

W. B. Yeats and Mysticism

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By

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For my family

"He sat there beautiful, as only an Eastern is beautiful, making little gestures with his delicate hands and to him alone among all the talkers I have heard, oratory, and even the delight of ordered words, seemed nothing, and all thought a light into the heart of truth."

—W. B. Yeats's description of Mohini Chatterjee, "The Way of Wisdom," in *The Speaker*, April 14, 1900.

"The mystical life is the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write."

—From Yeats's letter to John O'Leary, July 23, 1892.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xiv
Abbreviations	xv
Chapter One.....	1
An Introduction to Yeats's Literary Mystical Viewpoint	
Chapter Two	23
O Sages Standing in God's Holy Fire: Yeats's Wise Men	
Chapter Three	65
The Yeatsian Mystical Journey	
Chapter Four	93
The Great Stone: Yeats and Celtic Mysticism	
Chapter Five	120
Eternal Beauty: Yeats's Rosicrucian Poems	
Chapter Six	146
Automatic Writing and the Yeatses: Their Discursive and Intuitive Approaches	
Chapter Seven.....	175
The Sexual and the Divine in Yeats	
Chapter Eight.....	198
The Apocalyptic Vision in Yeats	

Conclusion.....	219
Notes.....	227
Bibliography	254

PREFACE

William Butler Yeats is one of the literary pillars of twentieth-century modernism. He was interested in the mystical and mythical elements of the world's dominant cultures. Accordingly, he interpreted history in a context that broadly negotiated with magic, the occult, theosophy, alchemy, astrology, mythology, mysticism, and religion. He was not attracted to any specific culture, even though he was an enthusiastic poet for his Celtic culture, particularly in his early work. His dual Anglo-Irish identity created a severe conflict in his personality; however, it was fruitful, leading him to consider the most significant cultures during his lifetime. His Romantic background and affinity led him to the Romantic East, which was then exemplified by the charming stories and magic of the *Arabian Nights*. The Eastern influence in his work extended to include mystical visions found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism or Cabbala, and Islam or Sufism. He saw his Celtic culture as rooted in the East, and his love of that culture, particularly its folklore and mythology, brought him into opposition to modernity and motivated him, along with other activists like Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, to launch the Irish cultural revival.

Unlike his beloved Maud Gonne, Yeats was not a simple fanatic for his nationality or the Irish cause, but rather a profound defender against those subversive elements which he thought could affect his culture and identity. His history theory emerged partly from the fear that the subversive elements of modern society were about to eliminate his culture. Consequently, his view of history was drawn up in the context of an apocalyptic vision. This vision was not far removed from his original Christian beliefs, even though he felt free to quote from other faiths and cultures. His book, *A Vision*, which was a product of the automatic writing process Yeats undertook with his wife, George, became the basis of his esoteric system. The potential dramatisation in this book and Yeats's poetic imagery confer a prophetic touch to the book's text, even though they also undermine the scientific authenticity of what he presents as facts. However, this book does constitute an abstract of his principal thoughts on spirituality, mysticism, and history.

In this book, I will analyse what some critics see as marginal in Yeats's work, which I argue is central to understanding his work. Yeats's concern with the links between Celtic mysticism and Arabic culture, for example, has not been dealt with in sufficient detail; therefore, there remains expansive room for further exploration here. Furthermore, Yeats is better known as a nationalist writer than a mystic, even though he often said that mysticism was at the core of his work and life.

This book has eight chapters, which offer a careful examination of Yeats's mystical experience with a special focus on the Eastern influence found in his work. The first chapter introduces the most essential mystical themes, symbols and concerns in Yeats's work. These include Hermeticism, Platonic Forms, the Logos, Plotinus's theory of emanation, Porphyry's astrology, the enlightenment in Hinduism and Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, the Cabbalistic Tree of Life, Tarot cards, Rosicrucianism, mythology, magic, alchemy, the Golden Dawn, Yeats's interest in the East, and his love for Maud Gonne as it is associated with Divine love. This chapter also underlines Yeats's cultural background and his reflections on politics and history related to his spiritual system. Druidism and Bardism or Celtic culture are explored in terms of how Yeats understood them in the context of the Irish cultural revival.

The second chapter explores the Indian and Arabian influences on Yeats's work. Yeats's Indian poems absorbed such ideas as the renunciation of desires, the reincarnation and the liberation of the soul, the mystical journey, and the Pantheistic view of life. His later poems were influenced by the ideas of another Indian sect, Tantrism. Indian thinking reached Yeats through contact with four mystics, namely Mohini Chatterjee, Poruhit Swami, Shri Hamsa, and Rabindranath Tagore. I argue that Celticism has many links with Hinduism, particularly in terms of Pantheism and rebirth. Islamic Sufism was influenced by Indian thought, especially that of Ibn Arabi, who developed the doctrine of the Unity of Being. Yeats was fascinated by this doctrine and Arabic and Islamic civilisation, especially that of Arabic Spain. He even came to see the Moorish character Leo Africanus as his "anti-self." Yeats's poetic drama, *Mosada*, was another expression of his interest in the Arabic civilisation in Spain; however, his focus is on magic, astrology, and heterodoxy versus orthodoxy. The magical dance of the Arabian Judwali tribe, which draws the movement of history, as Yeats perceived it, is hinted at in his important poem "The Gift of Harun Al-Rascid." The latter poem, along with "The Phases of the Moon," deals with many Arabic characters and

symbols, which feature in his esoteric system as revealed through the automatic writing process that Yeats practised with his wife George.

The third chapter deals with the topic of the mystical journey or quest, a matter dealt with by Yeats in such poems as "The Wandering of Oisín," "The Lake of Innisfree," "The Stolen Child," "Countess Cathleen in Paradise," "Father Gilligan," "The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland," and "Sailing to Byzantium." The relations between this quest's mystical and Romantic elements are highlighted, particularly in the first three of these poems. This chapter focuses on the definition of the mystical journey and whether it can be considered a real journey that can be taken to achieve union with God or instead simply understood as a revelation or a vision. The shadow of politics is never far from the background of this Yeatsian mystical journey. Yeats's life can be seen as a kind of mystical journey, indeed as a self-conscious allegory that culminates in the tower, that mystical device with its winding stair. Yeats travelled a great deal both within and away from Ireland before discovering his final destination at the Ballylee Tower in County Galway.

The fourth chapter discusses Celtic mysticism and its significant symbols and themes: stone, moon, wood, fairy or *Sídh*, magic, and human sacrifice. This chapter also shows the struggle between Celtic culture and Christianity as depicted in Yeats's poetry, especially in "The Wandering of Oisín." The chapter also focuses on primitivism, the Celtic or Irish cultural revival, Yeats's conflicted identity, and cosmopolitan ambitions. In the context of mysticism, Yeats's political views on the dualities of mob and elite, power and faith, are explored in this chapter, particularly by reading his unpublished group of poems, *Under the Moon*.

The fifth chapter deals with Rosicrucianism and its effects on Yeats's poetry, looking in particular at the poetic symbol of the Rose. I discuss Yeats's involvement with The Golden Dawn and the various branches of Hermeticism. I focus on alchemy, magic, and astrology, the main topics of Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism, and look at how they feature in Yeats's work, notably in *The Rose*, *The Secret Rose*, "Rosa Alchemica" and "Chosen." This chapter also examines how themes from the Cabbala and the Cabbalistic Tree of Life form part of Yeats's creative development.

Chapter Six explores automatic writing as a creative activity shared by Yeats and his wife, George. This activity led Yeats to compose the esoteric *A Vision*, as well as two powerful poems "The Gift of Harun

Al-Raschid" and "The Phases of the Moon." The chapter discusses whether the automatic writing process is the product of either discursive or intuitive approaches or a combination of both. The quaternaries of Faculty, Principles, Perfections, and Wisdoms are explored in Yeats's spiritual system. His history theory is shown to be symbolised by the spiral movement of the gyres and his desire to identify an Irish "avatar." Further Arabic and Islamic influences on Yeats's work are also discussed in this chapter, for instance, the gyres, the twenty-eight phases of the moon, the idea of chance and choice, magical dancing or the Dervishes' dance, and the doctrine of the Unity of Being. Some "automatic" texts are examined to show their complexity and significance.

Chapter Seven deals with the relationship between sex and the Divine. Yeats was influenced by Indian Tantrism, which uses sexual intercourse as a meditative tool to reach enlightenment. This chapter traces the concept of linking the sexual and the Divine as it develops through the early, middle and late stages of Yeats's work: examining, in turn, "The Travail of Passion," "Solomon and the Witch," and "Chosen." Other poems and poetic dramas are also explored in this context, notably "Leda and the Swan," "Solomon and Sheba," "Veronica's Napkin," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Byzantium," "Demon and the Beast," "The Gift of Harun Al-Raschid," *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *The Player Queen*.

Chapter Eight focuses on the apocalyptic vision in Yeats's work. This chapter discusses the cultural, political, emotional, and religious elements that formed the rationale for Yeats's apocalyptic vision across the whole of his work. Yeats's history theory and his configuration of the gyres are powerfully linked to this vision, as can be seen in many poems, such as "Leda and the Swan," "Demon and the Beast," "The Gyres," "Solomon and the Witch," and "The Second Coming." The Celtic and Hermetic apocalyptic symbols in certain poems are also discussed here. Yeats's spiritual project for salvation, as exemplified in "Chosen," is connected with his apocalyptic vision to form a panoramic view of his entire esoteric system.

My argument sheds light on all aspects of Yeats's work by gathering together diverse threads from his interests and activities and putting them in a different context that makes more significant sense of his complex poetic career and life. The argument puts forward a new reading of Yeats in the context of his long-standing fascination with mysticism and with Eastern cultures.

The methodology used in this book was principally a cultural approach that I used throughout the book; however, many other approaches, sometimes, were invited wherever they needed. These approaches include the historical, social, political, psychological, and biographical.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CP	<i>The Collected Poems by William Butler Yeats, 1889-1939</i>
Ly	Edward Larrissy, <i>The First Yeats: Poems by W.B. Yeats, 1889-99</i>
MCV	Michael Comyn's Verse Version of "The Lay of Oisín"
OJE	<i>The Only Jealousy of Emer</i> , by W. B. Yeats
UM	<i>Under the Moon</i> , by W. B. Yeats
VP	<i>The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats</i>
VPL	<i>The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats</i>

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO YEATS'S LITERARY MYSTICAL VIEWPOINT

It is challenging to define mysticism, but it is also necessary to explain its major features to comprehend how the term will be used here. Ninian Smart defines mysticism as a "direct access to the divine."¹ This brief definition reflects the notion that human beings long to connect with a higher presence, their God. Religion can indeed offer this connection, but mystics always transcend the borders of faith in their search for union with God.² Some religions include mysticism in specific parts of their doctrine, while others are fully mystical in their beliefs.³ Another definition of the mysticism goes further than the idea of God and depicts mysticism as the "direct experience of ultimate reality."⁴ The term "ultimate reality" can substitute for God in certain other religions and is called, for instance, "Tao," "Nirvana," or "Brahman."⁵ There are also different names for the ultimate reality in other religions, although the concept of God is similar, even when different terms are used.

Plotinus's neo-Platonic theory of emanation is one of the primary sources of mysticism, leaving as it did a broad scope for connection with the Divine presence. That extension of Divine presence included humans and objects; consequently, both are raised to the level of divinity or apotheosised somehow. This neo-Platonic theory is consistent with an immanent, not a transcendent, concept of God. The Vedanta hypothesis on the necessity of God being plural and thus the reason for the creation of the Cosmos recalls the notion of perfection. The perfection of God implies self-sufficiency but not a necessity. However, in this sense, the immanent concept of God relates to the Vedanta hypothesis of necessity. In contrast, the transcendent concept of perfection relates to the notion of perfection as self-sufficiency.

In neo-Platonism, the notion of perfection is understood as follows: "Perfection is typically relative to kind. Something is perfect to the extent that it achieves or fulfils its nature; it is imperfect in so far as it

fails in this regard."⁶ Accordingly, the concepts of the Soul, Nature or Cosmos, and perfect Forms can be considered in the same context. Objective existence is the result of the ideal contemplative mind and the external self-expression of the One.⁷ The necessity of the one being plural is demonstrated through the perfect Forms, which have an intermediary status between the One and the human. The failure to contemplate these Divine Forms leads to the origin of evil. Consequently, "when the Soul, in the form of the individual existents, becomes thus preoccupied with its experience, Nature comes into being, and the Cosmos takes on [a] concrete form as the locus of [human] personality."⁸ In this sense, Nature or Cosmos is the error committed by the Soul, which means that humans then exist in an evil environment. This understanding also means that salvation only emerges from the Soul's perfection. In an imaginary letter Yeats wrote from Leo Africanus to himself, the Platonic Forms are depicted as plastic images:

The living mind could [not] exist for a moment without our succour, for god does not act immediately upon the mind but through mediatorial forms. These forms, however are not messengers as you understand the word. They do not carry a letter in their hands, even in their memories for being plastic images, changeable as the will they can clothe one another's thought, the subtle mind within the more gross, the coarser body enfolding as it were the more delicate.⁹

As Yeats configures them, these forms are not negative receivers or mediators, but rather they are like desire in its changeability and flexibility. This notion reaffirms Yeats's emphasis on subjective choice as the equivalent of contingency in his history theory.

Philo of Alexandria allocated the logos an intermediary status between God and the Cosmos, thus "being both the agent of creation and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend God." At the same time, the Stoics consider logos as an active principle that can be equalised with God.¹⁰ Philo's view coincides with the medieval Platonists' consideration of the logos as an immanent and transcendent Divine that exists simultaneously.¹¹ This belief that the logos extends to reach Christianity is exemplified in Jesus, as the "Word" of God. In this sense, Jesus represents the human and the Divine nature in his singular identity; a quality that means more to mystics, particularly, those who aspire to gain access to the power of God. It has been said that the triadic formula found in Christianity is merely an image of the old Egyptian triad of Osiris, the god of Good, as the father; Horus, the guardian of the holy

light, as his son; and Isis, who gives her husband's life back by using the logos that is the sacred secret after he is killed by his brother Seth—the god of Evil.¹²

Plotinus's theory of salvation through contemplation is not entirely consistent with Christianity; instead, Porphyry, Plotinus's disciple, offers his theory of virtue as a means of perfecting the soul and reaching God by one's efforts. Moreover, Porphyry's concern with astrology leads him to objectivise the soul and thus depart from his teacher's theory of the Cosmos. Porphyry believes that the stars and planets have certain powers over the behaviour of the individual soul; for instance, there is "right judgment from Saturn, proper exercise of the will from Jupiter, impulse from Mars, opinion and imagination from the Sun, and [...] sensuous desire from Venus; [while] from the Moon [as] the soul receives the power of physical production."¹³ The Automatic Script produced by Yeats with his wife George is full of such details, and it seems that Porphyry offers more to this script than Plotinus does. Furthermore, some of Yeats's most profound poems, including "The Phases of the Moon" (1919), "Chosen" (1933), "Solomon and the Witch" (1921), and the Byzantium poems, relate to the notion of salvation being attained through the spiritual configuration of the cosmos. Yeats's history theory associates this configuration of the cosmos with the end of the world in his version of the apocalypse.

Salvation in Buddhism is more relevant to Yeats because it arises from the self and not from an external realm as in neo-Platonism. There is a mystical procedure to be followed to achieve Nirvana or enlightenment, which means that "the relocation of our true nature is the ultimate mystical quest in Buddhism."¹⁴ As in Hinduism, salvation is also associated with the soul's liberation from an endless cycle of rebirths. The renunciation of desires or non-attachment leads to that final state of enlightenment. The monastic lifestyle is reflected in this particular faith and especially in Zen Buddhism, the main concepts of which are "the emptiness, impermanence, and unsatisfactoriness of the world."¹⁵ In his book, *Yeats and Zen: A Study of the Transformation of His Mask*, Shiro Naito lists the many books found in Yeats's private library that relate to Zen concepts, notably Daisetz Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and Yone Noguchi's *The Spirit of Japanese Art*, and, *Hiroshige*.¹⁶

Buddhism's "emptiness" does not mean nothingness per se, but it does mean focusing on one thing and thus the emptying-out of anything else. In his book *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, Suzuki defines emptiness as the effort to "keep your mind awakened

without having it abides anywhere" or "to keep the mind perfectly unobstructed by anything."¹⁷ However, the emptiness of things in Buddhism can be perceived as the demolishing of the self: there is no "distinctive individuality."¹⁸ Enlightenment or Nirvana is attained by focusing on the Divine or the contemplation of existence and a long process of the renunciation of both pain and pleasure. This passive happiness is achieved by abandoning individuality and stepping from the transient to the eternal. In other mysticism, that state is called the union with God. Emptiness or nothingness recalls annihilation (whose root "*nihil*" means "nothing" in Latin).¹⁹ In this sense, the annihilation of the body leads to Nirvana or perfection in Buddhism. In his poem "Fragments" (1928), Yeats alludes to this in terms of automatic writing:

Where got I that truth?
 Out of a medium's mouth.
 Out of nothing it came,
 Out of the forest loam,
 Out of dark night where lay
 The crowns of Nineveh
 "Fragments" (CP 215, 11, 1-6)

The "Divine voice" comes "Out of a medium's mouth." George, Yeats's wife, was the medium through which Yeats came to write his esoteric book *A Vision* (1925) in a dialogue that began shortly after their marriage in 1917. In the same poem, Yeats also hints at the Buddhist idea of nothingness: "Out of nothing it came," as Naito also notes.²⁰ Yeats's understanding of the concept of nothingness or emptiness here may not wholly coincide with the Buddhist idea of spiritual truth coming out of the annihilation of the body and its desires. But his reference to "the crowns of Nineveh" evokes Mesopotamia and its culture of mysticism. The "dark night" also confirms this conclusion, and Yeats repeats the image of the magical activity at "midnight" in some of his poems and "The Gift of Harun Al-Rasid" (1923).

Enlightenment can be gained by the body-soul interaction in another Buddhist sect called Vajrayana, which is rooted in Indian Tantric tradition:

The Indian tantric tradition employed "magic" in the search for enlightenment. Sacred sounds (mantras) and sacred spaces (mandalas) have intrigued Tantrists, as has a general sense that enlightenment requires liberating the most powerful psychosomatic energies.²¹

In Hinduism, especially in the *Upanishads*, the enlightenment phase is called *moksha*. It can be attained by liberating the individual soul (*atman*) from the endless cycles of birth and death, and consequently, a union with the universal soul (*Brahman*).²² *Brahman* is supposed to be found in *atman* as well. This pantheistic view is seen in the doctrine of another sect based on the *Upanishads* called *Advaita Vedanta*, or non-dualism. This sect was established by Sankara during the eighth century CE, and it argues that a person can transcend the material world and unite with *Brahman* by following certain yogic principles or practices.²³ The renunciation of worldly desires is essential in *Advaita Vedanta*; however, the *Bhagavad Gita* offers two ways to deal with these desires: the first is renunciation, and the second, which is preferable, is to live in this world normally but with a personal dedication of one's work to *Brahman*.²⁴

The Pantheistic elements of the Cabbala are close to those of the Vedanta or Hinduism. The revelation of the Jewish God YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai is central to Judaism because it defines the relationship between this personal God and his people. While the mystics seek the face of that God, they look in vain for their indescribable God. However, these mystics and other worshippers assume that the abode of God is the Temple in Jerusalem.²⁵ Mount Sinai, where God was revealed to Moses, is significant for Yeats, particularly in his poem "The Phases of the Moon," while Jerusalem also features in his prophetic poem "The Second Coming." In the latter text, Yeats supposes the end of history to be happening near Bethlehem or Jerusalem.

Here the influence of Blake on Yeats is crucial. In Blake, Jerusalem—just like Byzantium in Yeats—is a symbolic Divine city founded out of space and time.²⁶ The timeless gyre, central to Yeats's history theory, recalls Blake's ball in its shape, which facilitates winding and gyring.²⁷ But likewise, the gyre can be linked to many other mystical figures, from the dance of the Islamic Dervishes to Plato's spindle or even Flaubert's spiral.²⁸

Yeats's interest in Jewish mysticism is revealed by studying the Tarot, the Cabbala and the Tree of Life. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats mingles the Cabbala with Arabic mathematics figures on the Tree of Life:

The Tree of Life is a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called Sephiroth joined by straight lines. Once men must have thought of it as like some great tree covered with its fruit and its foliage, but at some period, in the thirteenth century, perhaps, touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia in all likelihood, it

had lost its natural form.²⁹

Although Yeats mentions the mathematics of Arabia, he might not have known how the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are described in the Koran:

Seest thou not to what God likeneth a good word? To a good tree: its root firmly fixed, and its branches in the Heaven: Yielding its fruit in all seasons by the will of its Lord. God setteth forth these similitudes to men that haply they may reflect. And an evil word is like an evil tree torn up from the face of the earth, and without strength to stand.³⁰

The relationship between God and His creations is represented by the Tree of Life as branched into ten Sephiroth. Each Sephira designates a specific concept or symbol. The transcendental God or the Absolute seems to communicate the Creation indirectly according to the Cabbalistic hierarchy found on the Tree of Life.³¹ Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi describes the Cabbalistic Tree of Life and its representation of God, cosmos, and man as follows:

The Tree is a model of the Universe. It is the template of all the Worlds, carrying within it a recurring system of order. Moreover, any complete organism or organisation is an imitation of its plan. Man is the prime example. He is a microcosm of the macrocosm. His being is an exact replica in every detail in miniature of the cosmoses above him. True, he moves in the physical World, is made up of atoms, molecules and cells yet he partakes in the subtle realm of Forms, can assist in conscious Creation and has access to the Divine.³²

The neo-Platonic theory of Forms as the mediators between man and God lurks behind Halevy's description, as well as the Hermetic belief in the similarity between Heaven and Earth. Hermes Trismegistus seems to have many names, manifestations, or identifications that reflect his great significance in knowledge, magic, alchemy, and mysticism. He is identified with the Egyptian god Thoth, the prophets Idris and Enoch, Elijah, Utnapishtim of the Gilgamesh epic, and the ambiguous Islamic character called al-Khidr³³ (although in Druidism, Teut or Teutates was similar to Thoth in his features as a god of wisdom, and the name might be Westernized).³⁴

In John R. Hinnelles's *A New Dictionary of Religions*, Hermes is an Egyptian sage who lived in the Age of Moses.³⁵ This reference

coincides with the Koranic narrative of Moses and the good servant later known as al-Khidr: "One of Our servants, unto whom We [God] had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us."³⁶ The Koranic narrative reveals that al-Khidr is more knowledgeable than Moses, and the Sufis heavily rely on this narrative in their interpretation of their mystical approach. According to the Sufis, al-Khidr's Divine knowledge is not available to every person unless that person follows their mystical order. According to Sufi circles, it is thought that al-Khidr is immortal and represents "Eternal Youth."³⁷

This immortality of al-Khidr brings to mind the Yeatsian character, Aengus, the god of youth, in "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889). The theory of Forms has one of its significant examples in the character of al-Khidr, as he resembles the direct access to the Divine. His name means "the green" in Arabic, which is the rationale for his being identified with nature. Also, it is a characteristic that suggests associating him with Hermes because green is the colour of Hermes's Emerald or Smaragdine tablet.

Hermetic ideas are termed "Hermetica," and basically, there are three branches, namely Greek, Latin, and Arabic Hermetica.³⁸ However, Hermetic teachings can be allocated to two levels: The first, which is termed *technical* because it explains the "techniques for the application of the knowledge of the principles and forces at work in the universe to daily life and practical problems"; and the second, where "Hermes teaches his disciples in the dialogues how to transcend their bodily circumstances and to overcome fate through purification of the intellect and contemplation, leading to a true knowledge of God."³⁹ The mystical approach of the Hermetic teachings offers the soul's salvation through a process including magical rituals, astrology, alchemy, medicine, and spirituality.

Another deity with the same characteristics as Hermes and al-Khidr is, as we have seen, the Egyptian deity Thoth. He is also a messenger of God "with a wide range of associations, including nature, cosmology, writing, science, medicine, and the afterlife."⁴⁰ Thoth's magical and divine powers enabled him to heal and protect Horus and Isis in their struggle against Seth in the Osiris legend. He helped Isis restore the body of her husband Osiris and taught her to revive him.⁴¹ Thoth's role as a mediator in this legend makes him an archetype for the later configuration of prophethood and the Forms. The effect of the Osiris legend figures is evident on some of the names or symbols of the esoteric societies in which Yeats took part (for instance, the Isis-Urania Temple).

However, these "Egyptian rites" were controversial among many of the members of the Golden Dawn society.⁴²

Yeats's interest in the occult and Hermeticism began early in his life, in 1888, when he joined The Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. However, Yeats was not happy with Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society because of Blavatsky's dominating presence and what he saw as the credulity of some members of the society.⁴³ So, Yeats undertook to establish an Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society to satisfy "his own inclination toward magical experimentation and the verification of supernatural phenomena."⁴⁴ His psychical research was based on empirical investigations and caused Blavatsky to expel him from her society in 1890. As Foster notes, despite this expulsion, Yeats remained fascinated by the "eclectic Eastern flavour of Theosophy," and he found his interest more indulged by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.⁴⁵ In her book, *Yeats the Initiate*, Kathleen Raine comments that:

The central teaching of the Golden Dawn was Cabbala (especially the Christian cabbala of Dee and Agrippa) with its numerology and complex system of correspondences based on the diagram of the Tree of Life; the Tarot was used in this sense, according to Eliphas Lévi's view that these cards represent the Tree of Life in pictorial form.⁴⁶

Numerology is significant in mysticism in general and in Cabbala in particular. The number of lines that link the ten Sephiroth in the Cabbalistic Tree of Life corresponds to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁴⁷ Tarot cards also follow the four, ten, and twenty-two numbers. The structure of the Sephiroth is based on the four elements and their worlds, while the twenty-two lines between the Sephiroth represent the paths of the serpent of wisdom.⁴⁸ Althea Gyles drew this serpent for the cover page of Yeats's book, *The Secret Rose* (1897). In this image on the cover page, the folded serpent emerges from the skeleton, representing the lowest Sephira of man (*Malkuth*) and reaching for the three major Sephiroth at the highest point of the Tree of Life.⁴⁹ The Sephira is configured as a four-petal Rose that also represents the Cross. Under the three principal Sephiroth, there is an embracing male and female, and further down, there is the fourth Sephira on the heart of the page or the tree. That Sephira may resemble the Sephira of (*Daat*) or knowledge (see Figure 1 below). So number four is also significant for this drawing of the four Sephiroth.

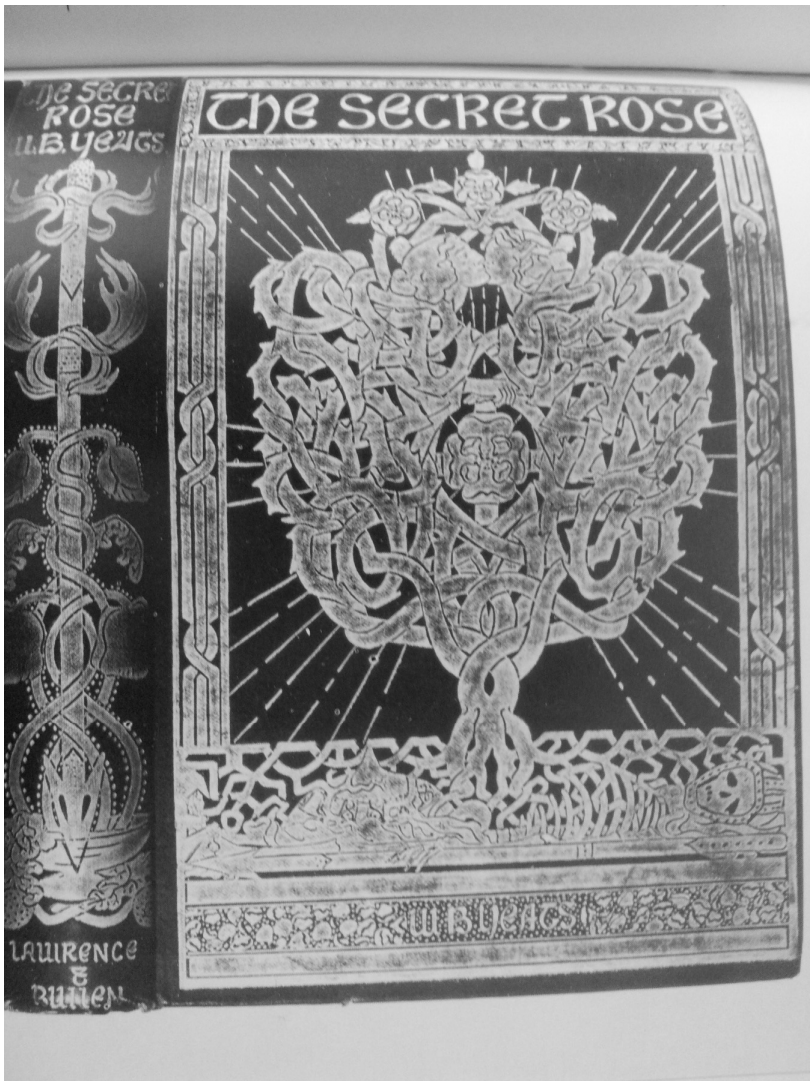


Figure 1: The cover page of Yeats's book, *The Secret Rose* (1897), drawn by Althea Gyles.⁵⁰

The tree in Irish culture is highly symbolic in the use of the letters of the old Irish language "Ogham," according to what is called "the Celtic Tree Alphabet," with each letter of this alphabet referring to a certain kind of tree. The calligraphy of this language is like a tree or its branches. Oisín's sword is engraved in Ogham letters (VP 38, II, l. 128), which allows it to be identified with Oisín, so consequently, Yeats intends to preserve the Irish or Celtic tradition.

Through the Society of the Golden Dawn, Yeats met many influential figures relating to Rosicrucianism which would become a great interest, with its ideas taken up in his poetry. In his book, *The Secret Doctrine of the Rosicrucians*, the writer who signed "Magus Incognito" explains the development of symbolism in Rosicrucianism, stating that the Cross represents the male, and the Circle represents the female, and joining the two constitutes the first use of these symbols in the Order. According to Rosicrucian symbolism, the Cross and the Circle represent "the Universal Activity and Universal Creation, symbolizing the Great Mystery of Occult Generation on all planes of Life."⁵¹ Later, it was changed into the Cross and the Rose instead of the Circle.⁵²

The Cross is sometimes viewed as a Sword "with its Cross-like handle," and "the sign, then, of the Cross (or Sword) combined with the Circle (or Rose), symbolizes the Mystic Union of the Rose and the Cross, from whence arose the name of the Order, i.e., Rosi-Crucian, meaning 'Rose-Cross.'"⁵³ In *The Identity of Yeats*, Richard Ellmann discusses the significance for Yeats of the mystical marriage symbolism, with the cross as a male character and the rose as female beauty.⁵⁴ Ellmann sees both cross and rose as Christian symbols; however, he admits that the rose in Yeats's dream implies "a kind of pagan beauty."⁵⁵ Yeats stresses this implication as well when he seeks to unite "religion and beauty, the spirit and nature, and the universe of spirit and of nature in magic."⁵⁶

Arguably the symbolic circle has its roots in the Babylonian cult of the moon. According to the Babylonian epic, *Atrahasis*, the holy days of the lunar months are the first, the seventh, and the fifteenth.⁵⁷ These same numbers are found in Celtic mythology too. The Babylonian gods, *Anu*, *Ea*, and *Enlil*, take the shapes of the moon during its different phases. In the first phase, *Anu* is a crescent, in the seventh *Ea* is a kidney, and *Enlil* is a circle in the fifteenth.⁵⁸ The sacred circle in Druidic faith seems to have had its origin in the Babylonian cult of the Moon, which constitutes a significant part of Celtic ritual. In his geometric system, Yeats considers the first and the fifteenth phases of the Moon as

supernatural or sacred, as seen in both the Babylonian cult and Celtic belief. In his poems, Yeats's imagery of the moon and the sun takes on various manifestations according to his affinities toward mythology, magic, alchemy, astrology, and the occult.

Magic is an element of Druidic ritual, and its magic, as Eugene O'Curry argues, "was not essentially different from that of the Magi in the East."⁵⁹ Yeats believes that "the outlines of magical belief and practice were everywhere the same, but that they had achieved a particularly developed form in Celtic Druidism."⁶⁰ It was magic and mysticism in general that played a big part in attracting Yeats to his wife George Hyde Lees in 1917 after being frustrated by Maud Gonne for a long time. The marriage between Yeats and George was certainly fruitful. As well as having children (Anne, b. 1919 and Michael, b. 1921), they developed a prosperous creative partnership in terms of the occult and together produced automatic writing scripts.

The short story, "Rosa Alchemica" (1897), which Yeats included in the volume, *The Secret Rose*, embodies the Rosicrucian concern with alchemy, with Yeats describing it as "a little work on the Alchemists."⁶¹ This story also reflects the Yeatsian theme of "Moods," which was a central theme during this period.⁶² In "Rosa Alchemica," Yeats announces the death of his character Michael Robartes, who embodies Yeats's heresy and paganism. Robartes, like many other legendary characters—Cuchulain, Oisín, Fergus, the Druids and others—is no more than a dramatic vehicle for Yeats to use to explore cultures other than Christianity. Cuchulain, Oisín, and Fergus represent Yeats's Celtic longings. They also symbolise the heroic age, showing how Yeats sought to revive his Irish heritage to contribute to the struggle for Irish freedom. Fenianism versus Christianity is a noticeable feature of Yeats's early work, particularly his quasi-epic "The Wandering of Oisín."

In *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, Michael North argues that Yeats utilised history against "liberal democracy and capitalism" and took refuge in history as an "alternative to discrete facts and to empty generalizations, to scientism, positivism, and [the] liberal version of natural law."⁶³ Moreover, Yeats added certain mythological elements to his history theory to evade the strict laws of science and rationalism. He felt that modern, liberal society threatened Irish culture—its folklore, mythology and heroic history—and consequently to Irish identity. As North puts it, Yeats sees automatic writing with his wife as part of this defence of the Irish cultural elite: he "tended to see democracy

as the ultimate fall into [the] contradiction of individual and race, and aristocracy as the fruitful balance of these as contraries."⁶⁴

The hero of Yeats's "unfinished novel," *The Speckled Bird*, is like Robartes in being tempted by the East.⁶⁵ This temptation reflects Yeats's concerns: what is available in the East completes or integrates that which is found in the West. Moreover, with his Sindbad-like travels, Robartes satisfies Yeats's Romantic interests. Yeats invented not only the characters of Aherne and Robartes but also imaginative titles for his book to "puzzle the reader and to amuse Yeats himself," as Birgit Bjersby argues.⁶⁶ Bjersby believes that Yeats complicated his stories and references for the sake of entertainment and the reader's enjoyment of the Romantic oriental atmosphere that was created:

The whole thing appears to have become more or less like an entertaining game to Yeats, and he appears to have enjoyed making it all as complicated as possible. Moreover, he could not abstain from giving the Oriental element a rather Romantic twist. In his eyes, the Arabs seem to have been a type of people he could well use for his Romantic purposes.⁶⁷

The Arabian characters found in Yeats's works, such as Harun Al-Raschid and Kusta Ben Luka, reveal his Romantic tendencies as influenced by the atmosphere of the *Arabian Nights*. Yeats substituted Kusta Ben Luka, the Christian philosopher and translator who lived during the Abbasid's reign, for Ja'ffar, Harun's minister and companion in the *Arabian Nights*, to introduce his thinking about the cooperation and struggle between religions and civilisations. In his article, "Yeats's Arabic Interests," S. B. Bushrui places Yeats's preoccupation with Arabia in the context of European Romantic interest in the East during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries:

Yeats's preoccupation with Arabia was naturally greatly stimulated by the interest of his contemporaries in the East in general. At about the time when Yeats was entering upon his literary career, the interest in Eastern lore which began with the Romantics reached its height; and between 1850 and 1925 there was a flood of translations, travel books and studies all connected with Arabia, her people and language.⁶⁸

The conflict between Romantic nostalgia and modernity tended to be solved by Yeats, especially in his early work, in favour of the former. Romanticism appealed to Yeats as a refuge in history, a site of mythology,

folklore, magic, and mysticism in general and as a kind of personal retreat as well. However, in another sense this retreat, was a "revolt of the soul against the intellect," linked politically to the figure of the Irish rebel fighting against the British Empire.⁶⁹ This rebellion can be interpreted as the Irish or Celtic Romantic and spiritual mind against the British scientific and analytical mind or "political and moral materialism."⁷⁰ Influenced by John O'Leary, Yeats's concept of cultural nationalism is based on every nation's uniqueness with her cultural heritage that distinguishes her from other nations. Yeats's view of nationalism considers the humanitarian perspective that implies unity found in diversity. However, as North argues, the Irish cultural revival proved the very reverse of what Yeats intended, namely "a cause of division instead of unity."⁷¹ Fanatical nationalists used this revival for their purposes, regardless of Yeats's universalist perspective. The revival of any cultural heritage is always problematic for its functions and applications, and that is the point where people disagree on its significance and fall into division.

Yeats's intellectual nationalism was bound up with his love for Maud Gonne, who became a Fenian separatist.⁷² However, he constantly criticised Gonne for her extravagance, her extremism in politics and the Irish cause. His hatred of the mob might be partly a reaction against Gonne's extreme views, and another critical influence was the public's hostile reaction toward Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907. On supposedly moral grounds, the audience also responded negatively to Yeats's earlier play, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). The Faustian bond with the devil was a central theme of that play, and in it, Cathleen is confronted by two devils disguised as merchants who offer to buy Cathleen's soul to save the Irish people from starving during the famine. This satanic bond, as Ellmann notes, mingles in the play with "a nationalist description of Irish poverty under English Rule."⁷³ The conflict of mob and elite also flows into Yeats's concept of democracy versus aristocracy, thus bearing on his spiritual system and his history theory. In *A Vision*, the twenty-eight phases of the moon, a figure borrowed from Arabic culture, as exemplified on the Great Wheel of Time, represent Yeats's whole movement of history. He considers the 2000 years before Christ as pagan or antithetical and aristocratic and the recent 2000 years as Christian or primary and democratic. He predicts that the next epoch of history will be pagan or antithetical and aristocratic, again according to his configuration of the gyre movement.

Yeats designed the Great Wheel of Time according to the twelve signs of the zodiac. The twenty-eight phases of the moon represent either

twelve or ten revolving gyres of history that both turn on themselves and move onward. The movement is spiral or circular and symbolises the direction of the soul. As a spiritual symbol, the circle is essential in Yeats's system, as it has its roots in what was sacred in Druidism, Rosicrucianism, and many other faiths in terms of the moon or the sun being spherical shapes.

The Great Wheel of Time might be influenced by the Tarot card "The Wheel of Fortune." The Wheel of Fortune contains the four letters of the God YHWH and the four letters TARO (if it is read clockwise) or TORA (if it is read anti-clockwise) inscribed on the rim of the wheel.⁷⁴ TARO suggests Tarot, and TORA suggests Torah, the Jewish sacred book. TARO (if it is read clockwise) becomes ROTA, the Latin word for the wheel, and ATOR, the Egyptian goddess of the dead.⁷⁵ Every card has a number, and the number of The Wheel of Fortune card is ten. This number of The Wheel of Fortune card may be associated with the ten Sephiroth of the Cabbalistic Tree of Life if we consider the theory of the French magician, Eliphas Levi, who argued that Cabbala is the source of the Tarot,⁷⁶ and the Yeatsian ten gyres might be borrowed from them as well; then, this number ten symbolises "the idea of perfection realized through the destiny of a human life."⁷⁷

Tarot cards, which fascinated Yeats, are formed from seventy-eight pieces with "esoteric images and figures." Twenty-two cards form the Major Arcana, which begins with the zero cards, and the rest of the fifty-six cards constitute the Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana cards deal with "archetypal ideas and cosmic forces," while the Minor Arcana cards tackle "the outer range of human experience." This difference suggests the opposition of the choices of gods and humans.⁷⁸ Another difference is exemplified in the composition of The Minor Arcana cards "being comprised of four suits: Swords, Wands (also called Staves), Pentacles (also called Coins or Discs), and Cups, each suit containing ten cards plus four court cards, King, Queen, Knight and Page."⁷⁹

Yeats's "Stories of Red Hanrahan" reflect the themes of both the Major and Minor Arcana cards.⁸⁰ Yeats's character Red Hanrahan undergoes a mystical journey even though he fails to gain enlightenment. His life seems to be destined by Tarot cards, particularly "The Moon," which suggests a mystical journey. The symbols indicated by these cards are manipulated by Yeats, like a Hermetic magician, as he believes that "Humanity's divine spark inspires us to seek reunion with Divinity."⁸¹ The first story of this small collection of stories, entitled "Red Hanrahan,"