

Ithell Colquhoun, with an introduction and notes by Richard Shillitoe and Mark S. Morrisson. *I Saw Water: An Occult Novel and Other Selected Writings*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. 201 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-06423-9. Hardcover \$54.95/Paperback \$32.95.

It is difficult to understand how Ithell Colquhoun's *I Saw Water*, an exemplary work of surrealist fiction, failed to be published upon completion in the 1960s. Now, after half a century, the novel finally comes to print (based on a 1967 typescript) at the able hands of Richard Shillitoe and Mark S. Morrisson, who also provide a comprehensive introduction and in-depth notes that provide context for some of Colquhoun's more obscure allusions. The editors also include a number of short essays and poems (some previously unpublished) that display her interest in esoteric subjects such as occult colour symbolism, alchemy, and the Tarot. Both these texts and the novel itself are complemented by nine brilliantly coloured reproductions of Colquhoun's surrealist paintings, for which she is, perhaps, best known. The publication also features an extensive bibliography—no doubt an extension of the one already maintained by Shillitoe on the web.<sup>1</sup> The focal point of this publication, however—and its greatest treasure—is *I Saw Water*, a surrealist splashing of image and colour onto a dream-like tapestry woven with the myths and symbols of Christianity, alchemy, geomancy, Druidry, Wicca, and ceremonial magic. These traditions are only a few of the tributaries that stream harmoniously together, floating Colquhoun's effort to bypass the rational and connect with the reader on a more primal level—unconscious mind to unconscious mind.

Colquhoun considered *I Saw Water* to be less the product of creative fiction writing and more a collage of 'found' textual snippets—a sort of automatic writing in which dream records were combined with conscious narrative. The dreams from which she gathered material to shape the characters, settings, and themes of the novel were recorded over a 20 year period—from sometime in the 1940s as her activities amidst London's influential surrealist circle began to wind down along with the movement itself, to mid-60s Cornwall, where she had permanently resettled in 1956. After these decades of dream recording, Colquhoun set to work to synthesize these 'found' narratives with a more

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk/bibliography.html>

linear form of story construction. The result is *I Saw Water*, a tale that relies on the Theosophical concept of a second, astral life that awaits the self between physical death and rebirth. Most of the characters in *I Saw Water* occupy Ménéec, an ‘Island of the Dead’ (41) where inhabitants await a moment of realization that will allow them to progress to their next physical reincarnation or, perhaps, elevation into rebirth on a higher plane.

The novel begins with little suggestion of the surreal, ethereal scenes that are to come—as Colquhoun’s central character—Sister Brigid in astral form; Emma de Maine in her former physical life—wanders the seaside hills of Brittany, tending the herds and flocks belonging to her ‘Parthenogenesisist Order.’ By the third chapter, however, the narrative flashes back to Sister Brigid’s early life as a postulant, a time ‘seen as through torn clouds, which half-disclose a distant panorama’ (58). With the flashback the narrative thus takes on a spatially and temporally disjointed dream perspective. From this point Colquhoun rarely returns to the realist mode, though comprehensible plot-lines continue to progress through the somnambular onslaught of colourful vignettes that come together, sometimes only tangentially, to carry the novel forward. Despite this progression, there is little linearity; characters and settings appear from nowhere—just as in a dream. Even the more established characters lack much in the way of consistency—they are villains in one moment, heroes in the next, as in the case of Sister Brigid’s lover who appears to her as a sort of vampiric capitalist but then quickly morphs into the target of a Byronic tryst (97, 103). These inconsistencies would be failings in most other narratives, but they lend well to the dream experience of *I Saw Water*. Colquhoun’s aim seems to be that of the Romantic poet—the evocation of feeling and experience through the sharing of dream, metaphor and vision. *I Saw Water* is thus no page-turner, but it is a feast for the reflective mind.

Part of the dream feel of Colquhoun’s surrealist novel is lent by her heavy reliance on symbolism that proves obscure for what the editors call the ‘nonspecialist reader’ (2)—myths, images, and practices derived from Catholicism, Celtic lore, and a number of different esoteric traditions, including modern forms of pagan practice just beginning to gain significant traction at the time of the novel’s publication, particularly Druidry and Wicca. Colquhoun’s motivation for integrating so much esoteric material seems fairly clear. She no doubt wished to explore and express her experiences with ceremonial magic, modern pagan activity, and Christian practice. Because *I Saw Water* is collaged from dream life and personal experience, it offers fascinating insight into the complex processes of expression and exploration of personal experience that

lie behind Colquhoun's fictional portrayals of setting, character, and action—a close relationship between fiction and reality that seems to be found more often in occult literature than elsewhere, perhaps because of the inherent narrativity of esoteric knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Of course, her frequent personal involvement with the traditions that underpin the symbolism in the novel indicates that such phenomena was not obscure for Colquhoun, but it is likely that she saw value in its obscurity for others. Marginal Catholic saints, pagan traditions, alchemical lore and occult colour symbolism all help perpetuate the ethereal and the abstract in the novel, bypassing rational modes of interpretation in favour of the unconscious glimpses targeted by surrealist artistic practice.

In an attempt to mitigate this obscurity and make the novel more accessible for a wider readership, Shillitoe and Morrisson take great pains to contextualize unfamiliar concepts and symbols for the reader, particularly those related to the esoteric traditions. Morrisson, a scholar of literary modernism and historian of esoteric movements, and Shillitoe, who recently analyzed Colquhoun's synthesis of art and magic in *Ithell Colquhoun: Magician Born of Nature* (2007), are well suited to this task. Their 36 page introduction covers a wide range of topics—surrealism, occultism, geomancy, Breton geography, nature worship, the tripartite goddess, dream theory, astral travel, Kabbalah, alchemy and the late Victorian emergence of the female magician are all introduced as part of the editors' effort to explain unfamiliar concepts and suggest 'important lines of analysis' (2). 27 pages of endnotes are also provided to contextualize and interpret Colquhoun's allusions to everything from etheric light (84) to rhubarb (108).

Both introduction and notes are enormously helpful in granting the reader almost effortless comprehension, but it must be asked whether the analytical approach taken by the editors honours Colquhoun's original intentions for *I Saw Water*. Shillitoe and Morrisson's approach unquestionably prioritizes rational reading faculties over the surreal, unconscious experience the author intended. Perhaps with this problem in mind, the editors have placed the notes at the end of the novel; those readers looking to access the surrealist exchange of unconscious understanding can do so by assiduously avoiding both the

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<sup>2</sup> On esotericism and narrative see Andreas Kilcher, "7 Epistemological Theses," in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 147. For a discussion of a similar relationship between the masonic-Rosicrucian experiences of British fantasist Charles Williams and his seven novels of occult fiction, see Aren Roukema, "A Veil that Reveals: Charles Williams and the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross," *Journal of Inklings Studies* 5, no. 1 (2015).

introduction and the editors' notes. Still, the problem of respect toward the priorities and intentions of the author remains. Colquhoun offers her own notes of context where she seems to feel a need (e.g. 88). She also included her own preface, which partially explains the concept of the second, aphysical life after death. In large part, however, she seems to have intended the allusions and metaphors of the 1967 version to stand for themselves. A passage from Colquhoun's commentary on one of her paintings, 'Dance of the Nine Opals' (1942—included in this publication, 165–66) indicates that she may have seen further clarification as impossible, given the 'found' nature of the images, symbols, and settings of *I Saw Water*: 'When a picture comes directly from the unconscious, it is almost as difficult for the artist as it is for the spectator to say what it means.' The interpretation of meaning delivered via the artist's subconscious therefore remains relative to the experience of the reading subject. While Colquhoun proceeds in the same essay to interpret and offer context for the images in 'Dance of the Nine Opals'—thus at least somewhat supporting the editors' method—I would (rather stodgily) suggest that the creator of a work has more place to do so than a critic. At times the notes attached to *I Saw Water* present a danger of limiting the reader's understanding of the novel to the parameters set by the editors' interpretation of meaning; in such a layered, multivalent work, this bracketing inevitably reduces the full potential of direct reader interpretation and experience. Examples of such notes are found on pages 149, 153 and 157, where interpretation of particular event sequences or dream snippets accomplish a task for the reader that could have easily been performed themselves. I don't wish to suggest that there is no place for the critical extrapolation of meaning seen in such literary interpretation, but it doesn't seem fitting in the context of supplementary notes attached to a surrealist novel.

That said, despite these few overzealous interpretations and perhaps a little too much contextual information, Shillitoe and Morrisson do a masterful job of providing historically accurate, well-balanced, appropriate information for the reader to digest along with the novel itself. Those looking to better understand Colquhoun's philosophy, thought processes, and artistic method will appreciate the approach taken, as will those interested more in comprehension than in experiential, visionary reception of the written word. Inevitably, given the scope of Colquhoun's references, readers will sometimes find themselves wondering why particular obscurantisms are defined and contextualized while others are left to stand alone. For example, a mysterious reference to a group of children running before Sister Brigid shouting 'Aha!' (64) would become

much clearer in the context of Aleister Crowley's *Aha!* or *Liber CCXLII*. In the preface of this volume Crowley states that the dialogue which makes up the majority of the text is intended 'for the instruction of the little children of the light.'<sup>3</sup> There is little doubt that Colquhoun would have encountered this text as a member of the Ordo Templi Orientis, a Crowleyite magical order, so the connection seems clear. It could also be argued that the editors could have spent more time contextualizing Colquhoun's heterodox Christian beliefs, particularly since this context would help the reader unfamiliar with Christian imagery and tradition understand a novel that, on balance, is built more on Catholic material than that of any other spiritual tradition. However, since the notes and context can already seem overwhelming, the editors likely made the right choice in assuming that this material would already be more accessible to the average reader.

Such oversights are, moreover, unavoidable given the wide symbolic vistas through which Colquhoun's creativity wanders. Those interested in the historical context provided by Shillitoe and Morrisson will encounter high-grade research performed by experienced scholars, who clearly have an excellent grasp of the complexity of the traditions Colquhoun draws upon. The editors tiptoe adroitly through the tripwires and land mines that seem to lie between historical or discursive approaches to esoteric knowledge and the interpretations of those more closely invested in it—never finding themselves with a need to offer value judgments on the belief systems of Colquhoun or those who influenced her. This quality editorial contextualization and analysis, combined with the valuable supplemental materials, enrich an already impressive novel—a surrealist enchanting viewed through jagged dream fractals.

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<sup>3</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Liber CCXLII*, [https://www.100thmonkeypress.com/biblio/acrowley/downloads/equinox%201\\_%203/aha/aha.pdf](https://www.100thmonkeypress.com/biblio/acrowley/downloads/equinox%201_%203/aha/aha.pdf) (accessed June 14, 2015).