

LETTER XVII  
The Star, Arcanum of Growth  
L'Étoile



*Study guide by Carl McColman*

Just like the Song of Songs is the most beautiful book of the Bible — in any translation — so too Arcanum XVII, The Star, is often the most beautiful card in any Tarot deck, regardless of what version it is. Here are two other legendary “Star” cards, from well known Tarot artists Pamela Colman Smith and Lady Frieda Harris (I encourage you to go online and seek other other images of the Star, from contemporary Tarot artists like Mary Hanson Roberts, Robin Wood, and Meredith Dillman). Compare these images to the simplicity of the Marseille Star as pictured above, and the quality of serenity and gentleness is pretty hard to miss. And while the Star traditionally depicts a nude woman, it’s hardly an exploitative image — far closer in spirit to Botticelli than to Hugh Hefner. And when artists like Harris or Dillman either downplay the nakedness or eliminate it altogether, the loveliness of the image still shines through (sorry, couldn’t resist a starry pun).



If you’ve been accompanying our Hermetic author letter by letter, you might join me in thinking “it’s about time” we came to image that evokes beauty rather than loss, addiction, or terror. Unlike the angel of Temperance, who provides only a momentary respite between the arcana of Death and the Devil, the Star truly represents a turning point on the Fool’s journey. Yes, we still have the spookiness of the Moon to contend with, but after that, it’s all light, life, and fulfillment. The Star is truly the herald of a new day.

Our author begins his meditation on the Star by contrasting it with the Tower: whereas Arcanum XVI represented the energies of *construction* (implying the willful activity of human beings interacting with the environment to engineer and manage change according to our designs), the Star represents the energies of *growth* — by contrast more natural, more innate, and simultaneously more earthy/biological/material, but also more heavenly/sacred/divine. This is why the Star depicts a woman pouring two vessels of water — a clear echo of the angel of Temperance, but where Temperance depicts a single flow of liquid miraculously between two vessels (at an angle!), the Star shows a woman pouring both vessels out, one onto the ground and the other into a pool.

In this imagery we find one of the themes of this meditation (and, increasingly, of the book as a whole): the tension between duality and nonduality (which our author describes more prosaically as the “marriage of opposites”). Pouring the liquid (presumably water) onto earth but also into a pool symbolizes a kind of dualism, a distinction which the author interprets as representing “water and Water” — a distinction between earthly/material growth, and heavenly/God-inspired transformation. And yet, both vessels are held by the same woman, look very similar, and presumably contain the same fluid (especially if we assume these are the same vessels carried by the angel of Temperance).

So here we see illustrated one of the great mysteries of mystical wisdom: the nondual union of dual opposites. Many sincere Christians balk at the very concept of nonduality because of their training to view God as the champion of all that is good and holy and pure, but therefore must be simultaneously opposed to all that is evil and profane and sinful/diseased. “How can nonduality be real, when we are called to reject, renounce and resist evil?” more than one person has asked me over the years. The answer, of course, is that nonduality is not meant to imply a kind of acquiescence toward evil! The nondual mystic still struggles against all that is evil as we work to promote all that is good. But nondual consciousness means that the entirety of such action is grounded on a unified contemplative response to (and embodiment of) divine love.

We are called to unity *in God* which paradoxically equips us to effectively interact with a world that still manifests incredible *disunity*. So part of the paradox of duality/nonduality is the paradox of the present and the future. God is in all things, and yet God’s triumph will not be fully manifest until the end of the ages. This paradox forms the foundation of one of the three theological virtues, which is also a major theme of this meditation: the virtue of *hope*.

Ironically, I have read the writings of more than one Buddhist author (including writers I generally respect very much) who view hope as a problem rather than a virtue. Hope is seen by some as a flight from the present moment, a way of hiding in a desire for a different/better future, but such desire only keeps the wheel of samsara (illusion, fueled by death, rebirth and karma) spinning. This, I respectfully submit, represents a deep misunderstanding of mystical hope as taught in the western contemplative tradition.

Mystical hope is never a flight from the present; if anything, it is intended to equip us to meet the present with a consciousness other than cynicism or despair. True hope does not require the attachment of desire; in fact, following the teaching of great mystics like Ignatius of Loyola and Meister Eckhart, we can say that mystical hope calls us to a profound *nonattachment* or holy *indifference* where our trust in the triumph of love is not contingent on our own needs or desires being met. Indeed, Ignatius makes clear that indifference (nonattachment) only makes sense because it frees us to be more truly available to the call and demands of divine love). So far from being an attachment to a desired future, hope represents radical freedom in the present, paired with an infinite but unknowing *trust* in God's future.

Our author suggests that hope is paired with creativity and tradition to provide the triune energies that inspire or make possible growth — whether earthly or spiritual. Creativity makes intuitive sense, for like hope, creativity represents a playful nonattachment to the limitations of the present in order to manifest new possibilities for the future (even if we mean only the “future” that exists at the culmination of the creative act). I cook dinner out of hope for a meal. If I did not have that hope, the effort to cook would be meaningless. Likewise, farmers plant an olive tree, knowing that only their grandchildren (and beyond) will be able to harvest the olives. It is an act of hope, but also an act of cooperation with both earthly and divine creativity.

But why is *tradition* paired with creativity and hope? Here we see our author's conservatism (but hopefully, in the best sense of that word!) — for tradition represents stability just as creativity represents innovation. The two need each other in a type of dynamic tension that enables the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. Without tradition, we have no grounding in the past: we forget who we are, and we are liable to make needless mistakes (“those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it”). But tradition, despite what some religious traditionalists may insist, requires the innovation of creativity just as much as creativity requires the stabilizing foundation of tradition. Creativity allows tradition to grow and evolve in life-giving ways, just as tradition offers healthy boundaries to allow creativity to be *growthful* but not *cancerous*. Each needs the other, and hope unites them and instills meaning in both.

## What to Look for in Letter XVII:

As you read through Letter XVII, here are some points that might be helpful for you as you seek to explore the gentle energies of growth that reflect both physical and spiritual evolution and transformation.

1. On page 464, the author suggests that the theme of the Star is the *universal sap of life*, implying that this is the agent of growth. He also describes it as the *agent of transformation from the ideal to the real*. Here we can see the link with hope and creativity. Isn't every creative act an expression of hope: of hope that the creative act will bring into being some sort of improvement or betterment?
2. It's been said that an oak tree is simply an acorn that stood its ground. This is one of several examples the author provides (again, page 464) to describe this transition from the "ideal" (i.e., what only exists in the mind, whether the human mind or the mind of God) to the "real" (what is materially/physically manifest).
3. The author suggests a distinction between two agents of change: the "Magical Agent" and the "Agent of Growth" — the former being symbolized by the lightning that struck the Tower (Arcanum XVI) while the agent of growth is characterized by the gentle flow of the water being poured by the woman in Arcanum XVII, the Star. Magic shocks, while organic growth flows. (page 465) — the fire of magic is equated with "transformism" while the watery flow of growth is equated with creation (the author uses "creationism," which is not to be confused with the ideology that rejects evolution in favor of a young earth).
4. Page 469: following the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin, our author draws a distinction between "Fire and fire" and "Water and water" — the celestial elements representing divine activity, in contrast with the "lower" elements of mundane existence. Thus, the two vessels being poured by the woman of the Star represents the blending of water and Water.
5. The "waters" that flow in life (the blood?) comprise both "serpent's venom" and "tears of the Virgin" (page 470) — these flow together, now but not always. Our author suggests that great world teachers such as Zarathustra, Buddha and Mani were great "masters of dualism" which may seem counterintuitive (especially in regard to Buddha), but his point is that these and other great teachers awaken us to the distinction between "the serpent" and "the Virgin," and in that distinction we are given the freedom to choose. Thus, it is a kind of temporal duality, in service of an eternal nonduality (where all opposites are reconciled by grace).

6. The Star, especially as depicted in the Marseille Tarot (where a golden star is superimposed over a red star) signifies another seeming duality: the split between contemplation and action, a problem which has caught the attention of many great mystics, past and present (including our author). On page 471, our author suggests that the Star represents a uniting of the “guiding principle of understanding” with the “guiding principle of the will.” Here is the marriage of opposites: the (re)union of contemplation (understanding) and action (will).
7. The marriage of opposites signifies the overcoming of dualism (the manifestation of nonduality), although this is an *eschatological* reality: it is a *hope* that points to the future. Our author suggests this represents a reversal of the deep cynicism of the declaration in Ecclesiastes that “there is nothing new under the sun.”
8. Also page 471: Hope is signified in the arcanum of the Star as the “light-force which emanates from the star — constituted through the marriage of contemplation with activity.” Just as starlight can seem so tiny and vulnerable in the darkness of night, and yet is never fully extinguished by the night, so too is the hope of starlight seemingly very small in the darkness of cynicism and despair, and yet that hope can not be extinguished by any amount of darkness.
9. On page 473, the author suggests that the Star could also be called the “Arcanum of the Mother” referring to Eve (but Eve is always a type and precursor to the Blessed Virgin). He links this maternal arcanum to pagan “Mysteries of the Mother” which in turn he relates to the maternal passage of Romans 8:19-23, which uses the metaphor of childbirth to describe how all of creation has awaited liberation in Christ. Thus, maternity is seen as an expression of hope: not only earthly hope (“every baby is a vote from God that life is good”) but celestial, divine hope as well.
10. What is the relationship between evolution and salvation? Page 474, our author again draws from Teilhard: “Here evolution and salvation—the two truths of science and religion—are no longer contradictory: they bear together the message of hope.”
11. Beginning on page 476 our author offers a lovely meditation on poetry, seeing poetry in terms of tradition, and seeing an essential link between these two essential elements of wisdom literature. “One cannot pass by poetry if one attaches value to tradition. The whole of the Bible breathes poetry—epic, lyric and dramatic—and likewise the Zohar (a key text of the Kabbalah) is full of poetry.” Page 477: “The poet is the point at which the separated waters meet and where the flow of hope and that of continuity converge... Poetic inspiration is the union of blood from above (hope) and blood below (continuity).”
12. Pages 478-479: the author reflections on the distinctions between “sacred magic” and “personal magic” and “miracles.” Sacred magic is oriented toward water (growth) and makes room for the graced manifestation of miracles (which are



- always the activity of God), while personal magic is oriented toward fire (electricity) and is more akin to science, in that it represents the assertion of the human will over nature. A “personal” magician may attempt to create a “miracle” through the sheer force of will, whereas a sacred magician understands that the role of magic is to willingly create the space where “hope may descend” and the miracle, under the initiative of God, could then take place.
13. On page 483, the author returns to a recurring theme: that the open circle, the spiral, is an agent of growth (of hope, of the activity of God) unlike a closed circle, which is the domain of the serpent and ultimately leads to despair rather than hope.
  14. Following this idea, the Biblical expression of the preparation for Christ (the fourteen generations from the Genealogy of Matthew) is presented as an ever-opening spiral, which our author compares to the individual’s salvation journey (represented by both sacramental experiences like baptism and confirmation, and inner experiences such as repentance and expiation of sins).
  15. Page 485: our author suggests that the three gifts of the Magi (gold, frankincense and myrrh) represent the “steps of the spiral” of humanity’s “spiritual way” to prepare for the coming of Christ. But in addition to this imaginative interpretation of the three gifts, he suggests that John the Baptist (and, by extension, all of us) offer the infant Christ a “fourth gift” — the human heart. No matter how impoverished we may be, as long as we live we are capable of offering our heart to the service of divine love.
  16. As the chapter comes to a conclusion, our author suggests that hope, along with creativity and tradition, together form the agent of growth. “Now, the unity of hope, creativity and tradition is the agent of growth. It is the concerted action of spirit, blood and water. It is therefore *indestructible*; its action is *irreversible*; and its movement is *irresistible*.” (page 487)
  17. Returning to the over-arching theme of *Meditations on the Tarot* as a “journey into Christian hermeticism,” the chapter ends with a consideration that the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus represented an ancient/pre-Christian expression of this kind of hope/sacred growth. The author speculates that the Emerald Tablet of Hermes was an expression of faith in this sacred hope, and that the Major Arcana of the Tarot represents a restating of this hope; he completes this meditation by suggesting that perhaps in our time we need another concise statement of hope and growth: “This is the message of the woman kneeling under the stars on the bank of a current which flows from the past into the future—a woman who never ceases to pour water from above into the flow of water below. It is she who is the mother of the future, and this is why her message confronts us with duty towards the future—the duty towards the flow of uninterrupted tradition. Let us therefore try to comply with this!” (page 490)

Questions for personal reflection (and, if you wish, communal discussion on our Course Forum):

1. What does hope mean to you? How do you experience hope, and how does hope play a part in your daily spiritual walk? How can we safeguard and nurture hope, given the tremendous social and environmental problems we are facing today? How can hope equip us to meaningfully respond to the problems of our time?
2. Do you agree with the author that pre-Christian and non-Christian wisdom teachers like Zarathustra (Zoroastrianism), Buddha (Buddhism) and Mani (Manichaeism) offered an essentially dualistic message (by helping us to understanding the difference between the serpent's venom and the tears of the Virgin)? Why or why not? Can the argument be made that Biblical teachers, from Moses to Elijah to Jesus to Paul, similarly illuminated a present-day dualism by their teachings, even if this is meant to prepare us for an eschatological nonduality?
3. Our author thinks that we need a new summary of spiritual wisdom in the tradition of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus and the Major Arcana of the Tarot. What do you think such a "wisdom summary" would look like? How could it be meaningful for the people of our time (especially young people) and the generations to come, especially given that the communications revolution of our time (the Internet, computers, smartphones, etc.) represent as radical a break with the past as the invention of movable type signified at the dawn of the Renaissance?