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# The Religious Ideas of William Butler Yeats in A Vision

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THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

IN A VISION  
(TITLE)

BY

BEVERLY ANN KLAUS  
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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## INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the major factors influencing the development of the religious ideas of William Butler Yeats and his expression of these ideas in A Vision.

What is religion? The definition of religion accepted by the author of this paper is the following:

Any system of belief, worship, conduct, etc., often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

According to some critics, perhaps William Butler Yeats has expressed his religious ideas better than any other writer of his time, although they have been derogated by a number of critics, as the most representative anthology, The Permanence of Yeats, illustrates.

In his essay, "Yeats as an Example," W.H. Auden rejects the ideas of Yeats:

How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats's gift take such nonsense seriously?...but mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient--how embarrassing...Thus, we find Yeats adopting a cosmology apparently on purely aesthetic grounds, i.e., not because it is true but because it is interesting...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 1527.

<sup>2</sup>W.H. Auden, "Yeats as an Example," The Permanence of Yeats, James Hall (ed.) (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 345-346.



T.S. Eliot calls Yeats "the greatest poet of our time":

But to be able to praise, it is not necessary to feel complete agreement; and I should not think it right to dissimulate the fact that there are aspects of his thought and feeling which to myself are unsympathetic.<sup>3</sup>

Since the religious sources are so numerous and Yeats spent nearly fifty years on the development and synthesis of his ideas, a complete summary of the sources of Yeats's religious ideas is impossible in a paper of this type. But some of the sources are immediately apparent, some assuming more importance than others: those of major importance being (1) The conflict of family attitudes; (2) Ancient Irish background; (3) Blake's Prophetic Books; (4) The revival of occultism.

Sources of religious influence of less importance are: (1) Ancient Greek background; (2) Shelley's Prometheus Unbound; (3) Swedenborg's works; (4) Japanese Noh plays.

A wide range of philosophy of the traditional type also entered incidentally into the formulation of Yeats's ideas. Yeats was familiar also with the doctrines of reincarnation embodied in the Hindu Upanishads and in Buddhism and medieval astrological lore such as Chaucer's Frankelene mentioned.

In the present study the writer's summary and evaluation of the major sources will be presented first, followed by a discussion

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<sup>3</sup>T.S. Eliot, "The Poetry of W.B. Yeats," The Permanence of Yeats, p. 343.

of the minor influences and sources, with particular reference to Yeats's major work, A Vision, about which a final summarizing chapter has been added.

## CHAPTER I

### THE CONFLICT OF FAMILY ATTITUDES

The family into which the philosopher-poet was born served as a fertile ground for the early development of intellectual and religious ideas. Conflicting personalities of this family caused the early development of conflicting ideas in the mind of young Willy Yeats, who was born near Dublin, Ireland, on June 13, 1865, the son of John Butler and Susan Pollexfen Yeats.

Since the failure of an ancestor in business, the Yeats family had lost interest in material concerns and were chiefly preoccupied with what they considered to be "the good things in life"--art, literature, music, philosophy, and religion.

John Butler Yeats, the poet's great-grandfather, attended Trinity College, Dublin, took orders in the Church of Ireland, and was appointed the living at Drumeliff in County Sligo. His children, William Butler and Thomas, after preliminary education with their father in Sligo, also attended Dublin University and became clergymen in the Church of Ireland.

Later, the poet's father, John Butler Yeats, following the family tradition, also attended Trinity College, Dublin, where he was expected to follow the example of his father and grandfather and take orders in the Church of Ireland. However, the young John Butler Yeats began to question the validity of the teachings of the Church of Ireland and entered enthusiastically into the study of classics, metaphysics, and logic. John Butler Yeats tells of this

experience in his Early Memories:

...I lost my orthodoxy. I was reading Butler's Analogy when I suddenly amazed myself by coming to the conclusion that revealed religion was myth and fable.<sup>1</sup>

Making an unsuccessful attempt at law, the aesthetically-minded John Butler Yeats decided to become an artist.

In September, 1863, at St. John's Church in Sligo, John Butler Yeats married Susan Pollexfen, whose family offered a marked contrast to the idealistically-minded Yeats group.<sup>2</sup> Considering worldly and material possessions of utmost importance in life, the Pollexfens cared little for intellectual pursuits. Yeats said of them:

They were practical, always doing something with their hands, making boats, feeding chickens, and without ambition...They let their houses decay and the glass fall from the windows of their greenhouses, but one among them at any rate had second sight. They were liked, but had not the pride and reserve, the sense of decorum and order, the instinctive playing before themselves that belongs to those who strike the popular imagination.<sup>3</sup>

The Yeats family was proud of their ancestors, telling of the deeds they had done, but the Pollexfens were quite reticent about their smuggling ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup>John Butler Yeats, Early Memories (Churchtown: The Guala Press, 1924), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>William Butler Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 17.

When Willy was three years old, the family moved to London in order for John Butler Yeats to attend art school. Nevertheless, Mrs. Yeats maintained close contact with Ireland and Sligo. During these early years, Susan Pollexfen Yeats exerted a religious influence upon her children, teaching them their prayers, having them confirmed, and taking them to church. The marked difference between Willy's mother and father was summed up by J.B. Yeats's characterization of his own parents:

My father was my friend and counsellor, my mother was my conscience. My father theorized about things that delighted me...My mother never explained anything, she hadn't the theoretic faculty.<sup>4</sup>

William became deeply aware of the skepticism of his father. Questioning of God's existence began to occupy the boy's thoughts. Who was God? Where was God?

My father's unbelief had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion.<sup>5</sup>

While staying in London, John Butler Yeats, the poet's father, apparently became quite concerned about the emotional and physical condition of Willy, who was always considered a strange child. These words of J.B. Yeats are found in a letter to his wife, who was visiting at the Pollexfen home in Sligo with her children:

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<sup>4</sup>Early Memories, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Autobiography, p. 25.

I am very anxious about Willy. He is never out of my thoughts. I believe him to be intensely affectionate, but from shyness, sensitiveness and nervousness, difficult to win and yet he is worth winning. I should, of course, like to see him to do what is right but he will only develop by kindness and affection and gentleness. Bobby is robust and hardy and does not mind rebuffs-- but Willy is sensitive, intellectual, and emotional, very easily rebuffed and continually afraid of being rebuffed so that with him one has to use sensitiveness which is so rare at Merville.<sup>6</sup>

One can surmise the turmoil that must have been raging in such an idealistic young mind. Especially in connection with the extreme difficulty he experienced in learning to read, his Pollerfen relatives decided Willy was a daydreamer and quite lacking in intelligence.

Yeats wrote thus about the situation to read in his

Autobiography:

Because I had found it hard to attend to anything less interesting than my thoughts, I was difficult to teach. Several of my uncles and aunts had tried to teach me to read, and because they could not, and because I was much older than children who read easily, had come to think, as I have learnt since, that I had not all my faculties.<sup>7</sup>

When nothing was accomplished, an attempt was made by J.B. Yeats to teach his young son.

Having noticed that his father did not attend church services with the rest of the family, William decided his father's refusal to attend church was a good excuse to stay away from Sunday services

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<sup>6</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

at St. John's Church. William had never particularly cared to attend these services because he had to dress in uncomfortable clothes and obey his stern Grandmother Pollexfen. So, much to his mother's displeasure, young William Butler Yeats stopped attending Sunday church services:

My father was staying in the house and never went to church, and that gave me the courage to refuse to set out one Sunday morning. I was often devout, my eyes filling with tears at the thought of God and for my own sins, but I hated Church. My grandmother tried to teach me to put my toes first to the ground because I suppose I stumped on my heels...My father said if I would not go to church he would teach me to read...

He was an angry and impatient teacher and flung the reading book at my head, and next Sunday I decided to go to church.<sup>8</sup>

One finds some of Yeats's childhood distress was due to fear of his maternal grandfather, William Pollexfen. Yeats described this fear of Grandfather Pollexfen in his "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth":

Some of my misery was loneliness and some of it fear of old William Pollexfen, my grandfather. He was never unkind, and I cannot remember that he ever spoke harshly to me, but it was the custom to fear and admire him...I think I confuse my grandfather with God, for I remember in one of my attacks of melancholy praying that he might punish me for my sins...<sup>9</sup>

Young Willy also admired the old man, wishing for

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<sup>8</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

some of the grandfather's courage and strength:

I had a harassed life and got many a black eye and had many outbursts of grief and rage...I was ashamed of my lack of courage, for I wanted to be like my grandfather, who thought so little of danger that he had jumped overboard in the Bay of Biscay after an old hat.<sup>10</sup>

Later, W.B. Yeats describes his early religious feelings:

All my religious emotions were, I think, connected with clouds and cloudy glimpses of luminous sky, perhaps because of some Bible picture of God's speaking to Abraham or the like. At least I can remember the sight moving me to tears.<sup>11</sup>

Again, Yeats tells us about the origin of one of his beliefs:

One day I got a decisive argument for belief. A cow was about to calve, and I went to the field where the cow was with some farmhands who carried a lantern, and next day I heard the cow had calved in the early morning. I asked everybody how calves were born, and because nobody would tell me, made up my mind that nobody knew. They were the gift of God, that much was certain, but it was plain nobody had ever dared to see them come, and children must come in the same way. I made up my mind that when I was a man, I would wait up till calf of child had come.<sup>12</sup>

While listening to conversations of his Pollexfen relatives, Willy heard them speak of "the voice of the conscience." Willy

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>12</sup>Loc. cit.



wondered why had not heard such a voice, and because he had heard no voice, decided his soul must be lost:

One day someone spoke to me of the voice of the conscience, and as I brooded over the phrase I came to think that my soul, because I did not hear an articulate voice, was lost. I had some wretched days until being alone with one of my aunts I heard a whisper in my ear, "What a tease you are!" At first I thought my aunt must have spoken, but when I found she had not, I concluded it was the voice of my conscience and was happy again...From that day the voice has come to me at moments of crisis, but now it is a voice in my head that is sudden and startling. It does not tell me what to do, but often reproves me. It will say perhaps, 'That is unjust,' of some thought; and once when I complained that a prayer had not been heard, it said, 'You have been helped.'<sup>13</sup>

Yeats relates two other experiences apparently supernatural:

I had a little flagstaff in front of the house and a red flag with the Union Jack in the corner. Every night I pulled my flag down and folded it up and laid it on a shelf in my bedroom, and one morning before breakfast I found it, though I knew I had folded it up the night before, knotted round the bottom of the flagstaff so that it was touching the grass. I must have heard the servants talking of the faeries for I concluded at once that a faery had tied those four knots and from that time on believed that one had whispered in my ear. I have been told, though I do not remember it myself, that I saw, whether once or many times, I do not know, a supernatural bird in the corner of a room.<sup>14</sup>

When the poet's brother Robert died, Willy's young mind was filled with more questions. Relatives told Willy that God had taken Robert.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Loc. cit.

My realization of death came when my father and mother and my two brothers and my two sisters were on a visit. I was in the library when I heard feet running past and heard somebody say in the passage that my younger brother, Robert, had died. ...Next day at breakfast I heard people telling how my mother and the servant had heard the banshee crying the night before he died. It must have been after this that I told my grandmother I did not want to go with her when she went to see old bed-ridden people because they would soon die.<sup>15</sup>

For what reason did God take Robert? Where did He take Robert? Should Yeats accept the skepticism of his father or the faith of his mother in order to find the answers?

Torn between the conflicting attitudes of his parents, William Butler Yeats did not have a happy, normal childhood. He gives a statement to this effect in his "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth":

Indeed I remember little of childhood but its pain.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the next sentence, Yeats tells us:

I have grown happier with every year of life as though gradually conquering something in myself, for certainly my miseries were not made by others but were a part of my own mind.<sup>17</sup>

Yeats spent a whole lifetime searching for answers to his religious queries in his vast reading in science, history, philosophy, religion, and literature based on symbols and themes of primitive religion. Finally, the composite of all these ideas emerged in his creation of A Vision.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>17</sup>Loc cit.

## CHAPTER II

### ANCIENT IRISH BACKGROUND

At about the same time that William Butler Yeats first began to hear about God and "the voice of the conscience" from his Pollexfen relatives, he also heard about fairies and "second sight." Susan Pollexfen and her Middleton relatives deeply loved Sligo and Ireland and passed on unforgettable stories to young Willy:

It was through the Middletons perhaps that I got my interest in country stories, and certainly the first faery stories that I heard were in the cottages about their houses.<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Moore in her work, The Unicorn, said of Yeats and his native Sligo:

Yeats was passionately Irish, and perhaps the more so because, long ago, some of the Irish had come from Yorkshire. Not Dublin, and certainly not London of recurrent exile, but Sligo--Sligo on the Western shore of Ireland, together with Drumcliff's bay and mountains--his heart called home. It was as if its legends and Druid lore had been melted down and dissolved forever in his blood. Cut him anywhere, and he bled Sligo.<sup>2</sup>

The Irish people had always been believers in supernatural happenings and loved to relate their native legends. Their belief in visions was especially suited to the taste of Yeats.

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<sup>1</sup>Autobiography, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Moore, The Unicorn (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 42.

Although many unimaginative people could live in such an environment, discounting the tales and mythology of the Irish folk as mere make-believe stories, young Yeats, being naturally inquisitive about the spiritual world, listened avidly to the accounts of the Sligo cottagers:

...All the well-known families had their grotesque or tragic or romantic legends, and I often said to myself how terrible it would be to go away and die where nobody would know my story. Years afterwards, when I was ten or twelve years old and in London, I would remember Sligo with tears, and when I began to write, it was there I hoped to find my audience.<sup>3</sup>

In A Vision Yeats mentions the tales of Irish cottagers telling of spirits departing into the air in an ascending gyre. In an early essay in The Celtic Twilight, Yeats relates such an event told by an Irish countrywoman:

With that she gave a swirl round on her feet and raises up in the air and round and round she goes, and up and up, as if it was a winding stairs she went up, only far swifter. She went up and up, till she was no bigger than a bird against the clouds, singing and singing the whole time the loveliest music I ever heard in my life from that day to this.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter of July, 1892, Yeats tells of other miraculous events:

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<sup>3</sup>Autobiography, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>William Butler Yeats, The Celtic Twilight (London: A.H. Bullen, 1902), p. 205.

I work from 11 to 2, chiefly at my novel. When reading I have to rest a minute or two every twenty minutes...I have no news, for Galway is not the place for it, at least no news of this world--I have plenty of news of the other. For instance, a woman who came to mend chairs went for a walk down the avenue with the housemaid last week and presently both came in in a fainting state. They had seen three fairies--tall figures with black hats and ruffs, evidently Elizabethans. (I saw an Elizabethan woman here a year ago.) That night, later on, one of them was going upstairs to bed and saw a portrait of Mary Queen of Scots that is here, and fainted because she recognized the ruff. The way I saw my Elizabethan was I seemed to wake up in the middle of the night, not exactly to wake up but to see the room and bed quite clearly--and I saw her pass through the room.<sup>5</sup>

Yeats began to have strange dreams and one evening when crossing a little stream had a weird sensation. That night he sat up in his bed and heard a voice saying:

The love of God is infinite, for every soul is unique, and no other soul can satisfy the same need in God.<sup>6</sup>

This idea reappears by implication in many of Yeats's works.

Both believers in the supernatural world, Yeats's uncle, George Pollexfen, and his so-called "second-sighted" servant, Mary Battle, lived in a cottage in the village of Ballisodare. They told Yeats tales of a sound like someone throwing a handful of peas against the mirror under which another cousin was reading and a heavy thumping upon the walls

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats, p. 150.

<sup>6</sup>William Butler Yeats, "Anima Mundi," Essays (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 513.

in a different portion of the room. Steps were heard in the empty house by a servant, while at night time a cousin saw the ground under some trees all in a blaze of light:

His servant, Mary Battle, who had been with him since he was a young man, had the second-sight, and that, may be, inclined him to strange studies. One morning she was about to bring him a clean shirt, but stopped saying there was blood on the shirt-front, and that she must bring him another. On the way to his office he fell, crossing over a little wall, and cut himself and bled on to the linen where she had seen the blood. In the evening, she told him that the shirt she had thought bloody was quite clean. She could neither read nor write and her mind, which answered his gloom with its merriment, was ranned with every sort of old history and strange belief.<sup>7</sup>

After hearing these tales, Yeats began to search deeper into the Irish fairy tales and ancient legends. He found behind these ancient Irish fairy tales of "second-sight" a conception of man's organization. The ancient Celts believed every man has a Doppelganger, or dark shadow-self as well as a higher self capable of functioning independently, and so of separating from the physical body. This higher part is capable of seeing the invisible and is the "inner eye" or intuitive faculty of man.

Yeats turned to these Irish fairy tales, accepting them as authentic records of actual experience:

I began occasionally telling people that one

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<sup>7</sup>Autobiography, p. 63.

should believe whatever had been believed in all countries and periods, and only reject any part of it after much evidence, instead of starting all over afresh and only believing what one could prove.<sup>8</sup>

Yeats studied Irish folklore intensively. He consulted such Irish documents as the Book of Dun Cow, the Book of Leinster, the Book of Ballymote, the Book of Lismore, and the Yellow Book of Lecan. Yeats also read the writings and heard the lectures of contemporary Irish lore enthusiasts. Among these were Lady Mary C. Ferguson, Eugene O'Curry, and Standish O'Grady.

Yeats had this to say after studying and reading about the ancient Irish legends:

And now a new fountain of legends, and, as I think, a more abundant fountain than any in Europe is being opened, the fountain of Gaelic legend... and none can measure of how great importance it may be to coming times, for every new fountain is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Yeats became convinced that Ireland was peopled with invisible beings who possessed divine truths:

I say to myself, when I am well out of that thicket of argument, that they are surely there, the divine people, for only we who have neither simplicity nor wisdom have denied them, and the simple of all time, and the wise men of ancient times have seen them and even spoken to them. They live out their passionate lives not far off, as I think, as we shall be among them when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>9</sup>"The Celtic Element," Essays, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>The Celtic Twilight, p. 108.

Yeats also studied the teachings of the ancient Irish Druids or magicians. In these Celtic doctrines, Yeats found evidence for his later-developed ideas regarding correspondences, as well as reincarnation. One man lives through many lives, making one universal whole.

As in the Irish legends, Yeats found in the Druids' practices a distinction drawn between a higher and a lower world. To the Celts, good and evil were always present. However, evil was redeemable, being transformed by good. According to the Druids, evil arose from Annwoyn, the Underworld, Not-World, or Loveless Place, a sphere of ignorance. At the other extreme was Gwnfyd, the highest sphere of existence. A world-soul existed, creating a link between this higher and lower world, man and the supernatural.

Druidism became to Yeats more than a crude, primitive belief; he considered it a higher knowledge, brought down to earth by vision.

Yeats became so imbued with the Druids' practices that in his early twenties he started eating fungus. He had read that if one ate certain fungi, "second-sight" was increased. Since the Druids worshipped the mistletoe and regarded a drink from its berries as an assurance of fertility and an antidote against poison, Yeats began drinking mistletoe juice.

The controversy over the nature and origin of Druidism was at its height during Yeats's time. Numerous books on Druidism had been written after the publication in 1726 of Toland's Critical



History, which opened the subject. Among the authors of books discussing Celtic Druidism, Yeats seemed most concerned with the writings of John Rhys, Douglas Hyde, and Arboid de Jubainville.

Yeats comments about these authors:

To the old folklorists, fables and fairy tales were a haystack of dead follies, wherein the virtuous might find one little needle of historical truth. Since then, Jubainville and Rhys and many more have made us see, in all these things, old beautiful mythologies wherein ancient man said symbolically all he knew about God and Man's soul: once famous religions fallen into ruin and turned into old wives' tales, but still luminous from the rosy dawn of human reverie.<sup>11</sup>

Yeats assumed with Rhys that a close alignment existed between Druidism and Christianity:

Irish Druidism absorbed a certain amount of Christianity, and it is a problem of considerable difficulty to fix on the point where it ceased to be Druidism, and from which onwards it could be said to be Christianity in any restricted sense of the term.<sup>12</sup>

Yeats and his friends began to perceive an awakening of the supernatural in Ireland. In 1896 George Russell, a friend of Yeats's, wrote to William about this supernatural awakening:

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<sup>11</sup>William Butler Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup>Jacob Rhys, Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom (London: William and Norgate, 1900), p. 223.

Dear W.B.Y:

I am not going to bother you about any damned thing this time but simply to tell you some things about the Ireland behind the veil. You remember my writing to you about the awakening of the ancient fires which I knew about. Well, it has been confirmed and we are told to publish it. The Gods have Returned to Eri and have centered themselves in the sacred mountains and blow the fires through the country. They have been seen by several in vision. They will awaken the magical instinct, everywhere, and the universal heart of the people will turn to the old Druistic beliefs. I note through the country the increased faith in faery things. The bells are heard from the mounds and soundings in the hollows of the mountains. A purple sheen in the inner air, perceptible at times in the light of day spreads itself over the mountains. All this, I can add my testimony to. Furthermore, we are told that though now few we would soon be many, and that a branch of the school for the revival of the ancient mysteries to teach real things, would be formed here in time. Out of Ireland will arise a light to transform many ages and peoples. There is a hurrying of forces and swift things going out and I believe profoundly that a new Avatar is about to appear and in all spheres the forerunners go before him to prepare. It will be one of the kingly Avatars, who is at once ruler of man and magic sage. I had a vision of him some months ago and will know him if he appears.<sup>13</sup>

Yeats also believed that such a change was in store for Ireland:

When we are beginning to be interested in many things which positive science, the interpreter of exterior law, has always denied: communion of mind with mind in thought and without words, foreknowledge in dreams and in visions, and the coming among us of the dead, and much else,

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Ellmann, Yeats: the Man and the Masks (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 120.

we are, it may be, at a crowning crisis of the world, at the moment when man is about to ascend, with the wealth he has been so long gathering upon his shoulders, the stairway he has been descending from the first days.<sup>14</sup>

According to Yeats, then, myth is a way of discovering divine truth:

Myth is not, as Vico perhaps thought, a rudimentary form superseded by reflection. Belief is the spring of all action; we assent to the conclusions of reflections but believe what myth presents; belief is love, and the concrete alone is loved; nor is it true that myth has no purpose but to bring round some discovery of a principle or a fact. The saint may touch through myth the utmost reach of human faculty and pass not to reflection but to unity with the source of his being.<sup>15</sup>

After studying Irish legends and myths, Yeats arrived at the conviction that art (literature, poetry, etc.,) and religion are vitally related. Perfection or truth can be found in both art and religion:

In the very early days the arts...were almost inseparable from religion, going side by side with it into all life...I would have Ireland re-create the ancient arts...for there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection, and it sometimes has the form of the religious life and sometimes of the artistic life.<sup>16</sup>

Yeats thought that through his writings these ancient mysteries could finally be revealed to the people of Ireland.

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<sup>14</sup>"The Autumn of the Body," Essays, p. 235.

<sup>15</sup>William Butler Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup>Autobiography, p. 210.

He says in a passage in his Autobiography:

I wished my writings, and those of the school I hoped to found, to have a secret symbolical relation to these mysteries, for in this way, I thought there would be a greater richness, a greater claim upon the love of the soul...Should not religion hide within the work of art as God is within His world...<sup>17</sup>

There must be, he maintains, "a tradition of belief older than that of any European Church."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> The Permanence of Yeats, p. 226.

## CHAPTER III

### ANCIENT GREEK MYSTERY BACKGROUND

In the background of Yeats's religious ideas, one can detect not only the nature myths of pagan Ireland but also the nature myths of pagan Greek antiquity. During his search for a primitive, universal religion, Yeats always prefers Celtic mythology as his final authority; but he also relies upon the archaic faith from Greek Eleusis and the Orphic Mysteries.

Beginning in the 1890's, Yeats was determined to discover a primitive religion and through explanation of it in his writings to rescue the world from religious despair. He tells us of his conviction that such a religious faith might be founded upon Celtic heliolatry, Blake's Prophetic Books, "all imaginative literature," and "mysteries like those of Eleusis":

I planned a mystical Order which should buy or hire...a castle, and keep it as a place where its members could retire for a while for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis...; and for...years to come my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create ritual for that Order.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, here in these Orphic Mysteries, Yeats could find his universal faith of pagan antiquity. Reading widely, Yeats discovered these Orphic Mysteries have had an overwhelming influence on literature, philosophy, and religion of the western

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<sup>1</sup>Autobiography, pp. 217-218.

world. Echoes of Orphic influence can be found in the writings of Philolaus, of Plato, of Euripides, Aristophanes, Plotinus, Plutarch, medieval alchemy, Renaissance occultism, as well as in the occultist revival which swept over Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Yeats intensively read the neo-Platonists, such as Proclus and Porphyry, as well as the works of Blake, Shelley, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Boehme, and Swedenborg, each of whom was influenced by Orphism. Between 1890 and 1910, he belonged to the Golden Dawn, a society of would-be magicians who in their rituals tried to resuscitate Orphic belief and practice. And throughout A Vision and the later poems there is much symbolism echoing rites, dogmas, and theology of Eleusis.

The religion of Eleusis was a synthesis of ancient folk superstition with three originally different sacred cults and festivals. The Athenian festival of Thesmophoria, the first and oldest festival, celebrated a reborn earth god and drove evil spirits away from the first fruits. A second general Hellenic festival in honor of Dionysus, god of wine and vegetation, was based on the belief that man by means of physical intoxication at first and later by means of spiritual energy could pass from the human to the divine. Dionysus suffered an annual ritual death, followed by resurrection. Brought to Athens by Orpheus, the third festival added the belief that through mysterious acts of asceticism and

purification, men could attain complete union with the godhead, becoming immortal.

Gradually, the synthesis of the rituals of these three festivals took place, culminating around sixth century B.C. The Orphic Mysteries were based on an elaborate conception of cyclical rebirths, the symbol of which was a sacred great wheel, each spoke representing the phases of an imaginary moon. Also, central to the Orphic Mysteries was a symbolic drama of mystical death and rebirth. The physical self or evil self was to die; the spiritual or pure self was to be reborn--first in this world, but afterwards in the next; and the rebirth was to be signified by the adorning of a sacred veil or mask, the image of the worshiper's own idealized self or godhead.

Furthermore, these Orphic rites were based on a mystical conception of opposites: evil and good, body and soul, represented by opposing symbols such as clay and water, sun and moon, and light and darkness.

The Orphic Mysteries centered on a mystic Eros, similar to Yeats's Anima Mundi, a transcendent deity. Eros was the mind, the force, the principle of cyclical recurrence of the universe.

The Orphics believed that after death, the human soul passes from planet to planet, and on each planet is purified and reborn, relives its past life in memory, frequently in reverse, until it again becomes an infant. When the soul is again an infant, it is prepared for its next rebirth. And, after it had

made its planetary rounds of purification and rebirth, the soul next completed a number of cycles, to return to the phenomenal world, where, after being purified of all sexual desire, it became identified with the mystic Eros.

Orpheus, a priest and poet, considered art only in religious terms. The poet was a prophet who possessed the divine powers of describing the other world and possessed magic formulas for the evocation of spirits. In the same way, Yeats described the role of the modern poet and explained the function of art as being essentially religious.

Yeats's later poems reveal the Orphic influence. He often mentions Leda and writes about the Delphic oracle, as well as the mystical power of wine. His characters are capable of evoking apparitions and describe the cycles of rebirth. Among such Orphic-influenced poems are "The Rose Tree," "Easter 1916," "Byzantium," and "Crazy Jane."

Yeats's ritual plays are also suggestive of Orphism. Plays embodying the threefold theme of an Orphic festival--the ritual murder of a god, the mystical vision of a spiritual rebirth, and the evocation of supernatural powers--are Calvary, The Resurrection, The King of the Great Clock Tower, A Full Moon in March, Purgatory, The Dreaming of the Bones, The Player Queen, The Cat and the Moon, The Words upon the Window-Pane, and The Herne's Egg.



These plays are close to Orphic Mysteries in symbolism, simple narratives, and dramatic techniques, as well as themes. In these plays, one finds symbolic stagecraft, symbolic costumes, ceremonial songs, and plaster masks, suggesting a religious festival, a ritual murder of a god, and a mystical rebirth. The protagonist must cast off his lower or evil self; and he must become, with the aid of his dying and resurrected earth god, his own Mask or immortal self. For only then can he achieve purification, mystical identification with Anima Mundi, divine life, and immortality.

By employing in his plays and poems both the symbols and themes of a primitive mythology--whether Greek or Irish--Yeats believed that he could discover and re-create a universal faith. He was convinced that in the sacred rites of primitive men all modern philosophy and all modern religion have their origins.

Thus, according to Yeats, the primitive Greeks and Irish were quite close to primordial energy, happiness, and truth. He would weave into his writings by the use of archaic mythology what he considered to be permanent impulses of every human life--the impulse to die and the impulse to be reborn.

## CHAPTER IV

### SHELLEY'S PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

On the foundation of ancient Greek and Irish mythological material, Yeats continued to add. The first major additions were probably those systems of religious faith which he came upon in the poetry of Shelley and Blake. Yeats became interested in these poets' works, mainly at the suggestion of his father, in the early 1880's. The two poets became his favorite authors, and about each of them he wrote a number of essays.

Although Blake exercised the greater influence on Yeats, in this chapter, the writer will deal first with Shelley's relationship to Yeats; a more detailed discussion of Blake and Yeats will be given in the next chapter.

Yeats refers to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound as one of his "sacred books."

I have reread Prometheus Unbound, which I had hoped my fellow-students would have studied as a sacred book, and it seems to me to have an even more certain place than I had thought, among the sacred books of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Shelley's work is a poetic drama in which he mentions no theory of psychology, seldom mentions the antinomies, and makes only a few remarks about symbolic wheels. Shelley's image of moral perfection is the sun and not the moon and his work contains no long discussion of gyres and symbolic cones.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," Essays, p. 79.

Nevertheless, there are striking similarities between this work and A Vision which cannot be ignored. In both works, civilizations are described as undergoing great cycles of death and rebirth--a great age is born, grows to cultural maturity, dies, and afterwards is recreated in a succeeding age. The high point of a culture is the point at which human life is closest to a transcendent realm of pure being; and the ebb of a culture, that moment when men are farthest from God, exclusively interested in material things, and entirely forget their supernatural origins.

Both poets envision the birth of a golden age. When this age arrives men will enjoy the best possible social harmony, a brilliant unity among all their cultural endeavors and a profound communication between themselves and their souls. Shelley's golden age is similar to Yeats's description of western culture at Phase Fifteen of a historical cycle: "No description except complete beauty."<sup>2</sup>

Both poets assign a high place to the poet, proclaiming him a prophet and beholder of past knowledge. Poetry is capable of revealing ancient truths. Yeats attributes these qualities to Shelley and his poetry:

I have re-read his Prometheus Unbound for the first time for many years, in the woods of Drim-da-rod, among the Echte hills, and sometimes I have looked towards Slieve-nan-Orr, where the country people say the last battle of the world shall be fought till the third day, when a priest shall lift a chalice, and the

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<sup>2</sup>A Vision, p. 97.

thousand years of peace begin. And I think this mysterious song utters a faith as simple and as ancient as the faith of those country people, in a form suited to a new age, that will understand with Blake that the Holy Spirit is 'an intellectual fountain,' and that the kinds and degrees of beauty are the images of its authority.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are many other points of resemblance between Yeats and Shelley, but in a paper of this scope, the writer has attempted to deal only with the most evident. Since it appears that Blake had exercised the greater influence upon Yeats's thought, a more detailed study is made of Blake in the following chapter.

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<sup>3</sup>"The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," Essays, p. 80.

## CHAPTER V

### BLAKE'S PROPHETIC BOOKS

As stated in the previous chapter, William Butler Yeats's appreciation for the philosophical ideas of William Blake had been greatly encouraged by John Butler Yeats. During childhood, William listened to his father's reading of Blake's lyrics, and, later on, carried on lengthy discussions with his father about Blake's ideas. In A Vision, Yeats wrote:

I have never read Hegel, but my mind has been full of Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as conflict...and could distinguish between a contrary and a negation.<sup>1</sup>

Yeats's chief biographers--Hone, Ellmann, and Jeffares--mention Yeats's interest in Blake, but Charles Gardner goes so far as to call Yeats

A fair offspring of Blake's marriage of heaven and hell...Blake's spiritual child.<sup>2</sup>

Yeats was so intensely interested in Blake that with Edwin J. Ellis, a Pre-Raphaelite friend of his father's, he collaborated in an edition of Blake's lyrical and prophetic poems, which was published in three volumes in 1893.

Even when an old man, Yeats still was imbued with the ideas of Blake, mentioning him in his letters and other

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<sup>1</sup>A Vision, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Gardner, Vision and Vesture (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1916), p. 156.

prose works quite frequently. The first appearance of Blake's name in the correspondence occurs in a note to Katherine Tynan, written in 1889, during the period when Yeats was at work on the edition of Blake. The last appearance occurs in a letter written to Ethel Mannin in 1938, not long before Yeats's death (January 28, 1939), and it gives a clear indication of the extent to which Blake's thought held Yeats through the years.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats wanted so much to resemble Blake that he sometimes went to great lengths to find a similarity. Persuaded by a fellow Order member who claimed kinship with Blake, Yeats convinced Ellis that Blake was really an Irishman--his grandfather had changed his name from O'Neal to Blake to escape punishment for debt. Yeats also expressed pleasure that his initials were similar to Blake's.

Yeats supported his assumptions on this basis:

A marginal note in the Yeats and Ellis Blake (Vol. I, p. 2) on Blake's Irish extraction says, "My authority for Blake's Irish extraction was Dr. Carter Blake, who claims to be descended from a branch of the family that settled in Mulligan and entered the wine trade there."<sup>4</sup>

Yeats attempted to draw another association with Blake:

It is possible that he received initiation into an order of Christian Kabbalists then established in London and known as "The Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Margaret Rudd, The Divided Image (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1953), pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>5</sup>William Butler Yeats, Works, Vol. I, p. 24.

Since childhood, Yeats had been torn between the actual and the ideal aspects of the universe. To which should he turn for divine truth? Yeats tells us in A Vision that when he was twenty-three years of age this sentence popped into his head: "Hammer your thoughts into unity."<sup>6</sup> For years, Yeats searched for this unity. Yeats thought that in Blake this unity might be found:

He announced the religion of art, of which no man dreamed in the world he knew...In his time educated people believed that they amused themselves with books of imagination, but that they "made their souls" by listening to sermons and by doing or by not doing certain things...In our time we are agreed that we "make our souls" out of some one of the great poets of ancient times, or out of Shelley, or Wordsworth, or Goethe, or Balzac, or Flaubert, or Count Tolstoy in the books he wrote before he became a prophet and fell into a lesser order, or out of Mr. Whistler's pictures while we amuse ourselves, or at best make a poorer sort of soul, by listening, to sermons or by doing or not doing certain things.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, he wrote:

I had an unshakable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>A Vision, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup>William Blake and the Imagination," Essays, pp. 136-137.

<sup>8</sup>Autobiography, p. 218.

Both poets believed that there exists between every detail in the phenomenal universe and every detail in the noumenal a correspondence. The doctrine of correspondences is found to be dominant in the thoughts of both William Blake and William Butler Yeats. Yeats found in the philosophical ideas of Blake additional support for his conviction of an interrelation between the higher and the lower world involving a tension between the actual and the ideal:

Man is born a Spectre or Satan and is altogether an Evil, and requires a New Selfhood continually, and must continually be changed into his direct contrary.<sup>9</sup>

Again, Blake says:

There exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this vegetable Glass of Nature.<sup>10</sup>

Both felt opposites are to be seen throughout the universe. Although they correspond, they are in perpetual conflict and revolve in opposite directions. While alternately expanding and contracting, they alternately wind and unwind each other.

Thus, correspondences exist throughout the universe, the natural and supernatural worlds. Of course, the supernatural order is given the position of primary importance.

Blake and Yeats preached the same doctrine regarding

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<sup>9</sup>William Blake, The Complete Poetry of William Blake, p. 955.

<sup>10</sup>William Blake, Poetry and Prose (New York: Random House, 1927), p. 830.



correspondences: nature is the lower, spirit is the higher level of existence; according to both men, art bridges the gap. For both, imagination projected through art is the "means" or "vision" making possible the seeing of true form. Art and religion flow from the same source: the spiritual world.

Imagination is a spiritually divine faculty given to us. Moreover, imagination is a faculty which all human beings are capable of developing if they want to. In most men, however, imagination lies dormant, waiting to be exercised.

Blake, as well as Yeats, considered the poet a prophet. The poet revealed eternal truths to the world through his imagination by which he perceived the supernatural world. Both considered themselves as prophets of this divine truth.

Said Blake:

If I myself omit one duty to my station as soldier of Christ, it gives me the greatest of torments. I am not ashamed, afraid, or adverse to tell you what ought to be told: that I am under the direction of messengers from heaven, daily and nightly.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible, according to Yeats and Blake, not only records the lives of actual people but also uses symbols of spiritual states and stages of man's spiritual growth. According to Blake, and likewise Yeats, symbolism is the only possible expression of otherwise inexpressible spiritual essence. The power of the symbol is that it connects the individual imagination with by-

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<sup>11</sup>Letters, p. 101.

gone centuries of human emotion and experience and beyond that with the Great Memory from which all human emotions and experience spring. We find these ideas expressed by Yeats in many of his writings and especially in his Essays:

Anyone who has had any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning, if indeed they do not delude one into the dream that they are meaningless, one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has anyone who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day in some old book or on some old monument, a strange or intricate image, that had floated up before him, and to grow perhaps dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but a part of some Great Memory, that renews the world and men's thoughts, age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the bottom but a little foam upon the deep.<sup>12</sup>

Blake chose the symbolic four Zoas to present his myth to the world. These four Zoas, representing divisions of humanity, are connected with specific parts of man's body: Luvah is the heart, Urizen the head, Tharmas is the loins signifying nature and the five senses, and Uthona, the loins signifying will or spirit. Once there existed a "Universal Man" or flawless unity which fell into a downward state. Having fallen into this downward state, "Universal Man" lost his spirit. Everything was thrown out of its proper place, causing confusion, warfare, and a conflicting of opposites. Vision was lost and the only salvation is re-discovering this vision. This re-discovering of vision will require many incarnations. However, through a "Spiritual Man" created by

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<sup>12</sup>"Ideas of Good and Evil," Essays, p. 96.

God in God's image, man can be resurrected.

Again, in Blake, Yeats found the conception that everything revolves in a never-ending circle. Blake believed that God is the unity out of which everything has emanated and to which everything will return.

Declared Blake:

God is in the lowest effects as well as  
in the highest causes...Our Lord is the Word of  
God, and everything on earth is the Word of God,  
and in its essence is God.<sup>13</sup>

Possibly from this conception Yeats began to formulate his theory of the never-ceasing Great Wheel of human existence. Yeats also tells us in A Vision that he came upon his symbolic gyres while reading Blake's "The Mental Traveller." Even though the word "gyre" is not specifically used by Blake, his works convey the idea of all things dying and being reborn.

According to Blake, there are varying degrees of materiality through which man must pass before obtaining salvation or revelation of truth. He calls this state of materialism "mask." This same term is used quite frequently by Yeats when he talks about his search for reality. Both use the term "mask" as a symbol for the personality one assumes and presents to the world. In other words, a "mask" is a false face. Both writers also dealt with the problem of the cleavage between what we are and what we believe we are, or

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<sup>13</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 249.

hope to become.

Both poets thought history proceeds in great cycles. Blake thought history develops in great cycles of six thousand years each; Yeats depicts history as developing in great cycles of two thousand years each. History moves in cycles of death and rebirth, and beyond the cycle of historical progress there is the greatest possible cycle of a perpetually expanding and self-exhausting universe.

Both poets repudiated the idea of eternal damnation. The phenomenal universe perpetually exhausts itself, but the individual souls perpetually improve until the individual soul escapes from the cycles of rebirth, eventually enjoying complete happiness.

Last of all, a striking resemblance can be seen between Blake's description of Urizen, the embodiment of evil, in his prophetic work First Book of Urizen and Yeats's description of the beast in the prophetic poem "The Second Coming." In Blake Yeats found support for his ideas that a new paganistic era was rapidly approaching.

Here are Blake's lines describing this evil Urizen:

Lo, a shadow of horror is arisen  
In Eternity! Unknown, prolific,  
Self-clos'd, all-repelling; what Demon  
Hath form'd this abominable void,  
This soul-shudd'ring vacuum? Some said  
'It is Urizen.' But unknown, abstracted,  
Brooding, secret, the dark power hid...  
For he strove in battles dire,  
In unseen confliotions with shapes  
Bred from his forsaken wilderness

Of beast, bird, fish, serpent, and element...  
A self-contemplating shadow,  
In enormous labours occupied...  
Ages on ages he lay clos'd, unknown,  
Brooding, shut in deep...  
A void immense, wild, dark, and deep,  
Where nothing was: Nature's wide womb.

A similar description is found of Yeats's beast precipitating  
this new pagan era or "second coming."

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are these words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the 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?

Yeats did not cease his search for proof of his religious  
convictions. To this background, of Irish and Greek myth, Shelley's  
works, and Blake's works, Yeats continued to add.

## CHAPTER VI

### SWEDENBORG'S WORKS

During the period in which he was systematically studying Blake's works, Yeats also became acquainted with the ideas expressed by Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg. Also, Yeats read Plato and the early neo-Platonists, adding further to the materials of A Vision.

All these authors dealt with universal cycles, antinomies, geometrical symbols, the doctrine of correspondences, and the transmigration of the soul. However, in the works of Swedenborg, Yeats found the most explicit formulation of these concepts.

Even though Yeats probably did not read all of Swedenborg's works, he did read Heaven and Hell and The Spiritual Diary, as he mentions in his essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places."

Yeats found particular interest in Swedenborg's description of the soul and the life after death. According to Swedenborg, the individual has inner and outer levels of being, or faculties and principles, respectively. Immediately after death the faculties disappear, and the principles accompany the soul on its journey through the supernatural. During its supernatural life, the soul does not lose any of its earthly powers of thought or perception. At first the soul finds accepting the fact of its bodily death difficult, but once it has done so, it proceeds to relive its past

life in reverse through memory, until it has again become an infant. After this, the soul relives the exact opposite of its past life, fulfilling all dreams and unfulfilled desires. Then, it will relive the life of its next incarnation. The soul may control the thoughts and dreams of living men while it is in the supernatural world. In the same way, souls in the supernatural can become material objects, carry on conversations with human beings, and haunt the places where they once lived. Finally, the souls in the supernatural are purified of sexual desire, escaping from the cycles of rebirth and enjoying the Beatific Vision.

Furthermore, central to Swedenborg's thought was the doctrine of correspondences:

Whatever originates in the ultimate parts of nature on account of its deriving its origin from heaven, involves something celestial in what is terrestrial, or something spiritual in what is natural, and it does so on this ground, that everything that is represented in the Divine Mind cannot but be carried out in reality in the ultimate parts of nature, and be formed there according to the idea of heaven. There results thence a correspondence of all things.<sup>1</sup>

Swedenborg also looked to primitive religions for support:

The land of Canaan...Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Chaldaea, Assyria, Egypt, Zidon, Tyre, and Nineveh: the religion of all these was representative and was based upon a knowledge of correspondences. That knowledge was the basis of their wisdom and gave them interior perception and communication with heaven. Those who understood the correspondences of their Word were called wise and intelligent and afterwards diviners and magi...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Unicorn, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Loc. cit.

In 1914, Yeats wrote his essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places," his first major attempt at relating the history of the soul between death and rebirth. Another such schematization of this history is later given in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, and, finally, in A Vision. However, in Theosophy Yeats also came across a similar description of the soul's journey after death, so it is difficult to determine the extent of Swedenborg's influence.

Yeats and Swedenborg also had similar ideas regarding geometric symbols:

Gyres are occasionally alluded to, but left unexplored in Swedenborg's mystical writings. In The Principia, a vast scientific work written before his mystical life, he describes the double cone....I am not concerned with his explanation of how these cones have evolved from the point and the sphere nor with his arguments to prove that they govern all the movements of the planets, for I think, as did Swedenborg in his mystical writings, that the forms of geometry can have but a symbolic relation to spaceless reality.<sup>3</sup>

In 1910, after twenty years, Yeats re-read Swedenborg's The Spiritual Diary and found much reenforcement for his theories regarding the state of the soul after death.

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<sup>3</sup>A Vision, p. 69.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE REVIVAL OF OCCULTISM

It was only when Yeats began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that he broke away from his father's influence. To this effect Yeats made the following comment:

He had been a follower of John Stuart Mill and so had never shared Rossetti's conviction that it mattered to nobody whether the sun went round the earth or the earth round the sun. But through this new research, this reaction from popular science, I had begun to feel that I had allies for my secret thought.<sup>1</sup>

Although the skepticism of his father had a great effect upon Yeats, he still wished for some system of philosophy that would incorporate his belief that the legends, personalities, and emotions handed down by poets, painters, philosophers, and theologians were the nearest approach he knew to truth.

Yeats turned to occultism not only as a revolt against his father, but also because of a movement in that direction all over Europe and America. Many young poets and novelists were involving themselves in mystical thought, since experimental science did not supply them sufficient answers to the "whys" of the universe. The occult tradition was especially strong in France. Victor Hugo's friend, the Abbe Constant, who wrote under the name of Eliphas Levi, awakened considerable interest by a series of books taking up every aspect of what he considered "la haute magie."

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<sup>1</sup>Autobiography, p. 79.

The core of Levi's teachings was the Kabbalah, a collection of medieval Hebrew writings which occultists both during and since the Middle Ages have treated as a kind of esoteric Bible.

Yeats first heard of the Theosophists during the 1880's through his two Dublin friends, George Russell and Charles Johnston. Together, they founded the Dublin Hermetic Society. The purpose of the group was to discuss Theosophical doctrines, as well as to investigate Esoteric Buddhism, other Oriental religions, Odic Force, and the religious function of art. Yeats proposed to the Hermetic Society that they assemble the affirmations of the great poets and make a new religion out of them:

Whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and their mythology, their spirits of water and wind were but literal truth.<sup>2</sup>

A Bengali Brahmin, Babu Mohini Chatterjee, one of the earliest members of the Theosophical Society in India, was invited to lecture at the Dublin Theosophical Lodge. Chatterjee possessed a wide knowledge of different schools of Indian philosophy as well as of western philosophy and religion. He taught that everything we perceive, including so-called illusions, exists in the external world; that this is a stream which flows on, out of human control; that we are nothing but mirrors and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it reflects nothing. Yeats herein found support for his theories regarding reincarnation.

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<sup>2</sup>Yeats: the Man and the Masks, p. 43.

During this time, Yeats read widely in Theosophical literature and encountered the works of A.P. Sinnett. When he was about twenty, Yeats read Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism--the chief scripture of the Theosophic movement, which attempted to give an account of teachings of spiritual beings living in the Himalayas; and at the same time, attempted to teach that all religions are fundamentally the same, each religion having as its source a universal secret doctrine. Kept alive by oral tradition since antiquity by this mystical brotherhood, this secret wisdom has been known by a few great men such as Plato, Pythagoras, and Plotinus.

At one of these meetings of Theosophists in London, Yeats met Madame Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy. For quite a while previous to this meeting with Madame Blavatsky, Yeats had thought that divine truth could be found in the world perhaps only in some lonely mind communing with God; now, it was possible that such a mysterious person as Madame Blavatsky could tell him of such a person. Perhaps she was the person.

It was believed by adherents to Theosophy that Madame Blavatsky was the person to whom Koot-Hoomi and Morya, two masters of the Tibet brotherhood, had revealed the secret wisdom which would enable man to have a complete spiritual regeneration. Theosophy would thereby serve as a universal religion.

In her book, Isis Unveiled, with which Yeats was quite familiar, Mme. Blavatsky attacked all current religion and offered a synthesis of

science, religion, and philosophy. She asserted that the similarity in fundamental beliefs of different religions was due to the existence of the secret doctrine which was their common parent. Now, through her efforts in the Theosophical Society a little of this doctrine could be revealed from time to time to the human world.

The Secret Doctrine, Mme. Blavatsky's second book, also has something to offer Yeats. In this work, the author stated her theories of flux and reflux (a world consists of conflicts of opposites, good and evil, etc.), and the fundamental identity of souls with the Universal Oversoul. This work also supported Yeats's ideas of reincarnation. Mme. Blavatsky identified as her source The Book of Dyzan, which she declared to be the oldest manuscript in the world.

Yeats consulted G.R.S. Mead's work, Thrice-Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis, Being a Translation of the Extant Sermons and Fragments of the Trismegistic Literature, with Prolegomena, Commentaries, and Notes in order to discover more information about Hermetism. According to Mead, Hermes Trismegistus, Egyptian God of Wisdom, possessed truths which have floated down to us through thousands of years. Although The Hermetic Corpus was lost for centuries, in the eleventh century a copy fell into the hands of Michael Psellus, the great Byzantine reviver of Platonic studies. Arousing interest, Hermetism traveled into the West with humanism. Many translations of this work appeared.

Yeats found in the teachings of Theosophy striking resemblances to the other systems he had studied. Here, again, as described by Swedenborg and Blake, the universe can be thought of as exhibiting variations on certain geometrical symbols: a circle or wheel, a cone, and two interpenetrating gyres. Thus, again, one finds that all things die and are reborn.

The doctrine of correspondences and cycles is central in Theosophic thought. The most important symbol is the moon with its twenty-eight phases. Beyond the years or cycles of present human experience, a Great Year exists. Revolving in cycles of death and rebirth, a major cycle requires approximately two thousand years, and culminating in violence, is inevitably reborn differently and superior to its former existence. The ultimate result of this rebirth is a final golden age during which God and man coexist in perfect harmony.

Theosophists also believed that antinomies exist throughout the universe. Each individual possesses two selves or souls. Adopting this dichotomy, Yeats used "personality," the imaginative self, and "character," as the rational self. Of course, the imaginative self is superior.

Anima Mundi is also mentioned by the Theosophists, and appears many times in the works of Yeats. This great storehouse of intelligence is diffused throughout all things and borders on the unconscious mind of all human beings. Thus, it is possible for human beings to share in the same dreams, ideas, and

emotions. Also, Anima Mundi can be evoked through symbols which the poet, who possesses deep powers of concentration, is capable of creating.

When it is in Anima Mundi, the soul must pass through states of moral being before it can again be reborn, and its future life is ruled by the laws of Karma--our rewards or punishments in future incarnations proceed from our actions in previous lives.

Theosophy did not preach eternal damnation for human beings. Immediately before rebirth as a human being, the soul forgets all its past lives and activities in Anima Mundi. Becoming increasingly beautiful with each incarnation, the individual soul eventually is released from the cycles of rebirth and experiences complete happiness.

Yeats found in Theosophical doctrines analogies and additions to what he had already found in Greek and Irish myth, Blake and Shelley, and Swedenborg. Although after 1890 he ceased to attend Theosophic meetings as frequently as before, Yeats continued to be interested in the doctrines.

At about this time, Yeats met MacGregor Mathers, a student of magic. Mathers interested Yeats in the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, a society claiming ancient origins such as the Orphic Mysteries and the Jewish Kabbala. An active member of the Golden Dawn from 1890 to 1903, Yeats read works concerned with magic and formulated his tenets of magic in 1901 in his essay "Magic":

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 depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are—

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

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

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats's father told him that his interest in magic would never be real or lasting. Even Yeats's close associate, John O'Leary, after some prompting by Yeats's family, assumed that Yeats's interest in magic was only transitory. In a letter to John O'Leary in August, 1892, Yeats replied:

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "weak" or otherwise because I choose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life...The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin holds to the work of Shelley and I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance--the revolt of the soul against the intellect--now beginning in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Through the ancient myths and traditions of the Hermetic

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<sup>3</sup>Essays, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Yeats: the Man and the Masks, p. 94.

Students run the idea that a believer in magic can find the source of power, both material and spiritual. He does this by the use of spells and symbols, memorization, and concentration, until he raises his mind to the point where it transcends itself. Occult progress is achieved through study and practice, through self-purification, and isolation. Its steps are symbolized by a series of initiations, each of them withdrawing the initiate further from his ordinary self and bringing him, as his mind is freed of impurities, to more powerful knowledge. After he reaches a certain state of purification, he can call spirits from the vast deep, has the power to heal, and can otherwise influence men and things. He can transmit his thought over great distances, also.

Poetry was considered the highest form of spiritual expression created by a person of superior powers. Here, again, the poet was considered a prophet.

According to Yeats:

...all men, certainly all imaginative men, must be forever casting forth enchantments, glammers, illusions... Have not poetry and music arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers-by.<sup>5</sup>

Along with other members of the Golden Dawn, Yeats became a frequenter of seances. According to Yeats, spirits were able to "reunite the mind and soul and body of man to the living world

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<sup>5</sup>Essays, pp. 48-52.



outside us." Earlier, before the age of twenty, Yeats had had a rather unpleasant experience at a seance. A friend of his, Katherine Tynan, had taken him to it. When the seance was begun, Willy's body began to twitch and he was thrown against the wall. He felt compelled to make movements which he had not willed. Yeats believed evil spirits were present that night, and did not attend another seance until 1908, when his interest in the subject was renewed with vigor. In June, 1908, Yeats wrote to Florence Farr:

I had a seance last night with Mrs. Thompson, Myers' medium. Very interesting, though not exactly evidential. The control Nelly (spirit "go-between") came--it was curious to watch the sudden change in the midst of a lively conversation. Nelly spoke of being in the medium's stomach...She distinguished between what she got from spirits and what she saw in our stomachs...She told me that in her own home she understood things, and that there she got into a state which she called "crysalis," a state, it seems, of partial unconsciousness...pepple in it...had no "bodies" or "feet or boots."...If she could only come straight without being a crysalis she could tell a lot.<sup>6</sup>

Again, when Yeats was attending a seance in the home of an American, Mrs. Wreidt, strange happenings occurred. Here Yeats met his counterpart, called Leo. Yeats now began tracing down details from beings he believed dead. He recorded various strange sights, smells, and sounds he believed had come from the dead.

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<sup>6</sup>Letters, p. 67.

Through his experiences with occultism, Yeats began to be interested in astrology, in which he sought to find a possible connection between this seen and that unseen world that he thought so much about. He became quite adept at astrology, learning how to cast and read horoscopes.

His interest in astrology comes out strongly in his letter to Florence Farr in October, 1907:

Astrology grows more and more wonderful everyday. I have some astonishing and irrefutable things to show you. I am trying to work at primary directions...and am trying to find in the aspects a basis of evocation.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their interest in the invisible world, followers of the Golden Dawn were avid social and political reformers. Through his writings and the use of magic, Yeats and the members of the Golden Dawn hoped to regenerate the modern world spiritually, and eventually, enable man to enjoy a golden age.

During the nineties, Yeats and his associates attempted to found the Irish Mystical Order, based upon doctrines of Celtic heliolatry, Orphic Mysteries, the writings of Blake and Shelley, and the teachings of the Theosophists and the Hermetic Students. This Order was to correlate Irish art with Irish and Greek myth, Irish national politics, and esoteric religion. However, this Order was never materialized, and, instead, Yeats incorporated

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<sup>7</sup>Autobiography, p. 59.

these various elements into A Vision.

Since childhood, Yeats had possessed an inner dissatisfaction with himself. He felt a need to be spiritually reborn. The teachings and beliefs of the occultists appeared to offer him just such a chance. The order dwelt a great deal upon the individual rebirth which was achievable through magical practices; however, the occultists taught that this individual transmutation was closely associated with the world's rebirth as well. Florence Farr states the obligation entailed in accepting these teachings:

To choose a life that shall bring him in touch with the sorrows of his race rather than accept the Nirvana open to him; and like other Saviours of the world, to remain manifested as a living link between the supernatural and terrestrial natures, a perfect instrument for the regeneration of the world.<sup>8</sup>

As has been mentioned previously, Yeats believed certain people were capable of communing with spirits. In fact, in 1917,<sup>9</sup> when Yeats married Miss George Hyde-Lee, he thought his medium was found. Yeats and Miss Hyde-Lee spent a great deal of time together attending seances and mystical meetings. Mrs. Yeats had belonged to many of the same occult organizations as her husband and had read many of the same books. She knew Yeats's writings thoroughly.

Shortly after the marriage, a strange event occurred in the Yeats's home, which Yeats narrates as follows:

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<sup>8</sup>The Man and the Masks, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>A Vision, p. 8.

On the afternoon of October 24th, 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 persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer.<sup>10</sup>

Supposedly, Mrs. Yeats could speak and read only French and Italian, but her automatic writing contained words and phrases and answers to questions in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, German, Welsh, Irish, Chinese, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. In addition, Yeats tells us, spirits of obscure dead people took possession of her hand and wrote down facts about themselves which she could not possibly have known.

To Mrs. Yeats's surprise, odd sentences were produced on a subject of which she apparently knew nothing. Yeats became convinced of the importance of these revelations which they received at first by Mrs. Yeats's automatic writing.

Other strange happenings occurred:

The automatic writing and the speech during sleep were illustrated or accompanied by strange phenomena. While we were staying at a village near Oxford we met two or three nights in succession what seemed a sudden warm breath coming up from the ground at the same corner of the road.<sup>11</sup>

Again:

Then too there was much whistling, generally as a warning that some communicator would come when my wife was asleep. Sweet smells were the most constant phenomena, now that of incense, now that of violets or

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<sup>10</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

roses or some other flower, and as perceptible to some half-dozen of our friends as to ourselves, though upon one occasion when my wife smelt hyacinth a friend smelt eau-de-cologne.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, as in younger days, Yeats would be at the proper point for seeing truths and something would interfere:

They shifted ground whenever my interest was at its height, whenever it seemed that the next day must reveal what, as I soon discovered, they were determined to withhold until all was upon paper.<sup>13</sup>

Yeats decided that he had irrefutable evidence that a living mind could serve as a medium for departed spirits, and that these spirits preserved their identities even in death.

Many critics have commented upon these strange automatic writings of Mrs. Yeats's. Some critics dismiss the writings as nonsense, others find them quite credible, and still others take a middle-of-the-road view.

To Jeffares:

Yeats's account of the creation of this incongruous collection of material...cannot be accepted.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Hone comments about this automatic writings:

The manifestations began in a hotel at Ashdown Forest a few days after his marriage, when his wife surprised him by attempting automatic writing... What came in sentences was so remarkable...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>13</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup>W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats, p. 329.

Hone does not seem to be alarmed about this strange occurrence. At least, he does not say that he doubts its authenticity.

Ellmann has this to say about automatic writing:

Automatic writing is chiefly a matter of suspending conscious use of the faculties... the script that results is full of dreamlike images, fragmentary, run together, by turns coherent and incoherent. Spirit-control is not the only possible explanation; indeed, the skeptic need not believe that anything more than the unconscious mind was involved though some of the attendant manifestations... are difficult to explain.<sup>16</sup>

Virginia Moore also offers her conjecture concerning automatic writing:

In her mediumship, all unknowingly, Mrs. Yeats may have tapped her own subconscious or read her husband's mind telepathically, or, as Yeats claimed, acted as a vehicle for spirit communications. Or she may have combined the three, or any two. Still, having said this, I must admit from the Golden Dawn and Yeats's known reading matter, a restless mind might have made A Vision synthesis and application. The "makings" were there.<sup>17</sup>

Recently, Morton Irving Seiden has even questioned Mrs. Yeats's belief in the materials:

Did Mrs. Yeats have a supernatural experience or was she only pretending? Less than ten years after the poet's death, she clearly suggested to A. Norman Jeffares, one of his biographers, that her seances had been a hoax. Mrs. Yeats had realized that after their marriage, her husband thought entirely too often about the very beautiful Maud Gonne; and,

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<sup>16</sup>The Man and the Masks: W.B. Yeats, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup>The Unicorn, pp. 258-260.

having become jealous, she had wanted to draw his attention to herself, even if on his terms. Did Yeats, deceived or not deceived by his wife, believe the objective or external reality of his spirits? His very refusal directly to consider the problem in "A Packet for Ezra Pound," suggests to me that he did not. But that he had at least this kind of disbelief is supported, I think, by his explicit or half-explicit statements as well.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of such evidence against the authenticity of this automatic writing, Yeats, keeping in tune with his love for mystery, tells us about his strange mediums:

They once told me not to speak of any part of the system, except of the incarnations which were almost fully expounded, 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...For the same reason they asked me not to read philosophy until their exposition was complete, and this increased my difficulties... I had once known Blake as thoroughly as his unfinished Prophetic Books permitted, and I had read Swedenborg and Boehme, and my initiation into the "Hermetic Students" had filled my head with Cabalistic imagery, but there was nothing in Blake, Swedenborg, Boehme, or the Cabala to help me now. They encouraged me, however, to read history in relation to their historical logic, and biography in relation to their twenty-eight typical incarnations, that I might give concrete expression to their abstract thought.<sup>19</sup>

In these fragmentary sentences that were scribbled on the paper, William Butler Yeats saw the foundations of the technique for expressing his religious ideas symbolically.

Yeats also tells us in A Vision that the communicators told him about the symbol of the gyre. Some six weeks after

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<sup>18</sup> Morton Irving Seiden, William Butler Yeats (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> A Vision, p. 12.

Mrs. Yeats had begun her career of automatic writing, two interpenetrating cones drew themselves into her script, and the cones were explained in terms of European history. Yeats refers to these symbols as gyres, spirals, spools, or perns, a local Irish word.

Maintaining his interest in occultism, Yeats added to what he had already found in Gaelic and Greek myth, Prometheus Unbound, The Prophetic Books, and Swedenborg's works.



## CHAPTER VIII

### JAPANESE NOH PLAYS

In the winter of 1914, Ezra Pound introduced Yeats to the Noh drama of Japan. After studying the Noh structure and finding it adaptable to his purposes, Yeats successfully wrote five plays, employing the Noh technique: At the Hawk's Well, The Dreaming of the Bones, The Only Jealousy of Emer, Calvary, and The Cat and the Moon.

Yeats preferred the style of the Noh drama for his plays partly because of its aristocratic and simple form. The Noh was a private form, originally intended for performances before the Shogun and his friends; therefore, this form was equally adapted to the forty or fifty present in the audience at performances of Yeats's plays. Furthermore, Yeats chose a small audience of highly intelligent and cultivated people.

Yeats tells us in his essay "Noble Plays of Japan":

I have written a little play that can be played in a room for so little money that forty or fifty readers of poetry can pay the price. There will be no scenery, for three musicians, whose seeming sunburned faces will, I hope, suggest that they have wandered from village to village in some country of our dreams, can describe place and weather, and at moments action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer...In fact, with the help of Japanese plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound, I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way--an aristocratic form.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Essays, p. 273.

Yeats describes the background of the Noh drama and comments upon its aristocratic form thus:

The Noh theater of Japan became popular at the close of the fourteenth century, gathering into itself dances performed at Shinto shrines in honour of spirits and gods, or by young nobles at the court, and much old lyric poetry, and receiving its philosophy and its final shape perhaps from priests of a contemplative school of Buddhism. A small daimio...was the author. He brought them to the court of the Shogun at Kioto. "Accomplishment" the word Noh means, and it is their accomplishment and that of a few cultivated people who understand the literary and mythological allusions and the ancient lyrics quoted in speech or chorus, their discipline, a part of their own breeding.<sup>2</sup>

Yeats especially loved this Japanese drama because it reminded him paradoxically of its origin among the common people, who, according to Yeats, are closest to divine truth:

I love all the arts that can still remind me of their origin among the common people, and my ears are only comfortable when the singer sings as if mere speech had taken fire, when he appears to have passed into song almost imperceptibly. I am bored and wretched, a limitation I greatly regret, when he seems no longer a human being but an invention of science...He has become a wind instrument and sings no longer like active men, sailor or camel driver, because he has had to compete with an orchestra, where the loudest instruments have always survived...As poetry can do neither, the voice must be freed from this competition and find itself among little instruments, only heard at their best perhaps when we are close about them.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats chose the Noh drama for his symbolic, subjective drama largely due to his interest in the plaster masks worn by the Noh actors, and from 1885-1914, he spent much of his time developing his doctrine of the "mask". He tells us:

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

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Therefore it is natural that I go to Asia for a stage-convention for those formal faces for a chorus that has no part in the action, and perhaps for those movements of the body copied from the marionette shows of the fourteenth century. A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice.<sup>4</sup>

Evidences of psychological dualism were not new to Yeats.

Even as a child, he had recognized psychological conflicts within himself, his family, and his friends. Later, he encountered evidences of psychological dualism in the works of Blake; Madame Blavatsky and other followers of Theosophy, with whom Yeats was familiar, refer to "masks" in their writings and lectures. The students of the Golden Dawn referred to a person's mask of the objective or false self, also.

The simple construction of the Noh drama was likewise suitable to the tastes of Yeats. Compressing the action into a single scene, or at the most two scenes, a play was built around a single meaningful action. The dialogue of the players, rich in mythological symbolism is quite simple, and the players, wearing plaster masks, chant their speeches. These plays required few players, and the chorus-musicians took the place of stagehands. The scant scenery was highly symbolic and meaningful.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

These mask-wearing players represent individuals possessing deep psychological conflicts within themselves or with others, and in turn, represent the psychological conflicts characteristically within all human beings. Elements of foreshadowing, suspense, irony, motivation, coincidence, and resolution are dramatized by the masked protagonists; and at the end of the play, a symbolic dance is performed, conveying the desired emotion to the audience.

My play is made possible by a Japanese dancer whom I have seen dance in a studio and in a drawing-room and on a very small stage lit by an excellent stage-light. In the studio and in the drawing-room alone, where the lighting was the light we are most accustomed to, did I see him as the tragic image that has stirred my imagination. There, where no studied lighting, no stage-picture made an artificial world, he was able, as he rose from the floor, where he had been sitting cross-legged, or as he threw out an arm, to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded, but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind. One realised anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts' greatness can be but in their intimacy...As a deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism, and loud noise.<sup>5</sup>

Within the limits of the compressed construction of the Noh drama, Yeats presents to us simply and directly in his free verse his system of belief concerning life and death. Later, he incorporates these ideas into A Vision.

Yeats hoped his theater would serve the same purpose as the theaters of the Japanese Middle Ages; it would serve as a means of spiritual regeneration for the modern world. The playwrights would fulfill

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 277-278.

the duties of the priest, describing and evoking the supernatural world through symbols and setting up ideal standards for human beings to pursue.

## CHAPTER IX

### A VISION: A WORK TYPIFYING WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

As has been shown in earlier chapters of this study, Yeats, early in his development, became convinced of the inseparability of religion and art. Through symbolic literature Yeats believed truths could be revealed to the human world that could not be revealed otherwise. With this view in mind, Yeats wrote A Vision. With the intent of revealing through his complicated arrangement of symbols truths that he believed came to him from the world beyond the senses, Yeats gives to us the synthesis of all the ideas he had been gathering to make up his religious doctrine.

In A Vision he attempted to present symbolically a theory of the varieties of human types, of the changes of history, and of the transformations of the soul before and after death. Cleanth Brooks, Jr. offers this explanation of Yeats's system underlying A Vision:

The system may be broken up into three parts: a picture of history, an account of human psychology, and an account of the life of the soul after death. The theory of history is the easiest aspect of the system. It bears a close resemblance to Spengler's cyclic theory. Civilizations run through cycles of two thousand-odd years, periods of growth, of maturity, and lastly of decline. But instead of Spengler's metaphor of the seasons--Yeats uses a symbolism drawn from the twenty-eight phases of the moon. Yeats speaks of phases 1-8 (the first quarter of the moon). A civilization reaches its zenith at the full moon (phase 15) and then gradually declines passing through phases 16-28 (the dark of the moon).

Yeats further complicates his scheme by dividing his cycles into two subcycles of twenty-eight phases and of one thousand-odd years each. The phases 15 of these two subcycles which make up the two thousand years of Christian civilization are Byzantine civilization under Justinian and the Renaissance. Our own period is at phase 23 of the second subcycle; the moon is rapidly rounding toward the dark when the new civilization to dominate the next two thousand years will announce itself--"The Second Coming."<sup>1</sup>

Many parts of A Vision are not pertinent to a discussion of Yeats's religious philosophy. In spite of this, one finds within the framework of this work Yeats's central religious convictions stated over and over again. One finds Yeats's expression of his theories of the reincarnation of the soul, the cyclical nature of the universe, the concern with the afterlife, the interest in spiritism, and the ever-present belief in a Great Soul, Anima Mundi, or Universal Being uniting all.

Yeats states that his system is only a set of symbols, like his Irish myths, to give us supernatural truths:

Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon. Those that include, now all recorded time in one circuit, now what Blake called "the pulsaters of an artery" are plainly symbolical, but what of those that fixed, like a butterfly upon a pin, to our central date, the first day of our Era, divide actual history into periods of equal length? To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason

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<sup>1</sup>Cleanth Brooks, "The Poet as Myth-Maker," The Permanence of Yeats, p. 71.

has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice.<sup>2</sup>

Believing in the revelatory power of symbols, Yeats chose as his chief symbols the wheel and the gyre. In such objects, unity is present and never-ending. What better symbols could Yeats have chosen to express his belief that human history is a great ever-returning spiral and that the transmigration of the soul through many lives is possible?

Yeats says that in November, 1917, his Teachers gave him an exposition of the twenty-eight typical incarnations, or "Phases," linked to the moon, together with the movements of man's "Four Faculties"; and then on December 6 a diagram of a cone or gyre, together with an explanation of how it represented the soul's judgment after death; and thereafter a double cone, which was applied to European history, followed by a discourse on the stages of man's progress between death and a new birth.

Long before, Yeats had come into close contact with the symbol of the wheel symbolizing God. Wheels are featured symbols in Plato, Celtic legends, Boshme, Emerson, Blake, Book of Dyzan, and the Hermetic Order.

The Hindu religion also included the conception that human

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<sup>2</sup> A Vision, pp. 24-25.



history moves in a circle or great wheel, emerging from the great beyond only to sink into it again.

Yeats also tells us in A Vision that the communicators told him about the symbol of the gyre. As has been mentioned, some six weeks after Mrs. Yeats had begun her career of automatic writing, two interpenetrating cones appeared in her script and were explained in terms of European history. As stated before, Yeats refers to these symbols as gyres, spirals, spools, or perns, a local Irish word.

In "Shepherd and Goatherd" Yeats tells us how he had heard the word "pern" in his childhood:

When I was a child in Sligo I would see above my grandfather's trees a little column of smoke from the 'pern' mill, and was told that 'pern' was another name for the spool, as I was accustomed to call it, on which thread was wound.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats gives us his explanation of a gyre in A Vision:

A line is a symbol, or time, and expresses a movement, symbolizing the emotional subjective mind, with extension in space; a plane, cutting the line at right angles, is spatial, the symbol of objectivity and intellect. A gyre is a combination of line and plane, and as one tendency or the other must always be stronger the gyre is always expanding or contracting. The gyre is drawn as a cone which represents sometimes the individual soul and its history, sometimes general life. For this two cones are substituted, since neither the soul of man or nature can be expressed without conflict.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>William Butler Yeats, Collected Poems (Macmillan, 1919, New York), p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>A Vision, p. 50.

These gyres also were not new to Yeats and his wife.

As was mentioned in chapters V and VI, long before they had done considerable research on gyres. Yeats tells us that Blake used gyres, especially in "The Mental Traveller":

What I have found indeed is nothing new,  
for I will show presently that Swedenborg and Blake  
and many before them knew that all things had  
their gyres; but Swedenborg and Blake (as well  
as the Chaldaeans and Neo-platonists) preferred  
to explain them figuratively, and so I am the  
first to substitute for Biblical or mythological  
figures historical movements and actual men and  
women.<sup>5</sup>

Again, Yeats tells about others' use of these gyres:

...and so on, one gyre with in the other  
always. Here the thought of Heraclitus dominates all:  
"Dying each other's life, living each other's death."

The first gyres clearly described by philosophy  
are those described in the *Timaeus* which are made by the  
circuits of the Other (creators of all particular  
things)...Alcemon, a pupil of Pythagoras, thought that  
men die because they cannot join their beginning  
and their end...But my friend the poet and the scholar  
Dr. Sturm sends me passages in Dr. Dee, in Macrobius, in  
an unknown mediaeval writer, which describe souls  
changing from gyre to sphere from sphere to gyre.<sup>6</sup>

In A Vision Yeats mentions the tales of Irish cottagers  
telling of spirits departing into the air in an ascending gyre.

Thus, according to Yeats, "All things are from antithesis,"  
and the gyre becomes an excellent symbol for opposing elements  
of existence.

Yeats uses the symbols of the gyre and the wheel to the

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. xi, xii.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-69.

fullest extent in his description of the twenty-eight phases of the moon. Yeats classifies human personality into twenty-eight types in relation to the twenty-eight phases of the moon, each phase being pictured as one of the spokes of a Great Wheel.

According to Yeats, any human soul passes through all twenty-eight phases in a series of incarnations, although at full moon and dark of the moon the soul takes on the form of a spirit rather than a man. The soul may be said to pass through all phases within a single lifetime, beginning with the completely unindividualized or objective state of infancy in phase one, rising to full subjectivity or maturity in phase 15, sinking back at last into second childhood and mere oblivion in phase 28, where it dies, and then after a period begins the round once more.

His poem "The Phases of the Moon" also describes the process:

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,  
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,  
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six and twenty  
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in;  
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.  
From the first crescent to the half, the dream  
But summons to adventure and the man  
Is always happily like a bird or a beast;  
But while the moon is rounding towards the full  
He follows whatever whim's most difficult  
Among whims not impossible, and though scarred,  
As with the cat-o-nine tails of the mind,  
His body moulded from within his body  
Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then  
Athena takes Achilles by the hair,  
Hector is in the dust, Nietzsche is born,  
Because the heroes' crescent is the twelfth.  
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must.  
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.  
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.

This idea of the twenty-eight phases of the moon had been encountered by Yeats in his study of astrology. In 1910, Yeats reread Chaucer's works, coming across Chaucer's suggestion that man can be classified according to twenty-eight types, each type associated with one of twenty-eight possible phases of the moon. Chaucer's words in "The Frankeleyn's Tale" are the following:

He him romembred that, upon a day,  
At Orlions in studie a book he say  
Of magik natural, which his felawe,  
That was that tyme a bachelor of lawe,  
Al were he ther to lerne another craft,  
Had prively upon his desk y-laft;  
Which book spak muchel of the operaciouns,  
Touchinge the eighte and twenty mansiouns  
That longen to the mone, and swich folye,  
As in our dayes is nat worth a flye;  
For holy chirches feith in our bileve  
Ne suffreth noon illusion us to greve. (Lines 395-406)<sup>7</sup>

Yeats devotes a large portion of A Vision to his conceptions of life after death and the reincarnation of the soul. He assumes that the soul after death goes through certain cycles in which it relives its earthly life, is freed from pleasure and pain, is freed from good and evil, and finally, reaches a state of beatitude.

According to Yeats, the soul after the physical death of the individual passes through six stages of being: The Vision of the Blood Kindred, The Return, The Shiftings, The Beatitude, The Foreknowing, and The Vision of Friends.

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<sup>7</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Walter W. Skeat, (ed.) (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 493.

"The Vision of the Blood Kindred" occurs immediately after the death of an individual. During this stage, sexual desire, conscious memory, and the soul or abstract mind leave the spiritual body. Instinct remains in the body temporarily, later sinking into Anima Mundi. The soul finds it extremely difficult to accept the fact of the physical body's mortal death.

Next, comes "The Return." During this stage, after which the soul has accepted the fact of its mortal death, the soul relives one or more of its past lives, assuming a human shape. As it relives the discomfort or pleasure which it may have caused others, the soul experiences symbolic hell or symbolic heaven.

After "The Return" the soul experiences "The Shiftings." During this stage, the soul relives the exact opposite of its past life on earth, fulfilling all of its past desires.

In "The Beatitude" the soul is without a sense of time and place, completely forgetting all of its past life, and enjoys absolute harmony and ecstasy. It is the souls in "The Beatitude" that supply poets and artists with symbols that distinguish great masterpieces of the human imagination.

During "The Foreknowing" the soul experiences a revelation of all the coming events of its next incarnation.

After having experienced a preview of the events and people destined to influence its coming life, the soul enters into the stage termed "The Vision of Friends." Having forgotten its former life and what it has seen of the future life, the soul is molded

into a human shape and enters the womb. Then it is born at one of the twenty-eight phases of the lunar cycle.

In A Vision, Yeats tells us about these Upanishad<sup>8</sup> conceptions:

Certain Upanishads describe three states of the soul, that of waking, that of dreaming, that of the dreamless sleep, and say man passes from waking through dreaming to dreamless sleep every night and when he dies.<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to say:

The Mandooka Upanishad describes a fourth state, which is reached not in dreamless sleep but in contemplation and in wakefulness. This fourth state, pure light to those that reach it, is that state wherein the soul, as much ancient symbolism testifies, is united to the blessed dead.<sup>10</sup>

Yeats describes the Spirit of the dead as having great powers:

The Spirit, that it may make the Passionate Body intelligible, cannot only tap the minds of the living but examine letters and books, once they come before the eyes of the living, although it can see nothing that does not concern the dream, for it is without reflection or the knowledge that it is dead.<sup>11</sup>

Yeats tells us that the idea of an analogy between dreams and the Spirit of the dead once was a universal belief:

I am convinced that this ancient generalization in so far as it saw analogy between a "separated spirit," or phantom and a dream of the night, once was a universal belief, everywhere. Certainly I find it in old Irish

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<sup>8</sup> Yeats had encountered the teachings of the Upanishads while a member of the Theosophical Society.

<sup>9</sup> A Vision, p. 220.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

literature, in modern Irish folklore, in Japanese plays, in Swedenborg, in the Phenomena of spiritualism, accompanied as often as not by the belief that the living can assist the imaginations of the dead.<sup>12</sup>

Yeats finds evidences of the belief in reincarnation in Asiatic and European stories:

Indian Buddhists cease to offer sacrifices for a particular dead person after three generations, for after that time we must, they believe, have found a new body. There are stories Asiatic and European of those who die in childhood being reborn almost at once...Neither between death and birth nor between birth and death can the soul find momentary happiness; its object is to pass rapidly round and round its circle and find freedom from that circle.<sup>13</sup>

Next comes the core of Yeats's doctrine--the belief in Magnus Annus, the Great Year, the Platonic Year, or the Great Wheel. This belief is associated with the procession of the equinoxes which bring roughly every two thousand years a great year of death and rebirth. All the cycles of a soul's incarnations cover approximately 36,000 years. Yeats believed that signs and direct warnings come out of Spiritus Mundi or the Great Memory warning of such a rebirth or decay; and the poet or philosopher, if he looks closely enough, can see and hear these warnings. The Christian Era, being nearly two thousand years old, is due for extinction and replacement by the "Second Coming."

The transition from era to era is naturally a time of turmoil. The period we are now approaching is the exact opposite of our present era. According to Yeats:

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

Man awaits death and judgment with nothing to occupy the worldly faculties, and helpless before the world's disorder, drags out of the sub-conscious the conviction that the world is about to end.<sup>14</sup>

In A Vision Yeats implies that each new civilization is inaugurated by a new spiritual leader. Thus, the Christian Era was inaugurated by the birth of Christ. Yeats's conception of Christ changed during the years. In his early twenties, like Mme. Blavatsky, Yeats saw Christ as just one of the great spiritual leaders. However, in A Vision Yeats gives Christ more importance representing Christ as the supernatural Self of all humanity.

According to Yeats, the birth of Christ took place at about the symbolic center of the Great Year:

The wheel...completes its movement in four thousand years. The life of Christ corresponds to the mid-period between birth and death.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Christ has a special relationship to the entire wheel, representative of the essential spirituality of the whole.

Yeats described Christ as identical with Phase 15 of the twenty-eight phases of the moon. To Yeats, the phase is one of complete beauty and perfection. However, he says:

Even for the most perfect, there is a time of pain, a passage through a vision, where evil reveals itself in its final meaning. In this passage Christ, it is said, mourned over the length of time and the unworthiness of man's lot to man, where as his forerunner mourned and his successor will mourn over the shortness of time and the unworthiness

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 284-85.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 263.



of man to his lot; but this cannot yet be understood.<sup>16</sup>  
So, for Yeats, Christ becomes an embodiment of the Unity of Being.

The first publication of A Vision was in 1925. However, due to its obscurity and vagueness, Yeats undertook to prepare a second edition, which he finished in 1929. During this time, Yeats carried on intensive research in order to discover more support for his ideas. Among those authorities Yeats studied were Vico, Edmund Burke, Henry Adams, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Alfred North Whitehead. He also reread the works of Plato, Plotinus, Boehme, Swedenborg, Blake, and Shelley.<sup>17</sup>

On October 7, 1937, in London, Macmillan and Company published the second edition of Yeats's A Vision. Evidences of Yeats's further reading and study appear throughout this edition, which is more scholarly than the first and gives evidence of a greater self-confidence.

In the first edition, Yeats introduced a mythological story to explain his system, which was obviously not credible. This, as he explained in the second edition, was because his wife did not wish to acknowledge her share in it. In the second edition, he gave the full account of the automatic writings.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 19, 23, 24.

The first version of this book, A Vision, except the section on the twenty-eight phases, and that called "Dove or Swan" which I repeat without change, fills me with shame. I had misinterpreted the geometry, and in my ignorance of philosophy failed to understand distinctions upon which the coherence of the whole depended, and as my wife was unwilling that her share should be known, and I to seem sole author, I had invented an unnatural story of an Arabian traveller which I must amend and find a place for some day because I was fool enough to write half a dozen poems that are unintelligible without it.<sup>18</sup>

This amended version became "Michael Robartes and his Friends" in the second version. Thus, Yeats did not completely abolish his myths but made them an integral part of the book.

Yeats, somewhat uncertain, labeled his ideas in the first edition as mythology; but in his later version, Yeats describes his system as "stylistic arrangements of experience..."

The 1937 A Vision put a great deal of emphasis upon the Thirteenth Cycle, "which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space," a concept which he had hardly touched upon in the 1925 edition.

Basically, however, the philosophic ideas presented in both editions are the same. In the 1937 edition, Yeats clarified and extended his ideas through carefully chosen symbols.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION

Apparently, after searching for nearly fifty years, Yeats was more than ever convinced that divine truths had been revealed to him and that he was destined to reveal these truths to others through the written word. The conflicts that had existed in the mind of young William Butler Yeats were, apparently, ultimately resolved.

It has been reported that Yeats had this to say right before his death on January 28, 1939:

It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put it all into a phrase I say "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life.<sup>1</sup>

Yeats had always believed that the hour of a person's death is predestined. Shortly before his death, he wrote his epitaph "Under Ben Bulbin," from which the following stanzas are quoted:

Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities,  
That of race and that of soul,  
And ancient Ireland knew it all.  
Whether man die in his bed  
Or the rifle knocks him dead,  
A brief parting from those dear  
Is the worst man has to fear...

Poet and sculptor, do the work  
Nor let the modish painter shirk  
What his great forefathers did,  
Bring the soul of man to God,  
Make him fill the cradles right...

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats, p. 510.

Under Bare Don Bulben's head  
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.  
An ancestor was rector there  
Long years ago, a church stands near.

By the road an ancient cross.  
No marble, no conventional phrase;  
On limestone quarried near the spot  
By his command these words are out:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death,  
Horseman, pass by!

Yeats was convinced, after, as well as during, many years of research and writing, that death is merely a passing of the individual being, not out of existence, but into a higher supernatural realm.

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