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June Leavitt, *Esoteric Symbols. The Tarot in Yeats, Eliot, and Kafka*, New York etc.: University Press of America, 2007. xv + 155 p. ISBN 978-0-7618-3674-2.

In the introduction to *Esoteric Symbols*, the author deplores that the tarot cards are, as she considers it, 'stigmatized': associated with 'fortune-telling and dressed-up gypsies' rather than with serious study (p. xiii). She may be right to the extent that the tarot have not quite received the extensive scholarly treatment that other western esoteric subjects do have. Apart from the important studies by Michael Dummett, both alone and in collaboration with Decker and Dupaulis (among others, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, 1996; and *A History of the Occult Tarot*, 2002), academic research on the tarot has been limited to a handful of publications. Yet there is a growing recognition among scholars of the relevance of the occult revival around the turn of the twentieth century for understanding modernist literature and art. References by W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot to the tarot have been noticed and selectively studied. Kafka's relation to the tarot has remained relatively unexplored, and Leavitt's study is intended to remedy this, while also providing a fresh and in-depth exploration of Years and Eliot.

Esoteric Symbols opens with an introduction to the tarot. It is followed by chapters analysing references to the tarot in Yeats's *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, in sections of Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, and in Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika*, respectively. Three more chapters discuss the life and views of these authors. As the basis of her analysis Leavitt uses the Rider-Waite tarot (1909) by Pamela Coleman Smith and Arthur E. Waite.

Leavitt locates references to Rider-Waite cards in *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, particularly the first eponym story, by pointing out specific "iconic" elements mentioned in the narrative and paralleled in certain cards. For example, she finds a correspondence between Yeats's description of four old women and the images of the four Rider-Waite Queens (24-25). In the analysis of Madame Sosostriis and her card-laying in *The Waste Land*, the author focuses upon the pattern in which the cards are arranged, in addition to the cards themselves. Eliot has not named all the cars in his poem, while those that are named sometimes carry an unusual designation, such as "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" or the "Lady of the Rocks"; yet Leavitt is able to pinpoint a corresponding Rider-Waite card for all cards, whether named or not, leading her to suggest an alternative reading of *The Waste Land* on that basis (51ff.).

In the analysis of Kafka's *Amerika*, Leavitt attempts to read between the liens of the text, as she also does in the chapter on Yeats, in order to find possible references to

the tarot. For example, she identifies a character of a servant as The Hermit, on the basis of characterising elements such as a lantern and a beard. An apparent discrepancy – Rider-Waite's Hermit appears to stand in an open, mountainous space, while Kafka's servant is described as acting indoors – is explained by referring to the *reverse* meaning of the card. Moreover, the “inherent” meaning of the cards, as Leavitt calls it, provides further clues, such as the reference to the journey that the servant in *Amerika* makes, which would parallel the meaning of The Hermit. In fact, the inherent meaning or “universal symbolism”, as it is called, has such “latent force” that the cards ‘will always impress their message in the text’, even despite the author's own intentions, to which the ‘universal symbolism’ is superior. This is not only the case in *Amerika*; Leavitt also claims that the cards as she has identified them in *The Waste Land* are a divination of the Eliot's future, unbeknownst to the poet himself (58).

Leavitt certainly has a point in stating that references to the tarot can be found in selected works of Yeats and Eliot, and perhaps Kafka as well. What I find problematical about her book, however, is that, while her arguments certainly point in that direction, they fall a bit short of building a strong and convincing case. Leavitt combines various techniques of analysis with both personal and scholarly insights and so presents a new interpretation of familiar material. There can be value in this approach. Leavitt has partly grounded her study upon a few obscure and relatively older articles that have explored the issue of either Yeats or Eliot and the tarot, and she brings them, deservedly, to light. Leavitt also uses various publications by such authorities as A.E. Waite, Aleister Crowley (*The Book of Thoth*) and Rachel Pollack (author of the very successful popular work *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*). While relevant and perhaps useful, one would have wished that Leavitt had exercised a little more caution here, as such sources obviously need a critical context if used as secondary sources in a scholarly publication. That critical approach is, sadly, often lacking. Unfortunately Leavitt missed Leon Surette's excellent 1993 study *The Birth of Modernism*, which explores the influence of historical occultism upon Yeats and Eliot and their work, among others.

Leavitt's reading of tarot in Yeats seems plausible and appears to complement the findings in other studies. She might well be on to something in the case of Eliot. The attempt to provide a reading of *The Waste Land* that goes against the usual scholarly grain is a brave one; however, I find her arguments for identifying unconventionally named cards as Rider-Waite tarots just a bit too weak. I am more concerned about the author's notion of so-called latent force of the cards (that defies a poet's own literary intentions)

as an argument for locating tarot references; if intended as solid scholarly evidence it is certainly in need of more contextual and critical embedding than is offered by Leavitt here.

The case that offers the most exciting possibilities is that of Kafka. Leavitt provides a few important clues, such as the connections between Kafka and Gustave Meyrink, and between Kafka and Rudolf Steiner, as well as Kafka's reference to clairvoyance in his diaries (62-64). However, these remain but tantalising evidence, as Leavitt does not investigate them further. Instead, she chooses to focus on other arguments in her attempt to prove Kafka's knowledge of the Rider-Waite deck, such as Kafka's origins in Bohemia; his possible knowledge of a fortune-teller; and the fact that Kafka's parents were card-players, conceivably of the "Bohemian" (Czech) game of *Tarocky*, a trump game that, she argues, would have familiarised Kafka with "the iconic language of the Tarot" (61-62). Today many scholars agree that Renaissance trump-games formed the basis for later tarot decks. Leavitt does mention this, but still argues that the "mystical origin" and "hermetic roots" of the tarot can be located in "China, Egypt or Hindustan", with the added *caveat* that "it is best not to delve too deeply into the obscure and eclectic history of the Tarot" (8). This being said, a thorough exploration of the origins of the tarot, specifically their reinvention in occult milieus in France in the nineteenth century and subsequent dispersal to other milieus and countries, would not have been remiss in this book, which after all presents itself as offering a ground-breaking perspective. Is delving deeply not indeed part of the very research work of scholar?

In the end, this book represents a brave attempt to provide an alternative reading of the source material. While I can not judge the personal or even spiritual fulfilment one might acquire from it, it must be said that from a scholarly point of view Leavitt's approach is too personal and that far too many questions remain unanswered. This is unfortunate; as the author herself correctly points out, the issue of the tarot's role in life, prose and poetry of Yeats, Eliot and Kafka – as well as in modernist literature more generally – well deserves scholarly attention.

Tessel M. Bauduin