journal, his correspondence, official OTO documents
- official records and documents: wills, marriage licenses, etc. (Philip Heselton is to be commended in leading the way in this area of research.)
- testimony of many living witnesses, including well-known High Priestesses and other initiates and associates.
- a surviving Book of Shadows from *another* member of the group Gardner joined (copied independently from the same source as "ye Bok of ye Art Magical")

From a careful, comprehensive analysis of *all* of these texts and sources, a new picture of Wican origins is emerging. And for many of us studying this material, "Wica" with one "c" is becoming the common way to refer to the tradition that Gardner joined, from which the Gardnerians and others descend, since Gardner reported that this group called itself "the Brotherhood of the Wica" (one "c") and it was Gardner who later *assumed* that this must refer to the Anglo-Saxon word "*wicca*".

Without going into the details or laying out the evidence – believe me, such a controversial subject takes a *lot* of pages of evidence – I can summarize my own conclusions as:

- There is indeed a traceable continuity of an explicit "Paganism" consisting of a body of cosmological lore and ritual practice from the Hermetic and Neoplatonic theurgists of the Eastern Mediterranean of late antiquity down to the beginnings of Gardnerian Wica. (A line of transmission of this lore, and the mechanisms making the transmission possible, can be traced almost person to person from Pythagoras forward to the beginnings of modern Wica, but the presentation of the evidence in support of this admittedly controversial claim must be the subject for another time.)
- This body of lore & practice was Classical in focus and flavor until the middle of the 20th century, acquiring a patina of a romanticized Celticism around the time that Gerald Gardner got involved. (This in no way invalidates the current "Celtic" style of Gardnerian Craft; rather it clarifies that "Celtic" is the latest in a long series of cultural manifestations, from antiquity to the present day, of the tradition now known as Gardnerian Craft.)
- The existence of an ongoing, organized group manifesting this tradition can *only* be traced from the mid-18th century forward to Gardner.

- Gardner himself was an exceptionally reliable recorder of information from this group, but only a mediocre folklorist. His discovery of a surviving “Witch-cult” convinced him of the “truth” of Margaret Murray’s theories on Witchcraft as a British Pagan fertility cult. As a result, and unfortunately, his often “Murrayite” speculations about Craft origins were incorporated into the tradition by his followers to such an extent that a common Celtic / Murrayite myth of Craft origins has misled scholars down to the current day.

One of the most direct manifestations of Neoplatonism in Wica is in the four-fold cosmology preserved in “the Dryghtyn prayer”, said in nearly every Gardnerian circle:

In the name of Dryghtyn, the Ancient Providence,
 which was from the beginning, and is for eternity,
 male and female, the original source of all things;
 all-knowing, all-pervading, all-powerful, changeless, eternal. [→ the One]
 In the name of the Lady of the Moon,
 and the Lord of Death and Resurrection; [→ Mind / Gods]
 in the name of the Mighty Ones of the Four Quarters, [→ Soul / Daimons]
 the Kings of the Elements, [→ Matter]
 Bless this place, and this time and they who are with us.²

While some may balk at ascribing such clear monism to a Pagan path, the ancients were quite clear in their polytheistic monism, as were the Witches known to Gardner. In *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, Gardner said:

They [the Witches] quite realize that there must be some great ‘Prime Mover’, some Supreme Deity; but they think that if It gives them no means of knowing It, it is because It does not want to be known; also, possibly, at our present stage of evolution we are incapable of understanding It. So It has appointed what might be called various Under-Gods, who manifest as the tribal gods of different peoples; as the Elohim of the Jews, for instance, ... Isis, Osiris and Horus of the Egyptians; ... and the Horned God and the Goddess of the witches. (Gardner 1959, 26-27)

The views of this first modern coven echo those of Macrobius as well, in focusing on a God / Goddess pair between us and the One.

The theurgic process of spiritual development is manifest in Wica. A common image of the theurgic process, from Iamblichus to Agrippa, was one of “tuning” the Self... Just as we tune a musical instrument by comparing it to an instrument that is already *in* tune, in theurgic ritual we tune *ourselves* to an instrument that is already in tune, that instrument being the natural world, a fundamentally good emanation of the One.

² Quoted in Crowther (1974, 39-40). By the way, *all* of my quotations from Gardnerian ritual texts are from material published by Gerald Gardner himself or by his High Priestesses, under the assumption that *they* would have the clearest idea of what was considered oathbound & secret and what was not. Even so, the texts as published are slightly different from what appears in the actual, traditional, passed-down material, but the differences are not significant for the points being made here.

One of the later Neoplatonists, Proclus of Athens, wrote in the 5th century, that theurgy is...

... a power higher than all human wisdom embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation and in a word all the operations of divine possession. (Platonic Theology, 1.26.63)³

Gardnerian Wica as Theurgic Ascent

The process of proceeding through the three initiatory Degrees of the Gardnerian tradition is a theurgic process of union with the One, with each Degree corresponding to the appropriate realm of the Neoplatonic cosmology. Respecting the traditional secrecy of the Mysteries by means of sometimes-veiled reference, this can be elaborated as follows...

* The First Degree corresponds to Matter. The initiate learns about the material components and physical movements of the rites. The sacrifice is of the Body, through physical effort and other means.

* The Second Degree corresponds to Soul. The initiate learns of the descent of the Soul into Matter, as portrayed in the Descent of the Goddess myth. The sacrifice is of Emotion, expressed in the rite.

In *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner tells us what he calls “the Myth of the Goddess”, but has also been called “the Legend of the Descent” and “the Descent of the Goddess”. The story has been reprinted in many Craft books and is too long to tell here, but in brief:

The Goddess wishes to understand the mystery of Death, so she journeys to the “nether lands”. There, she meets Death and, after a complex conversation in which Death explains Himself and His actions, she comes to understand Him. They love and are one, and teach each other about the Mysteries. (Gardner 1954, 40-41)

Gardner says: “This myth upon which its members base their actions is the central idea of the cult. ... It is very easy to say this is only the story of Istar descending into hell, but the point of the story is different.”

One could also compare it with the descent of Demeter into Hades and say the same thing. An interesting aspect of the story of the descent of Demeter that is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, is the presence of Hekate in the story. Many scholars believe that the passages describing Hekate’s involvement are survivals from an earlier, now-lost myth of the Descent of Hekate into the Underworld. Like the Goddess in the Wican Myth of the Goddess, Hekate journeys to the Underworld, but does not return, instead She assumes a liminal position, neither here nor there, overseeing the process of transition between the worlds.

³ Quoted in Janowitz (2002, 11).

I have been studying this tale with Prof. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila of the University of Helsinki. Jaakko is one of the world's leading experts in Middle Eastern "descent myths". As he has said, "The more one looks at this Myth of the Goddess story, the more unique and curious it becomes."

We now know that the Goddess of the coven Gardner joined was Hekate, although called by a special, secret name associated with her. Given this, it has been suggested that the Wiccan "Myth of the Goddess" may ultimately descend from that lost Legend of the Descent of Hekate into the Underworld. If so, then the Wiccan *corpus* would preserve one of the oldest stories in the world.

For the late Neoplatonic theurgists, Hekate often symbolized the *anima mundi*, or world-soul. As such, it should come as no surprise that when the Myth of the Goddess or "Legend of the Descent" is read as a Legend of the Descent of Hekate, it can easily be read as an allegory of the descent of the soul into matter.

Understanding this is part of pursuing Gardnerian Wicca as a theurgic path.

* The Third Degree corresponds to Mind. The initiate learns the traditional methods of deity possession, joining with the Gods to become something greater than he or she was before, as expressed in the words of the Greek writer Pindar (Nemean VI.I.1-8):

Single is the race, single of men and of Gods,
from a single source we both draw breath,
but a difference of power in everything keeps us apart.
For we are as nothing, but the Gods exist forever.
Yet we can, in greatness of minds, be like the Gods...⁴

Here the sacrifice is of the individual Self in union with the God or Goddess.

Through ongoing ritual work, through passage through the Degrees, the Gardnerian initiate ascends towards union with the One – with Dryghtyn – understanding and incorporating into themselves the lessons of Matter, Soul, and Mind.

Union with the One, in the context of Neoplatonism and of Gardnerian Wicca, does not mean annihilation of the Self. Nor does it mean abandoning embodiment. After all, the nature of the One is to emanate, even unto embodiment. And all things *always* exist at all levels existence, from Matter to the One and back again. It's just a question of where you locate your sense of self and which direction you are looking: towards the One or away from it.

R.T Wallis, author of one of the standard introductions to Neoplatonism, explained this by saying:

Think of yourself as a small circle with a center point. Now think of the One as a vast, infinite circle with a center point. In union with the One, your center point

⁴ Quoted in Bourne, (1985, 203).

and the center point of the One overlap. You do not cease to be, but you become aware of an all-encompassing reality beyond your experience. (paraphrase)

Union with the One may happen many times during an individual's lifetimes, or not at all. The goal of the theurgic process – or of Gardnerian Craft – is to live, to locate your sense of Self, in union with the One and thereby participate in the emanation of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty into the world.

Benefit 1: Free Will

While the inherent Goodness, Truth, and Beauty of such a union is, of course, its own reward and reason for being, the Neoplatonic theurgic process offers more “tangible” benefits along the way... Free will and Immortality.

The process of emanation creating the world on an ongoing basis is one of the harmony of the realm of Soul ordering the chaos of the realm of Matter to create Nature.

In Neoplatonism, this demiurgic function is performed by the Daimons (sometimes called “the Mighty Ones”), spirits charged with creating and maintaining the order of the world. Thus, the Natural World, left to its own processes, was seen as completely deterministic. This Divine order, or *heimarmene*, was often seen as confining and oppressive in late antiquity, leading to both an obsession with astrology (which could reveal the pattern of the predetermined plan of the world) and a desire for an escape from determinism, for free will. The latter was offered by the Mystery cults. Through the Mysteries, the individual could gain access to and understanding of the realms beyond the Natural World, even beyond the realm of the Daimons, and so be liberated from the “tyranny of the angels” (to quote the *Hermetica*). Hekate, the patroness of the theurgic process, was often called *Soteira*, “the Savior”, precisely because she saved her followers from the bonds of Fate.

As the Chaldean Oracles put it:

The theurgists do not fall into the herd, which is subject to Destiny. (*Chaldean Oracles*, frag. 153)

Thus, one of the spiritual benefits of the Gardnerian path, indeed of any Mystery path, is liberation from the bonds of Fate through understanding of the “higher” or “more fundamental” realms – the acquisition and exercise of free will.

Benefit 2: Immortality

In pursuit of union with the One, the individual learns to locate their sense of Self at different points along the chain of being from Matter to the One, resulting in different understandings and experiences of death.

* The individual who is purely materialistic, living in the realm of Matter, experiences death as the end. You're born, you live, you die, that's it.

* The individual who understands something of the Spiritual, lives to varying degrees in the realm of Soul and experiences death as part of a process of reincarnation. Each life is relatively self-contained, but there is a continuity and greater or lesser amounts of memory retained from life to life, as is promised to the initiate in the Legend of the Descent:

To fulfil love you must return again at the same time and place, as the loved ones, and you must remember and love her or him again. (Gardner 1954, 41)

* The individual who has achieved union and identification with the Gods lives in the realm of Mind, beyond the concept of time that is part of the harmonizing function of Soul. Lifetimes all exist simultaneously as part of an eternal present, each life a different facet of the Self.

Thus, the Gardnerian path assists the individual in accepting and understanding, and therefore experiencing, their own immortality, as is promised in the Charge:

For mine is the secret door which opens upon the Land of Youth, and mine is the cup of the wine of life, and the Cauldron of Cerridwen, which is the Holy Grail of immortality.⁵

Conclusion

Gardnerian Wica is one of many magical & Neopagan paths today whose practitioners are reclaiming the heritage of theurgy that was almost lost in the West. We are embracing this living and lively school of Pagan thought, as applicable today as it was when Paganism was the majority religion on Earth. Theurgy is part of the legacy handed down from our spiritual forbears and it can help lend depth to our practice, explain the mysterious while approaching the Mystery, lead to union with the One, grant free will & immortality, and point the way to increased understanding with those of other faiths.

Thank you.

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⁵ Quoted in Farrar (1981, 43); recommended by Doreen Valiente in Valiente (1989, 62).

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*** **Comparison of Wican & Neoplatonic / Hermetic Concepts** ***

"Dryghtyn Prayer" Wican Degree Spiritual Beings Philosophic Concept Number Principle Nature

Dryghtyn	(none)	(no beings)	the One	1	unity	eternal
the Goddess & God	3 rd Degree	the Demiurge / the Gods	<i>Nous</i> / Mind	1 & 2	order	eternal
the Mighty Ones	2 nd Degree	the Daimons / the <i>Anima Mundi</i>	Soul(s)	1 & many	harmony	temporal
the Elemental Kings	1 st Degree	the 4 Elements	Matter	many	“chaos”	temporal