

Nicoleta Stanca *

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY IN W.B. YEATS'S WRITINGS

Keywords: W.B. Yeats; spirituality; religion; the occult; symbolism; Irishness

Abstract: Yeats's works appear to be dominated by a constant pursuit of the collective sacred knowledge that must have been passed down from generations and which is often revealed in the tension between the material reality and the spiritual world. Drawing on and challenging at the same time the Christian tradition of his country, but also Neo-Platonism, Hinduism and the occult (Theosophy, The Order of the Golden Dawn, spiritualism and folklore), Yeats placed spirituality at the center of his life and writings. Visions of an Irish occult secret order, of an *Anima Mundi* that stores everything that has been humanly thought, the belief in reincarnation and a cyclical theory of time, symbolism and the power of evocation and invocation of language, all these aspects offered Yeats a life-long belief that he was on the edge of a revelation. In his desire to gain access to a world religion, to have a revelation of a universal pattern or of the Unitary Being and to liberate the Irish consciousness, Yeats harmonized all these religious, philosophical, supernatural, folk and literary traditions.

This article "Alternative Spirituality in W.B. Yeats's Writings" has been thought as my Romanian contribution to *Yeats2015*, a year long programme of cultural and artistic events planned to celebrate, in Ireland, the 150th anniversary of the great Irish poet's birth. The celebrations, including Yeats Day (June 13th), feature exhibitions, performances, festivals and events across all the art forms throughout the island of Ireland and worldwide, all honouring the renowned poet and playwright credited as having given expression to the spirit of a whole nation.

Yeats's spirituality finds its roots in his belief in a collective sacred knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, this *Anima Mundi* that stores everything that has been humanly thought. Yeats also considered that there is a supernatural side of the world not addressed by the Christian tradition. Thus, Yeats he his own religious system; he believed in reincarnation, in a cyclical theory of time, in the power of evocation and invocation of language, which has the force to reveal the meanings of the multiple-faced symbols in *Anima Mundi*, in a communication with the world of the dead through séances and automatic writings sessions. The essay *A Vision* represents an attempt to structure Yeats's spiritual and esoteric beliefs, as the writer has always imagined himself as being on the edge of a revelation of the secret of life and death, a revelation that was going to come. This is how Yeats describes his beliefs in an essay titled "Magic" (1901):

* "Ovidius" University, Constanța, Romania.

I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are: 1) that the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy; 2) that the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself; 3) that this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (qtd. in Graf 38)

*

Yeats grew up in an Ireland in which scientific humanism undermined Christianity understood in the traditional way, as in the Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church, and he replaced it with a new religion. Yeats was dissatisfied with the religious institutions in Ireland. In spite of his Protestant background and his quest for a cultural collective identity embodied by the Protestant Irish Revival, Yeats labeled Irish Protestantism as “materialistic and abstract” (in Arkins 31), as it seemed to him membership was more social than religious. Irish Catholicism, developed to a greater extent after the Great Famine, appeared as equally difficult to accept: “anti-intellectual, hostile to art, and obsessed with sexual morality” (Yeats qtd. in Arkins 31); the Catholic reactions against his play *Countess Cathleen* and other plays performed at the Abbey Theatre alienated Yeats from organized Catholicism.

Regarding faith and the fundamental belief in Christ’s Resurrection, Yeats shows an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, he considers that Christ’s sacrifice was not Love itself but pity “for the common lot, man’s death, seeing that he raised Lazarus, sickness, seeing that he healed many, sin, seeing that He died” (Yeats qtd. in Arkins 32). On the other hand, Yeats’s play *The Resurrection* seems to accept the miracle of Christ’s resurrection, or at least, add one more example to the writer’s explanations of man’s heart feeding on miracles and visions. According to Harold Bloom, “In some sense that Yeats would not altogether acknowledge, the play hesitates upon the threshold of becoming Christian drama” (qtd. in Armstrong and Topping 68). The play has been interpreted as springing from the desire to re-imagine history, reframing events from a different perspective. In the play, published in 1931 in a revised form of the initial one that appeared in 1927, the Greek (an Egyptian in 1927) does not believe that Christ is a real man; the Hebrew does not believe that He is God; the Syrian, in a very tolerant manner, accepts Christ’s resurrection and the fusion between the human and the divine: “What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order?” (Yeats qtd. in Arkins 32). Thus, the ideas in the play testify of Yeats’s representation of Christianity as spiritual enlightenment, without aligning himself to any religious institution. The climax of the play depicts the Greek screaming violently after he has passed his hands over Christ’s body, the author’s focus being on the violence accompanying epiphanic moments of historical change.

With regards to Christian influences on Yeats, one may also consider the numberless Dantean references. One theme to support this view is the poet-lover praising the angel-woman (Dante’s unrequited love for Beatrice and Yeats’s for Maud Gonne), a revisitation of a tradition established through the cult of Virgin Mary, the virgin martyrs and

love poetry. With Dante, the woman is pictured like an angel under the influence of the tradition inaugurated by the troubadours and as an expression of repressed physical desire, turned into mystical experience. Dante's angel-woman represents the path to salvation and shows him the way to God. *Vita Nuova* still contemplates Beatrice as the object of passion in the first half of the work, but *Divina Comedia* shows the ideal angel-woman as spiritualized beauty, revisited by the Pre-Raphaelites and then, through them, by Yeats.

The rose, as a traditional symbol of spiritual love and supreme beauty, which gives Yeats's volume title *The Rose* (1891-92), may have been inspired by Dante in several ways. Dante uses the symbol of the white rose with a yellow center to stand for heaven: the white rose of the Empyrean where the happy ones reside, as do love, beauty, his beloved Beatrice and the sacredness of Virgin Mary. Dante sees in Paradise how the blessed form a giant rose with Mary the Queen of Heaven in the centre. Higher there is the Trinity, of which one "only retains the memory of three Circles; the flower is divided down the middle and across, with horizontally on one side the male saints, and the female on the other; and below them the souls of beatified children" (de Vries 392).

With Yeats, the rose is love, beauty, Maud Gonne, Ireland, (Catholic) religion, a Rosicrucian symbol – the flower growing on the Tree of Life in circles, wheels embodying the way to the attainment of the *daimon*. Yeats also uses an example in folklore to explain the symbolism of the rose: the flower is associated with a beautiful woman who is situated near the top of a tree and she confers a rose on the man climbing the ladder winding through the tree. The ladder corresponds to the twenty-two paths of the Tree of Life that the member of the Order of the Golden Dawn has to climb through initiation, study and meditation. The purpose of the man is to enter the upper region of the Tree. The circling movement is to be found in Yeats's symbol of the gyre, the stairs of his Tower and Dante's *Divine Comedy*; it is the path of the rose of Eternity to be gained through renunciation on the Cross of time. The four thorns of the rose's stem may symbolize the four Cabalistic worlds through which the initiate has to ascend to reach the divine, the "Condition of Fire" (in Graf 86). In "The Rose of the World", Maud becomes Helen of Troy, half-mortal, half-goddess, the rose acquiring a powerful significance through its beauty, which is the primary characteristic of God and through its double nature, mortal and immortal.

*

The fact that Yeats was drawn to Christianity is also proved by the mystery-religions of the Hellenistic and Roman eras, particularly those of a god suffering, dying and being reborn, such as the Greek Dionysus and the Syrian Adonis. The cult of Dionysus regularly appears in many of Yeats's texts; inspired by the writings of Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy*), Walter Pater (*Greek Studies*) and James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), Yeats focused on the god whose inspiration comes from madness, so the Irish poet's wise men are the fools, often used for to symbolize the Mask.

In *The Resurrection*, Yeats parallels Christ's resurrection to that of Dionysus. The latter symbolized madness and irrationality, being described in the play through the rite practiced in midwinter during a biannual festival at Delphi by the Bacchanals dancing,

tearing pieces of an animal and eating its raw flesh. The similarities between Christianity and the cult of Dionysus occupy a central position in Yeats's thinking: both Jesus and Dionysus are immortal gods, yet they die, are resurrected and they ascend to heaven next to God/Zeus. At their birth, a star rose: the star leading the Magi and the star of goddess Astrea, which became the constellation of Virgo. The death and rise of both happens before the full moon in March; the Dionysian festival took place in March in Athens and on the third day there was a celebration in which the dead were imagined as walking and mingling with the living; in the Antiquity, the first full moon was thought to bring the victory over the powers of darkness. The message of both features liberation on condition the worshipper renounced themselves: for Christianity by becoming one with God and for Dionysus, by letting one being lifted out of oneself, as E.R. Dodds explains: "ecstasies – which . . . could mean anything from 'taking you out of yourself' to a profound alteration of personality" (Muller 212).

Yeats's interest in the mystery-religions was also expressed through his desire to initiate a cult on the island on Lough Key, Co. Roscommon. The centre of the Order was to be occupied by Connla's well, the sacred fountain of ancient Ireland and Irish heroes and gods were to be invoked. In spite of Yeats's wish and struggle to initiate the practices of this Celtic Order of Mysteries, it never functioned, probably because of the long institutionalised Christian tradition in Ireland.

*

Yeats was deeply involved in the study of the occult (Theosophy, the Order of the Golden Dawn, spiritualism and folklore). With the help of magic, Yeats hoped to find a pattern that brings together the Unity of Being, the Unity of Image (the Mask) and the Unity of Culture in a coherent cosmos.

Irish folklore is a key element in Yeats's occult experiences: "The ghosts and goblins do still live and rule in the imagination of innumerable Irish men and women, and not merely in remote places, but close even to big cities" (Yeats qtd. in Arkins 45). For Yeats, "Fairy belief is exactly the same thing as English and American spiritism except that fairy belief is very much more charming" (in Arkins 45). In connection to Irish folklore, Yeats favoured the idea of reincarnation seeing Ireland as a holy land that preserves spirits and houses them in places like groves and woods, making them accessible through folk belief and art. This ties in with the idea of metamorphosis of the microcosm (man in life and death) and the macrocosm (Ireland and the world) - involved in Celtic pagan myths and Christianity. "Interest in Celtic myths, pagan and Christian, is only one of the major sources of metamorphosis in his poems. Life for him involved personal and objective metamorphosis". This idea of mutation, transformation and change ties him to James Joyce as they "both struggled always to transcend the finite, to become godlike – one of the attributes being a command over form" (Bernetta Quin qtd. in Stanca 53).

The late 19th century witnesses a flourishing of occult societies, challenging 18th century rationalism and 19th century materialism. Theosophy, a new movement emerging in Europe contained a synthesis of science, religion and philosophy, while claiming to oppose all three. These movements were extremely successful because they attacked

atheism but supported anticlericalism; they went against science but used scientific language and all in all, they restored hope in a spiritual evolution.

In 1885, Yeats became the president the Dublin Hermetic Society, but after one year only, he left it because of the emphasis on ethics rather than on metaphysics. In the meantime, the Irish writer had discovered his fascination with Hinduism, Vedantic asceticism and the doctrine of reincarnation in Indian thought. In London, in 1887, Yeats called on Madame Blavatsky, founder of The London Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society and a controversial figure, labelled as a fraud, yet impressive at that time for the young writer, who joined the lodge in spite of the scandals surrounding her activity and the doubts regarding her occult powers.

In 1890, at the invitation of MacGregor Mathers, translator of *The Cabbala Unveiled*, Yeats joined the Order of the Golden Dawn and remained a member until 1922; the organization was encouraging its members “to practice magic and psychic experiments” (Untereker 20). The order was established by three Freemasons: Mathers, Westcott and Woodman, members of the Rosicrucian society in England, used to a complicated system of grades and divisions, which they imposed to the Golden Dawn as well. Yeats was raised to the second Order in 1893 in a rite in which he was tied to a Cross of Suffering and after the experience, he claimed he saw a gold cross and a red rose. Being centred more on the European tradition than on the Eastern wisdom, the ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn included a mixture of elements: Rosicrucianism, Christian, Egyptian, Jewish, Masonic and the Tarot Cards. The rich traditions focusing on an anti-materialist dimension of life, on the Cabbala and on an exegesis of the Bible describing the universe in Neoplatonic terms as a series of emanations from an ineffable source, were praised by Yeats and he also appreciated the steps within the elaborate ritual of initiation involving a movement from darkness to light and spiritual knowledge. “Occult progress is achieved through study and practice, through self-purification and isolation” (Ellman 90).

The central motif of the Order was the death and resurrection of the adept; in the earlier grades, the example presented to the candidate was a Rosicrucian one: Christian Rosenkreutz, fourteenth century, whose body did not rot in tomb after his death. In the later stages, the example was that of Christ: “In that year he attained the Inner Order of the Golden Dawn and in the initiation of the Path of the Portal, he lay down in the tomb, died a symbolic death, and rose reborn in spirit, Christified” (Ellman 99). Yeats compared the rebirth of the individual in this process to an alchemical transmutation of base metal into gold. Yeats laboured towards achieving this transformation using his Order name *Demon Est Deus Inversus*; in Latin *daemon* means spirit/genie, not devil (in Latin *diabolus*), this spirit giving intuition and inspiration to the poet. The order name proves the commitment of the poet to ceremonial magic and the union with the *daemon* to attain inspiration and transformation.

Between 1906 and 1909, Yeats continued studying with the Golden Dawn, pushed by his life-long belief in the human mind to control reality. From 1909 to 1910, he went through a phase of self-criticism and the visions within the Order lost their power on him; they were the same as the supernatural beings of the folk stories at the stage when Yeats realized there was not going to be any Irish mystical order. Consequently, since

1911, another phase of Yeats's spiritual quest begins: spiritualism. In 1911, he met a remarkable American medium during a lecture tour in the US, so he decided to follow this path; Yeats was fascinated by the atmosphere full of fright, suspense and secrecy. The role of the spirits was not to supply him with what he could not find in the Irish mystical order or in the Golden Dawn: "evidence for the existence of another world interlinked at points but identical with man's. They must prove that the soul survives the body's death" (Ellman 197). Yeats did research for two years (1912-1914) and concluded that he had evidence for living minds acting as mediums for the dead and that the spirits preserved their identities.

While attending séances, Yeats connected to the spirit of an Italian geographer and traveller, Leo Africanus, about whom he also read that he was a poet among the Moors. The experience offered Yeats a key to his quest as Leo Africanus was the Irish poet's opposite as a personality. Also, it proved to Yeats that the tension was not of the self with the mask, which was a conscious product of the mind, but of the self with a daimon, which had a personality of its own, so it all appeared as a confrontation between this world and the next. Yeats will try to give an answer to the question whether Leo Africanus was a ghost, an image, a creation of the living in his "*Ego Dominus Tuus*", through the dialogue between *Hic* and *Ille*. In the text, the term anti-self is used, but the dilemma remains, as Yeats begins by evoking Dante and Keats's spirits as Christ's creation and ends with a supernatural explanation. The séances he attended regularly and the automatic writings of his wife's in the 1900s offered Yeats this possibility to reinforce his doctrine of the Mask/Daimon/anti-self, to whom the poet had access through this contact with the spirits of the dead. Ultimately, the experiences promised to bring to the surface all the possibilities of the being and to teach him control over himself and other and to become a hero (Ellman 66).

*

Yeats's major views of the occult are captured in the essay *A Vision*, a scaffolding to many of his poetic and dramatic works: "the final book represents Yeats's effort to construct a metaphor for the correlation of all things" (Untereker 24). His theory relies basically on two diagrams – the Gyres and the Great Wheel; both represented the basic personalities, phases of life and phases of each of world's historical ages. Yeats's *A Vision* emerged as a result of his notebooks filled with notes of automatic writing, in an effort to create a pattern of reality to correlate all things. The idea behind it is that the writer considered that the world of the matter would make sense to him if he discovered the world of the spirit. It is imagined as a combination of principles of esoteric systems, the philosophy of history and human personality; it also contains the theory of the mask by which a man is constantly striving to become his anti-self.

Yeats's cosmogonical system is made of three parts: a picture of history, an account of human psychology, an account of the life of the soul after death. Civilizations run, according to Yeats, through the twelve Platonic cycles of 2000 odd years; the first started with the conception of Helen of Troy by Leda and the second with the annunciation to the Virgin; each civilization has periods of birth, growth, maturity and

decline. The progress of a civilization to its zenith is represented as a conical figure (a gyre); the two civilizations are represented as two interlocking cones in constant movement. This is also the pattern of a man's life; it is a structure meant to measure personality, nation and civilization, "a convenient diagrammatic structure to measure personality, the temper of the times, or almost anything else" (Untereker 25). Yeats claims to have found the concept with the help of his guides; in poetry, the term gyres is used, but in his notebooks he uses "funnel" to refer to the same entity. In Cabbalistic thinking, the whirling movement of this vortex figure occurs at the transmutation of matter from the immaterial first cause into the physical world.

History, according to Yeats, is composed of these two cones rotating in opposite directions, the apex of each at the centre of the other's widest arc. Every moment in time moves through these opposing spirals. When one cone is widening, the other, whirling in the opposite, narrows. The times of maximum historical turbulence are those when the gyres reverse their motions. These great historical reversals occur every 2000 years, at those moments when the previously expanding cone begins to contract and the previously contracting one to expand. According to Yeats's philosophy, progress contains the seeds of regress and the other way round and the same pattern is valid for the pair good – evil, as illustrated by poems such "The Gyres" and "The Second Coming" (Stanca 60-62).

The same essay, together with other works, such as "Ego Dominus Tuus" and "The Phases of the Moon" shed light on the other diagram used by Yeats intensely, that of the phases of the moon. The pattern of the Great Wheel offers explanations for the twenty-eight phases of any single life, the twenty-eight incarnations one must get through and the twenty-eight phases of world's history. In "The Phases of the Moon", Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes make their visit to Yeats's tower under the moon; Robartes is Yeats's voice explaining his philosophy on the changes in the soul going through difference stages of existence in direct relation to the phases of the moon, which establishes the degree of subjectivity or objectivity; (Drake 46, Ellman 225-226) the phases are shown symbolically on the gyres. At the time of the Renaissance, subjectivity was considered to be at its fullest expansion and its personalities were realizing themselves to the most (Ellman 229). When the body is in darkness, the soul is in light and vice-versa; in phases 1 and 15, in complete darkness or light, life does not exist; from phases 2 to 12 man's soul goes through various incarnations; phases 13 and 14 show beautiful men and women anticipating phases 15, when the cycle reverses, the body becoming more important again (Ellman 240-243).

While in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, the soul is divided in the Self and the Anti-Self, in *A Vision* it is divided in four faculties: the Will (the Ego), the Mask (or the Anti-Self, which can be True or False), the Creative Mind (the Intellect) and the Body of Fate (the external force acting from the exterior) (Ellman 229). The human mind works by reconciling the four faculties. In the section "Anima Homis" in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats asserts that in order to find perfection in creation, the artist has to identify with the soul of the world, *Anima Mundi*. How can he do that? By looking inwardly, through introspection and Yeats resorts to the mask, which he used earlier under the name of the "Immortal Mood" (Graf 70) but re-defined in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* as magical, as the

daimon called down by the self. Yeats explains his *daimon*'s place on the Tree of Life among the perfect spirits. The *daimon* is actually the soul transformed; the soul relives its passion until it forgets it; the soul has to exhaust "the passionate necessity" to find perfection in Dante's "Condition of Fire", the place of souls that do not need to reincarnate. Yeats gives a description of the "Condition of the Fire" in Book xxi "Anima Hominis": there is state in which the mind approaches the "Condition of the Fire": "I enter upon it the moment I cease to hate" (qtd. in Graf 145). The conditions that allow the emergence of the anti-self and the meeting with the *daimon* take the shape of "some fine landscape" (Yeats qtd. in Graf 103) and the aim of the poet's quest was to make men find the innermost self and happiness, that state of bliss once gone through the purifying fire.

*

"Ireland is, I suppose, more religious than any other European country, and perhaps that is the reason why I, who have been born and bred there, can hardly write at all unless I write about religious ideas" (qtd. in Arkins 47). Yeats shows a constant preoccupation with religion and spirituality in a complex and syncretic manner, different from a mere attachment to the religion of his family, ancestors or countrymen. "Yeats's spiritual nature is not at all one that deals in piety, faith or good works, but is systematic knowledge, structured ritual and organized power" (Brown qtd. in Arkins 47). Yeats's autobiography, letters, essays, poems and plays, philosophical writings and cosmology, interlinked in a gossamer of echoing images represent "a last act of defense against the chaos of the world" (Yeats qtd. in Untereker 43).

Works Cited

- Arkins, Brian. *Reimagining Ireland*. Vol. 19: The Thought of W.B. Yeats. Bruxelles: Bel, Peter Lang AG, 2010. 29-47. Print.
- Armstrong, Charles, and Erik Tønning. *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Print.
- Dante, Alighieri. *Vita Nuova*. Web. 3 Aug 2012.
<<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/TheNewLifeIV.htm>>.
- . *The Divine Comedy, Complete. The Vision of Paradise, Purgatory and Hell*. Trad., Rev. H. F. CARY. June 11 2009. Web. 28 July 2012. <www.gutenberg.org>.
- de Vries, Ad. *Dictionary of Symbols*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company. 2nd Ed., 1976. Print.
- Drake, Nicholas. *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Ellman, Richard. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. New York: Norton, 1948. Print.
- Graf, Susan Johnston. *W.B. Yeats – Twentieth-Century Magus*. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 2000. Print.
- Muller, Elizabeth. "The Cult of Dionysus in the Works of W.B. Yeats." *Re-Embroidering the Robe: Faith, Myth and Literary Creation since 1850*. Ed. Suzanne Bray, Adrienne E. Gavin and Peter Merchant. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008. 210-227. Print.

- Stanca, Nicoleta. *The Harp and the Pen: Tradition and Novelty in Modern Irish Writing*. 2nd Ed. Bucharest: Editura Universitara, 2014. Print.
- Untereker, John. *A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1959. Print.
- Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Poems*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000. Print.
- . *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. New York, Macmillan, 1918. Print.
- . *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*. Ed. Edward Larrissy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.