

# Tarot of the Magicians

**The Occult Symbols of the Major Arcana that Inspired Modern Tarot**



**Oswald Wirth**

**Introduction by Mary K. Greer**

*Includes the 1889 Wirth Deck*

# **Tarot of the Magicians**

**OSWALD WIRTH**

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*To the Memory of Stanislas de Guaita*





# Introduction by Mary K. Greer

A Swiss, an Italian, a Spaniard and a Dutch-Frenchman walked into a bar . . . It sounds like the beginning of a joke, but in the artistic and metaphysical melting pot of *fin de siècle* Paris this was a formula for a creative and volatile, indeed, alchemical mixture as profound in the esoteric world as the symbolist and expressionist movements were in the art and literary world. In 1888, the same year as the birth of England's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Oswald Wirth joined Stanislas de Guaita, Papus, and Joséphin Péladan in founding the *Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix* ("Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross"). The following year Wirth, under the direction of de Guaita, created a landmark Major Arcana Tarot deck that has been reproduced here for the first time since 1889 in a form that you can cut out to make your own deck.

## THE MAN AND THE DECK

Joseph Paul Oswald Wirth was born on August 5, 1860 (d. 1943), around 9 a.m. in Brienz, near Bern, Switzerland to Alsatian parents. His father was a painter and Oswald assisted him at his work. Around 1880 he came to Paris, served briefly in the army, tried working as an accountant, joined the Freemasons, and took up the study of hypnotism, magnetic healing and occultism. He soon fell under the sway of the wealthy Italian nobleman, Stanislas de Guaita (1861–1897), who, at 26, was a year younger, and already a well-known poet and author in French esoteric circles. Wirth became de Guaita's close friend and personal secretary, beginning a nearly two year journey that would culminate in the Tarot deck, *Les 22 Arcanes du Tarot Kabbalistique*, originally published by Georges Poirel in an edition of 350 copies.

A hundred years earlier, in 1781, Antoine Court de Gébelin (1719–1784) announced in volume eight of his encyclopedia, *Le Monde Primitif*, that the



Tarot, formerly seen as a card game, came from Egypt and portrayed ancient occult mysteries. Eight years after that, Jean-Baptiste Alliette (1738–1791), under the *nom de plume* Etteilla, published the first specifically occult deck, extensively modified to carry out the Egyptian and creation motifs described by de Gébelin.

De Guaita didn't think much of Etteilla's deck. He felt that the true occult mysteries were already inherent in the traditional French Tarot de Marseille. So, with Wirth as the artist, they designed the *22 Arcana of the Kabbalistic Tarot*, adding esoteric symbolism to the Marseille model. Their deck would be the first to depict the Kabbalistic correspondences and magical philosophy of the great French magician, Éliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant, 1804–75). Based on a seminal book on the Kabbalah, the *Sepher Yetzirah*, Lévi linked the Hebrew numbers, letters and astrology to the Tarot. Although Lévi had died when de Guaita and Wirth were still youths, many of his unpublished papers were obtained by de Guaita for his extensive esoteric library.

The Wirth Tarot illustrated the 1889 edition of *Le Tarot des Bohémiens* by Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916), which also contained an essay by Wirth. As jealous animosity developed between them, Papus decided to create his own original Tarot card designs, illustrated by the talented young artist Jean-Gabriel Goulinat (1883–1972), which he used in his 1909 book *Tarot Divinatoire* and in the 1911 reprint of *Le Tarot des Bohémiens*.

Not only were there tensions within the order, but when Oswald Wirth and Stanislas de Guaita infiltrated a rival occult church and published an exposé describing it as a “Temple of Satan,” the Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross found itself in the middle of a violent magical conflict that was known as “The War of the Roses.” The writer Joris Huysmans, in a novel and an article, charged de Guaita with murdering the Abbé Boullan by occult means. De Guaita challenged him to a duel and Huysmans backed down. There were more duels that included a comedy of errors of misfired guns and collapsed carriages, culminating when Papus and the publisher Jules Bois finally wounded each other with sabers (which didn't stop them from later becoming friends). De Guaita died suddenly in 1897—some said of a drug overdose while others claimed it was the result of a demonic attack.

After de Guaita's death Oswald Wirth took a civil service job in a government library and lived quietly with his widowed sister and his niece. He went on to become a major figure in French Freemasonry, promoting through books and articles an esoteric interpretation of the symbolism of their rituals and of the Tarot as a compendium of Masonic knowledge. Wirth clearly identified himself as the Hermit in the Tarot, which in his deck is supposedly a self-portrait. His occult pseudonym, Diogène Gondeau, alludes to the ascetic Greek philosopher Diogenes, who is usually shown holding up a lamp in his search for “an honest man.”

In 1926 Wirth designed a new version of his deck incorporating several changes and including metallic-gold ink and elaborate art nouveau borders

containing thinly-disguised glyphs from the early Phoenician alphabet. A year later, he published the book you now hold in your hands, originally titled *Le Tarot des Imagiers du Moyen-Âge* (“Tarot of the Medieval Image-Makers”) to share what he had learned in forty years studying the Tarot. But, it wasn’t easy getting there.

## THE TAROT CHAPEL

Wirth tells us in his preface that he tragically lost the first manuscript of his Tarot opus, but was then given the opportunity for ‘uninterrupted meditation . . . stimulated by a Gothic background’ at a location ‘with one of the finest landscapes in France.’ It was there that he was able to complete his second version. It was precisely for the unmatched beauty of the landscape that American heiress, Mary Wallace Shillito, built *Le Château des Avenières* on a hill top in the south of France. Mary Shillito was a devotee of Paris’ esoteric, literary and artistic salons who married an engineer, occultist and amateur archeologist of Assyria and Egypt, Assan Farid Dina (1871-1928). Dina was well thought of in metaphysical circles, and together with his wife, they hosted gatherings of prominent occultists including René Guénon, Papus, Paul Chacornac, René Schwaller de Lubicz and Oswald Wirth.

Built in the Gothic style (note Wirth’s description above), the Château (now a five-star hotel known for its breathtaking views) contains an even more Gothic chapel, completed in 1917. The walls are covered with enamel and gold mosaics depicting all the images of the Tarot Major Arcana. It is likely that Wirth retreated here to write his book. The chapel art and Dina’s own obsession with archaic alphabets must have inspired the revised art nouveau Tarot deck Wirth published in 1926. French writer Alain Bocher speculates that the Tarot mosaics were actually designed by Wirth himself because of the unquestionable similarities. However, there are also images from the deck created by fellow Order member, Papus with the artist Georges Goulinat. But, no matter who copied whom, the chapel makes it clear by the way its images ascend into the vaulted ceiling, that Wirth’s own deck, rather than being a psychological or fortune-telling one was created as a moral and initiatory Tarot that describes the apotheosis of human kind.

## SACRED SYMBOLS

In his preface, Wirth gives an eloquent description of the power of medieval symbolism that he discovered upon following de Guaita’s instructions to restore the purity of the Tarot. “We should learn to appreciate this masterpiece of the Middle Ages; worthy of our admiration to the same extent as are the Gothic cathedrals and philosophic Alchemy.” Sacred symbols that “put the esotericism of initiation into picture forms” had more to do with the arts of the stone cutters of the great

cathedrals than with the more distant Egyptians. But, both were thought to contain a deep, silent wisdom common to all cultures and kept alive in rituals like those of the Freemasons. These ideas are found in teachings called the Perennial Philosophy, Ancient Wisdom Tradition, the Secret Doctrine or Teachings of the Ages.

Medieval consciousness experienced images as conduits for otherworldly forces to effect the physical world. Statues and paintings were an invocation as well as a remembrance of the forces depicted. In a sense, the Tarot remains as a kind of last gasp of the medieval ideal of a cosmological order that continually reasserts itself in the lives of gods and men. There can be little doubt that in the minds of those who created the deck, it depicted relative positions in society, virtues and values, inevitable forces, and a triumphant end with which everyone could be expected to essentially agree.

Wirth's original title, *Le Tarot des Imagiers du Moyen Age* ("Tarot of the Medieval Image-Makers"), alludes to human kind as constructive workers in the eternal creative work of the Divine. The original word, *imagier*, is incredibly rich as it can be translated as sculptor, artisan, stonecutter, illustrator or symbolist. For Wirth, it referred to the operative craftsmen—architects and builders who made the temples and cathedrals—who would have belonged to a guild that initiated apprentices into the craft secrets that included sacred symbolism. In a broader sense, each one of us partakes of the double nature of artist-artisan, symbolist and builder shaping the rough stone into the perfect cube for a Temple, which is both the perfected self and a world in harmony with all its parts. Achievement of the "Great Work" of union with the Divine is only a first step; it is to be followed by a commitment to remain earth-bound and work toward the betterment of all society.

Most of today's Tarot readers come from a modern perspective that blends Jungian, Neopagan, New Thought, New Age, and earth-centered Eco-Spiritualism with New Physics and a sprinkling of Theosophical concepts in a kind of quasi-pantheistic idea of the immanence of Spirit in all beings and in nature. It is important to understand that Oswald Wirth came from a European world view that had only recently emerged from the rationalist ideals of Enlightenment Humanism found in such advocates of equality, social-responsibility and revolution as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. The occult Tarot blended this with a more esoteric transcendent deism espoused in Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry and in the practice of theurgic magic. Major influences include Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Jacob Böhme, Emanuel Swedenborg, Martinez de Pasquale and Louis Claude de Saint-Martin. The idea was to work with Nature but ultimately transcend it. The thread that runs through all this is the Perennial Philosophy with roots in Pythagorean numerology, Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, which was blended with Classical philosophy whose re-emergence had spearheaded the Renaissance. By the seventeenth century a system of correspondences had

emerged that included alchemy, astrology and Kabbalah—all suggesting that a direct knowledge of the nature of god (*gnosis*) is possible through a kind of spiritual illumination.

## TRANSCENDENTAL MAGIC AND THE ASTRAL LIGHT

Éliphas Lévi stood at the crossroads as the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment wound down into the spiritual aesthete of the Symbolists. He taught what he called “the Science of Transcendental Magic” in which he sought to reconcile magic and religion. (Two of his books were translated into English by A.E. Waite and a third by Aleister Crowley.) His was a metaphysical idealism, the key of which he proclaimed could be found in a single book: a universal key, “which is the summary of all sciences, which can resolve all problems by its infinite combinations, which speaks by evoking thought, is the inspirer and moderator of all possible conceptions, and the masterpiece perhaps of the human mind.” *This book, this “Great Arcanum of Transcendental Magic,” is, he tells us, the Tarot.* (The terms Major and Minor Arcana were coined by his follower, Paul Christian.)

The English title of this book, *Tarot of the Magicians*, is found in Chapter Seven’s cosmogonic outline: “*The god of Tarot is the Magician*, the father of all things, the eternal generator” who, as Wirth explains, symbolizes creative activity and will, the idea before conception. This idea directly addresses the magic of transcendence that for Lévi and Wirth was accessed through the Astral Light, a sort of etheric electromagnetism (aether, odic fluid, vril, orgone, prana, Qi and *Star Wars*’ The Force) that operates uniquely on each plane of consciousness: “It is through this astral light that the signs and wonders of magic are mediated,” allowing the molding of energy through will into physical forms.

For both Wirth and Lévi incarnation in the material world serves Spirit by forcing Spirit to free itself from the limitations of an illusion of separateness, both from the Divine and from others. Nature becomes a kind of school in which we are to see through the illusion of separateness that matter imparts. Wirth follows Lévi in seeing the Devil as the force which condenses astral light into a denser animal magnetism—the instinct for physical survival—essential for the life of the body. As a radical force for self-preservation it sees each entity as separate and sees Nature and others for its own benefit—in a way, selfishly damming or short circuiting the free flow of energy. It is a person’s direction of this force by a pure will that is the secret to using its qualities for good. This is one of the great lessons that the Tarot teaches.

## MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Although the Major Arcana-only Wirth Tarot has never become wildly popular in English-speaking countries, these twenty-two cards continue to intrigue and

inspire new expressions (see the list of decks at the end). Perhaps it is because Wirth achieved what few deck designers have done: “a perfect unity of symbolism in which no element is unnecessary.” It is this quality that we find in the most iconic decks, from the Renaissance Italian, to the Marseille, to the Rider-Waite and Thoth. A fellow member of the Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross, Sâr Péladan, wrote, “Making the invisible visible: that is the true purpose of art and its only reason for existence. . . . Art is a little piece of God within a painting. . . . If you create a perfect form, a soul will come and inhabit it.”

This is true of the Wirth deck, which, like the other iconic decks, seems to endure through time. When the artist, Wirth, worked with the esotericist, de Guaita, depicting Éliphas Lévi’s vision of Tarot, he achieved something more than a projection of his own personality. Rather, it is a work edited to achieve not just beauty but faithfulness to an intent that transcends the personal. Wirth drew this deck many times over the years, with slight changes, to illustrate his articles on Masonic Tarot, and as simplified drawings for this book (the illustrations used here were redrawn by Michel Simeon for a modern French edition). They culminated in his 1926 portfolio of gilded art nouveau Tarot plates.

One other change should be noted. The title of the very important Appendix that explains the book’s key symbols was rewritten in the 1966 Tchou edition. The 1926 original translates as, “Some Indications on the Symbolism of the *Pantacles* which Accompany the Text.” It should read “pantacles” wherever the appendix text previously read “pentacles.” This edition of the book has been corrected. A pantacle is *any magical figure* intended to produce results, a mental aid and prompt during magical workings. According to Éliphas Lévi, the pantacle is a complete and perfect synthesis expressed by a single sign, which serves to focus all intellectual force into a glance, a recollection, a touch. It is a starting-point for the efficient projection of will. By contrast, a pentacle (a pentagram within a circle) is the preeminent or archetypal pantacle, representing the Microcosm. Wirth tells us, “At the sign of a pantacle we ought to enter meditation and through ourselves find the all (*pan*), the world of thoughts to which it is related.”

## FOR TAROT NEWBIES: HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Tarot newcomers and those interested primarily in reading the cards may get bogged down by the order in which this work is presented. I suggest the following plan:

- Read only the first part of Chapter One on the origins of Tarot (there are some historical errors that are understandable for the time).
- Proceed directly to Part Two on the symbolism of the trumps, referring to the Appendix as needed. (Some familiarity with the myths of Isis/Osiris and of Ishtar/Gilgamesh helps.)

- Next, study Part Four on the Tarot applied to divination.
- Also helpful is Chapter 11 in Part Three, as it summarizes card interpretations in terms of both good and bad characteristics.
- After this, read the book through from beginning to end. And then read it again a decade or so later.

Those who truly want to experience Oswald Wirth as their teacher and guide will *read this book in the order he intended*. To get the most from the experience, lay out your own cards in the patterns described in Part One using the cards included in the back of this book or another Wirth-influenced or Marseille-style deck. (A list of Wirth-inspired decks can be found at the end of this introduction.) Following his reasoning is like being taken through an intricate and confusing landscape by an experienced guide who points out key elements that will help you make important connections when you later explore on your own.

While his explanations are only one of many Tarot perspectives, they effectively synthesize the great occult and metaphysical ideas that coalesced in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For English-speakers, it can broaden and deepen our parochial Anglo-American Tarot view, shaped primarily by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and New Thought authors, Paul Foster Case and Eden Gray.

## THE MEDITATION PATTERNS

For Oswald Wirth, the underlying structure of the Tarot is revealed first by viewing the twenty-two arcana in a circle, neatly solving the perennial problem of where the Fool goes. He then divides them into two rows of eleven cards that provide matching pairs, which Wirth next groups into quaternities. Regarding the two rows, the first row (cards 1 through 11) is an active, masculine set expressing what we possess innately. The second row (cards 12 through 21 & 0) is a passive, feminine set that is receptive and susceptible to the cosmic forces that surround us. It helps to think of these two sets as the grammatical active and passive voices. The difference is similar to that between “John throws the ball” and “The ball was thrown at John.” We can see this distinction more clearly in the two cards of the Lovers and the Star: The Lovers is about actively making a choice, and the Star is about being at the effect of one’s destiny. This dual process forms the bedrock for Wirth’s understanding of the Tarot. He firmly believed that anyone who studies these sets will eventually learn all they need to know about the Tarot and about humanity’s purpose within the cosmos.

When laid out in two rows, the second row begins with the Hanged Man. For the Hermeticist or alchemist, this card, half-way through, marks the accomplishment of the Great Work—but only within oneself. The rest of the



cards show how the Divine works upon the Adept after he or she has completely surrendered to that working.

In both this book and in the short follow-up, *Introduction to the Study of Tarot*, Wirth gives directions for learning directly from the pairs, although the technique is couched in paradox.

- “The main secret is to put the characters together in pairs and listen to their conversation.”
- “By their contrast with each other, you can learn to know them best.”
- “To make the Tarot speak is our objective, but the arcana only speak to those who have learned to understand them.”
- “Words do not suffice for what we see, which is why they are mute. But, out of the need to communicate what is seen in reverie, both the poet and prophet is born.”

In order to demonstrate that the cards work at different levels for different purposes, Wirth surveys the cards several times: first, he describes the symbolism that informs any reading of the cards, then a cosmological overview, followed by the path of Initiation, the work of an Hermetic or Alchemical Adept, and finally the allegories of Freemasonry. Some cards have a totally opposite meaning at different levels, for instance the Moon card is about getting lost in deception and illusion at one level, but at another it is about recognizing the symbolic and allegorical truths in old myths, mysteries and superstitions.

## DIVINATION

Despite his many-layered approach, Wirth never loses sight of the practicalities of mundane divination. When he first published his deck in 1889 Wirth tells us he was prejudiced against divination. However, many friends asked him for readings, which he could not deny them, and they reported back on the incredible accuracy of what was revealed. After much experience he concluded that, “To divine is to imagine rightly,” and that we must educate and discipline the imagination to make divination into a sacred art.

“Divination is the mother of all our knowledges, all our philosophies and of all our religions. It is worthy of respect and deserves to be taken seriously . . . One must divine in order to understand and acquire the clairvoyance of which the narrow rationalist in his blindness deprives himself. This rationalist runs the risk of assuming the heavy gait of a learned beast.”

His spread, which takes the form of a case being tried in court, is as iconic in France as the Celtic Cross Spread is in the English-speaking Tarot world. It

provides a perfect opportunity to listen to the cards converse as the prosecuting and defense attorneys argue their case and the judge evaluates their pleas.

Ultimately, for Wirth, the Tarot tells us where we came from, what we are, and where we are going (past, present, future). The purpose is to regain Paradise, but in a Universal Regeneration in which, ultimately, all humans come as close as nature will allow to Divine Perfection. We humans become artists in order to complete a Divine Work that brings order to human chaos. “We become Free Artists, Free Builders, Freemasons, carrying out the plan of the Supreme Architect via the law of life which is that of creative work.”

MARY K. GREER

MARCH, 2012



# *Author's Preface*

**I**ndulging as I was in the practice of occultism and before studying its theories deeply, I was, at the beginning of 1887, applying my hypnotic skills on a sick woman who fell asleep under my influence. She was a lucid patient who informed me of the state of her organs and of the effect produced by my fluid. Her tendency to chatter came out in spontaneous revelations, quite unexpected, to which I only paid moderate heed.

One day however, I was struck by my clairvoyant's tone of conviction, which seemed to perceive with more accuracy than usual as she said 'You will receive a letter with a red seal of armorial bearings!' This she exclaimed as if this fact were of particular importance.

'Can you see who the letter will come from?'

'It is written by a young fair-haired man with blue eyes who has heard of you and wishes to make your acquaintance. He will be very useful to you and you will get on extremely well together.'

I asked other questions, but the replies were confused; they merely embarrassed the lady to no purpose. She was floundering and finally said, 'Wait for the letter; I can see it clearly with its red seal. It will reach you in a few days, before the end of next week.'

Intrigued, I looked out for my mail, but the week went by and nothing came, then two more weeks went by and I was tired of waiting. I decided that the sleeping woman had been dreaming, surrendering to the suggestion of her wandering imagination, as was her wont as soon as her vision ceased to relate to herself and to the stages of her cure. In short, lucidity is dependent on the instinct which urges the sick animal to seek its health-restoring grass. In any case it is easier to see clearly within oneself, than to draw true information from the outside. That is to say, vague moving images which receptive imaginations pick up.

Reflections such as these made me forget the letter that I had waited for in vain, to such an extent that the prediction which I have rejected only came to mind when I received a letter with a red armorial seal. Without bothering with the envelope, I hastened to find out the contents, they took me far away from all the mutterings of a sleepwalker.

Stanislas de Guaita was inviting me to come and talk to him. Now, what I knew then of the future author of *Serpent de la Genèse* made me picture him as an erudite man, rich in knowledge accumulated during the course of many years of study. I expected to be received, if not by Doctor Faustus, not yet rejuvenated, at least by a master writer who had passed the half-way mark in his life. You can imagine my surprise when I saw myself joyfully welcomed by a young man of twenty-six years of age: who in no way pontificated. My heart was immediately won. He was young and fair-haired, with blue eyes, and the letter had been sealed with red; no doubt at all . . . this was him, the friend, the protector as promised by the sleeping patient.

The future justified the extraordinary emotion of the clairvoyant when she announced the letter with the red seal, which at that time had not yet been written.<sup>1</sup> My entering into a relationship with S. de G. became for me an event of great importance! He made me his friend, his secretary and his collaborator. His library was at my disposal and benefiting from his conversation, I found in him a teacher of the Kabbala of high metaphysics, as well as the French language; for G. took the trouble to form my style and to refine me from a literary point of view. He made me appreciate well-turned phrases by initiating me into the aesthetics of beautiful French prose. It is to him that I owe my readability.

I am also obliged to him for forming my intellect. When it was his desire to have me as a friend, I was only an elementary handler of fluid, gaining empirical results, but I was weak in logic. Guaita possessed the enlightenment which I lacked. Whereas I had but a smattering of spiritism and vague theosophy, he had assimilated the traditional doctrine of the masters of the science of the occult, of which he said he was a very humble disciple. Starting from Eliphas Lévi he had gone on to the Kabbalists of the Renaissance and to the hermetic philosophers of the Middle Ages, reading and understanding everything with amazing facility. The most obscure texts became clear as soon as he threw the light of his brilliant mind upon them.

Metaphysical problems were like child's play to him, and I was far from being able to follow him, but when I was too far behind he was quick to retrace his steps and in brotherly fashion take me by the hand. He was lenient towards my slow saturnine understanding.

Being caught up as I was in the briars of the earthly forest: I found in Guaita the guide who moved in the heights. Without him how would I have found my way? It was he who inspired the study which I have not ceased to pursue.

Knowing of my skill in drawing, he advised me, right from our first interview in 1887, to restore the 22 arcanas of the Tarot to their hieroglyphic purity and gave me the necessary material by providing me immediately with two Tarots, one French the other Italian, as well as *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, the most important work of Eliphas Lévi, in which the Tarot is the object of copious commentary.

Such was the starting point of the present work of which one could say that Stanislas de Guaita is the spiritual father. After I had submitted to him a first Tarot redesigned on the two crude packs which I have compared, this learned occultist gave me his criticism for which he was held answerable at the time of the publication of the *Tarot Kabbalistique*, which appeared in 1889, with 350 copies, with the help of the photogravers of G. Poisel.

This Tarot was valued and appreciated by the occultists. Compared with the card games then in circulation it was very satisfying, but it still had to be perfected. The ideal to be realized demands a perfect unity of symbolism, so that everything fits into the 22 compositions, which must throw light upon each other and must contain no arbitrary detail which is not justified. To lead to this operation one had to grasp the overall idea of it and become acquainted with the concepts which gave it birth.

With the help of Stanislas de Guaita, I set to work to acquire the knowledge of symbolism empowering me to restore the Tarot to the design and colours in accord with the Medieval Spirit. It was a long process, but I had the patience to learn methodically. Whenever I came across them I practised interpreting the symbols even to the point of gaining the reputation of being a specialist in the field. Starting first of all with the constructive symbolism of the Freemasons, I was then led to compare it with that of the Alchemists, who put the esotericism of initiation into picture forms, taken from ancient metallurgy. This esotericism was most carefully adapted to the practice of their arts by the stone cutters of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as one is able to make the symbols speak, they surpass all speech in eloquence, for they allow one to find the 'Last Word', that is to say the eternal living thought, of which they are the enigmatic expression. Decipher the hieroglyphics of the deep silent wisdom, common to thinkers of all ages, religions, myths and poetic invention, and you will reveal ideas in harmony and relative to the problems which have always preoccupied the human mind. In a poetic way symbols reveal to us concepts which are too ethereal to lend themselves to the limitation of words. Not everything can be dehydrated into the prose of barristers and rhetoricians. There are some things so subtle that one has to feel and divine them like the adepts of the wise philosophy of the Medieval Symbolists, who will react against the pedantic slavery of words.

It is from these wise and discreet masters that the Tarot comes to us, as a unique monument which instructs the thinker more than all the sententious



treatises, for its pictures teach us to discover the modest truth which lies hidden in the depths of our own understanding.

No collection of symbols is comparable to it, revealing as it does, wisdom of a completely unarbitrary kind, for each of us discerns it freely, without being prey to any other suggestion but that of silent pictures.

Containing in a condensed form, otherwise inexplicable thoughts, these pictures have no words, but do not hide the fact that they have to make us fathom their precious wisdom. But does the mentality of the twentieth century lend itself to divination? What would be the lot of the Tarot today if it remained enigmatic, just as it has come to us, without being accompanied by some interpreting text however slight? We are in a hurry and no longer have the leisure time for meditation; to think entirely for oneself takes too long. We need ideas explained clearly to achieve a quick assimilation or immediate rejection.

I did my best to conform to the requirements of the age. My efforts ended in a series of essays which I felt in no hurry to have published in view of their imperfection. In 1922 however, I thought that I ought to draw from my mass of materials a definite manuscript. The editor of *The Green Snake*<sup>3</sup> had made proposals which made me decide finally to produce a work which was bordering on an obsession. The draft copy which I entrusted to the publisher however, did not deserve to see daylight, for it was lost in a rather incomprehensible way. After a long but fruitless wait concerning the result of searches undertaken to find my text, I had to resign myself to starting the work again.

The necessary uninterrupted meditation was found for me in the course of my holidays of 1924/25. Benefiting from a lovely retreat in a delightful spot where the view embraces one of the finest landscapes in France, I hope that my final text reflects the inspiring background and great light of the longest days.

By becoming absorbed in a contemplation stimulated by a Gothic background, I thought that I was in meditative communion with the past, living in the memory which constantly evoked Stanislas de Guaita. I am convinced that the master for whom the veil of mystery was lifted, does not abandon his colleague who is straining to discern the truth.

Like many other theories, that of the Unknown Superior Beings is true, provided that it is understood. Our true initiators often do not reveal themselves to our senses, and sometimes remain as silent as the symbolic compositions of the Tarot, but they keep watch on our efforts at deciphering, and as soon as we have found the first letter, they can mysteriously prompt the second to put us on the path of the third. Guaita certainly helped me, for my thought calls to his so that between us a telepathic connection is established. The relationship between one mind and another is in the nature of things, that has nothing in common with the classic or modernized necromancy in the form of spiritism.

Philosophic occultism is not superstitious although it is based on a study of superstition. It is concerned with indestructible beliefs used to analyse and search for the truth which motivates them; for it would be illogical to admit that humanity is forged with all the patches of false ideas which go with nothing. The smoke which darkens space comes from a fire whose hearth we should discover. The investigators of the obscure occultism assign themselves the task of going back to the source of a belief which by necessity has its 'raison d'être'.

Stanislas de Guaita pursued this investigation with the enthusiasm of an exceptionally gifted neophyte, who discerns quickly and who perceives immediately the theoretical synthesis, realizing the overall significance of the facts which are seen as magical. This marvellous receptivity gives us the worth of books which are the enlightening testament of a tradition which is established from now onwards. Guaita, who has never allowed himself to innovate in occultism, arrived only at interpreting faithfully an orthodoxy, that of the masters of the school to which he was linked. These masters were sacred to him and he did not think of criticizing their assertions, for he could not hold suspect the teaching of those whom he admired without reserve.

At this stage one should point out the most remarkable trait in Guaita's character. His generous spirit led him to admire others. I have heard him praise to the skies Josephine Peladan, Maurice Barrès, Laurent Tailhade, Saint Yves d'Alveydre and a number of other contemporaries whose knowledge or literary talent he appreciated. He gave Eliphas Lévi almost the status of a god and bowed before Fabre d'Olivet with a somewhat mystical respect.

The journalists who saw the author of the *Temple de Satan* as the 'dark Marquis' spending his nights in conjurations with the help of books of spells, made the enlightened author laugh heartily as he was totally opposed to any suspect practices. He was never tempted to carry out the slightest magical act, knowing only too well that whatever can be gained in this way is only dangerous illusion leading to breakdown and madness.

Nevertheless ridiculous rumours are abroad in certain places where it is not accepted that the owner of the 'Clef de la Magie Noire' died of natural causes. They carry their effrontery as far as claiming that the last words of Guaita were 'I die the victim of my own work'. I flatly deny this imaginary story, invented to fit in with the doctrines of charlatans' occult practices. Guaita died in the Chateau d'Alteville towards the end of 1897 without ever having attributed his illness to his studies, which had been undertaken before the onset of his illness. The people who were present during his last moments thought that they heard him murmur. 'I can see! I can see!', while an expression of happy surprise spread over the face of the genial explorer of the occult.

Solar natures in love with an ideal of beauty live the life of the flesh only in part, and then only for a limited time. Like Raphael and Mozart, Guaita was

to die young. It was granted to me to live on, but the incomparable friend, the inspiring master, has never died for me. His thought remains as mine; and with him and through him I aspire to initiate myself into the secret things. We collaborate secretly, for he who has gone encourages me to pursue his work, which I deem useful to resume on the basis of the most recent archaeological discoveries. Occultism deserves to be taken seriously, and should not be left to the equivocal dogmatism of disturbed imaginations. In it everything is to be reviewed, weighed up and controlled according to the requirements of an enlightened empiricism.

In this sense I have always done my best, especially when studying the Tarot; as I am conscious of never having ceased to be the secretary of Stanislas de Guaita, who found in me but an inadequate scribe, but strong in his determination in sincerely searching for the truth, and strong too in his cult of gratitude towards the intelligent spirit, whose acts continue, for nothing is lost in this sphere of strength.

May the reader be grateful to Stanislas de Guaita for the ideas which I express, and indulge his pupil who sets them forth here.

—OSWALD WIRTH

# *Author's Introduction*

**I**n occultism a very great importance is attached to the twenty-two arcanas or keys of the Tarot, which all together present in pictures a treatise on high philosophy.

Similar books in which the text can be reduced at the very most to the chapter headings, have nothing to say to the person who has acquired the faculty of making the books speak to him. On the other hand they speak . . . and with marvellous eloquence . . . to those who can question them wisely. Unfortunately we have lost the habit of becoming absorbed in rich and fruitful thought prompted in us simply by the appearance of things. To us the book of nature remains closed with seven seals; its pictures disconcert us, for we understand nothing except the words, whose sound alas bewilders us pitifully.

This has not always been the case. Human language has only recently become philosophical and precise. In early times it did not lend itself to the expression of any abstract idea. The first thinkers were therefore condemned to silence; lacking words, they outlined pictures to relate their dreams to them. Then in order to communicate their ideas to each other, they made for themselves a language incomprehensible to ordinary people, not by inventing new terms, but by drawing the current vocabulary away from its coarse meanings, and giving it a mysterious sense which would be intelligible to the wise. Thus came into existence the system of allegory which all revealers of truth have used.

This language evolved, gradually becoming more precise to provide for the needs of dialectic. Communicative nations acquired the taste of using words, and granted us supremacy in this field, a supremacy which reached its zenith in the ages of scholasticism.

The excess of sterile verbalizing and discussing was bound therefore to cause a reaction, a return to silent meditation based no longer on words and phrases, on

definitions and arguments, but simply on the evocative magic of symbols. Tired of pointless quarrels, imaginative thinkers withdrew and turned aside to devote themselves to dreams. The suggestive influence of these dreams was to bring to life poets like the troubadours, artists, like the builders of cathedrals, not forgetting the modern illustrators, whose enigmatic compositions seem to have been inspired in a mysterious way.

Among these, one masterpiece has survived; it is the Tarot, whose pictures of naive appearance proceed from a secret wisdom, as if the refinements of Hermeticism, of the Kabbala and other diffused traditions, had taken form in the series of the twenty-two arcanas.

In order to appreciate this strange monument we must study it in a profound way. The present work will facilitate the task of the searcher, who will not recoil when faced with the unavoidable effort involved in a strictly personal piece of work. When interpretations are applied to symbols, which are as windows opening onto the infinite, they can have only an indicative value; they never exhaust the subject. Now the indications are there for whoever can make use of them. Simply to repeat them is of no use if no direct application results from this. To make the Tarot speak is our objective, but the arcanas only speak to those who have learned to understand them. So let us develop our understanding if we wish to interrogate, to some purpose, an android, which far from being a thinking machine like Albert the Great's, teaches us to imagine rightly, with the help of a true alphabet of the imagination.

Is the reader ambitious to discipline his imaginative faculties with a view to acquiring an art once honoured, yet is hesitant now that reason alone claims to guide humanity in the paths of wisdom? Is there a better guide than the symbols of the Tarot to the person who is obsessed by mystery, to the heart anxious to sound the depths of night which at present envelop us?

Combined in such a way as to reveal the secret of their interpretation to perceptive spirits, these symbols lead us to discover the mysteries of a world which is foreign to narrow objective assertions, but one must decipher. How? Through what method?

Being anxious to reply to these questions, the author has dedicated the first part of this book to an exposé on method, the aridity of which may put off impatient readers who could be tempted not to linger long enough to benefit from the results of the method, results condensed in the interpretation given to the symbolism of each of the twenty-two arcanas. Then, lastly instructed in the meaning of the symbols, they will be in a hurry to draw divinatory oracles from the Tarot.

Alas, what poor divination they will practise, those who are in haste. One does not become a diviner by improvisation, however gifted one might be with a spontaneous flair for divination, for these gifts do not offer real service except



when they have been cultivated. Divination is an art which has its rules like any other art, and if the Tarot is to be the ideal instrument of this art, then this instrument must perforce be handled as an artist would handle it.

The following pages attempt to reach a judicious handling of the Tarot. I hope they will be able to guide those who are curious and worthy of them, in their own efforts to become initiated into the mysteries of human thought. By making known this work through its own right, a work so characteristic of the Middle Ages, may these following pages also pay homage to the unrecognized genius of a so-called 'dark' era, which made the stars of the most sublime idealism shine in the night of the Western World.







PART ONE

# The Tarot



# *The Origins of the Tarot*

**T**he oldest game of cards known to us comes from Venice, where it was played as early as the fourteenth century. It is made up of seventy-eight cards, which is equivalent to the sum of the numbers from one to twelve inclusive. This total is divided into two fundamentally distinct categories.

The first category contains twenty-two cards, called 'tarots'. These are symbolic representations, clearly designed with a view to something quite different from the game itself. The players are hampered by them and can do nothing with them, except for the trump cards, which are given a value according to their numerical order, without the players being concerned at all with the subject of the card. One might as well replace them with blank cards, simply marked with a number. But it is even more logical to take out of the pack the so-called 'tarots', as did the Spanish players, keeping only the fifty-six other cards.

This second category is divided into four series or 'colours' of fourteen cards. The distinguishing signs of the series are the Wand, the Cup, the Sword and Money, which correspond to what we, in the game of piquet, call Clubs, Hearts, Spades and Diamonds. Each series has ten numerical cards: Ace, Two, Three, etc., up to Ten, then four persons, King, Queen, Knight and Jack.

All card games played in different countries are, in varying degrees, modifications of the earlier game, which has been kept in its entirety in Italy, French Switzerland, Provence, and in the east of France, as far as Alsace. The name of Tarot is attributed to it by extension, for, strictly speaking, this term only applies to the twenty-two cards which are named thus:

1. The Magician
2. The Priestess (Juno)<sup>4</sup>

3. The Empress
4. The Emperor
5. The Pope
6. The Lover
7. The Chariot
8. Justice
9. The Hermit
10. The Wheel of Fortune
11. Strength
12. The Hanged Man
13. Death
14. Temperance
15. The Devil
16. The Tower
17. The Star
18. The Moon
19. The Sun
20. Judgement
21. The World
- ...The Fool or Mate

## THE ALLEGED BOOK OF THOTH

Until the eighteenth century Tarot was only seen as the remains of a barbarous age, and of no interest whatsoever. No one took any notice of it until 1781, the date of the publication of *Le Monde Primitif* by Court de Gebelin, a work in which appeared, in volume VIII, page 365, the following lines:

If one heard the statement that there still exists today a work of the ancient Egyptians, one of the books saved from the flames which destroyed their superb Libraries, a book which contains their purest doctrine on objects of interest, each one of us would, without doubt, be anxious to know such

a precious and extraordinary book. If furthermore it were stated that this book was well known throughout the greatest part of Europe, and that for a number of centuries has been in everyone's hands, then one's surprise would certainly increase. Our surprise would be even greater if we were told that it had never been suspected of being Egyptian, that we have this book without really possessing it, and that no one has ever tried to decipher one sheet of it, and that the fruit of a delightful wisdom is simply looked upon as a collection of extravagant images which in themselves mean nothing at all.

The fact however is only too true: this Egyptian Book, the sole survivor of their magnificent Libraries exists today: it is even so well known that there is no learned man who has not deigned to look into it, no one before us having even guessed at its illustrious origin. This book is the GAME OF TAROTS . . .

Court de Gebelin, quite unprompted, confirms the Egyptian origin of the Tarot. He only needed to discern the symbolic character of the figures until then considered as products of the imagination, to recognize them at once to be hieroglyphics, which one could attribute to the wise scholars of highest antiquity. But this is going too quickly on with our task.

A hypothesis which appeals to the imagination is not put forward without being immediately reconsidered and extended. A wigmaker called Alliette, who under the name of Eteilla, became the high priest of fortune-telling, proclaimed the Tarot to be the oldest book in the world, a work by Hermes-Thoth. He did not stop at that, but believed that he was qualified to revise a document of such importance, but 'this man of imaginative rather than judicious spirit'<sup>5</sup> managed only to falsify a symbolism which had not been studied sufficiently deeply.

Christian in his *Histoire de la Magie* also agrees upon Egypt. This author makes us attend an initiation into the mysteries of Osiris. After this we go into the crypts of the great Pyramid of Memphis, where the initiate undergoes terrifying trials, which lead him to the opening onto a gallery whose double wall has two pilasters, twelve on each side, in twenty-two panels decorated with hieroglyphic paintings. These are the prototypes of the Tarot. The person about to be received walks past these pictures which relate the secret doctrine of the high priests. As he goes along a guardian of the sacred symbols provides explanations which make up the beginner's instruction in initiation.

It is annoying that this gallery should be unknown in the study of Egyptology, which has not brought to light a single trace of this wall-painted book of Hermes of which, when persecuted by the Christians the last of the initiated would have taken a copy, while they were preparing to flee the sanctuary.

According to our present thesis the secret hieroglyphics, once reproduced on portable tablets, were passed on to the gnostics, then to the alchemists, from where we have inherited them.



What one can grant to those who support this connection is that the 'ideas' from which the Tarot takes its inspiration are of great antiquity. These ideas are timeless; they are as old as human thought, but they have been expressed differently, according to the climate of the age. The philosophical system of Alexandria gave them verbal expression, whereas the Tarot was later to present them in the form of symbols. If not by its substance, at least by its form, the Tarot proves itself to be an original work which, in no aspect at all reproduces pre-existing models. Archaeology has not found the slightest trace of what could constitute the remains of an Egyptian Tarot, either gnostic or even of Graeco-Arab alchemy.

## THE THERAPHIM

What strikes us particularly in the Tarot is the number 22, which is exactly the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. One may therefore, wonder whether it is not to the Jews that we owe our Kabbalistic forms. We know that the priests of Jerusalem used to consult the oracle of 'Urim' and 'Thumin' with the help of the 'Theraphim', that is to say, with representations or hieroglyphics. Eliphas Lévi explains how the consultations took place in the temple, on the golden table of the arch saint, then he adds:

When the sovereign priesthood came to an end, when all the oracles in the world were silent in the presence of the Word of man, speaking through the mouth of the most cherished and most gentle of wise men, when the ark was lost, the sanctuary profaned and the temple destroyed, then the mysteries of the 'Ephod' and of the 'theraphim', which were no longer traced on the gold and the precious stones, were written, or rather outlined, by a few wise Kabbalists on ivory, on parchment, on silver and gilt leather, then finally on simple cards which were always held suspect by the official Church as containing the dangerous key to its mysteries. Hence came these tarots, whose ancient origin, revealed to the scholar Court de Gebelin through his knowledge of hieroglyphics and of numbers, so strained the doubtful perspicacity and the tenacious investigation of Eteilla.<sup>6</sup>

The information which we possess on the 'Theraphim' is so vague that it is difficult to appear so positive about them. The Kabbala was familiar to the authors of the Tarot, but these philosophical artists could scarcely have belonged to the Semitic race, which, far from encouraging a symbolism in art, has always preferred to link its abstract speculations with the terseness of letters, number and geometric figures. On the other hand, the Aryan mind takes pleasure in the richness of colours and forms: it is, by nature idolatrous and is in love with pictures. From this point of view, Greece could be the homeland of the Tarot, if Italy of the Middle Ages did not give us undeniable proof as to the invention of playing cards.

## POSITIVE DATA

In the epochs before the invention of wood-engraving, a special industry, that of illustrators or painters of pictures, made by hand very many examples of religious or profane subjects, on parchment or cardboard which delighted the popular customers for these objects. As these buyers liked compositions that were not isolated subjects, but presented as a series, one could offer for sale more and more complicated collections. From the ternary of the godly virtues, from the quaternary of the evangelists, of the elements or of the cardinal virtues, they went on to the septenary of the planets, of the sacraments or of the cardinal sins, without neglecting the allegories relating to the five senses and the nine muses, etc.

The Italians had the idea of putting these pictures all together into a game to amuse and instruct children. So came about the 'naïbi', the innocent cards recommended by moralists such as Morelli, in 1393.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century the first instruction cards led to the invention of playing cards which attributed to Francois Fibbia, who died in 1419. The followers of the Reformation in the town of Bologna did, in fact, grant the right to this lord to place his coat of arms on the Queen of Sticks, and those of his wife, a Bentivoglio, on the Queen of Pennies<sup>7</sup> by virtue of his being the inventor of 'tarocchino'.

The idea of numerical cards (Ace, Two, Three, etc.) seems to have been given to the players by dice, while chess could give them the figures: King, Queen, and Knight, not to mention the Fool and the Tower (House of God) of the Tarot.

But these explanations, tentatively put forward by scholars who were concerned with the origin of the cards, are far from solving the mystery of the origin of the Lombard-Venetian Tarot.

This ancestor of all card games known in Europe is obviously marked by Kabbalistic knowledge, as Papus in his *Tarot des Bohémiens*<sup>8</sup> brought out most clearly. The objects which point out the four sets of fourteen, of the 56 (foreign cards) to the real 22 tarots, are connected with the arts of the occult and correspond to the letters of the divine Tetragram.



Wand, the staff of augury or magic wand, the sceptre of male domination, the emblem of the male's productive power: the Father.



Cup, the cup of divination, woman's receptivity, imaginative and physical: the Mother.



Sword, the blade of the conjuror, which outlines the shape of a cross and so reminds us of the fruitful union of the two principles of male and female, the fusion and the cooperation of opposites. The blade symbolizes, moreover, a penetrating action like that of the Word or of the Son.



Pentacle, the five-sided disc, a sign of support of the will-power, condensing matter of spiritual action; synthesis bringing the ternary to unity, Trinity or Tri-unity.

There is in this choice something else apart from the fortuitous element, and no one can doubt that the inventor of the Tarot, as a game, was conversant with the science of the occult of his time.

But what can one think of the twenty-two trump cards which are of earlier origin than the other cards?

These strange compositions were reproduced in 1392 by Jacquemin Gringonneur 'for the enjoyment of our unfortunate king Charles VI'; but they seem to have been already known by Raymond Lulle, a clever alchemist monk, who lived from 1234 to 1315.

There has been a wish to derive them from the so-called cards of Baldini which are attributed to Mantegna. The two editions which we have of this game only go back to 1470 and 1485, it is true, but one supposes, not without reason, that the engraver of this period was inspired by an older model. Now this unknown model can only be looked for in the Tarot whose Baldini cards are but a systematic extension. The artist, very skilled in his art, but in no way initiated, wanted to correct the Tarot by slanting it in accordance with the demands of his logic and philosophy. In a logical way he tried to classify figures whose incoherence shocked him; this explains this extremely artistic game of fifty subjects grouped in series of tens. The first of these tens designates the hierarchy of social classes: the beggar, valet, artisan, merchant, nobleman, knight, doge, king, emperor and Pope. The nine muses and Apollo make up the second ten. The third is devoted to the sciences which encroach upon the fourth, partly kept for the virtues. Finally the last ten contains the seven planets, as well as the eighth sphere, the first impetus and the first cause.

In this game all the figures of the Tarot are found, slightly modified and adapted according to the ideas of the artist. The latter has, therefore, composed his work in accordance with traditional tarots. If the opposite had been done, one cannot conceive how 22 subjects would have been arbitrarily taken out of a sumptuous collection of 50. Moreover the naivety of the style would guarantee the earlier origin of the Tarot.

The 22 early tarots must, however, be connected with the 'naïbi', those instruction cards not yet used for playing with. An adept of the thirteenth century would have wanted to make a Kabbalistic book with the help of these richly coloured pictures which enjoyed such popularity at that time. Their variety allowed him to choose those which it was possible to link with the ten Sephiroth of the Kabbala, then, by extension, with the 22 letters of the sacred alphabet.

Thus at a place and at a date unknown to us it was possible for the original outline of our Tarot to come into existence.

But is it certain that we are in the presence of the work of an individual? Did a man of genius conceive the Tarot as a whole? This is extremely doubtful, if we are to judge by the changes which the Tarot has undergone during the course of time. The oldest specimens are not the most perfect from the symbolic point of view; they are of a hesitating symbolism, as yet finding its way. It was the successive copyists who finally gave us a Tarot in which every detail has its significance which harmonizes with the whole. One must admit that among the illustrators, some, gifted with a sort of divining sense of symbols, introduced into their reproductions lucky variants which later prevailed; others, carried away by an imagination which did not obey the mysterious directives of tradition, could only distort the original. Although they were continuous, the deviations did not form a school, for a vague but sound instinct brought our most skilled illustrators into the right path of pure symbolism. So, in the Tarot, we receive an anonymous heritage, a work of genius, thanks to the collaboration of various humble people who copied from each other with inspired artlessness, producing, without realizing it, a pure and marvellous work.<sup>9</sup>

## THE INITIATION VALUE OF THE TAROT

We can consider as pointless any discussion on the age of the Tarot as soon as we bring in the intrinsic value of this strange document. Relatively modern in its form, but doubtless extremely old in its subject, this collection of symbols has excited all those who have managed to decipher them.

Let us listen to the Abbé Constant who, under the pen name of Eliphas Lévi, published the works from which proceeds, for a very large part, contemporary occultism.<sup>10</sup>

It is a monumental and unique work—said the Adept (Lévi) when speaking of the Tarot—strong and simple like the architecture of the pyramids, consequently long-lasting like them; it is a book which contains in essence all knowledge and whose infinite combinations can solve all problems; it is a book which, as it speaks makes us think; the inspiring and regulating force of all possible conceptions; the masterpiece, perhaps, of the human mind, and surely one of the finest things which antiquity has left to us; the universal key whose name has been understood and explained only by the enlightened scholar Guillaume Postel<sup>11</sup>; it is a unique text whose first characters alone sent the religious mind of Saint-Marrin<sup>12</sup> into ecstasy and would have restored the power of reason to the sublime and unfortunate Swedenborg.<sup>13</sup>

To these, taken from *Dogme de la Haute Magie*, page 68, one should add the following, taken from *Rituel*, page 355, where it is said, still concerning the Tarot:

It is a real philosophical machine which stops the minds from wandering, all the while leaving us our initiative and freedom; it is mathematics applied to the absolute, the linking of the positive to the ideal; it is a lottery of thoughts, all as rigorously fair, like the numbers; in short, it is perhaps at the same time the most simple and the greatest achievement that the human spirit has ever conceived.

But it is for the reader himself to judge the Tarot, by learning to distinguish in it the marvels which are promised. We are going to proceed methodically, and show how one can make a silent book speak.