

# A Good Tarot Hermeneut



A good  
tarot hermeneut  
needs to recognize,  
we view:

The timeless-in-time  
through the foggy lens  
of ineffable self-knowing,  
towards a simple  
selflessness...  
We see by the feeble  
structure  
of 78 pieces of paper:

Their odd-familiar images,  
old friends,  
alien visitors  
who announce  
mute intimacies  
and unexpected prospects  
in the anonymity of  
airless silence:

In which we divine  
in sounds our breaths  
humble offerings,  
makeshift names  
breaking the muddle.  
Stories woven from light  
against darkness,  
campfire consultations,  
candlelight mummary,  
locutions of mystery,  
hope, joy,  
danger...

Meek greetings to  
the tarot mystery:

Together,  
we are not alone.  
We are all  
ever alone  
in the Alone,  
alone.

# Occulting Yeats:

An Excursus into Yeats' Gyres

[Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune by Susan Johnston Graf \[SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions, State University New York Press, 9781438455563\]](#)

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Essay: A Vision: Key to Yeats as Alchemical Poet and Magician by Sarah Fuhro

[Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune](#) by Susan Johnston Graf [SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions, State University New York Press, 9781438455563]

Excerpt: [Talking to the Gods](#) is a study of the beliefs and practices of four writers who were members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In most discussions of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Dion Fortune, and W. B. Yeats there is mention of their membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn. This work explores what that membership meant and how it shaped their work. Machen, Blackwood, and Fortune are minor literary figures by most accounts, whereas Yeats is a monolithic modernist poet. Still, much of the material that forms the basis for their works is similar because all four were influenced by occultism and the religious convictions engendered in the Golden Dawn temples to which they belonged.

Although none except Yeats can claim canonization by the academic literary establishment, all the writers chosen for this study are still in print and have a wide readership, which differentiates them from various other individuals who produced imaginative literature and were members of the Golden Dawn or its various offshoots. For this study, the most prolific and popular writers whose works have remained in print have been selected. This study is also narrowed to writers who were members, at least initially, of the original Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or its later offshoot, the Stella Matutina.

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...In 1897, Yeats published *The Secret Rose*, and as the title announces, it contains stories written on occult themes. Its publication was a wake-up call for the young Yeats. His publisher, A. H. Bullen, told him that there was growing resistance to his work in Ireland because it was considered "heterodox." Yeats imagined that the Catholic clergy in Ireland was working against him. The volume included the short story "Rosa Alchemica." According to a note Yeats wrote in 1925, he also intended to include two other stories, "The Tables of the Law" and "The Adoration of the Magi," in that volume, but Bullen refused publication of the two stories, most probably due to their "heterodox" content. "Rosa Alchemica," as the title suggests, is also a story on an occult theme, and its action centers on a fictional occult order that was active in the west of Ireland. It's "Celtic Mysteries" become abhorrent to the story's narrator. In the story's final, publishable incarnation, it is a cautionary tale, a story about the dangers of occultism. Given that Yeats was deeply involved in organized Golden Dawn occultism at the time of the publication of "Rosa Alchemica" and was actively working to formulate an Irish occult order, it is curious that the protagonist is a reformed occultist and a devout Roman Catholic.

The antagonist, or possibly anti-hero, of the story is Michael Robartes, the character in Yeats's writing that comes to embody the anti-self and the ideal of the antithetical man. In "Rosa Alchemica," Robartes appears in the narrator's life after a long absence and immediately burns incense that has a drugging, hallucinatory effect on the narrator. Yeats subtly suggests that the

entire adventure at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose in the west of Ireland involved an incense-induced stupor. The narrator implies that he lacked free will, that Robartes had his way with him, carrying him off to the west of Ireland to be initiated into the order.

Despite its cautionary frame, Yeats managed to create a lush story that expounds on Art for Art's Sake and Symbolist aesthetics as well as some basic tenets of occultism. The narrator lives a reclusive life in a house in Dublin that he has filled with gorgeous artwork, believing he has "at last accomplished a long-cherished design, and changed [his] rooms into an expression this favorite doctrine." The "favorite doctrine" has to do with the "transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences." The narrator lives as a religious hermit who venerates great art. He explains that "I had gathered about me all gods because I believed in none, and experienced every pleasure because I gave myself to none, but held myself apart, indissoluble, a mirror of polished steel." Nonetheless, he makes clear that he is a devout Roman Catholic, even having considered taking "refuge in the habit of Saint Dominic." The narrator's Roman Catholicism is a refuge from the terrors of occultism.

Although Yeats certainly respected the power of occult practice and realized the psychic dangers that it could present, he embraced occultism and rejected the Roman Catholicism that both he and AE believed crippled the will of the Irish people. The terrors that the initiate-narrator relates in the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, paint a negative and macabre parody of a temple evocation. The story also offers a warning to those performing scholarly work on occultism: It can call to those scholars the dangers of real occult experience; it can call a Michael Robartes to the door. It is just after the narrator has published his work on alchemy and discovered the true nature of The Great Work that Robartes reappears in his life.

Perhaps after being chastised by Bullen and having two of his stories rejected, Yeats saw the value of playing to his audience. After the turn of the century, Yeats's occultism becomes more-opaque both in his writing and in his public life. That is not to say that he backed away from occult practice. In 1900, he was acting as imperator of Isis-Urania Temple during the schism with Mathers, and he remained a lifelong, committed occultist. However, producing important, lasting poetry was always his first mission. In his dedication of the first edition of, arguably, his most occult work, *A Vision*, he writes about his rationale for involvement with Golden Dawn Magic:

Some were looking for spiritual happiness or for some form of unknown power, but I had a practical object. I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul's.

In magic, Yeats found "a system of thought" that would enable him to call down his poetic genius so that he could write poetry. However, Yeats's ideal was not to write poetry that would be mundane (in the esoteric sense of the word). His mission was the writing of poetry that would, like his exemplar, Dante, tell about a spiritual quest and the history of the soul.

### III

At the height of the problems in the order at the turn of the century, Yeats was writing the essay "Magic" for his collection entitled *Ideas of Good and Evil*. In the essay, Yeats makes a simple, clear statement of his beliefs:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call 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 depth of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early time, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:—

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.

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.

That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

The above passage is the most unequivocal statement Yeats makes about his magical beliefs. At the time he wrote the essay he would, acting as imperator of the order in crisis, also have been penning his plea to the inner order adepts of the Golden Dawn entitled "Is the R.R. et A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?," and perhaps he needed to express his foundational beliefs in the essay "Magic." The third point in Yeats's essay is that symbols are the key to magic in the sense that, for Yeats, they are the access point for "this great mind," what he would later call the "Anima Mundi" or the "Spiritus Mundi."

Israel Regardie has written of the use of symbolism in Golden Dawn magic:

it may be as well to emphasise the fact that symbols are of the utmost importance in the Qabalistic and magical scheme, for it is by their intervention and use that we are able to enter into the life of other parts of our consciousness, and through them into the consciousness of the universe about us.

Regardie's statement is synonymous with Yeats's idea in "Magic" because Yeats's ideas are in keeping with—possibly even derived from—Golden Dawn teachings about the potency of symbol. Through the use of symbol, Yeats found the nexus of his poetic and magical practices. For Yeats, the use of symbolism in poetry was no different from its use in magic. Both were capable of drawing forth energy and both were dangerous and powerful. For Yeats, poems could be magical incantations.

Yeats's respect for the power of symbols and their uses, even when used artistically or accidentally, is documented in an exchange between him and his friend, the artist and poet, Thomas Sturge Moore. Moore regularly designed for Yeats, having done the covers for *Reveries*, *Responsibilities*,

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The Tower, The Wild Swans at Coole, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, and The Winding Stair, as well as bookplates for both Mrs. Yeats and Yeats. In March 1921, Yeats wrote to Moore about designing a cover for *Four Years: 1887-1891*, which Yeats calls "a new autobiographical work of mine." Yeats suggests a hawk since he says he uses the hawk "as a symbol once or twice in the book." Yeats adds that the hawk could be "perched or flying, or perched and hooded." By September of the same year, Moore sent the design to Yeats, and it was refused, not on artistic grounds, but on magical ones. The letter to Moore is dated September 6, 1921, and marked "private." Yeats explains:

I am sorry for it would make a fine design but don't nail the hawk on the board. The hawk is one of my symbols and you might rather crudely upset the subconsciousness. It might mean nightmare or something of the kind for some of us here. Life when one does my kind of work is rather strange.

Clearly, for Yeats there was no separation between symbol used in magical working and symbol as it appeared in art or poetry.

A poem entitled "The Hawk" was included in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, published before *Four Years*. The poem is a conversation between a man and a hawk. Read exoterically, the poem presents the hawk arguing that he should not be captured and eaten. That the poem is esoteric, and the hawk is a symbol is signaled in line thirteen when the speaker calls the bird a "Yellow-eyed hawk of the mind." The hawk in the poem is a denizen of the air that is invoked, "called down," to bring intellectual capacity to the speaker: "Call down the hawk from the air/ Let him be hooded or caged/ Till the yellow eye has grown mild." The speaker in the poem believes that the hawk's presence endows him with the ability to "give my friend/ A pretence of wit" whereas he had before "sat/ Dumbfounded before a knave." Read esoterically, the poem is about intellectual inspiration coming from Ruach in the Kabbalistic scheme of worlds.

Yeats tells Moore that his "main symbols are Sun and Moon (in all phases), Tower, Mask, Tree (Tree with Mask hanging on the trunk), Well." Strangely, he omits cross and rose, which had been important symbols in his early poetry during his formative Golden Dawn experiences. In 1895, Yeats published a collection of poetry entitled *Poems*. Within that volume, the poems, some of which had been published previously, were grouped under subheadings. Two of the subheadings were "Crossways," which included some fifteen poems, and "The Rose," which included some twenty-one poems. The subheadings indicate that cross and rose, seminal Rosicrucian symbols, were part of Yeats's symbology early on.

It is also important to note that there was a literary movement during the 1890s in both France and England that was a reaction against realism and called itself the Symbolist Movement. Its aesthetic was explicated in a book by Arthur Symonds entitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* that was dedicated to Yeats. The Symbolist Movement aspired to create literature that would, as Yeats puts it, become "the garment of religion as in old times." Literature would be elevated to a sacred art that would evoke subtle emotions and associations through symbol. The Symbolist aesthetic fit perfectly with Yeats's occult conception of poetry as magical incantation and symbols as the secret wonder

workers of the psyche. Yeats notes that the writers like Maurice Maeterlinck, Gerard de Nerval, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and others were "preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time, a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all the arts, as somebody has said, are beginning to dream."

In 1899, Yeats published *The Wind Among the Reeds*, one of the more esoteric of his poetry collections. A short, seven-line poem in that collection offers a key to Yeats's use of symbol, especially when read alongside two essays published in *Ideas of Good and Evil*: "The Symbolism of Painting" and "The Symbolism of Poetry," both of which espouse the Symbolist aesthetic that goes hand in hand with occultism. The poem attributes the passage of time to forces from, in Golden Dawn Kabbalism, the realm of fire, the highest of the Kabbalistic realities. Yeats calls them "the fire-born moods." Moods is a peculiar word to choose, but in his essay "The Symbolism in Poetry," written just after the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Yeats explains that symbols work in poetry, even popular poetry, by evoking emotions, and Yeats might have said that those emotions vibrate to a certain "Mood," and so could, in a sense, activate that level of awareness. In the essay he puts it this way:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; ... The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, . . . the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us.... Poets and painters and musicians, ... are continually making and unmaking mankind.

Yeats imagines the evocation of emotion in his reader very much as a Golden Dawn adept would think of magical evocation, as a calling forth of energy. By the poet's act of evocation, the world is changed when the emotional tenor of the reader is changed. Some might call it poetry in action; Yeats thought it was magic.

Yeats draws a distinction between "intellectual" and "emotional" symbols. Emotional symbols evoke only emotion, and Yeats notes that according that definition "all alluring or hateful things are symbols."<sup>45</sup> Intellectual symbols, according to Yeats, evoke ideas. The problem is that intellectual symbols, according to Yeats, can devolve into meaningless conventional symbols over time and become "the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away." He uses the example of rose and lily in his discussion of intellectual symbols, noting that both can still be powerful if used properly by the artist. For Yeats, the true power of symbolism is achieved when a symbol is working on both the emotional and intellectual levels simultaneously. Then the work of art transports its audience and can change the world. Yeats writes:

All art that is not mere storytelling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which mediaeval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence.



When a work of art or a poem is "full of patterns and symbols and music," according to Yeats, it can lead its audience "to the threshold of sleep," or what Yeats later admits is trance. In poetry, the poem's rhythm is also part of its mesmeric force. Yeats believed that if a truly Symbolist art would be achieved so would the realization that the "laws of art" are "the hidden laws of the world." Here Yeats does not mean the laws of magical art. He uses the term art in the modern sense of artistic creations, but for him, that very distinction was irrelevant.

#### IV

Yeats is considered a quintessential modernist poet. It has commonly been said among scholars and critics that had Yeats only produced the late Victorian work of the 1880s and 1890s he would be remembered, if at all, only as a minor figure. Still, in the 1890s, during his intense Golden Dawn involvement, Yeats was a prolific writer. In 1893, at the age of twenty-eight, he and his father's friend, Edwin Ellis, published the first collection of the writings of William Blake in three volumes. Yeats had also published, by that time, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, *The Celtic Twilight*, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, and *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*. He was becoming well-known as a literary man. By the end of the decade, in 1899, Yeats was publishing more poetry and stories—*The Secret Rose and Wind Among the Reeds*—and in 1895 he had his first collection, simply entitled *Poems*, published. However, it was his later work, *The Green Helmet*, *Responsibilities*, *The Tower*, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, and *Last Poems* that earned Yeats his canonization and legacy. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Poetry in 1923. By that time, he was friends with the younger Modernist poet and editor, Ezra Pound, who read and suggested changes to Yeats's poetry during the time between 1912 and 1925 or so when Yeats would have been finding the terse, hard style of his modernist verse.

As Yeats aged and was making the transition from nineteenth-to twentieth-century poet, he always worried that his inspiration, his poetic genius in the sense of tutelary higher-order spirit, what he called his daimon, would leave him. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, a treatise about magic and inspiration written in 1917, Wordsworth is his exemplar for a poet who wrote good poetry as a young man and then seemed to lose his inspiration, writing mediocre verse later. Yeats's poetry grew in power as he aged, and he wrote as a Modernist while upholding his Symbolist aesthetic. His style lost the flowery softness of the early verse and attained the edgy, avant-garde, straightforward cadences associated with Modernism. For example, one of the more Kabbalistic of the early poems, in terms of imagery, is "The Two Trees," published in *Poems* in 1895 as part of the "The Rose," and it is quintessentially late Victorian in style. The poem begins:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,  
The holy tree is growing there;  
From joy the holy branches start,  
And all the trembling flowers they bear.

Compare those lines with lines from "The Circus Animals' Desertion" first published in January 1939, the month of Yeats's death at the age of 73. The poem may presage his death, using the image of Jacob's ladder from Kabbalism, but unlike the earlier poem, the imagery is more abstract—he never connects the ladder image with the Kabbalah—and the language is more modernist, the speaker more ironic:

... Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the hearts

The trajectory of Yeats's poetic power is unusual, and Yeats knew that. He knew that old poets were often resting on their laurels, having produced good or even great work as young, vibrant men, but losing their poetic vigor as they aged. Yeats connected sexual vitality to creative vitality, and that may be why, in 1917, he became desperate to marry.

In fall 1917, Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees, an English woman in her early twenties who had been a member of the Amoun Temple of Stella Matutina for several years and attained the 5=6 in 1916. It is probably not coincidental that Yeats decided he should marry in 1917. He may have decided that he wanted a wife-adept with whom to work. His poem "On Woman" was first published in 1916. The subject of the poem is King Solomon, a mythical, consummate occultist and wise man. Yeats writes that Solomon's knowledge came through his relationship with his consorts, the most famous of whom is Sheba:

Thought pedantry denies,  
It's plain the Bible means  
That Solomon grew wise  
While talking with his queens.

Later in the poem Yeats euphemistically suggests that it was more than "talking with his queens" that gave Solomon his wisdom. Rather, wisdom was an outgrowth of

Harshness of their desire  
That made them stretch and yawn,  
Pleasure that comes with sleep,  
Shudder that made them one.

"Wisdom" comes to Solomon through the ecstasy of sexual pleasure, the "Shudder that made them one." In published Golden Dawn documents there is no explicit mention of sexual magic or tantric practices. However, the Golden Dawn admitted women. It was founded by master masons who were interested in having female members in their organization. Many couples were members. Ideas about sexual polarity were in the air at the time that Yeats became fixated on marriage. Sir John Woodruff had published *The Serpent Power*, a translation of tantric texts, in 1919, so ideas would have been filtering in from the East as well.

Yeats thought of marrying Maud Gonne, but she continued to refuse him, just as she had for twenty years. He also thought of marrying Maud's daughter, Iseult, who was only in her early twenties. Iseult refused him as well. Interestingly, as Yeats prepared to ask Iseult to marry him, he composed the precursor to *A Vision*, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Unlike *A Vision*, *Per Amica* is not written through automatic writing; it is written through Yeats's own efforts in an attempt to explain his "convictions" to Iseult Gonne. *Per Amica* is a singular piece in the Yeats canon, a prose poem written about Yeats's beliefs as they relate to his creative process. Yeats addresses it to Iseult under her pseudonym, "Maurice."

Yeats seems to have become desperate to marry, and he wanted a woman who could understand his magical worldview. It was so important to him that he wrote *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* for Iseult who was not a member of the Stella Matutina or any other occult group. The book is divided into two sections, "Anima Hominis" (the soul of man) and "Anima Mundi" (the soul of the world). "Anima Mundi" contains twenty-two sections just as the Kabbalistic Tree of Life contains twenty-two paths, and the Hebrew alphabet contains twenty-two letters. Yeats writes that he originally intended to call *Per Amica* "An Alphabet," lending credence to the idea that he was loosely basing the organization of his book on the Kabbalah, which is organized according to correspondences to the Hebrew alphabet. The cover for the volume was designed by T. Sturge Moore and features a simple line drawing of the Kabbalistic rose of twenty-two petals that Yeats would have known from his Golden Dawn training and would have worn as a rose cross lamen. Yeats explains key Kabbalistic ideas in *Per Amica* such as the paths that energy can take as it traverses the ten Kabbalistic worlds.

The basic tenet of *Per Amica* is that individuals find creative inspiration through contact with a "daimon," a higher-order, tutelary spirit. The daimon is attracted to an individual via a "mask" representing the "anti-self," an alter ego presented to the world that is the opposite of the individual's true nature. It is through the daimon, according to *Per Amica*, that any creative work is undertaken. Yeats also wonders if there may not be some "whispering in the dark" between "daimon and sweetheart." In other words, he wonders if the daimon, the source of inspiration, could be evoked through the agency of a lover. At bottom, Yeats was a poet. That is the rudimentary Yeats that was overlaid by the senator, Nobel laureate, and theater administrator. Yet, he always worried that his creative inspiration, his creative power, was leaving him. As he aged, he worried incessantly about it. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* details the relationship between man and daimon, and, short of espousing sexual magic, makes clear that having a "sweetheart" is one way of attracting a daimon and ensuring that inspiration will be forthcoming.

Ultimately, Yeats chose Georgie Hyde-Lees for his bride. Yeats was an experienced lover by the time he courted Georgie. He would have turned fifty-one in 1916, but Georgie was only twenty-four. She had been initiated into the Amoun Temple of the Stella Matutina in 1914 when Yeats sponsored her, and she was a member of the inner order by the time he married her. George, as Yeats called her, was an intellectual force in her own right and a practicing ritual magician who shared his occult beliefs. The two had been married only days before she began to experiment with automatic writing, and the material that would eventually become *A Vision* began pouring forth from Mrs. Yeats's pen. It seems that Yeats had married his Sheba, a pythoness to whom his daimon could whisper in the

dark. Yeats found his poetic vitality through his sexual vitality, so even though he was middle-aged, his young wife-adept secured years of inspiration for him.

In the month of his marriage, October 1917, Yeats published a poem, "Solomon to Sheba," about marriage between adepts. Solomon sings to Sheba:

'There's not a man or woman  
Born under the skies  
Dare match in learning with us two,  
And all day long we have found  
There's not a thing but love can make  
The world a narrow pound.'

Yeats and his young wife were magical partners, producing some fifty notebooks of automatic writing and dictation over five years of work. During those five years, they also gave birth to two children, Anne and Michael Yeats. As the automatic scripts, now published in three volumes as Yeats's *Vision Papers*, attest, the couple was working to bring information through from the "Spiritus Mundi." They were also, however, working to incarnate a high-order being, an avatar, and the spirits were working with them to facilitate such a birth. The Yeatses believed, as did many occultists at the beginning of the twentieth century, that a new age was dawning and that its commencement would be heralded by the coming of an avatar.

The material that came to the Yeatses during their trance work was shaped into Yeats's most philosophical and difficult work, *A Vision*. The gyre becomes a dominant image in Yeats's thought following his and George's trance work. Cycles and spirals, all Kabbalistic images, became his preoccupation after the spirit teachers gave the Yeatses information concerning them. Perhaps the most famous of his poems, "The Second Coming," was first published in 1920. It begins: "Turning and Turning in the widening gyre ...," and depicts the beginning of a new age for the world.

In *A Vision*, Yeats writes about the importance of his occult system to his worldview and his art, and he explains in both editions of *A Vision* that the book came directly from automatic writing accomplished by himself and his wife. Nonetheless, the critic Cleanth Brooks is quoted on the back cover of an early paperback edition of *A Vision*, and he calls the book "The most ambitious attempt by any poet of our time to set up a 'myth'." Just how does the setting up of a myth pair with trance work and automatic writing? It would seem that scholars took Yeats's statements about the mediumistic origin of *A Vision* as a mythic construct, a fictional frame for the book that sets it up, sensationally, as offering revealed knowledge when it is really just Yeats making things up. In fact, the publication of *Yeats's Vision Papers* proves that his claims for the revelatory nature of the material is not a fictional frame. Rather, *A Vision* is the product of two inner order Golden Dawn adepts working together to bring material through from higher planes of existence. Scholars can argue that it was Yeats and his wife's subconscious minds that created the material, so it was still Yeats creating it. However, the important point is that Yeats believed that spirits gave the material to him.

## V

*A Vision*, the product of George and W. B. Yeats's mediumistic trance work, is the culmination of Yeats's Golden Dawn career in many ways. Paradoxically, Golden Dawn adepts were warned against "psychism," mediumistic intrusions from the astral realm. However, Golden Dawn rituals and practices were said to have come from "the secret chiefs" who were thought to be shadowy entities that could exist on the earthly plane or be disembodied. Trance work was seminal among Golden Dawn practices.

In the late 1890s when Yeats decided that he wanted to found a secret society for the practice of magic based in Ireland at Lough Key, he went to the inner order adepts of the Golden Dawn for help in formulating the rituals for the order. Members of the inner order along with AE and William Sharp conducted trance workings to contact forces that would give them the material on which to found the order. Much material was generated before Yeats lost interest in the project.

Trance work was also performed after the breakup of the original Golden Dawn when the Stella Matutina was coming into being. Robert Felkin, one of the chiefs of the Stella Matutina, was contacting entities from a higher plane of existence for help. Felkin's entities, the Sun Masters, were not the secret chiefs of the order, but Felkin was asking them for help in finding rituals. Most of the work was done through his wife's mediumship and automatic writing." After 1910, the Stella Matutina seems to have become obsessed with such mediumistic contacts.

However, the automatic scripts did have some provenance in terms of Yeats's earlier work. In the introduction to the second edition of *A Vision*, Yeats writes that the writing of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was a necessary first step in the spiritual process that would eventually lead to the revelation he was given in *A Vision*:

Sometimes when my mind strays back to those first days [of the automatic writing] I remember that Browning's Paracelsus did not obtain the secret until he had written his spiritual history at the bidding of his Byzantine teacher, that before initiation Wilhelm Meister read his own history written by another, and I compare my *Per Amica* to those histories.

Yeats also claims that the spirit writer of *A Vision* "took his theme at first from my just published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*." Yeats clearly spells out that the material was gathered through his wife's automatic writing that was first undertaken on "October 24th 1917, four days after [his] marriage."

Just as with his other work, Yeats expected that there would be readers who would read the work esoterically and those who would read it exoterically. A reader does not have to have any idea about Golden Dawn magic in order to read Yeats and appreciate his genius. However, with knowledge of Golden Dawn ideas and practices a deeper level of understanding is possible. Yeats dedicated the first edition of *A Vision* to his colleague from the early days of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Moina Mathers, using her Golden Dawn motto, "Vestigia." He tells her "As I most fear to disappoint those that come to this book [*A Vision*] through some interest in my poetry and in that alone, I warn them from that part of the book called 'The Great Wheel' and from the whole of Book II, and beg them to dip here and there in the verse and into my comments upon life and history. Upon the other hand my

old fellow students may confine themselves to what is most technical and explanatory; thought is nothing without action, but if they will master what is most abstract there and make it the foundation of their visions, the curtain may ring up on a new drama."

Clearly, Yeats thought that the material that he was publishing in the first edition of *A Vision* was occult, Golden Dawn-related material. He suggests to Mrs. Mathers that the material may even serve as the basis for a new occult order or impetus and that "the curtain may ring up on a new drama."

Yeats also hints at the Kabbalistic nature of the material by reminding Mrs. Mathers of their work:

When the first draft of this dedication was written, I had not seen you for more than thirty years, nor knew where you were nor what you were doing, and though much had happened since we copied the Jewish Schemahamphorasch with its seventy-two Names of God in Hebrew characters, it was plain that I must dedicate my book to you.

The Schemahamphorasch is an exercise whereby a kabbalist arranges Hebrew letters so that the seventy-two names of God are revealed. According to Eliphas Levi, the consummate nineteenth-century occultist,

The sum of all these Divine Names formed from the one Tetragram [the four letters that make up the name of God, Yod He Vau He], but outside the Tetragram itself, is a basis of the Hebrew Ritual and constitutes the occult force which the kabalistic rabbins invoke under the title of Shemhamphoras.

In the first paragraph of his dedication, Yeats alludes to Kabbalistic work, and the import of that allusion would not be lost on a reader like Mrs. Mathers who would have been well schooled in the innuendo of occult secrecy.

The first edition of *A Vision* was a small print run. Until 2008, the 1925 version was out of print. The 1937 edition was the only available text, one that Yeats had changed significantly from the first edition. Overall, the 1937 edition is more exoteric. For example, the dedication to Vestigia is expunged in the 1937 text. It is replaced by "A Packet for Ezra Pound." Pound was friends with Yeats and George in 1912. It was through Pound that Yeats was able to spend time with George initially. Yeats could have inserted "A Packet for Ezra Pound" into the first edition, but he did not. The dedication to Moina Mathers, Vestigia, signals that the book concerns esoterica and its intended audience is occultists. Its replacement with "A Packet for Ezra Pound" signals that the audience for the book is a hard-edged, modernist literary one and that the book is about history and literature. The 1937 edition opens the way for Brooks to make his famous statement about Yeats "setting up a myth."

The introduction to the 1937 edition also contains an "Introduction to 'A Vision'" in which Yeats attempts to connect the material to his literary work more strongly than to his occult work. He begins by quoting his long-time patron, Lady Augusta Gregory, who told him that his poetry had "gained self-possession and power" in the ten previous years, which would be between 1918 and

1928 when the introduction was penned. That statement is the opening for Yeats to explain that the reason that his poetry was stronger was the material gained through the automatic writing. In the next section of his introduction, Yeats claims that the spirits told him that they had "come to give [him] metaphors for poetry." Effectively, Yeats created a frame for the 1937 edition that presents it as a book about his poetry rather than a book about occultism.

Of course, Yeats did find the material for his later poetry, that written between 1918 and his death, through the automatic writing. Much of that poetry is related to the occult ideas that the automatic writing presented. However, given the original dedication to the book, it seems doubtful that Yeats really believed the material came to him so that he could write poetry about it. More likely, he thought the material was important because it related to the spiritual nature of humankind and human destiny. That he wrote poetry about it was secondary. In the 1937 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats was creating a book that would be a suitable philosophic text for a poet such as himself to write: He was "setting up a myth." Careful study of the 1925 edition of *A Vision* along with Yeats's *Vision Papers* leads to the conclusion that Yeats and his wife were engaged in deep trance work to bring occult concepts and ideas through. They were capable of the work because both were trained and initiated adepts.

Through the automatic writing, Yeats found a central symbol for his later work—the gyre—which became a dominant symbol in his work after the automatic writing, and it is the central trope in both versions of *A Vision*. Yeats dedicated the first—and perhaps more honest—version of *A Vision* to Moina Mathers, an early Golden Dawn colleague, because he recognized the gyre as belonging to the symbolism of the Kabbalah that was central to Golden Dawn occultism. The spirits had simply elaborated on the symbolism, giving Yeats new material to supplement preexisting Golden Dawn teachings. That Yeats was gathering and disseminating new order materials is borne out by a letter he wrote to his old friend, Olivia Shakespear, on October 13, 1929. He tells her that he is going to London and for two days to "the west of England to look up a little groups [sic] of Kabalists." George Mills Harper, general editor of *Yeats's Vision Papers* and author of *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, an important study of Yeats Golden Dawn involvement, thinks that Yeats was probably going to visit the Hermes Temple of the Stella Matutina at Bristol, the same temple of the order to which Fortune would have belonged at that time.

In the same letter, Yeats also tells Mrs. Shakespear that he will stay in London for three weeks, and the only plans he has are to "meet an old Kabalist [sic] in London" when he "must accept his date for lunch or dinner—a sign that the great work is almost finished and that I want to give it to the right people." Mills Harper thinks the "great work" is *A Vision*, but the first edition was finished by 1925, and the second edition was not published until 1937. It seems more likely that Yeats had generated Kabbalistic material that he was passing on to the "Kabalist" in London. "The Great Work" is a traditional euphemism for alchemical processes or in Golden Dawn parlance, finding one's divine, higher self. The symbolism of the gyre is Kabbalistic, so perhaps Yeats generated material from the automatic scripts that he was passing on to his fraters and sorors within the order. As mentioned earlier, there was a shadowy occult group working in England at the time, and Yeats may have been passing materials on to them.

## VI

Yeats does not connect the gyre with the Kabbalah or Golden Dawn teachings in either version of *A Vision*, but then he was publishing a book for a general audience, and he expected a wide readership because he was a well-known poet and playwright by that time. Initiates who had taken oaths of secrecy did not publish occult secrets at that time. Until Regardie published the complete rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn in four volumes in 1938, it would have been unthinkable that an order member would publish order secrets. Yeats was of the "old school," a member from the founding of the order, and it would have been out of the question for him to consider publishing order secrets. So he published *A Vision*, giving material that came to him and Mrs. Yeats through magical trance work, but he couched it in terms that did not make the connection to Golden Dawn teachings.



A gyre, as it is presented in both editions of *A Vision*, is a vortex. Yeats prefers the more exotic word gyre, but he could just as easily have used the terms funnel or vortex. The image of a gyre is the predominant symbol that is given to Yeats by his disembodied instructors. Both versions of *A Vision* are rife with diagrams, usually picturing the gyre as a triangle lying on its side. The whirling three-dimensional symbol is necessarily pictured in two dimensions. For Yeats, the whirling motion of the gyre represents the dynamic aspect of existence: It can represent the movement of time; the changes in an individual's character over a series of lifetimes such as that in Yeats's "Phases of the Moon"; the changes that a soul experiences after death; or the beginning of existence for the universe. As an abstract symbol, it has many meanings.

Yeats's gyre is never singular. It is, due to the nature of existence in a dualistic reality, always paired with its opposite. The symbolic pictogram for the two, interpenetrating gyres is a six-pointed star, but in Yeats's diagrams the apexes of the triangles stay within the bases of the two cones (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows what the interpenetration would look like if the gyres are moved out just slightly.

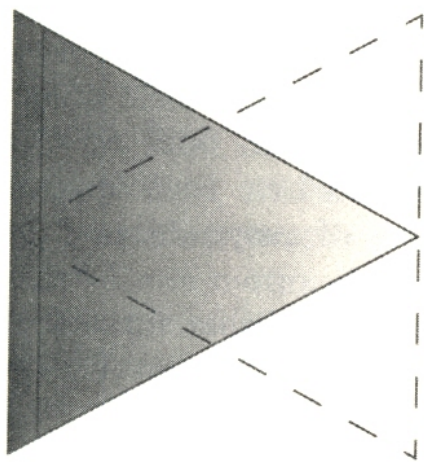


Figure 1. Interpenetrating Gyres.

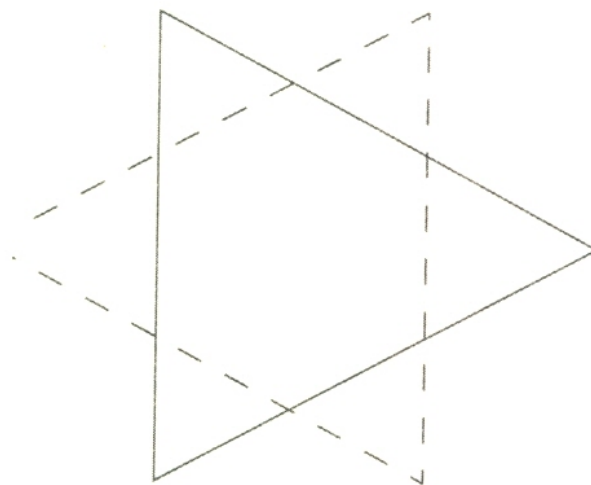


Figure 2. Six-pointed Star Presented on Its Side.

*Figure 1. Interpenetrating Gyres.*

*Figure 2. Six-pointed Star Presented on Its Side.*

The fact that the interpenetrating gyres could be the same symbol as the Seal of Solomon could not have been lost on the Yeatses. The Seal of Solomon is yet another glyph for the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a glyph for the symbolic system that Yeats had been studying since he was a young man and that forms the basis for Golden Dawn magic.

Yeats's Golden Dawn motto, *Demon est Deus Inversus*, is Kabbalistic and has to do with the Seal of Solomon. The motto has been translated as "the devil is the converse of God." However, "demon," or "daemon," does not mean "the Devil" in Latin. A daemon would have been a higher order spirit that could be good or evil, depending on its bent. The concept is synonymous with the daimon of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. The Latin word for devil is *diabolus*. Yeats chose the word "demon," and, in fact, there is no Latin translation for that word. In Christianized Medieval Latin the diphthong "æ" in *dæmon* was often written in manuscript shorthand as "e," giving us the word "demon." Its meaning in Medieval Latin is the same as today's meaning. In common parlance, there is a vast difference between "the Devil" and a demon. The Devil is an all-powerful being, Satan, who tempts mankind and does battle with God. A demon is usually thought to be one of Satan's minions, a lesser evil entity. According to Christian eschatology, there are numerous demons of greater and lesser power. Yet Yeats's motto is *Demon est Deus Inversus*. The motto has an ominous ring and has led to speculation that Yeats was interested in diabolism. Within the Golden Dawn, Yeats was usually called DEDI for the initials of his motto, but sometimes he is referred to as "the Demon."

As Ann Saddlemyer points out in her biography of Mrs. Yeats, it is quite likely that Yeats took his motto from *The Secret Doctrine*, the seminal text of the Theosophical Society, written by Helena Blavatsky. When Yeats would have chosen his motto, he was still a member of the Theosophical Society. Book I, part II, section IX of volume I of *The Secret Doctrine* is entitled "Demon Est Deus Inversus." In that section, Blavatsky argues that both good and evil come from the same root cause and that there cannot be two eternal absolutes. She argues that light was created out of darkness when the material universe came into being, so the very act of creation was dualistic, as is the nature of material reality. If there is good, there must be evil, and one is not more essential than the other. Both are necessary. These ideas are Kabbalistic, and would have been important to Yeats, who entitled his 1901 collection of essays, *Ideas of Good and Evil*.

The early nineteenth-century magus, Eliphas Levi—much admired by Golden Dawn adepts—sheds light on the idea of *Demon est Deus Inversus* as it relates to the Kabbalah. Levi's writing predates Blavatsky's. In *Transcendental Magic*, translated from the French by A. E. Waite, a Golden Dawn frater, Levi is writing about Kabbalism. In discussing the emanations from the divine first cause, Levi explains that as matter moves farther from the divine source it becomes degraded. The Kabbalistic image of the tree of life is a glyph of emanation from Godhead through ten worlds called Sephiroth. One complete series of emanations from the highest Sephira, Kether, through the other eight Sephiroth, and finally down to Malkuth, the material reality, is latent within the first of the Sephira, Kether. Kether is termed the Ancient by Levi and also later by MacGregor Mathers in the introduction to his translation of *The Kabbalah Unveiled*. The chain of emanations continues ad infinitum as the Malkuth of one world becomes the Kether of the next. The emanating trees of life are linked together, creating a never-ending ladder, a kind of double helix that has been called "Jacob's ladder." Levi writes of the images of the Ancient as they replicate:

These images, less perfect in proportion as they are removed farther from their source, projected upon the darkness an ultimate reflection or glimmer, representing a horrible and deformed Ancient, who is termed vulgarly the devil.

In footnoting the material regarding the Ancient, Waite notes the outcome if the Hebrew letters that make up the name of God—Yod He Vau He—are reversed:

Jehovah is he who dominates Nature like a magnificent horse and makes it go where He wills; but Chavajoh [the reversed name]—otherwise, the demon—is an unbridled horse which overthrows its rider and precipitates him into the abyss.

Here, then, are two related Kabbalistic ideas that may explain Yeats's Golden Dawn motto. He may have been thinking about the emanation from the divine in terms of the Kabbalah.

When Yeats's Golden Dawn motto is put in the context of Levi's explanation, its imagery can be linked to the interpenetrating gyres of *A Vision*. The image that is given of the Ancient is the Seal of Solomon (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Seal of Solomon.

The seal is a hexagram within a mandala bordered by Ouroboros—the snake with its tail in its mouth. The hexagram is split vertically across the middle. The top portion of the hexagram is a white, bearded, male figure complete with a mitre and cross at the top, and the words *quod superius*, which translate as "what is above." The inverted figure below the central line is a shaded, demonic figure, a reverse image of the mitered figure, and the words *quod inferius*, which translate as "what is below," are written below him. The upper figure is labeled the *macroprosopus*, whereas the inverted figure is the *microprosopus*, the macrocosm and the microcosm. The image represents, literally, the idea of *Demon est Deus Inversus*. The figure is also a symbol of the occult maxim, "As above, so below," and is an all-encompassing archetype for Western occultism that includes the Kabbalah, Christian imagery, and Hermetic teachings. It contains two interpenetrating triangles, and it is hard to think that the parallel to the gyres of *A Vision* was lost to Yeats, *Demon est Deus Inversus*.

In addition to the interpenetrating triangles associated with the seal of Solomon, Yeats would have been familiar with the Kabbalistic description of the "thread of the Ain Soph" from a teaching paper issued within the Golden Dawn by MacGregor Mathers entitled "The Tree of Life As Projected in a Solid Sphere" (Figure 4).

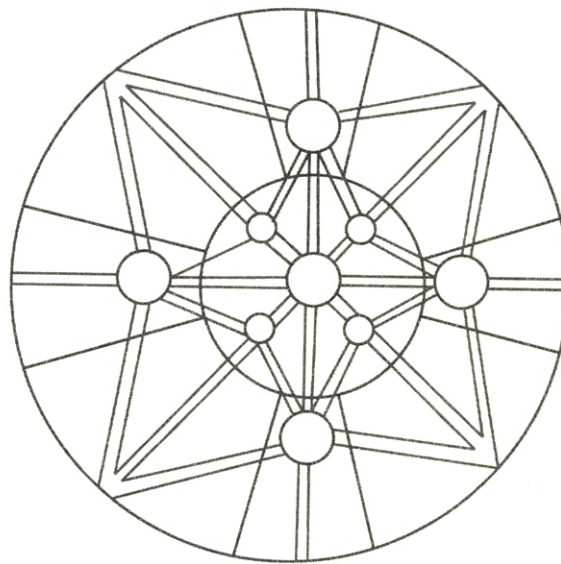


Figure 4. Kabbalah Projected on a Sphere, Bottom View.

The essay concerns conceiving of the glyph of the Kabbalistic tree of life in three dimensions rather than two. The tree then takes on a crystalline shape. The Sephira multiply themselves to create four Sephiroth where the two-dimensional figure contains only two. Viewed from below, from Malkuth, the lowest emanation, the figure resembles Yeats's "Great Wheel" (Figure 5). The central, interior, four-pointed figure in Mathers's image is large, but is identical to that of Yeats in his more stylized "Great Wheel." The Kabbalah contains wheels within wheels, and Mathers ends his essay by quoting the biblical Ezekiel, who seems to be talking about interpenetrating gyres:

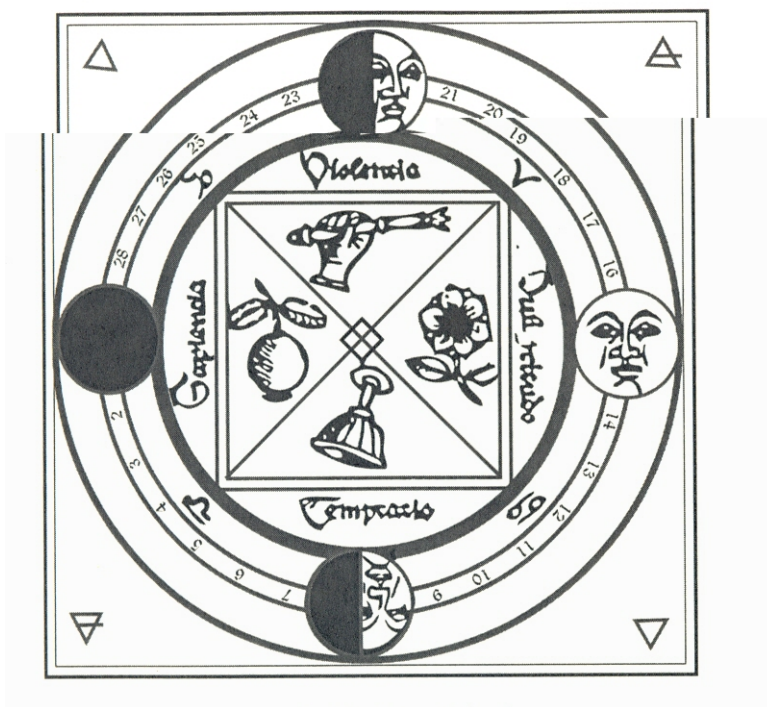


Figure 5. The Great Wheel.

"And I beheld, and lo! A tempestuous whirlwind came out from the North, a mighty cloud, and a fire violently whirling upon itself, and a splendor revolving upon itself, and from the midmost as an eye of brightness from the midst of the fire. And from the midmost the forms of the Four Chaioth."

Mathers's essay explains the movement of energy from one Kabbalistic world, a Sephira, to the next via the "thread of the Ain Soph." The Ain Soph is the first matter, the uncreated void. According to Mathers, emanation occurs when the "thread of the Ain Soph" moves in a whirling, hourglass formation from one world or plane of existence to another. In Mathers's figure, there is no interpenetration, only the hourglass shape, which whirls in one direction.

The question is what does the difference between Yeats's gyres and Mathers's hourglass mean? It would seem that in Mathers's conception, the divine energy is moving in one direction: The emanation is "downward" from the world of archetypes and the supernal to the gross, material world. Again the idea is *Demon est Deus Inversus*, the demonic being formulated from the dross of the supernal energy as it degrades in its emanation. In Yeats's conception of the interpenetrating gyres, the energy moves in two directions, so that energy from the demonic world, in the idea of *Demon est Deus Inversus*, is moving toward divinity as surely as the divine energy is moving toward the demonic. Yeats's gyres are the Ouroboros, the serpent eating its own tail, the figure that describes the exterior of Eliphas Levi's seal of Solomon.

In published documents, Yeats does not comment on what his gyres mean or if they offer a new or enriched perspective on the Kabbalah. However, in the first edition of *A Vision*, dedicated to Vestigia,



who is Mrs. Mathers, the widow of MacGregor Mathers who penned the essay on the "The Tree of Life as Projected in a Solid Sphere" discussed previously, Yeats intimates that he believes the material he was given might portend the curtain ringing up "on a new drama." Then in 1929 he has material that must be passed on to another Kabbalist. Yeats and his wife would have had the esoteric knowledge and understanding to make use of the material they believed the spirits had communicated to them because it would have been informed by their Golden Dawn Kabbalism. Their forays into mediumistic inquiry may have led to a better, or even new, understanding of their lifelong study of the Kabbalah.

## VII

The symbolic idea of a vortex or funnel was part of the Golden Dawn magic that Yeats had been studying beginning in 1889, but the symbol, which he chose to name a gyre, comes to occupy a central place in his symbology after the automatic scripting began. Consequently, it becomes more prominent in the poetry after that time. For example, the title of one book of poems, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, first published in 1933, obliquely alludes to a gyre. Picture a winding staircase. For Yeats, the symbolist and occultist, the symbolic implication would not have been lost and would have been intentional.

In four poems, "The Second Coming," "The Gyres," "Meru," and "Sailing to Byzantium," gyre symbolism is central. Each of the poems was composed after the automatic writing commenced and is part of Yeats's later, modernist oeuvre. However, "The Second Coming" is the earliest, having been written in 1920, just three years after the automatic scripting began and several years before the first edition of *A Vision* was completed. "The Second Coming" has become one of Yeats's most famous poems, perhaps because it seems to depict an apocalyptic turn of events, subject matter that has been topical since before the turn of the nineteenth century. In the poem, gyre imagery is used to evoke the idea of the changing dispensation ala Yeats's philosophy of historical cycles in *A Vision*.

According to Yeats's theory as put forth in *A Vision*, every two thousand years a new dispensation begins. In "The Second Coming," as well as in *A Vision*, the gyre symbolism is used to picture the cycles of history. When one gyre whirls to its broadest limit, it collapses on itself and begins a new gyre, a new wave of cycling. The collapse of one gyre and the beginning of a new one's whirl is the symbolic representation of the cycles of history alternating, as Yeats believed that they had. Of course, the alternating whirl of the two interpenetrating gyres of Yeats's symbol system are not only used to reference cycles of history. They are used to represent every alternating change that occurs, but in "The Second Coming," the gyres are linked to the cycles of history.

The poem alludes to Christian eschatology, not only through its title, which references the second coming of Christ, but also in naming the "great beast" that "slouches toward Bethlehem to be born." The speaker is experiencing a vision, feeling sure that "some revelation is at hand." Yeats's is playing with the idea of Christianity's second coming of Christ that is predicted in Revelations. However, his poem does not predict a new Christian dispensation because his philosophy did not allow for such a thing. For Yeats, the second coming can only be the beginning of a new pagan, antithetical dispensation.

Still, as much as Yeats might have looked forward to a coming new age that would be pagan, polytheistic, and dominated by the moon, he depicts its coming in apocalyptic terms. As the poem opens, the gyre is beginning its last outward spiral toward dissolution: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/." The point at which the dispensation is about to dissolve into its opposite is a chaotic time when "The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/." When the dispensation changes, social upheaval occurs, and "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, .../." Nor does the poem offer any comfort. It concludes with a "rough beast" that "slouches" toward the spiritual omphalos of Western civilization, Bethlehem, to "be born." Although Yeats chose not to capitalize the "B" is the word "beast," he is alluding to the Great Beast, 666, that is the harbinger of the last days according to Christian eschatology. Although the speaker in the poem is anguished, "The Second Coming" offers a cold, intellectual prediction of apocalyptic change. Yeats is using his newly deepened conception of the gyre symbol to express his ideas about the cycles of history and the coming new age.

Another poem, a much later one titled simply "The Gyres," uses gyre symbolism in much the same way as does "The Second Coming." "The Gyres" was published in 1939 in *Last Poems*, but was probably written between July 1936 and January 1937. Like the "The Second Coming," "The Gyres" depicts a society, a civilization even, on the verge of collapse. Just as "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity" in "The Second Coming," in "The Gyres," the speaker reports that "Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul." However, in the twenty years between the composition of the two poems, a note of existential, even joyous, acceptance comes into the speaker's observations. Whereas the speaker in "The Second Coming" seems horrified by his vision of the "rough beast," the speaker in "The Gyres" seems to taunt his conception of an omniscient being, evoking him as "Old Rocky Face" and commanding him to "look forth!" It is not clear what Old Rocky Face is, and scholars hesitate to delineate him, but he seems to be a kind of demiurge that is responsible for the fallen world in which the speaker finds himself. Rocky Face seems to be a being or force that glories in men of action, the men who would have made his work manifest, men who are "Lovers of horses and women, ... /."

The speaker in "The Gyres" commands Old Rocky Face to look forth to see "The gyres!" It is as if the speaker's vision supersedes that of Old Rocky Face. The speaker acts in a prophetic role, as he comments on the apocalyptic state of affairs, and like Yeats, the speaker believes that, although he is at the end of one civilization that has become degraded and deranged, a new one will replace it. But even with that seemingly hopeful renewal, this speaker knows that every civilization is simply a turn of the wheel. Each in its turn degrades and is destroyed to make way for the new. The speaker in "The Gyres," perhaps like the twenty years older Yeats, is much more cynical than the speaker of "The Second Coming." The speaker in "The Gyres" asks repeatedly, "What matter ... ?" He asks, "What matter though numb nightmare ride on top,/ And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?/ What matter?...." He asks this because he knows that it does not matter because "... all things run/ On that unfashionable gyre again."

Another poem "Meru," uses the gyre imagery to discourse on cycles of history but does so obliquely. It appeared in a small collection of poems entitled *Supernatural Songs*, published in 1934. It is

number XII, the last of the collection, and in some ways its piece de résistance. The poem is fairly short, a modified sonnet. The reference to gyre imagery is subtle and oblique: "Civilization is hooped together...." Here the idea of the whirls of a gyre are referenced as hoops. That is the only reference to the image, but the idea of cycles of history is the thematic concern of the poem: "Egypt and Greece, Goodbye, and Goodbye Rome!" However, instead of focusing on an apocalyptic present, the speaker is more concerned with the idea that only through enlightenment can humankind escape the cyclic nature of human history, the "Ravening, raging, and uprooting ..." that marks humankind's transit.

The poem offers the dark hope that humankind is capable of transcendence, even if only the "Hermits on Mount Meru or Everest/ Caverned in night under the drifted snow, ..." are capable of it. The speaker acknowledges that "... man's life is thought, ..." and that civilization can exist, can be hooped together, only by "manifold illusion." The speaker realizes, just as do those of "The Gyres" and "The Second Coming," that the cycles of history, with civilization following and replacing civilization, is the pattern that humankind is bound to repeat, but the speaker in "Meru" believes that there is a small cadre of humans—Hindu or Buddhist holy hermits—who can actually see the reality that the interpenetrating gyres represent. The poem acknowledges humanity's spiritual elite, just as the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" calls on "sages" for guidance.

"Sailing to Byzantium" employs gyre symbolism, but it differs from the "The Gyres," "The Second Coming," and "Meru" because the gyre symbolism is used to depict the movement of spiritual entities between cabalistic worlds. Instead of changing dispensations within a civilization, the coming change in the poem is the death of the speaker, a personal rather than civilizational apocalypse. The poem appeared in *The Tower*, and according to A. Norman Jeffares, it was composed in summer 1926.

Although Yeats references the cycles of history by setting the poem in Byzantium, which he felt, according to *A Vision*, was the high point of Christian culture, cycles of history are not the main thematic concern of the poem, nor is civilization-wide apocalypse. Instead, the poem is a poignant statement about growing old and facing the inevitability of death. The speaker observes that "An aged man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick,...." However, the speaker realizes that earthly life is not the end-all and that the soul, not the body, is the crucial element of a man's existence.

Then the speaker imagines that he has sailed to the "holy city of Byzantium" where, according to Yeats's cyclical map of history, a man might find the elements of civilization—art and culture—that would elevate consciousness and tutor the soul. The third stanza of the four-stanza poem is an evocation of saints pictured in the Byzantine mosaics: "O sages standing in God's holy fire/ As in the gold mosaic of a wall,...." Yeats puts them in "holy fire" because Kabbalistically the world of fire is the most enlightened realm where saints and high-order spirits would exist. The speaker goes on with his evocation, pleading for the sages to "Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,/ And be the singing-masters of my soul." In "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats applies the gyre symbolism to the mystery of divine intervention and enlightenment. It is by "perning in a gyre," whirling magically from a higher realm to the consciousness of a man, that divine teaching and inspiration come to



"gather" an individual "Into the artifice of eternity." In this poem, Yeats uses the gyre as a mystical symbol. It is the thread of the Ain Soph from his Golden Dawn teachings, the passage between different worlds and realities.

## VIII

After the closure of the Amoun Temple, which seems to roughly coincide with end of the mediumistic work of the Yeatses, there is no record of magical activity for either George or W. B. Yeats aside from the meeting in 1929 that he mentions offhandedly in his letter to Olivia Shakespear. That does not mean that the work did not occur, but only that there is no evidence that it did. However, Yeats was still a spiritual seeker, and in the 1930s he looked to Vedanta for further insight. In 1937 he published, along with Shree Purohit Swāmi, *The Ten Principal Upanishads*. In the introduction, he recalls his disagreements with his friend AE who was a lifelong, fervent Theosophist, although he did not belong to the official society after 1910. Yeats recalls that "Between us [himself and AE] existed from the beginning the antagonism that unites dear friends." Yeats became disgusted with AE when he would not take up Golden Dawn ritual magic instead of Theosophy because Yeats always maintained, as did other ritual magicians such as Fortune, that only Western practices were suited for Europeans. The thinking was that the ways of the East—vegetarianism and the passivity of meditation—were out of tune with the more materialistic Western psyche. Yeats remembers AE quoting passages from the Upanishads forty years earlier and claims that he had promised himself that "some day I will find out if he knows what he is talking about." Yeats also calls his friend's fascination with the East a "ceaseless vague preoccupation" that is "a need and curiosity of our time."

As much as Yeats eschewed Eastern methods when he was young, in the introduction to the Upanishads, he seems to say that he had found a universal notion of a human who is self-possessed and capable of seemingly superhuman feats. Whether that human is called an adept or a yogi, Yeats came to realize, does not matter. He writes:

Psychical research, which must some day deeply concern religious philosophy, for its evidences surround the pilgrim and the devotee though they never take the centre of the stage, has already proved the existence of faculties that would, combined into one man, make of that man a miracle-working Yogi. More and more too does it seem to approach a main thought of the Upanishads. Continental investigators, who reject the spiritism of Lodge and Crookes, but accept their phenomena, postulate an individual self-possessed of such power and knowledge that they seem at every moment about to identify it with that Self without limitation and sorrow, containing and contained by all, and to seek there not only the living but the dead.

Yeats seems to have come to a realization that the East and the West are expressing the same truths about human potential and the possibility for self-possession and realization. The West names such an enlightened, self-possessed individual an adept, whereas in the East the name is yogi.

In the end, Yeats came to realize that the development of the soul, in the words of the Golden Dawn, the conversation with one's higher divine genius, is the only purpose for life. He came to the cynical view that all of humankind's projects and accomplishments amount to nothing, and that the attainment of self-realization is the only worthwhile endeavor. The late sonnet, "Meru," first published in 1934 and written just before his work with Shree Purohit Swāmi, expresses these sentiments. It is "Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,/ Caverned in night under the drifted snow," who see the truth of existence. Only they "... know/ That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ His glory and his monuments are gone." Meru, a mythological mountain in Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, is one of the world's spiritual centers and the center of reality. The hermits in the poem are similar to the "holy sages" who "pern in a gyre" in the poem "Byzantium" to become "the singing masters" to the speaker's soul. In both poems the hermits or sages are enlightened beings who recognize that all of life is cyclical, "That day brings round the night," so that all of human material accomplishments, "His glory and his monuments," will be destroyed just as surely as they will again be created in a never-ending, dualistic cycle.

Finally, Yeats may have softened in his views about Eastern religions and their applicability for Western people, and he felt sorrow that his friend AE died just a year or so before he might have been able to talk to him about it and their old disagreements. However, Yeats's appreciation of Vedanta was a further broadening of his earliest Golden Dawn training. The point of "the Great Work" was always the development of the initiate's divine higher self, and Yeats strove for such development. As an old man, he had achieved some measure of that development, and it allowed him to see that a yogi and a magus are one and the same, two different cultural expressions for the same kind of highly evolved individual.

Yeats's study of Vedanta and his work on a poetic translation of the Upanishads with Shri Purohit Swami, may also have coincided with the investigation of tantric ideas. Yeats, always preoccupied with sexual energy and its connection to creativity and inspiration, took a further step to safeguard his poetic output. He had a medical procedure performed in 1934 that was called the Steinach procedure, and up until possibly the 1980s it was fabled to be the grafting of primate gonads. Richard Ellmann finally explained that the procedure was nothing more exotic than a vasectomy. Apparently there was some vogue, at the time, for men having the procedure done because it was reputed to increase sexual vigor. For Yeats, although he does not write about his thinking concerning the vasectomy, the idea of re-absorption of the seminal fluid must have seemed similar enough to tantric withholding to have merited a trial. Yeats believed that the operation was a success, and he produced some of his best work between 1934 and 1939.

Despite his modernist credentials and his standing among modernist writers, Yeats is an anomaly, probably in large part because of his occult beliefs. Stylistically, he became a modernist. Philosophically, he remained a symbolist. He never changed the aesthetics that he pronounced at the turn of the century, and he thought that the subject matter of the modernists was sadly lacking.

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Artists did not become a new priesthood and art did not become the sacred book of humankind. Instead, art became, in some ways, the expression of the chaos and disillusionment of post-World War I reality. A fundamental difference between Yeats and his contemporaries was that he thought the artist should shape reality, as he wrote, by "continually making and unmaking mankind." As a ceremonial magician, he saw his role as that of shaman, or in Irish Druidic terms, bard, and he believed such was the proper and fitting role for the artist. In that role, the artist is not only reactive, but also active. In other words, the artist not only produces work that expresses a reaction to the world, but also work that actually makes the world and shapes reality.

Yeats wrote about his belief in the constructive role of magic in "A General Introduction for My Work" two years before his death:

I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality, that the natural and supernatural are knit together, that to escape a dangerous fanaticism we must study a new science.

That "new science" would understand the principles of ceremonial magic. Like his fellow late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultists, Yeats believed that magic was worked through the laws of the natural world, laws of which humans had become ignorant. The magician, in a sense, "remembered" how to use the will to interact with those natural laws. Yeats called the idea of progress the myth of the nineteenth century and in his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" he asks "How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world ...?"

As Yeats wrote to Moina Mathers in the dedication to the first edition of *A Vision*, he became an occultist because he was searching for the inspiration to write poetry that would, "make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul's." He found himself at odds with the younger modernists because he thought that "they express[ed] not what the Upanishads call 'that ancient Self' but individual intellect." Yeats attempted to express "that ancient Self" in his work, and Golden Dawn ceremonial magic was his creative process, his way of calling down the genius that would give him inspiration. <>

## *The Poems*

[THE SECOND COMING](#)

[THE GYRES](#)

[MERU](#)

[SAILING TO BYZANTIUM](#)

## THE SECOND COMING

TURNING and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out.  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man.  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

## THE GYRES

THE GYRES! the gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth;  
Things thought too long can be no longer thought,  
For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,  
And ancient lineaments are blotted out.  
Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;  
Empedocles has thrown all things about;  
Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;  
We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.

What matter though numb nightmare ride on top,  
And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?  
What matter? Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,  
A greater, a more gracious time has gone;  
For painted forms or boxes of make-up  
In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again;  
What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice,  
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice!'

Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul,  
What matter? Those that Rocky Face holds dear,  
Lovers of horses and of women, shall,  
From marble of a broken sepulchre,  
Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl,  
Or any rich, dark nothing disinter  
The workman, noble and saint, and all things run  
On that unfashionable gyre again.

## MERU

Civilisation is hooped together, brought  
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace  
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,  
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease  
Ravening through century after century,  
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come  
Into the desolation of reality:  
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!  
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,  
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,  
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast  
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know  
That day brings round the night, that before dawn  
His glory and his monuments are gone.

## SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

I

THAT is no country for old men.  
The young In one another's arms, birds in the trees —  
Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

1927



# *A Vision:* *Key to Yeats as Alchemical Poet and Magician*

Sarah Fuhro

Conflicts and oppositions in Yeats' life and chart were healed and regarded in a new light through his experience with the channeled material he received and recorded in *A Vision*. This was the culmination of an alchemical process of soul work. His training as astrologer and occult philosopher allowed him to be able to read the messages of the spirits and the reception coincided with astrological indicators. His physical marriage with Georgie Hyde-Lees provided the necessary cauldron for the alchemical work to take place.

Where got I that truth?  
Out of a medium's mouth,  
Out of nothing it came,  
Out of the forest loam,  
Out of dark night where lay  
The crowns of Ninevah. <sup>1</sup>

## ***A Vision Arrives as a Wedding Present***

Yeats was 52 years old, a well-established poet and playwright, when he married 25 year old Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917. "...four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I...offered to spend what remained of [my] life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. 'No,' was the answer from the spirits, 'we have come to give you *metaphors for poetry*.'" <sup>2</sup> (my italics).

In 1925 the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) published his first edition of *A Vision*. The images and metaphors from this book can be found throughout his later poetry, some of his strongest work. This article is an attempt to show how the astrology of Yeats' natal chart and the transits during the reception of the book illustrate the importance of what he found in *A Vision*, and how it provided integration of his life as poet, as magician and as political activist.

## **Astrologer and Student of Magic**

Yeats, who many believe to be the greatest poet in the English language of the twentieth century, was a well-trained astrologer and occultist. He gave his magical education full credit as source and inspiration for his poetry. In 1925 he wrote to his friend and fellow poet, Thomas Sturge-Moore: "If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single line...The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write." <sup>3</sup>

Yeats' rationalist father directed his early education. In reaction, Yeats turned to the Irish countryside and people for the imaginative and spiritual sustenance he lacked. Much of Yeats' early work as poet and playwright has to do with rediscovering the Celtic tradition of his native Ireland, and to the magical practices, which remained a part of that culture. We know Yeats was instrumental in transforming Irish theater, but his dedicated participation in the occult revival, which took place during this same period, remains in the shadows.

Yeats enrolled in the School of Art, Dublin when he was eighteen, and during that same period became involved in his occult studies. Throughout his lifetime, Yeats kept notebooks full of astrological charts. Many of the charts were horaries for Tarot readings. He may have begun his astrological studies as a student of theosophy when he was eighteen. Yeats left the Theosophical Society in 1890, soon after he became a member of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn at age twenty-five. He moved quickly through the ranks of initiations of the Golden Dawn, and two years after he joined he became 'Instructor in Mystical Philosophy' for the Order.

### **Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn**

The Golden Dawn was founded in London in 1888 with the specific intention to train people in the Western Magical tradition. Rituals were modeled on the sacred rites of Egypt and Greece, and attempted to connect the participants to specific spiritual entities. Astrology was part of the Golden Dawn training, as were Kabbalah and Tarot. The Rider-Waite Tarot deck developed from their work with archetypes and divination and continues to be the most commonly used deck in the English-speaking world.

This group is particularly significant to students of the occult when we consider that, perhaps for the first time since Christianity had separated them, men and women came together as equals in magical ceremonies. Alchemy was once more seen as a mystical process reflected in the mixture of male and female energies rather than a foolish experiment in chemical transformation. Yeats dedicated the first edition of *A Vision* to Moina Mathers, a mystical artist, a founding member of the Golden Dawn, and sister to the philosopher Henri Bergson. He wrote in his dedication:

“Perhaps this book has been written because a number of young men and women, you and I among the number, met nearly forty years ago in London and in Paris to discuss mystical philosophy.”<sup>4</sup>

The Golden Dawn attracted artistic, literary and political revolutionaries of the time. Members included Maud Gonne, the 'Joan of Arc' of Irish independence, the avant-garde actress Florence Farr and the magician Aleister Crowley, later ousted from the group. Many members, like Yeats, were involved in the creation of new theatrical forms, and the magical work they pursued in The Golden Dawn was both enriched by their talent and provided inspiration to their artistry.

*A Vision* allowed Yeats to experiment with the process of alchemy, which he had studied earlier, but had never fully embraced. In 1896 Yeats wrote *Rosa Alchemica*, where he explored the dynamics of alchemy in the form of a short story.

“I had discovered, early in my researches, that their (the alchemists) doctrine was no merely chemical phantasy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements and to man himself; and that they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of an universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance; and this enabled me to make my little book a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences. I understood the alchemical doctrine, that all beings, divided from the great

deep where spirits wander, one and yet a multitude, are weary; and sympathized, in the pride of my connoisseurship, with the consuming thirst for destruction which made the alchemist veil under his symbols of lions and dragons, of eagles and ravens, of dew and of nitre, a search for an essence which would dissolve all mortal things.” 5

This was the young Yeats who admired the power of destruction in the alchemical process. But clearly he was not yet ready to connect himself to the spirits of the ‘great deep,’ nor did he believe he could transmute the lead of the material world into the gold of a yearned for spiritual existence. It was not until his marriage and reception of *A Vision*, when transiting Saturn (lead) in the company of Neptune (dew) was in conjunction with his progressed Sun (Gold) that he found the process, which, for him had the transformational power of alchemy. Through the process of receiving and transforming the spirit material his wife channeled, Yeats became the alchemist. At last he understood and accepted himself as both human and sublime.

### **The Theme of Opposites**

In the Western Magical tradition, and most clearly delineated in alchemy, there is always the task to acknowledge and then integrate polarity, and to distill purification from the heat of suffering. As a member of the Golden Dawn he would have had to grasp the unity of opposition over and over. Yeats’ magical name, *Demon Est Deus Inversus* (the Devil is God inverted) underlines that passion for opposition.

In identifying his own natural appetite for opposition Yeats says,

“...my mind had been full of Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as a conflict...and could distinguish between a contrary and negation. ‘Contraries are positive,’ wrote Blake, ‘a negation is not a contrary... there is a place at the bottom of the grave where contraries are equally true’”6

The spirit messages drove Yeats to delve into history and biography for evidence of parallels to the cycles as they were revealed.

“My initiation into the ‘Hermetic Students’ had filled my head with Cabbalistic images, but there was nothing in Blake, Swedenborg, Boehme or the Cabbala to help me now...”7 Turning to history and biography Yeats “read with an excitement I had not known since I was a boy...and made continual discoveries... if my mind returned too soon to their unmixed abstraction they would say, ‘we are starved.’”8.

For the same reason the spirits asked Yeats

“not to read philosophy until their exposition was complete, and this increased my difficulties. Apart from two or three of the principal Platonic Dialogues I knew no philosophy. Arguments

with my father, had destroyed my confidence and driven me from speculation to the direct



experience of the Mystics.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Astrology of Yeats' Natal Chart**

The necessity to reconcile opposition is clearly delineated in Yeats' birth chart. His Sun is conjunct Uranus in the sign of Gemini, the twins, the sign most associated with duality. Opposite this brilliant but rationalist combination, is his Jupiter, powerful in the sign of Sagittarius. Jupiter in Sagittarius in the 11th house seems right for the political side of Yeats, He was born into the ruling class, the landlord English presence, yet he was a staunch Irish Republican and Celtic revivalist. Here was another painful contradiction which was transformed over time. He felt in his early life that he was neither English nor Irish, yet, he was active in support of the Irish revolution for freedom, and became a member of the Irish parliament once the new government was formed.

Jupiter in Sagittarius in the 11th house is also symbolic of his role as ritualist and hierophant in the Golden Dawn. North Node conjunct Saturn in Libra makes a sextile to this Jupiter from the cusp of the Ninth House. Yeats struggled to incorporate all these threads of his life into the rich tapestry of his life.

What Then?

His chosen comrades thought at school  
He must grow a famous man;

He thought the same and lived by rule,  
All twenties crammed with toil;  
*'What then?' sang Plato's ghost? 'What then?'*

Everything he wrote was read,  
After certain years he won  
Sufficient money for his need,  
Friends that have been friends indeed;  
*What then sang Plato's ghost, 'What then?'*

All his happier dreams came true—  
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,  
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,  
Poets and Wits about him drew;  
*'What then? sang Plato's ghost, 'What then?'*

*'The work is done,' grown old he thought,  
According to my boyish plan;  
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,  
Something to perfection brought';  
But louder sang that ghost, "What then?"*<sup>10</sup>

Yeats' powerful Gemini Mercury stands upon the IC perhaps to symbolize the literary and intellectual nature of the Anglo-Irish culture into which he was born. He tried to overcome his intellectual nature in order to excel as poet and magician. He desperately wanted to connect to the world of spirit through direct experience. Yet when he did make contact with spirits through his wife's reception of *A Vision*, his Gemini Mercury and Sun-Uranus combination would come into its own. For the first time in his life he willingly delved into scholarship to discover the historical and cultural manifestations of the Moon's cycle, which was revealed to him through the channeled material.

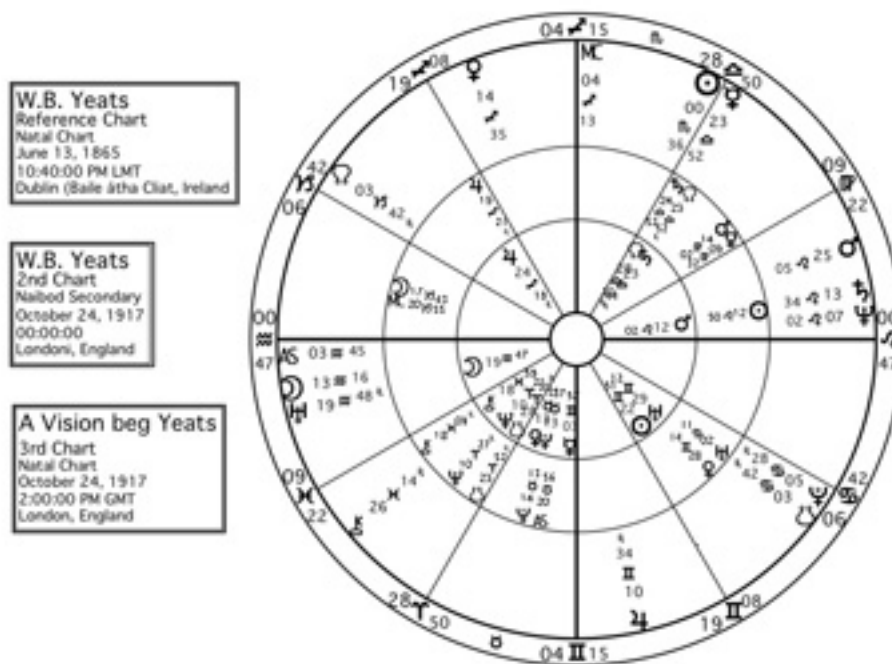
Yeats' ascendant and Moon in Aquarius in his first house might be an indicator of the importance of astrology in his life. Mars opposes Moon in the 7<sup>th</sup> house in the sign of Leo. This fiery Mars balanced his airy Ascendant, Moon and Sun with the passion for action which they lacked. The Moon trines Saturn in Libra and the Sun in Gemini to form a grand trine in air. This pattern can often be found in the chart of people who enjoy intellectual stimulation, but don't make use of their talents.

Other than Chiron, there are no planets or angles with water signs. It's strange that a poet so identified with emotional imagery should lack this element. Perhaps the deep feeling, and certainly the intense love of the Irish countryside is symbolized by his Pluto and Venus conjunction in Taurus. As a Druid and astrologer, I have drawn up the horoscopes of many people who reverence the earth as sacred and beloved, and have often noticed the prominence of Taurus in their charts.

Neptune in Yeats' chart makes a trine to his 7th house Mars. His most famous lines are an illustration of that trine:

The Second Coming  
Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>11</sup>

At the time of Yeats' birth, Neptune and Saturn were approaching an opposition, which we are experiencing in 2006-2007. At the time of his wedding and the reception of *A Vision*, Saturn and Neptune had just completed a conjunction in the 7th house. Form (Saturn) and spirit (Neptune) had come together to show him the true nature of opposition. It seems significant that Yeats' life long desire to channel (Neptune) spirit information came directed to him, through his wife (seventh house).



### Astrology of the Arrival of *A Vision*

Four days after their marriage Georgie Yeats, who was also a member of the Golden Dawn and an astrologer, began to channel the messages, which became *A Vision*. Progressed Mercury and Mars had just entered Yeats' eighth house of transformation. Transiting Mercury was exactly conjunct his natal Saturn on that day. Saturn in his chart is conjunct his North Node in Libra. In order to cook in the cauldron of alchemy, Yeats had to except this responsibility of marriage, and with it the process of turning the base metal of everyday human life into the gold he so yearned for in his spiritual quest.

The Moon was in Aquarius on the day of the first spirit messages, and during the afternoon was conjunct his natal Aquarius Moon. In close proximity to the Moon, transiting Uranus was also making an exact conjunction to his first house natal Moon. This seems quite right for the beginning of an unusual work about the Moon's cycles! The Moon magic continued with the approaching opposition during the reception of the spirit information, between his progressed Sun, in Leo, and his natal Moon. A bit later his progressed Moon would conjunct that powerful Moon in Aquarius and then be in the Full Moon position to his progressed Sun. Sol and Luna were in a cosmic alchemical dance.

Yet looked at overall, the book, the way it was received, and the basic principles and themes, are Mercury and Neptune territory. Here again we find the basic dichotomy of *A Vision*: objective-subjective. Neptune is about vision (subjective), yet this experience sent Yeats into an intellectual foray (objective) that would seem Mercurial. Contemplating the Moon in this Mercurial way, Yeats reclaimed his delight in scholarship and philosophy.

### **Astrology of Yeats' Marriage**

Yeats, as astrologer expected to marry while his progressed Sun in Leo was conjunct his natal Mars in the seventh house. At the same time, transiting Saturn had also entered the 7th house and passed over his Mars. And if that were not enough cosmic prompting, Yeats' last progressed new Moon, which occurred in 1904 had taken place at 29° Cancer, 1 degree from his 00° Leo Descendant, the cusp of the 7<sup>th</sup> house. The manifestation (progressed Full Moon) of that important new cycle would take place in 1919 within a few degrees of Yeats' natal Moon.

As he saw marriage in his chart, Yeats once again proposed to his beloved Maud Gonne, and when that proposal was rejected, proposed to her daughter, Iseult. With that also denied him he proposed to twenty five year old Georgie Hyde-Lees. They were married two weeks later. Yeats used his Leo Mars in the seventh to quickly enter this new phase of his life. Uranus was in exact conjunction by transit with Yeats' Aquarian Moon in the first house at the time of the wedding. Here was a sign of deep change of feeling, even identity. And with his Moon in aspect to so many planets in his natal chart, this would reverberate throughout. Yeats had spent 28 years, an entire Saturn cycle, in love with Maud Gonne. Her refusal to marry him in the physical world—they claimed to have a spiritual marriage—provided Yeats with the emotional suffering necessary for the alchemical breakdown process to take place.

Georgie had been in love with Yeats from her childhood. Yeats discovered that his young wife could provide him excitement from a source he had never expected. A new life as husband and father began for him. Combined with the information he was receiving from the spirits, Georgie's channeling may have provided the intensity (Pluto is conjunct Venus in Yeats' natal chart) he needed to make his marriage romantically exciting for him.

The Saturn-Neptune conjunction with Yeats' progressed Sun and natal Mars all took place in the 7th house of marriage and in the sign of Leo (one of the main symbols of alchemy). The chart for the wedding day does not suggest a cozy domestic partnership, rather a relationship with sudden and electrifying communications from mysterious sources. The spirit communication allowed Yeats to enter a transformational relationship with a woman grounded in the earth of daily life.

## Gratitude to the Unknown Instructors

*What they undertook to do  
They brought to pass;  
All things hang like a drop of dew  
Upon a blade of grass.*<sup>12</sup>

*A Vision* must be read in a kind of twilight state of understanding. Yeats, in his prologue to this multi-layered description of the Moon's cycle wrote:

"Some of those readers I most value ...will be repelled by what must seem an arbitrary, harsh, difficult symbolism. Yet such has almost always accompanied expression that unites the sleeping and waking mind. " <sup>13</sup>

The system presented uses the Moon's cycle for the model of the soul's evolution, and a lunar rather than linear explanation of historical periods. All phases of the cycle must be experienced and reconciled through the acceptance of wholeness.

"Sing me the changes of the moon once more:  
True song, though speech: 'mine author sung it me' <sup>14</sup>

Sing out the song: sing to the end, and sing  
The strange reward of all that discipline."<sup>15</sup>

The spirits insisted that Yeats verify the proof of their assertions in history and biography. Yeats' gives this description:

"It was part of their purpose to affirm that all of the gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his true being."<sup>16</sup>

Yeats had attracted the notice of the spirit informants when he published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*.

"I had made a distinction between the perfection that is from a man's combat with himself and that which is from a combat with circumstance..." <sup>17</sup> Upon this distinction the spirits built "an elaborate classification of men according to their more or less complete expression of one type or the other."<sup>18</sup>

*A Vision* describes the cycle of the Moon as a double gyre, in which spheres of opposites spiral in on one another creating a diamond pattern in the center where they commingle. Yeats mentions

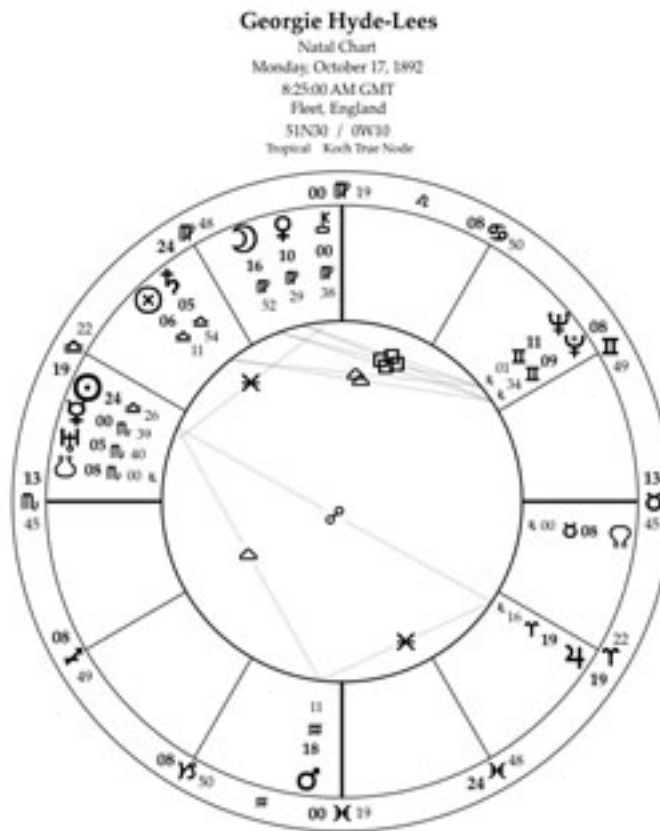
"Alcemon, a pupil of Pythagoras, who thought that men die because they cannot join their beginning and their end. Their serpent has not its tail in its mouth." <sup>19</sup>

This theme of working with opposites is a necessary step for the initiate in the Western Magical tradition. C.G. Jung describes this process in his work on alchemy, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*.  
"...in the image of the uroboros (the serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail) lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process. The uroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., of the shadow...it is said of the uroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself." <sup>20</sup>



## Spirit Communication

During the ten years of spirit communication, methods and signals of the messengers changed often. Georgie very soon tired of the automatic writing and Yeats took over as scribe, while she spoke the words in trance or sleep. It should be noted that in the first edition no mention is made of her participation. She had not wanted her part as channel to be revealed. Perhaps this can be explained by her conjunction of Pluto and Neptune in Gemini. The ability to channel spirit communication (Neptune in Gemini) may have been a Plutonic secret. Or we can look to her Mercury conjunct Uranus (unusual communication) in Scorpio as the reason for reticence. Then there is the issue of the conjunction between Yeats' Libra Saturn and her Libra Sun. Perhaps he did not want her to shine, or she felt that way.



The spirits announced their presence in a multitude of ways, and Yeats and his wife were treated to a variety of spirit phenomena. There was whistling as a warning to Yeats that the communication through his sleeping wife would begin. When servants complained of a 'whistling ghost' the technique was abandoned, but sudden smells were a continuing signal. Floral odors, roses and violets and the smell of incense were the most common, but sometimes a foul smell like cat's excrement would arise. Flashing lights, cracking sounds and breaths of warm air were also signals of their presence.

The spirit sources were highly fallible, and often mistook conversational comments between Yeats and his wife. For example, they were in a restaurant on one occasion, talking about a garden. The spirits misunderstood and decided that they were alone in a garden and began to communicate with Georgie, much to her distress.

There were also interruptions in the presentation of the material by hostile spirits who were called the 'Frustrators.' They would occasionally take over the dictation and throw the whole system into confusion before their plot was discovered. Yeats was forbidden to speak "of any part of the system, except of the incarnations ...because if I did the people I talked to would talk to other people, and the communicators would mistake that misunderstanding for their own thought." 21

For a man who was extremely sociable with a wide circle of literary and magical friends, it must have been quite a challenge to keep this fascinating project largely secret.

### **What the Book Contains**

*A Vision* begins with a long poem called *The Phases of the Moon*. The introduction to the book tells the story of the reception of *A Vision*, and how deeply it affected the poet's intellectual and artistic life. It then goes into a description, based on the symbol of a double cone or vortex, explaining the cycles of history and art, as well as the soul's journey.

"Twenty and eight the phases of the moon,  
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents" 22

Finding the cone symbol difficult, Yeats turned to the Great Wheel and the Moon's cycle as he continued to revise the book. "I described the Great Wheel as danced on the desert sands by mysterious dancers who left the traces of their feet to puzzle the Caliph of Baghdad. This wheel is every completed moment of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought. Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it attainable, at Phase 15 (Full Moon) and returns to Phase 1 (New Moon) again...Phase 15 is called Sun in Moon because the solar or primary tincture is consumed by the lunar....all is beauty." 23

"The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war  
In its own being, and when that war's begun  
There is no muscle in the arm; and after,  
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,  
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,  
To die into the labyrinth of itself!" 24

The twenty-eight phase lunar system becomes a structure on which Yeats categorizes the men and women he knew around him and those of the past he had chosen to study. Like Dante before him he seizes the opportunity to place his friends and enemies where they belong in a great system. Even though Yeats was an astrologer, he did not look to the relationship of the Sun and Moon in the charts of those he listed for each phase. Instead he developed a system of twenty-eight archetypes characterized by four faculties which he calls Will, Mask, Creative Mind and Body of Fate.

Here is an example of his descriptions taken from Phase 6.

“Had Walt Whitman lived out of phase, desire to prove that all his emotions were healthy and intelligible, to set his practical sanity above all not made in his fashion, to cry “Thirty years old and in perfect health!” would have turned him into some kind of jibing demagogue; and to think of him would be to remember that Thoreau, picking up the jaw-bone of a pig with no tooth missing, recorded that there also was perfect health. [Whitman] used his Body of Fate (his interest in crowds, casual loves and affections, and all summary human experience) to clear intellect of antithetical emotion...Abstraction had been born, but it remained the abstraction of community....” 25

The next sections of *A Vision* (Books II, III and IV) take the Great Wheel analogy beyond the description of personality to the larger cycles of history. Yeats explains the cycle can also be divided between the influence of Mars and Venus in the signs Aries and Taurus to the influence of Saturn and Jupiter in the signs of Aquarius and Pisces.

“These two conjunctions which express so many things are certainly, upon occasion, the outward-looking mind, love and its lure, contrasted with introspective knowledge of the mind’s self-begotten unity, an intellectual excitement.” 26

Here we have the description of Yeats’ two inspirational forces in his poetry: his passion for Maud Gonne (Mars/Venus) which ruled the first half of his adult life, and the material he received through Georgie for *A Vision* which began with his marriage in middle age (Jupiter/Saturn).

Yeats used the lunar cycle to explain the soul’s journey between lives. Here is a sample of the poet’s explanation of this delicate subject in which the soul struggles to remember what it learns from one incarnation to the next:

“I remember a beautiful young girl singing at the edge of the sea in Normandy words and music of her own composition....sang with lifted head of the civilisations that there had come and gone, ending every verse with the cry: ‘O Lord, let something remain.’”27

Book IV is called The Great Year of the Ancients and is based upon the complete cycle of two thousand year periods for each sign of the zodiac. The Great Year begins and ends with the precession of the equinox from the sign of Aries as the Vernal Equinox. Yeats called his last segment *Dove or Swan*, and, attempts to trace civilizations through the cycle of the last four thousand years, the Christian era and the two thousand year cycle that went before. He introduces this section of *A Vision* with his poem, *Leda*. Many of Yeats’ poems of this period contain his contrast between Pagan and Christian thought and imagery.

#### Leda

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs,

And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? 28

### **Impact Upon the Poet**

Yeats received *A Vision* as he entered the waning phase of his life. The material he received allowed him to integrate his life as poet, magician, husband, father and public servant of the newly independent Ireland.

And after that the crumbling of the moon:  
The soul remembering its loneliness  
Shudders in many cradles; all is changed.  
It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,  
Choosing whatever task's most difficult  
Among the tasks not impossible, it takes  
Upon the body and upon the soul  
The coarseness of the drudge.  
Before the full  
It sought itself and afterwards the world. 29

Despite bouts with serious illness, this was a time of tremendous vitality and productive fervor for Yeats. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, continued his relationship with the disintegrating Golden Dawn, became a senator of the Irish Free State, and traveled widely. He published four books of poetry while receiving the spirit material: *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. The poet revised *A Vision* throughout his lifetime. Each edition contains changes in his beliefs about the material.

When I first read *A Vision*, I was often frustrated in my attempts to 'understand' it, yet the book opened Yeats' poetry to me as if a key had turned in a locked door. Upon reading *A Vision*, I was drawn to these same magical sources, including astrology, Tarot and Druidry. As astrologers, we have the opportunity to experience and appreciate first hand the rich symbolism which inspired Yeats as a writer.

A decade after the messages began, Lady Gregory, co-founder of the Irish Literary Review and Abbey Theatre said to Yeats: "You are a much better educated man than you were ten years ago and much more powerful in argument."<sup>30</sup> Yeats replied: "And I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this

change to an incredible experience.“<sup>31</sup> This ‘incredible experience’ was the reception and creation of *A Vision* and the alchemical transformation which took place in Yeats’ life.

## END NOTES

- 1 Collected Poems, p. 211
- 2 *A Vision*, p. 8
- 3 Celtic Twilight, preface
- 4 *A Vision*, 1925 dedication
- 5 Rosa Alchemica, PART 1
- 6 *A Vision*, p. 72
- 7 *A Vision* p. 12
- 8 *A Vision* p. 12
- 9 *A Vision* p. 12
- 10 Collected Poems, p. 300
- 11 Collected Poems, p. 184
- 12 Collected Poems p. 249
- 13 *A Vision* p. 23
- 14 *A Vision*, p. 66
- 15 *A Vision* p. 61
- 16 *A Vision* p. 13
- 17 *A Vision* p. 8
- 18 *A Vision* p. 8-9
- 19 *A Vision*, p.13
- 20 *A Vision*, p. 60
- 21 *A Vision* p. 80-83
- 22 *A Vision*, p. 60
- 23 *A Vision* p. 113-114
- 24 *A Vision* p. 207
- 25 *A Vision* p. 220
- 26 *A Vision* p. 267
- 27 *A Vision*. p. 8
- 28 *A Vision* p. 8
- 29 *A Vision* p. 5

## Chart Data and Sources

### William Butler Yeats

June 13, 1865 10:40 PM LMT 23:05 GMT Dublin, Ireland 53 N 20 6W15,

Rodden Rating: AA, from Yeats’ family Bible.

Source: Quoted in Mary Greer’s *Women of the Golden Dawn*, 1995, Park Street Press. Rochester, VT.

### Georgie Hyde-Lee Yeats

October 16, 1892 8:25 am, Fleet England 51N30 0W10 source:

<http://www.yeatvision.com/Charts.html>

This was the data for the chart which Georgie used for herself according to her biographer,

Anne Saddlemeyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

### **Reception of the spirit messages**

October 24, 1917 London. (I chose 2:00 PM for the time.)

Rodden Rating: A, from memory

Source: Yeats' introduction to *A Vision* in he which says: "On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, *four days after my marriage...*"

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### **BIOGRAHY**

Sarah Fuhro combines her training as an astrology counselor and flower essence practitioner in a healing practice she calls Star-Flower Alchemy. She is a Druid member of the international Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, and participates in the training of Druids. Her love of Yeats' poetry and *A Vision* led her to a Golden Dawn study group in 1976 where she began her exploration of Tarot, astrology and the Western magical tradition. She has a deep commitment to help her clients to hear the messages of the natural world through astrology and flower essences. Sarah can be reached at 508 652 9881. [sarahbeagl@aol.com](mailto:sarahbeagl@aol.com) or <http://www.StarFlowerAlchemy.com>.