Yeats Studies Series
GENERAL EDITORS
Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds

This series is devoted to the critical assessment and publication of unpublished works of W. B. Yeats and the Yeats family: unpublished poems, plays, and prose works; drafts of poems, plays, prose works, diaries, memoirs, letters, and other manuscript materials that deepen our understanding of the creative process and the finished work.

Yeats and *The Theatre*, edited by Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds
Yeats and *The Occult*, edited by George Mills Harper

In preparation

The Speckled Bird by William Butler Yeats,
edited by William H. O'Donnell

Unpublished Memoir of John Butler Yeats,
edited by William M. Murphy

Yeats and *The Irish Tradition*,
edited by Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds

Yeats and The Occult

Engraving from Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata*, 1677. As far as can be read, the difficult Latin inscriptions on parts of the picture are: Metaphysicagentibus (sky), Mare Concupiscentia (sea), lucet (candle), Intrum male (cave mouth), Iterat (left foot), Domat (right foot), and the symbols near the cave mouth read $\psi\psi\zeta\omicron\eta\delta$.

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Yeats and The Occult

EDITED BY
George Mills Harper

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Source: British Library Board.

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PLATE 2: Photograph of the bleeding oleograph. *Source*: Henri Birven, *Abbé Vachère: Ein Thaumaturg Unserer Zeit* (Brandenburg, 1928).

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Note to the Reader

The following abbreviations have been used throughout the volume:

- CP *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1967).
- CPL *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
- VP *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Allt and R. K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1957).
- VPL *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, edited by R. K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1965).
- M *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959).
- E *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962).
- E&I *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961).
- A *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955).
- V *A Vision* (1937) (London: Macmillan, 1962).

Bracketed page references are to these editions.

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G.M.H.

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Introduction

This volume of the *Yeats Studies Series* is devoted to the study of Yeats and the occult. The time has passed when it was necessary, in order to preserve intellectual respectability, to express either astonishment or dismay at the nature of Yeats's intellectual pursuits. The "occult" means literally the covered, the hidden, the veiled; and during his life Yeats was concerned with the hidden significance underlying the appearances of the universe and of human life. He was, as he said himself, a religious man, and deprived of a comfortable belief in orthodox Christianity by the lively scepticism of his father, he sought in many quarters and opened up many veins in his quest for the jewel of enlightenment which would make intelligible "the burthen of the mystery . . . Of all this unintelligible world".

In this volume, which makes use of primary materials as well as the insights of modern scholars but still only scratches the surface of the subject, we can trace something of Yeats's spiritual Odyssey. He began by attaching himself to the Theosophical Society and then to the rituals and investigations of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded by MacGregor Mathers, W. R. Woodman, and William Wynn Westcott in 1888. Yeats was initiated into the Golden Dawn in March 1890, and remained a member of the Order, and its successor, the Stella Matutina, for thirty-two years, from the age of twenty-four to fifty-six. He hoped, by means of the techniques transmitted in such bodies, to become an Adept, a Mage,

capable of supernatural experiences and of creating a channel of supernatural power. In this phase Yeats came to see the world as a symbol, and he learned from Mathers the practical use of symbols to induce visions. He uses age-old metaphors to describe his activities: he must "tread this path, open this gate, seek this light". MacGregor Mathers, it is clear, made an indelible impression on Yeats, and he appears as Maclagan in *The Speckled Bird* and as the "fiction", or "mask", or "persona" of Michael Robartes, with far-reaching implications for Yeats's poetry and prose.

Yeats had been familiar, of course, with the ghost and fairy lore of the Irish countryside from his boyhood days in Sligo, and later, with Lady Gregory, he turned his attention more seriously to this tradition, finding in Irish folk stories of the fairies, the race of "good people", apparitions, and mysterious manifestations of all kinds, further evidence of the existence of an invisible world, of the continuance of life after death, and of the immortality of the soul. What has not yet been pointed out is the important part which certain doctrines of the Catholic Church played in this general belief of the Irish people in ghosts and visions. In the Ireland of Yeats's time, the doctrines of the existence of Purgatory and of the "communion of souls" were, of course, firmly held. The poor souls in Purgatory might appear, it was believed among the people, to ask the help of the living; and the "communion of souls" meant that the living and the dead, as long as they were in a state of grace, might help one another by prayer. The power of prayer was seen as able to influence the bestowal of God's grace; Heaven might be taken by assault from earth. The world of the country people, therefore, was open to the influx of the supernatural from two sides: that of their Christian religion, and that of the ancient fairy faith which they shared with other branches of the Celtic race. What Chesterton called the "small arrogant oligarchy" of the living fell into perspective against this continual pressure of the swarming dead, out of sight, but not out of mind.

Yeats, however, was never content with belief in another world: he had always wanted access to it. After the death of Synge, he turned once again to techniques through which this access might be gained, this time to the techniques of spiritualism, to the use of mediums, and of automatic writing. We can see from the hitherto unpublished essay, "Preliminary Investigation of the Script of ER", how seriously, though at the same time how cautiously, he ap-

proached the phenomena of spiritualism, and how he sought help in the world beyond for the problems of this life. His experience with automatic writing culminated after his marriage in 1917, and resulted in the writing, with his wife as medium, of *A Vision*: a triumphant vindication of his belief in the spirit world.

Yeats had always been interested in writers whose minds were attuned to the Neo-platonic tradition. In his early twenties he also studied Swedenborg and Boehme, and found in them, as well as in other occult sources, a key to the work of William Blake. From these writers he was led, naturally enough, to Plato and his followers, especially Plotinus, who had incorporated in their philosophical expositions an age-old view of the universe. In the Platonic tradition, as Jung points out, individual human life is seen as the ephemeral flower blooming from the perennial rhizome, in death returning to the great ocean of being, withering and descending into the rhizome, to bloom again in another spring, in another incarnation. The universe is not dead matter, but a living creature. Mankind is not complete, the initiator of action, but merely the foam upon the deep, merely the momentary blossom of some spiritual impulse. Through him the invisible moods of the universe work their will; the great unchanging myths are constantly being enacted and re-enacted. As Henry Vaughan puts it, the soul "... though here born yet is acquainted/Elsewhere". Or as Yeats wrote:

From our birthday, until we die,
Is but the winking of an eye.

It is no small part of the measure of Yeats's genius that he persisted, against the intellectual current of his day, in exploration and experiment within a great tradition that, for three centuries, had had only a subterranean life.

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