YEATS AND THE OCCULT

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Fifteen Apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.

The most disquieting photograph of Yeats ever published is the one reproduced as Plate 1 in Yeats and the Occult edited by George Mills Harper.¹ In black and white, and simply labelled 'spirit-photo', it depicts the poet in a three-piece suit and a bow-tie seated four-square on a stool or chair, his hands folded passively on his lap, his shoulders set slightly forward, his head inclined a little to the left. Apparently rising from the crown of his head, and tilted sharply to the left, is a ghostly face. The lips are slightly parted; the shape of the nose is quite distinct; the eyes appear to express a somewhat anguished, somewhat questioning look; the forehead, overlain by hair, merges quickly into the background. In contrast, the face of the poet seems solid, but vacant. The forehead, the bridge of the nose, the upper lip, and the point of the chin are thrown into strong relief by harsh light, while the rest of the face falls sharply into deep shadow. Some of this shadow obscures the lenses of Yeats's pince-nez, an effect that produces the illusion that the poet has no eyes. He appears to stare out of the photograph without seeing anything. The rigidity, the almost cruel passivity of the pose, seems completely at odds with Yeats's poetry; the indisputable presence of the ghostly face insists on some explanation.

Most people to whom I have shown this photograph respond by exclaiming, 'How frightening!' and 'How embarrassing!' W. H. Auden spoke for many when he said:

However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to . . . [the] occult is, I fancy, the same: How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats's gifts take such nonsense seriously? I have a further bewilderment, which may be due to my English upbringing, one of snobbery. How could Yeats, with his great aesthetic appreciation of aristocracy, ancestral houses, ceremonious tradition, take up something so essentially lower-middle-class — or should I say Southern Californian — so ineluctably associated with suburban villas and clearly unattractive faces? A. E. Housman's pessimistic stoicism seems to me nonsense too, but at least it is the kind of nonsense that can be believed in by a

gentleman — but mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient — how embarrassing!  

And it is! And the embarrassment cannot be made to go away by claiming, as Virginia Moore has done in her book, *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats's Search for Reality* (1955), one of the first major studies of this subject, that Yeats's occultism was essentially Christian, and that what was not Christian was Druidical, and as Christianity, and perhaps at a pinch Druidism, are acceptable, then his occultism is acceptable. Neither is it sufficient to assert as R. P. Blackmur did in his very influential essay on Yeats published in 1936 that it was the occult with all its secret impurities which prevented Yeats from becoming 'one of the greatest poets' — and because its influence was malign it can and should be ignored. 'Yeats's magic, then, like every other feature of his experience, is rational as it reaches words; otherwise it is his privation, and ours, because it was the rational defect of our society that drove him to it.' Yeats's failure arises out of our failure, so we have a sacred duty to art and to society to purge ourselves of these embarrassing impurities. Implicit in this argument, which was widely accepted at the time, was a feeling that a poet like T. S. Eliot was certain to be more enduring than Yeats because he drew from the centre rather than the fringe, for at least the iconography if not the beliefs of Christianity are still widely shared. T. S. Eliot himself thought otherwise. Just four years after the publication of Blackmur's essay, and so perhaps not unmindful of its assertions, he declared in a public lecture commissioned by the Irish Academy to celebrate Yeats's achievements:

There are some poets whose poetry can be considered more or less in isolation, for experience and delight. There are others whose poetry, though giving equally experience and delight, has a larger historical importance. Yeats was one of the latter: he was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them. This is a

5. Note Kathleen Raine, 'Hades Wrapped in Cloud', in Harper, ed., *Yeats and the Occult*, p.82: 'I remember an occasion when the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (herself a student of Vedanta) asked Eliot why he had not pursued his early studies in Indian philosophy. He answered that in order to do so he would have had to learn to use an alien language; as a man of the Western civilization his terms must be found within the Christian tradition.'
very high position to assign him: but I believe that it is one which is secure.6

Eliot directs us to Yeats, occult impurities and all, as a source of understanding; and implicit in this direction is the advice that we should enquire equally into the embarrassing and the enlightening; advice which we should remember as we enquire into the occult for even that subject has some areas that are more respectable than others.

We will need to go beyond Richard Ellmann's two seminal books Yeats: The Man and the Masks (1949) and The Identity of Yeats (1954) which offer an incisive, erudite analysis of the iconography of the occult and demonstrate its significance for the poetry and the plays, while gracefully evading the implications of the seance room with its jostling crowds of twittering spooks. This approach, and it is one which has been applied with considerable rigour to Yeats's late plays by F. A. C. Wilson,7 is like inviting Madame Blavatsky rather than MacGregor Mathers to afternoon tea with one's aunt, all the while hoping that the guest will talk about neo-Platonic philosophy and not try to materialize her own tea cup. The occult was more to Yeats than a source for a flexible symbology which was sanctioned by tradition, marginal though that tradition might be. It is also difficult to stand with Edmund Wilson and dismiss the preoccupation with the occult as escapism and the poems that were generated by it as flawed by indecision and evasion.8 It is in fact some of these poems that seem to touch the deepest chords in our minds, that seem by their apt and haunting images to give expression to our own perceptions of the world, by their adumbrated symbols to challenge us to confront ourselves and our time.

I have deliberately chosen to write first about 'The Second Coming' because the composition of this poem shows the way Yeats sometimes resorted to his own investigations of the occult for inspiration years after those investigations had taken place. 'The Second Coming' was begun in response to world events of 1917 and 1918, in particular the Russian Revolution. The first draft of the poem contains the line 'The Germans are . . . now to Russia come', which is probably an allusion to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, where on 3 March 1918 Lenin had surrendered large tracts of territory to the Germans. But this and other topical allusions were weeded out of the poem in successive drafts as Yeats began to divine the nature of

the forces that were generating the bloodshed and the chaos. Yet it was not until he reached the fourth draft, and turned away from the world about him to a horrifying vision he had seen in the course of an occult experiment conducted by MacGregor Mathers in the 'nineties, that he was able to complete the poem.9

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.10

Lines such as these can hardly be dismissed as evasive — they neither offer excuses nor are they prevaricating, quibbling, equivocal. The images, even in the chiaroscuro setting, are resonant — rich in literal and symbolic meanings. Even from an initial reading it is easy for the reader who is coming to the poetry for the first time to sense the emotional force of what is at once being evoked and delineated. The opening metaphor of the falcon immediately enlists the imagination. The bird is depicted as wheeling out of control and beyond recall above the head of the falconer; one of Nature’s most efficient engines of destruction, circling, caught in the nonchalant self-absorbed attitude that seems to precede and accompany outbreaks of casual violence, poised ready to launch the blood-spilling attack. As the reader becomes more familiar with Yeats’s iconography he comes to realize that the metaphor of the falcon and the falconer also has a symbolic reference. A falcon is a hawk,11 and a hawk for Yeats is symbolic of the active or intellectual mind; the falconer is perhaps the soul itself or its uniting principle — that state which Yeats described as ‘Unity of Being’ where mind and body, sense and spirit, imagination and reason are brought together and united as one with the community of images, attitudes and beliefs that belong to an age.12 There is also the opposition that Yeats has made several times that


11. Stallworthy, Between the Lines, pp.17–18 points out that in the early drafts the word ‘hawk’ was used.

Wisdom is a butterfly
And not a gloomy bird of prey.\textsuperscript{13}

But I have allowed my enthusiasm for the poetry to draw me away from rebutting the charge of evasiveness. Perhaps all I need to do for the present is direct your attention to the syntax of the poem: to point to the steady and impressive accumulation of clauses; the sense of authority and directness created by the use of the present indicative — an excellent example of the way in which simple syntax can effectively harness the latent energy of complex symbolism; and the achieved balance of the final clause: ‘The best lack... while the worst are full of...’, where the sentence, because it is periodic, finally spills its flood of meaning. You may also wish to observe the masterful use of repetition and parallelism to create the sense of everything disintegrating and being swept away in a swollen flood; or the sense of dislocation achieved in part by pitting the adjective against the noun in the phrase ‘mere anarchy’.\textsuperscript{14}

I am well aware that to praise Yeats’s poem in this way is essentially to validate Eliot’s observation that the syntax of great poetry and great prose can bear equal scrutiny; that I am essentially praising great writing, great craftsmanship. But I have done this to point out that the poem is not evasive, that while the diction and the symbolism might be shadowy the syntax firmly guides the reader to what in almost any other context would seem but a trite maxim:

\begin{quote}
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
\end{quote}

The use of syntax to direct the reader to a final statement suggests that Yeats himself was willing to confront the images of desolation that rose up and passed before his eyes. The fact that the poem was at a crucial point in its composition inspired by clairvoyance argues that he deliberately and actively sought these images. And the fact that the images are not explicated in the poem or in notes or in a preface implies that Yeats was sensitive to the decisiveness of reticence.

Nowhere in his poetry is this decisive reticence more evident than in a poem he wrote toward the end of his life. Entitled ‘The Apparitions’, it draws from a series of terrifying death dreams which he saw in 1933 and 1934. ‘Did I tell you that my apparition came a seventh time?’ he wrote to a close friend on 11 November 1933.

\begin{quote}
As I woke I saw a child’s hand and arm and head —
faintly self-luminous — holding above — I was lying
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Yeats, \textit{Poems}, p.827.

\textsuperscript{14} Note the use of the same structure in ‘Easter 1916’: ‘a terrible beauty is born’.
on my back — a five of diamonds or hearts. I was [not] sure which. It was held as if the child was standing at the head of the bed. Is the meaning some fortune teller’s meaning attached to the end or does it promise me five months or five years?  

Three months later he wrote to the same friend:

Did I tell you that when that apparition appeared to me for the tenth time I saw, in broad daylight, an arm waving goodbye at the edge of a screen beside my door? It has not appeared since.

But the apparition apparently continued to reappear at least another five times, its most horrific manifestation taking the form of an empty coat hung upon a coat-hanger. Yeats wrote in a manuscript book he was using at the time: ‘The first apparition was the passage of a coat upon a coat hanger slowly across the room — it was extraordinarily terrifying.’ And the terror would be intense if, as John Unterecker has suggested, the coat he saw move slowly across the room was the one he wore every day. And yet even though he saw these apparitions in 1933 and 1934, at a time when he was deeply troubled about the possibility of his own imminent death (he underwent a Steinarch operation for rejuvenation in May 1934), he did not write his poem about them until late March or early April 1938. The question he had asked in November 1933, ‘does it promise five months or five years’, was to be answered nine months after he wrote the poem, for he died in January 1939 — five years and two months after he saw the first apparition. That he waited for well over four of those five years before writing the poem suggests he probably felt that he should hold the experience at a distance until he was sufficiently confident to confront it again for his poem. Hence it is the writer, the poet, who is in control, even when the subject is a horrifying vision of his own death. This willingness to wait until the supernatural could be related to the natural, in this case the perennial need for friendship, seems to me characteristic of Yeats’s investigations of the occult. He was often profoundly disturbed by what he witnessed, but he let it settle into the soil of common experience before cultivating it for art.

I have chosen to use this poem as a focal point for my brief enquiry for several reasons. Though it was inspired by a sequence of death dreams that

came at a time when Yeats was consulting mediums and frequenting seances it was written at a time when he was confident about life and joyfully in command of his artistic powers. The poem is a considered personal response to the occult, composed during a period of rich creativity. Two great poems ‘News for the Delphic Oracle’ and ‘Long Legged Fly’ were written either side of this one — while ‘The Statues’ was composed barely a month later.20 ‘The Apparitions’ thus seems to combine the felt intensity of personal experience with the poise and command of mature artistry.

Before I discuss the poem I would like to direct your attention to its frank, assured tone; the wry perceptiveness of the opening couplet; the way the colloquial ease of the stanzas, due in part to the interplay of rhythm and near, half and exact rhyme, is pitted against the formality of the refrain with its inverted syntax — ‘Fifteen apparitions have I seen’; and finally the tension created by the movement of the stanzas from personal experience to general observation while the refrain forcefully returns the reader to the particular:

Because there is safety in derision
I talked about an apparition,
I took no trouble to convince,
Or seem plausible to a man of sense,
Distrustful of that popular eye
Whether it be bold or sly.
_Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger._

I have found nothing half so good
As my long-planned half solitude,
Where I can sit up half the night
With some friend that has the wit
Not to allow his looks to tell
When I am unintelligible.
_Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger._

When a man grows old his joy.
Grows more deep day after day,
His empty heart is full at length,
But he has need of all that strength
Because of the increasing Night
That opens her mystery and fright.
_Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger._

20. Ibid., p.286.
Notice the matter-of-fact tone of the opening stanza. Yeats is at once aware of the embarrassment caused by talking about the supernatural and of the temptation to provide some scheme of explanation that will make the manifestations he has seen appear 'plausible'. He cannot deny what he has experienced, but he does not want to be forced to define and validate it. He has not cluttered the poem with the details of the fifteen apparitions — the child's hand and arm and head; the hand holding the five of diamonds or hearts; the arm waving goodbye at the edge of the screen beside the door. The whole series of death dreams that were spread over several months have been reduced to one vivid image: the coat upon the coat-hanger. His way of discussing this is not to propound a theory but to posit a question: 'How does one account for these experiences?' And the question is posited less for the sake of an answer than as a means of protecting his right to speculate, whether or not that speculation is either 'intelligible' or does or does not produce 'plausible' explanations. His reservations, doubts, and hesitancies are as important as his convictions, enthusiasms, and proofs. This unwillingness to press toward a final conclusion, to embrace one overarching theory, is characteristic of all Yeats's enquiry into the occult. As a young poet in Dublin in the late 'eighties aspiring to take control of the National Literary Society, he skilfully trapped his main rival, the lawyer John F. Taylor, by announcing at one of their parties: 'Five out of every six people here have seen a ghost.' Taylor took up the challenge, but when the first two people they questioned admitted they had seen a ghost, Taylor retired in confusion; a confusion made all the more sweet for Yeats because he had been able to silence his critic by drawing on evidence and by not having to substantiate that evidence himself.22 After a life-time of such experiences, Yeats could say in his poem 'Fifteen apparitions have I seen', confident that many others could admit to something similar.

Because he felt he could not ignore the constant interpenetration of the natural and the supernatural, Yeats devoted much of his life to investigating the occult. While still in his 'teens in Dublin he founded a Hermetic Society to study the supernatural. When he went to London in the early 'nineties he joined Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and gained membership of its Esoteric Section, until he was expelled for conducting experiments which were considered not to be in harmony with the principles of Theosophy.23 But his expulsion did not unduly concern him for by then he had joined an order of magicians called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He was to remain a practising member of this order and of its successor Stella Maturina for almost thirty-three years, contributing

22. Yeats, Autobiographies, p.97.
significantly to its organization with a number of circularized letters and a thirty-page pamphlet entitled: *Is the Order of R.R. and A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?* Throughout his life, but particularly from the years 1911 to 1917, he frequented mediums and attended seances. He was an avid collector of folklore, and on several occasions joined a team of investigators who had been commissioned by the Society for Psychical Research to study various occult phenomena. His wife possessed the gift of automatic writing and it was in collaboration with her that he drew up his major statement of his own philosophy, a 300 page book entitled *A Vision*, the first edition being published in 1925, and a significantly revised edition in 1937.

What is the occult? What are the principal characteristics of the type of mind that is attracted to and shaped by long devotion to it? The Oxford Dictionary defines the occult as:

Kept secret, esoteric, recondite, mysterious, beyond the range of ordinary knowledge; involving the supernatural, *mystical, magical*, whence not obvious on inspection.

For the moment I would like to focus on ‘mystical’ and ‘magical’ for they seem to me to be the two principal traditions which have been drawn together under the umbrella-word ‘occult’. Perhaps the best description of the principal characteristics of each tradition, and the distinctive habits of mind that each tends to encourage has been given by Evelyn Underhill. According to her the mystic temperament is characterized by a disciplined will, subservient emotions, strongly developed intuitive powers, an avidness for moral perfection, and a deep yearning for a transcendent love relationship with the Infinite. In ‘mysticism’, she explains,

The will is united with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined to the one eternal and ultimate Object of Love; whose existence is intuitively perceived by that which we used to call the ‘soul’, but now find it easier to refer to as the ‘cosmic’ or ‘transcendental’ sense. This is . . . the religious temperament acting upon the plane of reality.

For the mystic, the self is a soul, whose value is realized only in service for others and in union with the Infinite.

Magic on the other hand is utterly egocentric. ‘The Great Work’, Eliphas

Levi, an eminent authority on the occult has written, 'is before all things the creation of man by himself, that is to say, the full and entire conquest of his faculties and his future.' Magic claims to be a practical, intellectual, and very ancient science, whose secret formulae and doctrines enable an initiate to dominate and control all natural and supernatural powers. This dominance is achieved by intensifying and extending the powers of the will, and by manipulating the two fundamental laws that are said to govern the whole universe — the law of cause and effect, and the law of analogy. The first is a crude application of a Newtonian-like causality; while the law of analogy is said to have been taken from the Smaragdine Tablet buried with the body of Hermes Trismegistus: 'What is above is like that which is below to accomplish the wonders of one thing.' Mastery of hidden rituals and secret incantations are said to give the initiate power to control these laws to his own purposes. In 'magic' as Evelyn Underhill has pointed out,

The will unites with the intellect in an impassioned desire for supersensible knowledge. This is the intellectual, aggressive, and scientific temperament trying to extend its field of consciousness until it includes the supersensible world.

Certain habits of mind are considered essential for the successful study of magic. 'To attain the SANCTUM REGNUM, in other words, the knowledge and power of the Magi', declares Eliphas Levi, 'there are found four indispensible conditions — an intelligence illuminated by study, an intrepidity that nothing can check, a will that cannot be broken, and a prudence which nothing can corrupt and nothing intoxicate. To Know. To Dare. To Will. To Keep Silence.' In magic, the soul is entirely subsumed to the purposes of self, as the mage attempts to realize to the full the divine potential of his humanity.

In summary: mysticism is concerned with attempting to transcend the phenomenal world; magic with attempting to enlarge its boundaries. The mystic humbly and passively accepts any supernatural revelations, such as visions, clairaudience or automatic writing, as a spiritual gift, a sign of Divine Grace. The mage appropriates all supernatural revelations to himself as objective proof of the success of his incantations, and through the extension of his powers he attempts to force the spirits to yield up their secrets. The mystic does not trust his own faculties — his intellect, reason, and

senses — for he sees them as nothing more than the obedient slaves of the phenomenal world he believes he has indisputably transcended. 'Initiation into magic', Eliphas Levi asserts, 'is a preservative against the false lights of mysticism; it equips human reason with its relative value, and proportional infallibility, connecting it with supreme reason by the chain of analogies.'

Mysticism is active and practical. The great mystics like St. Francis, St. Teresa, and St. Catherine, busied themselves with the day-to-day needs of their fellow men. Magic is combative and secretive. Of the knowledge of Quaternity', Eliphas Levi says: 'To know it and have the courage to use it is human omnipotence: to reveal it to a profane person is to lose it; to reveal it even to a disciple is to abdicate in favour of that disciple, who henceforward, possesses the right of life and death over his master — I am speaking of the magical standpoint — and will certainly slay him for fear of dying himself.'

Finally, language always seems inadequate for the mystic, whose special differentia is the power of apprehending simultaneity. The Memorial of Pascal is an excellent example of the way a great religious philosopher, whose writing is distinguished by its lucidity, can be put utterly to rout by a mystical experience. Magic, on the other hand, exploits the denotative and imperative power of language. 'It is a magical axiom', states Eliphas Levi, that 'within the circle of its action, each word creates that which it affirms.'

Perhaps we should pause here briefly to examine the question whether Yeats was or was not a mystic. Several eminent critics have asserted that he was. I think they are incorrect. Yeats was always interested in the mystic temperament but he was not a mystic. And despite his detailed analysis of mysticism in the Autobiographies and in the various drafts of A Vision, it seems clear that he himself only partly understood the mystic temperament, even though he experienced a number of ‘mystic moments’ himself. For example, Section IV of ‘Vacillation’ describes an experience which, according to authorities such as William James and Evelyn Underhill, can definitely be characterized as mystic:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;

32. Ibid., pp.93-94.
33. Ibid., pp.56-57.
34. Ibid., p.317.
35. pace Virginia Moore.
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.  

The sudden intrusion of a powerful feeling of unity with all the visible and the invisible world, the overwhelming sense of peace, and the confidence with which Yeats felt he had become a source of spiritual regeneration are the distinguishing marks of a true mystic experience. It is, however, equally important to note that most mystics would not have timed their vision; 'twenty minutes more or less'; they would not have described their physical surroundings; and they would have made some attempt, however faltering, to give a fuller account of the Unitive State. Of course the poem itself reminds the reader that such moments were rare, and that, at the most, Yeats knew that his emotional affinities were with the antithesis of mysticism, ceremonial magic, and that they took as their example: 'Homer and his unchristened heart.'

These are judgements on which Yeats himself probably would have concurred. He told Ethel Mannin towards the end of his life that he was not '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;' by which he probably meant he had sought and found the miraculous, but had subjected it to intellectual scrutiny before incorporating it in his art.

George William Russell (AE), a very close friend and literary associate, once described Yeats's mind as having 'layers of faith and scepticism.' The image is as true as it is apt. The intellectual rigour and questioning curiosity of the sceptic were as vital to him as the acceptance and assurance of the believer. 'We prove what we must', he once said, 'and assume the rest upon hearsay.' On the other hand he showed great reverence for those ancient faiths recorded ‘in the book of the people’, defending, for example, his own belief in the existence of the Sidhe by quoting Socrates' retort to Phaedrus: "The common opinion is enough for me." On the other hand,

37. See Underhill, Mysticism, p.246.
38. Yeats, Poems, p.503
he defended himself against the charge that he was credulous about the spirits by writing in the introduction to *A Vision*: ‘Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon. . . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered.’ 43 Even in his first published statement about his belief in magic, an article published in *The Monthly Review* in 1901 — eleven years after he had first joined The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn — he shielded himself against criticism by saying of his own evocations: ‘I do not give examples to prove my arguments but to illustrate them.’ 44 In an unpublished journal he once wrote, ranging himself for comparison alongside T. S. Eliot’s recourse to Christianity and Ezra Pound’s to Provence, the Middle Ages and Chinese poetry:

We, even more than Eliot, require tradition and though it may include much that is his, it is not a belief or submission, but [an] exposition of intellectual needs. I recall a passage in some Hermetic writer on the increased power that a God feels in getting into a statue? I feel as neither Eliot nor Ezra do the need of old forms, old situations that, as when I re-create some early poem of my own, I may escape from scepticism. 45

The escape of course is only temporary. It lasts as long as, or perhaps a little longer than the recasting of the poem, the exploration of the old situation, and then it reasserts itself, driving the poet back into a new situation, a new poem, a fresh exploration of an ancient faith. It is a truism that has often been remarked about Yeats’s poetry that much of it is concerned with the writing, the composition of poetry. What has not been sufficiently remarked is that much of this composition is framed as an interrogation — and an interrogation of the spirits.

What then did Yeats hope to gain from his study of the occult? In the first place he hoped to secure access to a personality that was the opposite of what he believed himself to be. He wrote in his *Autobiographies*:

As I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is. 46

The words ‘hard and cold’ bring immediately to mind broad tracts of

Yeats’s poetic landscape. There is his statement of intention in ‘The Fisherman’.

Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
Where the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, “Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.”

In ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ Yeats images himself pondering his choice of poetry as being ‘caught in the cold snows of a dream.’ In ‘The Double Vision of Michael Robartes’ he summons

the cold spirits that are born
When the old moon is vanished from the sky
And the new still hides her horn.

In ‘All Things Can Tempt Me’ he contrasts his youthful passion for heroic celebration with his present wish to be: ‘Colder and dumber and deafer than a fish.’ There is the chilled ecstasy of his poem, ‘The Cold Heaven;’ the wintry passion of the Last Poems; and AE’s apt description of A Vision: ‘All this fantasy and the philosophical poems set in the book create about its hard geometrical core an air of cold beauty like a wintry sunrise playing on a pyramid of stony rock.’ Finally, there is Yeats’s own epitaph, the closing stanza of ‘Under Ben Bulben’:

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there

47. Yeats, Poems, p.348.
48. Ibid., p.424.
49. Ibid., p.382
50. Ibid., p.267.
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

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

With the passage from the *Autobiographies* and the images and tones of the poems fresh in our minds, I would now like to direct your attention to an observation Evelyn Underhill makes about the habits of mind that are engendered by a prolonged study of Ceremonial Magic:

The doctrine of magic which has been described shows us the 'Secret Wisdom' at its best and sanest. But even on these levels it is dogged by the defects which so decisively separate the occultist from the mystic. The chief of these is a peculiar temper of mind, the cold intellectual arrogance, the intensely individual point of view which occult studies seem to induce by their conscious quest of exclusive power and knowledge, their implicit rejection of love.\(^{53}\)

Yeats, of course, did not see the qualities that Evelyn Underhill has described: 'cold intellectual arrogance' and an 'intensely individual point of view' as undesirable. He seems to have thought that these were the very qualities that he needed to make him a poet. He turned to the occult, to Ceremonial Magic and to Spiritualism, because he believed these offered him access to a personality that was the opposite to the one he believed he possessed. In 'Ego Dominus Tuus' he has one of his poetic personae summon his anti-self, his mask — a preternatural self whose 'lineaments permit the expression of all that a man most lacks, and maybe dreads.'\(^{54}\)

*Hic:*

Why should you leave the lamp
Burning alone beside an open book,
And trace these characters upon the sands?
A style is found by sedentary toil
And by imitation of great masters.

*Ille:*

Because I seek an image, not a book.
Those men that in their writings are most wise

Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.
I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self,
And, standing by these characters, disclose
All that I seek; And whisper it as though
He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud
Their momentary cries before it is dawn,
Would carry it away to blasphemous men.55

Remember some of the habits of mind fostered by prolonged study of the occult — the thirst for mysterious powers, the obsession with secrets, and the compulsion to be combative.

The need to pit one order against the other, the natural against the supernatural, the spirit against the flesh, peace against war, youth against age, the body against the mind, the intellect against the passions, seems to have been deep-seated in Yeats. It is no surprise that he defined poetry in terms of conflict — ‘we make out of the quarrel with ourselves poetry.’56 As a poet he seemed to value this stimulus, asserting that poets ‘sang amid uncertainty.’57

Even in a poem like ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ in which he pleads to be ‘gathered into the artifice of eternity’, it is clear from the contraries used to construct the poem that this desired ‘eternity’ is something the poet himself makes, and that its order and abstraction is really a construct to be set over against the disorder and profusion of his own humanity.58 In the conclusion of his earliest essay asserting his preoccupation with magic, he said ‘I have now described that belief . . . which has set me all but unwilling among those fierce minds who are at war with their time, who cannot accept the days as they pass, simply and gladly.’59 Towards the end of the second book of A Vision, he declared: ‘My instructors identify consciousness with conflict, not with knowledge, substitute for subject and object, and their attendant logic, a struggle towards harmony, towards Unity of Being. Logical and emotional conflict alike lead towards a reality which is concrete, sensuous, bodily.’60 Of his instructors he said again: ‘It was part of their purpose to affirm that all the gains of man come from conflict with the

56. Yeats, Mythologies, p.331
57. Ibid., p.331
59. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp.50-51.
60. Yeats, A Vision (B), p.214.
opposite of his true being.' Magic, Ceremonial Magic, gave Yeats access to a source of vital energy for poetry.

Yeats also turned to the occult to command a spiritual power without incurring a commitment to any religious or philosophical organization or a set of beliefs or doctrines. He was initially attracted to magic as a form of spiritual enquiry that was free from the vagueness of the metaphysical speculation which he and his friends had encountered in the Theosophical Society. As Yeats later explained to one of these friends, he felt compelled ‘to lay hands upon some dynamic and substantializing force as distinguished from the Eastern quiescent and supersensualising state of the soul — a movement downward upon life, not upward out of life.’ While his friends spent their energies trying to unravel the tangled skeins of abstruse Theosophical doctrine, Yeats found that the study of Blake he was making at the time had so quickened his hatred of abstraction that the woolliness of what were called esoteric teachings irritated him. He was obviously thinking more of himself than Blake when he wrote in his Memoir of the poet that ‘the words he needed most were those that would brace him for a mighty effort, not those that would entangle him in a long meditation.’ Magic also purports to be the most ancient of all the sciences, and as a science it invites testing and experimentation rather than affirmations of belief. The mage does not profess; he performs. Furthermore, the layer of scepticism that I mentioned before as a characteristic aspect of his mind, made Yeats call into question the epistemology on which much esoteric teaching was based. It destroyed his confidence in the validity of ‘speculation’ and forced him to the conclusion that ‘truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed, and that if a man do not lose faith, and if he go through certain preparations, revelation will find him at the fitting moment.’ These preparations, of course, are not those of the mystic, who, whether he believes that the way of enlightenment is cataphatic or apophatic, renounces ‘the World, the Flesh, and the Devil’, but those of the mage, who seeks for revelations in rites, incantations, and ceremony. Yeats himself generally emphasized the experiential aspect of his enquiry into the occult.

And because he did not possess a visionary faculty, he often resorted to mediums, seances, evocations and the planchette for those supernatural revelations. The ritual, symbolism, and hierophancy associated with these activities excited his imagination. As a poet he coveted the mysterious

61. Ibid., p.13.
64. Yeats, A Vision (A), p.x.
power that had once been the prerogative of the Filid, the Druids, and other ancient orders of poets. What came out of a medium's mouth, the 'lightning of an old ghost's thoughts', seemed as incontrovertible as it was powerful. To be the intermediary between the supernatural and the natural was also to rebuild Irish poetry on its ancient footings. As early as 1888, Yeats had observed that 'poetry in Ireland has always been mysteriously connected with magic.' In later years he declared,

I learned from the people themselves before I learned from any book, that they cannot separate the idea of an art or craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere learning from witchcraft, and are fond of words that keep half their secret to themselves.

Thus magic promised Yeats supernatural revelations and concrete, vivid experiences that could be verified on the pulse, at a time when he was striving to write a popular poetry of 'insight and knowledge.'

He was also convinced that only Ceremonial Magic gave him living access to the seminal, holistic traditions of pre-Christian Gaelic Ireland, traditions he came increasingly to see as the source of all his poetry. 'This subject matter', he wrote, 'is something I have received from the generations, part of that compact with my fellow man made before I was born. I cannot break from it without breaking from some part of my own nature.' The ancient traditions were important to him for a number of reasons. They provided him with that coherent social and spiritual faith which, in common with many early modernist writers, he felt his art demanded but neither his nation nor his age could give. They kept him proof against that corrosive and debilitating fragmentation of the European sensibility which he believed had been initiated by the birth of Christianity and completed by the triumph of empirical science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And they enabled him to reconstitute his Irish identity, an identity that generations and generations of his fellow country-men had been compelled to deny. The significance of pitting a ritualized evocation of pre-Christian Gaelic Ireland against the destructive and deracinating forces of the modern world can be seen in 'The Statues':

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,

65. Yeats, Poems, pp.439, 600.
67. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.10.
69. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.viii.
70. For example see Yeats, Autobiographies, pp.189-194.
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?  
We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.  

Yeats was convinced that Ceremonial Magic of all the branches of the occult alone provided him with the means of recovering the lost traditions, of maintaining that ‘continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ that he believed was as important for Irish life as it was for Irish literature. Mediums, seances, the planchette, automatic writing, and the rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn permitted him to confront the ‘mere anarchy’ and the ‘proper dark.’ And if it produced in him that ‘dérèglement de tous les sens’ which Rimbaud had advocated was requisite for the modern poetic sensibility, he then submitted these experiences to the scrutiny of his ‘analytic mind.’ For Yeats, the intellect was the necessary antithesis to the ‘mere anarchy’ and the ‘proper dark.’ While he asserted that it was ‘measurement [that] began our might’, he believed that this ‘measurement’ should be applied to all human experience — the preternatural equally with the natural.

Just a few days before Yeats died he wrote:

It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say: ‘Man can embody truth but cannot know it.’ I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere drags out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not . . . the Song of Sixpence.

His occultism was part of his attempt literally to ‘embody truth’. The poetry he wrote gives us at once that ‘experience and delight’ and the ‘consciousness’ of our age that Eliot rightly claimed constitute great art. The ‘secret impurities’ of the occult did not prevent Yeats from becoming a great poet.

71. Yeats, Poems, pp.610-611.  
73. Yeats, Poems, p.638  
Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can."