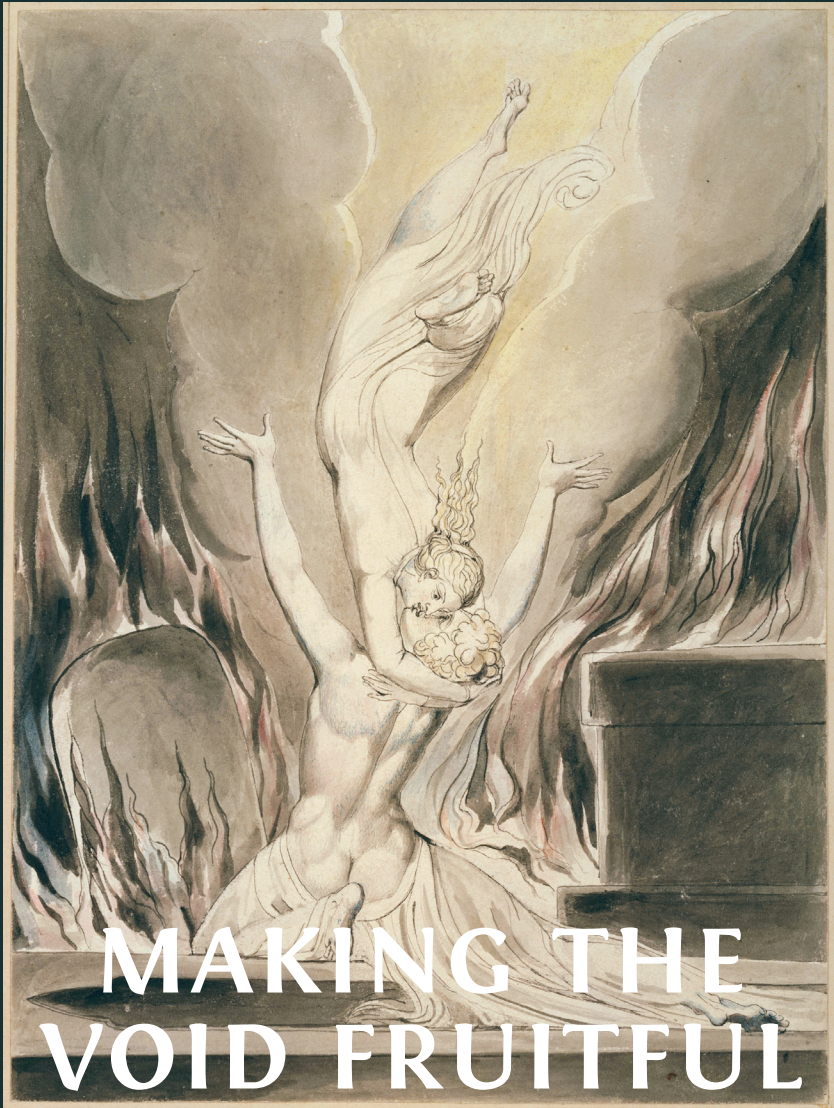


PATRICK J. KEANE



Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



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Patrick J. Keane, *Making the Void Fruitful: Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275>

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ISBN Paperback: 9781800643208

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643215

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643222

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643239

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800643246

ISBN XML: 9781800643253

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0275

Cover image: William Blake, watercolor illustrations to Robert Blair's 'The Grave', object 15: 'The Reunion of the Soul & the Body' (1805), Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Illustrations_to_Robert_Blair%27s_The_Grave,_object_15_The_Reunion_of_the_Soul_%26_the_Body.jpg.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

2. Hermeticism, Theosophy, Gnosticism

‘Her favorite reading as a child was Huxley and Tyndall,’ Virginia Woolf tells us of Clarissa Dalloway. As Yeats was fond of saying, ‘We Irish think otherwise.’ He was quoting the most famous Irish-born philosopher, George Berkeley, reinforcing that Idealist’s resistance to Locke’s materialist version of empiricism with his own defense of visionary powers in an era unsettled by philosophic and scientific skepticism. In the section of *The Trembling of the Veil* covering the period 1887–91, Yeats says he was ‘

unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions [...] passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians.¹

Though Yeats was not religious in the normative sense, he *did* seek a world, as he says later in this passage, that reflected the ‘deepest instinct of man,’ and would be ‘steeped in the supernatural.’ That was his own instinct. It was his conscious intention, as well, to offset the scientific naturalism of John Tyndall and T. H. Huxley, ‘Darwin’s bulldog,’ and to buttress his rebellion against his father’s forcefully expressed agnostic skepticism. In making up his own religion, Yeats relied essentially on ‘emotions’ (with the *heart* as their repository) and on *art* (‘poetic tradition,’ ‘poets and painters’). But he included in his ‘fardel’ strands from interrelated traditions Western and Eastern. Seeing them all as a single perennial philosophy, ‘one history and that the soul’s,’ he gathered

1 Yeats, *Au*, 114–15. For Clarissa’s reading, see Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 106–07.

together elements from Celtic mythology and Irish folklore, British Romanticism (especially Shelley and Blake, whose Los 'must create a system or be enslaved by another man's'); Platonism and Neoplatonism; Rosicrucianism and Theosophy, Cabbalism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, along with other varieties of spiritualist and esoteric thought, including Gnosticism. Though Yeats was not a scholar of Gnosticism, there are persistent themes and emphases in his thought and poetry that Gnostics would find both familiar and congenial. Others, not so much. Most obviously, whereas Gnosticism (with the exception of two sects I will later discuss) stressed the conflict between body and spirit, with the ultimate goal freedom from the body, Yeats's instinct was to heal this breach in favor of what he called Unity of Being.

After this preamble, I will, in discussing the spiritual dimension in Yeats's work, sometimes focus on Gnostic elements. But this is an essay on Yeats rather than Gnosticism. I bring in historical Gnosticism and the tenets of certain Gnostic sects only where they illuminate particular poems; for example, 'The Secret Rose,' 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman,' and 'What Then?' Otherwise, I will have little to say of the religious movement drawing on, but competing with, Judaism and Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first and second centuries, CE.² Instead, I will emphasize *gnosis* as differentiated from historical Gnosticism, precisely the distinction made at the 1966 international conference, the Colloquium of Messina, convened to examine the origins of Gnosticism. In the colloquium's final 'Proposal,' the emphasis was on the attainment of *gnosis*, defined as 'knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite.'

Such knowledge was individual and intuitive. For most Gnostics, this intuitive esoteric knowledge had little to do with either Western philosophic reasoning or with the theological knowledge of God to be found in Orthodox Judaism or normative Christianity. For spiritual

2 Even that Gnosticism is syncretist and complex, steeped not only in Hebrew and early Christian writing, but with roots in India, Iran, and of course in Greece (Orphism and Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neoplatonism). That kind of cross-fertilization simultaneously enriches the tradition and complicates analysis. In addition, the various sects were secret. Because of its value as the way to break out of our imprisonment by the flesh and the material world, and thus the path to salvation, the knowledge was kept hidden, reserved for the spiritual elite capable of achieving and exercising *gnosis*.

adepts, such intuition derived from knowledge of the divine One. For poets like Yeats, it was identified with that '*intuitive Reason*' which, for the Romantics—notably, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their American disciple, Emerson—was virtually indistinguishable from the creative imagination. Yeats was also steeped in the dialectical thinking of Blake, and much of his strongest poetry derived its power from the tension between the spiritual '*perennial philosophy*' of Plato and Plotinus and the formidable and welcome challenge presented, after 1902, by 'that strong enchanter, Nietzsche,' who, Yeats believed, '*completes Blake and has the same roots*' (L, 379). It was, above all, Nietzsche, enemy of all forms of the otherworldly, who provided Yeats with the *antithetical* counterweight required to resist the *primary* pull of body-denigrating spiritualism, whether Christian, Neoplatonic, or (in most forms) Gnostic.

At the same time, there is no denying the centrality of spiritual quest, of esoteric knowledge, mysticism and '*magic*,' in Yeats's life and work. In July 1892, preparing to be initiated into the Second Order of the Golden Dawn, he wrote to one of his heroes, the Irish nationalist John O'Leary, in response to a '*somewhat testy postcard*' the kindly old Fenian had sent him. The '*probable explanation*,' Yeats surmised, was that O'Leary had been listening to the poet's skeptical father, holding forth on his son's '*magical pursuits out of the immense depths of his ignorance as to everything that I am doing and thinking*.' Yeats realizes that the word '*magic*,' however familiar to *him*, '*has a very outlandish sound to other ears*.' But it was '*surely absurd*' to hold him '*weak*' because

I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life [...]
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 Kathleen* have ever come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write [...] I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world. (L, 210–11)

Just as he had emphasized art and a '*Church of poetic tradition*' in the creation of his own '*new religion*,' even here, in his most strenuous defense of his mystical and magical pursuits, Yeats inserts the caveat that they were paramount, '*next to my poetry*.' But this is hardly to dismiss

the passionate intensity of Yeats's esoteric and mystical pursuits. What seemed to W. H. Auden, even in his great elegy, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats,' to be 'silly' or, worse, to Ezra Pound, to be 'very very very bughouse' (it takes one to know one), or by T. S. Eliot to be dreadfully misguided, was taken, not with complete credulity, but very very very seriously, by Yeats himself. His esoteric pursuits, in many heterodox guises, remained an energizing stimulus, if not an obsession, throughout his life. In his elegy, written just days after the poet's death in January 1939, Auden says, 'You were silly like us; your gift survived it all.' But the interest in mysterious wisdom, dismissed by Auden and Eliot and Pound, actually enhanced Yeats's artistic gift—as Virginia Woolf perceived the very first time he engaged her in conversation.

When she met Yeats in November 1930, at Lady Ottoline Morrell's, Woolf knew little of his thought and not all that much of his poetry, but she was overwhelmed by his personality and by an immediate sense of a body of thought underlying his observations on 'dreaming states, & soul states,' on life and art: 'I perceived that he had worked out a complete psychology that I could only catch on to momentarily, in my alarming ignorance.' When he spoke of modern poetry, she recorded in her diary, Yeats described deficiencies inevitable because we are at the end of an era. 'Here was another system of thought, of which I could only catch fragments.' She concludes on a note seldom found in Bloomsbury self-assurance: 'how crude and jaunty my own theories were besides his: indeed I got a tremendous sense of the intricacy of his art; also of its meaning, its seriousness, its importance, which wholly engrosses this large active minded immensely vitalized man. Wherever one cut him with a little question, he poured, spurted fountains of ideas.'³

§

The Golden Dawn was a major source of that 'system of thought,' that abounding glittering jet of ideas, that so impressed Virginia Woolf. Yeats was, along with his friend George Russell (AE), a founding member, in 1885, of the Dublin Hermetic Society, which, the following April, evolved into the Dublin Theosophical Society. Though he 'was much among the Theosophists, having drifted there from the Dublin Hermetic Society,'

3 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 3:329.

Yeats declined to join, believing that 'Hermetic' better described his own wider interests as a devotee of what he called the study of 'magic.' He did join the Theosophical Society of London, in which, eager to push mystical boundaries, he enlisted in the 'Esoteric Section.' He resigned in 1891, amid tension, though not, despite rumor, expelled, let alone 'excommunicated.' Yeats was for more than thirty years a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which he joined in London in March 1890; he stayed with the Golden Dawn until it splintered, then joined one of its offshoot Orders, the Stella Matutina. During its heyday in the 1890s, the G.D. and its Inner Order of the Rose of Ruby and the Cross of Gold (R.R. & A.C.) was 'the crowning glory of the occult revival in the nineteenth century,' having succeeded in synthesizing a vast body of disparate material and welding it into an effective 'system.'⁴

Yeats took as his Golden Dawn motto and pseudonym *Demon Est Deus Inversus* (D.E.D.I.). That sobriquet's recognition of the interdependence of opposites is a nod to both William Blake and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the eleventh chapter of whose seminal text, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), bears this title. The most extraordinary of the many exotic figures that gathered in societies and cults, making Victorian London ground zero in the revolt against reductive materialism, Madame Blavatsky (HPB to her acolytes) was, of course, the co-founder and presiding genius of the Theosophical Society. In a letter to a New England newspaper, Yeats referred to her with wary fascination as 'the Pythoness of the Movement,' and as a half-masculine 'female Dr. Johnson.'⁵ Unless we accept her own tracing of Theosophy to ancient Tibetan roots, the movement was born in 1875, in part in Blavatsky's New York City apartment, where she kept a stuffed baboon, sporting under its arm a copy of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* to represent the creeping tide of scientific materialism she was determined to push back—though it should be mentioned that

4 Ellic Howe, ix. The admission ceremony to the R.R. & A.C. required an initiate to commit to the 'Great Work': to 'purify and exalt my Spiritual nature,' and thus, with divine help, to 'gradually raise and unite myself to my Higher and Divine Genius.' The main point of Yeats's 1901 pamphlet *Is the Order of R.R. & A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?* was that frivolous 'freedom' was inferior to 'bonds gladly accepted.' That emphasis illuminates his later philosophy in *A Vision*, as well as the tension in his poetry between freedom and traditional forms.

5 Yeats, *Letters to the New Island*, ed. Bornstein and Witemeyer, 84. The volume collects pieces Yeats sent between 1888 and 1892 to *The Boston Pilot* and the *Providence Sunday Journal*.

The Secret Doctrine was promoted as an audacious attempt to synthesize science, religion, and philosophy.

While he never shared the requisite belief in Blavatsky's Tibetan Masters, Yeats, without being anti-Darwinian, did share her determination to resist and turn back that materialist tide. And he was personally fascinated by the Pythoness herself, whom he first met in the formidable flesh in 1887 when he visited her at a little house in Norwood, a suburb of London. She was just fifty-six at the time but looked older (she would live only four more years). Young Yeats was kept waiting while she attended to earlier visitors. Finally admitted, he 'found an old woman in a plain loose dark dress: a sort of old Irish peasant, with an air of humor and audacious power.' Their first conversation was a whimsical exchange on the vagaries of her cuckoo clock, which Yeats thought had 'hooted' at him. On subsequent visits he found her 'almost always full of gaiety [...] kindly and tolerant,' and accessible—except on those occasions, once a week, when she 'answered questions upon her system, and as I look back after thirty years I often ask myself, "Was her speech automatic? Was she a trance medium, or in some similar state, one night in every week?"'⁶

Her alternating states were adumbrated in the phases, active and passive, HPB called, in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), 'the days and nights of Brahma.' Yeats had read that book and Blavatsky's alternating phases may have influenced his lifelong emphasis on polarity, the antinomies: the tension between quotidian reality and the spiritual or Romantic allure of the Otherworld, in forms ranging from the Celtic Fairyland to that city of art and spirit, Byzantium; and, early and late, between things that merely 'seem' (Platonic 'appearance,' Hindu *maya*) and the spiritual reality perceived by Western visionaries and Hindu hermits contemplating on Asian mountains. After reading *Isis Unveiled*, Yeats had delved into a book given him by AE. This was *Esoteric Buddhism*

6 Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), in Au, 173–74, 179. The report issued on Blavatsky by Richard Hodgson, a skilled investigator employed by the Society for Psychical Research, assessed her claimed activities in India to be fraudulent, but concluded that she was no 'mere vulgar adventuress. We think she has achieved a title to a permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters of history' (cited in Peter Washington, 83.) Yeats, writing in 1889, and registering Blavatsky's magnetism and skills as an eclectic magpie, found that conclusion simplistic, noting, with his usual mixture of skepticism and credulity, that 'the fraud theory,' at least at 'its most pronounced,' was 'wholly unable to cover the facts' (Mem, 281).

(1883) by Madame Blavatsky's fellow Theosophist and sometime disciple, A. P. Sinnett, whose earlier book, *The Occult World* (1881), had already had an impact on Yeats. 'Spirituality, in the occult sense,' Sinnett declared, 'has nothing to do with feeling devout: it has to do with the capacity of the mind for assimilating knowledge at the fountainhead of knowledge itself.' And he asserted another antithesis crucial to Yeats: that to become an 'adept,' a rare status 'beyond the reach of the general public,' one must 'obey the inward impulse of [one's] soul, irrespective of the prudential considerations of worldly science or sagacity' (101).

That Eastern impulse is evident in Yeats's three hermit poems in *Responsibilities* (1914). It was even more evident a quarter-century earlier, in three poems in his first collection of lyrics. 'The Indian upon God,' 'The Indian to his Love,' and the lengthy (91-line) 'Anashuya and Vijaya,' were written under a more direct and visceral influence.⁷ For the lure of the East had another source, also related to Madame Blavatsky. Yeats had been deeply impressed with the roving ambassador of Theosophy she had sent to Dublin in April 1886, to instruct the members of the Dublin Hermetic Society in the nuances of Theosophy. The envoy was the charismatic young Bengali swami, Mohini Chatterjee, described by Madame Blavatsky, with perhaps more gaiety than tolerance, as 'a nutmeg Hindoo with buck eyes,' for whom several of his English disciples 'burned with a scandalous, ferocious passion,' that 'craving of old *gourmands* for *unnatural* food.'⁸ Despite his inability to resist the sexual temptations presented to him (he was eventually dispatched back to India), Chatterjee preached the need to realize one's individual soul by contemplation, penetrating the illusory nature of the material world, and abjuring worldly ambition. His 1887 book, *Man: Fragments of a Forgotten History*, described reincarnational stages, and ascending states of consciousness. The fourth and final state, which 'may be called transcendental consciousness,' is ineffable, though 'glimpses' of it 'may be obtained in the abnormal condition of *extasis*' (64).

7 The latter anticipates Yeats's later and greater debate-poems as well as two late mountain-poems: the sonnet 'Meru' (1933), centered on caverned Hindu hermits, and 'Lapis Lazuli' (1936), which ends with a mountain vision. In 'Anashuya and Vijaya,' the young priestess Anashuya compels Vijaya to swear an oath by the gods 'who dwell on sacred Himalay,/ On the far Golden Peak' (66–70). Like Meru, Golden Peak is a sacred mountain.

8 Quoted in Washington, 88–89. Italics in original.

'Ecstasy,' an *antithetical* state, whether spiritual or sexual or both, became a crucial term in Yeats's lexicon, at war with abstract wisdom or knowledge, though not with a deeper *gnosis*. Perhaps Yeats was not completely hyperbolic in later saying that he learned more from Chatterjee than 'from any book.' There is no doubt that he was permanently affected by the swami's concept of ecstasy and by the idea of ancient and secret wisdom being passed on orally from generation to generation, fragmentary glimpses of an ineffable truth. There are distinctions between East and West, but, as in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky and Mohini Chatterjee presents an unknown Absolute, from which souls emanate as fragments, or 'sparks,' separated from the divine substance, and longing to return to the One from which they came. The principal Eastern variation is that, to achieve that ultimate goal requires a long pilgrimage through many incarnations, living through many lives, both in this world and the next.

Many years later, in 1929, Yeats wrote an eponymous poem, 'Mohini Chatterjee.' Its final words, 'Men dance on deathless feet,' were added by Yeats 'in commentary' on Chatterjee's own words on reincarnation. There is no reference to a God, and we are to 'pray for nothing,' but just repeat every night in bed, that one has been a king, a slave, a fool, a rascal, knave. 'Nor is there anything/ [...] I have not been./ And yet upon my breast/ A myriad heads have lain.' Such words were spoken by Mohini Chatterjee to 'set at rest/ A boy's turbulent days.' When that boy, almost forty years later, published 'Mohini Chatterjee' in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), he placed it immediately preceding what is certainly his most 'turbulent' poem of spiritual purgation and reincarnation: 'Byzantium,' in which impure spirits, 'complexities of mire and blood,' are presented 'dying into a dance,/ An agony of trance,/ An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.' Yet, like most of the other poems we will examine, 'Byzantium' participates, though in this case with unique fury and surging energy, in the dominant Yeatsian *agon* between Time and Eternity, flesh and spirit.

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As we've seen, Yeats wondered if, on heightened occasions, HPB's speech might not be 'automatic,' and she herself a 'trance medium.' But, since he never gave full credence to the astral dictations of Blavatsky's

Tibetan Masters, it is ironic that his own major esoteric text had a related genesis. His book *A Vision*, first published in 1925 and revised in 1937, is based on the 'automatic writing' for which Mrs. Yeats discovered a gift when, in the early days of their marriage in 1917, she sensed that her husband's thoughts were drifting back to the love of his life and his Muse, the unattainable Maud, and to her lush daughter, Iseult, to whom Yeats had also proposed before marrying his wife. Whatever its origin, psychological or occult, the wisdom conveyed to George by her 'Communicators,' and then passed on to her husband, preoccupied the poet for years. Alternately insightful and idiosyncratic, beautiful and a bit bananas, *A Vision* may not be required reading for lovers of the poetry, except for advanced students. Informed scholarship has illuminated the collaboration that led to *A Vision*, but Tindall's old witticism still resonates: 'a little seems too much, his business none of ours.'

But Yeats's purpose was serious, and, as always, a balancing attempt to exercise individual creative freedom within a rich tradition. In dedicating the first edition of *A Vision* to 'Vestigia' (Moina Mathers, sister of MacGregor Mathers, head of the Golden Dawn), Yeats noted that while some in the Order were 'looking for spiritual happiness or for some form of unknown power,' clearly Hermetic or Gnostic goals, he had a more poetry-centered object, though that, too, reflects the intuitive Gnosticism of creative artists seeking their *own* visions. As early as the 1890s, he claimed in 1925, he anticipated what would emerge as *A Vision*, with its circuits of sun and moon, its double-gyre, its tension between Fate and Freedom: 'I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of one history and that the soul's.'⁹ Contemptuous of Yeats's specific supernatural beliefs ('obstacles' he had to overcome to achieve his 'greatness'), T. S. Eliot had himself memorably described creative freedom operating within a larger and necessary historical discipline as the interaction between 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.'¹⁰

9 *A Vision* (1925), xi.

10 Rejecting Yeats's occultism, along with other forms of 'modern heresy,' Eliot opined that Yeats had 'arrived at greatness against the greatest odds.' *After Strange Gods*, 50–51.

If it is not mandatory that those drawn to the poetry read *A Vision*, it was absolutely necessary that Yeats write it. It illuminates the later poetry, and even provides the skeletal structure for some of his greatest poems, the best known of which, 'The Second Coming,' was originally accompanied by a long note, reproducing the double-gyre, that central symbol of *A Vision*. Yeats tells us, in the Introduction to the second edition of *A Vision*, that, back in 1917, he struggled for several days to decipher the 'almost illegible script,' which he nevertheless found 'so exciting, sometimes so profound,' that he not only persuaded his wife to persevere, but offered to give up poetry to devote what remained of his own life to 'explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences' which he believed contained mysterious wisdom. The response from one of the unknown writers was conveniently welcome news for him and for us: "'No,'" was the answer, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry'" (Vis, 8).

Yeats was a man at once credulous and rational, a believer among skeptics, a skeptic among believers. In a letter to Ethel Mannin, written a month before his death, Yeats asked and answered his own jocoserious question: 'Am I a mystic?—no, I am a practical man. I have seen the raising of Lazarus and the loaves and the fishes and have made the usual measurements, plummet line, spirit-level and have taken the temperature by pure mathematic' (L, 921). Though always open to the possibility of miracle, when confronted by it, he tended to test, as he did in surreptitiously sending samples of blood said to be dripping from a religious icon off to the lab for scientific analysis. The response of Maud Gonne, who had crossed the Channel with Yeats in wartime to view the bleeding icon in the village of Mirebeau, was quite different: having long since converted to Catholicism, she dropped devoutly to her knees.¹¹

Yeats's lifelong quest for spiritual knowledge was countered by the circumspection of a self-divided man and notably dialectical poet, who also wanted to '*remain faithful to the earth*,' to cite the opening imperative of the Zarathustra¹² of 'that strong enchanter, Nietzsche,' whose astringent and electrifying impact on Yeats, beginning in 1902, changed the poet, if

11 George Mills Harper, "'A Subject for Study": Miracle at Mirebeau,' in *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. Harper, 172–89. For Maud's reaction to the bleeding holograph, see Cardozo, 292.

12 Prologue to 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 125. Italics in original

not utterly, substantially. But unlike Nietzsche, Yeats had no doubt that there was a spiritual realm. He strove to acquire knowledge of that world through any and all means at hand: studying the 'perennial philosophy,' but not excluding the occasional resort to hashish and mescal to induce occult visions, and belief in astrology and séances, of which he attended many. A séance is at the center of one of his most dramatic plays, *Words upon the Window-pane* (1932), which helps explain the emphasis on 'a medium's mouth' in his cryptic poem 'Fragments,' written at the same time, and which—since it condenses a world of history, philosophy, and mythology in its ten lines and forty-five words—I will later explicate at some length.

Though it is difficult to track and disentangle intertwined strands of thought and influence, let alone make conclusive pronouncements, two significant Yeats scholars, Allan Grossman (in his 1969 study of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, titled *Poetic Knowledge in Early Yeats*) and Harold Bloom, in his sweeping 1970 study, grandly titled *Yeats*, both concluded that their man was essentially a Gnostic. The same assertion governs an unpublished 1992 PhD thesis, written by Steven J. Skelley and titled *Yeats, Bloom, and the Dialectics of Theory, Criticism and Poetry*. My own conclusion is less certain. What *is* certain is that Yeats envisioned his life as a quest: first as a search for the secret and sacred, whether a book, a system, or an Otherworldly paradise; but also, early and finally, as a quest for the power to *create*, which meant elevating the role of the Poet over that of the Saint. It therefore meant refusing to submit to the authoritative and prescriptive demands of any 'religion,' orthodox or occult, Christian or Neoplatonic or Gnostic, that he deemed, whatever its attractions, ultimately hostile to imaginative creativity and to human life itself.

