
When “She” Is Not Maud: An Esoteric Foundation and Subtext for Irish Folklore in the Works of W.B. Yeats

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Abstract. This article examines Yeats’s broad use of Irish folklore between 1888 and 1938, and attempts to find a justification for his contention that his own unique metaphysical system expressed in both editions of *A Vision*, itself an outgrowth of his three decades of ritual practice as an initiate in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, could somehow function as both an interpretation and enlargement of “the folk-lore of the villages”. Beyond treating Irish fairy stories as a way for Yeats to establish his own Irishness, capture what remained of “reckless Ireland” in its twilight, or create a political counter-discourse set against English hegemony, the immutability and immortality of the *sídh*e are considered in light of the assertions of several minor lectures from the Golden Dawn. This connection sheds new light on Yeats’s ideas about Unity of Being, and hypothesizes a possible esoteric path to “escape” from his system of phases so as to resolve the body-soul dilemma evident in his poetry.

Key Words. Folklore, Golden Dawn, Cabala, *Sídh*e, Fairies, *A Vision*, Unity of Being.

Resumen. En este artículo se investiga cómo W.B. Yeats utilizó ampliamente el folclore irlandés entre 1888 y 1938, e intenta encontrar una justificación a la afirmación del poeta de que su personal sistema metafísico, tal y como se expresa en las dos ediciones de *A Vision*, libro que a su vez es el producto de tres décadas de práctica ritual como iniciado en la Orden Hermética del *Golden Dawn*, podría funcionar tanto como interpretación y como extensión del “folclore de las aldeas”. Más allá del intento por parte de Yeats de apropiarse de los cuentos irlandeses de hadas como forma de establecer su propia identidad irlandesa, o como una manera de capturar lo que quedaba de la “Irlanda salvaje” en su etapa final, o como forma de crear un contradiscurso político que oponer a la hegemonía inglesa, la inmutabilidad y la inmortalidad de los *sídh*e (seres mágicos) se estudian aquí a la luz de las afirmaciones que Yeats tomó de una serie de textos de la orden *Golden Dawn*. Esta conexión permite ver las ideas de Yeats sobre la unidad del ser desde otra perspectiva y se sugiere una vía esotérica para “escapar” de su sistema de fases y así resolver el dilema entre el cuerpo y el alma tan evidente en su poesía.

Palabras clave. Folclore, Orden del *Golden Dawn*, cábala, *sídhe*, hadas, *A Vision*, unidad del ser.

When I am introducing undergraduates to the basic mechanism of literary analysis, I send them home with a series of questions to aid in fitting together the text and authorial context of a poem or short story. In addition to annotating the text itself, looking up unknown words and tracking down obscure allusions, they are asked to research fundamental historical and biographical points, and answer questions such as: “What was going on during the writer’s lifetime, both before and at the time the piece was composed?” and “What sorts of things did the writer and/or that school of writers like to talk about?”

To the latter, students struggling through a Yeats poem like “Among School Children” come back with two standard answers. Number-one is, predictably, “Maud Gonne”, and in “Among School Children” this observation certainly holds true in stanzas 2-4, where the unidentified “she” of the “Ledaean body” is unquestionably a reference to Yeats’s great unrequited love. Beyond Yeats’s infatuation with Gonne, the second most popular subject for a Yeatsian poem according to most students is something along the lines of “Irish stuff, like folklore and mythology”. What follows, expanded from a presentation at the University of Sunderland’s 2009 conference of the North East [of England] Irish Cultural Network, examines the evolution of and *raison d’être* for Yeats’s use of Irish folklore, with particular emphasis on *A Vision* – all those times when “she” is not only *not* Maud, but is instead something that impacted Yeats’s art and thinking just as powerfully: the *sídhe*.

Growing up in nineteenth-century Ireland, and having spent months at a time in County Sligo visiting his Pollexfen grandparents, the young William Butler Yeats was unquestionably immersed in Irish folklore of all kinds, in particular stories of the *daoine sídhe*, the “people of the mounds”, who went by many other names among the peasantry: “The Good People”, “The Fair Folk”, or simply the *sídhe*. As extensively explored in Sinéad Garrigan Mattar’s article, titled “Folklore”, fairies and fairy-lore are prominent subjects throughout the entirety of Yeats’s poetry, essays, drama, and fiction, from beginning to end, starting in 1883 with “The Priest and the Fairy” followed by the “strategic ‘sifting’” of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (Holdeman and Levitas 249). Both subjects provided thematic material throughout his dramatic corpus for plays such as *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, prose volumes including *The Celtic Twilight* and *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, right through *New Poems* in 1938. Their presence is undeniably pervasive, affecting his work even more than that other “she”, Maud Gonne.

The general impetus for Yeats’s interest in Irish folklore has been explored many times before. As James Pethica observes, Irish folklore “appealed to [Yeats] on occult, philosophical, and literary grounds”, and its pervasiveness throughout his *oeuvre* is part and parcel of one of his major concerns, identifying himself “specifically as an Irish writer, and to assert the distinctiveness of ‘Irishness’ as a cultural identity” (Pethica 129). Indeed, readers may recall the anecdotes in “Reveries Over Childhood and Youth” to the effect that during Yeats’s time in London he was seen as a “foreigner” and a “Mad Irishman”, though once returned to Ireland he was looked upon as part of the English ascendancy by the Catholic majority (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 61-62). He seemed to fit in nowhere. Beyond question, emphasizing Irish folklore allowed Yeats to establish his own “Irishness” in a divided society where he struggled to find a place for himself. However, as shown by his remarks on the “Harps and Pepperpots” school of Irish self-identity, in making this decision he undoubtedly fought an uphill battle to avoid being grouped with those who pandered to the merely popular, conventional, and picturesque (*Autobiographies* 171-182).

Moreover, Yeats’s motives are rarely simple, linear, or straightforward. Beyond assisting in his creation of an Irish identity for himself and the literary movement he

championed, the sheer bulk of supernatural narrative (including ghost stories, holy wells, and garden-variety miraculous interventions) also provided him with an admittedly *ad populum*, first-level of justification for his beliefs about the supernatural universe, and established a foundation for his later psychical researches of all kinds. In an anthropological sense, codifying folk beliefs was a way to recapture “the reckless Ireland of [even] a hundred years ago [that he saw] in final degradation” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 73). As a Nationalist and member of the Irish Literary Revival, the elevation of Irish mythology at one end of the spectrum and peasant fairy-lore at the other served as a political counter-discourse set against English hegemony of the period, as stark as his late metaphor of Junzo Sato's ancient, consecrated blade with its “flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn / From some court-lady's dress and round / The wooden scabbard bound and wound” set “For emblems of the day against the tower / Emblematical of the night” (“A Dialogue of Self and Soul” ll. 13-15; 28-29).¹

At the same time, Yeats's stated motivations were in states of constant evolution and, like his poetry, subject to continual revision. Sometimes they jostle against each other or seem at odds. Frequently they are complicated by his often maddeningly associational prose style. In “Ireland and the Arts”, for example, he speaks of the necessity of recreating an Irish art for Irishmen at every level of society, everywhere:

The Greeks looked within their borders, and we like them, have a history fuller than any modern history of imaginative events; and legends which surpass, as I think, all legends but theirs in wild beauty, and in our land, as in theirs there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend ... I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of the mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their art, so that Irishmen, even though they have gone thousands of miles away, would still be in their country. Whether they chose for the subject the carrying off of the Brown Bull or the coming of Patrick, or the political struggle of later times, the other world comes so much into it [. . . and moves] a whole people and not just a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business. (*Early Essays* 151-152)

On the other hand, in direct opposition to the previous, one finds him revealing to John O'Leary that *The Secret Rose* (containing a selection of Irish supernatural stories including those of Red Hanrahan and “*Rosa Alchemica*”) was “an honest attempt toward that aristocratic esoteric Irish literature, which has been my chief ambition. We have a literature for the people but nothing yet for the few” (*The Letters* 286).

It is this esoteric aspect of Yeats's use of Irish folklore that has been largely neglected, and which I would like to explore: excavating around the edges of his claim in the dedication to the 1925 edition of *A Vision* that the entire system of the Golden Dawn regarding the various planes of existence, the *hodos chameliontos*, within which Yeats's own personal system could be understood, was merely “now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” (Yeats, *A Vision* 1925 liv). First, however, a few words need to be said about how Yeats's own beliefs, as well as his use of Irish folklore, have been viewed from the outside. Like his occultism, Yeats's fairy motifs are sometimes a contentious subject.

There are those who patently *believe*, as did my Sligo great-grandmother, Yeats's contemporary, in the reality of the invisible hosts of the air, the banshee (*Bean Sidh*, *Badhbh*, etc.), water horses, and the Fool of the Forth (*Amadan-na-Briona*). However, many of these individuals, among whom I number Yeats himself, do not like to hear the subject discussed too openly, for it raises the hackles on their necks and reputedly brings bad luck. For example,

Yeats's 1901 essay "Magic" seems unabashedly filled with references to visions of the Irish peasantry, invocations using old Irish symbols, and his own experiences with glamours and enchantments. Nevertheless, he plainly admits in the closing paragraphs:

I see little reason to doubt the truth of many things that are beyond my experience; and it may be that there are beings who watch over that ancient secret, as all tradition affirms, and resent, and perhaps avenge, too fluent speech. They say in the Aran Islands that if you speak overmuch of the things of Faery your tongue becomes like a stone, and it seems to me, though doubtless naturalistic reason would call it Auto-suggestion or the like, that I have often felt my tongue become just so heavy and clumsy. (*Early Essays* 40)

Thirty years later Yeats would put the same idea into the mouth of the soul in "Dialogue of Self and Soul" (l. 40), and he alludes to it later in his own voice in the closing lines of *A Vision*, when his "public philosophy" came too near his private goal of attaining the "thirteenth cone": "I have already said all that can be said" (Yeats, *A Vision* 1937 219). Clearly Yeats never outgrew what William Murphy describes as the "common folk superstitions" common to most Irish of that time; in this case that even a casual mention of the supernatural serves as an invocation (*Family Secrets* 370).

Likewise, there are certainly those who find the popular connection between Ireland and the fairies embarrassing, as Auden found Yeats's occultism absurd and embarrassing, who wish, perhaps, that the Celtic Tiger had simply devoured them all so that Ireland could reinvent itself for the 21st century and get away from that picturesqueness once so heavily propagated by Éamon de Valera, John Ford, and the Irish Tourist Board (Auden 191; 189). There are unquestionably scholars of Irish Studies who see Yeats as a primary perpetrator in creating a popular perception of Western Ireland as a sort of supernatural Disneyland. In this latter vein, perhaps the most puzzling scholarly contention regarding Yeats and Irish folklore comes, *ipse dixit*, from none other than Roy Foster.

Paradoxically, Foster maintains on the one hand that Yeats's preoccupation with the esoteric and occult "can no longer be dismissed as merely credulous, silly, or fantastical" (*The Arch-Poet* xxii). On the other hand, when he treats Yeats's extended Sligo holidays and belief in those other, non-mercantile gentry that would permeate his work start to finish, Foster seems to reverse himself: "Everyone in Sligo, it seemed to [the Yeats children], talked of fairies, and so they did – to children" (*The Apprentice* 21). This bizarre presumption that the thousands of tales told of the *sídh*e were simply children's stories represents a violent reinvention of Irish folklore, a revisionist history not only wholly at odds with my own experience, but also (for example) in complete opposition to the vast body of material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission during the 1937-1939 "Schools' Scheme".² One of the best and most recent refutations to Foster's contention can be found in Natalie Barber's *The Way They Never Were: Nationalism, Landscape, and Myth in Irish Identity Construction*:

Fairy forts are easy to spot in Ireland. They are typically sitting conspicuously in the corner of someone's property. While the rest of the land is groomed and cultivated, the fort is often left alone. While many are officially preserved today, they were preserved for centuries by the myths surrounding them. There are presently thirty to forty thousand fairy forts, some possibly dating back as early as 600 BCE, and they are scattered along the countryside as mounds encircled by trees. The mounds and trees are considered fairy property In 2001, a gentleman in Western Ireland told folklorist Eddie Lenihan, in reference to these forts: "I s'pose, if a fairy is molested, if you go tampering or meddling with 'em, well, they retaliate. 'Tis only kind o'

natural, retaliation when you're interfered with. Nearly everyone in Ireland is aware that it isn't the done thing. Was never the done thing. The most ignorant people in Ireland, people that were illiterate, wouldn't bring a thorn out o' them forts". (34)

This is not to say, however, that all of Yeats's contemporaries were believers, though I would hazard that many of those who perhaps scoffed publicly at the notion of haunted raths and fairy paths were nevertheless "respectful" in private. As for Yeats himself, in the words of his friend Dermot MacManus, the poet "was fully aware of the 'everyday aspect' of fairy lore and had great respect for it" (12). To be sure, there were (and are) those who simply did not like Yeats's presumption in attempting to create "master-myths of Irish nationality" (Howes and Kelly 129) – for all that he admittedly "rescued English lyric from the dead hand of Campion and Tom Moore" (Auden 195). John O'Leary's friend John F. Taylor certainly felt that Yeats's publication of Irish folklore had been "to the discredit ... of the Irish peasantry" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 180). Another memorable example can be seen in Hugh O'Donnell's scathing, forty-seven-page rant against Yeats's "Pseudo Celtic Drama" in 1904, in which it is asserted that "Mr W.B. Yeats seems to see nothing in the Ireland of old days, but an unmanly, an impious and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins and sprites . . . just like a sordid tribe of black devil worshipers and fetish worshipers on the Congo or the Niger" (24-25).³

However, Yeats – young or old – was never one to be swayed by the voices of detractors. When it came to those "thoughts so long habitual that I may be permitted to call them my convictions", he was a True Believer (Yeats, *Later Essays* 1). Still, he was unquestionably aware that there were those, even among his friends and admirers, who thought him a "crazed fanatic" (Yeats, *The Letters* 889) or, in the more colloquial idiom of Ezra Pound, "very very very bug-house" (qtd. in Foster, *The Arch-Poet* 157).

Nevertheless, there are many in academe who would like to read Yeats as a sceptic, despite his many frank professions of belief. For example, in *W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist*, Heather Martin asserts:

Yeats studied [magic and spiritism] carefully, but he did not swallow all their tenets whole Throughout even the obsessive *The Speckled Bird*, which he wrote while he was still trying to create a Celtic magical order, Yeats poked gentle fun at the fanatics and middle-class eccentrics he met in occult circles. This sense of humor, coupled with a healthy skepticism, is very much in evidence throughout his work, and is an important part even of *A Vision*. (3)

Such a portrayal seems to fly in the face of the accounts of those who knew Yeats well, personally. Sean O'Casey recalls dinner parties where Yeats was soporifically "booming" on "about Megarithma who had told him he must live by bread and water and avoid woods, because the woods concentrated the solar rays" and "the divine spirit of the path of Samekh, the golden heart that was the central point of the cabbalistic Tree of Life" (168). Ella Young, close friend of Maud Gonne – though not particularly fond of Yeats – describes serious visits with Moina and MacGregor Mathers in their company, filled with discussions of Gaelic folklore, Egyptian magic and mythology, memories of past lives, and "taro" cards (104-106). As a child, Yeats saw his first "fay" in Sligo "moving down a moonbeam toward him" (Murphy, *Family* 372). J.B. Yeats considered his son's attitude toward esoteric studies "hot and credulous" (Murphy, *Letters* 12). Other similar examples are legion.

Even when Yeats sought exterior validation, his methods were sometimes rather slipshod. Thus, in his excitement over finding apparent corroboration for what would become the central trope for *A Vision* (1925), his vision of "a naked woman of incredible beauty,

standing upon a pedestal and shooting an arrow at a star”, Yeats was blatantly duped by William Sharp (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 280; Yeats, *Later Essays* 14). As William Halloran rightly observed, “In rejecting the possibility that Sharp – or, as he thought at the time, Fiona Macleod – had written the relevant sections of “The Archer” after hearing from him of his Tullyra vision, Yeats displayed remarkable naiveté which serves as a measure of the intensity of his desire for contact with the supernatural” (Halloran 276). One might also note that in the surviving notebooks that comprise *Yeats’s Vision Papers*, Yeats seems to have made little attempt to validate the nature of his communicators – which is rather surprising for a Golden Dawn adept of his standing, especially given the difficulties he had with the so-called “frustrators” who occasionally misled him.⁴ As I evaluate Yeats, he may have been sceptical of others. However, when it came to his own beliefs, he was only a cursory sceptic in an *X-Files*, Fox Mulderesque “I want to have proof for what I already believe” fashion.

The *sidhe* are, Yeats informs readers of *Fairy and Folk Tales*, “‘Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost,’ say the peasantry. ‘The gods of the earth,’ says the Book of Armagh. ‘The gods of pagan Ireland,’ say the Irish antiquarians, ‘the Tuatha De Danán, who, when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high’” (Yeats, *Fairy* 1). What they were for Yeats remains to be seen, but he closes his introductory remarks with a curious appeal to the *Phaedrus*:

I have not rationalized a single hobgoblin. I seek for shelter to the words of Socrates “I have certainly not time for such inquiries. Shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my business, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And, therefore, I say farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me” (*Fairy* xvi-xviii).

Historically, his personal beliefs have often been downplayed, or subjugated to purely literary ends, as seen in Thomas Parkinson’s foundational study, *W.B. Yeats Self-Critic*. In his discussion of the evolution of Yeats’s early style, including his use of fairy motifs, Parkinson asserts that:

Through the special blending of Irish and occult lore, Yeats could attain a subject matter both unique and of general validity. Thus his three interests [the literary, political, and philosophical] became – at least in his poetic theory and practice – unified, for his art was the expression (as Pater required) of his personality, the expression (as Irish nationalism demanded) of the Irish mind, and a method of buttressing and extending (as Blavatsky and [MacGregor] Mathers urged) the teachings of theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and cabalism. (7)

I would put style aside, and concentrate rather on Parkinson’s final point.

An older generation of students learned from Sandra Gilbert’s slim study guide to *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* that the fairies were part and parcel of the poet’s “central obsession[s]”: “old age versus perpetual youth, mortality versus immortality, [and] change versus changelessness” (12). Immortality and changelessness are not, I think, bad places to begin, for even in a poem like “Among School Children” that, on the surface, seems to have little to do with either, one finds Pythagoras’ immutable musical ratios and the circular movements of the “fixed” stars in the sixth stanza, coupled with and played against the theme of reincarnation implicitly embedded in line fifteen’s reference to Symposium 190 and “Plato’s” – technically Aristophanes’ – “parable” (Serra, “Examining”).

It is certainly with the seduction of immortality that the *sídhe* tempted Oisín, the stolen child, the man who dreamed of fairyland, and so many others among Yeats's characters. And Yeats himself, frequently ill and having more-than-once barely escaped death was, like Keats, always cognizant of his own mortality. Nevertheless, one does not find him sleeping in a fairy-fort, hoping to be carried away "to the waters and the wild".

To elaborate on what would otherwise seem to be a rather flippant statement, I would pause at this juncture to state that my reading of Yeats differs somewhat from my more traditional or orthodox peers. As William Murphy rightly observes in *Family Secrets*, although J.B. Yeats had attempted to abolish "religion and insincerity" in his son, "he had merely abolished Christianity ... and other conventional forms of religion from which vast numbers of people take comfort in the face of the insoluble mysteries of human existence. He had not abolished William Butler Yeats's hunger for religion, which the son sought to feed through magic and mysticism" (372). However, as Monk Gibbon forcefully reiterates, Yeats's mentor MacGregor Mathers and his circle were no mystics, but "occultists and magic-mongers" (61). In fact, Yeats himself refuted Murphy's last assertion. As late as 1938 he categorically denied that he was any sort of "mystic" in terms of *passive* practices, describing himself instead as "a practical man", apparently with practical aims that remain largely unstated, though many are obviously tied up with the concept that he calls Unity of Being (Yeats, *The Letters* 921).

To be sure, Yeats experimented with occultism of all types. He consumed hashish with Martinists in Paris. He attended meetings of paranormal research bodies, such as the Ghost Club and the Society for Psychical Research, as well as magical ceremonies in Dublin where he was allowed to observe goetic evocations. Daniel Dunlop describes disturbing, Crowleyesque ceremonies in which Yeats sprinkled blood from a slaughtered cockerel over a chalked pentagram "in accordance with the instructions of those versed in the black arts" (E. Young 7). Perhaps Yeats even took information from his infamous former colleague Aleister Crowley, *via* Golden Dawn Imperator Robert Felkin; Francis King alleges that the latter was a member of Crowley's section of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*—that taught, among other things, a kind of sexual magic that may have played a part in W.B. and George Yeats' attempts to conceive an Irish avatar (King part 1, chapter 4).⁵

In his often-quoted 1892 letter to John O'Leary, Yeats asserted that his magical studies and attempts to live a (paradoxically, given the above) "mystical" life were "the centre off all that I do and all that I think and all that I write" (*The Letters* 211). Despite his loose use of the term "mystical", it is clear that Yeats was no mere scholar of magical symbolism; he was a serious *practitioner*. One sees in the chronology of his occult involvements a clear and continuous movement away from theory toward the pragmatic and experimental: from his early involvement in the Dublin Hermetic Society, through a brief stint in the Esoteric Section of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, to MacGregor Mathers' Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in which he studied and practiced magic for more than thirty years.

Furthermore, his connection with the last organization was severed only because of administrative "quarrels caused by men" – not because he became disillusioned with what he saw as the efficacy of its esoteric teachings. In fact, fifteen years after formally resigning from active participation in the Stella Matutina (the schismatic successor of Mathers' original Golden Dawn), Yeats closed nearly two decades' work on *A Vision* with the lament: "It seems as if I should know all if I could but ... find everything in the symbol. But nothing comes – though this moment was to reward me for all my toil. Perhaps I am too old. Surely something would have come when I meditated under the direction of the Cabbalists" (*A Vision* 1937 219). Still, *A Vision* is the result of extended experiments undertaken by *two* Golden Dawn adepts, and one finds in the *Vision Papers* multiple instances where Yeats attempted to correlate the various elements of his burgeoning system with the cabalistic framework that

MacGregor Mathers had taught him decades before. It is this magical system that Yeats claimed was “now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” (*A Vision* 1925 liv). Indeed, even while he was reading Vedanta within months of his death he was pondering how to revive his own aborted magical order, the Castle of Celtic Heroes: “mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace” utilizing Celtic symbolism, upon which he had dedicated a decade of his “most impassioned thought” in collaboration with the Matherses, attempting to recontextualize the Golden Dawn’s Egypto-Christian symbolism within the framework of Irish mythology and folk belief (*Autobiographies* 204).

Thus, while I agree with Margaret Mills Harper that the broad subjects circling the hub of Yeats’s occultism are theosophy, magic, spiritualism, and Hindu mysticism (Cf. “Yeats and the Occult”, in Howes and Kelly 144-166), I disagree with Timothy Materer that one has to search for a unifying principle that ties these together (Holdeman and Levitas 239), and likewise with Sinéad Mattar who asserts that the poet’s early “prophetic zeal” was soon (*italics mine*) “translated into a *disappointed* esotericism” and that his reading of Indian mysticism in the 1930s somehow supplanted his earlier esoteric hermeticism (Holdeman and Levitas 247-248; 254).

Put briefly, I see in Yeats’s dogged, decades-long adherence to the Golden Dawn’s system and teachings, despite scandal and schism and interpersonal conflicts with his fellows, proof that the cabala of the Golden Dawn functioned as the single unifying meta-system that ties together his otherwise seemingly disjointed passions and fields of study. To borrow a metaphor used by James Pethica in “Yeats, Folklore, and Irish Legend”, after 1890 Yeats had no need to search for the “Key to All Mythologies” like George Eliot’s Casaubon; he found it ready-made in the order’s secret, initiated teachings. For a much more detailed justification of this sort of reading, see “Esotericism and Escape” in *W.B. Yeats’s A Vision: Explication and Contexts* (Mann et al. 307-328).

To return to the specific topic of Yeats, the *sidhe*, and immortality: the most well-known occult discipline dealing with the subject of everlasting life is, of course, the medieval pseudo-science of alchemy with its quest for universal transmutation *via* the philosopher’s stone, the universal solvent or *alkahest*, and the universal medicine in the elixir of life. The Golden Dawn certainly utilized alchemical symbolism within its rituals and curriculum and, moreover, there was a strong interest in alchemy among many Golden Dawn initiates. The Westcott Hermetic Library to which the members had access contained a large number of alchemical texts and manuscripts.⁶ Founder Wynn Westcott published a number of alchemical pamphlets in his collection *Collectanea Hermetica*, including *A Short Enquiry Concerning the Hermetic Art by A Lover of Philalethes and Aesch Mezareph: or “Purifying Fire”*, which last Ithell Colquhoun claims as the key inspiration for the Order’s alchemical teaching (Colquhoun 272). In “The Trembling of the Veil”, written in disillusionment after the so-called “Revolt of the Adepts” in 1900 that split the Order into several ideologically-competing factions, Yeats would bitterly recount, “In the credulity of our youth we secretly wondered if [MacGregor Mathers] had not met with, perhaps even been taught by, some old man who had found the elixir [of life]” (*Autobiographies* 162).

Furthermore, schismatic adept Arthur Edward Waite’s 1926 *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy* was certainly informed by Order teaching, and likewise Israel Regardie’s *The Philosopher’s Stone*.⁷ Moreover, although there was certainly a trend toward reinterpreting alchemical metaphors in terms of spiritual perfection rather than physical processes via Mary Anne Atwood’s 1850 *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, there was at least one high-ranking adept in the order, Rev. W.A. Ayton, who maintained a full-scale alchemical laboratory in the basement of his rectory, and claimed to have manufactured the Elixir of Life.⁸

Although Yeats was clearly exposed to both the literal and metaphorical interpretations of alchemical immortality, the prose works coeval with his elevation to the Golden Dawn's Inner Order show that he tended to see alchemy, and thus hermetic immortality, in terms of initiation – and the initiation that led to the Golden Dawn's three highest grades in particular. In “*Rosa Alchemica*” – the “Alchemical Secret” – readers encounter an unsatisfied, unsuccessful aesthete narrator who espouses a metaphorical-spiritual interpretation of alchemy, and has collected alchemical apparatus once owned by Raymond Lully as decorative display pieces. He is confronted by Michael Robartes, whom Yeats would later resurrect as his mouthpiece for *A Vision*'s system, and taken to an Hermetic temple closely modelled on that used for the Golden Dawn's Inner Order initiations. Peacocks, which originally appear as alchemical symbols, are here presented as cabalistic images of the sephira Binah: in keeping with the idea that Robartes holds a rank corresponding to the Golden Dawn's Third Order, and perhaps accounts for the fact that he could be so easily “resurrected” by Yeats (Mann et al. 307, 325 no.7; Croft 100).

If Yeats, the occultist who invoked the Irish fairies in the same way he invoked cabalistic angels, had seen fairy immortality as a viable possibility, one would assume that he would have scaled Knocknarea with his ceremonial weapons and notebooks of barbarous names. According to Yeats, however, for those who succumb to such temptations, the *sídhe* are hindrances rather than helpers, and “come between him and the hope of his heart”: raising the question in a characteristically Yeatsian way of “What is the hope of the heart?”, just as in “Among School Children” he confounds readers by raising the implicit question, “What is ‘man's enterprise’?” (l. 56).

By the time he wrote “The Hosting of the Sidhe” referenced above, Yeats well knew from Wallis-Budge's Egyptology, his studies as an adept of the Golden Dawn, and through the writings of his co-adept, Florence Farr (with whom he “invoked the Irish fairies” in his article of the same name) that the heart is symbolically the *physical* seat of the soul. Decades later he would invoke this image in “Vacillation”, where the “heart” fears being stricken *not* by death, but “remorse” – being chewed-up again by *A Vision*'s macerating gyres. What is the hope of the heart? By implication, to escape *both* death (Cf. the “Self” in “Dialogue of Self and Soul”) and the gyres of the Yeatsian system (Nature and what the Golden Dawn termed the *hodos chameliontos*) and thereby attain Unity of Being: of self and soul, microcosm and macrocosm, man and God.

However, while fairies are reputedly immortal, fairy immortality is for fairies alone. Like angels, they are a separate order of being. One might say that Yeats wanted to be transmuted, not simply transported. More, they are not, perhaps, truly eternal, for if “the Sidhe are the gods” as Yeats says in “Dust hath closed Helen's Eye”, they are also clearly subject to diminishment if not eventual dissolution for lack of worship and offerings (*Mythologies* 18). The potential human immortality that he seems to describe (or imply between the lines) in *A Vision* is of a different kind. It is clearly not “heaven”, for Yeats disavows Christian orthodoxy in too many places to mistake his system for a theology even remotely compatible with Christianity. *A Vision* promises only a gradual, painful, inevitable purification through a series of incarnations linked to the symbol of the twenty-eight phases or “mansions” of the moon – unless one can somehow completely circumvent the pattern of gyres and “escape” as Owen Aherne says and Michael Robartes subsequently elucidates in “Phases of the Moon” (l. 117; also Yeats, *Explorations* 259).

Moreover, from an hermeticist's perspective, a mere knowledge of, or even passive interaction with the *sídhe a la* Oisín seems to have been insufficient for Yeats's purposes. A case in point can be found in “The Adoration of the Magi”, where Yeats's emissaries to the Second Coming, three idealized islanders straight out of the pages of *The Celtic Twilight*, are all sensitive to the supernatural world. Without questioning, they believe absolutely in the

reality of supernatural intervention in the natural world. In fact, they take the supernatural events so much for granted that they seem advocates for Evans-Wentz's view in *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*: "If fairies actually exist as invisible beings or intelligences, and our investigations lead us to the tentative hypothesis that they do, they are natural and not supernatural, for nothing that exists can be supernatural" (xxiv). Nevertheless, Yeats's peasant-magi fail in their quest, as Owen Aherne himself fails in the previous narrative in the literary triptych, "Tables of the Law". Their reason leads them astray and, moreover, they are merely passive mystics rather than active magicians like Yeats and his hermetic persona Michael Robartes. Their natural peasant awareness of and receptivity to the supernatural are squandered assets.⁹

Yeats himself, as an adept, went another way. He *commands* the fairies, seeks to know their natures and purposes in frank narratives such as "Regina, Regina Pigmeorum Veni" and "Invoking the Irish Fairies". In this last, Yeats says "The fairies are the lesser spiritual moods of that universal mind, wherein every mood is a soul and every thought a body", and editor John Frayne takes this opportunity to completely ignore Yeats's assertions that he had also gone to ancient Egypt in vision and seen the burial of her dead, heard mysterious talk of Isis and Osiris, made the invisible powers interpret the mystical Bembine tablet, called up the cabalistic Klippoth and seen them rush by like "great black rams". Nor does he make much of the multitude of statements where Yeats does more than hint about his belief in "disembodied powers" (*Early Essays* 116). Rather desperate to take the academic high ground, Frayne (like Parkinson before him) observes: "By 1895 this doctrine of the moods as spiritual emanations of the world soul was to become an essential part of Yeats's *aesthetic*" (in Yeats, *Early Articles* 548-49; emphasis added).

I think Frayne as mistaken as Foster, for to make use of or propose a set of beliefs on aesthetic grounds, as Auden reminds Yeatsians, is not to imply that they are in any way "true", but rather that they are merely useful or "interesting". Yeats himself shows readers, through the failure of the aesthete-narrator of "*Rosa Alchemica*", that the merely aesthetic artist is foredoomed. One has to put symbolism into larger, more consciously pragmatic practice or risk ending up with trivial and banal art: "Fairies are fun" as Auden phrases it (189).

Thought and mood, body and soul, even for the fairies, are divided—just as the *Anima Hominis* and the *Anima Mundi* are divided in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*.¹⁰ This is a function of existence within Nature, within creation, no matter how refined the state. Their reconciliation is one of Yeats's subjects in *A Vision*, and this horrible Everest of Yeats's occultism is, unfortunately, a text that is fundamentally closed to academics. For one thing, as Kathleen Raine observes, the *kind* of knowledge that Yeats was seeking, and which he presents in *A Vision*, is not understandable in academic terms (Raine 177). More specifically, by design, dedication, and decree Yeats made the text unintelligible to any but a select body of fellow students, who were already in possession of the rose, or esoteric key to his metaphors.

In the 1925 edition, Yeats is explicit: "As I most fear to disappoint those that come to this book through some interest in my poetry and in that alone" – metaphors for poetry be damned – "I warn them from that part of the book called 'The Great Wheel' and from the whole of Book II [The Geometrical Foundation of the Wheel], and beg them to dip here and there in the verse and into my comments upon life and history" (*A Vision* 1925 lv). That which is most technical, least incidental, is reserved for the *use* of his dedicatees, Golden Dawn initiates all.

In the 1937 edition, although his introductory remarks are completely different, Yeats nevertheless similarly apologizes to "those readers I most value, those who have read me many years", confronted [*italics mine*] "by what must *seem* an arbitrary, harsh, difficult

symbolism” without knowledge of and from “the six wings of Daniels angels, the Pythagorean numbers, a venerated book of the Cabala where the beard of God winds in and out among the stars, its hairs all numbered, those complicated mathematical tables that Kelly saw in Dr. Dee’s black scrying-stone”—without, in other words, the shared curricular background of every Golden Dawn adept (*A Vision* 1937 18). And how this recondite material can be “an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” must leave even those readers well-versed in both Irish folklore and the cabala of the Golden Dawn to scratch their heads. Still, it follows that if *A Vision* is aimed at an audience of high-ranking adepts, Yeats must have assumed that the information presented in his unique and otherwise circumscribed system of phases and gyres somehow facilitated a shared objective, an esoteric goal that may or may not be the same as the general, question-raising “man’s enterprise” of “Among School Children” (l. 56), an objective *somehow* connected with Yeats’s understanding of Irish folklore.

The highest, mostly undiscussed, aims of a Golden Dawn adept were radical. Most of the language in the rituals and official papers is densely symbolic, obscurely explained, unenlightening for the uninitiated. The closest thing to a mission or vision statement for the adepts of the Inner Order is found in Mathers’ essay on “The Symbolism of Self Sacrifice”. Using the glorified Christ as an example of one of the *many* sons of God, Mathers maintains that the successful adept achieves a union of the ordinary body with the “faculties of the Spirit body”:

Because if you can once get the great force of the Highest to send its ray clean down through the Neschamah [the Microcosmic divine spark] into the mind [or Ruach], and thence, into your physical body, the Nephesh [or energetic animating principle tied to the material and sensual] would be so transformed as to render you almost like a God walking on this Earth. The Ruach, then, has to undergo a certain check and suffering in order to attain its Apotheosis – which is the work of our Adept. (Mathers 136)

Apotheosis. Deification. Unite the parts of the soul, and thereby unite with God—preferably like Enoch and Christ and perhaps Plotinus – while still in the body, and thereby escape from the wheel of incarnations. Looked at from this perspective, the Unity of Being that Yeats “describes” in *A Vision* is the exact *opposite* of the fairy-lore he presents in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, where the *sídh*e are *diminished* from their previous power and stature.

How did one achieve this? Nobody knew; at least, nothing is recorded. One prerequisite, as spelled out in The Golden Dawn’s “Flying Roll 21” echoes Yeats’s sentiment in *Fairy and Folk Tales*, and is as old as Delphi: Know Thyself (Mathers 151-159). This would also be the prerequisite for anyone who wished to make use of the system of *A Vision* for other than literary or aesthetic purposes. Task #1: find one’s place within the system of phases. How? Of course Yeats never elaborates; that would be *telling*.

What connection do all these occult particulars have with Yeats’s understanding of Irish folklore? Certainly Yeats’s toil through the grades of the Golden Dawn and subsequent decades of personal experimentation along Golden Dawn lines, occasionally invoking Irish entities, were unarguably attempts to intellectually justify and validate his pre-existing emotional belief in the folklore of the country people that one might really be “carried away body and soul” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 89). With regard to particulars – What is that “destiny” to which he alludes? How did the fairies tell Yeats about himself? The argument flies off on a tangent to the gyre. The centre cannot hold.

Despite his claim that the Golden Dawn’s complex system of occult knowledge, and likewise his own personal system as a subset within it, was in part merely an interpretation,

and in part an enlargement of “the folk-lore of the villages”, there seems to be nothing in the cabalism of Mathers’ occult system, nothing in Yeats’s complex metaphysical calculus of Faculties and Principles, gyres within wheels within phases within epochs that somehow dovetails with the aims of a Golden Dawn adept, that presents anything even *remotely* like the folklore of the villages. Unless, of course, his emphasis was on “enlargement”, thereby creating an elite one-upmanship on the part of the magician privy to initiated secrets compared to the merely psychical peasantry.

What was Yeats after? Beyond vague and esoteric hints intelligible only to a handful of his “fellow students” we just do not know. He was sworn to secrecy, hobbled by the threat of supernatural retaliation. Moreover, Yeats generally and steadfastly refused to explain himself, on principle, ever. This, too, is a form of counter-discourse, and a reinforcement of his own Irishness, as “It is just that explaining which makes many English books empty” (Yeats, *The Letters* 905).

Notes

¹ All references to Yeats's poetry are cited by line number according to the conventions of the Collected Works series, Volume 1 (1997).

² In 1937 the Irish Folklore Commission created a pamphlet entitled *Irish Folklore and Tradition* that was distributed to teachers in some 5,000 primary schools across the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State (with assistance from the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation). During the eighteen-month course of the “Schools’ Folklore Scheme”, approximately 100,000 schoolchildren were encouraged to collect the folklore of their home districts and document it in copy-books. Suggested topics included local history and monuments, folktales and legends, riddles and proverbs, songs, customs and beliefs, games and pastimes, and traditional work practices and crafts as related by parents, grandparents, and older members of their communities. More than 500,000 manuscript pages, now known as the Schools’ Manuscript Collection, were thereby accumulated and are currently housed in the collections of University College Dublin. To date, only about a third of the material has been made available in digital form. However, a selection of the essays produced in the various schools in and around Kilmacrow, County Kilkenny, is published in Jimmie Cooke’s *Kilmacow Folklore and Kilmacow Folklore 2*. Other publications include Ríonach úí Ógáin and Tom Sherlock’s *The Otherworld: Music and Song from Irish Tradition*.

³ See Londrville.

⁴ For a comparative example, cf. Aleister Crowley’s account of working with his wife Rose Edith Kelly during the “Cairo Working” of 1904 that utilized techniques similar to those employed by the Yeateses during the Vision sessions. However, Crowley first attempted to guarantee the authority of his communicator by administering a series of questions dealing with Golden Dawn symbolism that was unknown to his wife. Crowley calculated that the mathematical odds that an uninformed person could answer even half of his queries correctly were greater than 21,000,000 to 1 against. An abbreviated account can be found in Crowley *et al.* 408-410.

⁵ However, King cites no authority whatsoever for this claim, and presents the material slightly differently in *Modern Ritual Magic*, where the link to the O.T.O. is strictly through Rudolf Steiner. I note that, once they emigrated to New Zealand in 1916, the Felkins would have been working with Frank Bennett (who was chartered to run the first O.T.O. Lodge in Australia – the “Sydney Rosicrucian Lodge” – in November 1915), yet there seems to be no mention of them in a recent biography of Bennett, nor in what is available of his diaries. Neither can the contention be confirmed from surviving O.T.O. archives. See Keith Richmond’s *Progradior and the Beast: Frank Bennett & Aleister Crowley and The Magical Record of Frater Progradior & Other Writings* by Frank Bennett. Beyond doubt, however, Crowley’s copy of *The Goetia* (a medieval manual for summoning demons now in the Warburg Institute) does contain some very suggestive marginalia regarding the doings of Yeats and a certain Irish seer.

⁶ For the catalog, see Harper 290-305.

⁷ Although even in those publications that Regardie explicitly put forth as “Golden Dawn”, it is often difficult to discern where actual Order teachings leave off and Regardie himself begins. Cf. “Esotericism and Escape” in Mann *et al.* 312-313.

⁸ See Ayton. With typical possessive pomposity, Yeats spoke of Ayton as “my alchemist” in a 20 January, 1902 letter to Lady Gregory – despite the fact that Ayton had split from the Golden Dawn faction to which Yeats had allied himself after 1900, allying instead with A.E. Waite’s Christianized “Holy Order of the Golden Dawn”. Cf.

“Esotericism and Escape” in Mann et al. Yeats also noted that if the rabbits on which Ayton was testing his current batch of the elixir survived, “we are all to drink a noggin full” (Yeats, *The Letters* 365).

⁹ Indeed, many of Yeats’s peasant characters seem of a type and are subject to a narrative blending of characteristics – with the single exception of the County Mayo informant for “Happy and Unhappy Theologians” who stands out vividly from the rest: visionary, devoutly Catholic, a knower of obscure bits of lore reminiscent of the druidical riddles Graves describes in *The White Goddess*, respectful of the sídhe but unafraid – and likewise powerful and uncowed by demons and other “bad thing[s]”, for she knows the words by which they are ‘put down’ and can send them “through the universe like a flash of fire” (Yeats, *Mythologies* 28-29).

¹⁰ Likewise, the two halves of human beings in “Plato’s parable” in “Among School Children”, and “the two halves of the soul” that Yeats references in relation to Michael Robartes in “A People’s Theatre” (Yeats, *Explorations* 259).

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