

“One Magical Movement from Kether to Malkuth”: Occultism in the Work of David Bowie

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Abstract

One of the twentieth century’s best-known popular musicians, David Bowie (1947–2016) drew upon a diverse range of influences in crafting his lyrics. Among these was occultism. As with many members of his generation, Bowie pursued a ‘pick and mix’ individualist approach to what he called ‘spirituality,’ rejecting institutionalised Christianity while taking an interest in a broad variety of culturally alternative belief systems. Bowie introduced occultist elements into his work in the early 1970s, adding references to Aleister Crowley and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in songs like “Quicksand” and possibly also “After All.” Rather than reflecting a committed adherence or practice of these occultist currents, such references probably represented attempts to imitate other popular musicians like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin. Bowie’s interest in occultism resurfaced in a more concentrated fashion when living in the United States in 1974–75. Suffering from severe paranoia, he came to believe that malevolent supernatural forces were acting against him and turned to occultist literature, particularly the work of Arthur Edward Waite and Dion Fortune, for protective purposes. He also developed an interest in Qabalah, demonstrating this in the lyrics to “Station to Station”. After 1976, he vocally distanced himself from occultism, but his work continues to offer an important case study for the influence of occultism in the history of popular music.

Keywords: David Bowie; Aleister Crowley; Dion Fortune; Arthur Edward Waite; Occultism; Popular Music

From gender-bending space alien to clean-cut stadium rocker, David Bowie (1947–2016) cemented his reputation as one of the preeminent icons of Western popular music. Over a five-decade career, he produced twenty-seven studio albums and a string of hit singles, accruing a devoted, multi-generational, and international cult following. A creative chameleon who repeatedly shifted his musical style and personal aesthetic, he cultivated a legacy that very few of his

contemporaries could challenge. Perhaps key to his ever-evolving persona was his status as a cultural magpie: throughout his career, he drew upon a broad array of source material, both within Western culture and beyond it. Among these sources was occultism.

This has not gone unnoticed by his biographers, fans, and detractors. Bowie's relationship with occultism has been subject to much speculation online, largely among esotericists and conspiracy theorists. The quality of this material varies. Much consists of reading occult-influenced messages into his lyrics and music videos, typically without much evidence that Bowie ever intended them.¹ These provide interesting data regarding the reception of Bowie's work, however, such an approach cannot be satisfactory for historians focused on Bowie himself and how he selected sources for incorporation into his creative output. To understand these issues, we must be discriminating in determining what elements of his work and thought clearly demonstrate the influence of occultism.

Since Bowie's death, a burgeoning scholarly literature has appeared on the man and his work. None of this academic material has yet included a concerted exploration of his relationship with religion or esotericism. To examine this facet of his work, we must turn not just to his lyrics, but to his own statements made in interviews and to the accounts of those who knew him. Central to understanding his artistic approach is the recognition that Bowie drew from a disparate range of sources and recombined them into something new.² The end result was not necessarily meant to be cohesive. In 1969, he asked listeners "not to go too deeply into my songs. As likely as not, there's nothing there but the words and music you hear at one listening."³ Four years later, he stated: "I don't necessarily know what I'm talking about in my writing. All I try to do in

1. Some of this has been summarised in Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*, 139-54. Thus far, perhaps the best treatment has been the short article by MacDonald, "White Lines, Black Magic," 140-47.

2. Moore for instance examined Bowie's work through the concept of bricolage; see Moore, "2004 (Bowie vs Mashup)," 153.

3. Coxhill, "Don't Dig Too Deep, Pleads Oddity David Bowie," 2.

my writing is assemble points that interest me and puzzle through it, and that becomes a song.”⁴ Bowie rarely crafted clear narratives and many of his songs readily permit multiple interpretations. It is in this context that we must appreciate the occultist references in Bowie’s oeuvre.

Prior examinations of occultism’s influence on popular culture have often utilised the framework of “occulture” put forward by the sociologist Christopher Partridge.⁵ Partridge’s framework would have utility for examining Bowie’s work but is impracticably broad for this particular study. For Partridge, “occulture” is not simply a portmanteau of “occultism” and “culture” but encompasses “an essentially non-Christian religio-cultural milieu, a milieu that both resources and is resourced by popular culture – the ‘occult milieu.’”⁶ Thus, Partridge’s occulture encompasses not simply occultism but also “a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range or beliefs out of a general interest in the paranormal.”⁷ While many culturally alternative movements, such as the religions of South and East Asia, did influence Bowie, this article looks specifically at the influence of occultism on his work. Here, occultism is specifically defined, following the scholar of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, as “a category in the study of religions, which comprises *all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.*”⁸ In this, it includes modern Western esoteric traditions such as Theosophy, Thelema, and New Age, but not imported Asian traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism or other culturally alternative movements like ufology or cryptozoology.

4. Murray, “Goodbye Ziggy,” 33.

5. The term “occulture” itself was probably devised by the British occultist-cum-musician Genesis P-Orridge (b. 1950) before being repurposed by Partridge for scholarly usage.

6. Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, 4. On the concept of occulture more broadly see also Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary.”

7. Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, 4.

8. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 422.

Bowie, a Spiritual Seeker

On 8 January 1947, Bowie was born — as David Robert Jones — to a lower middle-class family in Brixton, south London. Relocating to the suburb of Bromley in 1953, as a teen he committed himself to the goal of pop stardom. By the mid-1960s he was circling London’s mod scene and fronting a string of unsuccessful bands. Later that decade, he began moving in counter-cultural circles and developed an interest in some of the alternative ideas encountered there, ideas which contributed to the otherness or outsider status that helped define his artistic trajectory.

Perhaps the most important religious influence upon Bowie during the 1960s was Tibetan Buddhism, an interest he attributed to his reading of Jack Kerouac (1922-1969).⁹ Bowie visited both Tibet House in South Hampstead — there befriending the Lama Chime Rinpoche (b. 1941) in 1965 — and the Samye Ling monastery in Dumfriesshire.¹⁰ In 1972, he claimed that he had considered becoming a Buddhist monk, although his first wife Angie Bowie (b. 1949) later suggested that here he may have been exaggerating for effect.¹¹ He shared his interest in Tibetan Buddhism with his friend and collaborator, the producer Tony Visconti (b. 1944),¹² and the influence of Buddhism and Tibet is evident in two 1967 songs, “Silly Boy Blue” and “Karma Man.” Although Buddhist allusions are far rarer in his later work — in 1973 he declared himself no longer a Buddhist¹³ — he retained links with the Tibet House organisation, performing at their annual benefit gigs in 2001, 2002, and 2003. In his 2004 will, he stipulated that his ashes should be scattered in Bali, “in accordance with the Buddhist rituals.”¹⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given how space exploration and/or extra-terrestrial life pervades much of his early work, another counter-cultural movement Bowie encountered was ufology. Having developed a lifelong interest in science-fiction

9. Copetas, “Beat Godfather Meets Glitter Mainman.”

10. Trynka, *Starman*, 84; Tulku, “Lama Chime Rinpoche Tribute.”

11. Watts, “Oh You Pretty Thing,” 9; Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 44.

12. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 47; Visconti, *Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*, 253-54 and 355.

13. Salvo, “David Bowie Tells All.”

14. Sawyer and McNulty, “David Bowie’s lifetime interest in Buddhism.”

from his childhood viewing of *The Quatermass Experiment*,¹⁵ Bowie was well-read in science-fiction literature.¹⁶ According to Angie Bowie, he believed “very strongly” in extra-terrestrial visitors;¹⁷ the music arranger Paul Buckmaster (1946–2017) noted that they had conversations “about aliens and UFOs a lot when we first met. It seemed to be the primary topic of debate.”¹⁸ For several weeks circa 1968 Bowie joined flying saucer meditation sessions at the Hampstead flat of singer-songwriter Lesley Duncan (1943–2010).¹⁹ Despite his brief involvement in that group, it does not appear that Bowie seriously pursued involvement in any UFO religions, steering clear of Scientology when it was introduced to his band on their 1972 U.S. tour.²⁰

An interest in ghosts and hauntings was also present in Bowie’s life during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969 he moved into Haddon Hall, a large and reputedly haunted Victorian house in Beckenham, south-east London. According to Visconti, “all of us, at one time or another, saw a mysterious young lady dressed in white, possibly a burial shroud, walking in the garden, slowly, along the hedged border around dawn.”²¹ Bowie apparently shared this belief, informing his later girlfriend Ava Cherry about the Haddon Hall haunting.²² Beliefs about ghosts resurfaced when Bowie and Visconti were working on the *Low* album at the Château d’Hérouville near Paris in 1976, where again they both claimed to have sensed spectral entities.²³

Evident here is Bowie’s clear interest in ideas which, in the context of 1960s and 1970s Britain, were regarded as heterodox and alternative. Conversely, there

15. Trynka, *Starman*, 11.

16. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 60.

17. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 264.

18. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 60.

19. Trynka, *Starman*, 83.

20. Trynka, *Starman*, 174–75; Buckley, *David Bowie*, 155.

21. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 81. Visconti also mentions the haunting in *Bowie, Bolan, and the Brooklyn Boy*, 144.

22. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

23. Trynka, *Starman*, 264; Visconti, *Bowie, Bolan, and the Brooklyn Boy*, 239.

is little or no evidence that at this juncture Bowie was interested in mainstream Christianity or Christian symbolism. As a baby boomer — and thus part of what Wade Clark Roof called a “generation of seekers”²⁴ — Bowie partook in a growing trend for pursuing an interest in supernaturalism outside of institutionalised religious organisations. This pick and mix approach to belief and practice avoided the doctrinal attitudes more prevalent among earlier generations and represented a marked shift in Western religiosity. Although many individuals followed similar approaches prior to the 1960s, that decade is often seen as pivotal in its growth and move towards the mainstream.²⁵ Some sociologists have seen this as a reflection of a broader “subjective turn” impacting many areas of life in Western countries.²⁶ By the 1970s, such attitudes were associated with the vague terminology of the “New Age,” although this label had fallen out of fashion by the twenty-first century.²⁷ It may be overstating the case to call Bowie a New Ager, but clearly he was part of a broader move towards subjectivised and individualist pick and mix spirituality.

Similar attitudes can be seen among many of Bowie’s coeval collaborators. The work of American rocker Lou Reed (1942–2013), whom Bowie knew by at least 1972, demonstrated an interest in Theosophy, while King Crimson co-founder Robert Fripp (b. 1946) — who played guitar on Bowie’s 1977 album “*Heroes*” — incorporated Gurdjieffian influences into his songs after 1974.²⁸ Jim Henson (1936–1990), who directed Bowie in the 1986 fantasy film *Labyrinth*, was interested in Hinduism and Theosophy and used Jane Roberts’s (1929–1984) channelled Seth Material in his 1982 picture, *The Dark Crystal*.²⁹ David

24. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*.

25. See for instance Ellwood, *The 60s Spiritual Awakening*.

26. Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 2-5.

27. There is a vast literature on the New Age. Prominent texts include Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*; Heelas, *The New Age Movement*; Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*; Kemp and Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age*.

28. Fripp’s use of Gurdjieffian work is explored by Robertson, “Turning Ourselves.”

29. Odell, “Working with Jim Henson.”

Lynch (b. 1946), whose 1992 film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* features a brief Bowie appearance, practiced Transcendental Meditation, while Theosophical influences made their way into Lynch's earlier television series, *Twin Peaks*.³⁰ This is not to say that Bowie worked with these artists because of their religious interests, nor that he gave much thought to the Seth Material, Theosophy, or Transcendental Meditation. However, it reflects the broader popularity of alternative supernaturalist and spiritual ideas among many creative Anglo-American baby boomers and their willingness to draw upon such sources in their work. Bowie, therefore, was hardly atypical.

“I’m Closer to the Golden Dawn”: The Late 1960s and Early 1970s

Lyrics evidencing a clear influence from occultism are absent from both Bowie's debut album, *David Bowie* (1967), and its follow up, also titled *David Bowie* (1969). There is nevertheless a non-album track from this period which makes a passing reference to an esoteric belief. In “Did You Ever Have a Dream” — a B-side for the 1967 single “Love You Till Tuesday” — Bowie refers to traveling the world “On the magic wings of astral flight.” Having been promoted by the Theosophical Society from the late nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth the concept of astral travel had been popularised through books about out-of-body experiences.³¹ The concept would likely have been known to most individuals with alternative interests in late-1960s Britain and referencing it would necessitate no in-depth knowledge of occultism. Indeed, Bowie was not the only popular musician referencing the astral, as Van Morrison's (b. 1945) 1968 album *Astral Weeks* demonstrates. Bowie's reference to the astral should probably be seen in connection with his clear interest in fantasy at this time. His 1967 track “The Laughing Gnome” is a classic example, presenting a gnome as a real living creature, while in “When I Live My Dream”, written that same year, Bowie describes a fairy-tale

30. Doyle White, “My People Call it the Dweller on the Threshold.”

31. For instance, Fox, *Astral Projection*; Smith, *The Enigma of Out-of-Body Travel*.

world replete with romance, castles, and dragons. Other songs from this period attest to his aforementioned alternative preoccupations; “Silly Boy Blue” and “Karma Man” allude to Tibetan Buddhism while “Memory of a Free Festival,” with its reference to “tall Venusians,” nods to Bowie’s interest in extra-terrestrials.

It is only with the dawn of the 1970s that Bowie’s music begins to exhibit a firm occultist dimension, something apparent in several tracks on the albums *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) and *Hunky Dory* (1971). The opening song on the first of these, “The Width of a Circle,” may allude to the occultist’s practice of magic, with the titular circle likely representing a magic circle – the lyrics make reference to “this magic spell,” “the master,” “devil’s love,” and “the Gods,” all of which could have been drawn from the ready imagery of the occult milieu. However, nothing here suggests that Bowie was adhering to, or seeking to promote, a specific occultist system; none of the language reflects the definite influence of, for example, Thelema or Theosophy. Rather, he seems to be playing with stock imagery that could just as easily have come from a fantasy novel or film than the writings or doctrines of occultists.

In this it would be another example of Bowie’s already-displayed interest in fantasy and would also exhibit similarities to the lyrical work of Marc Bolan (1947-1977), his friend-cum-rival whose 1965 song “The Wizard” refers to a magical practitioner in a manner drawing upon popular stereotypes rather than occultism. Potentially bolstering the idea that “The Width of a Circle” lacks intentional reference to occultism is Peter Doggett’s argument that its lyrics allude to a taboo sexual encounter between Bowie and another man, in which case the references to magic and the “devil’s love” are deliberately euphemistic.³²

A potentially more explicit reference to occultism appears on the album’s fourth track, “After All,” which includes the lyrics “Live till your rebirth and do what you will, oh by jingo” in its final verse. *Do What You Will* is the title of a book of essays by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) first published in 1929, and this

32. Doggett, *The Man Who Sold the World*, 80-81.

may be what Bowie is alluding to.³³ However, given its juxtaposition alongside a reference to rebirth, it may instead be that Bowie was providing an adaptation of “do what thou wilt,” the central ethical tenet within Thelema, the religion established by the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).³⁴ It is of little surprise that Crowley might interest Bowie, for there are clear parallels between their lives; both were counter-cultural figures rejecting societal norms through, among other things, their bisexuality. However, it is difficult to interpret “After All” as a deliberate espousal of Thelemic teachings, in part due to the opaque nature of its lyrical content. It is not replete with either Crowleyan or broader occult references, with the “do what you will” reference standing alone in that regard. Bowie biographer David Buckley thought that the possible Crowley reference meant that Bowie was “envisaging a fan base of star-child occultists,” expressing the view that the song was “the first of Bowie’s mini-manifestos for his chosen children.”³⁵ This is possible, but it may be reading too much into this single, passing reference.

Bowie’s interest in Crowley was hardly idiosyncratic within the British pop music environment. The Beatles included the Thelemite prophet among the seventy-one figures adorning the cover of their 1967 *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, Led Zeppelin had “Do What Thou Wilt” engraved on the vinyl of their 1970 album *Led Zeppelin III*, while the lesser-known singer Graham Bond (1937–1974) had released two Crowley-themed albums, *Love is the Law* (1969) and *Holy Magick* (1970). Such Crowleyan influences would recur through ensuing decades, particularly among heavy metal artists: Ozzy Osbourne included “Mr Crowley” on his 1980 solo debut, *Blizzard of Ozz*, while Iron Maiden opened their 1988 album *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* with “Moonchild,” a song inspired by Crowley’s eponymous novel. Crowley was certainly a known figure within British counter-cultural circles at the time Bowie was writing “After All.” This being said, there is no equivocal evidence that Bowie’s quotation of

33. Huxley, *Do What You Will*.

34. The quotation first appears in Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, I.40.

35. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 85.

“do what you will” was a deliberate Crowleyan reference at all. It may allude to Huxley’s book, or simply reflect a phrase that Bowie had heard in conversation without being aware of its origin.

Occultism’s possible influence is also evident in two songs on Bowie’s fourth album, *Hunky Dory*. The album’s second track, “Oh! You Pretty Things,” references disparate influences then attracting Bowie’s interest. Its underlying theme is a form of pop Nietzscheanism prophesying the replacement of *homo sapiens* with a forthcoming “Homo superior,” a term borrowed not from Nietzsche himself but from *Odd John*, a 1935 novel by the English science-fiction writer Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950).³⁶ Elsewhere in the song, Bowie refers to these superior humans as “the coming race.” Again, this is a science-fiction reference, having been drawn from the title (and final lines) of *The Coming Race*, a book published anonymously in 1871. Its author was the English novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873), himself an occultist. On this count, it could be argued that the Bulwer-Lytton reference is also a nod to Bowie’s interest in occultism, however unlike some of Bulwer-Lytton’s other works, *The Coming Race* does not betray its author’s occultist leanings, and it is possible that at this stage Bowie had no idea about this aspect of Bulwer-Lytton’s life.³⁷

Far less ambiguously occultist is the sixth track on *Hunky Dory*, “Quicksand.” Here, Bowie declares that he’s “closer to the Golden Dawn / Immersed in Crowley’s uniform / Of imagery.” These are blatant references to two of the most prominent actors in the history of British occultism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn — a ceremonial magic group active between 1888 and c.1903 — and Crowley, one of its most famous members. As with the potentially Crowleyan reference in “After All,” these figures are presented in such a way so as not to suggest anything beyond a passing familiarity. Such a scenario is supported by some of Bowie’s later statements. In a 1993 interview, he recalled having referenced Crowley in “Quick-

36. As noted, for instance, in Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 98.

37. The Bulwer-Lytton reference has previously been recognised by Buckley, *David Bowie*, 233; Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 102.

sand” before having delved into the late occultist’s voluminous oeuvre. Instead, he noted, at that time he was reading “his biography,” presumably a reference to *The Great Beast*, a somewhat unflattering 1951 book by John Symonds (1914–2006).³⁸

In 2003, Angie — Bowie’s wife between 1970 and 1980 — opined that her ex-husband’s interest in occultism developed out of a desire to imitate Led Zeppelin, whose guitarist Jimmy Page (b. 1944) was keenly interested in the subject, and particularly in Crowley.³⁹ Bowie had known Page since at least January 1965, when the two were frequenting the same London hangouts.⁴⁰ It is certainly plausible that Page’s interest in the subject, and his inclusion of Crowleyan references in Led Zeppelin’s work, influenced Bowie’s desire to do the same. At the same time, attributing this influence to one singular source might be misguided given the prevalence of Crowley in the counter-cultural zeitgeist. In tapping into the Crowley chic, it is possible that Bowie wanted to accrue subcultural capital by demonstrating to his listeners that he too was familiar with the obscure, edgy references his more successful contemporaries were citing.

“Quicksand” also prefigures Bowie’s later interest in the intersection between occultism and Nazism through his lyric “I’m living in a silent film / Portraying Himmler’s sacred realm / Of dream reality.” This is the first clear reference to Nazism within Bowie’s oeuvre, an interest that became increasingly prevalent in the mid-1970s. At this juncture, however, it does not reflect a special interest in Nazism above other ideologies; tracks produced between 1971 and 1974 also reference such political figures as Winston Churchill (“Quicksand”), Aneurin Bevan (“Star”), and Che Guevara (“Panic in Detroit”). It is significant that of the eleven tracks on *Hunky Dory*, only one makes such an obvious, unambiguous occult reference, and even this juxtaposes it against other material; “Quicksand” also references Churchill, Greta Garbo, and the bardo, the state between two consecutive rebirths in Tibetan Buddhist belief.

38. Sutherland, “One Day, Son, All This Could be Yours . . .,” 218.

39. Angie Bowie was interviewed in 2003 for Koenig, “The Laughing Gnostic.”

40. Trynka, *Starman*, 45–46.

It is also from this period that we begin to see possible visual references to occultism. In mid-1971, Bowie had a publicity photograph taken by Brian Ward in which his garb mimicked ancient Egyptian costume.⁴¹ This may simply reflect the Egyptomania that emerged in British culture in the wake of nineteenth-century Egyptology. At the same time, Egyptomania had close links with forms of occultism, including Thelema, and many occultists regarded ancient Egypt as a source of ancient wisdom.⁴² Perhaps Bowie selected this outfit with such associations in mind; then again, perhaps not.

Bowie's early work demonstrates that, from at least 1970, he was aware of various topics pertaining to occultism, specifically the Golden Dawn, Crowley, and Bulwer-Lytton. At the same time, nothing suggests he knew a great deal about any of them. All his lyrics demonstrate is the ability to mention them in passing. It may be that he had some deeper knowledge, but this is not evidenced by his lyrics nor is it supported by his later statements, which instead suggest comparative ignorance of such matters. It is also apparent that at this juncture, Bowie was juxtaposing elements drawn from occultism with material from Tibetan Buddhism and with references to Nietzsche. It is nevertheless interesting and significant that he should choose to namecheck occult references in his work, in doing so mimicking similar references by other prominent pop musicians of the period, namely The Beatles and Led Zeppelin. He may have consciously sought to present himself as part of a wider zeitgeist, tapping into broader counter-cultural interests in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultism, in large part as a fashion statement. References to occultism then vanish from Bowie's work for five years. There are no obvious nods to the topic in *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), *Aladdin Sane* (1973), *Pin Ups* (1973), *Diamond Dogs* (1974), or *Young Americans* (1975). These albums contained occasional references to other religious or supernaturalist beliefs and practices,

41. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 110.

42. Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt*; Jordan, "Esoteric Egypt;" Tully, "Walk Like an Egyptian."

including prayer (“Drive-In Saturday”), Voodoo (“Ziggy Stardust”), reading tea leaves (“1984”), and Apollo (“Big Brother”), but occultism had apparently lost the interest it had held for him when composing “Quicksand” and possibly also “After All” and “Oh! You Pretty Things.” This further bolsters the argument that such references had never been particularly important to Bowie, having reflected just one of the many elements he drew upon in crafting his lyrics.

“Making Sure White Stains”: The Mid 1970s

Following the British success of Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust character, he moved to the United States in April 1974. It was there, according to Buckley, that the singer entered “the most paranoid and out-there period of his life” as his cocaine use “became very excessive very quickly,” soon morphing into an addiction.⁴³ It was at this point that Bowie’s interest in occultism revived, now in a more intense form, although exactly how this came about is unclear. In November 1974, Bowie appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show*, where the eponymous presenter related how a woman had informed him of her “feeling” that Bowie was “into black magic and that sort of thing.” Bowie’s laughing response suggested — if perhaps in a tongue-in-cheek manner — that it might be true, adding: “I’m a person of diverse interests.”⁴⁴ As earlier lyrics attest, Bowie clearly had at least a passing interest in occultism since 1971 and possibly 1970, and it may have been these references that generated the anonymous woman’s comment to Cavett. Several months later, a second incident occurred which likely encouraged his further immersion in the topic. In the U.S., Bowie initially resided on West 20th Street in the Chelsea area of New York City, and it was here, in February 1975, that Jimmy Page visited him. According to Ava Cherry, Bowie’s then-girlfriend who was present at the time, Page had spilled his wine on silk cushions but remained silent on the issue. Bowie was angry, and according to Cherry the two men

43. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 189, 197, and 204.

44. *The Dick Cavett Show*, Episode 1539, Season 7.

stared at each other; Bowie “wanted to show Jimmy that his will was stronger. Then all of a sudden, after that night, David has all these books around and is reading them.”⁴⁵ Angie Bowie later noted that her husband believed Page “was in league with Lucifer, and was out to get him.”⁴⁶

The following month, Bowie relocated to Los Angeles. His friend, the fellow Englishman Glenn Hughes (b. 1952) of the band Deep Purple, allowed Bowie to stay at his Beverly Hills house while he was away. On returning, Hughes found that Bowie had drawn pentagrams and other apotropaic symbols on the walls and windows.⁴⁷ Hughes later recalled that his conversations with the singer became “scary. This black magic theme crept in; and my house was near where the Sharon Tate murders were, he was convinced the whole Manson family was still around, and I found he’s hid all the knives in my house. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was learning all about cocaine psychosis.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Hughes noted that Bowie would “go on very bizarre tangents about Aleister Crowley or the Nazis or numerals a lot.”⁴⁹ In June, at which point he had moved into the Hollywood home of his manager, Michael Lippman, Bowie gave an interview to Cameron Crowe during which he claimed to see a body fall from the sky outside the window. He then pulled down the blind – on which had been scrawled a star and the word “AUM” – and briefly lit a black candle before blowing it out. To Crowe, Bowie declared: “Don’t let me scare the pants off you. It’s only protective. I’ve been getting a little trouble from . . . the neighbors.”⁵⁰

Bowie subsequently moved into a mid-twentieth-century “white cube” house at 637 North Doheny Drive along the West Hollywood/Beverly Hills border.⁵¹

45. Trynka, *Starman*, 231. Cherry also recounted the incident for Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 246-47 and Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

46. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 282-83.

47. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 261. Also attested in Trynka, *Starman*, 237.

48. Trynka, *Starman*, 234.

49. Spitz, *David Bowie*, 259.

50. Crowe, “David Bowie: Ground Control.”

51. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303; Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 226.

The house had what, in a 1983 interview, he called “Egyptian décor,” noting that it appealed to him because he then “had this more-than-passing interest in Egyptology, mysticism, the cabala, all this stuff that is inherently misleading in life, a hodge-podge whose crux I’ve forgotten. But at the time it seemed transparently obvious what the answer to life was. So the house occupied a ritualistic position in my life.”⁵² His paranoia about malevolent forces continued. According to Cherry, Bowie painted an apotropaic pentagram on her hand and once incanted a spell over her when she was in the bathtub.⁵³ Cherry also recalled him destroying one of his bracelets, a gift from a former girlfriend whom he now thought had malicious intentions.⁵⁴ He interpreted another gift, a red doll sent to him by his cousin Kristina, as a malevolent icon.⁵⁵ There is a story, repeated in various biographies, that he kept his urine in the fridge to prevent magicians from stealing and using it, although Angie Bowie noted that she never saw any evidence for this and — as noted by Bowie biographer Paul Trynka — it is possible that the tale is simply apocryphal, a myth to “exaggerate a situation that was already bizarre.”⁵⁶ There would nevertheless be some precedent for such a practice in various occultist texts. Crowley for instance described how practitioners of black magic acquired physical artefacts from their victims to aid their magical machinations, while Dion Fortune (1890–1946) urged people to destroy their hair and nail clippings lest such black magicians obtain them.⁵⁷ Angie noted that Bowie was aware of the tradition that witches could use “one’s cast-off bodily matter” for malevolent practices against the individual they originated from.⁵⁸

52. White, “David Bowie: The Interview.”

53. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

54. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263; Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

55. Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

56. It is repeated in Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 261; Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 231. See also Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 301-02; Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

57. Crowley, *Moonchild*, 149 and 151; Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defence*, 178.

58. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 302.

Cherry recalled Bowie talking about a secretive group of magicians whom he believed were intent on harming him; on one occasion, biographers Tony Zanetta and Henry Edwards relate, he held a ritual to deflect the harmful spells directed at him. This entailed writing down the name of his magical nemesis and burning it at midnight, but when he missed the appointed time he was forced to perform a longer variant. This involved writing out the name using a special quill dipped in “dove’s blood ink,” a concoction containing cinnamon, bay leaves, alcohol, gum Arabic, and rose oil. After this, the piece of paper was folded in a prescribed manner and then burned.⁵⁹ This was not the only instance in which Bowie claimed magical practitioners were attempting to harm him. In one instance he phoned up both his friend Cherry Vanilla (who was in New York) and his wife Angie (in London) claiming that a warlock and two female witches had abducted him. He insisted that they wanted him to mate with one of the witches – accounts differ as to whether this would take place on Walpurgis or Halloween – to bring Satan’s child into the world.⁶⁰ According to Angie, she alerted Lippman, and he convinced the singer to leave the reputed witches’ house and hail a cab to Lippman’s home. Angie flew into California to find Bowie there, paranoid that the witches would kill her as a means of getting to him.⁶¹

What exactly happened in this incident is not clear; it is possible, but far from certain, that he really was with a group of occultists. Angie suggested that his cocaine-induced paranoia had resulted in him envisioning a scenario that was “puffed-up, superheated, secondhand bullshit.”⁶² She suggested that Bowie had obtained the idea of witches wanting him to father their child from the

59. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 262–63. It is unclear who told them this, but it is likely to have been Cherry.

60. Vanilla’s account recorded by Trynka, *Starman*, 236 and Spitz, *David Bowie*, 260–61; Angie Bowie’s appears in Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 293, 295–97; Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 264–65; Koenig, “Laughing Gnostic,” and Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 232.

61. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297–99.

62. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297.

1968 film, *Rosemary's Baby*.⁶³ A less direct influence may have been Crowley's novel *Moonchild*, written in 1917 but republished in 1970, in which a woman undergoes a ritual process overseen by an occult order before giving birth to the eponymous "Child of the Moon."⁶⁴

In the aftermath of this incident, Bowie was guided by Walli Elmlark, a New York City Wiccan who had various contacts within the music industry — she had worked with Fripp on an unreleased album in London — and who wrote books on Wicca and rock music prior to her death in the late 1970s.⁶⁵ Quite how Elmlark was brought into the situation is unclear. According to Vanilla, she had passed Elmlark's name onto Bowie after he asked her if she knew of any "white witches."⁶⁶ Alternatively, Angie claimed that it was she who contacted Elmlark, noting that Bowie had met the "white witch" while in London in 1972. Angie noted that Elmlark provided her with "a prescription over the phone: the ritual scattering of household herbs" along with selected readings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a copy of which Bowie owned.⁶⁷

According to various accounts, Bowie eventually oversaw an exorcism to deal with the malevolent forces plaguing him, although as Trynka noted, "the details" of this "vary with the telling."⁶⁸ According to Angie, David became paranoid about the indoor swimming pool in his Doheny Drive home, alleging that he saw Satan rising from its waters one night.⁶⁹ Hughes confirmed this, noting that at one point Bowie asked him to go in "fully clothed searching for

63. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 297; also suggested by Spitz, *David Bowie*, 260–61.

64. Crowley, *Moonchild*, 333.

65. See Elmlark, *Wicca*; Elmlark, *Rock Raps of the 70s*. Elmlark's work with Fripp is discussed in Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson*.

66. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

67. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 299; an account also provided to Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 265.

68. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

69. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303.

the devil.”⁷⁰ Angie related that Bowie wanted an exorcism and that she called Elmlark again for advice. She found that the Greek Orthodox Bishop from LA’s Santa Sophia Cathedral would oversee the ritual, but Bowie refused his assistance. Instead, he performed the exorcism himself, using a book and paraphernalia Angie bought in a Hollywood esoteric store. He placed these items on a lectern, during which he spoke in a language Angie did not recognise, occasionally stopping to snort cocaine.⁷¹ She later related that during the exorcism, the pool’s water “bubbled vigorously,” something she thought “very, very strange,” and that after it was completed a “large shadow, or stain” resembling “a beast of the underworld” could be found at the bottom.⁷² Bowie left the Doheny Drive house not long after, relocating to Bel Air.⁷³ Years later, in 1997, he acknowledged the incident, noting that he remembered the appearance of the dark stain because “it was such an indelibly real thing at the time.”⁷⁴

Biographers have attributed this behaviour to paranoia induced by heavy cocaine usage.⁷⁵ However, in explaining away Bowie’s views at the time as an irrational aberration and sign of mental instability, we may be preventing fuller understandings of precisely why his paranoia took the form it did. Why, for example, did his fears take the form of witches, curses, and supernatural forces, rather than a belief in alien abduction or government agencies spying on him? One possibility is that it reflects his contacts within the Los Angeles occult scene of the period.

One may have been the underground filmmaker and Thelemite Kenneth Anger (b. 1927), whom he and Cherry reportedly met; Cherry noted that “I don’t remember exactly what happened. I kind of blotted it out.”⁷⁶ How this meeting

70. Hughes, “Glenn Hughes.”

71. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 303-5; also interviewed for Koenig, “Laughing Gnostic.”

72. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 304-5; she also recounted this to Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 232.

73. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 306.

74. Dalton, “Drum ’N’ Bass Oddity,” 20.

75. Trynka, *Starman*, 236.

76. Cherry is quoted in Trynka, *Starman*, 236; the encounter is also discussed in Gillman and

came about is not clear, but Bowie and Anger had associates in common. In the early 1970s, Anger established a friendship with Page, spending time at Page's Boleskine House in Scotland — a property previously owned by Crowley himself — before moving into the basement of Page's London mansion.⁷⁷ Alternatively, Bowie might have been introduced to Anger through Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger (b. 1943), a longstanding friend-cum-rival of Bowie's who had been acquainted with Anger since the late 1960s.⁷⁸ What Bowie and Anger thought of each other is not clear, but there is evidence suggesting their relationship was not a warm one. Cherry recalled that after the meeting, Bowie "felt very strange . . . he felt all those negative vibes were after him, whatever they were."⁷⁹ Anger has claimed that he and Bowie never met, which contrasts with Cherry's (somewhat vague) recollection of the event.⁸⁰ This perhaps indicated a desire to disassociate himself from Bowie, an attitude that appears to have been mutual. According to Zanetta and Edward, Bowie believed Anger was leading a small Thelemic group which meant him harm; it is unclear where they obtained this information, although it was likely through Cherry.⁸¹ Bowie would not speak regularly about Anger, however in a 1980 interview he stated that, given the chance, he would "far more work with [director Nicolas] Roeg than, say Mr. Anger," perhaps reflecting a negative encounter that he had had with the latter.⁸²

Another prominent Los Angeles occultist was the artist Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995), an associate of Anger's and the widow of the prominent Thelemite Jack Parsons (1914-1952). Cameron was just the sort of individual who

Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411. For more on Anger see Landis, *Anger*. For more on Anger's occultist framework and its influence on his work see Allison, "Kenneth Anger" and Doyle White, "Lucifer Over Luxor."

77. Landis, *Anger*, 183-84.

78. Landis, *Anger*, 163-65.

79. Gillman and Gillman, *Alias David Bowie*, 411.

80. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

81. Zanetta and Edwards, *Stardust*, 263.

82. MacKinnon, "The Future," 113.

would have interested Bowie — as noted by Cameron’s biographer, “Bowie’s themes dovetailed nicely with Cameron’s own longstanding passions and preoccupations” — although no evidence has come to light suggesting they ever met.⁸³ While in the city, Bowie also associated with the actors Dennis Hopper (1936–2010) and Dean Stockwell (b. 1936),⁸⁴ who, like Anger, were associates of Cameron back in the late 1950s.⁸⁵ This lends further circumstantial weight to the idea that Bowie may have been introduced to her at some point. Quite who else Bowie may have socialised with on the occult scene is not yet apparent. By the mid-1970s, the city’s organised Thelemic movement had largely dissipated; the Agape Lodge had existed from 1935 till the late 1940s, and the Solar Lodge from the 1960s to the early 1970s.⁸⁶ There may have nevertheless been Thelemic groups meeting either informally or in an organised setting whom Bowie could have encountered. The city was also then home to Israel Regardie (1907–1985), the English-born Qabalist who served as Crowley’s personal secretary before becoming a prominent author on Qabalah and the Golden Dawn tradition. No evidence has arisen suggesting Regardie and Bowie ever met, but Bowie would likely have been interested in meeting the eminent occultist; as will be discussed, he was familiar with Regardie’s work.⁸⁷

While personal contacts may have helped revitalise Bowie’s interest in occultism, the impact of his prodigious reading cannot be discounted. As noted by Cherry, he could be found “reading fifty books at a time about one subject, stacking them up and reading them for days.”⁸⁸ Angie noted that he had amassed a large number of books on occult subjects, but she also suspected that at this period, his heavy cocaine use ensured that “the necessary attention span” required

83. Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 230. On Parsons see Carter, *Sex and Rockets* and Pendle, *Strange Angel*.

84. Trynka, *Starman*, 234–35.

85. Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 140–41.

86. On these groups see Starr, *The Unknown God* and Starr, “Chaos from Order.”

87. Regardie lived in Los Angeles from 1947 to 1981; a biography of Regardie is provided in Suster, *Crowley’s Apprentice*.

88. Trynka, *Starman*, 198.

to study them in depth just “wasn’t there.”⁸⁹ There were few academic studies on occultism available in the mid-1970s, but much emic and popular literature existed. Looking back on these years in a 1993 interview, Bowie remarked that:

I was up to the neck in magick which was a really horrendous period. All my reading in that particular time were people like Ishmael Regarde [*sic*; Israel Regardie], Waite [Arthur Edward Waite] and Mavers [*sic*; Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers] and Manley [*sic*; Manly P. Hall] and all these sort of warlocks. And, y’know, it was all the secrets of the cabalistic practices and all that, an intense period of trying to relate myself to this search for some true spirit. And I thought I was gonna find it though [*sic*] reading all this material.⁹⁰

He returned to the subject in a 1997 interview with the *NME*, where he related that in 1974 and 1975 he had been “welling up Manley [*sic*] P Hall and the Theosophy Society [*sic*] and the Holy Grail and my descent into the Kaballa [*sic*].” He highlighted that he had not been involved in “devil worship” but rather “pure, straightforward, old-fashioned magic.” He further clarified that he:

always thought Crowley was a charlatan. But there was a guy called Edward Waite who was terribly important to me at the time. And another called Dion Fortune who wrote a book called *Psychic Self Defence*. You had to run around the room getting bits of string and old crayons and draw funny things on the wall, and I took it all most seriously, ha ha! I drew gateways into different dimensions, and I’m quite sure that, for myself, I *really* walked into other worlds. I drew things on walls and just walked through them, and saw what was on the other side!⁹¹

That Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) was “terribly important” to Bowie in these years likely offers clues to how the musician viewed occultism and particularly the practice of magic. Like Crowley, Waite was a member of the Golden Dawn but came to renounce magic as immoral, stripping it from his own occult order, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross.⁹² In his influential *The Book of Black*

89. Bowie with Carr, *Backstage Passes*, 265, 302.

90. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218.

91. Dalton, “Drum ‘N’ Bass Oddity,” 20.

92. On Waite’s life see the biography provided by Gilbert, *A. E. Waite*.

Magic (1898), later republished as *The Book of Ceremonial Magic* (1910), he provided an overview of various grimoires but while accepting a distinction between white and black magic, compared this to “the distinction between the idle and the evil world.”⁹³ For Waite, all black magic and most of the white was “a combination in equal proportions of the disgusting and the imbecile.”⁹⁴ Waite’s negative attitude towards magic may well have impacted Bowie, who at no point appears to have engaged in ceremonial magic. Bowie’s reference to Fortune’s *Psychic Self-Defence* is also instructive; its focus on protecting oneself from the malevolent attacks of “black magicians” was no doubt what attracted Bowie in 1975. However, his later description of it appears erroneous, for it does not encourage the reader to “run around the room getting bits of string and old crayons and drawing funny things on the wall.” What is apparent here is that Bowie’s later recollections of the contents of the literature he reportedly read in the mid-1970s are unreliable, perhaps unsurprisingly given the amount of time elapsed.

Bowie’s embrace of Waite and Fortune might have influenced his decision to distance himself from Crowley, a far more infamous figure. As well as characterising Crowley as “a charlatan” in the aforementioned 1997 quote, in a 1993 interview Bowie stated that he “didn’t get into Crowley . . . because he uses too much Greek.”⁹⁵ These claims nevertheless conflict with a 1995 interview in which he noted that his “overriding interest [in this period] was in Kabbalah and Crowleyism,” and another from 2004 in which he described having been involved in “black magic, Qabalism” and “the Crowleyism of the times.”⁹⁶ It also contrasts with comments made by Steve Schapiro (b. 1934), a photographer who oversaw a photo shoot with Bowie in 1975; Schapiro noted that Bowie “talked a lot about Aleister Crowley, whose esoteric writings he was heavily

93. Waite, *Book of Ceremonial Magic*, xxviii.

94. Waite, *Book of Ceremonial Magic*, 314.

95. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218.

96. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279; in a 2004 interview with O’Brien, “David Bowie ’04.”

into at the time.”⁹⁷ Bowie’s interviews were produced nearly two decades after the events in question; by his own admission, his memories of this period were patchy. This may explain the apparent contradiction. Alternatively, it may be that here Bowie was not using “Crowleyism” in specific reference to the teachings of Crowley himself, but rather as an (idiosyncratic) synonym for occultism more broadly. Evidence that Bowie employed language in ways unfamiliar to most occultists is apparent in other statements, like his aforementioned description of Regardie, Waite, and Mathers as “warlocks.”

While living in Los Angeles, Bowie focused on two projects. The first was Nicolas Roeg’s (1928–2018) film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which Bowie starred as its extra-terrestrial protagonist. The second was his tenth studio album, *Station to Station*, recorded between September and November 1975. Significantly, the album’s eponymous opening track is the most concentrated instance of occultist influence in Bowie’s oeuvre. The lyrics involve the singer, in his current incarnation as the Thin White Duke, declaring:

Here are we, one magical moment, such is the stuff
 From where dreams are woven
 Bending sound, dredging the ocean, lost in my circle
 Here am I, flashing no colour
 Tall in this room overlooking the ocean
 Here are we, one magical movement from Kether to Malkuth
 There are you, drive like a demon from station to station.

The second verse then ends with the words: “Making sure white stains.” These are all references drawn from occultism. The circle in which Bowie is lost is presumably a magic circle in which rituals are performed, and perhaps harks back to “The Width of a Circle.” “Flashing no colour” is probably a reference to the idea of flashing colours, a Golden Dawn practice of placing contrasting colours next to each other to affect the practitioner’s vision. Bowie could have encountered

97. Quoted in the front dust jacket flap of *Bowie: Photographs by Steve Schapiro*; the quotation does not appear in the book’s contents.

this practice in books like Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah*, published in 1935, or in the fourth volume of Regardie's *The Golden Dawn*, first published in 1940 and later reissued as part of a single volume.⁹⁸ The "magical movement" that goes from Kether to Malkuth is a Qabalistic reference, describing the journey from the highest to the lowest of the sephiroth on the Qabalistic Tree of Life. The final reference is a nod to *White Stains*, Crowley's book of poetry published in 1898.

For Trynka, the lyrics to the song "Station to Station" were "capable of wonderfully diverse interpretations."⁹⁹ It thus remains difficult to ascertain what Bowie wanted to convey with this song. The words "station to station" perhaps pertain to the travel between one sephiroth to another on the journey from Kether to Malkuth, although it may also have more prosaic associations. The music critic Ian MacDonald thought the title was partly a reference to Bowie's travels by train; the singer was known for his fear of flying.¹⁰⁰ Equally mundanely, "station to station" was an established American term for a type of operator-assisted phone call; it appears in this form in the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. The reference to *White Stains* is also of note, because while it draws a clear link to Crowley, this book of poetry was not explicitly part of Crowley's occult system and predates his development of Thelema. Taken together, these elements suggest that, as with earlier songs like "Quicksand," Bowie was using terminology drawn from occultism without presenting a coherent framework or narrative based in any single occult system or world-view. The opaque nature of the song's lyrics may have been exacerbated by the use of the cut-up technique, by which he divided a paragraph of text into smaller chunks before rearranging them; Bowie adopted this technique from William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) and certainly used it on both *Diamond Dogs* and *Low*.¹⁰¹

98. Regardie, *Golden Dawn: Volume Four*, 51–56. For more on the flashing colours of the Golden Dawn system and its context see Godwin, "Esoteric Theories of Colour."

99. Trynka, *Starman*, 243.

100. MacDonald, *People's Music*, 141.

101. Buckley, *Strange Fascination*, 261–62; Trynka, *Starman*, 199.

“Station to Station” was the first and only song in which Bowie explicitly referenced the Qabalah. There are various books from which he could have developed this interest, although MacDonald suggested Regardie’s *The Tree of Life* (1932) as the likely source.¹⁰² This is certainly possible, as Bowie later recalled having read some of Regardie’s work; moreover, the book was in circulation, with Samuel Weiser Inc. having brought out a new hardcover edition in 1969 and a paperback in 1972.¹⁰³ However, there had also been a spate of publications dealing with Qabalah in the preceding years. Since at least the late 1950s, Ernest Benn had regularly reprinted Fortune’s 1935 work, *The Mystical Qabalah*, while in 1964 the Aquarian Press first published W. E. Butler’s *Magic and the Qabalah*.¹⁰⁴ In 1970, Samuel Weiser Inc. re-released MacGregor Mathers’s *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, which they followed in 1973 with *The Qabalah of Aleister Crowley* (a text later republished, and today better known as, *777 and Other Qabalistic Writings*). In 1974 they published an edition of Eliphas Lévi’s *The Mysteries of the Qabalah*, with the UK-based Thorsons following suit that same year.¹⁰⁵ Bowie could have read any or all of these.

In 1996, a journalist quoted Bowie as saying that “absolutely no one else realised” that *Station to Station* was a step-by-step exploration of the Qabalah.¹⁰⁶ Although the interviewer believed Bowie was referring to the album itself, it is possibly he was instead referring to its titular song, the only track on the album containing explicit Qabalistic references. Indeed, in a 1997 interview, Bowie stated that this song “is very much concerned with the stations of the cross. All the references within the piece are to do with the Kabbalah.” Speaking of *Station to Station* itself, he added: “It’s the nearest album to a magick treatise that I’ve written. I’ve never read a review that really sussed it. It’s an extremely dark album.”¹⁰⁷ We might question

102. MacDonald, *People’s Music*, 144.

103. Regardie, *Tree of Life*.

104. For instance, Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*; Butler, *Magic and the Qabalah*.

105. MacGregor Mathers, *Kabbalah Unveiled*; Crowley, *Qabalah of Aleister Crowley*; Lévi, *Mysteries of the Qabalah*.

106. Brown, “Star Comes Back to Earth,” 310.

107. Cavanagh, “Changesfiftybowie,” 324.

how accurate these statements, made twenty years after the event, actually are. In the same interview, Bowie noted that he found much of the time spent in the U.S. during the 1970s, including the making of *Station to Station*, “really hard to remember.”¹⁰⁸ Certainly, there is nothing else on the album to suggest a clear influence from occultism. Rather, it contains more conventional religious references; “Word on a Wing” presents itself as a prayer to God, while references to prayer also appear in “TVC 15.” Structurally, the songs do not link with Qabalistic beliefs; there are for instance only six tracks on the album, four fewer than might be expected were each track to represent a different sephiroth on the Qabalistic Tree of Life.

While there remains little evidence that *Station to Station* was consciously structured around Qabalistic beliefs, it cannot be denied that Bowie was clearly thinking about the subject during its creation. For the album’s back sleeve, he selected a Schapiro photograph in which he – with white diagonal lines painted across his dark outfit – sketches the Tree of Life on the floor.¹⁰⁹ The album image makes this visible, although it is probable that few who bought it recognised the symbolism. How important Qabala was to Bowie in 1975 remains unclear, and it is apparent that within a year he was distancing himself from it. In “Breaking Glass,” the second track on *Low*, the lyrics relate how the singer has “been breaking glass in your room again / Don’t look at the carpet / I drew something awful on it.” In a 2001 interview, Bowie revealed that these referred “to both the cabbalistic drawings of the tree of life and the conjuring of spirits.”¹¹⁰

In interviews, Bowie also referred to a growing interest in Arthurian mythology, particularly the notion that, prior to World War II, a Nazi SS team travelled to Glastonbury in search of the Holy Grail.¹¹¹ In a 1983 interview he stated that he had been “incredibly interested” in Arthurian legend in the mid-1970s, including “the Englishness of the English and all that.”¹¹² Three years prior, he remarked

108. Cavanagh, “Changesfiftybowie,” 324.

109. Schapiro, “Afterword” in *Bowie: Photographs by Steve Schapiro*, no pagination given.

110. “Uncut Interviews.”

111. Sutherland, “One Day, Son,” 218; Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279.

112. Thomas, “The Face Interview,” 145.

that he had conversations “about the Arthurian period, about the magical side of the whole Nazi campaign, and about the mythology involved” with the musicians he was associating with.¹¹³ Links between Nazism and occultism had attracted growing attention during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in part due to the 1964 publication of *The Morning of the Magicians*, an English translation of Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s *Le Matin des magiciens*. Several similar volumes followed: Wilhelm Wulff’s *Zodiac and Swastika: How Astrology Guided Hitler’s Germany* (1973), Trevor Ravenscroft’s *The Spear of Destiny* (1973), J. H. Brennan’s *Occult Reich* (1974), and Jean-Michel Angebert’s *The Occult and the Third Reich* (1974).¹¹⁴ As the historian Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke noted, such books “were typically sensational and under-researched,” promoting “wild claims” as fact.¹¹⁵ They were nevertheless influential and Bowie probably read at least one. Doggett claimed that Bowie gave copies of *Occult Reich* to various friends, although where he obtained such information is unclear.¹¹⁶ Bowie’s interest in Nazism’s links with the Holy Grail likely stemmed from Angebert’s *The Occult and the Third Reich*, the only one of these volumes giving significant attention to said connections, although in contrast to Bowie’s statement that the Nazis sent an expedition to Glastonbury, the Angebert book has them discovering the Grail in the Pyrenees.¹¹⁷ Pauwels and Bergier had previously mentioned a link, but only in passing, when claiming that the SS leader Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) organised an expedition to find the Grail – although not specifying where – during the war.¹¹⁸ Bowie’s 1993 notion of Nazis in Glastonbury may have been obtained in conversation or, perhaps likely, reflected a misremembering of his mid-1970s interests.

113. MacKinnon, “The Future,” 117.

114. Pauwels and Bergier, *Morning of the Magicians*; Wulff, *Zodiac and Swastika*; Ravenscroft, *Spear of Destiny*; Brennan, *Occult Reich*; Angebert, *Occult and the Third Reich*.

115. Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 224–25.

116. Doggett, *Man Who Sold the World*, 230.

117. Angebert, *Occult and the Third Reich*, 44–45.

118. Pauwels and Bergier, *Morning of the Magicians*, 185.

1975 saw Bowie display an increasing interest in Nazism and the far right. In a series of interviews, he varyingly praised Hitler as “a marvellous morale booster” and “perfect figurehead,”¹¹⁹ welcomed the rise of a far-right dictatorship in Western countries,¹²⁰ and expressed the view that “I might have been a bloody good Hitler. I’d be an excellent dictator. Very eccentric and quite mad.”¹²¹ In his second interview with Crowe, conducted in February 1976, he declared: “I believe very strongly in fascism . . . Television is the most successful fascist, needless to say. Rock stars are fascists, too. Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars.”¹²² Amid this context, a photograph of Bowie’s arrival at London’s Victoria Station in 1976 led to press accusations that he was making a Nazi salute, although later footage suggested the photo merely captured him mid-wave.¹²³ It is difficult to ascertain to what extent his comments were meant seriously and on what level he was being deliberately provocative. Certainly, when read in context of the wider interviews, they sit alongside many incendiary and tongue-in-cheek statements – when Crowe ended his article by asking Bowie if he stood by his comments, the latter replied: “Everything but the inflammatory remarks.”¹²⁴

Bowie showed no sign of embracing Nazism’s racial theories – his friendships and relationships with Jewish and black individuals would render that difficult – and nor did he endorse far-right groups then active. What perhaps attracted his attention was the aesthetic of Nazism, its imagery, iconography, and art. The Führerprinzip may have held some fascination, for the idea of a single, bold man leading the crowd echoed both his longstanding Nietzschean interests and his status as trend-setting pop icon. There may also have been a deliberate desire to court controversy by identifying himself with one of the

119. Stein, “Flying Saucers, Hitler.”

120. O’Grady, “David Bowie: Watch Out Mate!”

121. Crowe, “David Bowie: Ground Control.”

122. Crowe, “David Bowie.”

123. Trynka, *Starman*, 252–53.

124. Crowe, “David Bowie.”

great bogeymen of post-war culture; the nascent punk movement was also using the swastika in this way. Many were concerned that Bowie was lending fascism greater respectability, but it would be misleading to view him as a fascist ideologue. Although attaching a political ideology to Bowie during the 1970s is difficult, his general attitude toward issues like gender roles was far from the reactionary, anti-permissive stances expected of the far right. Perhaps the Bowie of the 1970s is best understood as a cultural libertarian, an adherent of what Amedeo D'Adamo called "the brave libertarianism of the radical aesthete, ethically committed only to a freedom of play, expression and gender."¹²⁵

It was not long before Bowie was back-peddalling. In a 1977 interview, he insisted that "I'm NOT a fascist. I'm *apolitical*."¹²⁶ The following year, he suggested that his earlier comments had even contributed to opposing fascism: "the best way to fight an evil force is to caricature it."¹²⁷ Within a few years, he was indicating a greater willingness to acknowledge culpability for his past. In 1980, he stated that living in Berlin forced him to confront the realities of Nazism, and that many of his friends in the city were "naturally extreme leftists";¹²⁸ in 1983 he described his former statements as "incredibly irresponsible."¹²⁹ As the 1990s approached, Bowie's politics took on a left-leaning and less explicitly individualist direction. His 1987 track "Under the God" lambasts "right wing dicks" and "supremacist hate," while in a 1993 interview, he referred to himself as a "liberal" and expressed views about race relations influenced by Black Power discourse.¹³⁰

Alongside the clear occultist influence Bowie came under in 1974 and 1975, these years witnessed an emerging interest in Christianity not evident in his earlier work. In 1980, he stated that the time spent on *Station to Station* was "the

125. D'Adamo, "Ain't there One Damn Flag," 121.

126. Jones, "Goodbye to Ziggy and All That . . .," 67.

127. White, "Turn and Face the Strange."

128. Mackinnon, "The Future," 118.

129. Thomas, "The Face Interview," 145.

130. Sutherland, "One Day, Son," 227-28.

first time I'd really seriously thought about Christ and God in any depth," and that at that time he started wearing a crucifix.¹³¹ According to Lippman, "At one point we gave him a gold cross as a gift; He also asked to have a mezuzah up in his room because of his revival and belief in religion, and felt that it would create more security for himself."¹³² Discussing his wearing of the cross, Bowie told one interviewer that he "just felt I'd been pretty godless for a few years. It's no great thing, just a belief, or let's call it the usual force. Or God? Yes, sure. It's a lukewarm relationship at the best of times, but I think it's definitely there."¹³³ A little later, in 1984, he described that cross as "strictly symbolic of a terrible nagging superstition that if I didn't have it on I'd have bad luck. It isn't even religious to me – I've hardly ever thought of it as a crucifix."¹³⁴

As well as wearing Christian symbols, Bowie also brought in Christian imagery to the *Station to Station* album. The track "Word on a Wing" includes the lyrics "Lord, I kneel and offer you / my word on a wing," and later "Lord, Lord, my prayer flies / Like a word on a wing." In 1976, he related that the song was written as "a hymn",¹³⁵ and in 1980 added that it was designed as "a protection" that he "needed to produce from within myself to safeguard myself against some of the situations" occurring on the set of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.¹³⁶ As both his lyrics and use of material culture indicate, Bowie was not embracing Christianity as a "born again" believer, but saw it as having apotropaic significance; this could have derived from ideas found within occultism, although might just as easily have stemmed from fiction and popular stereotypes.

131. Mackinnon, "The Future," 115.

132. White, "Turn and Face the Strange."

133. White, "Turn and Face the Strange."

134. Murray, "Sermon from the Savoy," 169.

135. Hilburn, "Bowie: Now I'm a Businessman," 56-57.

136. Mackinnon, "The Future," 115.

“A Real Thrusting, Rampant, Spiritual Need”: Bowie’s Later Life

Any observable influence that occultism had over Bowie disappear around 1976, at which point he relocated to West Berlin to shake his cocaine addiction. The albums produced after that date, including his prominent “Berlin Trilogy” of *Low* (1977), *Heroes* (1977), and *Lodger* (1979), lack the obvious references to Crowley, Qabalah, or the Golden Dawn present in earlier years. This remained the case for the rest of his career. In the 1980s, Bowie reinvented his image, forging what biographer Marc Spitz called “Straight Bowie,” a figure shorn of its counter-cultural associations and whitewashed for the Reaganite era.¹³⁷ In this environment, it might have been commercially detrimental for Bowie to display clear links with occultism, and when asked upon the subject by later interviewers he was consistently negative.

In a 1995 interview, when asked if he believed that magic was a physical force in the universe, he explained the view that “all those things merely become symbolic crutches for the negative. It was all an adolescent state of mind, even though I wasn’t adolescent. I think drugs really perpetuate that adolescent state.”¹³⁸ When asked on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in 2004, he stated that after exploring Tibetan Buddhism, he went through “Nietzsche, Satanism, Christianity, pottery and ended up singing.”¹³⁹ Given the absence of any reference to Satanism elsewhere in his work it might be that here “Satanism” referred to his 1970s experiences with occultism. The tone of the interview is humorous and it may be that said reference to Satanism, juxtaposed as it is alongside pottery, is intentionally tongue-in-cheek. Conversely, it may reflect how negative his opinion of occultism had become by this period, so much so that he was prone to dismiss the whole topic as “Satanism.” Bowie nevertheless continued to discuss the issue in some contexts. In the early 1980s, Gary Lachman (b. 1955) of the

137. Spitz, *David Bowie*, 316.

138. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 279.

139. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 23 April 2004. Clips available on YouTube.

band Blondie attended one of Bowie's parties, where the latter conversed about witchcraft and claimed that the author Colin Wilson (1931–2013) ran a witches' coven in Cornwall, something Lachman thought doubtful.¹⁴⁰ Bowie apparently had a deeper interest in Wilson, and later included his 1956 book *The Outsider* in a list of his top hundred reads.¹⁴¹

Christian imagery recurred in Bowie's lyrics from the 1980s until his death. References to God, the Devil, prayer, Heaven, Hell, angels, and demons all feature, with a Christian theme being particularly apparent in songs like "Bus Stop" (1989) or "Sex and the Church" (1993). Sometimes, these references contained subversive undercurrents and it is of little surprise that in a 1984 interview, he spoke very dismissively of "the Church," referring to "the awful shit" it has inflicted on society.¹⁴² At a 1992 tribute concert for Freddie Mercury (1946–1991), Bowie knelt on stage to recite the Lord's Prayer.¹⁴³ The following year, he revealed that one reason for doing so was because a terminally ill friend had fallen into a coma before the performance. He described the recitation as "a universal prayer" rather than a Christian one but added that he now had "an unshakeable belief in God. I put my life into his hands every single day. I pray every morning." At the same time, he dismissed the idea that he was religious, insisting that he was instead "spiritual" and had "never bought in to any organized religion."¹⁴⁴ He echoed this idea in ensuing interviews. In 1995, he described having "a real *thrusting, rampant, spiritual* need,"¹⁴⁵ and in 1996 related: "The lesson that I've probably learnt more than anything else is that my fulfillment comes from that kind of spiritual investigation. And that doesn't mean I want to find a religion to latch on to. It means trying to find the inner-life

140. Lachman, "David Bowie Colin Wilson Story."

141. "Special Feature: How to Read Like Bowie."

142. Murray, "Sermon from the Savoy," 169.

143. Trynka, *Starman*, 354–55; Spitz, *David Bowie*, 348–49.

144. Sinclair, "Station to Station," 247.

145. Wells, "Artful Codger," 280.

of the things that interest me.”¹⁴⁶ In this, Bowie was not dissimilar from many other baby boomers; the emphasis on “spirituality” as something distinct from religion was pervasive within the New Age milieu.

By the mid-1990s Bowie was exploring other religious traditions; in 1995 he referred to a growing interest in Gnosticism.¹⁴⁷ The music video of his 1995 track “The Heart’s Filthy Lesson”, directed by Samuel Bayer (b. 1962), features a Minotaur-like entity and images of body modification; Bowie told an interviewer that the “new cults of tattooing and scarification and piercings and all that” were forms of “neo-paganism” that reflected people’s “real need for some spiritual life,” something not adequately catered for by organised religion.¹⁴⁸ Further reflecting this interest in the non-Christian, Bowie titled his 2002 album *Heathen*. As specified earlier, Buddhist influences also resurfaced, through references in songs like “Little Wonder” (1997) and “Seven Years in Tibet” (1997), his performances at Tibet House’s benefit concerts, and his desire for Buddhist funerary rites.

Although occultist references remained absent from his work, there is some circumstantial evidence that in the final years of his life Bowie began to reassess occultism in a more positive light. In 2013, he revealed his hundred favourite books, an eclectic collection including *The Gnostic Gospels*, the historian of religion Elaine Pagels’s 1979 study of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual*, the 1896 book by the French occultist Eliphas Lévi, and Bulwer-Lytton’s 1842 novel *Zanoni*, a work far more explicitly occultist-oriented than *The Coming Race*.¹⁴⁹ In 2016 Bowie selected Johan Renck (b. 1966) to direct his music video for “Blackstar.” A confessed “huge Crowley fan,” Renck had unsuccessfully attempted to make a film about Crowley’s life, and while he noted that he only talked “a little bit” about Crowley with

146. Brown, “A Star Comes Back,” 313.

147. Wells, “Artful Codger,” 280.

148. Penman, “Resurrection of Saint Dave.”

149. “Special Feature: How to Read Like Bowie.”

Bowie, the link is intriguing.¹⁵⁰ Contra claims circulating the Internet, there are no unambiguous occultist references in the “Blackstar” video, although the second Bowie video directed by Renck, “Lazarus,” features Bowie wearing a dark bodysuit with diagonal silver stripes: the same outfit he wore in the 1975 Qabalah-themed Schapiro photoshoot.¹⁵¹ Nothing here demonstrates that Bowie had embraced a particular occultist tradition. However, that he was open to including two explicitly occultist texts in his hundred favourite books, employ a director known for his interest in Crowley, and dress in a manner alluding to his prior interests in Qabalah strongly suggest that he was no longer seeking to distance himself from occultism as he had been doing from the late 1970s through to the early 2000s. Something had changed. That he avoided giving interviews after 2004 means that we presently lack much insight into his developing personal interests during the last twelve years of his life. Unless more private information becomes apparent in future, it is possible that the reasons for this shift will forever remain a mystery.

Conclusions

Bowie is one of the seminal figures of Western popular music, a man who both shaped and reflected the times in which he lived. Like many of his contemporaries, he was dissatisfied with established Christianity but retained an interest in what he called the “spiritual.” During the latter half of the 1960s, he pursued this through various culturally alternative routes, most notably Tibetan Buddhism. As his career took off, in the early 1970s he sought to emulate other successful British bands like The Beatles and Led Zeppelin by alluding to his knowledge of occultism through brief references to Crowley and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the song “Quicksand” and possibly also in “After All.” There is no evidence to

150. “Behind ‘Blackstar’.”

151. Among those suggesting that this reflected Bowie’s commitment to Qabalistic beliefs was Crowley, “He may have been exploring it.”

suggest that at this point his knowledge of the subject extended beyond a passing awareness gleaned from reading one or two books on the subject. Between 1972 and 1975, at which point he became a major star in Britain and the U.S., references to occultism disappear from his work, only to return in 1976 with *Station to Station*.

At this juncture, Bowie was living in the U.S. and suffering from paranoia probably induced by heavy cocaine usage. He became convinced that supernatural forces were threatening him and turned to forms of esotericism to combat them. Much of his knowledge of the subject appears to have derived from his reading, although it is likely that this was supplemented by interactions with occultists in the Los Angeles area; unfortunately, their identities remain unknown. This resurgent interest in occultism also influenced his artistic work, becoming particularly apparent in the song “Station to Station,” the clearest and most sustained example of the occultist influence in his entire oeuvre. This appears, however, to have also been the last time he drew upon occultism in such a manner. Later writings – and interviews – reflect a continued interest in “spirituality,” sometimes demonstrated through reference to Christianity, Gnosticism, and pre-Christian belief systems, while at the same time distancing himself from what he called the “black magic” and “Satanism” he had encountered in 1974 and 1975. Bowie remained influenced by esotericism, even as he distanced himself from occultism.

Exploring Bowie’s relationship with occultism, and with religion more broadly, is a task that warrants greater attention than space here permits. Hopefully, archival material might surface revealing which Los Angeles occultists he contacted or which precise books he read. There is also room for further exploration of Bowie’s relationship with Buddhism, ufology, and Christianity, as well as with ideologies like Nietzscheanism and Nazism. It will be instructive to examine how Bowie’s artistic contemporaries drew upon occultism, in doing so further contextualising his place in history and deepening scholarly understandings of how occultism has influenced popular music. May this article serve as an encouragement for other scholars to take up this task.

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