

## Article

# To Never See Death: Yeats, Reincarnation, and Resolving the Antinomies of the Body-Soul Dilemma

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**Abstract:** This essay addresses the ideas and schemas of reincarnation as used in the poetry and prose of William Butler Yeats, with particular focus on the two editions of *A Vision*. It contrasts the metaphysical system as given in *A Vision* (1937) with a number of inconsistencies found in Yeats's poetic corpus, with an emphasis on how one might interpolate an escape from the cycle of lives, in at least one possibility while still maintaining corporality. The justification for this last comes from an analysis of complex cabalistic metaphors and teachings that Yeats learned as a member of MacGregor Mathers' Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

**Keywords:** *A Vision*; Golden Dawn; cabala; Aleister Crowley; Theosophy; Yeats; reincarnation

Among the literary schools of the twentieth century, the Modernists are unquestionably among the most taxing for readers, not least because they undertook diverse and highly individual experiments in their attempt to redirect and reinvent Western literature in the aftermath of World War I, but also because, in company with the neoclassical writers of the eighteenth century, many delighted in what might be seen as egotistical displays of erudition, patching together dense patterns of language, symbols, and symbolism, daring readers to prove their wittiness (or worthiness) by excavating the clearly present but often inscrutable authorial intentions. Of them all, William Butler Yeats is perhaps the most challenging. There are, literally, thousands of articles, overviews, and book-length studies on almost every influence on Yeats's *oeuvre*, often taking the form of "Yeats and X": symbolism, the theatre, the theatre of "desolate reality," the visual arts, the ideal of unity of being, the occult, fascism, Japan, Noh, Sligo, European drama, Nietzsche, Rabindranath Tagore, Anglo-Irish Modernism, W.T. Horton, Theosophy, philosophy . . . the list is seemingly endless.

Despite the fact that Yeats himself would certainly have deplored such sharp, Aristotelian circumscriptions—attempts to distinguish the dancer from the dance—of what he perceived as a single, fluid unity of thought, such artificial divisions are an unfortunate necessity: the scope of his grand design, like Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, is simply otherwise overwhelming. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* takes in the entirety of time and history in a single, cyclical, discontinuous dream-narrative. By comparison, scattered among hundreds of poems, twenty-six plays, and dozens of essays, Yeats's vision encompasses time before time and worlds before creation, a thousand myriads of worlds ultimately extending outward into unutterable realms of Negative Existence and no-thing-ness. He attempted to chart the psychology of incarnation, the interplay of the individual soul and the World Soul, the *Anima Mundi* and the Divine, the immanent divinity and the transcendent and Absolute—of which the metaphysical calculus surrounding his theories of reincarnation are only one fraction.

Unfortunately, Yeats's thoughts on any subject are usually widely scattered, recurring with variations and contextual shadings across the body of his plays, prose, poetry, and correspondence—as well as in his copious body of draft manuscripts and the marginal notes within his surviving books. He was perfectly willing to intermingle seemingly disparate, even clashing ideas, and stir them together in any given work—often interspersed with and illustrated by autobiographical references unintelligible

to anyone lacking an intimate knowledge of the poet's life. Both his prose style and poetic method are often maddeningly associational, frequently flitting from idea to idea, theme to theme, touching lightly and moving on like a rock skipped across the surface of a pond. Yeats was a master of framing through the literary equivalent of negative space; what he leaves unsaid or assumed is often more fundamental to his themes than what is concretely shown. He favored rhetorical questions over definitive statements and, based on his years of study as a practicing occultist, espoused the belief that symbols, correctly used, would take on lives of their own in the minds of readers and thereby do half of his work on their own. To make matters worse, when dealing with metaphysical ideas such as reincarnation that touched upon or stemmed from his esoteric studies, bound by oaths of secrecy, Yeats often pulls up short: unabashedly admitting his refusal to explain himself in any meaningful way.

Consequently, when one asks a blunt question such as "What did Yeats think about reincarnation?", it is often an uphill battle to formulate a straightforward answer—even though the subject was of paramount importance to him, and the focus of decades of research. It would be nice to be able to say, "Read *A Vision*: Yeats's final word on the subject," but that problematic, meandering tome is itself fraught with ambiguities and questions. Likewise, his use of the subject within the poetic corpus is complicated by the fact that it is rarely an explicitly central theme *in se*, functioning rather at the subtextual level admixed with any number of seeming tangential elements (qv [Shin 1995](#)). As an illustration, I would begin with a pedagogical example.

One of the things that I am infamous for among Upper Iowa University's undergraduates is a week-long writing-about-literature exercise utilizing the text of William Butler Yeats's "Among School Children." At a mere 64 lines, the poem is short enough to be fairly non-intimidating, yet dense enough to provide at least five-dozen "Yeats and—" topical questions for exploration. For example, the first two lines—"I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;/ A kind old nun in a white hood replies"—easily yield "Yeats and" education, Irish education, private education, Catholic education, one-room-schoolhouse education, the Socratic method ("questioning" in a classroom setting), educational philosophy, philosophy generally, classical Greek philosophy, Platonic recollection (the object of the Socratic method), nuns (and the connotative clash of a "kind" nun), women, Catholics and Catholicism, and youth *versus* age—as well as a discussion about the necessity of establishing that the first-person narrative voice really is the author's own before automatically making that assumption.

As a group, the students having already done a bit of biographical research on Yeats himself and the history of the period 1865–1939, we spend four days dissecting the text, exploring the repetition of ideas at various places, and generating various thesis statements that might evolve from initial observations. In this way, one finds much beyond the "broad side of the barn" reading of "Among School Children" as Yeats's thoughts on the unity of youth and age, certainly more than the author's own statements of "meaning" that "even the greatest men are owls, scarecrows, by the time their fame has come" ([Wade 1955](#), p. 719), or that "life will waste [school children] perhaps that no possible life fulfill their own dreams or even their [sic] teacher's hope [ . . . and] that life prepares for what never happens" ([Yeats 2007](#), p. 361).

While the initial stanza certainly opens up topics for discussion, the second widens the field tremendously. One finds (arguably) a between-the-lines evaluation of the non-riveting nature of the curriculum Yeats is observing, biographical references that need to be connected to the text ("she" who?), intertextual references to other poems in the Yeatsian canon ("Leda and the Swan"), and obvious clashes between connotative and denotative value in word choice ("Plato's parable") with therein the first of Yeats's erudite, extra-textual allusions: all stirred together.

The majority of students instinctively understand that the Yeats-narrator is bored and has gone off into a daydream, and with the help of *Wikipedia* have no problem assigning the unnamed "she" to Yeats's great unrequited love, Maud Gonne. They are often titillated in the discussion that follows to find that the question of whether Maud ever broke down and had pity-sex with the poet is hotly debated at scholarly conferences, and rather appalled to be told the story of the 51 year-old Yeats's final proposed to Maud in 1917, followed by his proposal to her 23 year-old daughter Iseult, herself

conceived in a magical experiment on the tombstone of her dead brother, followed closely by his proposal to fellow Golden Dawn initiate Georgie Hyde-Lees whom he ultimately married on October 20. Most pick up on the obvious recurrent references to “Leda and the Swan”—both myth and poem—in lines 9, 20, and 29, but invariably miss the less titular connection to “Sailing to Byzantium” in the scarecrow image of lines 32 and 48.

On the other hand, possibly because of a lack of a philosophy general education requirement, very few catch the oddity of Yeats’s phrasing of “Plato’s parable” in the stanza’s close:

[...] it seemed that our two natures blent  
 Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,  
 Or else, to alter Plato’s parable,  
 Into the yolk and white of the one shell. (ll. 13–16)<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, “allegory,” “myth,” and “metaphor” all lack the alliterative element of “parable,” and would require some major reworking for the sake of meter. Likewise, none of the more orthodox options would capture the pagan-Christian fusion motif that often fascinated Yeats. And, of course, only two or three students, ever, have shown the curiosity to actually track down *which* of the Platonic allegories fits within the context of Yeats, Maud Gonne, eggs, and two things merging into one. In fact, that’s usually the assignment that they take home that night.

Most come back with the answer, “The Allegory of the Cave?”—because that’s the most popular Platonic allegory discussed on Google. It’s not the right answer, but not a total loss, either, since that snippet from the *Republic* does bear looking at in terms of Yeats’s later statement, “Plato thought nature but a spume that plays/Upon a ghostly paradigm of things” (ll. 41–42), as well as the implied reference to Platonic *anamnesis* mentioned previously, and the direct reference to “recollection” in line 36. However, there’s nothing at all in the Allegory of the Cave that suggests some kind of merging, much less eggs or some connection to the tempestuous relationship between the poet and Maud Gonne. The only bit of Plato that fulfils *all* these criteria is the myth presented in the *Symposium*’s speech of Aristophanes on the whys and wherefores of True Love:

You must first learn human nature and its condition. For our ancient nature was not what it is now, but of another kind. In the first place, there were three sexes among men, not two as now, male and female, but a third sex in addition, being both of them in common, whose name still remains though the thing itself has vanished; for one sex was then derived in common from both male and female, Androgynous both in form and name, though that name is now applied only in reproach. Again, the form of each human being as a whole was round, with back and sides forming a circle, but it had four arms and an equal number of legs, and two faces exactly alike on a cylindrical neck; there was a single head for both faces, which faced in opposite directions, and four ears and two sets of pudenda, and one can imagine all the rest from this [...]

The reason there were three sexes of this sort was that the male originally was the offspring of the Sun, the female of the Earth, and what has a share of both of the Moon, because the Moon also has a share of both. They were spherical both in themselves and in their gait because they were like their parents. Well, they were terrible in strength and force, and they had high thoughts and conspired against the gods, and what Homer told of Ephialtes and Otus is told also of them: they tried to storm Heaven in order to displace the gods.

Well Zeus and the other gods took counsel about what they ought to do, and were at a loss, for they did not see how they could kill them, as they did the giants, whose race they

<sup>1</sup> All Yeats poetry will be cited by line numbers as given in volume I of the Collected Works of W.B. Yeats series: (Yeats 1983).

wiped out with the thunderbolt—because the honors and sacrifices they received from human beings would disappear—nor yet could they allow them to act so outrageously. After thinking about it very hard indeed, Zeus said, “I believe I’ve got a device by which men may continue to exist and yet stop their intemperance, namely, by becoming weaker. I’ll now cut each of them in two,” he said, “and they’ll be weaker and at the same time be more useful to us by having increased in number, and they’ll walk upright on two legs. But if they still seem to act so outrageously and are unwilling to keep quiet,” he said, “I’ll cut them in two again, so that they’ll have to get around on one leg, hopping.”

So saying, he cut human beings in two the way people slice serviceberries to preserve them by drying, or as they cut eggs with a hair [ . . . ]

When the lover of boys and every other lover meets his own particular half, they are then marvelously struck by friendship and kinship and Eros, and scarcely willing to be separated from each other even for a little time. These are the people who pass their whole lives with each other, but who can’t even say what they wish for themselves by being with each other. No one can think it is for the sake of sexual intercourse that one so eagerly delights in being with the other. Instead, the soul of each clearly wishes for something else it can’t put into words; it divines what it wishes, and obscurely hints at it. (Plato 1993, 189d–190a, 190b–e, 192 b–d)

This, of course, leads to a discussion in which I try to see whether my students can logic their way out of a paper bag. If Plato’s theory of education rests on *a priori* knowledge (in opposition to “solider” Aristotle’s *a posteriori* understanding of things), then Plato obviously believed in the preexistence of souls. For Aristophanes’ myth to explain the kind of true love Yeats’s felt he shared with Maud Gonne, in what concept must one believe? Usually it’s rather like pulling teeth, but eventually someone in the class usually ventures, “Reincarnation?” Of course—or, at the very least, metempsychosis, which is close enough for government work. In fact, reincarnation and/or metempsychosis comes up in other places in the poem, too: by implication when Yeats mentions Pythagoras in line 45, and in the *very* obscure allusion to the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs* in lines 34–36, where an infant, “Honey of generation had betrayed,” must “sleep, shriek, struggle to escape/As recollection or the drug decide.”

Did Yeats believe in reincarnation? Of course he did. That’s why Iseult Gonne was conceived on the tombstone of her dead brother. That’s what Yeats’s largest and most ambitious prose work, *A Vision*, is all about: “begun” in October of 1917 during his honeymoon with the 25 year-old “George” Hyde-Lees—after both Iseult and Maud Gonne rejected his final offers of marriage—a book whose first iteration was seven years in the making, followed by a major revision that took an additional decade. The vast majority of his later poetry is connected to its “system” in one way or another, and in it he addresses any number of the above “Yeats and” topics with specific reference to the subject: reincarnation and Platonism, reincarnation and Christianity, reincarnation and Neoplatonism, *et cetera*.

This is not to say that Yeats’s ideas on reincarnation grew out of a Platonic, classical, or even Western understanding. For example, Yeats was introduced to esoteric Indian themes and theology beginning at least as early as 1884, when his mother’s sister, Isabella Pollexfen Varley, presented him with a copy of A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*. His first (1889) volume of poems, *Crossways*, includes three poems with “Indian” themes (“Anushuya and Vijaya”, “The Indian to his Love,” and “The Indian upon God”) influenced by his 1885 meeting with Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee: as well as the eponymous poem “Mohini Chatterjee” in the 1932 Cuala Press collection *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems*, expanded as the mass-market *The Winding Stair* the following year. Indeed, later in life he “translated” the *Upanishads* with Purohit Swami.

And yet Yeats was no strict philosopher, Indian or otherwise. Like his first mentor, Madam Blavatsky, and his later, most influential esoteric teacher Macgregor Mathers, Yeats engaged in esoteric eclecticism, if not syncretism. That is, his ideas about reincarnation were affected at least as

much by his readings in Platonism and Neoplatonism, the fireside “fairy” stories narrated throughout the west of Ireland, arguments with his longtime friend George Russell (“Æ”), and the works of John Rhys, Walter Evans-Wentz, and Alfred Nutt to name only a very few sources—to say nothing of his own personal research and experimentation. As he says in *Wheels and Butterflies*’ 1934 introduction to his play *The Resurrection*,

All ancient nations believed in the re-birth of the soul and had probably empirical evidence like that Lafcadio Hearn found among the Japanese. In our own time Schopenhauer believed it, and McTaggart thinks Hegel did [ . . . ] It is the foundation of McTaggart’s own philosophical system. Cardinal Mercier saw no evidence for it, but did not think it heretical [ . . . ] In a few years perhaps we may have much empirical evidence, the only evidence that moves the masses of men to-day, that man has lived many times. (Yeats 1934, pp. 106–7)

Masochistic scholars have been arguing and weeping over the complexities of *A Vision*’s system for eighty years—and yet it remains problematic for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, the assertions that Yeats makes about the psychology behind human personality in any of his hypothetical 28 stages or “phases” of incarnation, his exposition on the progression of the various discarnate states between incarnations, and his cyclical theory of human history that mirrors the progress of the individual soul on the macroscopic level: all were distilled from information provided by spirit communicators working through George Yeats in an extended series of experiments involving automatic writing and exposition in sleep and dreams carried out between 1917 and 1923. As Yeats explained in the introduction to the 1937 edition:

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, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. ‘No,’ was the answer, ‘we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.’ (Yeats 2015, p. 8)

For many, one life preserver of reason in dealing with this material that certainly did infuse much of his later poetry with complex and often recondite metaphors has been George Yeats’s frank admission that, in the beginning, she “faked” the automatic writing: in an attempt to distract her husband and set to rest his vacillation about the wisdom of his marriage and relationship with Maud and Iseult (qv Moore 1954, p. 253; Ellmann 1988, pp. 239–55). And, as Ann Saddlemeyer rightly observes in *Becoming George*, George Yeats also was well aware that, having made the admission, despite her assertion that subsequently her hand really was seized by an unknown power and therefore 99.99% of the material was genuine as presented, “The word ‘Fake’ will go down to posterity” (Saddlemeyer 2002, p. 103). As Virginia Moore once encapsulated the consequent questions: “Was it really spirit-controlled discourse? Or was it, on Mrs. Yeats’ part, either a garnering of her subconscious, or a telepathic reading of her husband’s mind, neither of which requires extranatural help? Or was it a fabrication on the part of Yeats and/or his wife? or something else?” (Moore 1954, p. 256). In the words of Margaret Mills Harper, “Through several generations of Yeats scholarship, discussion of the Yeatses’ occult experimentation still tends to begin, and often to end, at the question, Did they, or Do you, believe it?, with lines drawn between camps drawn on the basis of the answer to the latter. The Yeatses themselves were by no means distracted by such compulsions” (Harper 2006, p. 21). Regardless, the fact that Yeats was engaged in spiritualistic experiments at best, and perhaps even astrology, occult rituals, and sex magic at worst, makes most academicians profoundly uneasy, and this uneasiness has colored much of the foundational scholarship on Yeats’s metaphysical theories.

This essay is not, however, an exposition on the system of *A Vision per se*, nor an attempt at detailing its literary, philosophical, or theological precursors. For those who wish to study the complexities of Yeats’s metaphysical calculus, the primary and secondary source-works are readily available. The



1925 and 1937 editions of *A Vision* comprise volumes 13 and 14 of Scribner's *Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, and are heavily annotated by editors Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine Paul. The surviving original documents were compiled and edited by George Mills Harper as the four volumes of *Yeats's Vision Papers* (Yeats 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 2001). The seminal commentary on the evolution of the 1937 edition from the earlier text remains Barbara L. Croft's *Stylistic Arrangements: A Study of William Butler Yeats's A Vision* (Croft 1987). The best online resource covering all aspects of Yeats's system is Neil Mann's superb yeatsvision.com, supplemented by the breadth of recent scholarly essays in *Yeats's "A Vision": Explications and Contexts*. Furthermore, although there is no "reader's guide" to the text, one helpful publication is G.A. Dampier's thesis *Incarnation and the Discarnate States: An exposition on the Function of the Principles in the System of W.B. Yeats's A Vision* (Dampier 2007), and Colin McDowell's more specific "The Six Discarnate States of A Vision (1937)" (McDowell 1986).

Instead, what follows deals with a much narrower and somewhat more manageable topic: What can be said about Yeats's ideas on the process by which one might be freed from the ongoing process of continual rebirth? That is, for most people other than Yeats scholars, the complexities of the Yeatsian system beg the question: So what? Reincarnation happens. Death happens, and the soul goes through six distinct discarnate states and sub-states. Then reincarnation happens, again. The question is, as the Soul in Yeats's "Dialogue of Self and Soul" phrases it, how can one ascend "to heaven," be delivered "from the crime of death and birth," from, as the Self depicts incarnation:

[...] that toil of growing up;  
 The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
 Of boyhood changing into man;  
 The unfinished man and his pain  
 Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;  
 The finished man among his enemies?—  
 How in the name of Heaven can he escape  
 That defiling and disfigured shape  
 The mirror of malicious eyes  
 Casts upon his eyes until at last  
 He thinks that shape must be his shape?  
 And what's the good of an escape  
 If honour find him in the wintry blast? (ll. 38, 24, 44–56)

There are three—perhaps four—possible answers that arise in reading Yeats, though not all, or even most, are given much space in *A Vision* itself. Yeats never liked to make anything that easy. Therefore, while the first two *may* be somewhat explicit, the latter (characteristically) present themselves only by implication or interpolation.

First, there is obviously simple subjugation to what Yeats calls "the winding path" or the "Path of the Serpent"—a symbol taken from the earliest lessons of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn: gradual perfection achieved through a laborious journey of lifetimes that may or may not lead to anything more (Yeats 1994, p. 28). As he says in his introduction to *The Resurrection*: "There is perhaps no final happy state except in so far as men may gradually grow better" (Yeats 1934, p. 108). The subjunctive highlights one of the several disjunctions between the system of *A Vision* as it is presented in the primary texts and that system as Yeats used it to create "metaphors for poetry."

In *A Vision*, there are 28 discrete incarnations, each of which is structured by a given proportional and oppositional arrangement of the four microcosmic faculties: Mask and Will, Creative Mind and Body of Fate. Each incarnation, arguably, presents a specific "lesson" that the soul needs to learn in order to achieve its freedom from the cycle of births, and an individual may be forced to repeat a given phase up to four times in order to internalize the lesson sufficiently: "To [phases 8 and 22], perhaps to all phases, the being may return up to four times, my instructors say, before it can pass on. It is claimed, however, that four times is the utmost possible" (Yeats 2015, p. 86).

In “Among School Children” this is alluded to in Stanza V, where the child laid upon the youthful mother’s lap “must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape/as recollection or the drug decide” (ll. 35–36). It should be noted that in the Automatic Scrip itself there is a confusion of contradictory information that does not appear in the final published volume, including which phases can be skipped and under what circumstances, and which cannot.

For the average person, Yeats ties the length that one is bound to the wheel of incarnations to a period of approximately 26,000 years, matching the “Perfect” or “Great Year” in Plato’s *Timaeus*. Afterward, hypothetically, the soul attains freedom. However, in Yeats’s explanatory poem “The Phases of the Moon” that introduces both the 1925 and 1937 editions of *A Vision*, the narrator Michael Robartes—who is represented as one who understands the system much more so than Yeats himself—paradoxically asserts that (emphasis mine) “When all the dough has been so kneaded up / That it can take what form cook Nature fancies,” one is not automatically set free; rather, “*The first thin crescent is wheeled round once more*” (ll. 114–16).

As an aside, *A Vision* makes no provision for the transmigration of souls into lower forms, but Yeats himself tackled this idea in a much earlier poem, “The Three Hermits,” in the 1914 volume *Responsibilities*. While the third hermit bemoans the fact that the dead may be reincarnated “Into some most fearful shape,” he is mocked by the second, who maintains that:

They are not changed to anything,  
Having loved God once, but maybe  
To a poet or a king  
Or a witty lovely lady. (ll. 23, 25–28)

It should be noted, however, that—interestingly—the first hermit, apparently wiser and certainly closer to death than either of the others, “Giddy with his hundredth year,” says nothing to confirm or refute these assertions, but “Sang unnoticed like a bird” (ll. 31–32). Furthermore, in other places Yeats does indeed suggest that even animals, as part of nature, are caught up in the process of gradual perfection (Yeats 1994, p. 28).

The second option for an individual tied to the wheel of phases or incarnations is mentioned explicitly, again, in Yeats’s introduction to *The Resurrection*: “escape may be for individuals alone who know how to exhaust their possible lives, to set, as it were, the hands of the clock racing” (Yeats 1934, p. 108). This statement implies that *only* those who somehow manage to exhaust their possible lives by learning the lessons of multiple lifetimes in one, thereby skipping phases of incarnation, may manage to “escape” from bondage to the wheel. In the terminology of Robartes in “Phases of the Moon” one must, perhaps volitionally, leave the two dimensional plane of the diagrammatic representation of the phases and assume a new direction: straight up the axis of rotation following the path of the arrow shot from the “burning bow” “drawn betwixt/Deformity of body and of mind,” “Out of the up and down, the wagon wheel/of beauty’s cruelty and wisdom’s chatter—/Out of that ravening tide” (ll. 119, 120–23). In this way one obtains “the thirteenth sphere or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom” (Yeats 2015, p. 302).

The average person might certainly use Yeats’s material on the four faculties as they relate to each of the twenty-eight phases in book one of *A Vision* (1937)—fully half of the complete text—to achieve this end through some form of self-analysis. Furthermore, Yeats would have undoubtedly recommended the study of astrology as well. However, exactly how a person would initiate such a change of “motion” Yeats does not reveal: only that it is a possibility.

Option three is closely related to the above, but not as clearly apparent: become an initiate in an occult body such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (in which Yeats himself was deeply involved for nearly thirty years, George Yeats almost ten), and work toward the highest level of adeptship that ultimately confers union with God: arguably the unexplained but clearly singular “man’s enterprise” that Yeats refers to in line 56 of “Among School Children.”

At this juncture, I must make it clear that I differ from many other Yeatsians in that my primary methodology for interpreting Yeats’s ideas lies in the esoteric-magical-cabalistic system that he learned

as a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Before proceeding, a few words must be expended upon this subject in order to justify the remarks that follow.

As will be touched upon later, the Golden Dawn was not the first esoteric society with which Yeats involved himself, nor was it the only one that he explored later in life. However, among the multitude, it was the only one to which he dedicated *decades* of his life, striving to master grade after grade, initiation after initiation. He rose as high in the Order as it was possible to go without becoming what one might call a merely titularly-advanced administrator. When he ended his formal, dues-paying association in late 1922 or early 1923, it was only because of “quarrels caused by men, otherwise worthy, who claimed a Rosicrucian sanction for their own fantasies” (Yeats 1999, pp. 454–55, n. 117). He married a fellow Golden Dawn adept in 1917, summered in his renovated tower-house outside of Gort whose ceilings were painted with Golden Dawn designs in esoteric color-schemes, and he was still dreaming of gathering the energy—and money—to establish his own sister-order, the “Castle of the Heroes” in the months leading up to his death.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the extant quires of the *Vision Papers* themselves are sprinkled with extra-system queries for his communicators about Order affairs. Yeats corresponded with members of the remaining active membership during the composition of *A Vision*, and in various ways he dedicated both editions to his “fellow students”: Golden Dawn initiates all. To my mind (to use an academic metaphor), facts like these establish “*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*,” *A Vision*’s theoretical forebear, itself scattered with clearly identifiable Golden Dawn symbolism, as Yeats’s esoteric Master’s thesis, and *A Vision* his dissertation: his personal contribution to human knowledge gained through original research. For a much more thorough and extended justification for this argument, see “Esotericism and Escape” in (Mann et al. 2012, pp. 307–28).

Moreover, the Golden Dawn provided Yeats with something that went far beyond simple information: an esoteric schema that could be used to harmonize diverse and otherwise seemingly unrelated and perhaps otherwise conflicting ideas, symbols, and schools of thought. An accessible example has been published as 777 (Crowley 1955), which volume was in large part originally compiled by Yeats’s fellow adept Allan Bennett. In its final form the text contains 183 columns of up to 35 rows each, cataloguing and cross-indexing such things as the various astrological and planetary associations for the cabalistic Tree of Life, orders of angels and demons, the symbolism of tarot cards, the Hindu centers of prana, mineral and vegetable drugs, the pantheons of multiple religions, officers in a Masonic lodge, the forty Buddhist meditations, and the Arabic mansions of the moon that Yeats references in *A Vision*.

In my reading of Yeats, it is this harmonizing schema, along with the interlinked ritual practices that so many Yeatsians view as “ludicrous” (Murphy 1995, p. 375), “embarrassing,” “nonsense,” or even “Southern Californian” (Auden 1948, pp. 188–89) that allowed Yeats to bring together ideas—often otherwise contradictory—and merge them into his own personal, esoteric unity. Thus, a more traditional Yeatsian such as Matthew Gibson may take one of Yeats’s sweeping but question-begging statements out of *A Vision*, such as “The *Passionate Body* is in another of its aspects identical with physical light; not the series of separated images we call by that name, but physical light, as it was understood by medieval philosophers, by Berkeley in *Siris* [ . . . ] the creator of all that is sensible” (Yeats 2015, p. 140)—and, very profitably, proceed to unpack the philosophical implications with reference to Yeats’s reading (*qv* “Timeless and Spaceless?” in (Mann et al. 2012, pp. 103–35)). I, on the other hand, suggest that, while Yeats certainly seized upon Berkeley’s assertion that “light was the animating substance of the world through allusion to ancient authority, and [ . . . ] gave sensory form to spirits” (Mann et al. 2012, p. 107), unlike Gibson, who merely notes that “Through various earlier occult sources, Yeats had understood light as constituting the substance of spiritual incarnation” (*ibid.*), I would say that Yeats indeed “understood” light in this way, but also seized upon Berkeley’s ideas

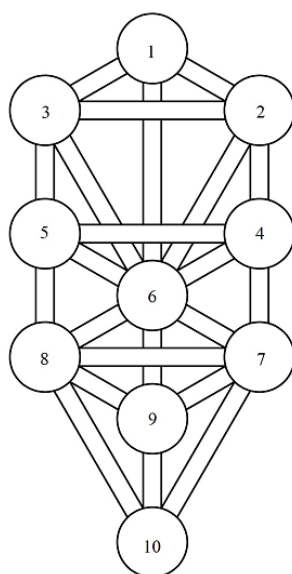
<sup>2</sup> The rituals for this organization had been worked up years before, with assistance from Golden Dawn chief Macgregor Mathers and his wife; (*qv* Breidenbach 1992).



because they tended to bolster his own cabalistic preconceptions: that “light” was the substance of the Divine outside of material creation in ever finer forms represented by the cabalistic terms *Ain* (“light” or “nothing”), *Ain Soph* (“limitless light” or “not even nothing”), and *Ain Soph Aur* (“light in extension” or “not even nothing always”)—otherwise known as the “Veils of Negative Existence,” and frequently referenced within the Golden Dawn’s rituals and lectures under a variety of other terms. Nor, I might add, does Gibson note that Wynn Westcott, one of the Golden Dawn’s three founding chiefs, primed Yeats with an esoteric understanding of Berkeley, as he asserts in his essay on the dogmatic “kabalalah” that the Bishop of Cloyne promulgated a number of philosophical ideas (his ideal theory in particular) that are “nearly identical” with the cabalistic doctrines taught in the Order (qv “The Dogmatic Kabbalah” in (Westcott 1910)). To put it a simpler way, the Golden Dawn’s version of cabala was Yeats’s “horse,” and every other idea he encountered—Neoplatonic philosophy, Irish folklore, the Upanishads, Noh drama, Zen Buddhism, Eliphas Levi, Bishop Berkeley et al.—went into the cart behind.

In brief, the occult ideas that underlie much of Yeats’s work come from a variety of sources, but the single consistent thread goes back to the cabalistic ideas of William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott, and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers as taught in the “original,” pre-1900, Golden Dawn (and, in its historical background, to Robert Wentworth Little, Kenneth Mackenzie, Frederick Hockley, John Yarker, F. G. Irwin, Benjamin Cox and other figures involved in late nineteenth-century English fringe-Masonry).

The order was structured around a series of initiatory grades tied to the various cabalistic spheres or *sephiroth* as depicted on the glyph of the Tree of Life (Figure 1 is the most basic version). Following the initial, probationary grade of Neophyte 0 = 0, the grades of the Outer or “First” Order were four in number (Zelator 1 = 10, Theoricus 2 = 9, Practicus 3 = 8, Philosophus 4 = 7) followed by the intermediate “Portal” grade: all broadly focused on basic hermetic and cabalistic symbolism. Members passing through these grades were “initiates.” Initiation into the Inner or “Second” Order (technically known as the *Rosae Rubrae et Aurae Crucis* or “R.R. et A.C.”: Red Rose and Gold Cross) began with the Rosicrucian grade of Adeptus Minor 5 = 6 (which many have claimed contained the core and indeed pinnacle of Golden Dawn teaching), followed by Adeptus Major 6 = 5 and Adeptus Exemptus 7 = 4. As the last three names indicate, members of the Inner Order were “adepts,” qualified to practice many sorts of ceremonial magic and, indeed, with the permission of superiors, to create spin-off organizations. As an example of the last, J.W. Brodie-Innes, “Deputy Archon Basileus” of the Order’s Amen-Ra Temple in Edinburgh, subsequently founded a sister organization known as the Cromlech Temple.



**Figure 1.** A Schematic of the Tree of Life as Taught in the Golden Dawn.

The three highest grades that made up the Third Order—Magister Templi 8 = 3, Magus 9 = 2, and Ipsissimus 10 = 1—were something else again. Originally, these were reserved for members of the so-called Secret Chiefs, roughly equivalent to Madam Blavatsky's Mahatmas (in that it was through them that all doctrinal authority emanated), although many members seem to have equated them to beings more similar to the Ascended Masters of Theosophical splinter groups. It is unclear whether orthodox adepts ever considered that these three highest grades could be achieved by living adepts, except in a purely honorary or titular way. Regardless, it is safe to say that moving upward in reverse order on the Tree of Life (see Figure 1) and achieving initiation into the Golden Dawn's Third Order promised union with God and, arguably, freedom from the bonds of subsequent involuntary incarnation.

To explain the process by which this happened as given in Robartes' metaphor of the "burning bow" referenced above, one must understand that the Golden Dawn assigned each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to one of the 22 paths on their version of the Tree of Life glyph. With respect to Figure 1, the letter qoph ("Q") was placed on path 29, between spheres 10 and 7; shin ("Sh") on path 31, between spheres 10 and 8; tau ("T" or "Th") on path 32, between spheres 10 and 9. In Hebrew, the word QShTh—*qesheth*—signifies among other related concepts "bow," "archer," "rainbow," and "Sagittarius." The bow is "burning" because the letter shin looks rather like three tongues of flame.

Moreover, the term *qesheth* was also applied to path 25, between spheres 9 and 6, because the zodiacal sign Sagittarius was assigned here (between the sun in sphere 6 and the moon in sphere 9: qv Mann et al. 2012, p. 310). Therefore, what Robartes indicates is that the path that takes one perpendicularly out of the system of phases is not the winding, zig-zagging path from sphere 10 to sphere 1 in order, but rather the so-called "middle pillar" of the tree that connects the lowest order of creation directly with the highest (and, incidentally, all three major levels of initiation) in a straight line. This symbolism had particular significance for Yeats since in 1896, following an extended cabalistic invocation of the lunar powers, he received a vision of "a naked woman of incredible beauty, standing upon a pedestal and shooting an arrow at a star" (Yeats 1999, p. 280; cf Yeats 1994, p. 14). As further particulars are *much* too involved for a journal article, I point interested readers to the chapter "Esotericism and Escape" in Yeats's *A Vision: Explications and Contexts* for a more detailed exploration (Mann et al. 2012, pp. 307–28).

The final possibility is strongly related to the last and is, unfortunately, even more complex. Yeats certainly strove to move upward as a member of the Golden Dawn. After being expelled from the Theosophical Society for advocating for a more pragmatic curriculum of esoteric studies, Yeats joined the Golden Dawn on 7 March 1890, taking the Theosophically-based motto *Demon Est Deus Inversus*: "The Devil is God Turned Upside-Down." Rather amusingly for anyone familiar with Yeats's outspoken personality, he was frequently referred to as "the Demon" by his peers in the order. Three years later, on 20 January 1893, he was initiated into the Portal and—somewhat inexplicably and against what this writer understands as Order policy of the time, also into what was then the lowest sub-section of the Adeptus Minor grade, and the two subsequent sub-grades of the 5 = 6 the following day. On 14 October 1914 he underwent the 6 = 5 Adeptus Major initiation and, according to the later report of George Yeats, was elevated to the grade of Adeptus Exemptus 7 = 4, the highest grade in the Second Order, sometime in 1916 (Moore 1954, p. 170). He remained active in the Golden Dawn, serving as advisor to the chiefs of the Amoun Temple—although he refused a high administrative position, perhaps as one of the chiefs, in 1920 (Harper 1974, pp. 129–30)—and, again, the *Vision Papers* are sprinkled with questions about Order matters that he posed to his communicators. Although Yeats apparently resigned from active membership in the early 1920s, he nevertheless maintained contact with his former associates and, again, explicitly dedicated both versions of *A Vision* to them.

Unsurprisingly, bits of Golden Dawn symbolism are scattered throughout Yeats's body of work—sometimes incidentally, as "The banners of the East and West" that appear in "He Hears the Cry of the Sedge," and sometimes quite explicitly as in "The Two Trees," "Vacillation," "Magic," *Autobiographies* and *A Vision*. If one understands the curriculum of the various grades, it is even

possible to connect subtextual themes in Yeats's writing directly with his Golden Dawn studies at the time. For example, one fact that Yeats was at pains to record about the initial automatic writing sessions was that "The unknown writer took his theme at first from my just published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*" (Yeats 2015, p. 8), what (comparing himself to Paracelsus among others) he calls his "spiritual history" that he identifies as a prerequisite to obtaining "the secret" (Yeats 2015, p. 9).

Although there is little curricular information available relating to the higher grades of the Golden Dawn's Inner Order, Yeats's one-time colleague Aleister Crowley provides a number of salient remarks concerning the Adeptus Exemptus degree in his own spin-off organization, the *Argentum Astrum*:

The Adept must prepare and publish a thesis setting forth His knowledge of the Universe, and his proposals for its welfare and progress. He will thus be known as the leader of a school of thought.

(Eliphas Levi's *Clef des Grands Mysteres*, the works of Swedenborg, von Eckartshausen, Robert Fludd, Paracelsus, Newton, Bolyai, Hinton, Berkeley, Loyola, etc., etc., are examples of such essays.)

He [ . . . ] should be already prepared to perceive that the only possible course for him is to devote himself utterly to helping his fellow creatures. (Crowley 1994, p. 483)

Elsewhere, Crowley advises his students to undertake seemingly innocuous magical practices that relate directly to Yeats's composition of his memoirs, begun in 1914, and particularly *A Vision's* direct antecedent *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

It is absolutely essential to begin a magical diary, and keep it up daily. You begin by an account of your life, going back even before your birth to your ancestry. . . . [Y]ou must find an answer to the question: 'How did I come to be in this place at this time, engaged in this particular work?' . . . [T]his will start you on the discovery of who you really are, and eventually lead you to your recovering the memory of previous incarnations. (Crowley 1945, "Letter A")

Clearly, by the very act of publishing *A Vision*, Yeats can be seen as trying "to help his fellow creatures" understand what he saw as the mechanism that determines their lives, and the eventual escape from the very system of incarnation and discarnate experiences he elucidates—despite the fact that (as Harold Macmillan observed to Yeats's literary agent regarding the 1937 edition) "the subject matter of the book is one that makes a very limited appeal. To most ordinary minds it appears to be quite mad" (Yeats 2015, p. xxiii). Indeed, Yeats's friend Ezra Pound pulled no punches when he described Yeats's "whole new metaphysics about 'Moon,' very very very bug-house" (as quoted from materials held in the collections of the New York Public Library in (Foster 2003, p. 157)). Equally clearly, when one looks at Yeats's poetic corpus, his thoughts about the subject stretch back far further than the creation of "*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*." As the poem "The Three Hermits," referenced above, shows: Yeats was thinking about issues of reincarnation at least as far back as 1912, when composing the material that would eventually be published in *Responsibilities*. Indeed, many of those poems contain language that would eventually end up featuring prominently in *A Vision*, such as his thoughts on passion and "escaping" from the cycles of rebirth and thereby "Running to Paradise." Furthermore, many also feature distinctly occult and Rosicrucian themes taken directly from the Golden Dawn: "The Mountain Tomb" of Christian Rosenkreuz, the hermetic-chemical "Peacock" that symbolizes the Third Order grade of Magister Templi that also featured prominently in the 1897 Michael Robartes narrative "*Rosa Alchemica*," "The Magi" (also connected with Michael Robartes in the notes to the 1899 edition of *The Wind Among the Reeds* (Yeats 1965, p. 803)), and even, perhaps, "A Coat" with its final lines about "more enterprise."

However, at this point, in order to come to grips with Yeats's hypothetical fourth option regarding the soul's bondage to the cycle of rebirth, one must consider that there is a marked disjunction between

the themes of many of Yeats's later poems and the material presented in *A Vision*. The Yeatsian system is concerned almost entirely with the soul, as Yeats's title for the fictional antecedent of the 1925 edition, *The Way of the Soul between the Sun and the Moon*, shows. By comparison, the themes of Yeats's poetry became more and more earthy as he aged. To give a few examples from the most famous poems: In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" the self dominates, is "content to live it all again/and yet again" (ll. 57–58) and effectively has the last word in the argument. In "Among School Children" "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (l. 58). In "Sailing to Byzantium" the soul must "clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/for every tatter in its mortal dress" in that "holy city" (ll. 11–12). And in "Vacillation" Yeats exults in human excellence ("What theme had Homer but original sin?" (l. 77); answer: *arête*) and professes a belief in and fascination with the "miracles of the saints," the uncorrupted body of Saint Teresa in particular, "Bathed in miraculous oil" (l. 81).

Likewise, the poet's own life reflected his growing fixation with the body. He purchased and renovated (with Golden Dawn color motifs) the sixteenth-century Norman tower house "Thoor Ballylee" as a magical oratory that Ezra Pound referred to in a 1 June 1920 letter to John Quinn as Yeats's "phallic symbol on the bogs—Ballyphallus" (as quoted from materials held in the collections of the New York Public Library in (Foster 2003, p. 84)). He engaged in numerous affairs with the full knowledge of his wife. Indeed, to combat issues with erectile dysfunction and impotence, he agreed to undergo the so-called Steinach procedure: a one-sided vasectomy designed to recirculate semen and thereby restore both his virility and creativity (qv Ellmann 1985).

Yeats was a magician. As he freely admits in the opening to the second section of "*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*": "I have murmured evocations and frequented mediums"—and such a statement does not *begin* to scratch the surface of his experiments over three decades (Yeats 1994, p. 16). In fact, in addition to his involvement with the Golden Dawn, he dallied with the Dublin Hermetic Society, the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, the Society for Psychical Research, and the Ghost Club, among other groups. Yeats meditated and took hashish with Martinists in Paris and attended ceremonies in Dublin to observe communication with evil powers. Daniel Dunlop describes rituals in which Yeats sprinkled blood from a slaughtered cockerel over a chalked pentagram "in accordance with the instructions of those versed in the black arts" (Young 1971, p. 7). Yeats even took information from the infamous Aleister Crowley *via* Golden Dawn Imperator Robert Felkin. In fact, Crowley's copy of *The Goetia*, now in the Warburg Institute, contains some very suggestive marginalia in the hand of Gerald Yorke regarding the doings of Yeats and a certain Irish seer.

Magicians do not, for the most part, simply wish to "know" and pile up knowledge for its own sake. Rather, they wish to use their secret knowledge to effect change, to *do* things, indeed to circumvent the normal progression of events and subvert it to their own ends. Thus (to highlight with one of many examples), one sees Yeats's character Michael Robartes, the image of an hermetic adept, lead the narrator of "*Rosa Alchemica*" away from the aesthete's apartment where he has simply collected occult and alchemical implements into an actual temple where occult theory is turned into practice.

Moreover, despite Yeats's poetic prowess (as the man who single-handedly "rescued English lyric from the dead hand of Campion and Tom Moore," he was very much of an elitist (Auden 1948, p. 195)). His involvement with the Golden Dawn made him feel special, initiated, in-the-know. He frequently described it as "my" order, and seems to be forever hinting, hinting, hinting . . . only to stop short of any real revelation. Of course he was bound by an oath of secrecy regarding Order matters, but this often seems like a convenient excuse, as he is only reticent about particulars.

It is almost unthinkable that Yeats, who spent decades studying and practicing magic, would suddenly decide to give up on the Golden Dawn's magical system with grades left to conquer, honors yet unearned. Equally, although it sounds rather absurd, if the plebes and *hoi polloi* could use *A Vision* to escape from the curse of repeated cycles of incarnation and attain union with God, then union with God was, perhaps, not good enough for Yeats. He was very much a have-his-cake-and-eat-it-too sort of person. Herein lies the fourth option, as I reconstruct it.

Yeats's remarks in the final pages of *A Vision* (1937) leave readers with a sense of disquiet and even dejection. Life imitates art as the poet in his own person mimics his decades-old persona from "The Phases of the Moon," sat in his tower, "a place set out for wisdom" that he will never find, cracking his wits day after day without hope of discovering meaning (l.27 ff), or perhaps emulating his even older character from *The Secret Rose's* "The Heart of the Spring," who has spent his life waiting to capture the precise moment to perform the magic that will make him one with the Immortal Powers:

Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over in my mind, exploring its details, defining and again defining its elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of Algebra. I have felt the convictions of a lifetime melt through at an age when the mind should be rigid, and others take their place, and these in turn give way to others [ . . . ] Then I draw myself up into the symbol and it seems as if I should know all if I could but banish such memories and find everything in the symbol.

But nothing comes—though this moment was to reward me for all my toil. Perhaps I am too old. Surely something would have come when I meditated under the direction of the Cabalists. (Yeats 2015, p. 301)

Clearly Yeats expected something to happen—which *clearly* didn't: some event, revelation, or transformation . . . but what was it?

Without a doubt, a few words must be devoted here to those pinnacles of mature Yeatsian lyric, the Byzantium poems, centered not only on the body-soul dilemma, but on artifice, artificiality, death-in-life and life-in-death, and the poet's triumphant paean, "I hail the superhuman" ("Byzantium" l. 15). Those readers who wish to sample a cross-section of the foundational criticism on these works are directed toward Richard Finneran's anthology *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems*. For my own part, despite the fact that there have been volumes written in the intervening years, I stand in general with Richard Ellmann, who received so much assistance and approbation directly from George Yeats herself and centers his reading on the symbol of the golden bird: "The eternity into which the poet longs to be gathered is described with deliberate ambivalence . . . those personages to whom he prays . . . are already removed from life, but he wishes to escape even further . . . to be turned into a beautiful mechanical bird . . . liberated not only from life but from all responsibilities . . . transmuted into an image" (Ellmann 1948, p. 256).

Indeed, Ellmann phrases it softer than Yeats, who closes "Sailing to Byzantium" not with a wish, but a declaration:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (ll. 25–32)

And Yeats returns to the same symbol and setting in the purgatorial "Byzantium":

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,  
More miracle than bird or handiwork,  
Planted on the starlit golden bough,  
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud  
In glory of changeless metal



Common bird or petal  
And all complexities of mire or blood. (ll. 17–24)

Nevertheless, to my mind the most incongruous element is that Byzantium, the city that serves as a weigh-station for souls waiting to be transported out of life “Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood” (l. 33) and welcomed into life by the cocks of Hades, is haunted by a mummy with “A mouth that has no moisture and no breath” that nevertheless summons (l. 13).

Perhaps Yeats saw Thanhouser’s film *The Mummy* during his 1911 American tour with the Abbey players, or a later production by Pathé, Gaumont, or Essanay. However, he was more than familiar with the rituals of the Golden Dawn that drew on complex, somewhat fanciful, and now largely outmoded ideas about esoteric Egyptology. Beyond this, Florence Farr—Yeats’s one-time lover, fellow-adept, leader of the so-called Sphere Group that contacted a discarnate Egyptian adept *via* a fragment of cartonnage, and dedicatee of *A Vision* (1925)—composed a monograph on the subject of *Egyptian Magic* that he must have known reasonably well. While mummies were popular Victorian curiosities, it is a picturesque yet inexplicable inclusion in “Byzantium,” for as Farr “explains”:

There is every reason to suppose that only those who had received some grade of initiation were mummified; for it is certain that, in the eyes of the Egyptians, mummification effectually prevented reincarnation. Reincarnation was necessary to imperfect souls, to those who had failed to pass the tests of initiation; but for those who had the Will and the capacity to enter the Secret Adytum, there was seldom necessity for that liberation of the soul which is said to be effected by the destruction of the body. (Farr 1998, p. 2)

Elsewhere in her exposition, perhaps setting the stage for *A Vision* in some fundamental way, Farr observes. “[W]e have hitherto written of man as composed of soul and body; but the Initiated Egyptians regarded themselves as being far from simply soul and body. They gave names to several human faculties, and postulated for each a possibility of separate existence” —and she goes on to elucidate them, including the *Khat*, *Hammemit*, *Kab*, *Sahu*, *Hati*, *Khaibt*, *Ka*, *Ab*, *Baie*, and *Khou* (Farr 1998, p. 3).

She continues:

Of course in thousands of cases the celestial body was restricted; the fatal moment of conception loaded the terrestrial being (composed of the *Sahu*, *Hati*, and *Ab* within the *Kab* or material body) with chains of destiny too strong for him to break through. And the *Ka* or *Ego* had to return to the *Hammemit* in the Place of Spirits and await the time when it might again have a chance of regenerating matter Astral and Material, and become of the number of these “Shining Ones,” who are set like Jewels in the Diadem of the Lord of Spirit and Life, made One (Farr 1998, p. 5)

Who and what are these “Shining Ones” who seem to be the *crème de la crème* of successful adepts? They are those individuals who have cultivated “the seed of the Tree of Life-Eternal” implanted in their hearts, ultimately allowing the individual to become “either an Evil Demon or a God” (Farr 1998, p. 12).

Moving back to “Among School Children,” Yeats includes a remarkable quasi-theological statement in lines 20–21: “For even daughters of the swan can share/something of every paddler’s heritage” that represents an inversion of conventional Christian thought. In the creation myth given in the opening chapters of *Genesis*, the body is mud, animated by the breath of God, and this divine pneumatic component is the soul that makes mere matter an image of the creator. In Christianity, this myth is transmuted into the Johannine theology of the Alexandrian school, eventually adopted by all orthodox Christian denominations, in which the most important aspect of the Christ story is that the *logos*, immortal God, humbles Himself to become man.

However, it is clear that Yeats often gave credence to tradition over current usage. The more ancient a mode of thought, the greater validity it possessed—orthodoxy notwithstanding. Alexandrian doctrines were not the only theology circulating in the early Church, and they are in opposition to

the direction that Yeats's observation takes readers. Rather, Yeats stresses that even those heroes and demigods of Greek myth have a *human* component. In an early Christian context, this is the theology of the Syrian school at Antioch that would later be condemned as part of the Nestorian heresy; that is, the most important aspect of the Christian story is that Jesus, a man, ultimately becomes God.

This observation would remain a puzzling bit of trivia, except for the fact that references to this strain of Syrian Christianity recur again and again in Yeats's mythology. In terms of *A Vision*, in Owen Aherne's fictional introduction to the 1925 edition, it is claimed that the (equally fictional) source documents, the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominorum* (sacred book of the quasi-fictional Judwali sect of Arabs known for "their licentiousness and their sanctity . . . tolerant of human frailty beyond any believing people") and *The Way of the Soul between the Sun and the Moon* "attributed to a certain Kusta ben Luka, Christian Philosopher at the Court of Harun Al-Raschid" both had "some remote Syriac origin" (Yeats 2008, pp. lx–lxi). Kusta ben Luka, an historical Melkite Christian known to and admired by Albertus Magnus, was specifically included in Yeats's myth as the author of a number of philosophical and magical treatises and translations, including "*Physical Ligatures* dealing with the virtue of the mind whereby the physical body is changed & influenced" (Taylor 1969, p. 86). More complete specifics can be found in Suheil B. Bushrui's essay, "Yeats's Arabic Interests" in (*In Excited Reverie* Bushrui 1965.)

Likewise, in *The Resurrection*—whose introduction is littered with remarks pertaining to Yeats's views on reincarnation and escape—Yeats plays three strains of theological thought off of one another in the characters of The Hebrew, The Greek, and The Syrian: gathered with the eleven disciples on Easter Sunday prior to Christ's first visitation (while a procession honoring Dionysus, who has overtones of Attis, goes on in the street outside). For the Hebrew, Christ was simply Jesus, a man born of woman. For the Greek, He was a phantom who "only seemed to be born, only seemed to eat, seemed to sleep, seemed to walk, seemed to die" (Yeats 1934, p. 116). Both are appalled to discover, when Christ actually appears, that he is a "phantom with a beating heart." Only the Syrian is prepared and exultant to report, and indeed embrace, the irrational.

To be sure, all orthodox Christians profess a belief in the ultimate resurrection of the body on the last day, in which the souls of the righteous dead will be reunited with their bodies, raised from the dust but "glorified" and remade with neither material limitation nor defect. However, who knew how long it would be until the Last Day when the tombs would be opened and the faithful souls reunited with their scattered bodies? Nor was there any promise that such a resurrection also entailed any of the earthly delights in which the aging Yeats took such pleasure—other than the promise of singing hosannas before the throne of God in company with the two seraphim. Furthermore, as before, if such a salvation was available for all, then there was nothing "initiated" about it for a magician like Yeats and, alike with those who attain what the *Bhagavad Gita* calls *brahma-nirvana* (5:24–26) and are freed from the cycle of rebirth at death, one does have to suffer death first, without any guarantees.

Regardless, while Yeats was a student of many religions and theologies, he had been purged of the ability to subjugate himself to the doctrines of conventional religion under the often harsh tutelage of his father—who nevertheless failed to eradicate in his son the human need for some sort of belief system larger than one's self. Much to J.B. Yeats's dismay, Yeats filled this void with esoteric studies and the practice of magic. As he so adamantly states in an often-quoted 1892 letter to John O'Leary:

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 more important pursuit of my life [ . . . ] If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Cathleen* ever have come to exist. The mystical life is at 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 [sic]—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world. (Wade 1955, pp. 210–11)

Similarly, in a letter to Lionel Johnson from the same period he comments on both religion and magic in no uncertain terms: “My own position is that an idealism or spiritualism which denies magic, and evil spirits even, and sneers at magicians and even mediums (the few honest ones) is an academical imposture. Your Church has in this matter been far more thorough than the Protestant. It has never denied *Ars Magica*, though it has denounced it” (Yeats 1986, pp. 355–56). In short, Yeats’s occult ideas, those stemming from his long tenure in the Golden Dawn in particular, were his religion, and it is unquestionably to the Golden Dawn that one must turn for any final or esoteric answer to the problems posed by a system of reincarnation posed by two Golden Dawn adepts working in tandem.

To begin with, Yeats was certainly aware of the fundamentals of *gilgul*, or cabalistic reincarnation, and used it in some of his early poems (qv Serra 1998). Furthermore, similar to Farr’s Egyptian schema outlined previously, the cabalistic system conveyed to initiates of the Golden Dawn taught that the spiritual constitution of a human being is made up of at least four distinct principles: the passions and senses (*Nephesh*), the intellect (*Ruach*), and the immortal spiritual soul (*Neshamah*), all of which exist within the physical body (*Guph*) that was nevertheless classified as a spiritual principle. To complicate things, the individual *Neshamah* is connected to a higher “animating” soul, *Chiah*, that is common to every living thing, which itself proceeds from an even higher soul, *Yechidah*: The One. These cabalistic ideas as taught by the original Golden Dawn are most fully expressed in two works by the Order’s founders: MacGregor Mathers’ translation of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth’s 1684 *Kabbala Denudata* (Mathers 1887), and Wynn Westcott’s *An Introduction to the Study of the Kabbalah* (Westcott 1910). Both are rather stiff reads (the former moreso than the latter), written as they are in rather heavy, old-fashioned Victorian prose. However, a much more succinct, accessible, and lighthearted treatment of the same information can be found among the essays of contemporary esotericist and occult scholar Bill Heidrick, who has written extensive exegetical commentaries on the Golden Dawn’s cabala (or “qabalah” as the post-Renaissance, quasi-Christian adaptation is more correctly transliterated to distinguish it from its strictly Jewish antecedent). Thus:

In Qabalah there is a series of souls. There’s even a soul for the physical body that IS the physical body. Wonder of wonders, it’s called the “Goof”—whence we derive our word “goofy”. Then there is the Nephesh, which is what keeps the Goof running. That’s in animals too. A Nephesh sometimes lingers after death. When the body drops, this soul tries to look for another one. That’s the ghost. It’s not particularly intelligent. It’s just able to hold the pattern it had. A wandering Nephesh will generally look like the can it was in. Electrical, who knows? It may have an explanation, and it may not. It’s there. It doesn’t seem to require an explanation to exist. Beyond the Nephesh is the human identity, something called the Ruach, the intelligent or human soul. This is the “somebody in there.” [ ... ]

[T]he Neshamah [is] the first immortal part of the soul, or the first immortal soul. Calling these entities parts or souls doesn’t matter. If you insist on having just one soul, call them parts. If you don’t have a problem with that, call them souls. The Egyptians had a group of terms for them. The Neshamah is the first immortal part of you. Your body will rot, smell bad and become a mess some day—unless you are weird enough to have it stuffed. Neshamah is not like that.

Nephesh, the animal principal, is corruptible. The Nephesh is the memory people have of you as though you were in the room. It’s the thing that makes friends think your ghost is present when they feel some intangible thing and suddenly see it as you. When a friend dies, a week or a year later, you may see that friend walking down the street. You hurry to catch up, because you don’t understand what is going on. Suddenly, it’s somebody who doesn’t look at all like that person. For a moment it did. That’s the ghost. Shade is another word just as good. The Nephesh eventually will die. When the last person who sees you in things or remembers you in mind passes away, when the last person who has heard stories

about you goes, your Nephesh dies. There are ways to keep it alive independently for a time. Some theories of Magick describe how to make a house for the soul or help it live in a tree. That can be done, but many people doubt whether those things work in themselves or only because the person who performed the appropriate ritual made a conscious effort to keep this spirit around.

If you write a book or leave a journal, it's possible to call your Nephesh back from the dead. A sympathetic person may read your literary effects. It's not enough to imagine seeing a person or to imagine what they are like. That won't bring back the Nephesh. The person must be seen as though physically present. It's quite a spooky thing to start thinking someone's thoughts and later see that person. Another way to approach this idea: to understand what life was like 300 years ago in some other part of the world, reading a book or visiting a place isn't enough. It's necessary to hallucinate what it would have smelled like. The impressions must be more real than imagined. It's one thing to read a book and imagine the life of some famous person. It's quite another matter to read the same book and begin to think like that person.

The Ruach survives well in books, buildings and works of art. That's the next soul after the Nephesh. If you don't smell the animal soul, you can still get ideas from the intellectual soul. Things that a deceased person left behind still function in the world as products of the personality. The Nephesh and the Ruach can be kept alive, but they will pass away if not deliberately kept alive. They depend on physical things or people still living. The Neshamah doesn't. The Neshamah is immortal by itself. It always existed. It always will exist. In a sense it is divine. [ . . . ]

Consider the concept of reincarnation: you're born and born and born again until finally you get it together with your Neshamah; finally the part of your [sic] that's immortal unites with the part of you that's mortal. After that occurs, you don't have to be born again (Heidrick 1994–1995)

MacGregor Mathers, Yeats's long-time chief in the Golden Dawn, therefore concluded, "[I]f you can once get the great force of the Highest [Yechidah] to send its ray clean down through the Neshamah into the mind, and thence, into your physical body, the Nephesh would be so transformed as to render you almost like a God walking on this Earth" (Mathers 1987, p. 136).

Was Yeats's answer to the "remorse" of a repeated cycle of births and deaths (*remordere*: literally being "chewed up, again!") to become *as* God, or even *a* god? ("Vacillation" l. 8), to become, like the patriarch Enoch, "not?" *Perhaps* this is an extreme possibility, and perhaps not. Without question Yeats announced to Ezra Pound that his intent in *A Vision* (1937) was to "proclaim a new divinity"—the individual perfected—and that his paradigms were the oppositional figures of Oedipus who, when the "earth opened, 'riven by love', [ . . . ] sank down soul and body" balanced against "Christ who, crucified standing up, went into the abstract sky soul and body" (Yeats 2015, p. 27): to use a term from *A Vision*, the most complete Unity of Being in both cases.

Regardless, Yeats exulted to Dorothy Wellesley in May of 1937 that the final proofs of *A Vision* were out of his hands (Wade 1955, p. 886). A scant eighteen months later, at the end of January, 1939, reading Vedanta and still daydreaming about the possibility of restarting his long-aborted project to form a Celtic sister-order to the Golden Dawn, he took the advice of his echo to "lie down and die" ("Man and Echo" l. 19), in his own estimation nothing but "a broken man" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion" l. 3). His intellectual soul lives, in the words of W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "scattered among a hundred cities" though "modified in the guts of the living." His body went into the ground—"an honoured guest"—at Roquebrune, on the French Riviera, "Emptied of its poetry" And his Neshamah? It's certainly not with the dry bones reinterred in County Sligo's Drumcliff cemetery. As his tombstone advises admirers, "Horseman, pass by."

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