

OCCULTURE: W.B. YEATS' PROSE FICTION AND THE LATE NINETEENTH-
AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY OCCULT REVIVAL

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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*OCCULTURE: W.B. YEATS' PROSE FICTION AND THE LATE
NINETEENTH- AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY OCCULT
REVIVAL*

ABSTRACT

In addition to being a respected poet, dramatist, essayist, and statesman, William Butler Yeats was a dedicated student of the occult and practicing magician for most of his adult life. In spite of his dedication, Yeats' commitment to occultism has often been ridiculed as "bughouse" (as Ezra Pound put it), shunted to the margins of academic discourse, or ignored altogether. Yeats' occult-focused prose fiction—the occult trilogy of stories "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi" and the unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*—has often received similarly dismissive treatment. Some critics have accused Yeats of being an escapist or of being out of touch with the intellectual currents of his time.

However, Yeats was in touch with the intellectual currents of his time, one of which was the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival. This was not a fringe movement; it was one which intersected with some of the most pressing social and cultural issues of the time. These include the dissatisfaction with mainstream religions, the renegotiation of women's roles, the

backlash against science, and nationalism and the colonial enterprise. This intersection is what I have termed occulture.

The central purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First, I demonstrate the cultural and academic relevance of the occult revival by analyzing its connections to these critical issues. Second, I situate the occult trilogy and *The Speckled Bird* as artifacts of the occult revival and its associated facets. Through its main characters, the occult trilogy illustrates a fragmented self associated with literary modernism and with scientific challenges to individual identity from Darwin, Freud, and others. In addition, these three stories exemplify a sacralization of the domestic sphere which conflicts with the officially-sanctioned sacred spaces of mainstream religions. *The Speckled Bird* also reconfigures the sacred space as Michael Hearne contemplates a magical order with Irish nationalist implications. In examining these works within this historical context, I present them as texts which engage with the social and cultural landscape of the time.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Titles of Works by W.B. Yeats

- CL1 *Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume 1*
- CL2 *Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume 2*
- CL3 *Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume 3*
- CW1 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 1: The Poems*
- CW2 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 2: The Plays*
- CW3 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 3: Autobiographies*
- CW4 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 4: Early Essays*
- CW5 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 5: Later Essays*
- CW6 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 6: Prefaces and Introductions*
- CW7 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 7: Letters to the New Island*
- CW8 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 8: The Irish Dramatic
Movement*
- CW9 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 9: Early Articles and
Reviews*
- CW10 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 10: Later Articles and
Reviews*

- CW12 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 12: John Sherman and Dhoya*
- CW13 *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 13: A Vision (1925)*
- M *Mythologies*
- SB1 *The Speckled Bird (1976)*
- SB2 *The Speckled Bird (2003)*
- V *A Vision and Related Writings (1990)*

Titles of Secondary Sources

- FOS1 Foster—*W.B. Yeats, A Life: Vol.1 The Apprentice Mage*
- FOS2 Foster—*W.B. Yeats, A Life: Vol. 2 The Arch-Poet*

“That is probably old Cornelius Patterson; he thinks they race horses and whippets in the other world, and is, so they tell me, so anxious to find out if he is right that he is always punctual.”

—Dr. Trench in Yeats’ play *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*

“I never did like the Heaven they talk about in churches; but when somebody told me that Mrs. Mallet’s husband ate and drank and went about with his favourite dog, I said to myself, ‘That is the place for Corney Patterson!’”

—Cornelius Patterson in Yeats’ play *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I had not taken up these subjects willfully, nor through love of strangeness, nor love of excitement, nor because I found myself in some experimental circle, but because unaccountable things had happened even in my childhood, and because of an ungovernable craving. When supernatural events begin, a man first doubts his own testimony, but when they repeat themselves again and again, he doubts all human testimony.

—Yeats, *Autobiographies*¹

I found I had the reputation of a magician; there was a story among the country people of my being carried five miles in the winking of an eye, and of my sending my cousin from her house at the First Rosses to the rocks of the Third in a like eye-wink—I had indeed sent her there in vision.

—Yeats, *Memoirs*²

I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, or emotion, of moods, of revelation, about to come in its place; for certainly belief in a supersensual world is at hand again.

—Yeats, “The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux”³

¹ CW3 211.

² *Memoirs* 76.

³ CW4 144-145.

One reason why William Butler Yeats is still revered as one of the world's greatest writers is his artistic engagement with the world in which he lived. In poems like "The Stolen Child," "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "Easter 1916," and "The Second Coming," Yeats addressed issues of the day, such as personal and national identity, colonialism, war, millennialism, and even women's roles in politics. In collaboration with Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats was part of Ireland's folklore collection movement which sought, in part, to reclaim Ireland's heroic heritage and use it to empower resistance to British imperialism. In founding the Abbey Theatre, Yeats helped to provide the first venue for Irish plays about Irish subjects. As a Senator, Yeats lobbied for the inclusion of Irish cultural symbols, like the harp, on the currency of the Irish Free State.

As a poet and a man, Yeats was actively engaged in the world around him. One aspect of Yeats' world in which he also participated was the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period of renewed interest, primarily in the United States and Great Britain, in spirit communication, magic, divination, and other occult pursuits coincided, and indeed intersected, with many of the political and social issues of the day, including women's rights, materialism, and colonialism. Spiritualism, for

example, was a religious movement spearheaded almost entirely by women, who had been blocked from positions of power in many traditional religious institutions. Material culture, with its emphasis on money and goods, was, many felt, squelching the spiritual life of human beings, which occultism sought to restore. Many occult belief systems, such as Theosophy, actively incorporated and honored the spiritual beliefs of subaltern countries like India, thereby inverting the Self/Other construct so entrenched in imperialist discourse. The occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which Yeats was an active participant, was more than a fringe element in society; rather, it represented fundamental shifts in the political, social, and cultural landscape of the time period.

That is why it is truly astonishing that so many of Yeats' critics have denigrated or even ignored his occult beliefs and practices. Mostly, critics do not share Yeats' interest in the occult and dismiss it as a silly pastime. This dismissive attitude also arose because these critics have overlooked the cultural significance of occultism and the occult revival in Yeats' lifetime. When they have dealt seriously with Yeats and the occult, their investigations usually include only his well-known involvement in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society or the experiments in automatic writing

conducted by Yeats and his wife George. This exclusion isolates Yeats' occultism within a narrow context and ignores the variety of occult beliefs and practices at that time as well as the larger cultural impact of the occult revival.

Consequently, Yeats' occult-focused prose fiction—especially the short stories “Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” and “The Adoration of the Magi” and his unpublished novel *The Speckled Bird*—, already relegated to a low position in the Yeats canonical hierarchy, have received similarly dismissive treatment. These works, however, are cultural artifacts of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival and represent the political and social changes that revival represents. It is important, therefore, to see Yeats' art and his occult writing as equally complex and engaged cultural products, and equally worthy of critical attention.

In this dissertation, I explore the varieties of occult beliefs and practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and demonstrate their connections with the most pressing cultural issues of the time. Within that context, I examine “Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” “The Adoration of the Magi,” and *The Speckled Bird* as evidence of the interconnectedness of occultism and the political and social issues of Yeats' time. In so doing, I will demonstrate the cultural relevance of occultism during the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries and also show Yeats as an artist who, in part through his occult studies, fully engaged with the pressing issues of his time. The occult revival is the most crucial contemporary context in which Yeats must be understood, and the revival itself must be recognized as a way of comprehending (and sometimes resisting) modernity.

Origins of This Project

My interest in William Butler Yeats' involvement with the occult sparked when I was working on my Master's degree at the National University of Ireland in Dublin. A cursory fascination with Yeats' poetry took me to Ireland, where I first heard inklings of Yeats' involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society. Certainly, there are shades of the occult in Yeats' poetry, but as I delved into Yeats' fiction for my Master's thesis, I discovered that this was where Yeats explicitly combined his interest in the occult with his art.

I began to see that Yeats the poet and Yeats the playwright are privileged over Yeats the writer of fiction and over Yeats the occultist. Yeats criticism focuses primarily on his poems and only a small portion deals with his fiction or the occult. In reading Yeats' autobiography and other biographies, I came to

understand how serious and important occult study was to Yeats. I also began to see how disparaging and dismissive many academics were about Yeats and the occult, either mocking Yeats' interests outright or avoiding the subject altogether. I wanted to know why.

Weldon Thornton sums up the general attitude towards Yeats and the occult, writing, "Such denigration of Yeats's thought reflects one of two false premises: 1) that we can meaningfully separate Yeats's work from his mind; or 2) that the occult was so trivial a part of Yeats's experience as to be dismissible" (61). In short, Thornton rightly assesses the occult as an integral part of Yeats' life and work. Two additional reasons seem to be behind this lack of interest and serious consideration. First, compared with Yeats' corpus of poems, plays, folklore, and essays, his output of fiction was minimal. He excelled at poetic and dramatic forms, and understandably spent most of his artistic energy on them. Poetry still holds a privileged position in the Yeats canon, reinforced by his 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature. In awarding Yeats the prize in 1923, Nobel Committee Chairman Per Hallström praised Yeats' poetry, "for which [Yeats'] inclination was strongest" (Hallström 194), and his plays as primary reasons for the award. Exposure of Yeats to a general audience confirms that this divide exists, and persists. A look inside any anthology of British or Irish literature reveals that

Yeats is represented by his poetry, usually "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "Easter 1916," "The Stolen Child," and other poems. His plays are usually absent from this context, as are *A Vision*, "Rosa Alchemica," "Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi."

Second, much of his fiction deals with occultism, a subject not readily accessible to and even shunned by many readers and academics. What R.P. Blackmur wrote in 1972 is unfortunately still true today: "fatalism, Christianity, and magic are none of them disciplines to which many minds can consciously appeal today, as Hardy, Eliot, and Yeats do . . . The supernatural is simply not part of our mental furniture, and when we meet it in our reading we say: Here is debris to be swept away" (113-114). Many readers of Yeats' occult fiction lack a shared context with the author. For example, "Rosa Alchemica" details a ritual initiation into a magical Order and the young hero of *The Speckled Bird* wants to found a magical order of his own. Such things may repel audiences not used to or interested in occultism and tend to be ignored for that reason.

Yet, as unfamiliar as such things might seem to contemporary academics, the climate was much different during Yeats' lifetime. His was a world in which séances proliferated, occult societies flourished, and esoteric challenges to mainstream religion thrived. Spirit photographs, in which disembodied ghostly

heads or sometimes full-body apparitions appeared in photographs with living people, were common. The folklore movement of the nineteenth century reinforced the general fascination with faeries, magic, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena.

G.R.S. Mead⁴, in his 1912 article “The Rising Psychic Tide,” describes the variety of experiences with which Yeats and his contemporaries would have been familiar.

In many directions we may see . . . revivals of divination, seers and soothsayers and prophets, pythonesses, sibyls and prophetesses, tellers of dreams and of omens, mantics of every description and by every sort of contrivance; astrologists and even alchemists; professors of magical arts and ceremonies; cosmologists and revelationists; necromancy and communion with spirits; enthusiasm trance and ecstasies . . . the bringing in of new gods and new saviours and new creeds, the blending of cults and syncretism of religions; societies and associations open and secret, for propagating or imparting new doctrines, new at any rate to their adherents though mostly old enough. (236)

⁴ G.R.S. Mead (1863-1933) served as general secretary of the Theosophical Society in England from 1891 to 1898 (Dixon 51). Among his writings is *Thrice-Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis*, published in 1906 (Clark 42).

A contemporary of Mead's, Victor Charbonnel, concurred, writing that mysticism was "'dragged . . . into everything, into magazines, both old and new; into newspapers; into poetry, the novel, criticism, songs; into the theater, into concerts, into the café-concert, into revues, into specially written tragicomedies, into every genre you can think of'" (qtd. in Pierrot 82-83). Experiencing these phenomena were a wide variety of people, including respected figures like writers Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, entertainer Harry Houdini, politician Abraham Lincoln⁵, and ordinary citizens

⁵ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the most logical of detectives Sherlock Holmes, was keenly interested in Spiritualism and published his two-volume *History of Spiritualism* in 1926. Conan Doyle's interest in Spiritualism sprang from his hope/belief that "'intelligence could exist apart from the body'" (qtd. in Kalush and Sloman 379). Lady Doyle practiced automatic writing, through which she made contact with Harry Houdini's mother and with her dead son Kingsley (Kalush and Sloman 375, 380-381).

Charles Dickens' chief occult interest was mesmerism or "animal magnetism . . . the belief, in other words, that the powers of the human body could be conducted and controlled by an invisible fluid and that by careful management of this mesmeric fluid the sick human subject could be cured or revived" (Ackroyd 244). Dickens attended mesmeric demonstrations, and his library included books on the occult such as Samuel Hibbert-Ware's *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions* and R. Dale Owens' *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (Kaplan 4).

Stowe biographer Joan D. Hedrick claims Stowe "took part in at least four séances presided over by medium Kate Fox Jencken" (367), one of the Hydesville Fox sisters, and that she received communication through a medium from her son Fred, who had disappeared in 1871 (391).

Harry Houdini was both skeptical of and fascinated by Spiritualism and was always on the lookout for fraudulent mediums. For instance, the teenaged Houdini attended a séance in Beloit, Wisconsin

where the medium claimed to contact the spirit of Abraham Lincoln. Houdini, who had read everything he could find on the life of Lincoln, questioned the spirit voice as to the first thing he did after his mother died. The disembodied voice answered, "I felt very bad. I went to my room and I wouldn't speak to anyone for days." Harry, however, knew "that Lincoln's first act was to get a preacher to say a proper service over her grave, which Lincoln's father had neglected." When confronted by Houdini, the medium admitted his deception. (Kalush and Sloman 51)

like Florence Theobald. Theobald and her sister-in-law were not surprised when “a small table walked out of the dining room, continued upstairs, and went into the drawing room where ‘it settled down, and would not stir another inch’” (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 81-82). Mediumistic services were even advertised in ordinary newspapers. A classified advertisement in the July 1, 1918 edition of *The London Times* promoted “Alfred Capper’s Thought Reading Séance” with “Special terms for all war functions,” the latter presumably aimed at the grieving relatives of war dead.

The occult was curious, exciting, possibly dangerous—and widespread. All of these examples led me to conclude that the occult revival was more significant than I had realized. The occult was an integral part of life for many in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and should be treated as such. Moreover, it has far more significance than in practical applications like palm reading and mesmerism. It was as significant a cultural movement as Romanticism or Modernism. Few scholars would argue, for example, that

Houdini’s “very public investigations included testifying in support of proposed United States Senate legislation to prevent mediums from ‘pretending to tell fortunes for reward or compensation [or] pretending to unite the separated’. Houdini endured lawsuits and death threats from Spiritualists, who sent him letters predicting that he would ‘meet a violent death soon as a fitting punishment for [his] nefarious work’. Even today, some people believe that the Spiritualists caused Houdini’s death on October 31, 1926; Houdini’s cause of death was listed as ‘diffuse streptococcic peritonitis’” (481, 491, 518).

“It was well known,” writes Barbara A. White in *The Beecher Sisters*, “that Mary Lincoln brought mediums into the White House. Of course, she could be dismissed as unbalanced, but cabinet members, senators, and Lincoln himself participated in the séances” (234).

Romanticism is merely a way into the poetry of William Wordsworth, or that Modernism is merely a backdrop for the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Both Romanticism and Modernism are recognized cultural movements, encompassing history, philosophy, music, sociology, visual arts, economics, and more. Any cultural movement develops within a peculiar historical context and meets certain needs of its time. Romanticism's emphasis on the individual, for example, is connected to the agitation for individual political representation in the 1789 French Revolution. Both Modernism and the occult revival coincided with a resistance against Romantic and Victorian discursive norms, as well as the uncertainties of world war and the coldness of science.

In his 1994 text *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Joscelyn Godwin traces the origins of this occult revival to circa 1777, situated within the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and covers its development through the 1920s. Godwin's book is unique in identifying how the nineteenth- and twentieth-century occult revival gained momentum from what came before it; Godwin asserts that

[Madame] Blavatsky's Theosophy owed as much to the skeptical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century as it did to the concept of spiritual enlightenment with which it is more readily associated . . .

Set in motion by French Enlightenment ideas, this became a vehicle

for those who sought a universal view of history, mythology, and world religions without being bounded by biblical fundamentalism or Christian supremacy. (xi)

Godwin places the occult revival in a historical context, specifically seeing it as a logical progression of thought from the intellectual currents that preceded it. This will be especially relevant to Yeats studies, and to those who see Yeats' occult involvement as eccentric or faddish. The occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries needs to be placed in a similar context, and its causes and effects comprehensively examined.

Thus, the idea for this dissertation research was born, and this idea is twofold. First and foremost, I seek to join the conversation to legitimize study of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival as a cultural movement and, in doing so, validate its place in Yeats criticism. As detailed below, a few scholars—Kathleen Raine, George Mills Harper, Susan Johnston Graf, and Weldon Thornton, among others—have posited occultism as a valuable and important aspect of Yeats' life and art. However, I explore occultism as a cultural movement which permeated and intersected with many aspects of ordinary life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition, I bring into the discussion on Yeats and the occult consideration of the occult revival beyond the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society: the Spiritualist movement and the push for women's rights, the Society for Psychical Research and the backlash against science, and others. Thus, Chapter Two will be a detailed discussion of this occult revival period: the reasons behind the renewed interest in the occult, the ways in which it was theorized and practiced, and the effects it had upon society.

My second purpose is to draw more critical attention to Yeats' prose fiction than has previously been given to it, and to look closely at this fiction as artifacts of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture of the occult. Chapter Three will focus on Yeats' occult trilogy: "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi." Chapter Four will center on his unpublished novel *The Speckled Bird*. Through this research and analysis, I hope to justify and illuminate the occult revival and Yeats' involvement in it as serious subjects worthy of academic study.

Definitions

What is the Occult?

Because many vague and erroneous definitions of the occult abound, my first step in this dissertation is to establish working, simplified definitions of occult terms relevant to Yeats and his work, such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, and magic. When confronted with the idea of the occult, contemporary audiences will likely think of Satanism and human sacrifice, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Ninth Gate*, psychic hotline advertisements in the back of *Rolling Stone*, the *Harry Potter* books and films, and television shows like *Ghost Hunters*. These associations permeate popular culture via film, television, and other media. As psychologist and Golden Dawn member Cris Monnastre wisely states in her introduction to the fifth edition of Israel Regardie's⁶ *The Golden Dawn*,

[t]hinking through and fully understanding the usage of such terms as "occult" or "magic" apart from their historically negative or even lurid connotations is fundamental. The association of these

⁶ Occultist and psychologist Israel Regardie joined the Golden Dawn in 1934 (some eleven years after Yeats left the organization) and continued to practice magic until his death in 1985. In his lifetime, Regardie's mission was to bring information about the Golden Dawn to modern seekers and to dispel inaccurate information about the order. His book *The Golden Dawn*, first published in four volumes between 1937 and 1940, provides an insider's guide to the Golden Dawn's rituals and is, essentially, a how-to manual for initiates; in addition, it preserves the knowledge that Yeats would have needed in his progression through the Order. In part a response to Howe's book, Regardie's work *What You Should Know About the Golden Dawn* is less a history of the Order than a refutation of popular misconceptions about the Golden Dawn.

words with “black” magic or Satanism has uniformly been the result of hysteria, narcissistic theatrics, capitalization by the media, or psychosis . . . [resulting in] the witch burnings of Salem [and] congressional hearings on censorship of lyrics in rock music.

(Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, xvii-xviii)

In reality, however, occultism is a religious and/or spiritual enterprise. Religion and spirituality are, as we know, contentious terms in and of themselves. For a basic definition of religion, and one particularly pertinent to this discussion, we can turn to William James, who defines religion simply as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*” (36). The crux of this definition is the words “individual” and “divine,” for religion basically boils down to the relationship between the two. Beliefs and practices termed “occult” share the focus on this relationship, as we shall see.

But, what exactly does the term “occult” entail? Demetres Tryphonopoulos, in his “History of the Occult Movement,” offers an initial definition of the term “occult.”

Operating outside established, orthodox religion, occultism comprises theories and practices based on esoteric knowledge.

Derived from the Latin root *occulere* (to cover over, hide, conceal), “occult” signifies anything hidden or secret in the sense of being mysterious to ordinary understanding or scientific reason . . . inherently unknowable by scientific reason, but still accessible to occult modes of cognition latent in everyone. (19-20)

For Cris Monnastre as well, “The ‘occult’ means nothing more than the study of what is ‘hidden’ beyond the perception of the five senses” (xviii). Frequently, this “hidden” knowledge is linked to religion, much of which is based upon faith in intangibles. For the occultist, however, even religions hide knowledge from their followers and promulgate the idea that such knowledge can be accessed primarily through religious leaders. Occult knowledge has to be sought out, and it must be sought by not just the mind but by the soul, psyche, or unconscious.

Thus, occult knowledge requires active seeking and not passive reception.

In his article “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture,” Edward Tiryakian defines occultism as

intentional practices, techniques, or procedures which: a) draw upon hidden or concealed forces in nature or the cosmos that cannot be measured or recognized by the instruments of modern science, and b) which have as their desired or intended

consequences empirical results, such as either obtaining knowledge of the empirical course of events or altering them from what they would have been without this intervention . . . To go on further, in so far as the subject of occult activity is not just any actor, but one who has acquired specialized knowledge and skills necessary for the practices in question, and insofar as these skills are learned and transmitted in socially (but not publicly available) organized, routinized, and ritualized fashion, we can speak of these practices as occult sciences or occult arts. (498-499)

Dion Fortune, psychologist and founder of The Society of the Inner Light, offers a similar definition of the occult. A prolific writer on the occult, Fortune published *Sane Occultism* (later published under the title *What is Occultism?*) in 1929. *Sane Occultism* is Fortune's attempt to separate popular misconceptions and outright falsities from serious occultism. For Fortune, occultism represents a synergistic relationship between science and religion, and is therefore not as outré as some may think.

Occult science, rightly understood, is the link between psychology and religion; it gives the means of a spiritual approach to science, and a scientific approach to the spiritual life. The experiences to

which it admits us, rightly understood, form a stairway from rational brain-consciousness, dependent on the five physical senses, to the direct apprehensions of spiritual intuition. (Fortune 25)

Fortune's definition is especially pertinent considering the time period in which she lived (1891-1946) and published. Scientific advancements during the nineteenth century had increased the prominence of the scientific method and empirical evidence, which coexisted uneasily with questions of faith and spirituality. Occultism offered the hope of bridging that gap between the mundane and the arcane.

Fortune realized that occultism "provides . . . a philosophy of life" which breaks down the barriers between man and God. Through occult practices like meditation and rituals, an individual can

penetrate . . . to the planes whence the revelations come, and for him they have an entirely different significance and validity. He is no longer dependent upon faith, he has had personal experience, and out of that experience he tends to formulate a religious belief in which he aspires to share in the work usually assigned to saints and angels as the ministers and messengers of God⁷. (11)

⁷ This is similar to Lewis Spence's definition of mysticism as the "attempt of man to attain to the ultimate reality of things and enjoy communion with the Highest. *Mysticism* maintains the

Occultism offered an alternative to mere faith; as an alternative, it was often not greeted warmly by holders of mainstream dogma.

In his 2000 dissertation “Multiple Views of Multiple Realities: The Rhetorical and Social Construction of the Occult,” John D. Richards⁸ reiterates this point and emphasizes the marginal status occultism sometimes occupies.

Richards writes that

definitions of the occult have often been used to establish *boundaries* between *binary* systems. In essence, the occult has assumed the opposing role to that which has been considered to be either religious, scientific, good, rational, real, normal, and so forth. (325)

As Richards argues, occultism often occupies the negative pole in binaries, e.g., irreligious instead of religious, or irrational instead of rational. Mainstream religions marginalize, and often reject entirely, occult practices. As occult scholar James Webb points out,

“[t]he occult” has been defined as “rejected knowledge.” This means that knowledge of a potentially valuable kind may be classified as “occult” just as easily as knowledge once accepted but

possibility of intercourse with God, not by means of revelation, or the ordinary religious channels, but by dint of introspection, culminating in the feeling that the individual partakes of the divine nature” (283-284).

⁸ Richards’ dissertation provides an exhaustive examination of definitions and rhetorical constructions of the occult and associated terms.

now discarded as primitive, facile, or simply mistaken. The term is so loose and all-embracing that it can be made to cover Spiritualism, Theosophy, countless Eastern (and not so Eastern) cults; varieties of Christian sectarianism and the esoteric pursuits of magic, alchemy and astrology; also the pseudo-sciences such as Baron Reichenbach's Odic Force or the screens invented by Dr. Walter Kilner for seeing the human aura . . . Although such bodies of opinion are frequently in direct conflict with one another, very often they share one common belief: the idea of "spiritual development." (15)

Webb's statement introduces a key component of a definition of the occult: "rejected knowledge" or "knowledge once accepted but now discarded as primitive, facile, or simply mistaken." By eliminating esoteric knowledge from their doctrine and discouraging followers from investigating that knowledge, mainstream religions can hold at bay the threat from alternative belief systems that may undermine traditional doctrines.

Even so, Webb suggests that occult knowledge can have intrinsic value and has been acceptable in the past. In analyzing Webb's definition, we must ask who has rejected this knowledge. In his choice of words, Webb implies that the

rejecting force or body is modern, complex, or irrefutable. It is a force of perceived progress, the new era that replaces the old and looks down upon it as less civilized. Major mainstream religions, like Christianity, drove occult traditions underground, and these traditions were “rejected” by the establishment.

We can see evidence of this in practices of the early Catholic Church, which routinely transformed suspect pagan traditions into Christian ones. The celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 corresponds with the Romans’ “solar festival, and their games of the circus in honor of the birth of the god of day . . . [which] took place the eighth day before the kalends of January—that is, on December 25” (Hall 139). Another example is the Celtic new year celebration of Samhain. As Kevin Danaher explains, it was also the point in the year when “the fairies and the ghosts of the dead were active” (200). This became All Hallows Eve, a day to remember the dead. Instead of wearing a coat inside out to confuse the faeries (207), contemporary children disguise themselves to obtain candy from their neighbors. The tradition of honoring the dead remains, but the pagan aspects have been renamed, reconfigured, or purged altogether. The basic point is this: ascendant and powerful social forces, like established religions and, later, institutionalized science, can and will dictate that antithetical practices and

beliefs should be rejected and shunned. Ironically, labeling these practices and beliefs as “occult” is one way in which the occult is repeatedly pushed to the margins of acceptable knowledge and practice and simultaneously reimagined by mainstream society.

Thus, occultism can be considered as specialized knowledge and practice that is outside mainstream religions, that is not apprehensible only with the conscious mind but also with the psyche, and that is often declared heretical by dominant religious and social forces. When I refer to the occult or occultism herein, I invoke this tripartite definition.

A final definition of the occult from *The Oxford English Dictionary* is worth mentioning. As stated above, the main difficulty in defining the occult is in separating that word from the ideas and practices that fall underneath this umbrella term. *The Oxford English Dictionary* also refers to the occult as “relating to magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy, or other practical arts held to involve agencies of a secret or mysterious nature.” While occultism encompasses all of these, each is distinctive on its own. They are not interchangeable, though many are used in that way. While each meets at least one of the tripartite criteria for the occult listed above, none of them can claim exclusive rights to the term. Therefore, the subcategories pertinent to this study— Spiritualism, magic,

psychical research, Theosophy, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, and Hermeticism— must be individually defined.

Spiritualism and the Society for Psychical Research

Spiritualism is a social and religious phenomenon with its origins in 1848 Hydesville, New York. There, sisters Kate and Maggie Fox began communicating with entities in their home which made knocking or rapping sounds in response to questions. The Fox sisters' experiences and exhibitions of their mediumistic gifts touched off a global fascination with spirit communication. Spiritualists like John and Mary Westerfield spread their beliefs around the United States and, in 1886, they founded the Spiritualist Church's Camp Chesterfield in Chesterfield, Indiana. Spiritualism "arrived in England . . . in the early 1850s and during the next twenty years took the country by storm" (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 18). R.F. Foster notes that "Spiritualist experiments became the rage in Dublin from 1886 to 1887" (*FOS1* 51), and Yeats participated in them enthusiastically.

Chiefly, Spiritualists sought to prove that the human personality survives after bodily death by communicating with those who had died. As Barbara Weisberg explains, Spiritualism's "central tenet [is] that death does not exist.

Instead, the state commonly called death is only a transition, a shedding of the body, and the spirits of individuals not only survive beyond the grave but also communicate from the other side" (4). Spiritualists used various methods to communicate with such spirits, most commonly mediumship—the use of a particularly sensitive individual as a channel for spirit communication.

Mediums would sometimes speak in the deceased's voice, or allow a spirit to control his or her pen to write messages to the living. Mediums could also encourage spirits to move objects in a room or even play music. Through Spiritualism, ordinary individuals could gain access to knowledge about life after death, which knowledge was only supposed to be disseminated through official religious channels.

Joscelyn Godwin senses an underlying subversion in this interest in ideas that were purposely being kept secret. Godwin suggests that "the Hydesville phenomena were not a spontaneous manifestation, but something provoked by living persons, acting with no lesser intent than that of changing the world view of Western civilization" (196). Spiritualism certainly threatened to equalize the imbalance of power between ordinary people and religious leaders. As Ruth Brandon explains in her historical study of the occult revival,

Certainly spiritualism rendered heaven utterly democratic and accessible to all in a way which appealed to the American view of things. And this accessibility extended to far more than free entry to heaven. In virtually all other forms of religion contact with the deity is maintained through a select priesthood, usually male, which is either born or lengthily trained to the job. And now anyone who wanted might personally contact the next world! (40)

If this information could be directly accessed through spirit communication, the role of the minister or priest as interpreter and intermediary would be diminished or eliminated.

Consequently, Spiritualism was not greeted warmly by mainstream religious leaders. Brandon relates an incident that happened in New York shortly after the Fox rappings began and which illustrates the conflict Spiritualism caused between its proponents and adherents of mainstream religion.

Calvinists railed against this general assumption of glorious immortality for all, but there were many, in this center of Calvinism, who were only too glad to get rid of the fear of damnation it engendered. As a spirit speaking through the mouth

of Judge Edmonds put it, "Fear of God is a terrible fear. The soul shrinks within itself in contemplating the jealousy of an omnipotent God. Every nerve thrills with unutterable anguish at this anger, and many have wished that God had never existed, or had never caused them to exist." Edmonds enlarged on this theme, speaking this time as himself. Authority, he said, had been the curse of the religious world for two thousand years. One great good which spiritualism had accomplished was to destroy all faith in prescription and authority, and throw men back on their own investigations. (39-40).

With occultism, individuals were encouraged to think for themselves about religion and spirituality, not merely accept what was being told to them, threatening the established hierarchical structure of religious authority.

This hostility was not limited to the United States, however. On 8 July 1879, American Spiritualist medium Emma Hardinge Britten delivered a lecture at the Garrison Hall in Dunedin, New Zealand. Her purpose was to refute the claims made by a local Christian minister, Mr. M.W. Green, in a hand-bill which she read out to her audience. In it, Green claims Spiritualism is "'an incentive to the commission of crimes'" and "'Atheistical—destructive of human

accountability—the enemy of marriage—[and] the forerunner of social and political anarchy” (6-7). Hardinge Britten begins her rebuttal by commenting sarcastically on Green’s “Christian sentiment and gentlemanly language” (7) and continues by refuting his argument based on lack of supporting evidence.

Spiritualism also provided people with an alternate, and more personal, way of understanding the self and spirituality than that offered through the accepted channels of religious institutions. In his Introduction to *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery*, social anthropologist Bruce Kapferer suggests that occultism “point[s] to matters of deep existential concern . . . the foundations of religion, the underlying features of the human psyche and, indeed, the very nature of science” (1). Irving I. Zaretsky concurs with Kapferer in his Foreword to *On the Margins of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult*.

Popular interest in the esoteric and the occult, however, has a long history in Western civilization. Every society in every historical period has had social groups, frequently organized as religious institutions, devoted to the accumulation of “hidden” knowledge and the search for power to apply that knowledge in daily life. In retrospect we often view such past efforts primarily in terms of the

philosophical and literary traditions to which they have contributed. Contemporary religious movements associated with the occult cannot be studied merely for their philosophical interest or traditional textual exegeses. We must examine their living component—the efforts of many people to build religious institutions and form movements devoted to the understanding of esoteric doctrines and their daily application. (vii-viii)

These applications include bringing the “hidden” knowledge usually reserved for priests into the public sphere and making that knowledge available to all people.

Clearly, the occult, and Spiritualism in particular, served more purposes than just entertainment and titillation, and arose out of serious societal concerns. Geoffrey Nelson, writing on America in the 1840s, tracks the social factors underlying the emergence of Spiritualism, arguing that “[t]he sources of religion lie deep within the psychological make-up of human individuals, but the particular form which religion takes at any place and time is determined by the social conditions within the given society” (68). Two factors that Nelson cites as causal are massive industrialization and the growing divide between wealth and poverty (63). The dehumanization of work in the industrial age and rampant

materialism promoted more spiritual inquiry to make up for the lack of spirituality in everyday life. Rather than being a stereotypically superstitious movement among poor immigrants trying to preserve their folk culture, Spiritualism appealed to all classes, including the intellectuals and the upper class. All religions have a spiritual component, but Spiritualism put the application of spirituality in the hands of the people. Nelson further notes that it was “in the areas of highest educational standards and the lowest rate of illiteracy that Spiritualism first arose, spread most rapidly, and gained its greatest support” (65). Spiritualism, and the occult in general, made spiritual enlightenment available to any individual.

Interest in Spiritualism waned and waxed at the turn of the century. This decline, according to Barbara Weisberg, concurred with changes in many of the social issues which brought Spiritualism to the fore in the first place. Women’s roles in society were changing in the twentieth century; for instance, more career opportunities were available to them (261) and, during the first World War, they were encouraged to support the war effort by taking up manufacturing jobs left vacant by deployed soldiers. While Weisberg also notes that advances in medical care increased life expectancy and decreased infant mortality rates (261), “The ranks of Spiritualism began to swell as grieving families sought to come to

terms with the loss of their soldier sons in World War I" (Kalush and Sloman 380). Today, Spiritualism is not the craze it was during its peak in the late nineteenth century; however, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, founded in 1893, and the Spiritualist communities of Lily Dale in upstate New York (Weisberg 260) and Camp Chesterfield in Chesterfield, Indiana still thrive.

While Spiritualism's main concern was communication with spirits, it spawned other movements and organizations which differed in their approach to spirits. A desire to empirically prove supernatural phenomena led Cambridge University philosophy professor Henry Sidgwick to found the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882. The SPR was not a fringe organization either. Among its affiliates was Sigmund Freud, who was "a corresponding member of the S.P.R., was intrigued by psychical research and pronounced himself reluctant to dismiss 'prophetic dreams, telepathic experiences, manifestations of supernatural forces and the like'" (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 237). Freud even contributed articles to the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (Foster, *FOS* 463). The SPR was committed to methodical, scientific investigation of supernatural phenomena like extrasensory perception and telekinesis (Weisberg 232). The SPR frequently investigated mediums, including Kate and Maggie Fox; SPR investigations of the Fox sisters were never conclusive, although Maggie Fox

confessed to fraud (a confession some argue was coerced and not genuine) in 1888 (Weisberg 241-245).

Both Spiritualism and the Society for Psychical Research sought to prove spiritual and supernatural phenomena by observation, deduction, and analysis. So, even though occult phenomena may seem antithetical to science, Spiritualism and the SPR attempted to bridge the gap between the two, as did Yeats. As a member of the Society for Psychical Research, Yeats “hoped to reconcile ‘spiritist fact with credible philosophy’. The séance-room must be made into a scientific laboratory” (Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* 294). Yeats was able to mediate between the seemingly opposite worlds of the scientific and the paranormal and find a balance between them.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah, and Hermeticism

Spiritualism and the SPR were public and well-known expressions of interest in the occult. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, on the other hand, was a secret society⁹, founded in London in 1887 by Dr. William Wynn

⁹ In his 1997 book *Secret Societies: From the Ancient and Arcane to the Modern and Clandestine*, David Barrett outlines four characteristics of secret societies: they have “carefully graded and progressive teachings . . . available only to selected individuals . . . leading to hidden (and ‘unique’) truths . . . and to personal benefits beyond the reach and even the understanding of the

Westcott, Dr. William Robert Woodman, and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. While the Golden Dawn has experienced fits and starts since 1887, the organization is still active and is currently headquartered in Florida ¹⁰.

According to Gerald Yorke, in his Foreword to Ellic Howe's *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923*,

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn . . . was the crowning glory of the occult revival in the nineteenth century. It synthesised into a coherent whole a vast body of disconnected and widely scattered material and welded it into a practical and effective system, which cannot be said of any other occult Order of which we know at that time or since. (ix)

Ellic Howe clarifies this assessment, noting that no "previous magical or occult fraternity had offered (a) a comparable instruction in magical theory and practice, allied with (b) a complicated and therefore intriguing hierarchical system and (c) a series of nine rituals which effectively incorporated the Order's elaborate symbolism" (xxii). The Golden Dawn did indeed incorporate rituals and symbolism from many different belief systems: Kabbalah, Tarot,

initiated" (16). The Golden Dawn meets all of Barrett's criteria.

¹⁰ Various Golden Dawn-oriented groups and temples exist around the world. One in particular, located on the web at <http://www.hermeticgoldendawn.org/index.shtml>, was founded by Israel Regardie's protégé, Chic Cicero, and his wife Tabatha.

Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, and astrology, among others. Students in the Golden Dawn

attempted to purify themselves through meditation on the secret wisdom revealed in such books as Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, and Eliphas Lévi's *The History of Magic*. Their labors were, partly because of the nearly impenetrable prose in which some of the books were written, Herculean. These texts tried, through a system of interlocking symbolism derived in part from Eastern religions and in part from the Jewish and Christian Apocrypha, to present to their students the primary patterns through which everything can be apprehended. Such patterns, linking—in the famous formula of Hermes—that which is above to that which is below, gave those who contemplated them peace. (Unterecker 20-21)

Books like Howe's and Regardie's provide valuable insight into the inner-workings and history of this secret society, yet they do not answer a pressing question: why did the Golden Dawn form when it did?

One theory comes from psychologist Carl Jung, who "regarded secret societies as serving a legitimate role in the development of the maturing

individual, describing them as ‘shelters for the poor and weak, a home port for the shipwrecked, the bosom of a family for orphans, a land of promise for disillusioned vagrants and weary pilgrims, a herd and safe fold for lost sheep, and a mother providing nourishment and growth’” (Roberts, *British Poets and Secret Societies* 3). In the Golden Dawn’s heyday, people from all walks of life gravitated towards it. As Israel Regardie notes in *The Golden Dawn*,

The membership of the Golden Dawn was recruited from every circle, and it was represented by dignified professions as well as by all the arts and sciences, to make but little mention of the trades and business occupations. It included physicians, psychologists, clergymen, artists and philosophers. And normal men and women, humble and unknown, from every walk of life have drawn inspiration from its font of wisdom, and undoubtedly many would be happy to recognise and admit the enormous debt they owe to it.

(16)

Both Westcott and Woodman were trained medical doctors. Members within Yeats’ circle included Maud Gonne, author and political activist, and Annie Horniman, heir to the Horniman Tea Company fortune who funded the Abbey

Theatre. Other prominent members included Arnold Bennett, author of *The Old Wives' Tale* and other novels, and Constance Mary Wilde, wife of Oscar Wilde.

One of the traditions the Golden Dawn drew upon was Rosicrucianism. This term refers to the beliefs and practices of an organization known as the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, a secret society with dubious origins. In her book *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, Marie Roberts writes that the

secret organisation of Rosicrucians announced its supposed existence to the world in the form of two manifestoes which were published between 1614 and 1615. Scholars still debate whether or not this clandestine brotherhood ever actually existed or if it was merely an elaborate hoax. (2)

In fact, Marie Roberts credits writers of occult fiction, like Edward Bulwer-Lytton¹¹, with creating and maintaining Rosicrucianism.

Spurious or not, Rosicrucianism existed and had an agenda. "The Rosicrucian movement," writes Demetres Tryphonopoulos, "included a vision of general reformation, an emphasis on philanthropy, a programme for the reconciliation of science and religion to be carried out by an elite group of adepts,

¹¹ Bulwer-Lytton is perhaps best known for his historical romance *The Last Days of Pompeii*, published in 1834. However, his interest in the occult shaped his other novels like *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story: An Alchemical Novel* (1862).

as well as an esoteric approach to religion and a proclivity for initiation and legitimation through alleged ancestry from ancient mystery cults” (39).

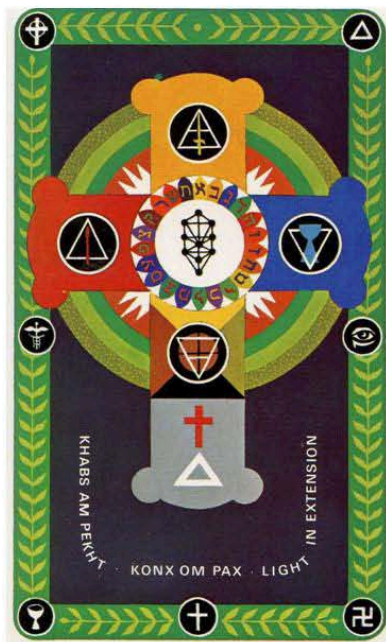
Rosicrucian groups studied and practiced alchemy, with particular emphasis on finding the *elixir vitae* which would ensure immortality. They also purportedly communicated with spirits and were able to control supernatural forces.

The iconography they used in rituals and documents focused around two symbols: the rose and the cross, frequently represented as a rose superimposed upon a cross. As a Golden Dawn member, Yeats would have made his own copy of the Golden Dawn Tarot¹², replete with rose cross imagery (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), and his own ritual Rose Cross lamén¹³ (Fig. 3). The rose, in itself, represents several related ideas. The rose is feminine in nature, “the cosmic principle personified as Venus,” according to Francis King (*Magic: The Western Tradition*, 8). It is also an emblem of beauty or, as Marie Roberts writes, “The Rose Cross

¹² The Golden Dawn Tarot pictured here was designed by Robert Wang, in conjunction with Israel Regardie, in 1978. Regardie had been friends with Aleister Crowley and was a member of the Stella Matutina, the order to which Yeats belonged following the 1900 schism orchestrated by Mathers and Crowley. Wang’s Tarot is virtually identical to Regardie’s own Golden Dawn deck, illustrations from which appear in his book *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*. Therefore, while Yeats’ Golden Dawn tarot deck has not survived, the Wang deck is a close approximation.

¹³ The rose cross lamén was a ritual object that was

to be made by each Adept alone, and consecrated by himself and never touched by any other person; and wrapped in white silk or linen when not in use . . . The Cross may be cut out of cardboard and the coloured portions may be painted or formed by pasting on portions of coloured papers of the required size and shape. The Colours must be correct, clear and brilliant . . . The cross was to be worn suspended from a yellow collarette of silk, the motto of the owner placed on the reverse side, with a white sash, and is for general use in Magical working, to be worn at all meetings of Adepts. (Regardie, *The Golden Dawn* 310, 312)



(Left) Fig. 1. The back of a Golden Dawn Tarot card.

(Right) Fig. 2. The face of the Golden Dawn Tarot Eight of Swords card.

Illustrations from the Golden Dawn Tarot deck reproduced by permission of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford, CT 06902 USA. Copyright © 1982 by U.S. Games Systems, Inc. Further reproduction prohibited.

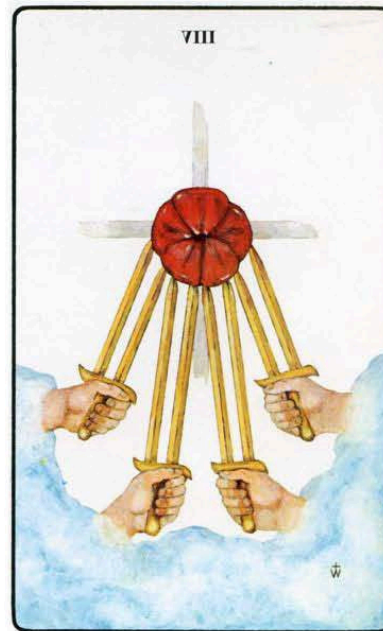


Fig. 3. W.B. Yeats' Golden Dawn Rose Cross Lamen. Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin. Reproduced by permission of A.P. Watt, Ltd. on behalf of Gráinne Yeats.

unites religion and beauty, spirit and nature, the actual and the ideal “(*British Poets and Secret Societies* 145). The cross represents, in Kabbalistic terms, God or divinity through the “Quaternary in Nature, the four letters of the Holy Name, I.H.V.H., the Tetragrammaton, Jehovah” (Mathers x). Israel Regardie identifies the rose cross as a symbol of “the harmonious reconciliation . . . of divinity and manhood” (*The Golden Dawn*, 47). As Yeats’ friend and fellow Golden Dawn member Florence Farr stated, ““The Rose and Cross symbolize man able to unite himself to the great powers of Nature”” (qtd. in Greer 402). For those conversant with Yeats’ poetry, the images of rose and cross are familiar ones, as in “To The Rose Upon the Rood of Time.” John Unterecker notes that the point of contact between rose and cross becomes in Yeats’ poetry “that point at which—mortal but in touch with immortal things—[Yeats] is able to hold fixed in mind on Time’s destructive cross the Rose, symbol of imperishable order” (76). For Yeats, the rose cross would come to represent an intersection, if not reconciliation, of eternal beauty and finite time.

The Golden Dawn also drew heavily from the Kabbalah¹⁴, a Jewish mystical tradition which seeks to achieve the direct relationship with God lost by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Matt 2). Indeed, S.L. MacGregor Mathers

¹⁴ Kabbalah is also spelled Cabbala, Cabbalah or Qabbalah. Except when quoting other writers, I will use Kabbalah as my standard spelling.

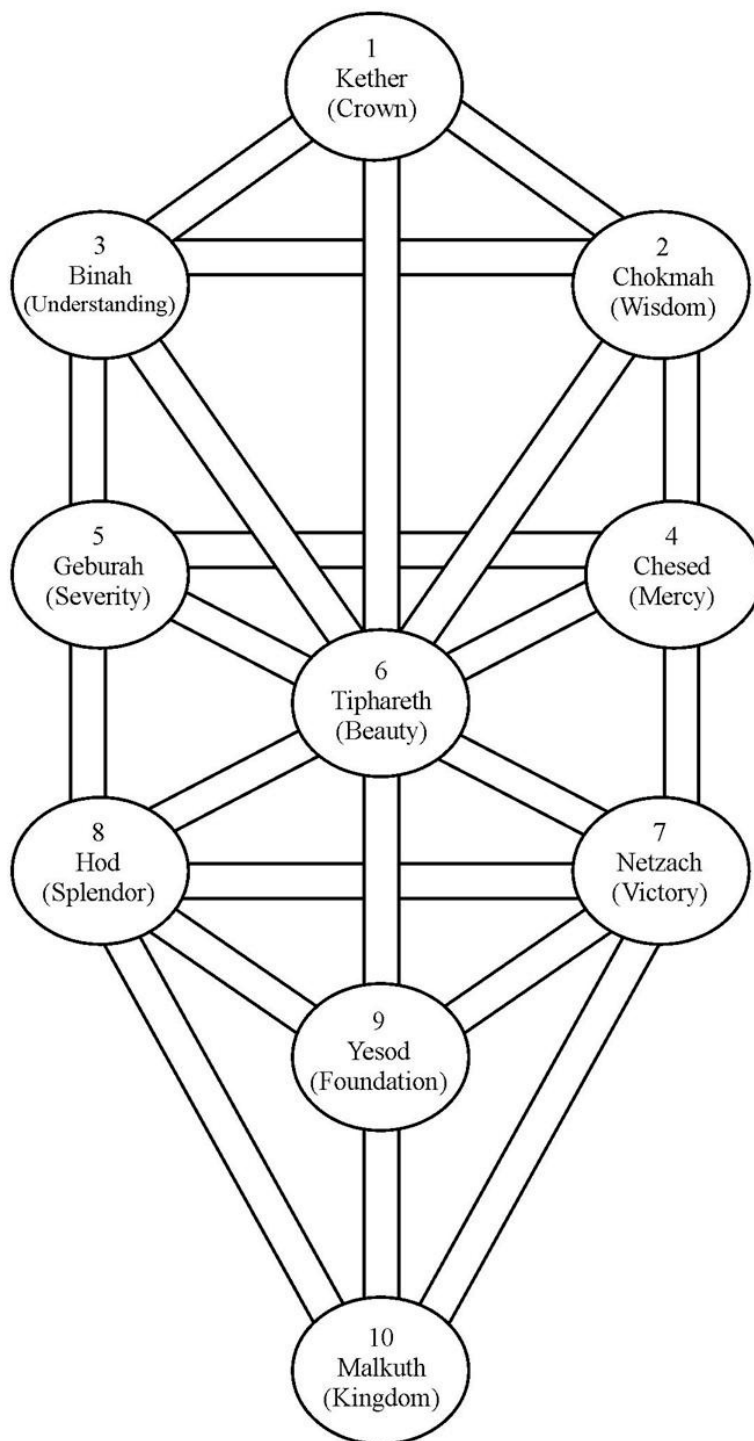


Fig. 4. The Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

saw the Kabbalah as a key to understanding the Bible. In *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Mathers writes that

the Bible, which has been probably more misconstrued than any other book ever written, contains numberless obscure and mysterious passages which are utterly unintelligible without some key wherewith to unlock their meaning. THAT KEY IS GIVEN IN THE QABALAH. (1)

The central image and focus of the Kabbalah is the Tree of Life (Fig. 4). The Tree of Life consists of ten spheres, or Sephiroth, connected by twenty-two paths. At the bottom of the diagram is the tenth Sephiroth, Malkuth or The Kingdom. This represents the material world in which humankind lives. At top is Kether or The Crown, "an infinite ocean of brilliance wherein all things are held as within a matrix, from which all things were evolved, and it is that divine goal to which all life and all beings eventually must return" (Regardie 18). The other Sephiroth and the twenty-two paths represent the progress an individual, through study and meditation, can make from the physical world to a higher spiritual consciousness. In Matt's definition above, the Tree of Life represents the opportunity for men and women to return to a prelapsarian closeness with

God. Yeats' friend Florence Farr identified the Tree of Life as "'the key to the rhythm of physical and mental states'" (qtd. in Greer 402)¹⁵. This, really, is a common focus in many occult traditions: the human potential to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of God. As Regardie explains, "the whole system [of the Golden Dawn] has as its objective the bringing down of the Light" (23). Indeed, as David R. Clark writes, "The initiation rites of the Order of the Golden Dawn involved a series of spiritual deaths and rebirths through which one could climb the Tree of Life, whose roots are in earth and whose branches are in Heaven, from grade to grade until one achieved a union with one's higher Self or God" (40). Therefore, the Tree of Life diagram mirrors, and is used in, the ritual progression of grades within the Golden Dawn, with which Yeats was intimately familiar.

¹⁵ A more extensive explanation of the Tree of Life is offered by Colin Wilson in his book *Mysteries*.

According to the *Zohar*, the ultimate godhead is the Macroprosopus or Ain Soph, who remains forever hidden. However, this *deus absconditus*, known simply as "I am" (yah), somehow gave birth to a lesser God, the Yahweh of the Hebrews, also known as the Tetragrammaton because his name has four letters (JHVA). In the Cabbala, this Creator is also known as Kether, the Crown, which split into its nine attributes—wisdom, understanding, love, power, beauty, endurance, majesty, foundation, and kingdom (the earth).

The Cabalists arrange these ten holy names—or Sephiroth—into a form which they call the Tree of Life, although the diagram makes it look rather more like a chemical molecule. God (the Crown) is at the top; earth (kingdom) is at the bottom. Man finds himself trapped in the lowest realm; with a great spiritual effort, he can climb the tree and once again become united with God. But this ascent is not simply a matter of climbing. The tree passes through ten different realms and wanders from side to side.

The Jewish Cabbalists who studied the *Zohar* regarded it as a mystical treatise that would enable them to invoke holy powers and combat demons. (394)

Hermeticism derives its name from Hermes Trismegistus, another name for the Egyptian god Thoth, author of mystical doctrines and keeper of arcane knowledge, specifically alchemical knowledge. Among the disciplines attributed to Hermes, according to Manly P. Hall, are “medicine, chemistry, law, art, astrology, music, rhetoric, magic, philosophy, geography, mathematics (especially geometry), anatomy, and oratory” (93). As this extensive list implies, Hermes himself has attained mythic status and “it is impossible to extricate the historical man from the mass of legendary accounts” (93). Even so, Hermes Trismegistus remains an icon of the seeker of spiritual truth. The basic tenet of Hermeticism is “As above, so below,” which expresses the persistent idea that human beings and the earth are microcosmic mirrors of the universe, or macrocosm. This idea, used by thinkers from Aristotle and Ptolemy and beyond, can be seen in the Kabbalistic tree of life and many other Golden Dawn symbols.

Through the Golden Dawn, then, Yeats studied and implemented ideas from a variety of occult systems. True, many of these ideas are expressed in his art but they were not solely sources for his art. Secret societies, like the Golden Dawn, the Freemasons, and the Rosicrucians “should not just be regarded as external forces acting on literature but as living art-forms which re-enact myth and symbolism” (Roberts n.p.). Roberts continues, stating that Yeats

recaptured through the magical Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn the occult mysteries submerged by the skepticism of early twentieth-century thought. The Golden Dawn served to remind modern mankind of the importance of myth since it was a syncretic Order excavated out of the bed-rock of world mythologies. (n.p.)

As a member of the Golden Dawn, then, Yeats actively participated in mythologies and belief systems from around the world for the sake of understanding both them and himself.

Alchemy

Alchemy's origins within ancient Egyptian magical culture are often associated with the aforementioned Hermes Trismegistus. However, alchemy did not spread to Europe until the eighth century, hence its association with medieval religion and mysticism. Through mixing, heating, or cooling metals and other substances, alchemists seek several outcomes, chief among which are

(1) the discovery of a process by which the baser metals might be transmuted into gold and silver; (2) the discovery of an elixir by which life might be prolonged indefinitely; and . . . (3) the manufacture of an artificial process of life. (Spence 10)

One of the chief components of the alchemist's toolkit is the famed Philosopher's Stone, which would affect the above transmutations and processes (10). As Hermione Granger discovers in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*,

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, but the only stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight). (Rowling 219-220)

Rowling takes some liberties with the life of Nicholas Flamel, a fifteenth-century French alchemist. However, he is associated with the Philosopher's, or Sorcerer's, Stone. According to Colin Wilson's research, "In 1383, [Nicholas Flamel] succeeded in making the 'red stone' (the Philosopher's Stone) and transmuted mercury into gold" (*Mysteries* 405). While alchemists did seek to convert base metals, like lead, into gold, the transformative nature of alchemy is also metaphorical and suggestive of the spiritual transformation as well.

In her 1850 book *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, Mary Anne Atwood writes that “the true subject of alchemy was not the transmutation of metals but rather the transmutation of man’s nature from the profane and carnal to the divine.” Furthermore, man “is the true laboratory of the Hermetic art; his life is the subject, the grand distillatory, the thing distilling and the thing distilled, and Self-Knowledge [is] the root of all Alchemical tradition” (qtd. in Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy* 36). For Atwood, alchemy is less a material practice than a spiritual endeavor. Thus, alchemy is another place where science and spirituality come together. As with other terms defined above, alchemy has at its heart a close association between the physical world and the realm of the divine.

Magic

Alchemy is often considered a form of magic, in that its goals involve altering parts of the physical world which had been considered the province of God, such as extending natural life. Magic itself, however, encompasses more than just alchemy. Simply stated, magic is, in a definition proffered by Aleister Crowley, “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with the Will” (qtd. in Wilson, *Mysteries* 235). Similarly, Israel Regardie defines magic as the practice of “creating change through consciousness at will” (xviii). Francis

King, in his book *Magic: The Western Tradition*, distinguishes four distinct categories of magic:

There is the magic of the stage illusionist . . . the magic of the anthropologist—naïve superstition, primitive fertility rites, curious folklore survivals . . . black magic, the performance of evil actions . . . in order to curry favour with devils . . . [and] the magic of the Western occultist. (8)

Magic, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, is the “use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge.” It is this last definition which coincides most closely with Yeats’ own understanding of the term magic.

In his essay “Magic,” Yeats describes magic as “the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed.” Yeats goes on to state three doctrines which form “the foundations of nearly all magical practices”:

- (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or

reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (CW4 25)

In this essay, Yeats explains his principle ideas about magic, but he also illustrates how he applied magic practically to solve common problems.

One example Yeats offers is how, waking up from a nightmare, he “imagined one symbol to prevent its recurrence, and imagined another, a simple geometrical form, which calls up dreams of luxuriant vegetable life, that I might have pleasant dreams” (38). In addition, Yeats also “cured” his uncle George Pollexfen using magical techniques.

Vaccination, probably from some infection in the lymph, brought on a very serious illness, blood-poisoning I heard it called, and presently he was delirious . . . Between eleven and twelve one night when the delirium was at its height, I sat down beside his bed and said, ‘What do you see, George?’ He said, ‘Red dancing figures’, and without commenting, I imagined the cabbalistic symbol of

water and almost at once he said, 'There is a river running through the room', and a little later, 'I can sleep now'. I told him what I had done and that, if the dancing figures came again, he was to bid them go in the name of the Archangel Gabriel. Gabriel is angel of the Moon in the Cabbala and might, I considered, command the waters at a pinch. The doctor found him much better and heard that I had driven the delirium away and given such a word of command that when the red men came again in the middle of the night, they looked greatly startled, and fled. (CW3 214)

Yeats, as the above examples illustrate, used magic not just ritually within the Golden Dawn, but applied it regularly and practically in his personal life.

Theosophy

In addition to the Golden Dawn and the SPR, Yeats was also a member of the Theosophical Society, and he even formed a Dublin branch. Theosophy, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a system of recent origin . . . [claiming] a knowledge of nature profounder than is obtained from empirical science, and contained in an esoteric tradition of which the doctrines of the various historical religions are held to be only the exoteric expression." The

Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, with the goal of combining Eastern mystical traditions with Western spiritual practices. According to Demetres Tryphonopoulos,

The professed objectives of the [Theosophical] Society were the following: (1) to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex¹⁶, caste, or color; (2) to encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science; and (3) to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humans. (44)

Like Spiritualism and the Society for Psychical Research, Theosophy included a scientific component in its examinations of “the unexplained laws of nature.” The Theosophical Society, according to Margaret Mills Harper, was really more of a “religious debating society” (153) and Blavatsky discouraged her followers from practical applications of theories. Yeats, while interested in discussion and debate about occultism, craved experimentation. In 1890, Yeats either left or was asked to leave the Theosophical Society ostensibly because “he refused to stop

¹⁶ While this was Blavatsky and Olcott’s stated intention, subsequent splinter organizations would often not follow this directive. One example is the Liberal Catholic Church (LCC), formed within the Theosophical Society in 1916. According to C.W. Leadbeater, one of its bishops, the “mighty gift of grace” was “arranged to flow through the masculine organism” and, consequently, women were barred from the priesthood of the LCC (Dixon 84).

pursuing 'phenomena', attempting to dissolve the boundaries between spiritual and physical planes by evocation and other methods" (154). This persistent curiosity, of course, led him to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

What all of these beliefs and practices share in common is a focus on things outside the realm of average human experience: arcane spiritual knowledge rather than received religious doctrine; communication with the dead rather than acceptance of death as a finite separation from life; reliance on the self to control aspects of the physical world rather than reliance on a god to provide for humans. For its practitioners, the occult provided a way for men and women to participate fully in their spiritual lives and work out spiritual truths for themselves instead of accepting truths passed down by patriarchal religious hierarchies. This is one way in which the occult revival was a significant element of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Not everyone, however, views occultism as a serious and legitimate belief system. Consequently, the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has received little attention in academic circles as an important cultural movement. Accordingly, Yeats' role as a participant in this cultural movement has been marginalized. In reviewing the critical conversation

on this subject, I will look first at the work on the occult revival in general, then at considerations of Yeats' involvement with the occult movement.

Dismissing—and Addressing—the Occult Revival

One of the main purposes of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate that magic, Spiritualism, and the like have political import and significance. This general disregard of the occult across academic disciplines may very well represent the high/low cultural divide present in much academic discourse, especially the discourse surrounding Modernism. In his 1974 study *The Occult Underground*, James Webb argues that while the "'occult' has not formed part of the overt concerns of members of the academic fraternity . . . to ignore the occult revival of the 19th century is to ignore a large slice of modern intellectual development" (1-2). Occultism was an integral part of the intellectual current of the time, but it was not restricted to one stratum of society.

Instead, it reached across boundaries of class, ethnicity, and economics. From peasants to politicians, people sought out occultism for spiritual enlightenment, thrills, or the power and awe reserved for magicians. In this, occultism is again similar to Modernism: until recently, Modernism was seen as the province of the intellectual elite and divorced from popular culture. Now,

with studies like Mark Morrisson's *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* and Michael Tratner's *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats*, Modernism and popular culture have entered into dialogue with one another. Occultism, often seen as the province of the lower class, actually crossed socioeconomic and cultural boundaries. Occultism was not practiced by an isolated group but drew in people like Dickens, Lincoln, Stowe, the Fox sisters, and bereaved men and women seeking contact with their dead loved ones; it pervaded aspects of high and low culture alike, and was much more common and widespread than many Yeats scholars have recognized. And, like any cultural phenomenon, occultism served functions that met, or anticipated, cultural and societal needs. When academics have studied and written about the occult revival, however, most of them have taken a historical, rather than cultural approach.

Not surprisingly, many of these historical accounts have focused on the largest occult organization of the period, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Ellic Howe's 1972 book *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* is, as his title indicates, the history of the founding and the development of the Golden Dawn. Howe is neither a literary or cultural critic nor an occultist, but his book is useful for understanding the

Golden Dawn as Yeats knew it. While Howe's factual information (e.g., dates, people, places) is correct, some within the occult community have questioned his objectivity. Israel Regardie, a member of the Golden Dawn, criticizes Howe for his anti-occult bias. He cites Howe's opening sentence—"I am neither an Occultist nor a 'Magician'" as evidence of Howe's inability to provide quality information about the Order. In addition, Regardie sees frequent references to the Golden Dawn's "interest and preoccupations" as "distinctly unusual" (Howe xxv) as evidence that Howe is not objective about his subject and, in actuality, prejudiced against the occult. Regardie's criticism is not without merit, but perhaps Howe's outsider status serves him well in that his account is not colored by emotional attachment to his subject matter. *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn* remains an accurate, if slightly biased, account of the rise and fall of the Golden Dawn¹⁷.

The second most popular subject, after the Golden Dawn, for historical treatments of the occult revival is Spiritualism. Because Spiritualism originated in the United States, most of the writing about it focuses on the American experience of Spiritualism. However, it is important to keep in mind that

¹⁷ Three other historical takes on the Golden Dawn will be discussed later. George Mills Harper's *Yeats's Golden Dawn: The Influence of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn on the Life and Art of W.B. Yeats* is discussed below in the section on the occult in Yeats scholarship. R.A. Gilbert's *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians* and Mary K. Greer's *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* are pertinent to my discussion of occultism and gender in Chapter One.

Spiritualism's practical applications, like séances, were a common part of Yeats' life in Ireland and England. One recent work on the subject is Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*. In it, Weisberg details the lives of the Fox family and the events that spawned modern Spiritualism. Throughout her book, Weisberg addresses a question that has always surrounded the Fox sisters: were they genuine or were they frauds? Weisberg presents evidence supportive to both sides, but refuses to, or perhaps is incapable of, answering that question, instead leaving it up to her readers to decide. Still, *Talking to the Dead* provides an intricate view of how the private—the home life of the Fox sisters—and public spheres—their subsequent appearances on the lecture circuit—collided to spur the occult revival.

Broader in focus than Weisberg's later book, Howard Kerr's 1972 book *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* is an extensive treatment of the origins of American Spiritualism and the debates it generated. Kerr looks at the occult revival not just as an object of curiosity to audiences across America but as a movement which overlapped considerably with progressive nineteenth-century political movements, such as that for women's rights. Specifically, Kerr cites mediums like Emma Hardinge Britten, who used the money raised from her appearances

to provide assistance to homeless women. The fact that most mediums were women also speaks to this overlap; mediumship provided something for women to do outside the home and, as in the case of Britten, offered a captive audience for political messages.

Perhaps as a result of this developing focus on the cultural significance of the occult revival, a critical conversation on the links between occultism and Modernism has recently expanded. Helen Sword's recent *Ghostwriting Modernism* examines the link between the occult revival and modernist writing, articulating "some of the more subtle ways in which mediums and communicating spirits unsettle seemingly stable ontological—or, as Jacques Derrida would have it, 'hauntological'—boundaries between self and other, absence and presence, materiality and spirituality, life and death" (xi). Works like Sword's and Bette London's *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* have brought occultism into the arena of literary criticism.

As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, a variety of concerns have impeded academic consideration of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival. While more attention has been given to Yeats and the occult, many of the same concerns have hindered a full appreciation of the occult

in Yeats studies. However, the conversation is ongoing and this dissertation will contribute to it.

The Scholarly Conversation on Yeats and the Occult

For many contemporary academics, magic, spirits, and séances are silly, frivolous, and embarrassing. But, they were part of life for a broad spectrum of people—well-known figures like Dickens and Lincoln and all classes of readers of *The London Times* and the tabloids—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yeats was part of that movement.

In a letter to his friend Katherine Tynan in 1888, Yeats describes a recent supernatural event of which he had heard; he writes, “A sad accident happened at Madame Blavatskys [*sic*] lately I hear. A big materialist sat on the astral Double of a poor young indian [*sic*]. It was sitting on the sofa and he was too material to be able to see it. Certainly a sad accident!” (CL1 49). In light of this amusing anecdote, it may not be surprising that Yeats caught a lot of flack, during his lifetime and posthumously, for his interest in the occult.

On the contrary, Yeats did not merely dabble but invested most of his adult life in occult studies. Mysticism was what Yeats called, in an endlessly-quoted 1892 letter to John O’Leary, “the center of all that I do & all that I think &

all that I write" (CL1 303). As a young child, Yeats recalls in his *Autobiographies*, reading Sir Walter Scott's "*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* gave me a wish to turn magician that competed for years with the dream of being killed upon the seashore" (CW3 30). Irrespective of its importance to Yeats, many of his contemporaries could not stomach the ideas of magic and occultism.

Ezra Pound, Yeats' close friend and erstwhile secretary, complained in a letter to John Quinn that Yeats' occult interests were "very very very bug-house" (181). Pound further grumbled to Quinn that "Yeats will be quite sensible till some question of ghosts or occultism comes up, and then he is subject to a curious excitement . . . usually quality of mind goes" (168). Even John Butler Yeats, the poet's father, while himself a patron of fortune-tellers and a firm believer in the clairvoyant abilities of his daughter Lily, was tetchy about his oldest son's occult activities. In a letter to his son dated 27 April 1918, the elder Yeats bemoaned, "I am sorry you are returning to mysticism. Mysticism means a relaxed intellect" (*Letters to W.B. Yeats* 348). Apparently, the elder Yeats was fond of complaining about his son's mysticism, as evidenced in the same letter Yeats wrote to John O'Leary.

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "week" [sic] or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided

deliberately four or five years ago to make next to my poetry the most important pursuit of my life. Whether it be, or be not, bad for my health can only be decided by one who knows what magic is & not at all by any amateur. The probable explanation however of your somewhat testy post card is that you were out at Bedford Park & heard my father discoursing about my magical pursuits out of the immense depths of his ignorance as to everything that I am doing & thinking. (CL1 303)

A contemporary reviewer, W.P. Ryan, in his 1894 work *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities*, urged Yeats to “shake himself free from the passing craze of occultism and symbolism, and realise that the universe is not tenanted solely by soulths and sheogues” (135). For some of Yeats’ contemporaries, at least, the occult was nothing but nonsense and hocus pocus.

For many scholars after Yeats’ death in 1939, the thought of a Nobel laureate dressed in robes, and mumbling incantations, made them uncomfortable, to say the least. In 1948, fellow poet W.H. Auden complained,

However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to all that occult is, I fancy, the same: How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats’s gifts take such nonsense seriously?

. . . How *could* Yeats, with his great aesthetic appreciation of aristocracy, ancestral houses, ceremonial tradition, take up something so essentially lower-middle-class—or should I say Southern Californian—. . . Mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient—*how* embarrassing. (309)

Here, Auden reaffirms the stereotype that occultism is the opiate of the “lower-middle-class” and something that respectable and intelligent people should avoid.

In their Introduction to *The Permanence of Yeats*, James Hall and Martin Steinmann summarize the dismissive attitude towards Yeats and the occult.

For the greatest obstacle to his full acceptance has been the persuasion—stated most brilliantly by R.P. Blackmur—that he is a poet of “magic”, and that his poetry partakes of the limitations and especially the rootlessness of magic . . . Holding—or seeming to hold—the most extraordinary and unfashionable views, he has weathered the kind of nonliterary test that the reputation of a lesser poet could not have survived. Most of the possible ways of getting around, as well as of facing, the question of Yeats’ beliefs have been tried, but the intellectual condescension which theosophy,

Rosicrucianism, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism, and the system of *A Vision* have aroused in most critics has proved steadily embarrassing to Yeats' defenders and convincing to his detractors. I.A. Richards and Edmund Wilson have written Yeats down as an escapist. (1-2)

In this same collection of essays, Edmund Wilson claims that, in embracing magic and "rejecting the methods of modern science," Yeats has "cut himself off in a curious way from the general enlightened thought of his time" (27), and Allen Tate refers to *A Vision* as "childishly eclectic" (101). Of particular interest in these passages are the adjectives used: magic's "rootlessness," occultism as "unfashionable," childish, and unenlightened, and occultists as "escapist." The collective connotation is one of clear denigration.

In 1965, Karl Shapiro, in his essay "W.B. Yeats: Trial by Culture," states that Yeats "never rose above" (92) his interest in the occult, indicating that occultism is something that needs to be overcome, like a bad habit or a disease. "Everyone who loves poetry forgives Yeats [*A Vision*]," he continues, "although it would be foolhardy to overlook its dangers" (94). In writing *A Vision*, Shapiro contends, Yeats "make[s] a sociological ass of himself" (101). With these comments, Shapiro implies that occultism is ridiculous and socially

unacceptable. Shapiro further states that Yeats embraced “the superficialities of the ‘supernatural’ (ghosts on the stair, the wee folk, ectoplasm, etc.)” and argues that “There is a lifelong silliness about Yeats’s preoccupation with magic which he himself contributed to by not ever quite believing in it; and in the end it weakened his whole structure of thought” (104). Not only is Shapiro’s condescending tone inescapable, he also erroneously claims that Yeats did not believe in magic, which he certainly did.

There are, however, voices of dissent against this demeaning treatment of Yeats and occultism. In *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats’ Search for Reality*, Virginia Moore defends Yeats frankly, stating that “a man does not belong to a society nearly thirty years, submitting to rigorous disciplines and striving to pass all grades up through the highest, as a pastime, or out of curiosity, or indeed for any lesser reason than conviction” (27). Echoing Moore, John Senior writes of Yeats’ long-term interest in the occult, “Twenty-five years is not a weekend” (157). In *The Permanence of Yeats*, Cleanth Brooks, Jr. counters Wilson’s “escapist” claim, writing that “there is nothing ‘escapist’ about a hostility to science which orders science off the premises as a trespasser when science has taken up a position where it has no business to be . . . The formulas which Edmund Wilson tends to take up—scientific = hard-headed, realistic;

antiscientific = romantic, escapist—are far too simple” (61). Susan Johnston Graf, a recent sympathetic voice on the subject, experienced resistance to Yeats and the occult as a student. Graf notes that “my professors were exasperated with Yeats for being a ‘disciplinary’ problem” (*W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 202), and concludes, “With few exceptions, scholars of literature are not interested in the occult. Since their own beliefs often contradict a magical worldview, they find the idea of magical practice silly and repugnant” (ix). With these biases in play, the occult was virtually absent from Yeats studies during the first half of the twentieth century.

Prior to the 1960s, in the heyday of New Criticism, focus remained on Yeats’ poetry and drama. If the occult was mentioned, it was only as a source of ideas for Yeats’ artistic endeavors and not as a crucial component of Yeats’ life. Therefore, a central problem within Yeats studies is the gap maintained between Yeats’ occultism, his writing, and the occultism of the time period. Scholarship on Yeats and the occult occupies two separate spheres, one privileged over the other. One sphere focuses on Yeats the occultist, while the other focuses on Yeats the artist. Critics often privilege one over the other, or relegate the occult to the status of a background influence, instead of see them as inextricably linked, and as part of a larger picture. George Mills Harper’s *Yeats and the Occult*, for

example, deals almost exclusively with Yeats' occult manuscripts and activities, and leaves out discussion of his art. In his Introduction, Harper, while announcing that the "time has passed when it was necessary, in order to preserve intellectual respectability, to express either astonishment or dismay at the nature of Yeats's intellectual pursuits" (xv), also concludes that these pursuits went "against the intellectual current of his day" (xvii). Here, and in the book as a whole, Harper implies that occultism was an inconsequential part of Yeats' world, that it is anti-intellectual, and therefore is incompatible with academic study.

William H. O'Donnell's essay in *Yeats and the Occult* contains a hint of suspicion as well. O'Donnell writes, "Yeats not only believed that he had been given [glimpses into the supernatural world], but that it was possible for a mortal to become one of those supernal creatures; *most readers will not share his convictions*" (56; emphasis added). Maybe "most readers will not share his convictions," but a cultural study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of Yeats as a member of that culture, demonstrates otherwise.

One early foray into the subject of Yeats and the occult was Richard Ellman's 1948 book *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. Fellow Irish studies scholar Richard Finneran praises Ellman as the "first major critic to study Yeats's occult

activities with the seriousness they deserve" (231). In *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Ellman writes openly, and not unsympathetically, about Yeats' interest in the occult. In his fifth chapter, "Combating the 'Materialists,'" Ellman lays out the essential influences that led Yeats, and many others of his generation, to occultism: Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, A.P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, and the Society for Psychical Research. For Ellman, Yeats was drawn to these things because he was "parched by the desiccated religion which the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church, now purged of their old evangelicism, provided" (42). What Ellman does not do in this chapter is mention Yeats' writing within the same context.

After Ellman's *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, the subject of Yeats and the occult went virtually untouched until the 1960s, which I see as a result of two cultural shifts. First, the 1960s ushered in a decade of experimentation with sex, drugs, music, politics, and religion. Eastern religious concepts like transcendental meditation and karma were core components of hippie counter-culture, and were very slowly coming to the attention of a larger audience. Second, within academia the field of cultural studies was gaining momentum. While citing Richard Hoggart's 1957 work *The Uses of Literacy* as a foundational text in cultural studies, Simon During acknowledges that the ideas propounded

by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the 1940s, when culture was relatively homogenous—Hollywood ruled the film industry, television was still a marginal phenomenon—, gained a foothold in the pluralism of the 1960s (1, 29-31). Adorno, Horkheimer, and others helped to bridge the gap between academic discourse and popular culture, bringing the two into dialogue with one another. Within this changing academic and social landscape, poet and occult scholar Kathleen Raine and literary scholar George Mills Harper began their decades-long look into the intersections between Yeats' occult activities and his art. However, it was not until the 1970s that serious scholarship into Yeats and the occult materialized. Works published during this time include Raine's *Yeats the Initiate* and Harper's *Yeats and the Occult* and *Yeats' Golden Dawn*, standard texts for anyone exploring Yeats' occult interests.

Kathleen Raine, who died in 2003, was an independent scholar and poet who, while a Bollingen Fellow at Cambridge University, researched William Blake, Neoplatonism, and esotericism. Raine's approach to her subject matter is decidedly nonacademic, as she explains in the Preface to *Yeats the Initiate*.

There is a learning of the discursive mind and there is a learning of the imagination. Many scholars respond imaginatively to poetry; and a few poets have been learned. But I would ask the reader of

this book, in the name of the poets, never to lose sight of the truth that the learning of the imagination does not differ in degree but in kind from that of the scholar. (xv)

For Raine, the “learning of the imagination,” within which she includes “the excluded fields of magic and cabbala, [and] of psychical research” (xv), is not less important than the “learning of the discursive mind.” This mindset distinguishes Raine from most other writers on Yeats and the occult: she approaches her analysis from the position of a poet who also studied the texts Yeats studied, and thereby sees neither Yeats’ occultism nor his writing as superior to the other. Raine is really a cultural critic; she brings together modes of inquiry—occult studies and literary interpretation—which had been seen mostly as incompatible with each other.

Consequently, Raine presents occultism and art on an equal plane. In her 1968 essay “Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn” (included in *Yeats the Initiate*), she elucidates what Yeats would have known about the Tarot from his membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She also notes Yeats’ use of the Tarot symbols in his poetry and prose. In her essay “Hades Wrapped in Cloud,” Raine challenges academic critics of Yeats and the occult like George Orwell, R.P. Blackmur, John Wain, and W.H. Auden, the last of whom

. . . was typical of his generation in blaming Yeats for not being sufficiently aware of the leading ideas of his time . . . But is it not already becoming clear that Yeats' thought *was* the leading thought of his time? To Yeats himself the current materialist philosophies seemed mere ignorance. (81)

Yeats was a participant in a large and significant cultural phenomenon. And, like any cultural phenomenon, there are reasons, purposes, and needs behind the occult revival, which issues shall be discussed in Chapter Two. As a cultural movement, it necessarily reflected societal anxieties and needs, and it should be treated as such in Yeats studies.

While Raine's approach is artistic and esoteric, her frequent collaborator George Mills Harper approaches Yeats from a strictly academic point of view. Harper, a former Professor of English at Florida State University, died in January 2006¹⁸. Harper was primarily a textualist, and most of his research involved working with the notebooks and papers of automatic script that eventually became *A Vision*, published in four volumes as *Yeats' Vision Papers*. In 1974, Harper published *Yeats' Golden Dawn: The Influence of the Hermetic Order of the*

¹⁸ His daughter, Margaret Mills Harper, is currently a Professor of English at Georgia State University. She worked with her father on research into Yeats and the occult and has taken up her father's work. Her most recent publication in this area is *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W.B. Yeats* published by Oxford University Press in 2006.

Golden Dawn on the Life and Art of W. B. Yeats, an in-depth study of the two decades Yeats was active in the organization based upon Yeats' own notebooks and unpublished manuscripts. Yet, as the title suggests, Harper sees Yeats' membership in the Golden Dawn as a means to understand Yeats' art, rather than as an end in itself. This, however, is reductive, situating Yeats' occult studies as merely tools with which to shape his art instead of recognizing them as integral to Yeats' life and mind.

In 1975, Harper edited an anthology of essays entitled *Yeats and the Occult*, which deserves extensive discussion because of the variety of topics and approaches contained in its essays. *Yeats and the Occult* encapsulates several issues in Yeats studies. First, the contributors to the book for the most part continue to be the most prominent names in Yeats and the occult. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper have recently died but, as mentioned earlier, Margaret Mills Harper has largely taken up Raine's and her father's work. William M. Murphy, William H. O'Donnell, and Warwick Gould continue to publish on Yeats and the occult. O'Donnell has continued to work on Yeats' unpublished novel *The Speckled Bird* and Warwick Gould, in conjunction with Deidre Toomey, recently published a definitive edition of Yeats' *Mythologies*. Second, in the twenty-seven years since its publication, little has changed. There

are still areas of inquiry mentioned by the contributors that remain unexplored. Yeats' occult studies continue to evoke amusement or embarrassment in many scholars, who fail to take them seriously. Third, the mass of manuscript and notebook materials recently donated by Yeats' son, the late Senator Michael Yeats¹⁹, to the National Library of Ireland has not been fully examined.

In "Yeats' Occult Papers," Harper reflects on his and Kathleen Raine's examination in 1969 of Yeats' occult notebooks and manuscripts, which at the time were still housed with Yeats' widow George and later with their son Michael. Harper's impression was that "if properly digested and explained these papers would make clear much that students and critics of Yeats have either distorted or completely misunderstood" (1). In the rest of the essay, Harper attempts a brief descriptive cataloguing of these papers, but concedes that an "itemized catalogue might reach several hundred pages . . . That great task remains to be done" (10). This last statement seems to be as true today as it was in 1975; to date, Harper has only published Yeats' *Vision* papers.

In *Yeats and the Occult*, George Mills Harper collected the best scholarship on the subject at that time. He and Kathleen Raine are represented, and the table

¹⁹ In 2000, Michael Yeats donated more of his father's papers to the National Library of Ireland in Dublin. According to an article in *The Irish Times*, among these papers are "about 100 notebooks and copybooks and 130 files of papers relating to spiritualism, the occult and horoscopes" (O'Byrne n.p.). Prior to this, scholars wishing access to these papers would have had to work with them in Michael Yeats' home, a practice he understandably wished to discontinue. Michael Yeats died in 2007.

of contents includes many of the top scholars of Yeats and the occult. Of these, one of the most relevant is William H. O'Donnell. O'Donnell has focused, as I intend to do here, on Yeats' prose fiction; his 1983 book *A Guide to the Prose Fiction of William Butler Yeats* is an invaluable resource for navigating Yeats' fiction. O'Donnell's contribution to *Yeats and the Occult*, "Yeats as Adept and Artist: *The Speckled Bird*, *The Secret Rose*, and *The Wind Among the Reeds*," tracks Yeats' interest in ritual magic and his struggle in balancing art and magic through these three works. One significant observation of O'Donnell's is that in Yeats' time, occultism was an antithetical alternative to materialist culture. He cites one of the tenets of the Theosophical Society as seeking "'to oppose the materialism of science'" (qtd. in *Yeats and the Occult* 58) and notes that "in Gnostic redemption the soul is freed from the devils of material existence; and, according to tradition, the alchemical transmutation of base metals into gold can only be accomplished when the alchemist's soul has been similarly purified of material or earthly dross" (58). While O'Donnell makes claims about the significance of the occult in Yeats' lifetime, he does not offer examples of this significance to set Yeats' work within a cultural context.

Several of the essays in *Yeats and the Occult* deal more with Yeats' life, his family and friends, and the occult circles in which he moved. Of these

biographically related essays, the most pertinent is William M. Murphy's essay "Psychic Daughter, Mystic Son, Sceptic Father," later incorporated into his 1995 book *Family Secrets: William Butler Yeats and his Relatives*, discussed below. The essay focuses mostly on the poet's sister, Lily, who experienced visions and premonitions that even convinced her disbelieving father. It is interesting to note that no lengthy studies have been published on Lily Yeats' psychic abilities, John Butler Yeats' skeptical mysticism, or on George Pollexfen's interest in mysticism. All of these individuals participated to some extent in the occult revival, yet they have been neglected in favor of figures like MacGregor Mathers.

Mathers is the chief focus of Laurence W. Fennelly's essay "W.B. Yeats and S.L. MacGregor Mathers." While mostly a biography of Mathers, Fennelly observes that "Yeats' initial involvement with the occult was dictated by both the spirit of the age and his own temperament. Many persons of all classes were swept up by the occult revival that occurred during the last years of the nineteenth century; this was part of the inevitable reaction against the rationalism and materialism of the Victorian culture" (285). Fennelly also notes that the problems which splintered the Golden Dawn in 1900 led Aleister Crowley to take the matter to court. These court proceedings have never been explored in Yeats studies either.

While the Golden Dawn, and Yeats' involvement in it, understandably receives a lot of critical attention, Arnold Goldman chooses to look at Yeats' connection to Spiritualism in his essay "Yeats, Spiritualism, and Psychological Research." Here, Goldman details Yeats' associations and familiarity with mediums such as Mrs. Leonore Piper and Mrs. Etta Wriedt. He also writes about Yeats' first encounter with "Leo Africanus," a spirit who frequently communicated with Yeats, at one of Mrs. Wriedt's séances. Even this is a brief discussion, and the stories of Mrs. Wriedt and Mrs. Piper demand more attention. Goldman himself admits that "Yeats' encounter with spiritualism and psychological research can bear sustained inquiry" (128), which inquiry, in the intervening years since 1975, has yet to be tackled.

While Harper's *Yeats and the Occult* covers considerably more ground than Harper's own area of interest, it still maintains the gap between Yeats' occult activities and his writing. Other studies of the time do the same. Harbans Rai Bachchan's 1974 book *W.B. Yeats and Occultism: A Study of His Works in Relation to Indian Lore, the Cabbala, Swedenborg, Boehme and Theosophy* attempts to cover all of these elements in a brief study, but Bachchan's real focus is Indian lore, not Yeats' writing. Mary Catherine Flannery's 1977 book *Yeats and Magic* is similarly narrow in focus, although she does delve into Yeats' work with the Golden

Dawn. Yet, Flannery joins the camp which sees Yeats' occult interests as merely a tool for his art.

[Yeats] went to the Golden Dawn, to Blavatsky and Mathers, to Blake and to Irish Mythology and Folk-lore for the same purpose that he asked for and read [*The Secret of the Golden Flower*]—to learn how to construct a system, which was to make him a great poet. (7)

This statement situates Flannery as one of those scholars who is capable only of seeing Yeats' interest in the occult as subservient to his art and not as the integral part of his life that it was.

Since the occult was part of Yeats' everyday life, his biographers have had to wrestle with his involvement, with varying degrees of success. The standard biography of Yeats had been A. Norman Jeffares' *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography*, originally published in 1983 and revised in 1988. As biographies go, this book is quite ordinary; as Jeffares himself admits in the Introduction, the book "is intended as a study of Yeats' life rather than a blend of biography and a critical assessment of the writings" (vii). When Jeffares writes about Yeats' occult involvements, he does so by narrating these involvements without additional comments about the intersections between these activities and Yeats' writing or within the larger cultural and historical context.

Gradually displacing Jeffares' biography is historian R.F. Foster's two-volume *W.B. Yeats: A Life*. Volume one, *The Apprentice Mage*, was published in 1997; the second volume, *The Arch-Poet*, followed in 2000. Even before publishing the first volume, in 1989 R.F. Foster challenged the subordinate position of the occult in Yeats studies, reiterating T.S. Eliot's comment that Yeats was "one of those few poets whose history is the history their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them." Foster continues by contending that critics can "stand this on its head," and that "the curious and powerful resonance of Yeats's personality and his work is inseparable from the historical tradition and social subculture which produced him" ("Protestant Magic" 243-244). In this essay, Foster recognizes that a certain convergence needs to take place in Yeats studies.

In *The Apprentice Mage*, Foster reiterates this need as part of the impetus behind his biography.

What is needed is . . . not another exegesis of the poetry from a biographical angle, not an analysis of the development of his aesthetic theories, and especially not a study that ranges at will across the work of nearly sixty years . . . WBY's life has been approached over and over again, for the purposes of relating it to

his art . . . Most biographical studies of WBY are principally about what he wrote; this one is principally about what he did. (xxvi-xxvii)

Foster accomplishes this in his biography, placing Yeats' life at center stage and, as a historian, not venturing into literary criticism. And, as the first volume's indicates, Yeats' role as an "apprentice mage" is at the forefront. While many critics see Yeats as a poet first, a dramatist second, critic third, and "mage" at the very bottom of the list, Foster treats magic as a critical part of Yeats' life. The occult was not just important to Yeats, and it was not just something he used to fuel his art. The occult was everywhere. Foster, as a historian, recognizes that Yeats' involvement with the occult has been undeservedly shoved to the background and made subservient to his art. Yet, as a historian and not a literary critic, Foster establishes the need for a reexamination of Yeats and the culture of the occult but he does not venture into an analysis of Yeats' art and his occult writing as equal products.

William M. Murphy's 1995 book *Family Secrets: William Butler Yeats and His Relatives* excels at providing more detail on the lives of Yeats family members than traditional biographies offer. Yeats, as Murphy details, was not the only member of his family with mystical inclinations or psychic abilities. The

appendix "The Yeatses and the Occult" is especially illuminating. As Murphy had noted earlier, "It was fortunate that John Butler Yeats died three years before the publication of *A Vision*, for that book would certainly have killed him" ("Psychic Daughter" 25-26). Even so, Murphy concludes, "Like many thoroughgoing rationalists, John Butler Yeats was every twelfth inch a spiritualist" (*Family Secrets* 371), spending what little money he had visiting seers and mediums. It was John Butler Yeats who raised William to be a self-proclaimed "'churchless mystic'" (qtd. in Murphy, *Family Secrets* 372) by banishing conventional religion from the household. Murphy's appendix clarifies the influence of John Butler Yeats upon his son's occult studies, but it is also enlightening because it demonstrates how pervasive the occult revival was. Not everyone took occultism as far as W.B. Yeats, but even his skeptic father participated to an extent.

More recently, Susan Johnston Graf's *W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus*, published in 2000, provides a detailed study of Yeats' 1917 mystical autobiography, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. In addition to her work on Yeats and the occult, Graf has presented papers on the social impact of Yeats' friend Æ's mysticism, and has taught a class incorporating the writings of Dion Fortune and Aleister Crowley. While trained as a literary scholar, Graf is primarily a student

of the occult, giving her a perspective on Yeats similar to that of Raine. While Graf's book does not delve much into the culture of the occult in Yeats' lifetime, she has certainly opened up the conversation on the cross-currents of occultism and art, and her work is testament to the shifting attitude towards Yeats and the occult.

Graf self-identifies as a student of the occult first and a literary scholar second. Therefore, her book focuses less on Yeats' writings than on his magical beliefs, practices, and worldview. For example, she carefully explicates Yeats' Golden Dawn motto—*Demon est Deus Inversus*—which Yeats biographer A. Norman Jeffares simply translates as “the Devil is the converse of God,” a translation which is unfortunately and erroneously suggestive of demonic influence. Instead, Graf reminds us that “[t]he Latin word for devil . . . is *diabolus* not *demon*, and *inversus* translates as ‘inverted’—as in the top becoming the bottom—rather than Jeffares’ ‘converse’” (*W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 11) and connects Yeats' motto to the daimonic anti-self of *A Vision*. Graf also details, using Yeats' unpublished notebooks and the *Vision* papers, the ritual magic and esoteric experiments undertaken by Yeats and his new wife George. Graf approaches Yeats primarily as an occultist, magician, philosopher, and

seeker, and treats those aspects of his personality with respect and understanding.

Like Graf, Weldon Thornton argues for tolerance and understanding for Yeats' occult interests. For Thornton, Yeats' occultism "was not superficial or dilettantish" but was rather

an integral, essential part of his life-long exploration of the most basic questions he could ask . . . For Yeats these most basic questions involved the relationship between the visible and the invisible worlds, between this mortal life and whatever existence lies beyond the womb and the grave . . . But his pursuit of these matters was neither naïve nor gullible, nor did it involve any attempt to flee the burdens and responsibilities of mortal existence. On the contrary, he explored these phenomena with perspicacity and skepticism, and he did it in order to be able to live more fully and to write more profoundly. (64)

While so many critics view Yeats' occultism as subservient to his art, Thornton contends that Yeats' esoteric explorations were essential for living. Given this, Thornton wonders why it has been so criticized and denigrated. His answer is that occultism and all it entails "is so alien to received modern Western modes of

thought—and not simply to our explicit ideas, but to our presuppositions and to the underlying attitudes and investments of values these represent” (64). In other words, occultism is Other, foreign, unknown, and fearsome.

Yet Yeats rebelled against that traditional mind-set, and positioned “himself in diametric opposition to certain basic traits of the modern Western mind—its scientific ‘empiricism’ and its reductionism” (64-65). Thornton continues,

If we are convinced of the existence of our own consciousness, we are nevertheless vague about its relationship with the body; furthermore—and this is crucial—our “empiricism” does not permit us to attribute consciousness or intentionality to inanimate objects or “disembodied spirits.” Baffled as we may be about the relationship between body and mind, we nonetheless hold that all consciousness and intentionality are somehow grounded in the bodies of individual persons, and that communication among these occurs only through “empirically verifiable” media; we become dogmatically skeptical in response to suggestions of preexistence, or survival after death, or mental telepathy, or communication between spirits and living persons. Our age simply has no place,

intellectually, for these. And we are equally skeptical of any claims about larger universal forces or powers if these claims arise out of astrology or of alchemy—though we feel an obligation to believe even the most astounding anti-experiential claims if they have the sanction of modern science—e.g., of Einsteinean relativity or of current theories about cosmology or the structure of matter. (66-67)

Furthermore, Thornton concludes that what “Yeats gained from his lifelong exploration of the occult was not the escape generally presumed to be the point of such activity; what he gained was an enrichment and intensification of mortal experience” (73-4). Thornton argues that we must acknowledge that

in W.B. Yeats we have access to an example we moderns cannot afford to ignore. This is not to say that we must conduct séances or that we must swear an oath affirming belief in the spirit world. But it is to say that Yeats’s experiences deserve to be regarded seriously and sympathetically, and that if we persist simply in dismissing these intellectual interests which were so persistent and important a part of this great poet’s quest, we sell short both Yeats and ourselves. (75)

In sum, Thornton identifies Yeats' occult studies, and indeed Yeats' life and art, as explorations not conclusions, as a journey instead of a destination. He argues that what is important here is not Yeats' beliefs *per se* but his thoughts, his questions, his hypotheses, his revised hypotheses—in other words, his quest. Thornton even compares Yeats to Joseph Campbell's hero "who, not content simply to achieve a boon, felt he must bring it back for the benefit of his fellow man" (75). Therefore, to denigrate Yeats' occult studies is to denigrate his thinking mind.

The time is right to bridge this gap and set Yeats' occultism in its larger cultural context, rather than study his occultism as an isolated and marginal activity. In-depth studies of Yeats' fiction, especially his occult works like *The Speckled Bird*, "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi," are also lacking. A combined study of the occult revival and Yeats' occult fiction would situate Yeats within a historical context, a perspective that has so far been lacking.

What impact will my study have on Yeats scholarship? Most Yeats scholars have viewed Madame Blavatsky, the Golden Dawn, spiritualism, and psychic research through the lens of Yeats' art, if they have dealt with them at all. The resulting body of work is often merely a repetition of biographical and

historical information. The larger cultural context in which these occult practices thrived has been ignored.

In addition, this project will illuminate understudied contexts of early twentieth-century literature. For one, occultism needs to be incorporated into the debate about high and low culture currently occupying Modernist studies. Even a “high Modernist” like T.S. Eliot, while himself disdainful of occultism, drew upon archetypal Tarot imagery and the popularity of fortune-tellers in *The Waste Land*. The poet H.D. explored mystical forms of consciousness most explicitly in her prose work *Notes on Thought and Vision*. James Joyce expressed a fondness for “The Tables of the Law” and “The Adoration of the Magi.” Even Ezra Pound, while savaging Yeats’ interests, retained an interest in esoteric thought and practice. Eliot, H.D., Joyce, and Pound are all labeled and classified as Modernists. Can Yeats be included with them, even though he took his esoteric interests to the level of practice in the Golden Dawn, and even though he produced the mystical treatise *A Vision*? The answer to this question is yes, if we open up the definition of Modernism just a bit more to include the cultural relevance of the occult revival.

Second, occultism needs to be considered in the conversation regarding nationalism, Orientalism, and colonialism. Yeats’ collections of folklore, his

poems about faeries, and his dramatic vision of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as the embodiment of Irish national identity are all considered acceptable expressions of Irish cultural nationalism. Yet, Yeats' occultism, which arose from his interest in Irish myth and legend and the eastern traditions complicated by British imperialism, is dismissed.

Occultism was not practiced by an isolated group; it pervaded aspects of high and low culture alike, and was much more common, widespread, and significant than many Yeats scholars have recognized. In exploring the interaction between Yeats and the occult revival period in which he lived, perhaps some measure of scholarly acceptability, perhaps even respectability, can be given to occultism as a significant cultural movement and, by association, Yeats' involvement, practice, and beliefs. Yeats, his work, and his occult interests need to be considered within the context of this movement. Rather than minimizing the impact of the occult on Yeats' work, the importance of the occult revival to the culture of the time period needs to be addressed. Examining the various movements, people, and events important during this revival period, and situating Yeats in relation to them, will provide insights into Yeats' life and art, and will perhaps dispel some of his "Southern Californian" stigma.

CHAPTER TWO

OCCULTURE: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OCCULT REVIVAL

But the years just before the First World War saw a fashionable craze for mediums, despite a series of exposures and the irritation of rationalist intellectuals like Samuel Butler (who threatened “if ever a spirit form takes to coming near me, I shall not be content with trying to grasp it, but, in the interest of science, *I will shoot it!*”).

—Foster, *W.B. Yeats, A Life: Vol.1 The Apprentice Mage*¹

Yeats himself was acutely aware that the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was more than a fad. As noted earlier, the occult revival occurred simultaneously with disillusionment with traditional religions, shifting gender roles, anti-materialism, backlash against scientific progress, and expansion and contraction of imperialism. Indeed, the occult revival shared causes and effects with these social upheavals. Yeats recognized the potential energy of the occult revival. In the same 1892 letter to John O’Leary in which he stated “the mystical life is the center of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write,” Yeats called the occult revival “a greater renaissance—the

¹ FOS1 463.

revolt of the soul against the intellect" (CL1 303). Years later, while Yeats was in Stockholm to accept the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature, a woman curious about the occult approached him. In "The Bounty of Sweden," Yeats recalls how she asked him,

. . . "What is this new religion they are making up in Paris that is all about the dead?" I wonder who has told her that I know anything of psychical research, for it must be of that she speaks, and I tell her of my own studies. *We are going to change the thought of the world, I say, to bring it back to all its old truths,* but I dread the future. (CW3 398; emphasis added)

Occultism, Yeats asserts, has the potential to destabilize modern ways of thinking and behaving—to "change the thought of the world"—and to strip away artifice and reveal truths. This chapter addresses the aforementioned social movements as companions to the occult revival, and demonstrates that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival was not a fringe element but an integral component of modernization.

Disillusionment with Traditional Religions, and the Influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg

In his *History of Spiritualism*, originally published in 1926, Arthur Conan Doyle argues, "It is a recognized spiritual law that all psychic manifestations become distorted when seen through the medium of narrow sectarian religion" (34). For Doyle and others, mainstream religions interfere with and dilute the divinity within each human being, a divinity exemplified by the "psychic manifestations" to which Doyle refers. The occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed in part because of a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional religions and religious institutions. In the United States and Europe of this study, the primary targets of dissent were the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations. Some saw these as too narrow and exclusive in claiming to be the one true faith. The "Declaration to Our Readers and Subscribers" of *L'Initiation*, a French occultist periodical published between 1888 and 1912, stated, "'Let us destroy religious hatred by revealing the unity of all forms of worship in a single religion'" (qtd. in Pierrot 106). The editors of *L'Initiation* rejected the idea that only one religious tradition is correct and all others, therefore, wrong.

This inflexible binary mindset discounted commonalities among religions and certainly disallowed explorations of other belief systems within one religion.

Indeed, as Jean Pierrot asserts,

The [Catholic] Church, as [occultists] saw it, was in its death throes, and Christian dogmas were regarded as no more than legendary themes, on exactly the same footing as the beliefs and myths supplied by so many other religions similarly rendered obsolete in the course of history, and particularly the religions of the far east, which had been attracting the attention of scholars and writers for some time by then. (80)

This mainstream dismissal of other religions, especially eastern traditions, led many to the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, both of which honored and incorporated religious traditions from around the world.

In addition, the occult revival was a revolt against the impersonal nature of many mainstream religions. For Yeats, and many others of his time, mainstream religions, especially the Christian denominations, had strayed too far from the “old truths” involving gods and goddesses, magic, and personal spirituality. They had instead become bogged down in rigid, narrow dogma

and, in the case of the Catholic Church, restricted all earthly power to priests, bishops, and popes, placing a barrier between the common people and a wrathful, unfathomable God. Consequently, many of the faithful became alienated and disappointed with their religions, and sought spiritual fulfillment outside of these religions.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade argues that the popularity of occultism “reveals something of Western man’s dissatisfactions, drives, and nostalgias . . . his profound dissatisfaction with the worn-out forms of historical Christianity and his desire to violently rid himself of his forefathers’ faith” (3, 5). Bill Ellis, in his book *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*, sees occultism as “a way of subverting power structures” (6), allowing ordinary individuals the opportunity “to participate directly in the mythic realm, in spite of organized religion’s efforts to institutionalize it” (7). By placing spiritual expression back into the hands of the people, occultism was collapsing many religious hierarchies.

Ellis argues for a subversive interpretation of the occult revival phenomenon, noting that “practices defined as ‘magical’ may not be politically threatening, but the fact that such traditions gave people on the margins a context to entertain the possibility of inverting social roles made them dangerous

enough for many observers” (6). The growing interest in occultism was therefore “an expression of protest against religious norms . . . allowing individuals access to divine beings (even diabolical ones) [and allowing] them to resolve their doubts about religious beliefs through direct experience” (12). At a time in which people were encouraged to experience God through officially sanctioned religious channels, occultism offered the alternative of a personal spirituality with direct access to the supernatural. In this respect, occultism was a form of social resistance, a means of responding to—and resisting—modernity.

It is true that stirrings of dissatisfaction with mainstream religion occurred well before the nineteenth century. The burgeoning modernity of the eighteenth century fostered an increasingly literate middle-class public and philosophical ponderings on the virtue of maintaining the status quo, whether governmental, religious, or otherwise. As Jocelyn Godwin explains in *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, eighteenth-century intellectual traditions are marked by a “sociology of unbelief” (67). Godwin further demonstrates that the Western world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed an incredible amount of thinking and writing about Christianity. One of these thinkers who exerted a profound influence on the occultists of his own and subsequent times, and especially on Yeats himself, was Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Born in Sweden in 1688, Swedenborg was, for the first half of his life, a scientist; at the age of fifty-eight, Swedenborg experienced the first of many mystical visions, and devoted the rest of his life to writings about religion and spirituality (Williams-Hogan 3-15). Fifteen years after his death, these writings inspired the foundation of the Swedenborgian Church, sometimes referred to as the New Church. Swedenborg's ideas varied somewhat from those of the mainstream Christian religions, but were in line with the ideological currents stirring in his lifetime. Swedenborg's is a humanistic Christianity, in which the individual is in charge of his or her own spiritual health and eternal destiny. Swedenborg did not see benefit in worshippers' passive reception and acceptance of dogma passed down by religious leaders. Instead, he believed that each individual could be his or her own priest. Indeed, without active participation, without the exercise of free will,

man would not be man, but only a figure and effigy; for his thought would be without reflection, consequently without judgment, and thus in the Divine things which are of the church, he would have no more power of turning himself, than a door without a hinge, or, with a hinge, fastened with a steel bolt; and his will would be without decision, consequently no more active with respect to

justice or injustice, than the stone upon a tomb under which lies a dead body. (Swedenborg 52)

In addition, as Thomas Keiser writes, “[Swedenborg’s writings] completely destroy the foundation of fundamentalism, which is that the Scriptures interpret themselves and mean exactly what they say on the surface, no more and no less” (126). That an individual was not dependent upon a priest to mediate between him and God or to tell him what the Bible means was a radical idea, but one which fueled the momentum of the occult revival to follow.

Swedenborg was not only known as a thinker and writer about thorny issues of spirituality; he also had a reputation as a seer. Following his spiritual crisis of 1746, Swedenborg had frequent visions and communicated with the spirits of the dead. Numerous accounts of his clairvoyant abilities exist, including one in which he assisted the widow of the Dutch ambassador to Sweden, Louis de Marteville.

At some time after de Marteville’s death, a goldsmith presented his widow, Maria Louisa Ammon de Marteville, with a bill for twenty-five thousand guilders for a silver service her husband had bought. Madame de Marteville . . . was sure her husband had paid the goldsmith, but could not find the receipt. She was advised to pay

Swedenborg a visit and ask for his help. He offered to try, and a few days later encountered the dead ambassador in the spirit world. De Marteville assured Swedenborg that he would go and look for the receipt. Several days later, the ambassador appeared to his wife in a dream and explained that she should look behind a drawer in his desk . . . Madame de Marteville looked in this spot, and not only found the receipt but a hairpin set with diamonds that she believed was lost. (Smoley 35)

Swedenborg's communication with the dead was not, however, limited to extracting mundane knowledge for the use of the living.

In another of Swedenborg's visions, he experienced an afterlife which, were it to become widely known and accepted, would threaten mainstream religions which used fear of eternal damnation as a means of social control to discourage sin in their church populations. What Swedenborg experienced contradicts the view of the afterlife espoused by many mainstream religions, particularly the Roman Catholic vision of a judgmental God consigning souls to eternal bliss in Heaven or eternal torment in Hell.

As summarized by Arthur Conan Doyle in his *History of Spiritualism*, Swedenborg saw that

the other world, to which we all go after death, consisted of a number of different spheres representing various shades of luminosity and happiness, each of us going to that for which our spiritual condition has fitted us. We are judged in automatic fashion . . . the result being determined by the total result of our life, so that absolution or a death-bed repentance can be of little avail . . . Death was made easy by the presence of celestial beings who helped the new-comer into his fresh existence. Such new-comers had an immediate period of complete rest . . . (18-19)

Swedenborg's vision discounts the fearful prospect of being thrust into an alien existence, insisting that "celestial beings" are present at death to gently acclimate the recently departed soul to the afterlife. According to this vision, the Roman Catholic sacrament of last rites² would be ineffectual.

² According to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

The special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects:

- the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church;
- the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
- the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance;
- the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;
- the preparation for passing over to eternal life. (n.p.)

Swedenborg's vision also undermines the idea of a finite eternal fate; he witnessed an afterlife in which "[t]here was no eternal punishment. Those who were in the hells could work their way out if they had the impulse. Those in the heavens were also in no permanent place, but were working their way to something higher" (19). Interestingly, Emma Hardinge Britten described a similar afterlife over a century later at her lecture in Dunedin, New Zealand. Through communication with the spirits of the dead, Hardinge Britten asserts, mortals have learned

that every living soul is in judgment for the deeds done in the body, and reaps the fruits of its good or evil life on earth, in conditions of happiness or suffering hereafter; also, that there is no remission of sins . . . All the communicating spirits of the new dispensation coincide in declaring that the life immediately succeeding mortal dissolution is not a final state, but one which manifests innumerable conditions of *progress*, all of which are open to any soul, according to its will to do good and its personal conquest over evil . . . (12-13)

Swedenborg's and Hardinge Britten's views of the afterlife subvert several tenets of mainstream religion. First, the destiny of the soul after death depends solely

on what the person did in life, not on the intercession of priests or on an acceptance of Jesus Christ as savior. Second, the state of the soul in the afterlife is not fixed; souls in the “hells” are not forever damned but can work their way to the “heavens.” In addition, Swedenborg posits an interactive afterlife, one in which “celestial beings” give aid to other souls and where the bliss or suffering of a soul is not fixed but in flux.

Yeats, in his 1914 essay “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places,” reasserts Swedenborg’s vision of the afterlife by connecting it to Irish folk beliefs that “there are spiritual intelligences which can warn and advise us” (CW5 48) after physical death. Thus, Swedenborg’s version of the afterlife would appeal to those who dismissed an absolutist fire-and-brimstone portrait of a sharply defined Hell and Heaven. It also challenged those in positions of religious authority whose power would be undermined by such a vision.

Swedenborg, then, was “the first who really in a concrete and a living way, tried to describe the beyond, what happens when we die, and to give to Christian faith a concrete content concerning this very question” (Bergquist 466). He posited a less frightening and more flexible view of the afterlife and, while not denying the existence of God, portrayed a God of understanding and not of wrath. Furthermore, Swedenborg’s rejection of the human being as a passive

receptacle of dogma through sanctioned interpreters of Scriptures inspired, among others, William Blake, American Transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and, later, Yeats himself.

As we know, Yeats was an admirer and scholar of Blake, attracted not just by the latter's poetry but by his mystical inclinations and visions; it is likely that Blake was the gateway to Swedenborg for Yeats. We know that Yeats also read Emerson and Thoreau; Thoreau in particular influenced Yeats' early ideas of a contemplative life and his poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"³. Moreover, Emerson and Thoreau demonstrate that the personal spirituality advocated by Swedenborg and which permeated the occult revival anchored a transatlantic debate on human beings' relationship with the divine.

As Robert H. Kirven and David B. Eller detail in their essay on Swedenborg's influence on Transcendentalism, both Emerson and Thoreau had read Swedenborg's works at one time or another (206-210). Emerson, for example, "perceived that a 'silent revolution' was going on, and was convinced that the 'moral' and the 'spiritual' are a lasting essence . . . and that we will certainly bring back the words in their true essence', age after age, to their ancient meaning" (Hallengren 232). Emerson, and in particular his ideas on and

³ In *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats writes, "My father had read to me some passage out of *Walden*, and I had planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree, and Innisfree was opposite Slis Wood where I meant to sleep" (CW3 85).

affinities with Swedenborg, stands then as representative of the anti-hierarchical and anti-traditional view of mainstream religion shared by many in the occult revival and manifested in an emphasis on personal spirituality.

Emerson saw Swedenborg as a champion of individual spirituality, and as one who recognized “the connection that subsists throughout all things” (Emerson, “Swedenborg, or the Mystic” 60). Emerson further praised Swedenborg, asserting that,

To the withered traditional church yielding dry catechisms, [Swedenborg] let in nature again, and the worshipper escaping from the vestry of verbs and texts, is surprised to find himself a party to the whole of his religion . . . Instead of a religion which visited him diplomatically three or four times, when he was born, when he married, when he fell sick, and when he died, and for the rest never interfered with him, here was a teaching which accompanied him all day, accompanied him even into sleep and dreams . . . (69)

Emerson incorporated Swedenborgian ideas into his famous address to the Harvard Divinity School class on July 15, 1838. Emerson, a trained Unitarian minister, decries the impersonal, indirect, and inauthentic nature of religion

(specifically the Christianity with which he was familiar) received in churches through intermediaries. For Emerson, Christianity has two major flaws: that it has separated men from God by discouraging a direct relationship and that it promotes the idea that all revelation has passed (114-117). Instead, Emerson advocates a spirituality which “cannot be received at second hand . . . [and] is not instruction, but provocation” (112). In other words, individuals do not need to simply hear about religion from priests and pastors; they need to be passionately engaged in their own spirituality. Moreover, as Emerson also states, “In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought” (122). Emerson, it should be noted, is not anti-Christian. On the contrary, he firmly believes in a Christianity based upon an individual’s direct relationship with God, not on a relationship with God mediated by a priest or other middleman.

Henry David Thoreau concurs with Emerson on the importance of a personal spirituality. While castigating the superficiality and materialism he sees as rampant in American society, in *Walden* Thoreau also discusses his unease with Christianity, and implies an approach to spirituality much like Emerson’s. In the section of *Walden* entitled “Reading,” Thoreau writes,

The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo [sic] philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe

remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. (1820)

In this passage, Thoreau sees virtue in a direct investigation and experience of divinity.

Yeats' ideas of a revolutionary personal spirituality concur with those of Emerson, Thoreau, and Swedenborg. Edwin John Ellis and Yeats, in their "Memoir" of Blake, write that

In the year 1757, according to Emanuel Swedenborg, a new age of the world began. The divine description of the kingdom of heaven as 'within you' was to become more true than before by reason of a greater influx of spiritual light . . . behind education lies the great force of that flood of illumination foreseen by Swedenborg, and destined, as he declared, to break over and submerge the formalism of science and the materialism of the churches . . . We can already see a beginning of this around us now. Society half recognises the utility of its dreamers. Mysticism, ceasing to be misunderstood, is ceasing to be disobeyed. (1-2)

In this excerpt, Yeats highlights Swedenborg's idea of the divinity within, which in itself would negate the need for a mediator between God and humans, subverting the power of church hierarchies. Yeats also praises Swedenborg for his emphasis on "illumination," or the personal enlightenment which can only come from within the individual through communion with the divine, not through a priest. This "illumination" is similar to the path of enlightenment on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life: the individual must study and tread this path alone, not be led along it or told what it means. What Yeats extracts from Swedenborg is evidence of what he sees around him: the subversive, or revolutionary, nature of occultism and reemerging mystical traditions which, by encouraging personal spirituality, could supplant religious hierarchies and empower individuals to control their own spiritual lives.

Yeats, therefore, was not the only writer of the nineteenth century to emphasize a personal spirituality, the kind of which many occult belief systems espoused. Swedenborg, Blake, Emerson, and Thoreau articulated an approach to the relationship between God and human beings that threatened to thwart religious hierarchies. Yeats recognized this same approach in his occult studies, in particular in the emphasis on individual enlightenment proffered by the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society. However, while Emerson's and

Thoreau's writings have been integrated into the literary canon, Yeats' writings on the same issues have been ridiculed as, to use Pound's phrase, "bughouse." Examined within the context of Swedenborg's extraordinary experiences and ideas and of Emerson's and Thoreau's philosophical discourses, however, Yeats can be seen as a man of his time, not as someone who is out of touch, as many have suggested.

As these examples demonstrate, the popularity of occultism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not a peripheral trend but was instead part of a larger conversation regarding human beings' relationship with the divine and with the supernatural realm in general. Many occult societies advocated an individual's responsibility for his or her own spiritual life and, as we have seen, two of America's most respected writers concurred. For those who felt that mainstream religions were too impersonal and rigid, occultism offered a connective and flexible alternate spiritual path.

Occultism and Gender

The archetypal magician is female: the witch, the village herbalist, the fortune teller. Indeed, if we look at the trials and punishments of "witches" from

the middle ages through the seventeenth century, most of the victims were women. In his book *Lucifer Rising*, Bill Ellis notes that magic and the occult are . . . often associated with adolescents, particularly females, whose power roles in adult society are precisely the most debatable. In and of themselves, the practices defined as “magical” may not be politically threatening, but the fact that such traditions gave people on the margins a context to entertain the possibility of inverting social roles made them dangerous enough for many observers. (6)

Ellis touches on a key significance of the occult revival: the empowerment of people on the margins of religious power and, specifically, women. Charlene Spretnak concurs with Ellis in many respects, but sees these accused witches as subversive and definitely “politically threatening.”

They were the women who defied patriarchal oppression by observing the Old Religion, celebrating nature’s holidays (solstices and equinoxes) instead of the Church’s, and practicing contraception, abortion, midwifery, and healing among the peasants, thereby constituting a communication network that the patriarchal Church/State found threatening. (474)

This supposed threat is perhaps one reason why women, in many cases, took secondary roles, if any, in major mainstream religions. As the mid to late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the modern feminist movement in the United States and Great Britain, it also witnessed the revival of occultism and its associated practices. Among their many goals, both movements shared a common one: the empowerment of women in a male-dominated world, including the religious world. The occult revival presented many women with their first opportunity to take a leading and active role in religion.

There is no shortage of documentation demonstrating the limited and restrictive status of women in many Western societies and, in particular, the repressive cult of British Victorian womanhood. Characteristics associated with the ideal Victorian woman included “innate female passivity . . . female frailty . . . a moral and spiritual sensibility . . . and de-eroticised sexuality”; together, these produced the “pervasive figure of the Victorian perfect lady, a quiet, delicate, submissive creature, a self-sacrificing wife and natural mother” (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 7). Coventry Patmore’s mid-century poem “The Angel in the House” painted such an ideal picture of female domesticity that the phrase “angel in the house” became synonymous with a woman’s role in Victorian society, namely, within the home.

Women writers of the period also endorsed this ideal. In an 1865 article, schoolteacher Elizabeth Sewell recommends that girls should be acclimated to a domestic lifestyle from an early age.

Girls are to dwell in quiet homes, amongst a few friends; to exercise a noiseless influence, to be submissive and retiring . . . [A girl is to be] guarded from over fatigue, subject to restrictions . . . seldom trusted away from home . . . simply because, if she is not thus guarded . . . she will probably develop some disease . . . Any strain upon a girl's intellect is to be dreaded, and any attempt to bring women into competition with men can scarcely escape failure.

(qtd. in Greer 11)

Indeed, for many the idea of women entering the public sphere went against nature itself. As Mary Arnold Ward writes in "An Appeal Against Female Suffrage," "when it comes to questions of foreign or colonial policy, or of grave constitutional change, then we maintain that the necessary and normal experience of women—speaking generally and in the mass—does not and can never provide them with such materials for sound judgment as are open to men" (419). For these women, this protected domestic sphere, beyond which they

could only venture with a husband or other family member, seemed natural and normal.

However, as we know, many women were of the opposite opinion, desiring voting rights, education, and jobs outside the home. Indeed, the nineteenth century was one in which women's roles in society were rapidly changing. As historian Walter Arnstein records, "during the century's final decades . . . an increasing number of single middle-class women became not only governesses but also nurses and elementary school teachers and administrators" and "secondary schools for girls multiplied and both Oxford and Cambridge added women's colleges in the 1870s" (186). True, the above-mentioned jobs mostly attracted unmarried lower- and middle-class female workers and, therefore, would not threaten male employment opportunities; however, it is clear that there was an increase in the life choices available to women of the time, which did cast doubt on men's "competence as family breadwinners" (186). Just as women's educational and employment opportunities were changing, so were women's roles in religious life.

In the nineteenth century, the majority of religious positions of power were held by men. Catholic women with a call to religious vocation, for example, could be nuns; however, as such they could not celebrate Mass, hear

confession and offer absolution, baptize, or anoint the sick and dying. They were still subordinate to priests. In spite of these limitations, women like the first United States-born saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton⁴, did rise to positions of some authority in the Church. However, even Elizabeth Ann Seton was barred from performing priestly duties on the basis of her gender. Such women, despite their accomplishments, could only be second-class citizens in the Church hierarchy.

While Catholic women were excluded from celebrating Mass and preaching, many women of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did defy the patriarchal authority of mainstream religions and preach the Gospel. In her book *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse*, Christine Krueger focuses on the role of the Methodist revival in empowering women preachers. Methodism's emphasis on individual Bible study and personal experience of God encouraged women to be active participants in their faith and to challenge a woman's role in society. Krueger cites the example of Englishwoman Mary Bosanquet (1739-1816), whose refusal to stop evangelizing to her brothers led her father to turn her out of his house. In

⁴ St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) was born into a well-to-do Anglican family in New York City. At the age of 30, she converted to Catholicism. She devoted the rest of her life to Catholic education, founding the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, an order of teaching sisters, and in 1810 opening the first Catholic school in the United States, St. Joseph's Academy and Free School in Emmitsburg, MD. She was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1975 (Craughwell 99-100).

an age when most women lived either with their fathers or their husbands, twenty-two year-old Mary Bosanquet “was the mistress of her own Spartan lodging, armed with the confidence that she was doing God’s will” (35). Her preaching was sanctioned by Methodist founder John Wesley himself, who wrote to Bosanquet and her assistant Sarah Crosby that they had received an “extraordinary call” to preach (Wesley 440).

Additional examples of women publicly participating in religious activities are provided by Mary Farrell Bednarowski. In her article “Outside the Mainstream: Women’s Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America,” Bednarowski profiles four women who spearheaded religious movements: Ann Lee, who founded the Shakers; Mary Baker Eddy, who established Christian Science; Kate and Maggie Fox, whose experiences spurred the Spiritualist movement; and Helena P. Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society. The Shaker faith, for example,

embodied two beliefs which insured that women would assume roles of spiritual leadership: first, that God was both male and female in nature; and second, that “concupiscence” was the sin in the Garden of Eden and thus celibacy was the proper relationship between the sexes. Out of these two beliefs grew the necessity for

female leadership as well as male among the Shakers; not only to reflect in practice the dual nature of the divine, but to provide religious leadership for the female members of the communities . . .

The Father/Mother God kept the feminine aspect of the divine constantly before the Shakers, and the fact that celibacy was practiced by both sexes prevented the association of the feminine alone with the temptations of the flesh. (210)

In the Shaker faith, both Adam and Eve are equally culpable in the Fall, therefore the association of Eve with temptation and corruption is removed as is the rationale for denying women spiritual authority. In addition to the leadership roles available to Shaker women, their beliefs “gave women the opportunity to participate in the communal ownership of property, to have roles in their society other than wife and mother, and to participate equally with men in the spiritual leadership of their communities” (210-211). Through this belief system, Shaker women could participate fully in the social and spiritual life of their communities.

A similar concept of non-gendered divinity pervaded the other traditions Bednarowski profiles. For example, the “Spiritualist God was neither mother nor father” (214). In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky writes that God is ““neither Father

nor Mother'" (qtd. in Dixon 154). For Theosophist Margaret Cousins, in denying feminine divinity, "The Churches and their priesthoods have ever been the enemies of the freedom of women'" (qtd. in Bednarowski 223). What these groups offered women was, in part, as Joy Dixon summarizes, "the rejection of an anthropomorphic God and of a traditional, male-dominated, ordained priesthood" (68). Within the Shakers, the Christian Scientists, the Spiritualists, and the Theosophists, women were on an equal footing with men.

As with Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn welcomed women to participate in its study and rituals at all levels. The mysterious Fräulein Sprengel charged Woodman, Westcott, and Mathers to make the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn an organization which "was designed to include both men and women on a basis of perfect equality" (Regardie, *What You Should Know About the Golden Dawn* 11). This non-exclusion policy was built into the foundational documents of the Golden Dawn, as it was in those of the Theosophical Society. As R.A. Gilbert notes in *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians*, "the Certificate of Admission [to the Golden Dawn]" states "'Our Society does not exclude a worthy woman from being initiated'" (14). With such statements, it is no surprise that many women, including many of Yeats' friends and acquaintances, joined the Golden Dawn.

Florence Farr was one of four extraordinary women of Yeats' acquaintance who attained prominent positions in the Golden Dawn. Others were Abbey Theatre benefactor Annie Horniman, activist Maud Gonne, and MacGregor Mathers' wife Moina Bergson Mathers. Mary K. Greer, in her 1995 book *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses*, writes,

The characters and beliefs of these women ran counter to the norms of their society; they personally embodied the strongest taboos and repressed characteristics of late-Victorian England; they acted outside the boundaries of public codes of behavior. Yet they initiated lasting changes in politics and culture; they heralded a "new age" and a "new woman." (4)

It was no secret that Florence Farr was the mistress of playwright George Bernard Shaw; in this, she was representative of a "new woman" who rejected the confines of marriage and controlled her own sexuality. When the Golden Dawn's Isis-Urania Temple in London splintered into factions through the machinations of Crowley and Mathers in 1900, it was Florence Farr who took charge. Maud Gonne, in addition to her work for Irish independence, bore two children out of wedlock, a challenge to traditional marriage and childbearing. Their membership in the Golden Dawn, and all that that entailed, was part of a

revolt against Victorian womanhood. However, as a secret society the Golden Dawn did not necessarily extend that prominence into the public sphere. The most significant—and public—roles for women were as mediums.

Mediums, simply, are individuals who are sensitive to the supernatural world and are able to relay messages between it and the world of the living. In Spiritualism, mediums function as priests—that is, they bridge the gap between the supernatural and the physical realms. According to Emma Hardinge Britten,

the modern spirit medium was one and the same person with the ancient Prophet, the Seer, the Magician of Egypt, with those strange and exceptional persons known in the East for their wonderful gifts,—with the Priests of the ancient Peruvians and Mexicans, and with those who had charge of the oracles among the Greeks and Romans. (*Spirit Mediums* 5)

Female mediums, “with the approval of those present . . . assumed a male role and sometimes a trance persona which was at total odds with the Victorian idea of respectable womanhood” (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 11). The Fox sisters earned their own living giving public demonstrations of their abilities. Achsa Sprague, Cora L.V. Scott, and Etta Wriedt were three of the many other mediums who participated in such demonstrations. For many women, mediumship was a

means of active participation in public and spiritual life, and a form of emancipation. Many mediums also used their abilities to gain attention for various humanitarian causes.

As Houdini biographers Kalush and Sloman note, “As a grassroots, populist religious revival, Spiritualism adherents were often at the forefront of other reform movements, championing the cause of women’s rights, child labor concerns, and the temperance and antismut crusades” (50). Emma Hardinge Britten, for example, used her clairvoyant abilities for ““inspirational speaking”” in which she “praised the founders of religions—Christ, Moses, Osiris, Buddha, and Zoroaster—for breaking the chains of priestcraft . . . railed at the dogmas of Nicea and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglicans . . . told the Christians that their denial of all other religions was atrocious” (qtd. in Godwin 202-203). Here, Hardinge Britten exemplifies not just the emancipating power of the occult movement but also its characteristic acceptance of multiple religious traditions.

Hardinge Britten, however, did not just lecture and give demonstrations of her psychic abilities. She also used the money she earned from these activities for social activism. In 1860, she published her *Outline of a Plan for a Self-Sustaining Institution for Homeless and Outcast Females*⁵, to which institution she

⁵ Hardinge Britten outlined the central mission of her planned institution as follows.

donated profits from her published works. The referenced “outcast females” were mostly women who were “driven by desperation to the streets” and a life of prostitution (62); the institution would offer them housing and the opportunity to earn a respectable living. With this project, Hardinge Britten aligned “this new religion with the humanitarian and socially progressive movement of its day” (Godwin 203), in particular, efforts to empower women to control their own lives. Another component of these efforts was the dissemination of birth control information. In 1877, Theosophist Annie Besant published in London Charles Knowlton’s 1832 work on family planning, *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (Manville vii); as a result, she was tried under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. These

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1. To restore self-respect and a place in life to the fallen, a home to the destitute, employment and an available means of subsistence to the industrious.
 2. To remove friendless or outcast women from the temptation to sin for bread, until they can honorably provide for themselves; and while it is claimed that some special effort should be made in behalf of the utterly fallen sisters of humanity, who have too long been passed by, or devoted to penitential or impracticable systems of reform, leaving them with the stamp of that degradation which precludes their re-entrance into the arena of honest labor, it is by no means proposed to render vice a necessary qualification for admission; prevention and timely succor, no less than cure, being the aim proposed.
 3. In order to remove them from the struggle of ordinary competition, and qualify them with a specialty for superior merit, it is proposed to instruct them in the culture of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, upon the most matured scientific knowledge of the subject, with the design of aiding in sustaining the Institution by the sale of its products, and advancing the character of its members to such superior use and excellence, as will create a respectful demand for their services.
- (63)

examples demonstrate how closely the occult movement and its enhanced opportunities for women was connected to the push for women's equality.

While Spiritualism and mediumship provided opportunities for women, the authority these women possessed did always not carry over into the wider social arena. Such was the case of the Englishwoman Louisa Lowe, whose harrowing tale is detailed by Alex Owen in her book *The Darkened Room*. In short, Louisa married an Anglican vicar, Reverend George Lowe, in 1842, and she bore him six children. Louisa's marriage was loveless, blighted by fear and suspicion, and it constrained the reluctant Louisa to a life of quietude and domesticity. Louisa did not share her husband's orthodox religious views and found in Spiritualism "a great stepping-stone to God" (171), or, in other words, a more direct and personal relationship with God. She began practicing automatic writing and communicating with spirits. Through these experiences, Louisa resolved to "cast off the trammels of authority, and let my mind admit new ideas" and concluded that "man's only sure guide, and legitimate mental master is—CONSCIENCE" (175). Louisa was empowered to take charge of her spirituality and to reject the authority of husband, church, and society.

In September 1870, Louisa fled to Exeter in an attempt to live on her own. It is likely that Reverend Lowe's chief objections to Louisa's choices were her

rejection of the Anglican faith, of which he was a representative, and her refusal to play the role of wife and mother. Reverend Lowe, in conjunction with several medical doctors, had Louisa committed to the Brislington House mental asylum. Throughout her confinement as a lunatic (she was finally released in April 1872), Louisa argued for her own sanity, but investigating doctors and Commissioners in Lunacy always returned to Spiritualism and spirit communication as proof of her madness. It was not until her husband attempted to take sole legal control of Louisa's £1000 annual income that Louisa was allowed a legal forum in which to prove her mental competence. Following her ordeal, Louisa Lowe became active in the movement to reform the mental institution system, even filing a lawsuit against the commissioners who kept her institutionalized. As Roy Porter and Helen Nicholson note in their book *Women, Madness, and Spiritualism: Georgina Weldon and Louisa Lowe*, in 1873 Louisa "formed the Lunacy Law Reform Association and under its auspices began to speak at meetings and give lectures" (143). She continued to be an activist through the rest of her life.

Current scholars have begun to recognize and research the impact of occultism on women's rights. Ann Braude's 1989 book *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* examines the socially subversive nature of Spiritualism in its empowerment of women.

Braude rescues from obscurity the stories of women who spoke out for women's suffrage and rights, such as Mary Fenn Love, who came from New York to Indiana to obtain a divorce from her husband, and later married Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Seer of Poughkeepsie." Marriage reform, and discussions of sexuality, were common among nineteenth-century American Spiritualists. Not only did the Spiritualists challenge religious authority and autonomy, but sought to release marriage and sexual regulation as means of social control. Spiritualism not only allowed women an active voice in religion, but also empowered them to use their voices to financially support social causes.

Spiritualism and other forms of occultism provided many women with opportunities for self-fulfillment and public expression that had not been available to them before. Some women were able to earn a living through their telepathic gifts. Others used this new public forum to draw attention to and agitate for reform in areas as diverse as the treatment of the mentally ill and women's reproductive rights. In these respects, the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced and was influenced by the modern women's movement and the feminist first wave.

Occultism and Science

As G.R.S. Mead contends in his 1913 essay “The Rising Psychic Tide,” “every phase of the [occult] movement has been met, as is well known, by the most bitter hostility on the part of official science” (229). This sentiment was often mutual. In his first address to the Dublin Hermetic Society, Yeats commented, “Science will tell you the soul of man is a volatile gas capable of solution in glycerine” (qtd. in Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* 42). Yeats’ wry comment addresses a central and serious concern of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century life: the controversial role of science in the mysteries of life, e.g., the existence of God, the afterlife, the meaning of life, the origins of humankind, etc. Opinions differed on the relationship between science and belief.

The most public debate was over Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, which many saw as undermining belief in Biblical history. Within occult circles, however, there was also a debate. Some occultists, like those in the Society for Psychical Research, used scientific methods to gather evidence of supernatural phenomenon, such as photographs of spirit manifestations. Others felt, as Yeats sometimes did, that science was inadequate in that it could not completely capture or represent supernatural experiences. Occultists, therefore, participated

actively in one of the great debates of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Yeats, with his rejection and recognition of the role of science in the supernatural arena, embodies the confluence of occult phenomena and scientific exploration.

Arguments over science and religion were not unique to the nineteenth century. Rather, the explosion of scientific investigation in the nineteenth century often led people to occultism as a reaction against this “aggressive scientism, which refused to accept the reality of things of the spirit” (Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* 38). As Jean Pierrot argues, occultism and mysticism

[express] a growing desire to free man from the remorseless mechanism of the world posited by positivist science, and to regard him as capable of restoring a deeper and personal meaning to his life. Beyond the still recent discoveries of science, it therefore postulates the existence of an irreducible unknowable, and it is in this unknowable that man’s need for mystery and a sense of mystery can take refuge. (83-84)

Some of this mystery was challenged by the developing interest in and exploration of evolutionary theory.

Much has been made, and continues to be made, of Charles Darwin’s 1859 work *On the Origin of Species*, which posited an alternative to the creationist view

based on the Book of Genesis even while allowing for the possibility of miracles from God. Of *On the Origin of Species*, Karl Beckson remarks that it “undermined orthodox belief in creationism, unsettled religious faith, and ultimately resulted in emotional crises for many Christians” (xii). Even “those engaged in séances or psychic research saw the march of science as a threat to the spiritual values of Christianity” (Kirven and Eller 223). As Rosemary J. Mundhenk and LuAnn McCracken Fletcher point out in their anthology *Victorian Prose*, alternatives to creationism had already been posited by Charles Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) and Robert Chambers’ 1844 work *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (165), and these had not been warmly received by the religious establishment. But Darwin’s work was the flashpoint that prompted many, like Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, to speak out in opposition to evolutionary theory.

“Man’s derived supremacy over the earth; man’s power of articulate speech; man’s gift of reason; man’s free-will and responsibility; man’s fall and redemption; the incarnation of the Eternal Son; the indwelling of the Eternal Spirit,—all are equally and utterly irreconcilable with the degrading notion of the brute origin

of him who was created in the image of God.” (qtd. in Mudhenk and Fletcher 166)

Wilberforce’s perception is that science, especially biology, has discounted the spiritual nature, the divine spark, of humankind.

The overarching issue here, however, was over who had the right to pronounce answers to these persistent questions. Did religious institutions have the last word on the nature and origins of humankind, for instance, or could science have the final say? This question was not new to the nineteenth century, and it has continued to occupy humankind well into the twenty-first century.

Nonetheless, the proliferation of scientific experimentation and scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century drove the debate to the forefront of much social discourse. As Demetres Tryphonopoulos asserts, the science versus religion debate helped to fuel the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The causes of this particular manifestation of interest in the occult are numerous – with the reaction against the restrictive world-view of positivism being one of the major stimuli. The dominant role that science had assumed in modern culture, and science’s exclusion of all knowledge that is not quantifiable, sparked this

interest . . . Rather than repudiating science, occultism claims that it uses the methods of scientific analysis to provide empirical evidence for concepts and beliefs (such as the immortality of the soul) which religion asks that we accept on grounds of faith. (20-21).

Those involved in the occult revival actively participated in this debate and mediated between the two perspectives, arguing against monopolistic definitions on the part of science and religion and arguing for a combination of the two. As MacGregor Mathers explained in his Introduction to *The Kabbalah Unveiled*,

Material science would appear to be spiritualizing itself and occult science to be materializing itself . . . The Ancient Wisdom, the Sacred Books, taught that we cannot understand Matter without understanding Spirit, that we cannot understand Spirit without understanding Matter. (vii-viii)

Occultism was the nexus of connection between science and religion and, in many ways bridged the gap between the two. As G.R.S. Mead notes, "In spite of denial and ridicule, however, the evidence as to mesmeric phenomena accumulated by degrees, and a vast field of research was opened up, until under the name of hypnotism it has become part and parcel of accepted scientific

investigation" (230). As mentioned earlier, one organization that specifically bridged this gap is the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), of which Yeats was a member.

Yeats joined the SPR in 1913, although he had been attending séances for years before that. As R.F. Foster explains, the SPR satisfied Yeats' intellectual interest in supernatural phenomena. Since 1909, Yeats "had begun to experiment consistently in this area [e.g., spiritual phenomena] . . . At first, while he used the language of 'scientific' investigation favoured by the SPR, his inclination was towards the more 'spiritist' school, believing in supernatural survival rather than looking for psychological explanation. Later he moved towards a more questioning approach, in line with SPR orthodoxy" (*FOS1* 462-463). Yeats kept copious notes of his investigations and his "record of séances, inscribed at vast length and carefully kept, indicate a struggle between the spirit of inquiry enjoined by the SPR and a powerful emotional wish to believe" (466).

Yeats participated in at least two important investigations instigated by the SPR. In 1914, Yeats and fellow SPR member Everard Fielding went to France where they, together with Maud Gonne, examined a church in Mirebeau. Here, the priest, Abbé Vachère, had several oleographs of the Sacred Heart which had begun to bleed. George Mills Harper reprints Yeats' essay on the subject in *Yeats*

and the Occult. In that essay, Yeats recalls that the priest told him and his fellow investigators that the oleograph started bleeding on September 8, 1911 and that the “picture continued to bleed until the 15th October, wounds opening in the heart and on the hands, a crown of thorns showing itself in blood upon the head.” The church’s altar “had its own tremendous miracle, for here many times the roof had dripped with blood at the elevation [of the Host], making a pool upon the altar” (Harper, “‘A Subject of Investigation’: Miracle at Mirebeau” 183, 186). In this essay, Yeats details their several examinations of one of the oleographs and the altar cloths and of having a sample of the blood tested, but he does not come to any conclusions as to the authenticity of the phenomena.

In 1917, at the SPR’s behest, Yeats met with and investigated David Wilson, “a mildly deranged chemist (and part-time solicitor) in St Leonards-on-Sea [who] had constructed a machine which received and amplified voices from the spirit world.” Unfortunately, after a rumor that the machine had received a message in German reached the British authorities, the machine was confiscated for the duration of the war (Foster, *FOS2* 80). Yeats was initially convinced of the machine’s validity but, as with Mirebeau, he never felt comfortable reaching a definite conclusion.

Yeats, therefore, exemplifies this tension between scientific fact and spiritual belief. To reconcile that tension within himself, he often chose to look at supernatural phenomena, like the Mirebeau incidents, from both perspectives. In this respect, Yeats' interest in the occult was quintessentially modern: it was both a reaction against the scientific wave of his times and a use of scientific methods to investigate supernatural occurrences.

Occultism, Colonialism, and Nationalism

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the apex of the British Empire. By that time, "Britain [had] acquired as colonies or protectorates some 750,000 square miles with twenty million people in Asia and the South Pacific, and approximately 4,400,000 square miles with sixty million people in Africa" (Arnstein 164). These areas included Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Egypt, Ireland, among others. The imperial situation forged relationships between peoples that were problematic, to say the least, and which had both positive and negative implications.

On the one hand, British imperial administrators tended to look at native populations as Other, alien, and inferior. A crisis of identity ensued as colonized peoples struggled with who they were in the imperial scheme—members of the

Empire and therefore British or non-Britons whose native identities had been quashed and must be recovered—and as Britons abroad struggled with either retaining a British identity or “going native.” On the other hand, Britons at home imported through colonial channels ideas from around the world, benefitting from “the ethnological work of colonial administrators, missionaries, and explorers; the translations of sacred texts by scholars and missionaries with linguistic expertise; and the emergence of a serious and professional study of language and culture as new academic specialties” (Owen, *The Darkened Room* 29-30). Consequently, the British Empire proved fertile ground for renegotiation of racial and cultural identities, reassertion of national identities, and integration of Eastern spiritual beliefs into Western cultures. In all of these enterprises, occultism also played a significant role.

It is true that in looking at the founders and leaders of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult movements, we find most of them to be white Europeans and Americans. Theosophy, for example, was the brainchild of Madame Blavatsky, “[b]orn in the Ukraine in 1831 to a family that claimed German and Russian aristocratic heritage.” Despite Blavatsky’s claim that she had “traveled the world in search of spiritual enlightenment and studied with holy men in Tibet,” she was still a white European. In 1877, she published *Isis*

Unveiled, “an unruly amalgam of Western occultism, Buddhist and Hindu teachings,” the popularity of which “positioned India near the center of spiritual gravity” (Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* 29). But Blavatsky did more than bring Buddhism and Hinduism to a Western audience, as if they were souvenirs or curiosities from a foreign land. As Mary Helen Thuente elucidates, Blavatsky “attributed the similarity in the fundamental beliefs of all religions to the existence of a secret doctrine which was their common parent” (*W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* 43). In other words, Blavatsky demonstrated to the Western world its commonalities, as opposed to polarities, with the Eastern world. Do we, then, read Blavatsky as an exploitative colonial excavator, appropriating the Hindu and Buddhist beliefs of those silenced by colonial rule? Was this spreading of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs a dialogue or a one-way lecture?

Blavatsky’s appropriations seem to illustrate Gauri Viswanathan’s claim that occultists’ “relationship with Indian spirituality was parasitic” (“The Ordinary Business of Occultism” 3). In this respect, Blavatsky is colonizer and representer, appropriating the voice of the Other. However, Viswanathan alters her opinion of both Blavatsky and “parasitic” occultism, writing five years later,

Denis Saurat’s characterization of the occult as the “strange and monstrous alliance[s] of all the conquered religions” helps one to

identify occultism with colonial subjecthood in its rebellion against “dogmatic Christianity” and the European imperialism that sanctioned its spread. Blavatsky’s unique achievement, in my view, is that she uncovers the layers of history and experience that were suppressed by mainstream religion and encases them in a different narrative mode, which may be described as at once archaeological and cosmological. (“Spectrality’s secret sharers” 143)

Here, Viswanathan presents a Blavatsky who, as archaeologist, excavates suppressed traditions and places them alongside mainstream traditions in a holistic cosmology. This is a Blavatsky who speaks *with*—not *for*—the colonial subject and who creates a system—Theosophy—that honors Hinduism and Buddhism.

Indeed, as Dion Fortune points out, Blavatsky does not thief these ideas without credit but “gives chapter and verse from the Sacred Books” (*What is Occultism?* 45). In her earlier article, Viswanathan writes that

Theosophy developed in reaction to orthodox Christianity, as it sought the roots of spiritual life not in dogma but in an experiential religion recapturing a non-deity-centered, pantheistic theology. Its

appeal lay in finding a common ground between many world religions, without necessarily subscribing to the tenets of any one particular religion. ("The Ordinary Business of Occultism" 4)

Instead of relying on the comfortable binary of colonizer/colonized, Viswanathan acknowledges that "occultism offered the means for mobility between different personae and world-views otherwise denied or at least circumscribed by the restrictive relations between colonizer and colonized" ("Spectrality's secret sharers" 135). It is appropriate, therefore, to view Madame Blavatsky as a bridge between Western and Eastern cultures, as a pioneer who renegotiated not only spiritual parameters but also racial and cultural identities in Britain, the United States, and India.

A second role occultism played in colonial/postcolonial discourse was in the reassertion of national identities. In Ireland, for example, the population largely fell into one of two religious categories: Roman Catholic, the preferred religion of most of the native Irish, and Protestant/Church of Ireland/Anglican, the religion of the colonizers and their so-called "Anglo-Irish" descendents. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants were nothing new, but in Ireland the association of religion with power or powerlessness proved volatile. Catholics,

thanks in part to the Penal Laws⁶, were relegated to subordinate status while Protestants enjoyed positions of privilege.

Yeats was part of the latter category by virtue of his birth into a traditionally Protestant family. Homeschooled by his father, who “abolished religion and insincerity” (qtd. in Murphy, “Psychic Daughter” 11) from the Yeats home, Yeats absorbed many of his father’s humanistic and philosophical ideas, as well as the folk and fairy beliefs of rural Sligo. Consequently, Yeats never fully self-identified with Protestantism, and never felt drawn to Catholicism, the polarizing religions of Ireland. Instead, Yeats writes of his faith as transcendent, encompassing ideas from around the world:

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my
Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St Patrick as I
think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly
proportioned human body, Blake’s “Imagination,” what the

⁶ The Penal Laws were a series of laws instituted by the Irish parliament (itself subject to the British parliament) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries designed primarily to undermine the Catholic Church in Ireland. One passed in 1697 blamed Catholic bishops and priests for fomenting rebellion and ordered that

all Popish Arch-Bishops, Bishops, Vicars-General, Deans, Jesuits, Monks, Friars [sic], and all other Regular Popish Clergy, and all Papists exercising any Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction, shall depart out of this Kingdom before the first day of May [1698] . . . (“The Penal Laws” 874)

Any “Papists” caught after that date were to be imprisoned. Joseph M. Hernon, Jr. summarizes the Penal Laws, under which Catholics “could not practice law, hold Crown offices, purchase land, or take a lease for longer than thirty-one years;” in addition, “Catholic education was outlawed, and Catholics lost the right to vote and be elected to Parliament” (33). The Penal Laws were not eradicated until the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 (“The Penal Laws” 874).

Upanishads have named "Self" . . . ("A General Introduction for my Work," CW5 210)

In a country often polarized between religious traditions, Yeats was in the middle: neither Protestant nor Catholic. What other option was there? One option, as the above excerpt makes clear, was a belief system which united Protestant and Catholic ideas, e.g., the reverence for Christ, with ideas from the Hindu Upanishads and many others. Yeats found such a system in his occult studies, in the Theosophical Society, and in the Golden Dawn.

Yeats also appreciated that occultism has ties to the fairy and folk beliefs of Ireland, and to the magical adventures of mythological heroes like Cúchulain and Fionn mac Cumhaill. All share a sense of connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. The stories of the warrior Cúchulain highlighted an Irish heritage of strength, heroism, and supernatural powers. Also, much like Swedenborg's vision of the afterlife, in Ireland the belief persisted that "the dead stayed where they had lived, or near it, sought no abstract region of blessing or punishment but retreated, as it were, into the hidden character of their neighbourhood;" in other words, "the natural and supernatural are knit together" (CW5 210). In much the same way were the supernatural, folk and fairy beliefs, mythology, and Irish national identity knit together.

In dealing with Ireland's crisis of national identity, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Maud Gonne, and many others believed that recovering Irish mythology and folklore to assert a strong and noble Irish national identity was a key component in realizing Irish independence. Yeats saw this as a personal responsibility, as his letter of 23 September 1894 to Alice Milligan, Northern Irish Presbyterian nationalist, indicates.

. . . I feel that the work of an Irish man of letters must be not so much to awaken or quicken or preserve the national idea among the mass of the people but to convert the educated classes to it on the one hand to the best of his ability, & on the other--& this is the more important—to fight for moderation, dignity, & the rights of the intellect among his fellow nationalists. Ireland is terribly demoralized in all things—in her scholourship [*sic*], in her criticism, in her politics, in her social life. She will never be greatly better until she govern herself but she will be greatly worse unless there arise protesting spirits. (*CL1* 399)

To this end, Yeats attempted to recover, through folklore, myth, and literature, aspects of Irish national identity that were being subjugated, and inaugurated in Ireland a period of fervent cultural nationalism.

“Cultural nationalism,” as Terence Brown writes, is the belief that the essential, spiritual life of a people is assumed to subsist in its culture, bequeathed to it from antiquity and prehistory Indeed, the spirit of a people is vital in their language and in the legends, literature, songs and stories which that language makes available.

(516)

Brown continues, stating that “Yeats, AE and Lady Gregory wrote therefore of an ancient Ireland, heroic and self-sacrificially magnificent, in which unity of culture was manifest in a pagan, mythic, rural paradise” (518). According to R.F. Foster, “Folklore and oral culture, as conceived by WBY and gathered in Sligo and elsewhere, was non-English, anti-materialist, anti-bourgeois, and connected to Theosophical and Rosicrucian symbolism, via Blake and Swedenborg” (*FOS1* 129). Lady Gregory aided this cultural renewal with her works *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), which Yeats argued would give to “Ireland its *Mabinogion*, its *Morte d’Arthur*, its *Nibelungenlied*” (Gregory 334). Yeats did so with his stirring play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), his collection *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* (1918), and his cycle of plays about Cúchulain. All of these brought to the attention of a larger audience a vision of a noble Irishry quite at odds with colonial representations. Therefore, “cultural

nationalism . . . has its occult aspects, its capacity to satisfy minds hungry for mystery in an increasingly unmysterious and materialist world . . . in Irish cultural nationalism we see an illogical blend of radical fervour and occult yearnings, mingled with an evangelical certainty and excitement" (Brown 519).

This fervor led the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising to adopt Cúchulain as their symbol and to follow in the footsteps of Michael Gillane as he resolves to fight for Cathleen ni Houlihan. The execution of the leaders sealed their identities as immortal martyrs to the cause of Irish freedom. Mary Bryson links occultism and nationalism through the concept of reincarnation, a prevalent idea in Theosophy. Reincarnation, Bryson believes, informs "the sacrifice of Padraic Pearse, who believed himself to be the reincarnation of the Celtic hero Cuchulain" (36). Indeed, the element of sacrifice for Mother Ireland/Cathleen ni Houlihan permeates the history and mythology of Easter 1916, and would become entangled within Yeats' poem of the same name.

In addition, Yeats, according to Michael Böss, "had long held the Celts to be the 'Orientals' of Europe" (76), an idea incorporating all the negative connotations of the term, including racial difference⁷. In colonizing Ireland, "the

⁷ And he was right, according to Jimmy Rabbitte in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*:

The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads . . . An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland . . . An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin . . . Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud. (13)

lack of colour difference *intensified* the horror of the colonial vis-à-vis the Irish” (Loomba 109), leading Charles Kingsley to write of the Irish, “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees . . . to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (qtd. in Loomba 109). Irish cultural nationalism may not have changed every British opinion about the Irish, but it did assert to the world an Irish identity that contradicted and subverted their imposed colonial identity.

Of course, Yeats and the other Revivalists did not hold a monopoly on Irish nationalism, both its definition and its implementation. Yeats’ friend Constance Markiewicz (née Gore-Booth) and her fellow participants in the 1916 Rising emphasized political nationalism and advocated armed rebellion to secure independence. Douglas Hyde and other members of the Gaelic League stressed “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” especially in securing the survival of the Irish language. Seamus Deane even locates the nationalist underpinnings of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, arguing that in that novel, “The story of Dublin or of Ireland is the story of the world, the story of humankind, a generic parable” (“Imperialism/Nationalism” 366). Occultism could be said to have had similar

effects; in embracing and incorporating cultures from all over the globe, it brought their traditions into mainstream Western society.

Yeats and the Culture of the Occult

This, then, was the world in which Yeats lived and wrote. In this world, old forms of authority were being eroded and new ones were emerging. The authority of many mainstream religions was being challenged by science, which explored new avenues of explaining life on Earth; it was contested by a public seeking to rejuvenate their spiritual lives and also to sort out conflicts engendered by scientific discoveries. Consequently, many turned to occult groups, hoping to regain the mysteries of religion science had infiltrated.

In addition, patriarchal authority was being eroded by women—and men—questioning women's roles in many facets of society: marriage and family, education, politics, and religion. Because occult groups included and even welcomed women, they also contributed to changes in women's social status. Colonial authority was being contested by burgeoning nationalist groups asserting recovered identities squelched by colonialism. By bringing subaltern spiritual traditions to the Western world, occult groups participated in recovering and disseminating these identities. Therefore, occultism was at the

forefront of major social changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; as a participant in the occult revival, Yeats helped foster these changes, which changes are reflected in his stories "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi" and his unpublished novel *The Speckled Bird*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OCCULT TRILOGY: SELF AND SPACE IN

AN OCCULT CONTEXT

In “Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” and “The Adoration of the Magi,” Yeats presents his readers with three stories depicting quests for esoteric enlightenment. The stories date from 1896-1897, the period, not surprisingly, of Yeats’ early immersion in the occult movement. These stories are peopled by three characters: Owen Aherne, Michael Robartes, and an anonymous first-person narrator. Yeats exhibits an unusual connection particularly to Aherne and Robartes, treating them as fictional characters in the three stories and as actual acquaintances in poems like “The Phases of the Moon” and in parts of *A Vision*. This strange familiarity, combined with Yeats’ own occult pursuits and his tendency towards the autobiographical in his writing¹, suggests that Aherne, Robartes, and the narrator can be read as aspects of Yeats’ own self and as embodiments of his struggles to balance his life, his art, and his occult interests.

¹ For evidence of this, we can look to the many poems he wrote about his relationship with Maud Gonne, the “sixty-year-old smiling public man” of “Among School Children,” the body at rest “Under Ben Bulbin,” the apprentice magician Michael Hearne in *The Speckled Bird*, and others.

Yet, as Eileen Battersy claims, “The autobiographical as used by Yeats is informative, never confessional” (n.p.). Yeats uses the narrator, Robartes, and Aherne to explore, to test, to examine rather than to reveal.

Moreover, Yeats’ use of these three characters invites comparisons with his theories of personality, in particular his concept of Unity of Being, expressed in his mystical treatise, *A Vision*. Within this framework, however, is a larger web of correspondences which speak to notions of the fragmented self associated with modernity and with the intersections and conflicts between occultism and science, mainstream religion, and personal spiritual authority. The occult trilogy is therefore a set of socially-engaged texts which show Yeats using occultism to explore notions of the multi-part or fragmented self which he will eventually solidify in *A Vision*, and also to examine the role of the individual self within the culture of the occult.

In “Rosa Alchemica,” the unnamed first-person narrator² recalls his last meeting ten years earlier with Michael Robartes, who asks the narrator to join his Order of the Alchemical Rose. The narrator’s skepticism towards occultism

² Yeats’ critics disagree on the identity of this anonymous narrator. Critics like Richard Ellman and William H. O’Donnell assume that “[e]ach is told by the same narrator” (O’Donnell, *Guide to the Prose Fiction of William Butler Yeats* 89). Historian and Yeats biographer R.F. Foster assumes that Owen Aherne is the narrator of “Rosa Alchemica,” but not of the other two stories, in which the narrator refers to Aherne in the third person. However, because the narrator never explicitly identifies himself and because the narrator’s character is consistent across all three stories, I concur with Ellman and O’Donnell and operate under the assumption that the same character narrates all three stories.

contrasts with Robartes' unwavering belief in it. From the narrator's perspective, Robartes represents both attractive and dangerous possibilities. Physically, Robartes presents as a jumble of contradictions. When he arrives at the narrator's door, the narrator describes a man "whose wild red hair, fierce eyes, sensitive, tremulous lips and rough clothes, made him look . . . something between a debauchee, a saint, and a peasant" (*M* 179). Clearly, Robartes is full of passion—of both the physical and esoteric kind—and yet devout in his own unorthodox way. It is this all-consuming passion which brings about Robartes' surrender and loss of self, and nearly costs the narrator his own self in the process.

The narrator, at first reluctant, eventually agrees to join Robartes' Order, and the two travel by train to the west of Ireland. Once at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, the narrator participates in part of the initiation ritual—a dance with supernatural beings and fellow initiates—before losing consciousness. In the morning, a mob of angry villagers raids the temple and presumably attacks the members of the Order. The narrator escapes and, convinced that "the Order of the Alchemical Rose was not of this earth, and that it was still seeking over the earth for whatever souls it could gather within its glittering net" (*M* 200), turns to Catholicism, fearing that his experiences may compel him "to take refuge in the

habit of Saint Dominic" (177) and become not just a Catholic but a Catholic monk.

The second story, "The Tables of the Law," focuses on two meetings between Owen Aherne and the narrator, who is dining at Aherne's home. Aherne has transformed part of his home into a private chapel where he keeps a copy of Joachim of Flora's mystical work *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum* and two bare marble tablets. When the two men meet again ten years later, the narrator notices that the formerly blank marble tablets in Aherne's chapel are now covered in writing. As he starts to read, the room fills with incense of unknown origin and supernatural figures, much like those that unnerved the narrator at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, appear behind Aherne. Frightened, the narrator again flees.

The action of "The Adoration of the Magi" occurs shortly after the current events (the narrator's second meeting with Aherne) of "The Tables of the Law." The narrator is visited by three old men from the west of Ireland, who tell him of Robartes' death and of their own journey to Paris to find "a dying woman [who] would give them secret names and thereby so transform the world that another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleaguer Troy" (202).

After hearing their story, the narrator is even more convinced that Catholicism is the right path for him.

In the occult trilogy, Yeats' unnamed narrator is interested in the occult but also frightened by its potential dangers, and his fear leads him to take refuge in Catholicism. The other two main characters, Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, are acquaintances of the narrator and fellow occultists. Michael Robartes is a passionate mystic who travels the world in search of esoteric truth and mystical experiences. Like many occultists, he explores Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions: he travels to the Holy Land "to say my prayers at the Holy Sepulchre, and from there I went to Damascus that I might learn Arabic for I had decided to continue my prayers at Mecca" (CW13 lx). Aherne, on the other hand, dabbles with world religions and occult practices but cannot commit, choosing instead to pursue a philosophy which is a mixture of Christianity and occultism. It is easy to see Yeats in Robartes and Aherne since all three pursued mystical knowledge. Robartes' immersion in the occult reflects Yeats' passionate interest, but Yeats himself was only willing to go so far.

As Yeats was careful to delineate in that 1892 letter to John Quinn, magic was "*next to my poetry* the most important pursuit of my life" (CL1 303; emphasis added). Unlike MacGregor Mathers, Yeats was a public figure—an artist and

statesman—and was unwilling to sacrifice his art for “the retiring life of a reclusive adept” (Graf, *W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 118). Ted Spivey concurs, asserting that “Yeats was fully aware of a kind of mystic who withdrew from the world and its concerns, but this mystic was never his prototype of the new man. The true mystic, for Yeats, unifies in himself the opposites and looks beyond them” (124). Nor was Yeats willing to surrender his entire self to supernatural forces. As Stuart Hirschberg argues,

Yeats experienced an ambivalent attraction to both occultism and aesthetic pursuits throughout his life. In an effort to connect these divergent interests Yeats formulated a theory that, in both mysticism and poetry, the evocation of symbols and rhythmic incantations can release the subliminal mind from conscious control. (312-313)

In other words, Yeats strove to keep the mystic and the artistic aspects of his personality in balance, a stance which emerged out of his own experiences in tipping that balance.

This is apparently what happened to Yeats at a séance which R.F. Foster dates to January 1888 and which Yeats describes in his *Autobiographies*.

Presently my shoulders began to twitch and my hands . . . After a few minutes the movement became violent and I stopped it. I sat motionless for a while and then my whole body moved like a suddenly unrolled watch-spring, and I was thrown backward on the wall . . . I was now struggling vainly with this force which compelled me to movements I had not willed, and my movements became so violent that the table was broken. (CW3 106)

Yeats notes that he tried to pray but all he could think to say was the first lines of *Paradise Lost*. The movements subsided, but Yeats always wondered what had happened: “Was it a part of myself—something always to be a danger perhaps; or had it come from without, as it seemed?” and he confided in Katherine Tynan that he believed evil spirits had been at work (107, 439). The danger here, as Yeats expresses it, is in allowing his spiritual self or malevolent forces to supersede his will. Robartes’ risky immersion in the occult, Aherne’s eventual disillusionment, and the narrator’s fear-based religious fervor are cautions to both Yeats and his readers of the perils of excessive devotion to one pursuit.

The three main characters in the occult trilogy are therefore expressions of Yeats’ own ambivalence about his esoteric pursuits. James Hollis is even more emphatic in identifying the characters of the occult trilogy with Yeats. In his

article "Convergent Patterns in Yeats and Jung," Hollis refers to the narrator of these stories as Yeats himself, noting that in "Rosa Alchemica" "Yeats's reveries are disturbed by the appearance of Michael Robartes" and that "Yeats partially fears Robartes because of the magnetic power the visitor has over him" (63).

Further evidence of the close ties between Robartes, Aherne, and Yeats lies in Yeats' later portrayals of these two characters as acquaintances instead of as creations.

After their initial appearance in the occult trilogy, Aherne and Robartes resurface around 1919 in *The Wild Swans at Coole* and, specifically, the poem "The Phases of the Moon." In this poem, Yeats begins portraying them as actual acquaintances instead of fictional creations. In the poem, Aherne and Robartes stand near a tower (one of Yeats' symbols and also his actual home of Thoor Ballylee) where they know that Yeats himself is up late reading what they believe is a "book or manuscript" offering "mysterious wisdom." Aherne suggests that Robartes should knock at the door. Robartes declines, stating that Yeats "wrote of me in that extravagant style / He had learned from Pater, and to round his tale / Said I was dead ; and dead I choose to be" (CW1 165). The two men decide not to call on Yeats, Aherne commenting that Yeats "would never know me after all these years / But take me for some drunken country man" (168). Here, Yeats

introduces the metafictional idea that Aherne and Robartes are not just fictional characters but real people who he has (mis)represented in his work.

Yeats continues this theme in *A Vision*, which includes an Introduction supposedly written by Owen Aherne himself. This piece is Aherne's first-person account of his reunion with Michael Robartes in London in 1917, some thirty years after they last met during the events depicted in "Rosa Alchemica." As in the poem, Aherne and Robartes express disappointment with the occult trilogy, in which "Mr. Yeats had given the name of Michael Robartes and that of Owen Aherne to fictitious characters, and made those characters live through events that were a travesty of real events" (CW13 lviii). One "travesty" is the death of Robartes at the end of "Rosa Alchemica," which the "real" Robartes appreciates to an extent because it provides him a certain anonymity for many years.

Towards the end of this Introduction, Robartes and Aherne visit Yeats in his Bloomsbury quarters, and the three discuss the draft manuscript of *A Vision*. Here, Yeats implicates Robartes and Aherne in the creation of *A Vision*. In so doing, Yeats identifies Robartes and Aherne as co-authors, or co-editors, of his own works and solidifies their identities as aspects of his own self.

Also usually included in *A Vision* is "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends," which begins with a group of Robartes' followers congregating and

waiting for Robartes to arrive. Robartes' student Daniel O'Leary³ shares some personal details about Aherne and Robartes.

“Robartes,” said O'Leary, “sees what is going to happen, between sleeping and waking at night, or in the morning before they bring him his early cup of tea. Aherne is a pious Catholic, thinks it Pagan or something of the kind and hates it, but he has to do what Robartes tells him, always had to from childhood up . . .” (V 94)

Thus, according to O'Leary, Aherne and Robartes have known each other since they were children, and Aherne has been somewhat in thrall to Robartes.

In addition, the “real” Owen Aherne also has a brother, John. To the end of “Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends” is appended a letter to Yeats written by John Aherne. In this letter, John Aherne also chastises Yeats for misrepresenting the incident upon which he based “Rosa Alchemica.”

Some thirty years ago you made “Rosa Alchemica” . . . out of “a slight incident.” Robartes, then a young man, had founded a society, with the unwilling help of my brother Owen, for the study of the *Kabbala Denudata* and similar books, invented some kind of

³ In an unpublished prose piece, “Michael Robartes Foretells,” Daniel O'Leary is actually a guest in Yeats' house, Thoor Ballylee, where several of Robartes' other students find him. “Yeats sent me the key,” O'Leary tells them. “Somebody told him that I wanted to spend a week or two within reach of Coole House that I might look into the empty rooms [following Lady Gregory's death on May 22, 1932], walk the woods and grass-grown gardens, where a great Irish social order climaxed and passed away” (qtd. in Hood 219).

ritual and hired an old shed on Howth Pier for its meetings. A foolish rumour got out among the herring or mackerel sorters, and some girls . . . broke the window. You hatched out of this the murder of Robartes and his friends, and though my brother incorporated Christ in the ritual, described a sort of orgy in honour of the pagan gods. My brother is very bitter about the pagan gods, but is so, according to Robartes, to prove himself an orthodox man. Robartes makes no complaint about your description of his death and says nobody would have thought the Aherne and Robartes of such fantastic stories real men but for Owen's outcry. (V 107-108)

What John Aherne describes are the "real" events depicted in "Rosa Alchemica," with Howth Pier substituting for western Ireland as the site of the Order's Temple.

As with "The Phases of the Moon" and Owen Aherne's Introduction to *A Vision*, Yeats is reprimanded by these supposed real-world acquaintances for misrepresenting them in his fictional works. Similarly, in a 1922 letter to Allan Wade, Yeats writes,

I have brought [Robartes] back to life. My new story is that he is very indignant because I used his real name in describing a number

of fictitious adventures, and that because I called my fictitious hero by his name, many people have supposed him to be dead. (qtd. in Sidnell 228-229)

Again, in Yeats' own endnote to "The Phases of the Moon," "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," and "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," Yeats attempts to explain Aherne and Robartes' discontent and apologize for his part in it.

Years ago I wrote three stories in which occur the names of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne. I now consider that I used the actual names of two friends, and that one of these friends, Michael Robartes, has but lately returned from Mesopotamia, where he has partly found and partly thought out much philosophy. I consider that Aherne and Robartes, men to whose namesakes I had attributed a turbulent life or death, have quarreled with me. They take their place in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavor to explain my philosophy of life and death. (CW1 604)

Here, Yeats refers to Aherne and Robartes as "friends" who he has (ab)used in his fictional works. They embody an anxiety on Yeats' part about using the occult explicitly, and negatively, in his work. More interesting is Yeats' reference to these characters as representations of his "philosophy of life and death."

Yeats' note is dated 1922, a year in which Yeats was organizing the materials that would become *A Vision*, which could certainly be called Yeats' "philosophy of life and death."

A Vision grew out of Yeats' wife George's automatic writing and later her speech, transcribed by Yeats, during sleep. For five years, between their marriage in 1917 and 1922, the year following their son Michael's birth, the Yeatses received communications from and entered into dialogue with supernatural entities called "communicators" and "instructors." Among the many uses of these communications was advice on "producing high-order children, possibly even an avatar" of the New Age (Graf, *W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 169)—a spiritualist form of family planning. The bulk of *A Vision*, however, is the system of historical cycles, represented by the interpenetrating gyres, and the theory of human personality types and of the multiple aspects of the individual self which Yeats extrapolated from these spirit communications.

Yeats theorized that human personalities fall into one of twenty-eight phases, and that each phase is characterized by the traits of the four parts of the human personality, or what Yeats terms the Four Faculties: Will, Creative Mind, Mask, and Body of Fate.

By *Will* is understood feeling that has not become desire because there is no object to desire . . . By *Mask* is understood the image of what we wish to become, or of that to which we give our reverence . . . By *Creative Mind* is meant intellect . . . all the mind that is consciously constructive. By *Body of Fate* is understood the physical and mental environment, the changing human body . . . all that is forced upon us from without. (CW13 15)

Will and Creative Mind are “in the light,” but the Body of Fate and the Mask represent “those emotional associations which come out of the dark” (24). Yeats is clear that the usual associations of light with good and dark with evil do not apply here; a more appropriate analogy would be darkness’ associations with things hidden, and light’s associations with things seen. In addition, Yeats lists another aspect of personality—the Daimon—which is, basically, the reversal of an individual’s Four Faculties. Yeats explains that the Daimonic element is the key to a crucial concept in *A Vision*: Unity of Being.

Yeats did not clearly and consistently define Unity of Being in his writings, but it is possible to cobble together a definition from several sources. Yoshihiko Kodate argues that the idea of Unity of Being developed over several years, and that it has at least three definitions.

In the first phase of its pursuit (around 1922), Yeats regarded it as a kind of mental condition in which a man can bring his whole character to anything such as general converse and business. In the second phase (around 1925), however, he regarded it as another kind of a mental condition in which a man can bring all that happens, as well as all he desires, into an emotional or intellectual synthesis. Furthermore, in the third phase (around 1935), he identified it with what is called . . . in the Upanishads . . . unity of Brahma and Self. (151)

What is key here is the idea of synthesis in the mind, a bringing together of elements so that they work together. This coincides with definitions offered by both Yeats and his wife. George Yeats described Unity of Being as “a harmony” when “All the being vibrates to the note . . . like sounding on the piano certain harmonic notes which are responded to by others in their sequence” (qtd. in *CW13* 237). When Yeats asked one of the communicators to define Unity of Being, he was told that it is “Complete harmony between physical body intellect and spiritual desire—*all may be imperfect* but if harmony is imperfect it is unity” (qtd. in *CW13* 237). Unity of Being occurs when all aspects of the mind operate in harmony.

If man seeks to live wholly in the light, the *Daimon* will seek to quench that light in what is to man wholly darkness, and there is conflict and *Mask* and *Body of Fate* become evil; when however in *antithetical* man the *Daimonic* mind is permitted to flow through the events of his life (the *Daimonic Creative Mind*) and so to animate his *Creative Mind*, without putting out its light, there is Unity of Being.
(25-26)

For Yeats, Unity of Being is not just harmony but also the highest level of the human personality because “the greatest beauty of literary style becomes possible, for thought becomes sensuous and musical” (52). Unity of Being produces great art, like that of Dante and, in Yeats’ own estimation, of Yeats himself. Unity of Being is where human personality and art intersect.

However much he thought of his own work and his own capacity for Unity of Being, Yeats’ ideas of personality reflect an anxiety over the disunity of his own personality, “an estrangement between that part of him which was kind and gentle, which identified with the deprivations of the peasants, and that part which felt threatened by social contacts. He protected himself from turbulent confrontations in civil war Ireland, yet came to speak approvingly in the 1930s of mass sterilization and the loathsome Nuremburg Laws.” Indeed

both Yeats and Jung believe human personality to be the interplay of the primary and antithetical orientations and yet, as Jung suggests and Yeats manifested, often the intensification of one force or another results in rigidity and personality dysfunction. One would have to conclude that the Yeats of the thirties exemplifies precisely this: he intensified his youthful passions to the point that desire became lust, nationalism became fascism, and an always emotional disposition became bitterness. (Hollis 62, 65)

Therefore, it seems fitting that Yeats would idealize a personality solidified through Unity of Being.

Yeats' theories of a multi-component self were not unique and had been percolating throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to this time, the human mind was considered as more or less whole and straightforward. However,

a picture of the mind as a unified whole that can achieve full awareness of itself has been central to western thought since the seventeenth century. The 'cogito' or thinking self defines our humanity and our civility, our difference from animals chained to blind nature and uncontrollable instincts. In the early part of the

twentieth century, the assurance of that self-description was disturbed by Sigmund Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which described a discovery . . . that the human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams or neurotic symptoms. The 'unconscious', as he called it, is a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which, according to Freud, have to do with sexuality and violence. (Rivkin and Ryan 119)

Freud also asserted that these repressed aspects lead to the sense that "something strange coexists with what is most familiar inside ourselves" (119). That the human psyche contains elements of which we are consciously unaware and which direct our behavior are terrifying prospects. From that idea comes the notion that the conscious mind is not the only component of that psyche.

Not only is the self a mysterious abyss, it also has various parts, sometimes working in opposition and sometimes in concord.

As Sigmund Freud⁴ worked towards the theorization of a dynamic model of the mind that stressed the relative importance of

⁴ Freud's model of the human psyche developed over several years. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud presented his ideas on the unconscious, a part of the psyche which operates

conscious awareness, others began to postulate a psyche that might best be understood in terms of division and fragmentation rather than a unitary wholeness. It began to appear that the mind was a vast labyrinth possessed of a hidden but frighteningly powerful realm that interacted with everyday consciousness, and what all of this amounted to was an implied assault on the undisputed authority of the autonomous rational self as personified by the 'I' of personal identity. (Owen, "Occultism and the 'Modern Self' in *Fin-de-siècle* Britain" 75)

For Freud, the human self is not just the "everyday consciousness" that observes and processes the world around us but also includes memories, desires, and experiences which we may not realize, understand, or accept. Similarly, Darwin's evolutionary theory implies a model of the human self that incorporates the primitive, the earthly, and the bestial instead of ignoring those elements or rejecting them as aberrant. Many occult systems recognize the disparities between the physical and spiritual selves and the divine, and propose that the human self and the divine are not separate but capable of coexistence.

beyond the conscious mind. Freud's ideas of the ego, super-ego, and id emerged in his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and later in his 1923 book *The Ego and the Id*.

Indeed, much of occult practice and theory involved a conception of multiple selves existing simultaneously or sequentially. This concept most often included a distinction between a physical self and a divine self. As Alex Owen explains,

Theosophists, for example, referred to the distinction between the earthly 'personal self' or 'personal Ego' (the 'I') and a timeless 'permanent Self' or 'Spiritual Ego' that is continuously incarnated in human form until finally perfected and released from the wheel of karma. According to Blavatsky, the personal Self or Ego represents merely the temporary personality of a particular human incarnation. It is the Permanent Self, that which survives death to be continuously incarnated, that constitutes 'the real individuality' — the 'real' self. But Madame Blavatsky also spoke of an impersonal and ungendered Higher Self, a third self . . . the universally diffused 'divine principle' within every human being and akin to that spark of divinity that signifies 'the God within us'. (78).

Owen's account not only elucidates the physical and spiritual dimensions of selfhood, it also includes that transgression of gender roles inherent in the occult

movement. Occult groups helped to enfranchise women by welcoming them to positions of authority and also recognizing male and female divinity. The impersonality of the divine negates the image of the wrathful God used as a means of control by mainstream religions.

Madame Blavatsky was not alone in this concept of the self. Yeats would have experienced similar constructions in the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn postulated a "Higher (sometimes Highest) Self, Angelic Self, or Genius, as a God-like Self that must be nurtured and developed through advanced occult practice." In seeking to reach (and unite with, in Yeats' *Vision* schema) this higher self, "Perfect knowledge of Self is required in order to attain knowledge of Divinity, for when you can know the God of yourself it will be possible to obtain a dim vision of the God of All" (qtd. in Owen, "Occultism and the 'Modern' Self in *Fin-de-siècle* Britain" 78). The self in the Golden Dawn was fluid enough to exist in the physical world but still be able to penetrate the divine world, thereby bridging the gap between the two.

The practice of magic involved excavating a dormant self capable of manipulating the physical realm through the power of the mind. "Late-Victorian magicians," Owen writes, "were undertaking what we might think of as remarkable and sustained explorations of the psyche, and extraordinary

experimentation with the powers of the human mind . . . Magical Orders were teaching adepts how to develop a magical self that could conduct lengthy forays into real but hidden worlds that interpenetrate our own" (86-87). Even the act of belonging to a magical society changed the nature of the individual self.

Within the Golden Dawn, Yeats could set aside (not discard) his identity as an artist and become a magician, a traveler on the path of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, and a part of the Divine. In the initiation ceremony for the Neophyte Grade (the first of the Golden Dawn grades), for example,

as the Candidate stands before the Altar, as the simulacrum of the Higher Self is attracted, so also arises the form of the Accuser in the place of the Evil Triad. This similarly attracts the simulacrum of the Evil Persona of the Candidate—and were it not for the power of the 42 lettered name [of God] in the Palaces of Yetzirah . . . the actual evil Persona would at once formulate and be able to obsess the Ruach [e.g., the intellect⁵] of the Candidate. (Regardie, *The Golden Dawn* 365)

Here we have at least three selves operating: the Candidate's physical self, the Candidate's Higher Self, and the Candidate's Evil Persona. Part of the Neophyte

⁵ In *A Garden of Pomegranates*, Regardie defines the Ruach as "the Intellect, that part of one's individualized consciousness which becomes aware of things, desires them, and tries to attain them" (101).

Ritual's purpose, then, is to prevent this Evil Persona from overtaking the individual and to enable the individual to maintain all of his or her selves in balance. This has striking similarities to Yeats' idea of Unity of Being, which can be achieved when "the *Daimonic* mind is permitted to flow through the events of his life (the *Daimonic Creative Mind*) and so to animate his *Creative Mind*, without putting out its light" (CW13 26). Within all of these occult systems is a recognition that the human self is beyond human and societal definitions of good and evil, human and divine, natural and supernatural. All of these seemingly disparate elements, some more dominant than others, exist within the self, just as Freud's conscious and unconscious minds co-exist, if not consistently harmoniously.

Similarly, Yeats' commitment to and reservations about his occult quest coexisted within his self, and the conflicts between these elements appear in the characters of the occult trilogy. As James Hollis asserts, "Such fundamental conflict in human personality elaborated in the 1917 *A Vision* had been antedated by *Rosa Alchemica* [*sic*] and 'The Tables of the Law' . . . There his two literary personas, Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, make their first appearance . . . While distinct personalities, they represent opposing forces in Yeats' own personality" (63). Owen Aherne, Michael Robartes, and the narrator represent

Yeats' belief, as Margaret Mills Harper relates, that "were a human being to attain communion with the All . . . his or her very humanity might be in danger" (156). The narrator in "Rosa Alchemica" experiences this dilemma: he is unable to assert his will against what he calls Robartes' "magnetic power" (M 179) and is persuaded to join the Order of the Alchemical Rose. Robartes persuades the narrator by manipulating the environment within the narrator's home into a dreamlike vision of supernatural entities. As a result, the narrator feels he has surrendered his will to Robartes, stating, "I will go wherever you will . . . and do whatever you bid me, for I have been with eternal things" (M 183). The two men board a train for the west of Ireland.

During the trip, the narrator notices that Robartes' face seems "more like a mask than a face" and thinks, "The fancy possessed me that the man behind it had dissolved away like salt in water" (183-184). The narrator is unnerved by this "fancy" of dissolving identity, and presumably fearful of the same happening to him. This fear becomes more evident when the narrator enters the main hall of the Temple, where he experiences the same kind of hallucinogenic atmosphere in which he initially accepted Robartes' proposal. This atmosphere causes the narrator to "fall again into a dream" in which he "seemed to be a mask, lying on the counter of a little Eastern shop" (188). In this story, the mask

is a negative image signifying not the aspect of identity Yeats would later assert in *A Vision* but instead the shell empty of individual identity. If Robartes, with his commitment to occultism, is losing his self as a result, the narrator is beginning to experience the same loss. The idea of a human being as merely a shell divorced from its own will resonates with Yeats' own experience at the séance in 1888. Like Yeats, the narrator persists in placing his self at risk; and, like Yeats, whose experience kept him away from séances for many years, the narrator will reach a point beyond which he will venture no further.

The narrator continues with the initiation ritual, involving a dance in which the human initiates pair with impossibly beautiful and majestic supernatural beings. The narrator begins dancing with "an immortal august woman, who had black lilies in her hair." While they are dancing, the narrator has a moment of clarity and realizes in horror "that her eyelids had never quivered, and that her lilies had not dropped a black petal, nor shaken from their places." He concludes that he was dancing "with one who was more or less than human, and who was drinking up my soul as an ox drinks up a wayside pool" (190). At this point the narrator loses consciousness, and does not wake again until he hears the mob outside. He tries to rouse Robartes, but Robartes' stuporous sleep cannot be broken.

Clearly, this has been a frightening experience for the narrator, who has feared losing not only his self and becoming a "mask," but his soul, which was in jeopardy from the supernatural woman who seemed to be devouring it.

Consequently, he turns to Catholicism and, whenever he fears the "indefinite world" encroaching on him, he clutches his rosary and prays, "'He whose name is Legion is at our doors deceiving our intellects with subtlety and flattering our hearts with beauty, and we have no trust but in Thee'" (191). The narrator presumes that Robartes was lost, both to the "indefinite world" of supernatural beings and to the angry mob which raided the Temple. All of this seems to imply that the kind of surrender which Robartes chooses could result in an overthrow of the individual will and displacement of the self. Occult belief and practice, however, does not pose the sole threat to this overthrow.

While the narrator manages to escape Robartes' fate, he chooses to surrender his will to the Christian God instead. As William H. O'Donnell contends, the narrator's choice "does not undermine the story's pro-spiritual and anti-Christian bias; orthodox Christianity is represented in the story by a mob of murderous, bigoted peasants" ("Yeats as Adept and Artist" 74). O'Donnell concludes, "Nonetheless, 'Rosa Alchemica', rather than being a paean to Adeptship, is an expression of reluctance to subscribe to an ecstatic spiritual path

and an agonized recognition that no compromise is available" (74). If this is indeed the point to be taken from "Rosa Alchemica," then it is a peculiar one for Yeats the committed occultist. On the other hand, it reflects "Yeats' unwillingness to surrender his selfhood, even for so powerful a reward as immortality and supernal wisdom" (O'Donnell, *A Guide to the Prose Fiction of William Butler Yeats* 2-3). For Yeats, renunciation of his occult interests was impossible, but so was complete immersion in them.

Susan Johnston Graf argues that "Rosa Alchemica" is "the story of the narrator's search for his anti-self" (*W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 99), the opposite of the Mask⁶ that an individual presents to the world. Graf also contends that the "individual . . . experiences a spiritual awakening when he

⁶This Mask is not to be confused with the Mask which is part of the Four Faculties. John Unterecker explicates this idea of the Mask as follows.

We are all familiar enough with the false faces we wear in the ordinary business of life, the unreal and different persons we present to parents, teachers, employers, lovers, and tax collectors. Most of us, little concerned with truth, present still another false face to ourselves, "the real me," and live and die happy in our deception. The writer interested in reality, however, must make a more difficult decision: he must choose one as genuinely real or, if he is like Yeats, find ultimate reality not in any one of them but in their interaction . . .

The doctrine of the Mask erects, therefore, on the artist's personality a kind of private mythology in which the individual struggles to become that which is most unlike himself: the introvert artist puts on an extrovert Mask; the subjective man assumes the Mask of the man of action . . . A modern introvert's Mask—say Yeats's—might in many ways resemble one of the great stone faces of myth—say Cuchulain's face, a hero striding out of the remote legendary Irish past, a man of action, great fighter and great lover. (16-17)

A person's Mask, therefore, is not simply the opposite of the individual self. This is true, but the individual strives to integrate the contradictory aspects of self and Mask to achieve Unity of Being. As Yeats states in *A Vision*, "Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition [and] attains his object so far as it is attainable" (V 131).

becomes the anti-self" (99). Clearly, this awakening does not occur in "Rosa Alchemica." The narrator is the Mask (skepticism) and Robartes is the anti-self (belief), and neither becomes his opposite, meaning that each remains a static character. If the narrator and Robartes represent the skeptical and believing aspects, respectively, of Yeats' self, then "Rosa Alchemica" is a cautionary tale about the dangers not of occult exploration but of allowing either skepticism or belief total control over the self.

Yeats draws again on this bifurcated self in "The Tables of the Law." This time, the skeptical narrator is juxtaposed with Owen Aherne "an ascetic, a recluse-scholar [who is always] qualifying his actions with reservations" (Hollis 63). Aherne is someone who has attempted to reconcile his occult interests with Christianity. Initially, the narrator poses a question to Aherne.

"Why did you refuse the biretta, and almost at the last moment?

When you and I lived together, you cared neither for wine, women, nor money, and had thoughts for nothing but theology and mysticism." (M 192)

This question implies several things about Aherne's character. First, he is more involved in the Catholic Church than the narrator. The biretta, according to Gould and Toomey, is a cap "worn by clerics of all grades from cardinals

downwards;" because of that broad range of religious authority, "[i]t is not clear whether WBY uses the term to indicate the expectation of high ecclesiastical office for Aherne, or . . . to indicate that Aherne has refused to enter the priesthood" (400). Either way, Aherne would have to regularly attend Mass in order to fulfill his "priestly ambition" (199), which distinguishes him from the narrator, who apparently does not emphasize church attendance as an essential component of his spiritual experience. Second, Aherne is not a man of passion like the "debauchee" Robartes. One of Aherne's two chief interests is theology which, though a broad term, has associations with mainstream religion, doctrine, and religious study. His other main interest, mysticism, suggests not mainstream religion but occultism.

This duality is repeated in Aherne's choice of reading material: Joachim of Flora's *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum*. The real Joachim of Fiore was a twelfth-century abbot with a "double reputation as a saintly *magnus propheta* and as an heretical figure" for his idea that the New Testament was not the end point of "'spiritual understanding'" between humans and God (404). The narrator considers Joachim of Flora's idea "'heresy'" and chastises Aherne for believing "'so dangerous a doctrine'" (196, 197). While the narrator objects to Aherne's position and berates himself for his "failure . . . to combat his heresy," he retains

that curiosity which led him to the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, expressing a desire to “test the genuineness of [Aherne’s] strange book” (197). If he had completely dismissed Aherne’s ideas as heresy, there would be no question of the “genuineness” of Joachim of Flora’s book.

The narrator’s curiosity turns to fear, however, during his next meeting with Aherne. While walking along one of the Dublin quays, the narrator “recognised, with a start, in a lifeless mask with dim eyes, the once resolute and delicate face of Owen Aherne” (197). Again, Yeats uses the image of the mask, as he does in “Rosa Alchemica,” to signify the shell emptied of individual identity. That Aherne’s eyes are “dim” suggests a lack of conscious thought and a displacement of individual will. James Hollis suggests that “Aherne . . . has been broken by his ordeal. He has become so ethereal, so given to quixotic quests for epiphany, that he has sacrificed his humanity” (63). Reentering Aherne’s chapel, the narrator notices that the blank marble tablets are now covered with writing, presumably Aherne’s own thoughts on Joachim of Flora’s work.

Aherne tells the narrator that his spiritual explorations at first filled him with “divine ecstasy . . . as though I was about to touch the Heart of God.” Then, he realized that

“man can only come to that Heart through the sense of separation from it which we call sin, and I understood that I could not sin, because I had discovered the law of my being, and could only express or fail to express my being, and I understood that God has made a simple and an arbitrary law that we may sin and repent!”

(198-199)

To the narrator’s suggestion that “[p]rayer and repentance will make you like other men,” Aherne replies, “No . . . I am not among those for whom Christ died . . . I have seen the whole, and how can I come again to believe that a part is the whole?” (199). At this, the narrator witnesses a scene similar to the one which so frightened him at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose.

Suddenly I saw, or imagined that I saw, the room darken, and faint figures robed in purple, and lifting faint torches with arms that gleamed like silver, bending above Owen Aherne . . . Aherne, more happy than I who have been half-initiated into the Order of the Alchemical Rose, or protected perhaps by his great piety, had sunk again into dejection and listlessness, and saw none of these things . . . (199)

Aherne is caught between two worlds—the world of these supernatural figures bending over him and the world of his “great piety” —but belongs to neither of them. Furthermore, he is listless, a condition suggesting lack of conscious thought or action. Aherne is a divided self, one part his conventional piety and the other the part which would commune with these spirit figures. He seems unable to choose whether he is an orthodox believer, a heterodox occultist, or even someone who has integrated the two; in other words, he is unable to define his self. This identity limbo is what the narrator reacts most strongly against as he claims for himself an orthodox, Catholic identity.

The narrator’s foils in “The Adoration of the Magi” are the three brothers from the west of Ireland who show up on his doorstep. These men “had cared all their lives for nothing except for those classical writers and old Gaelic writers who expounded an heroic and simple life” (201). They are not portrayed as mystics or religious figures of any kind, so they share the same indeterminate spiritual identity as Owen Aherne in “The Tables of the Law.” Their identity as simple men who enjoy storytelling and learning, however, is compromised by a supernatural voice speaking through the second oldest man.

The first instance of this takes place in the west of Ireland, while the men are mourning the death of Michael Robartes. The second oldest man falls asleep

and, while asleep, “a strange voice spoke through him, and bid them set out for Paris” (202) to find the dying woman. Apparently, this does not faze the men because they go to Paris. The second instance occurs at the woman’s bedside, where this same man suddenly “crowed like a cock” and “a resonant chanting voice” spoke through him, saying,

“I am not a devil, but I am Hermes the Shepherd of the Dead⁷. I run upon the errands of the gods, and you have heard my sign.

The woman who lies there has given birth, and that which she bore has the likeness of a unicorn and is most unlike man of all living things, being cold, hard and virginal. It seemed to be born dancing; and was gone from the room wellnigh upon the instant, for it is the nature of the unicorn to understand the shortness of life. She does not know that it has gone, for she fell into a stupor while it danced, but bend down your ears that you may learn the names that it must obey.” (203)

Not only is an ancient Greek god speaking through one of the brothers, he tells them a harlot has given birth to a dancing unicorn which can be made to obey by

⁷ According to Gould and Toomey, this is “Hermes Psychopompus (i.e., ‘accompanier of souls’) [who] escorted the spirits of the dead to Hades and, in some traditions of Greek mythology, was the god of revelation” (423).

using certain names. In addition to channeling Hermes, the second oldest brother's soul has traveled outside his body to the site of the Christian Nativity.

The narrator's response to all of this is, again, fear. He concludes that the three old men were "immortal demons, come to put an untrue story into my mind for some purpose I do not understand" (205). He has heard of the supernatural possession of one of the old men by Hermes, which is strikingly similar to Yeats' involuntary movements at the séance. He does not want his own will and control over his identity to be supplanted by Hermes or by any heterodox ideas.

In these stories, Yeats attempts to reconcile what he sees as warring aspects of his own personality. As James Hollis writes,

Taken together we see the Yeatsian whole man in Robartes and Aherne . . . Together they dramatize the tension Yeats demonstrates in his own personality. When he is with Robartes, he speaks on behalf of Aherne's way of life; when he is with Aherne, he takes the part of Robartes. Each persona needs its opposite even though its opposite is the source of tensions that plague the troubled self.

(Hollis 63-64)

While Aherne and Robartes, and also the narrator, may comprise a complete human personality, they are still separate in the stories of the occult trilogy. It is not until Yeats presents another of his personas, Michael Hearne, in *The Speckled Bird*, that he resolves this disunity in a fictional context.

Another aspect of shifting identity represented in "Rosa Alchemica" is the reclaiming of the self as a spiritual authority and, subsequently, reclaiming the domestic sphere as a sacred space. We know that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, occultists deemphasized public hierarchical, often patriarchal, religious authority figures as the only means of accessing the divine. Spiritualist mediums like the Fox sisters, Methodist preacher Mary Bosanquet, and Theosophy's founder Madame Blavatsky are all proof of this shift. As spiritual authority broadened, so did the location for spiritual experience. Churches, mosques, and synagogues were not the only places spiritual experiences could occur. In "Rosa Alchemica," the narrator takes his spiritual life into his own hands and carves out a sacred space within his own home.

At the time of the narrator's meeting with Robartes, the narrator is still interested in unorthodox spirituality and has not yet taken to Catholicism. His sacred space is a *mélange* of classical pantheism, early Renaissance art, and

classic literature⁸. If the narrator can be said to worship anything, it is art, but not necessarily what that art represents. The narrator explains that “tapestry, full of the blue and bronze of peacocks, [falls] over the doors, and shut[s] out all history and activity untouched with beauty and peace” (177). These peacocks, birds sacred to the Greek goddess Hera, seem to the narrator “the doorkeepers of my world, shutting out all that was not of as affluent a beauty as their own” (178). His sacred space, therefore, is not one made for facilitating salvation, but instead for worshipping beauty and experiencing the emotions that beauty evokes.

For example, he has disposed of “portraits [which were] of more historical than artistic interest” (177), presumably because they did not spark an emotional spiritual response within him. He has apparently replaced these with two paintings of the Virgin Mary, which Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey gloss as Carlo Crivelli’s *The Virgin in Ecstasy* and Piero della Francesca’s *Nativity*⁹. One

⁸ In March 1921, fellow writer C.S. Lewis visited Yeats and his wife in Oxford and described a similar setting.

It was a funny room: the light was supplied by candles, two of them in those 6-ft. candle-sticks that you see before the altar in some English churches. There were flame-coloured curtains, a great many pictures, and some strange foreign-looking ornaments that I can’t describe. The company sat on very hard, straight, antique chairs: except Mrs. Yeats who lay on a kind of very broad divan, with bright cushions, in the window. (qtd. in Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats*, 268-269)

⁹ Carlo Crivelli (c. 1430/5-1494) and Piero della Francesca (c. 1410-92) were both painters of the Italian *Quattrocento*, or Early Renaissance. *The Virgin in Ecstasy*, later known as *The Immaculate Conception*, is dated at 1492; the *Nativity* is dated between 1470-5. Both would have been on

would expect someone meditating on such paintings to focus on Mary's story, her holiness, and her status as the mother of Jesus. This, however, is not the narrator's focus. Instead, he recalls that

when I looked at my Crivelli and pondered on the rose in the hand of the Virgin, wherein the form was so delicate and precise that it seemed more like a thought than a flower, or my Francesca, so full of ghostly astonishment, I knew a Christian's ecstasy without his slavery to rule and custom. (177)

The narrator meditates not on the holiness of the Virgin Mary but on the beauty of the flower in her hand; he seems not to care for the Nativity scene in his Francesca but for its otherworldly qualities. As the narrator himself admits, his response to these paintings is to feel ecstasy in their beauty but not to channel that ecstasy into obedience to religious dogma.

The narrator's spiritual menagerie is not limited to representations from Christianity. He has also acquired several "antique bronze gods and goddesses" which produce in him "all a pagan's delight in various beauty and without his terror at sleepless destiny and his labour with many sacrifices" (177-178). As with the paintings of the Virgin Mary, the narrator seems to worship only the

display in the National Gallery in London at the time Yeats was writing the occult trilogy (*M* 371).

beauty of these images and to insist on his ability to separate them from their religious contexts.

All of this goes some way towards explaining the narrator's interest in Robartes and his Order. The Temple of the Alchemical Rose was not originally constructed as a house of worship or temple of any kind; rather, it is "a square ancient-looking house . . . on the very end of a dilapidated and almost deserted pier" (184). This ordinary house, however, has been reconfigured as a sacred space for the Order of the Alchemical Rose. The ceiling of the Temple's main hall features "an immense rose wrought in mosaic"; in addition, "about the walls, also in mosaic, was a battle of gods and angels, glimmering like rubies and sapphires" (188-189). In one of the narrator's many trance-like states, he sees "the petals of the great rose, which had no longer the look of mosaic, falling slowly through the incense-heavy air, and, as they fell, shaping themselves into the likeness of living beings of an extraordinary beauty" (189). The Temple of the Alchemical Rose seems to emphasize in its decoration the same beauty that so captivates the narrator in his own home. He experiences a similar ecstasy in contemplating his paintings and gods to the ecstasy he experiences at the Temple. Yet, ultimately, the beauty and the ecstasy seem to overwhelm him, and

he begins to see evil where he had previously seen splendor, as he does with his dance partner.

Even when the narrator turns to Catholicism, however, he does not mention attending Mass, at least not in "Rosa Alchemica." At the end of "The Adoration of the Magi," he states that he "pray[s] best in poor chapels, where frieze coats brush against me as I kneel" (205). When not in some "poor chapel," he simply prays and holds his rosary. He credits only his rosary and prayer, not a priest, with keeping him "at peace" (191). Even at this point, he still asserts his own spiritual authority and his direct communication with God as sufficient for his salvation.

Owen Aherne, in "The Tables of the Law," has created his own sacred space by transforming an old Catholic church, "whose threshold had been worn smooth by the secret worshippers of the penal times¹⁰" (193). Unlike the narrator, Aherne does not find spiritual experiences through beauty, but instead believes "that the beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and finally life herself, by sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city" (192). He distrusts the kinds of emotional responses,

¹⁰ The "penal times" refers to the period in Irish history between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries during which laws restricting Catholic civil rights, such as the right to own property and to hold political office, were in effect. Aherne's chapel, therefore, must have been a secret place of worship for Catholics.

the “unlimited desires,” that the narrator values. Consequently, the only artwork Aherne possesses “has the beauty achieved by temperaments which seek always an absolute emotion” (193) not the kind of ecstasy that the narrator has experienced.

Aherne’s chapel is sparse compared to the narrator’s home. The only decoration is “a square bronze box which stood upon the altar before the six unlighted candles and the ebony crucifix, and was like those made in ancient times of more precious substances to hold the sacred books” (193). The box does indeed hold a book: the only surviving copy of Joachim of Flora’s mystical work *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum*¹¹ and two bare marble tablets, suggestive of the tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments. Aherne tells the narrator that in the *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum*, Joachim of Flora contends that

the Kingdom of the Father was past, the Kingdom of the Son passing, the Kingdom of the Spirit yet to come. The Kingdom of the Spirit was to be a complete triumph of the Spirit, the *spiritualis intelligentia* he called it, over the dead letter. (194)

¹¹ Gould and Toomey explain that Joachim of Fiore lived between 1135 and 1202 and was abbot of a Cistercian abbey in Italy. His major works were the *Liber Concordie Novi ac Veteris Testamenti*, the *Expositio in Apoclypsim*, and the *Psalterium Decem Chordarum*. Yeats “has in mind, in particular, Gerard of Borgo San Donnino . . . [who] circulated excerpts from Joachim’s three main works, together with his own *Liber Introductorius in Evangelium Aeternum* and glosses” (405).

This is a clear reference to the Christian Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is also probable that the “Kingdom of the Father” refers to the Biblical Old Testament, which details the covenant between God and His people. The “Kingdom of the Son” would therefore refer to the New Testament, which superseded the Old Testament covenant and replaced it with the one made by Jesus Christ. The “Kingdom of the Spirit” has no exact Biblical equivalent, except perhaps the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost narrated in the Acts of the Apostles.

However, it could also be a period of generalized spiritual renewal—of, as Edward Thomas asserts, “a life of contemplation and liberty and love” (147)—since Spirit can be extrapolated across different religious beliefs whereas God and Jesus are rooted in Christianity. And, since the “Kingdom of the Spirit” will negate “the dead letter” of the kingdoms which came before, Joachim of Flora, according to Yeats, prophesies a spiritual revival not tied to the Old or New Testaments or to mainstream religion in general. The revival of occult beliefs and practices, with its emphasis on spirits and heterodoxy, illustrates the dawn of this Kingdom of the Spirit. In this respect, Aherne has also moved beyond accepted Christian texts and has articulated an unorthodox theology.

In “The Adoration of the Magi,” the private sphere, and a seedier version of it, serves as a sacred space. When the three old men from Ireland arrive in Paris, they enter

some narrow and shabby streets, on the south of the Seine, where women with pale faces and untidy hair looked at them out of the windows; and just as they were about to turn back because Wisdom could not have alighted in so foolish a neighbourhood, they came to the street and the house of the dream. (202)

The men’s reaction is not surprising: how could this new advent be taking place in a red-light district? The woman they seek, the one who “would give them secret names [to] . . . transform the world” (202), lives in this tawdry street frequented by supposed prostitutes. Sitting at the woman’s bed, they look at her face and its “unquenchable desire, and at the porcelain-like refinement of the vessel in which so malevolent a flame had burned” (203). The men also learn that this woman has given birth to a unicorn-like creature which left as soon as it was born and is, by implication, the avatar of a new age.

The parallels to the Christian Nativity are clear. The harlot is the Virgin Mary, the unicorn creature is Jesus, and the old men are the three kings or magi who are instructed in a dream to visit the manger where Jesus was born. In the

Biblical accounts, the manger is the only place Joseph and Mary can find for the birth of the child, and this space emphasizes the humble origins of Jesus and his strong ties to humanity. In contrast, the brothel in Paris offers an image not of humility but of lustfulness and corruption. While Mary conceived Jesus while still a virgin, the woman in Yeats' story lives among prostitutes and is presumably a prostitute herself. The "magi" who come to this nativity find only confusion and uncertainty.

Yeats could mean several things by this setting. One possibility is that Christianity, and perhaps all mainstream religion, is corrupt, therefore, whatever is to replace it must arise from the same corruption, as a phoenix arises from its own ashes. Another possibility is that Yeats has taken the idea that anyone can be his or her own priest to the extreme, saying that anyone can be the harbinger or the avatar of the new age. Or, as Richard Ellman argues, Yeats attempts to demonstrate that "what he had learned in the back alleys of culture must be shown to be fundamentally what the greatest philosophers and religious men have always said" (*Yeats: The Man and the Masks* 294). In this, Yeats is able to unify the sacred and the profane.

What, then, do these stories say about identity, constructions of the self, and personal spiritual authority? The narrator is a constant in all three stories

and he represents a skeptical self that is easily frightened by the supernatural and is driven by fear to Catholicism. Yet, even in Catholicism he does not follow the mainstream, making one reference to praying in a church but none to attending Mass, going to confession, or listening to a priest. Because of Yeats' autobiographical tendencies, it is likely that the narrator is the aspect of Yeats' self that was frightened by his experience at that 1888 séance, the side of him that was curious but cautious, but never so frightened that he would allow that fear to dictate his spiritual choice.

The narrator's foils in these stories are selves who lose their identities to different degrees: Robartes is consumed by the Order of the Alchemical Rose, Aherne is in a limbo between the supernatural and the orthodox, belonging to neither, and the old men follow supernatural guides to a travesty of the Christian Nativity. None of them, however, really follows the religious mainstream, and all of them assert themselves as captains of their own spiritual destinies. If we combine the narrator with his foils, we get Yeats: a man not a slave to orthodoxy and unwilling to give up his identity as an artist in favor of being a mage.

In so doing, we understand that Yeats has divided his self and explored the various manifestations of that self as they conflict or work with one another. Therefore, in "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of

the Magi," Yeats is working through the ideas of the multi-component self and how those components conflict and intersect, ideas which later appear in his wife's automatic writing and which he will eventually articulate in *A Vision*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPECKLED BIRD: SACRALIZING IRELAND

In *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats continues the artistic depictions of occult culture that he began in “Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” and “The Adoration of the Magi.” Yeats began working on the novel around 1896, the same time that he was writing the occult trilogy. He continued to work on *The Speckled Bird* until 1902 and finally abandoned it unpublished in 1903. He would later refer to it in his *Autobiographies* as the “novel I could neither write nor cease to write” (CW3 283). Yeats left behind hundreds of handwritten and typewritten pages and four distinct versions¹ of the novel, which were compiled and published by William H. O’Donnell. As O’Donnell notes in his Introduction,

¹ William H. O’Donnell has spent the most time navigating the manuscripts of *The Speckled Bird* and has published two editions of *The Speckled Bird*, one in 1976 and the second in 2003, each containing all four versions along with annotations and appendices. O’Donnell classifies the four versions as follows. The thirty-five page 1897 version he refers to as the “Island” version, based on its location in the Aran Islands. The sixty-seven page 1897 “Leroy” version is so named because in this version the hero’s love interest is named Margaret Leroy. In the 1900 “DeBurgh” version, Yeats has given his hero Michael the last name of DeBurgh. In the “Final” 1902 version, Yeats’ main characters are Michael Hearne, his father John Hearne, and Michael’s love Margaret Henderson. I have chosen to look primarily at the 1902 version since this is viewed, by O’Donnell and other scholars, as the definitive version of the novel, and most likely is the version Yeats would have published. I will use the 1902 version of *The Speckled Bird* from O’Donnell’s 2003 book as my primary text; throughout, I will abbreviate it as *SB2*. References to O’Donnell’s 1976 book will be indicated as *SB1*.

“The novel is ‘finished’ in the sense that its plot reaches an ending, but Yeats did not do the extensive polishing which would have been necessary to bring *The Speckled Bird* up to his literary standards” (SB1 xxiii). The 1902 version is the most complete of the four and is likely the closest version to publishable in his eyes.

Like the stories of the occult trilogy, *The Speckled Bird* concerns a character, Michael Hearne in this case, and his quest for mystical enlightenment. *The Speckled Bird* is an autobiographical novel², in which Yeats uses Michael Hearne to articulate his own struggles to balance his life, his art, his loves, and his occult interests. The similarities between secondary characters in the novel and people in Yeats’ own life are also significant. What is most significant for my purposes, however, is that in *The Speckled Bird* Yeats manages to do something he does not do in the occult trilogy: represent himself as a single character, an undivided self. While Yeats explores many of the same issues as in the occult trilogy, he

² More than one critic has commented on the autobiographical nature of *The Speckled Bird*. David Wright has even suggested that “the resemblance between author and character may have seemed too close to allow him to publish” (272). Marie Roberts has called *The Speckled Bird* “the artistic counterpart to [Yeats’] spiritual aspirations” (*British Poets and Secret Societies* 150). In their General Editors’ Introduction to the 1976 text, Lorna Reynolds and Robert O’Driscoll assert that *The Speckled Bird* is “a spiritual autobiography, involving a metaphysical quest, in the guise of a naturalistic novel” (SB1 xviii). The crux of this “spiritual autobiography,” O’Donnell contends, is “Yeats’ long debate over the contradictory demands of art and Adeptship” (“Yeats as Adept and Artist: *The Speckled Bird*, *The Secret Rose*, and *The Wind Among the Reeds*” (59). Bernard O’Donoghue concurs, stating, “If there is a consistent theme to *The Speckled Bird*, it is the struggle between the occultist adept and the artist” (24).

does so in *The Speckled Bird* through Michael and through Michael's responses to his own experiences and to others' ideas. In addition, Michael muses on the relation between art and religion and expresses ideas linking occultism with Irish nationalism and with political revolution in general. By the end of the novel, Michael has forged an independent spiritual identity for himself and committed himself to balancing his love of art and beauty with his interest in occultism. Like many within the occult movement, Michael has taken control of his spiritual identity, independent of mainstream religion. And, unlike the characters in the occult trilogy, Michael has successfully integrated the various parts of his identity into a cohesive whole.

In *The Speckled Bird*, Michael Hearne grows up in County Galway³ under the tutelage of his unconventional father, John Hearne, who "is irresponsible, artistic, sympathetic and bookish, like Yeats' own father"⁴ (O'Donoghue 24).

³ County Galway, location of Lady Gregory's Coole Park and Yeats' Thoor Ballylee, lies south of County Sligo, where Yeats spent time in his youth. Terence Brown notes in his biography of Yeats, "Indeed, much of the wonder of Sligo for the growing boy was not because the county was a site of Celtic legendry and Gaelic tradition . . . but because Sligo town as a thriving port was where he was touched with the romance of the mysterious and the exotic. A place and his imagination wove together a primal magic of their own" (2).

⁴ Aside from the first name, John Hearne resembles Yeats' father in other ways. Both fathers had been art students at one time. Neither John Butler Yeats nor John Hearne set much store on formal, traditional education. As William M. Murphy states, John Butler Yeats' "scorn of conventional education was almost unlimited" ("Father and Son" 90). Consequently, neither William Butler Yeats nor Michael Hearne were given any early formal education. In *The Speckled Bird*, John Hearne "took some trouble to answer [Michael's] many questions" and "got the national schoolmaster to teach him some absolutely necessary things and did not prevent him learning his catechism from the butler's wife, though no Hearne had been to chapel for a

John Hearne prefers to have Michael educated at home and dismisses organized religion. Michael, therefore, enjoys a degree of freedom in his intellectual and spiritual pursuits. He reads voraciously, but also spends time among the peasantry and the local fishermen⁵, listening to their folktales and legends, much as Yeats enjoyed listening to Mary Battle's⁶ stories and later in life collecting folklore with Lady Gregory. Wanting to commune with the supernatural world, he tries to induce visions by fasting. On a trip to Paris, Michael meets two people who become crucial in his life: Samuel Maclagan, a mystic loosely based on MacGregor Mathers⁷, and Margaret Henderson, for whom Michael pines

generation" (SB2 7). With respect to religion, both John Butler Yeats and John Hearne are skeptical of religion in general and of their sons' mystical tendencies. In *The Speckled Bird*, John Hearne "spoke of the gradual fading of theology and belief in the supernatural, and a gradual awakening of joy and liberty as men talked when the poems of Swinburne and the discoveries of Darwin were in the air" (8). William H. O'Donnell notes that "Yeats's father was an early follower of Darwin and thought that all religion was myth" (SB2 184). To this, Michael, "in whose nerves the emotions of a very different generation were already beginning to stir, listened a little indignantly, and thought not indeed of devil or angel, God or saint, but of Merlin under the stone" (SB2 8-9).

⁵ In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes, "Indeed, so many stories did I hear from sailors along the wharf or around the fo'castle fire of the little steamer that ran between Sligo and the Rosses, or from boys out fishing that the world seemed full of monsters and marvels" (CW3 72).

⁶ Mary Battle was a servant of Yeats' uncle and fellow mystic George Pollexfen. As Yeats notes in his *Autobiographies*, she had "the second sight":

One morning she was about to bring him [George Pollexfen] a clean shirt, but stopped, saying there was blood on the shirt-front and that she must bring him another. On his way to his office he fell, crossing over a little wall, and cut himself and bled on to the linen where she had seen the blood. In the evening, she told him that the shirt she had thought bloody was quite clean. (CW3 84)

⁷ Michael Hearne first meets Samuel Maclagan in Paris and later encounters him at the British Museum, where they discuss creating a magical order. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes, "At the British Museum reading-room I often saw a man of thirty-six or thirty-seven, in a brown velveteen coat, with a gaunt resolute face, and an athletic body, who seemed before I heard his name, or knew the nature of his studies, a figure of romance" (CW3 159). In *The Speckled Bird*,

unrequitedly as Yeats did for Maud Gonne⁸. Michael also meets Harriet St. George who, like Olivia Shakespear for Yeats, briefly becomes Michael's mistress when his beloved rejects him. Michael and Maclagan begin creating a magical order centered on Celtic symbolism. Meanwhile, Margaret, pressured by her dying mother to be an orthodox Catholic, marries a man she does not love, Captain Peters, and also rejects Michael's mysticism. She later admits her unhappiness to Michael and, in a moment of passion, resolves to run away with him. However, after finding herself pregnant with her husband's child, she and

Yeats describes Maclagan as having "a dark, clean-shaven, clearly cut, many-lined face and might have been of any age from thirty to fifty . . . He was well-made and wore an old brown velvet coat and talked in a deep voice and with a certain air of mystery that either repelled or attracted one" (SB2 16).

⁸ Similarities between Maud Gonne and Margaret Henderson are numerous. Michael is immediately taken with Margaret as Yeats was with Maud. Both first meetings have associations with apple blossoms. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats describes Maud's "complexion" as "luminous, like that of apple blossoms through which the light falls" and, at their first meeting, she was "standing . . . by a great heap of such blossoms in the window" (CW3 119-120). Margaret Henderson is shown with "apple blossoms glimmer[ing] above her head" (SB2 40) and is described as having a complexion of "pink apple blossoms" (SB2 37). As Margaret ultimately rejects Michael, Yeats proposed marriage to and was rejected by Maud at least three times. When Margaret marries Captain Peters, there are echoes of Yeats' distress over Maud's two romantic affiliations. Yeats grieved to learn of Maud's illicit affair with French journalist Lucien Millevoeye. In the course of their affair, Maud bore Millevoeye two children: Georges, who died from meningitis in 1891 at the age of nineteen months, and Iseult, who Maud publicly referred to as her niece and who would later reject a proposal of marriage from Yeats herself (Ward 26-32). Yeats was even more grieved by Maud's unhappy and perhaps loveless marriage to Major John MacBride, revolutionary and future hero of the 1916 Easter Rising. The connection with MacBride is more tenuous than the one to Millevoeye. Maud and MacBride were married in February 1903 and, as both David G. Wright and William H. O'Donnell point out, it is unlikely that Yeats was actively working on *The Speckled Bird* at that time; Wright even suggests Maud's marriage as a reason for Yeats abandoning work on the novel (Wright 273-274). In addition, Yeats and Maud collaborated on an unrealized Celtic Order of Mysteries, much like the order Michael discusses with Margaret.

Michael part ways permanently. After a disagreement with Maclagan, Michael leaves on a journey to “the East” to continue his spiritual quest.

The central concern of *The Speckled Bird* is Michael’s spiritual journey. While Michael’s story bears many resemblances to Yeats’ life, one significant difference is religious background: Yeats came from a Church of Ireland Protestant family while the Hearnese are Catholic, though neither Yeats nor Michael is encouraged to practice the family faith. David Wright suggests that “Yeats may . . . have made Michael a Catholic to emphasize his loneliness as a visionary, since the Church emphatically disapproves of self-interpreted mystical experiences of the kind Michael undergoes” (272). Michael does end up on a solitary spiritual path, but this is due less to Church disapproval than to Michael’s own self-concept. He is firm in his convictions as to what his envisioned magical order should and should not be, but does not meet anyone who shares those convictions.

While the narrator of the occult trilogy tries on different spiritual identities—occultist then devout Catholic—Michael’s spiritual identity remains relatively stable throughout the novel. In fact, Michael seeks to reconcile the two traditions. In the occult trilogy, a polarization between Catholicism and occultism exists which is divisive; the narrator adopts an either/or mentality and

cannot see occultism and Catholicism as anything but incompatible. In *The Speckled Bird*, however, Michael adopts a heterodox spiritual identity that incorporates the folk beliefs of the local peasantry, certain symbolism and iconography from Catholicism, and elements of occultism, such as ritual magic. Unlike the narrator of the occult trilogy, Michael is able to see occultism and mainstream religion as similar and cross-fertilizing.

This is not to say that the conflict between mainstream religion and occultism does not exist in *The Speckled Bird*, however, it exists in the responses Michael receives from the orthodox community instead of within his own mind. In "Rosa Alchemica," for example, the narrator and Robartes meet an old man sitting on a barrel with a rosary hanging from it. Suspicious of their activities, the old man yells at them in Gaelic, "Idolaters, idolaters, go down to Hell with your witches and your devils; go down to Hell that the herrings may come again into the bay" (184-185). The old man represents the hostility of the Catholic Church towards anyone involved in occultism. Like many who dismiss or fear the occult, he associates the narrator, Robartes, and members of the Order with "witches and devils." Further evidence of this association is in the old man's contention that the Order's evil presence has tainted the natural world, driving

the herrings out of the bay. In response, the old man joins the mob that raids the Temple, resorting to violence to quell dissent against the Church.

Michael's experiences are less dramatic, but still hint at the hostility of the Catholic Church towards those who defy it. One day while walking along the quays, Michael meets two young priests and begins talking with them. The priests ask Michael if the nearby fishermen "were attentive to their religious duties," and Michael responds by praising the fishermen "for their sense of an overhanging spiritual life" and continues, "without weighing his words, to speak of apparitions that they had seen." One of the priests replies, "'People used to imagine they could see things of that kind, but they are too well educated now . . . These superstitions are all dead, I am glad to say'" (27). This dismissal of unorthodox beliefs and association of those beliefs with ignorance angers Michael. Clearly, the priests view such beliefs as primitive, but Michael, who is comfortable with multiple belief systems, asserts his own spiritual authority defending the fishermen instead of acquiescing to the authority of the priests. Not surprisingly, the young priests report Michael to Father Gillam, who comes to call upon Michael a few days later.

Father Gillam chastises Michael for not attending mass regularly or going to confession. Michael answers, "I do not think the Church is necessary to me. I

have my own spiritual life and a form of faith so old that the form of the Church is but of yesterday beside it. My mass is the daily rising and setting of the sun” (28). Father Gillam appears to give up on Michael’s immortal soul at this point. Because Michael has taken charge of his own spiritual identity and has converted the natural world into his own sacred space, he has no need for a priest who would circumscribe his beliefs and the appropriate environment in which to express them. Michael’s rejection of mainstream religion leads Father Gillam not to try harder to bring him back into the fold but instead to make Michael a social outcast.

One of the fishermen, Bruin, later reveals to Michael that Father Gillam told him to stay away from Michael because ““he is putting nonsense in people’s heads and getting nonsense put into his own head, and because he is without religion and without the grace of God”” (29). Bruin refuses to obey the priest, but other fishermen begin avoiding Michael, and one of them is convinced that the priests ““could turn him into a grasshopper”” (29). Undoubtedly, Father Gillam perceives Michael’s beliefs as a threat to the souls of those in the area, but also as a threat to his own power as a Catholic priest. Either way, Father Gillam demonstrates a vindictiveness which should be incongruous with priestly piety, and is more about hierarchy and power than faith.

Michael does not entirely dismiss Catholicism, however, but instead incorporates it into his heterodox spiritual identity. John Hearne's indifference to traditional religion—he "did not prevent [Michael from] learning his catechism from the butler's wife, though no Hearne had been to chapel for a generation" (SB2 7)—leaves Michael to explore his spirituality virtually alone. Michael forges a spiritual identity for himself that borrows imagery and practices from Catholicism, local folk and fairy beliefs, and the magical traditions he discusses with Maclagan. The only evidence of Catholicism in the Hearne home is a copy of a painting hidden away in an attic. The fifteen-year-old Michael discovers it one day when he is exploring.

It was a painting of the Blessed Virgin dressed in blue with a crown of rubies and sapphires upon her head and a brooch with rubies and sapphires encircling an enameled unicorn upon her breast, and having the Blessed Child, holding an apple, upon her knees. Beyond her was a trellis of roses and here and there Jerusalem lilies rose up before the roses, and under her feet was grass full of daisies. (10)

O'Donnell identifies the painting as *Madonna in the Rose Garden* by fifteenth-century German painter Stefan Löchner (SB2 185; Fig. 5). Michael does not



Fig. 5. *Madonna in the Rose Garden* by Stefan Löchner. Image courtesy of The Web Gallery of Art. Used by permission.

experience the painting as an object of religious orthodoxy, however. Instead, he “hardly thought of it as a picture, but as a real place he could see a little of, and he wondered what flowers were growing and people were walking in the part of the garden he could not see”⁹ (11). He thinks that the image of God the Father above Mary’s head looks like “Merlin or Taliesin” (10), more Arthurian wizard or Welsh bard than Christian God. This attitude towards a religious image reflects Michael’s interest, cultivated by his father, in the *Mabinogion* and *Morte d’Arthur* rather than the Bible. His spirituality is shaped more by literature, art, and imagination than by doctrine. It is integrative and unifies elements of multiple belief systems—the Christian Virgin Mary and God the Father, the Merlin and Taliesin of Celtic myth—a common denominator in occultist discourse.

Even so, the painting becomes a devotional object for Michael. He talks with a wandering tinker about the picture, and the tinker tells him a story of a man who, after fasting, saw a vision of Mary. This gives Michael the idea to fast¹⁰ in order to have some sort of mystical visionary experience. He begins avoiding the house at mealtimes and eating “as little bread even as he could”

⁹ Michael’s experience of being almost a part of the painted landscape coincides with Yeats’ definition of vision as “the intense realization of a state of ecstatic emotion symbolized by a definite imagined region” (*The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 583).

¹⁰ In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes that as a young man he would recall Biblical figures like John the Baptist and would live “upon bread and tea because I thought that if antiquity found locust and wild honey nutritive, my soul was strong enough to need no better” (CW3 140).

until he becomes “very dreamy and weak” (13). He spends his time in the attic “looking at his picture or telling himself romances with closed eyes” (13); however, no visions come to him until ten days into his fast.

On the tenth day, he finds a mirror in the attic in which he sees “a beautiful woman’s face watching him out of half-closed eyes and smiling” (14). When Michael looks into the mirror again the following day, he envisions himself

in a garden and before him was the woman with the smiling face he had seen in the mirror, sitting upon a throne. There were trellises of roses behind her as in the picture and little flowers under her feet, but she was not like the woman in the picture for she was large-limbed and beautiful and her hair was almost the colour the sunset had been. It seemed to shine like creeping fire. Before her were a great many men kneeling with immense horns in their hands. Some of them seemed to be dressed like the people he had read of in the two books [e.g., the *Mabinogion* and *Morte d’Arthur*], but others were in striped clothes, as he had heard the people who came out of Cruachmma¹¹ wore. Suddenly they all

¹¹ In his 1900 essay “Irish Witch Doctors,” Yeats writes

stood up and began to blow their horns, and Michael knew that this was because the hunt was going to begin. The sound grew louder, it grew louder than any sound ever was. Everything seemed to vanish into sound, but the sound had a shape; it was like icicles darting hither and thither. (14-15)

At this point Michael loses consciousness. When he faints in front of his father that evening, he confesses to fasting. An alarmed John Hearne decides that he needs a change of scenery and the two set out for Italy and France.

Michael's visions of these women are noteworthy for what they say about Michael's concept of spirituality and spiritual experience. He begins with a standard image of Mary and Jesus in the Löchner painting, but instead of keeping himself distant and separate from the represented divinity, he becomes part of the religious iconography by seeing himself within the landscape. He accesses the divine without recourse to a priest or other mediator. Like many participants in the occult revival, Michael rejects the idea that a human being can only reach God through a sanctioned intermediary, like a priest. With the Kabbala and the Golden Dawn, for instance, the path of enlightenment along the

The clothes of 'the Others' [e.g., fairies] are always described as 'bracket', which is the Irish for variegated, but is explained to mean striped by the country people when talking of 'the Others'. The old inhabitants of Ireland who have become 'the Others', the people say, because they were magicians, and cannot die till the last day, wore striped clothes. (CW10 29)

Tree of Life leads to the divine and a practitioner needs only himself or herself to navigate that path.

In addition, Michael's vision conflates pagan and Christian imagery. The beautiful woman Michael sees in the mirror does not look like Löchner's image of Mary, although she is similarly posed, situated amidst roses and surrounded by worshippers/admirers. The woman's red hair suggests both Celticism and power; both Queen Medb¹² and Cúchulain are often depicted with red hair. The men surrounding her remind Michael of figures out of the *Mabinogion* and *Morte d'Arthur* and also of Irish fairy folk. That she is "large-limbed and beautiful" with opulent red hair suggests a sensuality not associated with the Virgin Mary. In addition, the woman is the sole object of admiration in Michael's vision, whereas Mary is second to Jesus as an object of devotion. This woman represents Michael's heterodox spirituality: she appears to him after he has been meditating on a painting of the Virgin Mary and her appearance borrows from Marian iconography; however, she appears alone, devoid of the sacred context of Madonna and Child, and she is surrounded by men focused not on devotion but on hunting, much as the warrior Queen Medb is in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

¹² Medb, mythical warrior queen of Connacht, instigates "The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge," which gives its name to the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, in which Cúchulain also plays a major role.

These incidents with the fasting and the painting are also reminiscent of the narrator's approach to art in "Rosa Alchemica." In that story, the narrator tends to look past the orthodox meanings of the paintings he admires, seeing not the Virgin Mary and what she represents (e.g., holiness, obedience, sacrifice) but the artistic intricacies of the rose in her hand. Michael, too, looks to aesthetic, emotional experiences as part of his spiritual identity. He tells Margaret Henderson at their first meeting,

. . . I think that religion should have all art to express it—every kind of music, and every kind of painting. The prayers and hymns I have seen are, as it were, pale and faint and cold . . . I sometimes think that the only proof of a man being near to paradise is his power of saying, doing, or making something great and beautiful. It is better to read poetry and look at pictures which, though we do not know it, are descriptions of paradise rather than to read the words of hymns and prayers. (21)

While the narrator of the occult trilogy later replaces his meditations on art and beauty with a fervent Catholicism, Michael combines the two. In stating that "religion should have all art to express it," he situates religion and art as equally important in his spiritual schema and, in fact, views religion as "pale and faint

and cold” without art. This synthesizing further illustrates the kind of unified, and unifying, spiritual identity Michael represents in contrast with the fragmented self of the occult trilogy.

By the end of the novel, Michael has only himself to rely on, as he has broken with both Maclagan and Margaret. He has also decided to continue working on his magical order, which he indicates will include both Catholicism and occultism. He concludes that within his order “the symbols of Christianity must be the central expression, but they must be really catholic.” He also intends to travel “to Arabia and Persia” in search of “some lost doctrine of reconciliation” (SB2 80). Michael’s spiritual path has several significances and repercussions. First, he declares his independence from mainstream religion by setting out on his own to learn not just from Christianity but from the religious traditions of “Arabia and Persia,” much as those involved with Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and the Golden Dawn did. Second, in taking this independent path, Michael affirms his autonomy from religious hierarchies and asserts his authority in speaking spiritual truths, as did Spiritualist mediums. Third, Yeats illustrates his contention that mysticism could “change the thought of the world” by imagining mysticism’s role in forging an independent Irish national identity. In addition to being an exploration of personal spiritual identity, *The Speckled*

Bird equates occultism with revolutionary idealism and with the Irish nationalist movement.

Among the peasants with whom Michael associates, the Catholic Church is viewed as one of the obstacles preventing Ireland from achieving independence from Great Britain. When Bruin informs Michael that Father Gillam has been trying to ostracize him, Bruin comments that “if it was not for the priests we’d have had the English out long ago” (29). It is possible that, at this point, Bruin is simply angered by Father Gillam’s demand. However, Bruin associates the oppression he feels from the Catholic Church with the oppressive authority of the British government over Ireland. Indeed, the fall in 1890 of Irish nationalist leader Charles Stuart Parnell, betrayed by both the Church and the English¹³, would still be fresh in Bruin’s mind as well. Since occultism was effectively neutral—neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither British nor Irish—it could potentially be the catalyst for a spiritual revival of Irish national identity.

¹³ Belief in the collusion between the British and the Catholic Church is in evidence in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and in particular in the Christmas dinner argument between Mr. Dedalus, Mr. Casey, and Mrs. Riordan. When Mr. Casey asks rhetorically, “Didn’t the bishops of Ireland betray us in the time of the union when bishop Lanigan presented an address of loyalty to the Marquess Cornwallis? Didn’t the bishops and priests sell the aspirations of their country in 1829 in return for catholic emancipation?” (38), he indicates that the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland betrayed the nationalist movement in exchange for “the Catholic opportunity to sit in Parliament, hold government office, and achieve professional distinctions” (McCaffrey 63). Similarly, “when the Fenians rose in rebellion in 1867, many Catholic bishops denounced them, forbade them the sacraments and, in certain spectacular cases, excommunicated them” (Kiberd 23).

While Michael may or may not agree with Bruin on this point, his plans to establish a mystical order in Ireland hint that he shares a concern over Irish national identity and, in particular, Irish spiritual identity. In working with Maclagan on this magical order, Michael articulates a connection between spirituality and national identity. Maclagan envisions “Eleusinian rites” (50), but Michael has in mind an order that will celebrate Celtic heritage not Greek myths. In conversation with Maclagan about their mystical order, Michael puts forth the idea that their rituals

must not be founded on Egypt or on Greece, but they must make the land in which they lived a holy land. [Michael] proposed the Grail stories as their foundation . . . Maclagan accepted this idea for he was a Highlander¹⁴ and had ideas about the Celtic races. (50)

What is key here is Michael’s emphasis on making his own land a sacred space by elevating the myths and stories of his land to the status of sacred texts.

Yeats, of course, was aware of the political power of a text, as evidenced by his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. However, Edward Hirsch takes this further,

¹⁴ Of MacGregor Mathers Yeats writes in his *Autobiographies*, “Once when I met him in the street in his Highland clothes, with several knives in his stocking, he said, ‘When I am dressed like this I feel like a walking flame’, and I think that everything he did was but an attempt to feel like a walking flame” (CW3 259).

arguing that Yeats' fiction is meant to be read as documents of Irish national identity.

All of Yeats's fiction was designed to appear as part of a sacred book: Irish, pagan, occult . . . The literary text was not meant to be a criticism of life, but a tearing open of the veil which separated the natural and supernatural worlds, a contribution to a new (Irish) book of revelations. (56)

Thus, the text—whether it be folktale, song, legend, name, place, or image—is one significant key to national identity.

Yeats' contemporary Douglas Hyde was also acutely aware of this significance. In "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland," Hyde elucidates the centrality of the text, lamenting "our Irish names of places and people turned into English names; the Irish language completely extinct; the O's and Macs dropped; our Irish intonation changed, as far as possible, by English schoolmasters into something English; our history no longer remembered or taught" (528). In recovering the texts Hyde lists, Ireland could redefine itself as not-England and reclaim its political identity and spiritual identity as well.

Yeats himself was working on a similar project with similarly nationalistic undertones: a Celtic Order of Mysteries. For Yeats, the Ireland of his time "was

swiftly abandoning the sacral, magical, mythical consciousness of its traditional life, for a modernized, Catholic-dominated, Victorian normality" (Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* 16). The spiritual life of the nation needed rejuvenation. Around 1895, Yeats decided to establish "an Irish order for the practice of ceremonial magic" (Graf, *W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 37), "an Irish Eleusis which would become a mouthpiece for his patriotism" (Roberts, *British Poets and Secret Societies* 149). Yeats worked on this project for perhaps eight years and recruited fellow Golden Dawn members MacGregor and Moina Mathers for help in constructing rituals.

Yeats also enlisted Maud Gonne's assistance with the project, mostly due to her insistence on the spiritual nature of the Irish nationalist movement. She had some psychic ability, had briefly been a member of the Golden Dawn, and certainly supported any endeavor which had Irish independence as a goal. Maud Gonne stated that the order "was to be in the middle of a lake, a shrine of Irish tradition where only those who had dedicated their lives to Ireland could penetrate . . . It was to be built of Irish stone and decorated only with the Four Jewels of the Tuatha de Danaan"¹⁵ (Gonne 23). In addition, "In place of *dramatis*

¹⁵ Marie Heaney identifies as the tribal treasures the Tuatha da Danaan brought with them when they invaded Ireland.

From Falias they brought Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny. They brought it to Tara and it screamed when a rightful king of Ireland sat on it. From Gorias they

personae of the Golden Dawn rituals such as Hieres and Hierophant, they invoke the Herdsman, the Mason, and the Weaver. The god-forms were taken from Irish mythology: Aengus, Midir, Bridget, Etain, and others" (Graf, *W.B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* 41). The project never came to fruition, but Yeats did leave behind his plans for the Order. In his *Memoirs*, Yeats recalls a visit in April and May 1895 to Douglas Hyde's home in County Roscommon, where he finds the perfect location for his mystical order: Castle Rock in Lough Key.

There is a small island entirely covered by what was a still habitable but empty castle . . . All round were the wooded and hilly shores, a place of great beauty. I believed that the castle could be hired for little money, and had long been dreaming of making it an Irish Eleusis or Samothrace. An obsession more constant than anything but my love itself was the need of mystical rites—a ritual system of evocation and meditation—to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty. I believed that instead of thinking of Judea as holy we should [think] of our own land holy, and most holy where most beautiful. Commerce and

brought [warrior for King Nuada] Lugh's spear. Anyone who held it was invincible in battle. From Findias they brought [the first Tuatha da Danaan king] Nuada's irresistible sword. No one could escape it once it was unsheathed. From Murias they brought the Dagda's [Nuada's successor] cauldron. No one ever left it hungry. (3)

manufacture had made the world ugly; the death of pagan nature-worship had robbed visible beauty of its inviolable sanctity. I was convinced that all lonely and lovely places were crowded with invisible beings and that it would be possible to communicate with them. I meant to initiate young men and women in this worship, which would unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient world, and to use the Castle Rock for their occasional retirement from the world. (123-124)

What both Yeats and Michael Hearne do with their respective orders is expand the definition of the private sphere as sacred space to include the land/country/nation as sacred space. A country which no longer needed to look to Rome or to the Holy Land for spiritual guidance or sanction would be in a stronger position to reclaim its political autonomy.

According to Yeats biographer Terence Brown, Yeats' project "would infuse Irish reality, through symbolic rites and ritual enactments, with an ancient spirituality in which paganism and heterodox Christianity combined would help Ireland achieve a transcendent liberation from the crassly materialist world of England's commercial empire" (*The Life of W.B. Yeats* 92). According to William H. O'Donnell, "One of Yeats's goals in establishing a Celtic Mystical Order was

to revive the link between holiness and beauty” (124). In order to achieve this transformation, Yeats needed to create “mystical rites—a ritual system of evocation and meditation—to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty” (123). So Yeats’ Celtic Order of Mysteries, and its fictional counterpart in *The Speckled Bird*, was a way of resisting British political and economic control by rededicating Ireland as a sacred space and moving Ireland out of the global spiritual periphery.

One element which complicates this reading of Michael’s magical order is Yeats’ characterization of Margaret Henderson, the Maud Gonne figure in the novel. Michael falls in love with Margaret, is rejected, and is heartbroken when she marries a man she does not love—all similar to Yeats’ experiences with Maud. What Margaret Henderson lacks is Maud’s fierce commitment to the Irish nationalist cause. As William H. O’Donnell observes, Yeats omits “any hint of Maud Gonne’s energetic enthusiasm for political activities” and instead “emphasizes [her] delicate beauty” (*SB1* xxiv). Moreover, when Michael meets Margaret for the second time, she is staying with a loyalist family who looks forward to an upcoming visit by British royalty¹⁶; one of the other guests at the

¹⁶ O’Donnell notes that several royal visits may be conflated here, including visits from the Prince and Princess of Wales in April 1885 and the Duke and Duchess of York for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in June 1897. Both of these visits prompted protests by Irish nationalists. Indeed, upon Queen Victoria’s visit in April 1900, Yeats wrote to the editor of the *Freeman’s*

house becomes “very angry at the Nationalist newspapers who opposed the welcome to the Prince and Princess, and thought they ought to be suppressed”¹⁷ (SB2 39). In addition, the man Margaret will eventually marry, Captain Peters, tells Michael, “I am glad to say that the shops are going to decorate [in honor of the royal visit]” (36). When Michael talks with Margaret about his plans for a magical order in Ireland, the nationalist context for his project is absent. Margaret ultimately refuses to assist him not because of politics but because she believes his ideas are retrograde to her mother’s desire for her to be a good Catholic.

David Wright surmises that “[t]his artistic transformation may be an attempt to cope with [Maud’s rejection] by displacing it; on the other hand, it may show an uncharacteristic acknowledgement by Yeats that even without the political activities her acceptance of him would have been unlikely” (274).

Despite Margaret’s lack of political conviction and associations with loyalists, Michael speaks of his project as an endeavor which will highlight symbols and deities from Irish myth and which will use those elements to remake Ireland as a sacred space.

Journal that “it was the duty of Irishmen who believe that Ireland has an individual National life to protest with as much courtesy as is compatible with vigour” (SB2 190).

¹⁷ As Yeats notes in his *Autobiographies*, “Everyone I knew well in Sligo despised Nationalists and Catholics, but all disliked England with a prejudice that had come down perhaps from the days of the Irish Parliament. I knew stories to the discredit of England, and took them all seriously” (CW3 60).

But there is a larger revolutionary context within *The Speckled Bird*, and it relates to Yeats' comment that mysticism will "change the thought of the world . . . [and] bring it back to all its old truths" (CW3 365-366). It is Michael's friend and fellow occultist, Maclagan, who articulates the broad revolutionary potential of the occult movement. During Michael's first meeting with Maclagan, Maclagan claims that he was initiated into "the Society of the Rosy Cross by Swedenborg" (16). He also claims to have had visions.

"I saw the first when I was a child . . . I went through a ceremony I read of in a book. I wrote something with the blood of a bat and made a circle (and) after waiting many hours in the dark I believed that I saw the white moon . . . Once since then I woke up in the middle of the night. I saw the room quite clearly but I was not quite awake, and I saw a great many people about me and one held out a cup to me. Then I became quite awake and they vanished." (17).

Michael finds that he has in common with Maclagan the ability for visionary experience. This commonality leads Michael to begin working with Maclagan on creating a magical order.

While Michael's ideas for this magical order are rooted in Irish myth and national identity, Maclagan expresses the view that mysticism has revolutionary potential not just in Ireland but in the world at large. As William H. O'Donnell notes in his 1976 introduction, "During the years when [Yeats] was working on the novel, his reviews and essays were full of pronouncements that the reign of science and materialism would soon be replaced by a new era of imagination, artistic beauty, and evocative symbolism" (*SBI* xxv). At several points in *The Speckled Bird*, Maclagan expresses this belief that not only is a period of political upheaval imminent but that the revival of occult studies is part of this revolutionary current. Furthermore, Maclagan believes that this revolution will empower those with an understanding of mystical traditions. At their first meeting in Paris, Maclagan confides in Michael,

"Things are going very quickly in the world in our times, and you and I may see the streets and the factories burning. Then we who have seen the truth will be listened to. We will reshape the world . . . If all the people who merely bear and beget and eat and sleep and die, the people (who) have made the laws and the chimneys, were all drowning, do you think I would cry out for boats? I should say, 'My friends, when you are dead we will have a better

world. I and my friends have . . . a fate . . . of being law makers for a while.” (SB2 18)

Later, Maclagan proclaims that “there’s going to be a great change, there are going to be great disturbances. You and I shall see the streets run with blood, for no great spiritual change comes without political change too . . . from this meeting will come the overthrow of whole nations” (46). In these statements, Maclagan aligns himself and others “who have seen the truth” against the materialists, those associated with factories and laws and who, according to Maclagan, care for nothing beyond their basic physical needs.

Maclagan’s remarks illustrate David Wright’s observation that the novel depicts a “dissatisfaction with the immediate and everyday, [a] wish to escape to a purer world” (275). Maclagan dismisses those without his mystical knowledge as unworthy of power. He also foresees the rise of a spiritual culture, led by those “who have seen the truth,” which would supplant materialist culture.

This type of revolution is not what Michael has in mind, and this divergence of opinion is one of the reasons for the breach between Michael and Maclagan. Michael has no response to Maclagan’s pronouncements that “the streets [will] run with blood” in the impending revolution. He also has no desire to rise to power along with the others “who have seen the truth.” Michael

merely wants to create a magical order based in Ireland and honoring its traditions and heritage. The possibility of armed struggle and bloodshed does not seem to occur to Michael, as it is never mentioned outside of these conversations with Maclagan. The same could be said of Yeats, who was truly surprised and shocked by the events of Easter 1916¹⁸. Michael's revolutionary stance is, like Yeats', cultural not overtly political.

Another source of discord between Maclagan and Michael is the latter's artistic preoccupations. In a letter to Michael, Maclagan writes

When I met you I accepted your idea of an order centering in the Grail castle, thinking it better than nothing, but as we worked on I more and more realized that a wide gulf divided us. You thought all of forms—I of the inner substance. When I was thinking about the gathering into the order of ancient tradition, you were thinking of making it the foundation for patterns. I have come to recognize that you are not a magician, but some kind of an artist, and that the

¹⁸ Yeats was in England at the time of the Easter Rising but was kept apprised of events through news accounts and letters from Lady Gregory in Galway. Much of the shock, according to R.F. Foster, was due to Yeats' acquaintance with many of the rebel leaders. To his sister Lolly, Yeats wrote, "I know most of the Sinn Fein leaders & the whole thing bewilders me for [James] Conolly [*sic*] is an able man & Thomas MacDonough [*sic*] both able & cultivated" (qtd. in *FOS2* 46). This same sense of immediacy weaves through "Easter 1916." In it, Yeats expresses amazement that people like Connolly and MacDonagh, Padraic Pearse, and Constance Markiewicz who he had "met . . . at close of day" and "passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words . . ." (*CW1* 182) had become killers and, with the exception of Markiewicz, had been executed.

summum bonum itself, the potable gold of our masters, were less to you than some charm of colour, or some charm of words.” (SB2 69-70)

Michael, however, equates spiritual progressiveness with artistic progressiveness, claiming that Christianity “though it held that only a few emotions belonged to religion, enabled artists to make great art out of those few, but now Christianity itself has come to an end . . . I think we shall give up worshipping one God and worship a great many god” (38). In his review of *The Speckled Bird*, Bernard O’Donoghue writes, “If there is a consistent theme to *The Speckled Bird*, it is the struggle between the occultist adept and the artist . . . the outsider here is not only the adept (who might more commonly be seen as an outsider), but the artist who is a disruptive force among the occultists” (24). This leaves Michael to continue his work alone. Even so, Michael’s core spirituality—rooted in Celtic myth, Catholicism, and mystical traditions—remains consistent from the beginning of the novel.

Later in life, Yeats declared that the novel’s theme was “‘*Hodos Chameliontos*’ . . . which means ‘Path of the Chameleon’” (O’Donnell, SB1 xxix), a reference to a cabalistic document used in Golden Dawn rituals. This document emphasizes “that the student who seeks to ‘advance to the Knowledge of the

Adept' must follow 'the Path of the Chameleon, that Path namely, which ascendeth alone' to supernatural wisdom" (O'Donnell, *SB1*, xxix). That Yeats offered this as a theme strongly suggests the importance of solitary magical development and initiation to Yeats and to *The Speckled Bird*. Michael initially seeks out the assistance and companionship of fellow occultists Margaret and Maclagan, but differences of opinion sever these ties. He plans a magical order which, by its very nature, would be a communal, social endeavor. Yet, even though Michael enters into occult society, his spiritual path is ultimately his alone to take, as he does by traveling East at the end of the novel. This theme also solidifies Michael's spiritual identity as one which incorporates or rejects ideas from other traditions but which does not bow to pressures from others to conform to their beliefs. Michael maintains a consistent commitment to his own ideas of spirituality throughout the novel. He listens to the contrary ideas of the priests, Maclagan, and Margaret but chooses to pursue his own path and create his own spiritual identity.

In the occult trilogy, Yeats embeds various degrees of belief and skepticism, which he himself experienced, in the narrator, Michael Robartes, and Owen Aherne. The narrator retreats out of fear into Catholicism. Owen Aherne is defeated by his conflicting inclinations towards occultism and orthodoxy.

Robartes presumably meets a violent end because of his complete immersion in the world of the occult. The three stories convey an either/or mentality: one can be either an occultist or a practitioner of orthodox religion, but not both. In *The Speckled Bird*, however, Michael Hearne demonstrates otherwise. He manages to embrace occultism and not entirely reject Catholicism. With the narrator, Robartes, and Aherne, Yeats works out the ramifications of following different paths; in *The Speckled Bird*, he synthesizes them. The multiple self of the occult trilogy, where Catholicism and occultism, orthodox and heterodox, are in conflict, becomes in Michael Hearne a unified self keeping all of these elements in balance.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

William Butler Yeats was a man of his time: Romantic turned Victorian turned Modernist; participant in the folklore collection movement; cultural nationalist and founder of the world's first national theatre; Senator of the Irish Free State; theorist of human personality; mystic, magician, and occultist. All of these were integral components of Yeats' personality, yet the last has been dismissed, ignored, ridiculed, or limited to his involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society.

When I first began thinking about this dissertation, I already knew about Yeats' involvement with the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society. I understood that his commitment to occult study was far more serious than most scholars had recognized. What I did not realize was how widespread interest in the occult was during Yeats' lifetime. In all of my classes, in my research and reading, the occult appeared to be a dominant force in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, yet it was not treated as such in Yeats studies.

In a class on nineteenth-century rhetoric, for example, I learned about Sarah Grimké, abolitionist and women's rights activist, and other women who challenged women's roles in society and argued for women's oratorical freedom. This led me to Anne Braude's book *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. The sub-sub-title of this work is *How séances and trance speaking empowered a generation of American women to claim their own voices*. That Braude linked the nineteenth-century women's movement to Spiritualism was a revelation to me, yet it made sense. Being Spiritualist mediums allowed women to move out of the domestic sphere and speak in the public sphere for one of the first times in history. It also allowed them to penetrate the male-dominated world of religious oratory. An occult movement played a significant part in redefining women's roles in society; it was a force for social and cultural change.

Researching the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement led me to Camp Chesterfield in Chesterfield, Indiana, one of the few surviving Spiritualist centers from that era. In the Camp Chesterfield bookstore, I came across a hefty book: *A History of Spiritualism*. Its author was Arthur Conan Doyle. This came as a surprise. I knew that Arthur Conan Doyle created the Sherlock Holmes stories, yet I had no idea that he was involved in the Spiritualist movement, let

alone involved enough to write a two-volume history of it. Doyle added to the significant number of people I had read about who were involved in the occult movement.

I also began to encounter recent scholarly work on the occult movement and its links to Modernism. In *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Helen Sword writes,

In 1922—the *annus mirabilis* of modernist literature, when James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* both saw first publication—Thomas Mann attended a materializing seance in Munich . . . William Butler Yeats was hard at work on *A Vision*, the 1925 spiritualist tour de force in which he sets down and systematizes the otherworldly messages received via the trance mediumship of his wife during a thirty-month period beginning in 1917 . . . And H.D. had just experienced another of the mysterious bouts of visionary consciousness that would eventually culminate, during the air raids of the Second World War, in her seance communications with a group of dead R.A.F. pilots. (ix-x)

Through the work of Sword and others, Yeats’ occult interests were being placed within the context of Modernism, not shunted to the back burner.

Occultism was even being mentioned alongside Modernist powerhouses like Joyce and Eliot. James Joyce, as we know, was no occultist. Richard Ellman, in his biography of Joyce, relates that at the age of 19 Joyce participated in the fascination with occultism by reading Henry Steel Olcott's *A Buddhist Catechism* (76) but later in life mocked a friend who related her experience of "table-tapping and a long story of messages she and her friends . . . received from the spirits" (qtd. in Ellman 599). Joyce satirized Spiritualism in *Ulysses* by having "spirit hands . . . flutter" and "the apparition of the etheric double" (247) materialize in Barney Kiernan's pub. Even so, Joyce greatly admired both "The Adoration of the Magi" and "The Tables of the Law." According to Gould and Toomey, Joyce "felt that 'The Adoration of the Magi' was 'a story which one of the great Russians might have written' . . . [and he] knew 'The Tables of the Law' off by heart" (M li). This is high praise indeed from someone who did not share Yeats' enthusiasm for the occult. It also demonstrates the broad appeal occultism had during the time period.

I realized in researching this study is how deeply embedded occultism was in the cultural changes occurring in Yeats' lifetime. The story of Louisa Lowe, who was persecuted and institutionalized by her Anglican minister husband on the basis of her Spiritualist activities, illustrated for me how

threatening the occult movement was to male power and to religious power. That Madame Blavatsky incorporated Eastern religious traditions into Theosophy, and even located a headquarters of the Theosophical Society in India, demonstrated that occultism was at the forefront of dismantling preconceived notions of the East as uncivilized, barbaric, and primitive—a key step towards decolonization. That many occult belief systems offered a more personal, more individualized, and less dogmatic relationship with the divine situated the occult movement squarely within the backlash against many mainstream religious traditions.

Indeed, many of these same important elements manifest in the comparatively little-studied “*Rosa Alchemica*,” “*The Tables of the Law*,” “*The Adoration of the Magi*,” and *The Speckled Bird*. If Freud posited a revolutionary model of the human psyche that challenged ideas of a homogenous and understandable self, Yeats applied this model in developing characters—the occult trilogy’s unnamed narrator, Michael Robartes, and Owen Aherne—who together reflect a self fragmented by divergent impulses—towards mainstream religion, occultism, or confusion—and unable to reconcile them into wholeness. Yeats then reverses this model in *The Speckled Bird* and presents, in Michael Hearne, an individual who has managed to integrate Catholicism and occultism

into a satisfactory spiritual self-concept. In addition, both the stories of the occult trilogy and *The Speckled Bird* feature ways in which the absolute power of the religious mainstream to rigidly circumscribe how and, more importantly, where a person worships is subverted.

In “Rosa Alchemica,” “The Tables of the Law,” and “The Adoration of the Magi,” we see Yeats bringing to publication not a shocking, hidden subculture but something with which most of his readers would have been familiar, if not conversant. We see him trying on various personae—the skeptic, the believer, the orthodox man, the heterodox man—and exploring the ways in which occultism and mainstream religion conflict and coexist. We see him address common fears about occultism as amoral and irreligious and millennial concerns about the end of the world or the dawn of a new age. In *The Speckled Bird*, we see Yeats presenting a unified self in Michael Hearne, who illustrates how orthodoxy and heterodoxy, mainstream and occult, can hold dialogue with one another and can be kept in balance. We see him highlight the cultural significance of occultism, in particular its strong links to nationalism and its role as an agent of change in the world.

Yet, several things surprised me in researching and writing this dissertation. One is the somewhat negative portrayals of mystics and mystical

encounters in Yeats' occult trilogy. Far from being an occult hero, Michael Robartes is narrow-minded and manipulative. Through some mysterious hypnotic power, he is able to convince the narrator to join the Order of the Alchemical Rose. The initiation ceremony is rather frightening. The narrator's supernatural dance partner is neither clearly benevolent nor malevolent but indifferent; without knowing her intentions towards him, the narrator is understandably wary. Owen Aherne also does not inspire confidence. Like the narrator, he vacillates between Catholicism and occultism and, at the end of "The Tables of the Law," Aherne remains confused and disappointed in his endeavors. Finally, the narrator is justifiably unsettled by a late-night visit from three strangers who tell him a tale of possession and of a prostitute giving birth to a unicorn. Why would Yeats, whose own mystical experiences were mostly positive, portray such people and events in an ambiguous, if not downright frightening, fashion?

One reason is that Yeats understood the dangers of single-minded pursuits. He saw evidence of this danger in the angry nationalism of Maud Gonne and Constance Markiewicz and in the megalomaniacal occult pursuits of Macgregor Mathers and Aleister Crowley; none of these individuals escaped the destructiveness of an all-consuming passion. Another reason can be found in *The*

Speckled Bird. Whereas the pursuits of the characters in the occult trilogy are sometimes unhealthy, scary, or pathetic, Michael Hearne's are comparatively consistent and stable, and do not induce extreme emotional states like those experienced by Robartes, Aherne, and the narrator. Yeats was likely testing out occult identities in the occult trilogy, demonstrating a variety of approaches and results. Perhaps with Michael Hearne, Yeats arrived at an ideal mystic: balanced, inclusive, and stable.

Thus, Yeats is not a propagandist for occultism. He also does not fit comfortably within the socially-progressive occultism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. For example, many occult movements and groups, including the Golden Dawn, the Theosophical Society, and the Spiritualist movement, encouraged women to take active and leading roles. Yeats, however, does not come across as a champion of women's rights or as an anti-feminist. He certainly did not mind working alongside Maud Gonne, Annie Horniman, Florence Farr, and George Hyde-Lees in the Golden Dawn. Yet in his prose fiction, women do not hold positions of power within the occult movement, and sometimes women are not present at all. The only women in the occult trilogy are the narrator's dance partner and the prostitute; the only actors in these stories are men. Likewise, in *The Speckled Bird* Margaret Henderson has some potential

to be an equal partner in Michael's magical order, but that potential is never realized. Instead, she is primarily a love interest for Michael. Any occult work Michael does is with Maclagan. In these fictional works, the idea of occultism as an equal enterprise for men and women does not manifest or develop.

There is much about the occult revival that is socially progressive and democratic. The issue of gender roles is one example. The idea of universal access to the divine and to the afterlife is another. A third is the recognition and appreciation of non-mainstream, often subaltern, religious traditions. Yet again, Yeats does not fit easily within these parameters.

The Irish Literary Revival enterprise itself is problematic. The founders—Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge, primarily—all came from the aristocratic, landed class. Synge's family, for instance, was evangelical Protestant, landed, and known to have perpetrated the tenant evictions so despised by nationalists (O'Connor 125). Even with all of the recovery of heroic myths in order to ennoble the Irish, Yeats remained, as Nicholas Allen and Jonathan Allison remind us, an aristocrat suspicious of "a strengthening [Catholic] middle class" concerned more with "piety and mercantilism" than with heroism (Allison 186, 192). This same middle class would resort to brute force in 1916 and during the bitter treaty negotiations and bloody civil war which

followed, which violence Yeats' deplored. So despite the nationalist implications of Michael Hearné's Celtic magical order, Yeats' own nationalist sympathies were much more complex and varied.

Yeats' role in postcolonial discourse is problematic as well. His interest in the East encompassed his occult studies, his friendship with Shri Purohit Swami and work with him on *The Ten Principal Upanishads*¹, and his interest in Japanese Noh theatre. However, as Marjorie Howes notes, Yeats'

interest in Irish folklore, the Irish peasantry, and the occult can be read as commitments to the subaltern cultures and resistances of the colonized, or as forms of orientalism, in which Yeats projected onto 'others' various exotic qualities and forms of knowledge that fascinated him. (208)

While occultism's ties to decolonization are strong, Yeats' occult studies and his views on subaltern religious traditions are not clear-cut.

The connections between the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival and the important social issues of the time are numerous and significant. And, even though Yeats' status as a social progressive is debatable, returning to the idea that Yeats' occult studies and practices were merely

¹ Shri Purohit Swami (1882-1941) was an Indian Hindu mystic with whom Yeats worked on a translation of *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, published in 1938 (FOS2 427, 534).

“bughouse” is no longer a feasible position. None of these practices is “bughouse” or trivial or “embarrassing”; rather, they are meaningful, insightful, wide-ranging, and evocative renderings of the complex cultural web in which Yeats lived and worked. Since the occult revival was widespread and culturally significant, then Yeats’ involvement with it must be, too. The old idea that Yeats’ occult activities are an embarrassment to serious scholars is no longer viable.

There is much more to the story of Yeats and the occult than just the Golden Dawn and Theosophy. The occult permeated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English, Irish, and American culture. It shared common concerns with the women’s movement, the backlash against science, the unease with material culture, the waning interest in mainstream religion, shifting ideas of the human self, and the ramifications of colonial enterprise. The occult was not at the fringes of culture—it was at the heart of the culture of Yeats’ lifetime.

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