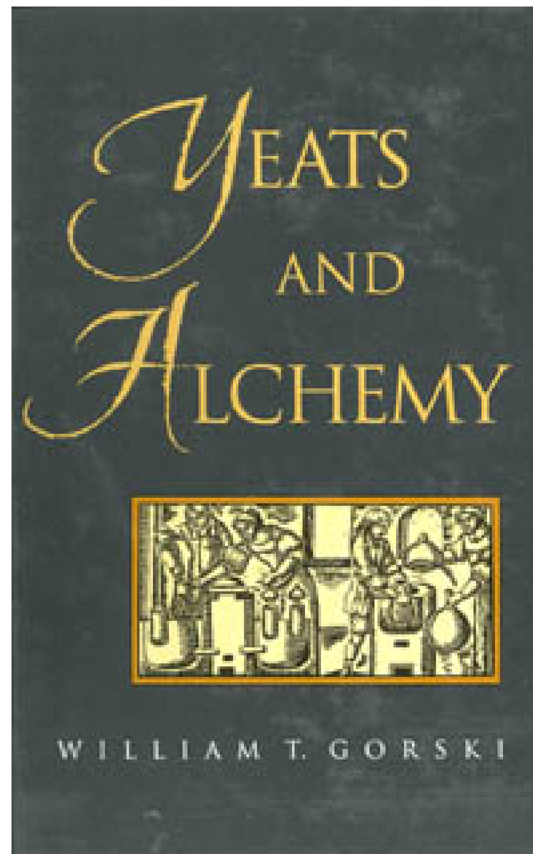

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Yeats And Alchemy

WILLIAM T. GORSKI

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For my parents,
Robert and Elizabeth Gorski

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Preface

A century ago, in 1896, Yeats's occult narrative "Rosa Alchemica" appeared in the short-lived Decadent journal *The Savoy*. This story uses alchemy as its master trope to dramatize Yeats's Symbolist desire "for a world made wholly of essences." This phrase marks out the text's concern as belonging to the fin de siècle, namely, signaling transcendence and apocalypse: an erasure of the body, time, and history. It is possible to read Yeats's twentieth-century work as a continual rewriting of the body, time, and historythat is, after the hoped for, yet dreaded, apocalypse failed to materialize. To examine the shifting attitudes Yeats displayed toward alchemy throughout his career reveals the dialectical struggle basic to the shaping of Western metaphysics: the struggle of spirit and matter. Alchemy, and its project to distill the spiritual part of nature, can be seen as the master narrative that plots this dialectical struggle. Yeats found in alchemy a pliable discourse that could represent the range of relationships between spirit and matter, whether separated or merged, harmonious or divisive. He also saw in alchemy a multifaceted metaphor for transformation, as it applied to both art and the human psyche. Alchemy was the poetic precursor to modern chemistry, a compensatory undercurrent to Christianity, an archetypal dream, and the science of spiritual transformation.

Although Yeats's avowedly alchemical pieces appeared in the 1890s, it was actually Jung's work of the 1940s and '50s that drew modern attention to the ancient "art." And it is to Jung's three volumes*Psychology and Alchemy, Alchemical Studies*, and *Mysterium Coniunctionis*to which we can credit

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alchemy's current popularity. However, Yeats's alchemy was indeed precursive to Jung's, not only in time but in vision. As my third chapter demonstrates through a close reading of "Rosa Alchemica," Yeats's adaptation of alchemy prefigured the spiritual psychology that Jung had developed with the support of medieval and Renaissance alchemical manuscripts.

Chapter 1 touches upon the many concerns to which alchemy gives rise in Yeats's writing. For the student of Yeats who is not familiar with the terms of alchemy, I have provided a brief historical overview of the tradition to show how Yeats borrowed from it. I also discuss Yeats's negative attitudes towards physical alchemy to throw into high relief his specific brand of spiritual alchemy. Further, I demonstrate how Yeats construed alchemy's literary precedence by aligning himself with Blake and the fin de siècle Symbolist movement. This chapter also addresses Yeats's conflict between the rival claimants of two kinds of alchemistsi.e., the artist and the adept.

One might expect of Yeats, whose goal was "to hammer [his] thoughts into unity," that his various generic modes of expression (namely: poetry, essay, and fiction) would complement each other like panels in a medieval triptych. One might expect that, although discreet and self-contained within its own framework, each separate image would be made more meaningful when viewed within the context of its neighboring imagesthat, through three separate images, one story was being told, one message transmitted. However, in the story of Yeats and alchemy, no such unity is apparent.

In *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann concludes, "[Yeats] keeps asking the same questions over and over until they have become profound: what is truth? what is reality? what is man? His answers are symbolic, but fully in harmony with one another, for they spring from a rich, unified

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consciousness." Though Ellmann's book was published a long time ago (in 1948), it is still difficult not to arrive at similar conclusions about Yeats. But in the postmodern era, the questions that Ellmann credits to Yeats's insistent posingwhat is truth, reality, man?call forth responses that challenge the structuralist and essentialist assumptions hidden within the questions. And Ellmann's assertion regarding the harmonic answers issuing from a unified consciousness is easily deconstructed by the poet's own work. Harmonic here is actually a euphemism for contradictory, for even with Yeats's last volume the potential for "mere anarchy" being "loosed" upon his own canon is still imminent.

It is difficult to resist the glamour and grandeur of Yeats, of the vast design he created in order to find a place and purpose for the contradictory, for the culturally discarded value. It is difficult to resist advocating for Yeats's work the claims that Yeats himself advocated. Yet if we refuse to read Yeats within the glaring light of his self-proclaimed agenda, we are more likely to stumble into those spaces of unresolved and unacknowledged conflict. I find these spaces located where Yeats's variant generic expressions interface. Where we might expect to find continuity and overlap, we instead find rough borders, rhetorical assertion colliding with poetic expression. Thus, regarding his early (pre-1900) alchemical interests, Yeats's essays make declamatory, unequivocal claims about his philosophical positions. Yet, in concurrently written poems, Yeats elevates and gives voice to the psychological ramifications that his prose assertions necessarily overlooked. On the surface, this generic disparity appears to be the old conflict between the head and heart, between philosopher and poet.

This study takes Yeats's canonical complexityor the

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struggle between modes of discourseas its strategy, shuttling back and forth between rhetorical and poetic expression, measuring to what extent these two forms square with one another.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with Yeats's pre-1900 work and address the conflict he exhibited between his avowed summum bonum and its actual attainment. Chapter 2, "The Poem as Hermetic Laboratory," focuses on Yeats's early poetry, which intimates his ideals as well as his misgivings concerning alchemical goals. Here I look at how Yeats interpreted the alchemical doctrine in terms that led him to fear the spiritual transcendence he so eagerly stalked. The crucial threat of disembodiment is only foreshadowed in the early poems. Chapter 3, "Avoidance and the Void," studies three of Yeats's fin de siècle short stories as they reveal, explicitly, the outlines of Yeats's alchemical philosophy and starkly dramatize his psychological responses to this philosophy. "Rosa Alchemica" receives the bulk of attention; I believe this story has been largely ignored but that it contains the seeds of what later followed in *A Vision*.

Chapter 4, "Mystical Marriage," discusses the alchemical theme of spiritual union that greatly interested Yeats. The chapter opens with an examination of previously unpublished biographical materials about Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne. This material is pivotal, as it reveals Yeats's frustration and dissatisfaction with the theme of disembodiment. Then through an examination of later love poems, I illustrate the gradual shift that Yeats's spiritual quest underwent. In alchemical terms, Yeats revises his thinking concerning natural and supernatural worlds, placing new value on what can be achieved in and through the body, rather than through disembodied transcendence.

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Chapter 5 considers the late poetry and essay, as well as *A Vision*. This chapter continues and enlarges the argument of chapter 4. That is, the integration of the body into Yeats's alchemy becomes a microcosmic symbol for the more encompassing dialectic of matter and spirit on a grand scale. My argument is that Yeats expanded his alchemical ideal to include the whole of physical creation. As in the second and third chapters, I consider essay and poem, this time showing how philosophical and poetic assertions find greater agreement.

I would like to thank Professors Elizabeth Loizeaux, Richard Cross, Donald Kleine and Jacob Goering for their support and assistance with earlier drafts of this project. The staff members of the Special Collections Division, State University of New York at Stony Brook, were helpful to me in wading through the Yeats Occult Papers. I owe a special thanks to Professor Roy Foster, who kindly granted permission to quote from Yeats's unpublished journals and also provided insightful suggestions.

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List Of Abbreviations

(*Au*) *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1938.

(*TP*) *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Richard J. Finneran. Vol. 1: *The Poems*. New York: Macmillan, 1989.

(*AV*) *A Critical Edition of Yeats's "A Vision."* Edited by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood. London: Macmillan, 1978.

(*E&I*) *Essays and Introductions*. New York: Macmillan, 1961.

(*Expl*) *Explorations*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

(*L*) *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.

(*M*) *Memoirs*. Edited by Denis Donoghue. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

(*Myth*) *Mythologies*. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

(*SB*) *The Speckled Bird*. Edited and annotated by William H. O'Donnell. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.

(*UCP*) *Uncollected Prose*. Collected and edited by John P. Frayne. Vol. 1: *18861986*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

(*VP*) *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1957.

(*VSR*) *The Variorum Edition of "The Secret Rose," Stories by W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould, and Michael J. Sidnell. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

(*LTSM*) *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore, Their Correspondence, 19011937*. Edited by Ursula Bridge. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.

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1

No Mere Chemical Fantasy

I had discovered, early in my researches, that their doctrine was no mere chemical fantasy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements, and to man himself.
Yeats,"Rosa Alchemica"

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The aims of alchemy have been enumerated through its enigmatic history as follows: to transform base metals into gold; to extract the fine from the coarse; to redeem spirit from matter; to unite the opposites; to discover the secret of matter, and hence, the mystery of creation; and, to perfect the human soul. Gerard Dorn, a sixteenth-century alchemist, said: "Transmute yourselves from dead stones into living philosophical stones." According to Dorn, humans, not metals, are the primary subject of alchemy. Compare the above commandment to Yeats's self-imposed imperative: "Myself must I remake." While the metallurgical aspects of alchemy were obvious anachronisms for the modern poet, the nonmaterial concerns of alchemytransforming, refining, uniting, perfectingwere central to Yeats's art, thought, and life. "Myself must I remake" is not just a metaphor for Yeats's tendency to revise his written works long after they had been in print. Rather, this dictate points toward the spiritual alchemy that he termed, in league with the hermetic tradition, the "Great Work," the magnum opus.

Alchemy was but one of the many occult traditions that Yeats studied. His early exposure to the supernatural was crucial for his ontological conviction that, though subject to time and space, humanity is rooted and completed in eternity. While most general critiques of Yeats provide some background for his spiritual and occult interests, their methods are eclectic, reflecting Yeats's broad learning. Other studies focus on specific aspects of hermeticism: George Mills Harper's *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, Virginia Moore's *Unicorn*, Mary Flannery's *Yeats and Magic*, and Kathleen Raine's *Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn*, to name a few. 1 These studies (except for Harper's,

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which is purely informative) argue for the positive nature of these influences on Yeats's writing. Yet other critics have found the occult in Yeats a source of embarrassment (as did Auden and Eliot) or have worked to minimize its importance. Richard Ellmann, referring to "otherworldly systems," writes, "When Yeats seriously contemplates leaving the observable world, he customarily points out what a mistake it would be." 2 Harold Bloom, while abjuring the occult as an end in itself, gives great weight to the gnostic and daimonic traditions as they place Yeats in the canon of Bloom's Romantic visionaries.

This study draws from both camps and strives to demonstrate alchemy's positive and negative appearance in Yeats's vision. Positively, alchemy had more poetic potential than other hermetic artssuch as magic, tarot, cabalism, and astrologyfor portraying the transformation of the human soul, due to its corpus of image and metaphor drawn from the natural world. Negatively, Yeats laid emphasis on the need for spiritual perfection that, in his early thought, entailed transcending physical dimensions into a realm of "essences," creating a dialectical tension between physical and spiritual worlds. Much of this study will focus on the various ways that Yeats sought to mitigate this tension: Yeats's later revisions of the alchemical motif are aimed at bridging the gap between spirit and matter, soul and body, above and below.

In the following brief historical overview of alchemy, we can see what and how Yeats borrowed from the tradition. Throughout this discussion, I refer to Yeats's familiarity with the alchemical texts noted in T. L. Dume and Edward O'Shea's bibliographical studies.3 Roughly, alchemy can be divided into six periods: Ancient, Egyptian-Greek, Gnostic, Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern. Though Yeats's investigations made

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points of contact throughout this three thousand-year development, his learning was less than systematic. Yeats's alchemy is a pastiche, and in many instances his discovery and artistic deployment of alchemy occur in the company of other occult and spiritual traditions.

Ancient alchemy grew out of primitive technology and the myths that explained the genesis of arts and crafts. This rudimentary form of alchemy was allied to Iron Age metallurgy. Mircea Eliade notes that metallurgy began on an industrial scale in Armenia between 1200 and 1000 B.C. 4 Eliade found in Mesopotamian myths the idea that metals were conceived in the earth and grew to maturity in the subterranean womb. Gold was the most "mature" metal, and all other metals were immature, unrefined versions of gold. Gold, therefore, symbolized the highest destiny of the natural world.5 Alchemy was the knowledge that the gods dispensed to smithies to help metals reach perfection. Through mining raw ores and submitting them to the furnace and the anvil, a metalworker expedited the processes of nature and became master of its rhythm. The Greek god Hephaestus, laboring at his forge, was deemed the divine progenitor of this rudimentary science-art. In this incipient stage, then, alchemy provided both practical skills and a myth about creative capacity: *homo faber*. Alchemy elevated human status nearer to the gods.

Yeats uses the motif of smith and metal-craft in his myth about "the holy city of Byzantium." The "worker in gold and silver" (*AV* 279), the "sages standing in God's holy fire" and the "Grecian goldsmiths" (*TP* 19394; *VP* 408), and "the golden smithies of the Emperor" and their "changeless metal" (*TP* 24849; *VP* 498) are players in Yeats's poetic representation of the *homo faber*. Yet, Yeats has replaced the ancient order of 1000 B.C. with a more recent historical era. His emphasis lay in "the

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artifice of eternity" (*TP* 193; *VP* 408), a spiritual development that did not concern the Iron Age maker of weapons and amulets. Eliade makes a further distinction about the worker in gold that helps us understand how Yeats refined the *homo faber*. "Gold is a creation of *homo religiosus*: this metal was valorized for exclusively symbolic and religious reasons." 6 The products of Yeats's metalworkers are never weapons; they are instruments of a constructive philosophy, such as the golden bird perched between eternity and time, materializing sublime intuitions that penetrate the rational edifice of fact and logic.

In Greek-Egyptian alchemy (600 B.C. to A.D. 100), the emphasis shifts from mining practices to a "theory of correspondences" that intertwines man, matter, and cosmos. It could be termed "high alchemy," since its infusion of Greek philosophy and Egyptian spiritual rites promoted the status of its practitioner from creator of metals to creator of souls. Although Yeats first discovered the theory of correspondences in the more modern format of the Theosophical Society, he later renewed his acquaintance with this theory when studying the ancient Greeks. The pre-Socratic philosophers (namely Democritus, Heraclitus, Anaximenes, and Anaximander), theorizing about nature, amplified their field of reflection with such technical terms as time, space, atom, matter, and energy.7 Their probings of the material world were part scientific, part philosophical: they inquired about the invisible structures that underlay visible bodies. Eric Holmyard, in *Makers of Chemistry*, cites Aristotle as the formulator of one of alchemy's chief concepts, the *prima materia* (16). Aristotle's theory in *De caelo* (bks. 3 and 4) regarding the constitution of matter posited that the *prima materia*first or primitive matterhad "only a potential existence until impressed with form" (Holmyard, *Makers*

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of Chemistry, 16). The building blocks of form were the four elements.

Later, during the time of Alexander, Greek thought was infused with Mesopotamian world-models. The Babylonian concept of correspondences took root in the Greek mind, wherein all beingsfrom star to stoneare connected through a hierarchy of influences. Astrology is the most enduring remnant of this thought, but in its classical heyday the theory of correspondences included animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds. Thus the planets ruled over men and metals: Sun over gold, Moon over silver, Mercury over mercury, Venus over copper, Mars over iron, Jupiter over tin, and Saturn over lead. In *A Vision* Yeats refers to the "Babylonian mathematical starlight," citing the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* as the source for his learning. 8

However, Greek speculations on matter always pointed to the one cause, the primum mobile, setting the cosmos into harmonic motion. Hence, we find in this amalgam of Greek and Babylonian thought a double binding agent: all life is unified by the ground of being (the *prima materia*, the unmanifest world) and by the hierarchic chain of influence (the manifest world). In Yeats we will see these two ideas repeatedly absorb his attention in the form of "Unity of Being" and "the One and the Many."

What the Egyptians contributed to the alchemy of this period is equally rich and complex. Whereas the Greeks brought a philosophical dimension to the science of transmutation, the Egyptian influence was both practical and mystical. On the practical side, "the Egyptian secret sciences consisted entirely of an age-old craft tradition about the behavior of matter. They knew how to make enamels and invisible ink, and all sorts of complicated alloys."9 With this

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metallurgical ingenuity, they concocted substances approximating gold and hence devised the practice of gilding. Further, gold or pseudogold was used in Pharaonic funeral rites, since its perpetual luster suggested immortality. Marie Louise von Franz writes that alchemy "originated from the Egyptian death cult, that the chemistry of mummification played an enormous role, that actually the Egyptians mummified their dead in order to obtain immortality and make the dead person divine, and that alchemy tried to do the same, namely produce the immortal man, produce immortality." 10 For the Egyptian mystery cults, alchemy was a metallurgical ritual symbolizing the process of initiation. Eliade notes, "[T]he essence of initiation into the Mysteries consisted of participation in the passion, death and resurrection of a God."11 Metalsor more simply, matterwere submitted to an analogous process of suffering, death, and rebirth. In this occult context, alchemy had no practical end in itself; instead, its purpose was to symbolize the spiritual transmutations occurring within the initiate.

Yeats drew frequently from the Egyptian tradition. As the discussion on modern alchemy will show, the Order of the Golden Dawn (of which Yeats was a member) based many of its practices on Egyptian sources. The opening of Pharaonic tombs and uncovering of ancient papyri in the early 1800s fueled the occult imagination of late Victorian England. While Yeats resisted the enthusiasts of Egyptology in his sect to some degreepreferring instead to exalt an Irish brand of sage, the Druidhe honored the Egyptians as significant torchbearers of tradition. His close friend Florence Farr, whom he remembered in "All Souls' Night," wrote a book entitled *Egyptian Magic*.12 And the "Bible of the Alchemists," the Emerald Tablet that Yeats referred to in his early and late work, was ascribed

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to the legendary father of Greek-Egyptian alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus. In his personal library, Yeats owned four works on Hermes Trismegistus, some of them heavily annotated; their dates of publication ranged between 1867 and 1924. 13

Gnostic alchemy shares much with Greek-Egyptian alchemy, but it contains more Near Eastern influences. Gnosticism was a salvation-oriented religion that arose concurrently with Christianity. However, the Gnostics did not postulate the historical occurrence of a *salvator mundi*. They maintained the Babylonian hierarchy of the seven ruling planetary deities, and the destiny of the soul was to pass from earth, through intermediate spheres, to attain the kingdom of light. The myth of gnosis features the fall of a divine power into the darkness of matter; that is, the benighted spirit becomes a prisoner in the human body. The alchemical implication of this myth is that spirit penetrates all matter, and therefore the entire cosmos regains its potential divinity. The function of the alchemist was not to resurrect matter, as in the Osiris-based Egyptian alchemy, but to awaken the sleeping spirit so that it might regain its reign over matter and thereby restore the proper relationship between the two opposites.

Jung linked the Gnostic version of alchemy to Christianity. He traced in Gnostic alchemy a compensation for the stress Christianity placed on transcending the earth and the ways of the flesh.

> Alchemy is rather like an undercurrent to the Christianity that rules on the surface. [Alchemy] is to that surface as the dream is to consciousness, and just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavors to fill in the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites.14

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Yeats's 1896 short story "Rosa Alchemica" fictionally embodied this idea nearly fifty years prior to Jung's work. A Golden Dawn treatise entitled "Physical Alchemy" reveals sources, especially Zosimus, from which Yeats may have learned about Gnostic alchemy. In Yeats's last years, the Gnostic motif of the spirit within matter strikes a dominant chord in his essays and poems. Whereas in the 1890s Yeats planned to start his own Mystery cult to enact rituals in the holy places of Ireland, in the 1930s Yeats's precinct of the sacred grew to embrace the whole created world.

In medieval alchemy, hermeticism joined forces with Christianity and cast many of its myths in the genre of allegory so popular at the time. Also in this period, alchemy adopted its characteristic obscurity; some students of the occult see here a deliberate effort to obfuscate, claiming that alchemists were attempting to escape medieval religious persecution. Alchemy, having infiltrated Christianity, was practiced by many monks but was considered heresy and witchcraft. Alchemists created textual smoke screens in order to circumvent church authority. Jung demonstrates how alchemists of this time began to equate the philosopher's stone with Christ, and hence the sacraments of the Catholic mass became material for further alchemical amplifications. 15 A prominent example of Christian-hermetic allegory was "The Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz," with which Golden Dawn initiates were familiar. In *A Vision*, Yeats uses an allegorical structure common to medieval alchemical accounts in "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends." In his 1895 essay "The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux," Yeats declared that the medieval age of romance was about to resurface, an age in which "we will learn again that the great Passions are angels of God" (*E&I* 197). In addition to "Rosa Alchemica,"

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Yeats wrote two other stories that embody this annunciation and merge hermeticism with Christianity: "The Tables of the Law" and "Adoration of the Magi."

Another medieval motif that Yeats employed was the alchemical idea of the mystical marriage, or *hieros gamos*, symbolized as the conjunction of sun and moon, the embrace of king and queen. According to this motif, a union of the masculine and feminine was required for the attainment of the opus, and hence the tradition of an alchemist aided by his *mystic sorore*, as depicted in the story of Nicholas Flamel and his wife Pernelle. Yeats entertained the idea of mystical marriage both in his actual relations with women and in his poetry about the union of the sexes, as I will discuss at length in chapter 4.

A primary source for medieval alchemy that Yeats would have known as early as 1888 was A. E. Waite's republication of an 1815 volume, *Lives of the Alchemystical Philosphers*. 16 Waite's book provides a hagiographical digest of many alchemists going back to the sixth century. From Waite, Yeats derived his catalog of alchemists in "Rosa Alchemica": Avicenna, Basilius Valentinus, Morienus, and Raymond Lull. However, what Yeats attributes to these alchemists cannot be traced to Waite. In general, Yeats used Waite as an information source rather than as a trusted exegete. Yeats's additional flourishes on these medieval alchemists always heightens them into heroic figures of romance. Waite, however, stressed whatever Christian factor he could find in occult subjects, and he generally diluted the arcana for a lay audience. He too was a member of the Golden Dawn and traced its lineage to the Rosicrucians. Waite maintained that alchemy was at the crux of hermeticism, being its primary myth of spiritual transformation.

Yeats owes much of his knowledge of alchemy to Renaissance writers. In the Renaissance, alchemy came under harsh

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scrutiny. On the one hand, there remained alchemists sincerely attempting to create a gold that was "philosophical." On the other hand, spurious practitioners having no interest in spiritual matters turned alchemy into a confidence racket, such as Ben Jonson portrays in his comedy *The Alchemist*. In addition to Jonson's satire on gullibility and greed, alchemy became a metaphor for sublimation in more serious literary works, as Charles Nicholl argues regarding the work of Donne and Shakespeare in *The Chemical Theatre*.

Moreover, the former confines of alchemythe metallurgical and the mysticalwere expanded to include natural medicine or "physic." Paracelsus was the pioneer of this alchemical medicine, arguing that both body and soul had to be cured to achieve the balance of health. The Paracelsian model of health was based on the hermetic idea of "man the microcosm"that the human body contained all the elements present throughout the cosmos. Just as the alchemist thought that he contained everything he needed for spiritual salvation within his own soul, so Paracelsus thought that physical health was a matter of activating the healing forces within the human organism to restore its inherent harmony.

With the advent of printing in the fifteenth century, Renaissance alchemy produced a number of texts. The medieval veil of secrecy had been torn aside by the zeal to circulate knowledge. In 1652 Elias Ashmole compiled several medieval alchemical texts in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannica*. Waite reprinted much of Ashmole's material in *The Hermetic Museum*, which Yeats read in the 1890s. He also knew Basil Valentinus's *Triumphant Chariot of Antinomy* and Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The most important Renaissance source for Yeats, however, was Franz Hartmann's *Life of Paracelsus*. 17 O'Shea's catalog lists three pages of marginal annotations for

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this text, both in the hand of Yeats and Edwin Ellis. Yeats and Ellis relied heavily on Paracelsus to help them decode Blake for their collected edition of Blake's poetry.

B. J. T. Dobbs, in *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy*, reconstructs the pivotal religious, political and scientific interactions of the late seventeenth century leading to radical shifts in the discourse of alchemy. As the Reformation produced a ferment of religious uncertainties, alchemy enjoyed a renewal of interest. Europeans sought in alchemy the mystical and ritualistic spirit that was being neglected in revised forms of worship. However, as Dobb notes, this renewed zeal for the mystical side of alchemy tended to ignore the physical side of alchemy. In turn, the imbalance that favored the mystical side evoked a reinvigorated practice of physical alchemy. Dobbs argues that alchemy was also transformed by the Reformation's larger social influence: "[Alchemy] became associated with efforts of general reformreform of man, reform of human knowledge, of society itself" (91). Regarding the hermetic art as science in the seventeenth century, alchemy was transformed through its engagement with mechanical philosophy and chemistry. Alchemy's previously vague, metaphoric, and unstable discourse was revised into a systematic body employing mechanical terminology. Dobbs draws the historical inference that "[t]he function of the movement toward the rationalization of alchemy was to join alchemy to the mainstream of scientific revolution, destroy its quasi-religious aspect, and set it on a path of gradual evolution into objective chemistry" (91). However, with the rise of modern scientific method in the eighteenth century, alchemical claims for the transmutation of metals were submitted to rigorous testing. And since such claims were discovered to be unverifiable, alchemy was institutionally disavowed. Nevertheless, the basic

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assumption of alchemythat "matter should have a unity behind all its apparent diversity"remains appealing to science to this day (92).

In the early nineteenth century, an American hermeticist, Mary Atwood, published *Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy*. 18 She placed primary emphasis on the spiritual nature of alchemy, citing its metallurgical antecedent as an ancient metaphor that was no longer necessary for the modern initiate. The philosopher's stone, in this context, implied an identification between the aspirant and his or her higher self. It is this view, which conjoins psyche and spirit, that sets the stage for Jung's twentieth-century version of alchemy.

Yeats's affiliation with the Order of the Golden Dawn has been well researched and documented by George Mills Harper. The Order of the Golden Dawn, established in 1887, incorporated an alchemical ritual into its extensive body of hermetic disciplines. Yeats joined the Order in 1890, and his reaction to Golden Dawn rituals was ambivalent; he found them "obvious and melodramatic" as well as "beautiful and profound" (*Au* 389). As stated previously, A. E. Waite wrote extensively on alchemy as the formative logos of the Rosicrucians and hence appointed alchemy's centrality for the Order of the Golden Dawn. However, it is noteworthy and perhaps ironic that Golden Dawn alchemy reverted back to the practices of physical alchemy, the transformation of substances. The description of the order's alchemical ritual, as found in Israel Regardie's *Golden Dawn* (as well as the Yeats Occult Papers at SUNY Stony Brook), reads like a primitive chemical experiment to be performed not in a laboratory but in an animistic universe wherein everything is alive, related, and consecrated. The planets can affect matter on earth, and the alchemist's

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state of being can aid the contact between higher and lower worlds.

To summarize briefly, the Golden Dawn alchemical ritual was an operation requiring at least seventy-nine days to complete. The initiate chooses a particular matter for transformation, seeking to create "an elixir for use according to the substance from which it came. If from a thing medicinal, then as a medicine; if from a metal, then for purifying metals." 19 The substance goes through a seven-stage process, during which the seven planets exercise their influence over the substance. For this atavistic ritual, the initiate wears robes, invokes higher forces, traces symbols in the air with his wand, and makes ceremonial gestures and incantations before the altar. At the outset, the initiate prays before the "Egg Philosophical" (an oval glass containing the matter): "So help me thou Lord of the Universe and mine own Higher Soul." The alchemist must make a new invocation each time he exposes the substance to a different planetary ray. The operation's success depends both on the matter and on the spiritual state of the alchemist, who must "Keepeth himself allied closely with his Higher Self during the work of the invocation."

While it is not known whether Yeats performed this ritual, other indications reveal that Yeats adamantly opposed the practice of physical alchemy. For instance, in "The Trembling of the Veil" Yeats looks back on his early occult involvements, recounting how MacGregor Mathers introduced him to "an old white-haired oxfordshire clergyman, the most panicstricken person I have ever known" (*Au* 124). This old clergyman, William Ayton, was a member of the Golden Dawn and in fact practiced physical alchemy.20 While Mathers revered Ayton"he unites us to the great adepts of antiquity" (*Au*

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124)Yeats's cameo presentation of Ayton is bitingly ironic. After Ayton confides that he had an alchemical laboratory in his cellar "where the bishop [could] not see it," he makes this further disclosure:

> I once made the elixir of life. A French alchemist said it had the right smell and the right color, but the first effect of the elixir is that your nails fall out and your hair falls off. I was afraid that I might have made a mistake and that nothing else might happen, so I put it on a shelf. I meant to drink it when I was an old man, but when I got it down the other day it had all dried up. (*Au* 12425)

Yeats switches from the comic to wistful remembrance in casting a nostalgic glance at his youthful high regard for MacGregor Mathers. Though Mathers played the role of mentor to the youthful initiate, the mature Yeats portrays Mathers as being tainted by his archaic quest for the alchemical elixir:

> In the credulity of our youth we secretly wondered if [Mathers] had not met with, perhaps even been taught by some old man who had found the elixir. Nor did he undeceive us. "If you find the elixir," he was accustomed to say, "you always look a few years younger than the age at which you found it. If you find it at sixty you will look fifty for a hundred years." None of us would have admitted that we believed in stone or elixir, the old Oxfordshire clergyman [Ayton] excited no belief, yet one among us certainly laboured with crucible or athanor. Ten years ago I called upon an elderly solicitor on some business, but at his private house, and I remembered whose pupil he had been when I found among the ashes of the hearth a little earthen pot. He pretended that he studied alchemy that he might

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> some day write its history, and I found when I questioned others, that for twenty years there had been such a little pot among the ashes. (*Au* 127)

Aside from the satiric pokes he takes at Ayton's home brew, Mather's tall tales, or the solicitor's serious attempts, Yeats emphatically dissociates himself from such practices. By depicting physical alchemy as a clumsy, defective anachronism, he at once lays bare the more embarrassing aspects of the occult and clears his own ethos of any misguided spiritual materialism.

Though clearly eschewing the physical practice and retaining the metaphysical plot-line, Yeats's alchemy also encompassed certain aesthetic claims. Yeats conceived the creative process (for all kinds of art) as a form of alchemy and, moreover, thought that the artist himself became transformed through the act of creation. In *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats's unfinished novel written around the turn of the century, he debunks the practices of physical alchemy in order to construct his aesthetic analogue. The protagonist, Michael, a thinly veiled spokesman for Yeats, is intellectually pitted against McClagan, who is modeled after MacGregor Mathers. McClagan talks a great deal about the alchemist's elixir and his hope to discover it. Apparently, as we have seen in the Golden Dawn's alchemical ritual, the initiates held a literal belief in the elixir and its promise of physical immortality. Whereas McClagan was still searching for the elixir, there were other adeptsthe Secret Chiefs of Third-Order Adeptswho reputedly possessed it. Mathers wrote of these Secret Chiefs in 1896, the same year that Yeats composed "Rosa Alchemica":

> When such a rendezvous has been in a much frequented place, there has been nothing in their personal appearance

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> or dress to mark them out as differing in any way from ordinary people except the appearance and sensation of transcendent health and physical vigor (whether they seemed persons in youth or age) which was their invariable accompaniment: in other words, the physical appearance which the possessor of the Elixir of Life has traditionally been supposed to confer. 21

The critic Kathleen Raine notes that Yeats was enchanted by such reports, and yet he invariably casts a shadow of speculation over such spiritual glamour. *The Speckled Bird*'s protagonist Michael, while retaining an oblique reverence for the ancient masters and their elixir, does not accept such a practice for himself as a modern aspirant. Instead, he looks upon "those old ideas as symbols of the greatness of man and man's intellect" (*SB* 63). Further, Michael does not wish for physical immortality but for the immortal world beyond death, which is clearly the desire of the Symbolist. He seeks that other world through contact with those great symbols. Immortality, in Michael's terms, is not consonant with duration in time but transcends time through states of consciousness not limited by the body.

With the introduction of Michael's aesthetic element into the discourse of alchemy, McClagen charges Michael with bastardizing the hermetic tradition:

> I have come to recognize that you are not a magician, but some kind of artist, and that the *summum bonum* itself, the potable gold of our masters, [is] less to you than some charm of color, or some charm of words. (*SB* 92)

Perhaps McClagan overstates his case. True enough, Michael (i.e., Yeats) does not believe in the elixir, but he does believe

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in the possibility that the elixir symbolizesthat of spiritual immortality. Yeats, then, through his speaker, portrays himself as an artist of this quest.

The Golden Dawn's "Flying Roll No. VI" delineates four categories of alchemy. These categories are aligned to the Cabala's four planes of existence. These are (1) physical alchemy, or the production of an elixir; (2) psychic alchemy, which is the "power of creation of living forms"; (3) mental alchemy; and lastly (4) spiritual alchemy. The following excerpt from "Flying Roll No. VI" describes mental and spiritual alchemies, which, I believe, held the strongest interest for Yeats:

> Mental Alchemy: the creations of Art and Genius, the ensouled music, picture and statue; this was practiced and not preached until modern times.
>
> Spiritual Alchemy: the practice was almost unknown except to a few entirely hidden Magi; but it was written about by some good and true philosophers, who couched their views on man's origin and destiny, his descent from God, and his possible re-ascent to God, in the language of the Material Plane to avoid persecution and destruction, at the hands of the priests of established churches. 22

Yeats shuttles back and forth between these two alchemies, between that of the artist and the adept. As an artist, Yeats used the metaphors of alchemy to represent his aesthetic pursuits: he endeavored "to condense as out of the flying vapor of the world an image of human perfection" (*VP* 489). And as an adept, his spiritual quest for the "perfection of the life," or the Great Work, took precedence.

A Renaissance axiom shows the relationship between

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alchemy and art: *Quod natura relinquit imperfectum, Ars perfecit* (What nature left imperfect, the art perfects). The "art" here is alchemy, and the alchemists believed that their function was to complete the work that God had begun. Likewise, the work of perfection, both in nature and in the soul, revealed to the human being his proper function in the cosmos as the bridge between spirit and matter. In order to serve the process of perfection, though, the alchemist had to combine the sacred and profane in himself. In "Under Ben Bulben," Yeats employs the phrase "profane perfection of mankind" to suggest the artist's ideal. In a declamatory tone, he exhorts his artistic successors to "do the work," which he specifies is to "Bring the soul of man to God" (*TP* 326; *VP* 638).

Obversely, the artist-alchemist restores God to Creation. Yeats discovered this allegiance between artist and alchemist in Hartmann's *Paracelsus* in the late 1880s. In the following passage, Paracelsus revises the myth of Genesis as alchemical narrative: "The first body, the YLIASTER, was nothing but a clod, which contained all the chaos, all the waters, all minerals, all herbs, stones and gems. Only the supreme master could release them and form them with tender solicitude, so that others could be created from the rest." 23 Here we see the hermetic principle that everything is contained in the raw matter of chaos, and the work of perfection is to bring out of that chaos all the forms existing within itextracting the gold from lead. Although God, the supreme master, was the only creative force at the world's beginning, Paracelsus theorized that God appointed Adam to assume the function of creative master on earth.

The artist-alchemist's business, then, is to release the spiritual essence from the physical forms that God has drawn out

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of the darkness. Paracelsus emphasizes that this work is an art, a creative act that, surpassing technology, requires the practitioner to be divinely inspired. Alchemy "changes the character of simple bodies, and raises them up into higher states of existence. To exercise this power, not merely mechanical labor, but artistic skill, is required." 24 Paracelsus finds more resemblances between artist and alchemist in drawing distinctions between alchemy and chemistry: "The painter who daubs a wall with paint is a chemist; his work requires skill, but no genius. The artist who composes a picture is an alchemist because he embodies an idea and puts his own character into his work."25

Yeats's spiritual aims for his art, to "bring the soul of man to God" and to render "the profane perfection of mankind," suggests yet a further analogue to the alchemist's art. Namely, the production of art must reflect the creation of a new being within the artist; it must create out of the complex aggregate of the artist (a polymorphous and polyphonic subjectivity) the philosopher's stone: a unity comprised of all dichotomies. In writing of artists whom Yeats believed to have achieved such unityShakespeare, Dante, and Villonhe offers, "We gaze at such men in awe, because we gaze not at a work of art, but at the re-creation of the man through the art, the birth of a new species of man " (*Au* 273). Similar to Paracelsus's alchemized version of Genesis, Yeats conceived the human psyche, like primordial chaos, as containing the possibility of its own perfection. He found evidence for this goal in "that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake's 'Imagination,' what the Upanishads have named 'Self'" (*E&I* 158). Actually, there was nothing new to be born, only the ancient to be reborn. It was human contact

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with the transcendent dimension that produced this new species: "I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death" (*TP* 248; *VP* 497).

Yeats found literary precedence for alchemy in historical periods whose creative expression favored symbols, romance, and imagination. As a fin de siècle literary critic, Yeats forecasted the end of an age that had stifled the human imagination for two centuries and he heralded the approach of a new era in phrases echoing his Romantic predecessors: "the imagination has been laid in a great tomb of criticism," "the age of criticism is about to pass," "for art is a revelation, not a criticism" (*E&I* 196, 197). As stated previously, hermeticism made inroads into Christianity in the Middle Ages, when a great literary flowering occurred with allegorical romances. According to Yeats, the parabolic arc of this influence met its demise when Rosicrucianism was forced underground in the 1700s. In his 1895 essay "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux," Yeats depicts the burial of imaginative art as but the temporary entombment of an eternal impulse: "The followers of the Father Christian Rosencrux, says the old tradition, wrapped his imperishable body in noble raiment and laid it under the house of their Order, in a tomb containing symbols of all things in heaven and earth, and in the waters under the earth, and set about him inextinguishable lamps, which burnt on generation after generation " (*E&I* 196). And although Yeats thought the previous two centuries were primarily a barren intellectual age cut off from the passionate depths of the unconscious, he found in Blake an anomalous flowering of the symbolic imagination. "He [Blake] had learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, 'the body of God,' 'the Divine Members,' and he drew the deduction, which they did not

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draw, that the imaginative arts were therefore the greatest of Divine revelations, and that the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sin commanded by Christ" (*E&I* 112).

Yeats's hope for a renewed imaginative art was strengthened by his contemporaries in the Symbolist movement who, Yeats believed, were dipping into the same "waters under the earth" to create art that hearkened to the eternal in the human. Arthur Symons, the chief spokesman for Symbolism, imported to England a post-Romantic French movement that began with Baudelaire. Yeats had already been writing what was considered Symbolist poetry when Symons's 1893 essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature" appeared, containing definitions that could easily have issued from Yeats's pen:

> The Symbolist, in this new, sudden way, would flash upon you the "soul" of that which can be apprehended only by the soulthe finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident. And naturally this endeavor after a perfect truth to one's impression, to one's intuition has brought with it, in its revolt from ready-made impressions and conclusions, a revolt from the ready-made of language, from the bondage of traditional form, of a form become rigid. 26

Just as earlier the Reformation's institutional sundering of the Church fueled a renewed interest in alchemy as a spiritual substitute, so with the virtual ideological foundations of Christianity being challenged by a rational and hermeneutic suspicion, Yeats turns to alchemy (in its aesthetic alliance to Symbolism) as a means of stabilizing a vanishing spiritual presence. In his 1898 essay "The Autumn of the Body" Yeats weaves together the literary ideals of Symbolism with the idea of alchemical

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transmutation. The alchemical artist performed a sacerdotal function: "The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things" (*E&I* 193). The autumn of the body hence represents this movement, in which the hard casement of the physical element slips away to reveal an essential form, a disembodiment. Specifically, this exfoliation of the concrete will lead to a new kind of poetry, which "will henceforth be a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems. I think there will be much poetry of this kind, because of an ever more arduous search for an almost disembodied ecstasy" (*E&I* 19394). The second and third chapters of this study will address the internal and literary conflicts that troubled Yeats about this disembodied ecstasy. His unequivocal endorsements here in essay form are balanced, if not undermined, by the equivocal and bleak attainments of his poetic personae who seek to transcend the physical world.

Yeats, then, valued alchemy as a metaphor for transformation, applicable to both the creative act and to spiritual work. However, the practice of spiritual alchemy, that "possible reascent to God," presented certain obstacles to Yeats's calling as a poet. As a member of the Golden Dawn, Yeats took upon himself the ideals of the Great Work, which he soon began to feel were inimical to the linguistic pursuits of the poet. To the adept, words were ceremonial and incantatoryinstruments to call down the power of the spiritual world.

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And in order to perfect his soul, the Golden Dawn initiate was oath-bound to

> solemnly promise and swear that, with the Divine permission, I will from this day forward apply myself unto the Great Work, which is to purify and exalt my spiritual nature that with Divine aid I may at length attain to be more than human and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my higher and divine Genius, and that in this event, I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me. 27

This oath is similar to that taken by monk or priest in that in concentrates on developing only the spiritual nature, thereby neglecting (and hence devaluing) the bodily and social aspects of human existence. Waite's handling of alchemy further emphasizes this purely spiritual quest: "Man is the true laboratory of the Hermetic Art; his life the subject, the grand distillery, the thing distilling, and the thing distilled; and self-knowledge is at the root of all alchemical tradition."28 Further, "The genuine alchemist's object was the perfection of man a certain unity, a living sense of the unity of the human with the divine nature, the attainment of which I can liken to the New Birth."29

Yeats was obviously attracted to the promise of this new birth, becoming "more than human," yet the one-sided emphasis on spiritual development engendered in Yeats a split between his two chief loves. If he were to put his heart into artistic pursuits, then he would betray the Great Work. If, however, he devoted himself totally to spiritual transformation, then he would have to deny his insistent impulse to write poetry. On the one hand, Yeats was "interested in nothing but states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences" (*E&I* 270). On the other hand, he wanted to "hammer [his] thoughts

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into unity" regarding three topics important to him as an Irish poet: a form of literature, a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. These two inclinations (the first internal and mystical, the second external and worldly) were lifelong preoccupations, and the conflict they induced prompted Yeats occasionally to reformulate his position between these two poles. In "The Two Kinds of Asceticism" (1906) Yeats draws crucial distinctions between the artist and the saint:

> The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himselfto the neglect of his own soul, alas!with the soul of the world, and frees himself from all that is impermanent in that soul, an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers. Those things that are permanent in the soul of the world, the great passions that trouble all and have a brief recurring life of flower and seed in any man, are indeed renounced by the Saint, who seeks not an eternal art, but his own eternity. (*E&I* 286)

As the previous quote from "Under Ben Bulben" shows, Yeats was able at the end of his life to conceive a shared purpose between the two eternities of saint and artist; that is, the purpose of art is "to bring the soul of man to God." Yet as a young poet he thought these two eternities were antithetical to each other. In the following passage, Yeats describes an eternity that seems to belong to the Saint: "I thought of myself as something unmoving and silent in the middle of my own mind, a grain of sand in Bloomsbury or Connacht but as I imagined the visions outside myself, my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life" (*E&I* 271). The unmoving, silent self and the external "still life" both have a static quality that seem stifling and impotent, because Yeats is conceiving eternity as fixed and unchanging. Moreover, Yeats's

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eternal art seems as unattainable as the philosopher's stone: "I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand" (*E&I* 271). That is, Yeats's eternity of art appears equally overshadowed by his distorted models of eternity.

Other instances of the conflict between artist and adept appear in Yeats's poetry. In "Vacillation" (1932), a poem whose title suggests the shifting attraction between opposite poles, Yeats polarizes the conflict through a dialogue between "The Soul" and "The Heart":

> *The Soul*. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
> *The Heart*. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?
> *The Soul*. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?
> *The Heart*. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!
> *The Soul*. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.
> *The Heart*. What theme had Homer but original sin?

The conflict represented here between spiritual salvation and the poet's calling, or, in other words, the conflict between transcendence and utterance, spirit and word, will be echoed throughout this entire study. The dialectical strife between heart and soul is carried forth into the next stanza, this time in a monologue by Yeats before his mute audience, Von Hugel, a German mystic, whom the poet respectfully recognizes but dismisses:

> Must we part, Von Hugel, though much alike, for we
> Accept the miracles of the saints and honor sanctity?
> The body of Saint Theresa lies undecayed in tomb,
> Bathed in miraculous oil, sweet odors from it come,
> Healing from its lettered slab. Those self-same hands perchance

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Eternalised the body of a modern saint that once
Had scooped out Pharaoh's mummy. Ithough heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tombplay a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has scripture said?
So get you gone, Von Hugel, though with blessings on your head.

(*TP 25253; VP 503*)

We will now turn to an examination of the poetry Yeats wrote in the 1880s and '90s. During this period the young poet was busily absorbing the hermetic ideas that would shape his worldview for years to come. In several poems from this period we will see Yeats testing out the ideas central to alchemy, and in many instances his poems reveal an unexpected darkness, a sense of loss, fear, and disappointment. Because he had yet to choose between the path of artist or adept, the poems curiously betray and undermine the vision of the alchemical quest. The following poem, "The Choice" (1932), shows Yeats years later weighing the ramifications of the choice he eventually made.

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
When all that story's finished what's the news?
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
That old perplexity an empty purse,
Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

(*TP* 24647; *VP* 495)

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2
The Poem As Hermetic Laboratory

Certain alchemical writers say that the substance left behind in the retort is the philosopher's stone, and the liquid distilled over, the elixir or alkahest; and all are agreed that the stone transmutes everything into gold, while the elixir dissolves everything into nothing, and not a few call them the fixed and the volatile. One might take these contraries as symbols of the mind of Brand and Peer Gynt. Peer Gynt lets sheer phantasy take possession of his life, and fill him with the delusion that he is this or that personage, now a hunter, now a troll, now a merchant, now a prophet, until the true Peer Gynt is well-nigh dissolved. Brand, on the other hand, seeks to rise into an absolute world where there is neither hunter, nor troll, nor merchant, nor prophet, but only God and his laws, and to transmute by the force of his unchanging ideal everything about him into imperishable gold, only to perish amid ice and snow with the cry in his ears, "Die! the earth has no use for thee!"
Yeats, "The Stone and the Elixir"

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Many alchemical texts of the Renaissance were accompanied by images, often primordial and dazzling, that symbolized the procedures of the magnum opus. One such image, from Michael Maier's *Tripus Aureus* (1618), demonstrates alchemy's dual nature, philosophical and practical. 1 The image is bifurcated: on the left three alchemists confer together in a library, and on the right one alchemist crouches before his alchemical stove, stoking the flames. Dubbed "Laboratory and Oratory," the image suggests that the alchemists' book-knowledge must be tested, transformed, and made manifest in the flames of experience. This chapter looks at Yeats and his early poetry (pre-1900) in the light of this image. That is, as a hermetic artist, Yeats took the ideas he learned from the Theosophists, the Golden Dawn, and the alchemists and transformed them into poetry. However, in the translation from oratory to laboratory, from theory to poem, Yeats reveals the uncertainty and anxiety he felt toward the quest of transformation, of becoming "more than human."

The search for ontological origins outside language, the body, and the natural world allured Yeats, even though this search threatened to "refine" the self out of physical existence. As the introductory epigraph shows, Yeats created a hermeneutics out of alchemical ideas to apply to literary works. "The Stone and the Elixir" (1894) was a review of Ibsen's plays *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. We can see Yeats's suspicion of his own transcendent urges in his commentary on Brand, who seeks "to rise into an absolute world where there is only God and his laws." Brand's spiritual triumph, his attainment of imperishable gold, is a violation of earth's laws. Brand fulfills

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his supreme desire through transmutation, by the unyielding application "of his unchanging ideal." Unfortunately he must perish, for once having attained his desire, "The earth has no use for thee!" Yeats though there was a tragic price to pay for such an implacable, single-minded approach to an ideal. He cited this fanatical devotion not only in the spiritual search but also in politicswherever radical change was being sought. In "Easter 1916" Yeats commemorates the Irish Nationalists who were as strident in their political ideals as Brand was in his spiritual aspirations.

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream.
>
> (*TP* 181; *VP* 393)

Yeats directs his countrymen "to murmur name upon name" those executed for their part in the Easter uprising, canonizing them in an act of prayer. So, the urge to sacrifice oneself to an idealwhether to effect spiritual or political changeresults in transmutation, which has death as its price tag.

Since transcendence of the physical world entailed an erasure of the body and its attendant psychology, the young poet fretted that becoming pure consciousness would obliterate his reference points for receiving the physical world, and thereby silence poetic speech. Yeats's first three volumes of poetry*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899)depict many heroes and seekers striving toward a transcendent summum bonum. Yet, poised on the threshold of this attainment, Yeats's poetic personae turn their backs on eternity, rejecting, refuting, or

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demeaning the bliss they initially sought. Although these personae conclude that a transformation of consciousness is possible, its fulfillment is gravely disappointing due to its exacting premium. The transcendent world is simply too vast, too potent, to accommodate the limitations of mere mortals. While leading us to the edge of the void, then setting us back on hard ground, the poems that address spiritual alchemy simultaneously advance and disavow their ideals. They are shields or icons of Yeats's hidden resistance to his own ideal, which was weighted too heavily toward spirit. Whereas critic Thomas Whitaker proposes that Yeats's spiritual alchemy prompted him "to transform himself into one who could accept the material world," I maintain that Yeats's poems insist on an acceptance of that world and that his task becomes, instead, the lifelong revisioning of the Platonic metaphysics that originally proposed a split between spirit and matter.

Yeats's spiritual alchemy was more than just a restatement of Golden Dawn hermeticism; it was an active stance maintained against the prevailing worldview. The artistic and intellectual climate of fin de siècle England and Europe was braced against Darwinian naturalism, against a scientific materialism that reduced the marvels of mind and nature to explicable, demonstrable causes. Yeats was seeking a new Romanticism to overthrow the cold slumber that science had imposed on the imagination:

> Seek, then,
> No learning from the starry men,
> Who follow with the optic glass
> The whirling ways of stars that pass
> Seek, then, for this is also sooth,
> No word of theirsthe cold star-bane,

> Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,
> And dead is all their human truth.
>
> (*TP* 78; *VP* 66)

Yeats wrote, "We are about to substitute once more the distillation of alchemy for the analysis of chemistry and certain of us are looking for the perfect alembic that no silver or golden drop may escape" (*E&I* 193). The alembic, an alchemical apparatus used for distillation, is the artistic imagination working with its flashes of inspiration (silver and golden drops). Further, discarding analysis in favor of distillation symbolizes alchemical refinement of the human mind. The Symbolist poetry of Yeats, Arthur Symons, and others of the 1890s demonstrates this refinement of sensibility, unmooring the imagination from the hard facts of physical existence in an attempt to create an otherworldly essence. In "Rosa Alchemica," Yeats's narrator aligns spiritual alchemy with the Symbolist aesthetic when he describes his "little book" on alchemy as "a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences" (*Myth* 267).

This world of essences, or the spirit world, implies the transcendence of the physical world, a disembodied existence. However, as much as this world might be desired as the ultimate goal, the hallowed ground of being, this existence is antithetical to the poet. Harold Bloom describes the conflict of the spiritual poet as a repetition of Satan's fate:

> The state of Satan is a constant consciousness of dualism, of being trapped in the finite, not just in space (in the body) but in clock-time as well. To be pure spirit, yet to know in oneself the limit of opacity; to assert that one goes back before the Creation-Fall, yet be forced to yield to number,

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> weight and measure; this is the situation of the strong poet, the capable imagination, when he confronts the universe of poetry, the words that were and will be, the terrible splendor of cultural heritage. 2

Bloom's account of the poet-as-Satan, the heroic explorer of human possibilities, presupposes an alchemical metaphysics: man as microcosm, man made in the image of God. In this hermetic model, human ontology originates as pure consciousness in a timeless, spaceless dimension, and from this primordial precinct the personal subject individuates, cuts himself off from the whole, and falls into matter, thereby narrowing the field of his vision.

Yeats's early poetry shows a decided dissatisfaction with the limits of body, number, and measure. He embraces, instead, the opposite: the ultimate goal to enter the limitless origin of being. Yet, we will see how Yeats betrays his ultimate goals by casting shadows over his poetically imagined apotheosis, instead censuring the spiritual world as dangerous and inimical. However, Yeats will not discard the metaphysics that gave rise to his terror. He maintains his hermetic world order but shifts goals within that universe, saying that he will not make the ultimate goal *his* ultimate. He willingly casts himself into a Luciferian tradition, though dissimilar to Milton's nonredeemable antihero. Yeats's donning of Luciferian robes is purely Gnostic; that is, he chooses to shed light, through the logos of his poetry, on the created, fallen world, wherein "everything we look upon is blest."

The philosophical root of Yeats's alchemical studies is the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. It seems that no ancient religion would be complete without its logos etched in stone, symbolizing spirit's power to penetrate even the densest materiality. The Emerald Tablet, or Tabula Smaragdine,

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has been called "the bible of the alchemists," and Yeats repeatedly met up with it in the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn, and in Waite's books. Legend has it that Alexander the Great found the tomb of Hermes in a cave near Hebron, and within the tomb was a tablet upon which were inscribed thirteen sentences in Phoenician characters:

1. I speak not fictitious things, but what is true and most certain.
2. What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.
3. And as all things were produced by the mediation of the one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.
4. Its father is the sun, its mother the moon; the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.
5. It is the cause of all perfection throughout the whole world.
6. Its power is perfect if it be changed to earth.
7. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment.
8. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth, and unite together the power of things superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly away from you.
9. This thing is the fortitude of all fortitude, because it overcomes all subtle things, and penetrates every solid thing.
10. Thus were all things created.
11. Thence proceed wonderful adaptations that are produced in this way.
12. Therefore am I called Hermes Trismegistus, possessing

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the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.

13. That which I had a say concerning the operation of the sun is completed. 3

Yeats cites the Emerald Tablets in several places as a hermeneutics to transmute human perception, showing that macrocosmic principles are operative in human life on earth. In "Ribh Denounces Patrick" (1935), Ribh, Yeats's druidic persona, denounces the Trinity of St. Patrick in favor of the more ancient and philosophically exact principles in the Emerald Tablet. Ribh argues that the all-male TrinityFather, Son, and Holy Ghostis a "crazed," imbalanced concept, since trinities on earth result from two sexes: man and woman beget child.

> Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.
> As man, as beast, as ephemeral fly begets, Godhead begets Godhead,
> For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said.
>
> (*TP* 284; *VP* 536)

In "Emotion of the Multitude," a 1903 essay, Yeats refers to the Emerald Tablet to grant sacerdotal status to the artist: "Did not the Egyptian carve it on emerald that all things have the sun for father and the moon for mother, and has it not been said that a man of genius takes the most after his mother?" (*E&I* 267) Prior to composing that essay, Yeats had been concerned about his writing style, finding it too elaborate and ornamental. He meditated on the symbols of sun and moon to diagnose his stylistic impasse and was told, "I must live near water and avoid woods 'because they concentrate the solar ray.' I believed this enigmatic sentence came from my

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own daimon, my own buried self. 'Solar,' according to all that I learnt from Mathers, meant elaborate, full of artifice, rich, all that resembles the work of a goldsmith, whereas 'water' meant 'lunar' and 'lunar' all that is simple, popular, traditional, emotional" (*Au* 247).

We can see the idea "as above, so below" echoed in the alignments that Yeats found in sun-gold-elaborate/moon-water-emotional. More specifically, he is employing the "theory of correspondences," which describes the alignment between heaven and earth. The theory of correspondences is a set of hermetic blueprints showing how the lower world is a copy of the higher world. Renaissance texts depict this theory in the form of a human body encompassing a map of the cosmos. These maps, though, did not chart the heavens as astronomers would. Yeats speaks of "the diagram's in Law's Boehme, where one lifts a flap of paper to discover both the human entrails and the starry heavens" (*AV* 24).

In this cosmography, circle within circle charted the rarification of matter into spirit, the scale of intelligence that graduated from the mineral to seraphic worlds. Man the microcosm, his limbs extended over this multifaceted unity, contained all the possibilities of the macrocosm. Yeats recalls in his *Memoris* that he "was a member of their [the Theosophists'] Esoteric section, an inner ring of the more devout students, which met weekly to study tables of oriental symbolism. Every organ of the body had its correspondence in the heavens, and the seven principles which made the human soul and body corresponded to the seven colors and the notes of the musical scale" (*M* 23). Yeats also found in this theory a flexible instrument for the study of history. "If, as I think, minds and metals correspond, the goldsmiths of Paris foretold the French Revolution when they substituted steel for their unserviceable gold

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in the manufacture of the more expensive jewel work, and made those large, flat steel buttons for men of fashion wherein the card-sharpers were able to study reflections of the cards" (*Au* 155).

The purpose for studying the "theory of correspondences," "man the microcosm," and "as above, so below" was to transform the awareness of the initiate from a sensual to a suprasensual consciousness wherein the initiate felt his connection to the whole of creation. The initiate, then, is not a separate ego but a living image of the cosmos meeting his likeness in all others.

In the following discussion of Yeats's early poems, we will see how he rendered the alchemical worldview in its positive and negative ways. The poem served as Yeats's hermetic laboratory, in which he tested the claims of alchemical theory and registered the results of his poetic-hermetic experiments. To begin, we will consider three poems"The Two Trees," "The Sad Shepherd," and "The Indian Upon God"which display the positive potential Yeats found in hermetic philosophy.

In "The Two Trees" (1892), Yeats depicts union and separation from the divine source. The poem contains two stanzas that contrast an inward spiritual orientation against an outward approach to reality based on the evidences of the senses. Harold Bloom detects the influence of Blake here, the two trees representing innocence and experience. 4 The first line in each stanza employs the word "gaze" as a metaphor for search, telling us where to look for the taproot of life. The first stanza directs us to gaze into the human heart, suggesting

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that the inner world is where the creative possibilities of "man-the-microcosm" may flourish:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colors of its fruit
Have dowered the stars with merry light;
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night;
The shaking of its leafy head
Has given the waves their melody,
And made my lips and music wed,
Murmuring a wizard song for thee.
There the Loves a circle go,
The flaming circle of our days,
Gyring, spiring to and fro
In those great ignorant leafy ways.
Remembering all that shaken hair
And how the winged sandals dart,
Thine eyes grow full of tender care:
Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.

(*TP* 48; *VP* 134)

Sacred geometry of the circle, and its movement as a gyre, return us to those medieval diagrams where man and cosmos coincide, where human entrails are superimposed upon the stars.

The second stanza shows us the outer world of the sensesthe Tree of Knowledgedominated by guile, storm, barrenness, unresting thought, and bitterness. Yeats wrote: "[M]en who are from the Tree of Knowledge wasted their

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days in anger against one another, and in taking one another captive in great nets" (*E&I* 130).

Gaze no more in the bitter glass
The demons, with their subtle guile,
Lift up before us when they pass,
Or only gaze a little while;
For there a fatal image grows
That the stormy night receives,
Roots half hidden under snows,
Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
For all things turn to barrenness
In the dim glass the demons hold,
The glass of outer weariness,
Made when God slept in times of old.
There, through the broken branches, go
The ravens of unresting thought;
Flying, crying, to and fro,
Cruel claw and hungry throat,
Or else they stand and sniff the wind,
And shake their ragged wings; alas!
Thy tender eyes grow all unkind:
Gaze no more in the bitter glass.

(*TP* 4849; *VP* 134)

That the "glass of outer weariness" was made "when God slept in times of old" suggests the mechanistic theories of the eighteenth century that proposed that God set the universe in motion and then vacated his creation*deus absconditus*. Once again, Yeats proposes a return to hermetic thought to restore the artist and his "beloved" to the depths of imagination, the storehouse of passion and symbol.

In "The Sad Shepherd" (1885) Yeats constructs topologies

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out of hermetic philosophy, wherein all its citizenscelestial, animal, or vegetableare imbued with spirit and essence. However, the Sad Shepherd, the poem's sole human inhabitant, is out of joint with the great harmony. We can turn to Yeats's gloss on Blake: "He cried again and again that everything that lives is holy, and that nothing is unholy except things that do not livelethargies, and cruelties, and timidities, and that denial of imagination which is the root they grew from in old times" (*E&I* 113). Unfortunately for the Sad Shepherd, a disembodied presenceSorrowhas befriended him, beclouding his awareness of the vivid life gleaming, humming, and glistening about him. Sorrow, in effect, represents that condition of self-absorption which obliterates the possibility of marvel and awe. Ironically enough, the rest of creationstars, sea, dewdrops, and seashellsare also self-absorbed, but their collective self-absorption confers upon them merriment and contemplative ease. The stars "laugh on and sing always," the sea rolls "along in dream from hill to hill," and the dewdrops listen "for the sound of their own dropping" (*TP* 9; *VP* 68). Though man-as-microcosm has the capacity to perceive the divine in creationone effect of the alchemist's elixirthe Sad Shepherd fails to fulfill this possibility.

The Sad Shepherd wishes to commune with his world, but in a perversely ironic way. Instead of perceiving his unity with the various creatures he meets, he tries to impose his piteous story on insouciant nature. And gaining no response from his blithe auditors, the Sad Shepherd carries out the injunctions prescribed in the companion poem "The Song of the Happy Shepherd":

> Go gather by the humming sea
> Some twisted, echo-harboring shell,

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And to its lips thy story tell,
And they thy comforters will be,
Rewording in melodious guile
Till they shall singing fade in ruth
And die a pearly brotherhood.

(*TP* 8; *VP* 66)

The Sad Shepherd's words reiterate the above passage:

I will my heavy story tell
Till my own words, re-echoing, shall send
Their sadness through a hollow, pearly heart,
And my own tale again for me shall sing,
And my own whispering words be comforting,
And lo! my ancient burden may depart.

(*TP* 9; *VP* 6869)

The expected catharsis does not occur, however. Nature, having received the shepherd's sad tale, has no power to transmute his emotion. Instead, the "sad dweller changed all he sang to inarticulate moan." The transformative medium of the "echo-harboring shell," which promised to convert story into song, is absent in the Sad Shepherd's terrain. The Sad Shepherd, misreading the directions of his happy counterpart, thinks that a simple speech act occurring in a void, absent any auditor, will suffice. Instead of finding the shell, he hopes that his echoing words will transmit his sadness to the appropriate department, so to speak. But an echo suggests a reflecting medium, an Other. Though the Sad Shepherd may desire to break out of his self-absorption (could he but diagnose his condition as such), he cannot manage this passage via the agency of a split self, a self who wants the medicine of his own words. What he needs to do is to enter into the semiotic chain of

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signifiers. However, he has not pierced his narcissistic wall, or echo chamber. He cannot restore himself to health because health, within the terms of the two poem, suggests relation to the world. It is the recognition of Otherness within the contextual web of signifiers that brings the possibility of song. Moreover, the Sad Shepherd's mismanagement of the prescription casts doubt over the shamanistic powers that the Happy Shepherd grants to language. The oft-quoted apothegm of the Happy Shepherd"For words alone are certain good"has been generally appropriated and endorsed at face value by Yeats critics to privilege the poet's medium (and implicitly to legitimize the critic's pursuit). Yet when viewed in the light of "The Sad Shepherd," those words ring out ironically, if not cruelly, at their presumptions.

Though the titles of "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" and "The Sad Shepherd" compel us to consider them as companion poems, the reflexive relationships between poems within the same volume does not end here. Obviously Yeats's ordering principles were strongly influenced by the Romantic tendency to set up dialogic relations between poems, such as in Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience." Further, what is perhaps more illuminating than Blake's influence is that the dialogic relation between poems goes hand in hand with the governing idea of hermetic cosmology: unity-in-multiplicity. Each poem bearing the impress of hermetic influence presents a different facet of the alchemical world.

One such poem, which advances the view of the indwelling spirit in nature, is "The Indian Upon God" (1889), noteworthy for its blending of Hindu and hermetic doctrine. As nature possessed a measure of self-consciousness in "The Sad Shepherd," the creatures in "The Indian Upon God" demonstrate more advanced mental powers: they can articulate an

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awareness of their divine origin. Yeats extends the idea of man-the-microcosm (or, humans created in the image of God) to the plant and animal kingdoms, featuring a lotus flower, a moorfowl, a roebuck, and a peacock. In effect, this poem is Yeats's response to Blake's "The Tyger" and "The Lamb," addressing the question "Did He who made the Lamb make thee?"

Whether or not Yeats intended a comic effect, he has certainly pushed this hermetic principle to the limit. The Indian, the sole human figure within the poem, walks through a lush landscape wherein he hears and records the soliloquies of moorfowl, lotus, roebuck and peacock. Each speaker claims that he was made in God's image, therefore concluding that the Creator must resemble the speaker, only much grander on the macrocosmic scale.

I passed along the water's edge below the humid trees,
My spirit rocked in evening light, the rushes round my knees,
My spirit rocked in sleep and sighs; and saw the moorfowl
  pace
All dripping on the grassy slope, and saw them cease to chase
Each other round in circles, and heard the eldest speak:
Who holds the world between His bill and made us strong or
  weak
Is an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond the sky.
The rains are from His dripping wings, the moonbeams from His eye.
I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk:
Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide.
A little way within the gloom a roebuck raised his eyes
Brimful of starlight, and he said: *The Stamper of the Skies,*
He is a gentle roebuck; for how else, I pray, could He

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Conceive a thing so sad and soft, a gentle thing like me?
I passed a little further on and heard a peacock say:
Who made the grass and made the worms and made my
feathers gay,
He is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth all the night
His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light.

(*TP* 1314; *VP* 177)

By anthropomorphically transcribing the Genesis axiom that man is made in the image of God, Yeats elevates the natural world to a status ascribed to it by the Romantic. However, within this magical transformation there resides a surreality of reflection and deflection, a cosmic narcissism that Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, delineates regarding the medieval episteme:

> As a category of thought, it applies the interplay of duplicated resemblances to all the realms of nature; it provides all investigation with an assurance that everything will find its mirror and its macrocosmic justification on another and larger scale; it affirms, inversely, that the visible order of the highest spheres will be found reflected in the darkest depths of the earth. Nature, like the interplay of signs and resemblances, is closed in upon itself in conformity with the duplicated form of the cosmos. (31)

And to those interested in Lacan's developmental phases, this poem provides a neat, if ironic, representation of the mirror stage. The soliloquies delivered by flower and animal alike are attempts to mediate a self-identity through the authority of a mirror image.

The Indian himself makes no such claim about his own origin, but by logical extension, the divinity of human nature must also follow. Further, the human being as the amanuensis

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of nature provides a unifying link between the above and below, a role that plant or animal cannot fulfill. That is, each separate creature can recognize only its own divinity, but the Indian can recognize the divinity in all of them. He is the only one who stands outside the epistemological constraints of narcissism. The Indian, in effect, looks through the eyes of God and deciphers the Creator's "signature" inscribed in all beings. Jacob Boehme expressed this idea more metaphysically: "The whole outward visible world with all its being is a signature, or figure, of the inward spiritual world as the spirit of each creature sets forth and manifests the internal form of its birth by its body, so does the Eternal Being also." 5"The Indian Upon God" further illustrates the alchemical idea of the One and the Many. That is, since God is made manifest in the multiple forms of "his" creation, God is but one Being housed in many forms.

The task of the artist-alchemist, then, is to create a simulacrum of these higher truths as he imaginatively conceives them. We can juxtapose the Indian's vision with the "profane perfection of mankind" in one of Yeats's last poems, "Under Ben Bulben." Therein Yeats reminds modern artists that their work is to "bring the soul of man to God," and he returns to the late Middle Ages to illustrate an artist's "right action":

> Quattrocento put in paint
> On backgrounds for a God or saint
> Gardens where a soul's at ease;
> Where everything that meets the eye,
> Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,
> Resemble forms that are or seem
> When sleepers wake and yet still dream
> And when it's vanished still declare,

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With only bed and bedstead there
That Heavens had opened.

(*TP* 32627; *VP* 639)

The alchemical thrust of this poem lies in its hermetic assumptions of a many-tiered universe, each echelon in the cosmic structure "resembling" the form of the echelons above and below it. The painted gardens that the poem references visually trope Edenic topographies accessible only in liminal states of consciousness. In other words, Quattrocento paintings bring into focus the spectacle of the "big Other," as Lacan calls it. If the heavens' opening suggests the alchemist's golden elixir, then the artist who strives to "bring the soul of man to God" becomes an expediting agent in the profane perfection of mankind, much like those ancient miners who were thought to quicken the maturation of metals.

Now we will look at four poems"Fergus and the Druid," "The Stolen Child," "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," and "The White Birds"that display a marked resistance to achieving the transcendent ideals of spiritual alchemy.

"Fergus and the Druid" (1892) melds together Hindu and hermetic concepts, as in "The Indian upon God," but does so with the help of Irish myth. Yeat's early reading of Madame Blavatsky and his contact with the Theosophists would have prompted him to amalgamate myth and divine philosophy from many disparate sources. In "Fergus and the Druid" the Hindu idea of metempsychosis is hitched to a hermetic hierarchical chain of being, which in turn is compounded by the assumption that "everything that lives is holy." However, in this poem we see these ideas come to a negative fruition.

Fergus, king of the Red Branch, has relinquished his crown because his kingship has become a "burden without end." The Druid asks him, "What would you, Fergus?" Fergus answers

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that he would "Be no more a king, but learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours" (*TP* 32; *VP* 104). The Druid offers his wisdom to Fergus in the form of a "little bag of dreams." In choosing to participate in the Druid's supernatural life, Fergus opens a Pandora's box that allows him to experience his past lives, mounting from the primordial elements to more complex forms of being:

> I see my life go drifting like a river
> From change to change; I have been many things
> A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
> Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
> An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
> A king sitting upon a chair of gold
> And all these things were wonderful and great
>
> (*TP* 33; *VP* 104)

We have already seen in "The Sad Shepherd" how nonhuman natural forms express a consciousness of self. In "Fergus and the Druid," the Druid's little bag of dreams transforms Fergus's consciousness, so that he perceives that Being is not a possession of the separate self but pervades all time and space. One might expect ecstasy to issue from the mind's opening to this cosmic-consciousness, but Fergus comes to an unexpectedly mournful conclusion:

> But now I have grown nothing, knowing all,
> Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
> Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing!
>
> (*TP* 33; *VP* 104)

In considering the poem as a laboratory in which Yeats could put extraordinary ideas to the test of his imagination, we might conclude in this instance that either the idea failed, or, that

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the poet's imagination failed the idea. The idea of unity of consciousness underlying all creation passes the test: Fergus does witness the transmigration of his soul through the various life forms. However, experiencing this new measure of consciousness does not put a stop to suffering. Instead, Fergus's "great webs of sorrow" suggest that the transmutation of his vision has prevented him from returning to his life as Red Branch King. Fergus has put on knowledge but not power. Transcendent vision renders him passive.

Another way to understand Fergus's failure is through our introductory epigraph from "The Stone and the Elixir." In that review, Yeats uses the alchemical image of the elixir to symbolize a seemingly negative transformation of consciousness: "The elixir dissolves everything into nothing. Peer Gynt lets sheer phantasy take possession of his life, and fill him with the delusion that he is this or that personage, now a hunter, now a troll, now a merchant, now a prophet, until the true Peer Gynt is well-nigh dissolved" (*UCP* 344). This formulation of the elixir and its effects is a nearly exact transcription of "Fergus and the Druid." While Yeats does not make an emphatic value judgment about the psychology of the elixir, we can infer that the elixir represented for him a threat to individual selfhood. The sovereign self is, of course, the primary target of the deconstructive project to uncover the anxious facades erected against what Gayatri Spivak terms "radical heterogeneity." Even though the experience of being a gleam of light or a drop of the ocean provides a rich imaginative excursion for the hermetic artista sort of ultimate "negative capability"Fergus is decidedly disappointed at being deconstructed. Having tasted the elixir and "grown nothing, knowing all," Fergus realizes the twenty-five hundred-year-old claim of Buddhism: the self is an illusion. Interestingly, in

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a pre-Saussurian image that presages semiotics, Fergus bemoans the "great webs of sorrow" of his mystical illumination. Does this sorrow issue from a bruised ego, which can no longer appropriate the signifier "I," or does the web of sorrow emanate from a compassionate apprehension of the interconnectedness of the units in the chain? In effect, then, "Fergus and the Druid" raises the question, Is the elixir worth the price? The answer is a resounding no.

The ostensible threat that the elixir poses to Fergus also appears in "The Stolen Child." The question keeps arising, How will the attainment of perfectionalbeit imaginaryaffect my human, mortal life? "The Stolen Child" raises the question in a less philosophical matrix than does "Fergus and the Druid." In "The Stolen Child" the faeries appear in the Irish locales of Sleuth Wood, Rosses, and Glen-Car. Aside from the peasant lore Yeats would have heard in the course of his upbringing, he also found support for the presence of elemental beings in the alchemical cosmology of Paracelsus: "There are beings who live exclusively in only one of these elements, while man exists in all three (earth, air, water). Each element is visible and tangible to the beings living therein, and its qualities may be known by its inhabitants." 6

In "The Stolen Child" the faeries infiltrate human life to steal away a child from the suffering world. The first three stanzas build up a stark contrast between the faery and human realms. The faeries live a life of gaiety, ease, playfulness, and dancing under the moon, "While the world is full of troubles / And anxious in its sleep" (*TP* 18; *VP* 88). The italicized refrain shows the faeries persuading the child to escape with them to a better existence:

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild

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With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

(*TP* 18; *VP* 88)

Although this refrain suggests that the human child is leaving a bad situation, his departure will deprive him of the simple comforts that ease the world of weeping:

He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.

(*TP* 19; *VP* 88)

Though the Celtic twilight has its enchanting side, Yeats is loathe to enter this "other" world. By representing the passage into the spiritual dimension as an act of kidnapping, Yeats highlights the inimical and hazardous aspects of the human relation to the superhuman. In effect, the higher world poses a threat to the lower world: it can overcome and override human life. Its power is fatal.

Moreover, Yeats is very uneven in his treatment here, as the poem fails to imagine the faeryland to which the child is being pirated. The poem raises many questions, such as, Can a human body enter the faery dimension? Do the poem's omissions of otherworldliness suggest the poet's incapacity to gaze at that Otherness or to render his vision of it? Further, since Yeats figures the faeries as occupying the active position in relation to the human world, is Yeats (under the guise of the stolen child) erecting a resistance toward his own wariness of becoming a passive agent? As we will see, these suspected

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fears hover around the edges of other works in which Yeats tropes the higher alchemical world as active (and controlling), such as in "Rosa Alchemica" and "Leda and the Swan."

"The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" also evaluates the loss and recompense resulting from the intersection of higher and lower worlds. Again Yeats sets the lyric in actual Ireland; again a human being is transportedat least mentallyto another dimension. What the enchanted mouthpieces of faeryland have to offer makes the man's earthly life seem one of ignorance and vanity in comparison. The heralds of that other worldfish, lugworm, knot-grass, and wormsprovide the man with alchemical glimpses of silver and gold, those higher values that elude him because he is too entrenched in earthly cares. 7 The last stanza portrays a rather inimical transcendent power troubling the eternal sleep of the man who dreamed of faeryland:

> He slept under the hill of Lugnagall;
> And might have known at last unhaunted sleep
> Under that cold and vapor-turbaned steep,
> Now that the earth had taken man and all:
> Did not the worms that spired about his bones
> Proclaim with that unwearied, reedy cry
> That God has laid his fingers on the sky,
> That from those fingers glittering summer runs
> Upon the dancer by the dreamless wave.
> Why should those lovers that no lovers miss
> Dream, until God burn nature with a kiss?
> The man has found no comfort in the grave.
>
> (*TP* 4445; *VP* 128)

Robert Schuler writes about this poem, "The death of the dreamer leaves Faerylandhere the land of perfect love, symbolized

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by the union of the masculine and feminine elements as gold and silveryet unfound; as always, the philosopher's stone has eluded the seeker." 8 Whereas Schuler provides an insightful gloss for the alchemical symbolism in the poem, he goes far afield when calling the man a seeker. The man has no yearning, let alone conception, for the philosopher's stone. He wants the simple comforts of a wife, a full purse, and eternal rest.

"The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" and "The Stolen Child" portray passive victims. Neither man nor child actively seek perfection but are sought out by alien presences. "Fergus and the Druid," conversely, portrays an ardent seeker who bargains for wisdom and must accept the fate resulting from his own choice. Yet which fate is the more promising: the ignorant man who cannot find peace in the grave, or the all-knowing man who cannot find peace in his illumination?

Further, "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" seems like the darker twin of "The Indian Upon God." Both poems use nonhuman natural forms as unlikely heralds of transcendent reality. However, the "Man" stands out in stark contrast to the Indian: one sees divinity in all creation, and the other is perturbed by nightmares of divine intrusion into his life. Again, alchemical transcendence has a terrible, terrifying aspect, here echoing the Christian charge of eternal unrest for the unrepentent sinner.

In these early poems, we can also see how Yeats is testing out alchemical ideas in relation to human love. Gaining a foothold in the higher worlds, or attaining perfection, also exacts too dear a price for the young lovers who populate many of Yeats's early lyrics.

Any love poem in *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889) will demonstrate the vulnerable position that romantic love held in Yeats's imagination. A meeting of lovers can take

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place only "far away [from] the unquiet lands" (*TP* 14; *VP* 78). And even on secluded islands of tranquility, passion must run its seasonal course and pass on. In *The Rose* (1893), on the other hand, Yeats does not encourage the impulse to flee from love's opponents. Instead, the lovers tend to scrutinize the various external forces that make love a difficult enterprise. In "The Pity of Love," for instance, the lover catalogs love's opponents:

> The folk who are buying and selling,
> The clouds on their journey above,
> The cold wet winds ever blowing,
> And the shadowy hazel grove
> Where mouse-grey waters are flowing,
> Threaten the head that I love.
>
> (*TP* 40; *VP* 119)

Here the marketplace and the transient nature of existence are the major contenders against enduring passion. Only through the image of the hazel grove (i.e., druidic wisdom of Faeryland) does Yeats parenthetically hint that the values of esotericism also threaten his beloved.

In "The White Birds" Yeats portrays spiritual alchemy as an obstacle to romantic love. The poem's hermetic content will only be clear, however, when one knows that the symbols of lily and rose (in stanzas 2 and 3) belong to alchemy. Lily and rose appear in tandem in many of Yeats's early poems; rather than developing them as symbols, Yeats places them as signposts of alchemical content. Schuler notes that "the lily and rose in the alchemical tradition stood for the moon and sun, or the white and red tinctures or elixirs, the final materials of the philosopher's stone." 9

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A weariness comes from those dreamers, dew-dabbled, the lily and rose;
Ah, dream not of them, my beloved, the flame of the meteor that goes,
Or the flame of the blue star that lingers hung low in the fall of the dew:
For I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam: I and you!

(*TP* 41; *VP* 122)

Further, Schuler provides glosses on other images that he considers part of the alchemical process. "The flame of the meteor" he equates with later images of fire that Yeats employed to denote "the sudden heat of simplification," those purging, consuming, and transforming flames of God's holy fire. The lover wants to avoid this alchemical fire because he fears a radical recasting of consciousness. He wishes to preserve him-self and his beloved in their present state:

I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;
Soon far from the rose and the lily and fret of the flames would we be,
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!

(*TP* 42; *VP* 122)

The goal of the Great Work, thought the young poet, asked for a sacrifice greater than he was willing to offer. According to Schuler, "[In] his desire to escape the flames of simplification, the lover makes a startling critique of a metaphysical

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system which, while it promises no less than ecstatic participation in divinity for the individual, has no place for the values of human love." 10 It is unclear whether the value system of alchemy accommodated the value of human love. The alchemical texts that Yeats read bore traces of medieval morality, advocating abstention from earthly passions to purify the soul. Though it is possible to read the white birds as tropes of resistance to spiritual alchemy, it is perhaps more contempo-raneously apposite to echo the previous readings about "Fergus and the Druid." That is, the "fret of the flames" hearkens back to one of the many deconstructive processes that alchemy propoundedthe *purgatorio*. Yeats both courts and flees from the threat (or fret) of a signification coming down from a higher order that might destroy the human network of signs. As the above stanza suggests, the poem's speaker, if he could arrange things his way, would create a third precinct, not subject to the forces of time or eternityboth of which eat away at the structures the speaker wants to preserve: the "I and you" from the first stanza. The "I and you," when once imagined as the two white birds, become visual duplicates of each other, or in other words, like two identical I's. Once again, the sovereignty of the subjectthis time masquerading behind a trope of romantic love that collapses into a narcissistic conflationis at risk. Spiritual alchemy represents the threat of the self's disintegration.

Two poems from *The Wind Among the Reeds*"The Travail of Passion" and "The Song of the Wandering Aengus"display Yeats's attempts to reconcile the earthly and the transcendent in human love. In the first, "The Travail of Passion" (1896), Yeats endorses the course of suffering and alchemical death that "The White Birds" sought to flee. The women speakers of this poem are those attendants of Christ's crucifixion

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who go to prepare his body in the crypt. Yeats here restores the word "passion" to its original meaning of suffering endured for a higher purpose. However spiritual the context may be, Yeats freights this eight-line poem with sensual images and thereby weds the two extremes of sense and spirit:

> When the flaming lute-thronged angelic door is wide;
> When an immortal passion breathes in mortal clay;
> Our hearts endure the scourge, the plaited thorns, the way
> Crowded with bitter faces, the wounds in palm and side,
> The vinegar-heavy sponge, the flowers by Kedron stream;
> We will bend down and loosen our hair over you,
> That it may drop faint perfume, and be heavy with dew,
> Lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream.
>
> (*TP* 7071; *VP* 172)

The unbinding of hair occurs repeatedly throughout *The Wind Among the Reeds*, usually suggesting the onset of sexual encounter. 11 It is the women's immortal passion for the Christ that allows them to bear their agony. And though the higher and lower worlds have joined to create a tempered perfection, the implicit price of such perfection is exacting: rebirth in the spirit amounts to forfeiture of physical existence. Yet, through propinquity of spiritual bond, the women partake of Christ's suffering and subsequently must share in the glorious light of his resurrected body.

Schuler reads the last line about lily and rose as "sexual union will be identical with spiritual union."12 Although a clear case can be made for equating sexual and spiritual union in Yeats's later work, there is still too much tension at this point to infer an identity between the two; that is, Yeats had not yet achieved a union of the sexual and spiritual in his actual life, though such an idea was nascent in his mind. The 1895

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essay "The Moods" describes the "mysterious instinct" of the artist as that which "discover[s] immortal moods in mortal desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion" (*E&I* 195). That Yeats deemed the physical and the transient to be the hiding places of the eternal and uncorrupt reflects the basic line of alchemical thought. That the immortal and undecaying may be discovered within the dross and drama of human emotion echoes the alchemical axiom that gold may be extracted from lead.

Perhaps of greatest note is that when Yeats uses feminine speakers, the resistance to alchemical transformation is removed, due largely to the convention of woman as passive receiver or reflector. In this rather patriarchal model of the feminine, woman occupies a naturally semiotic position and is, therefore, conditioned to accept signification from the Other, whether as spiritual or earthly bride.

"The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897) also strives toward a union of the opposites, of male and female, natural and supernatural. However, unlike "The Travail of Passion" in which supernatural man is attended by natural woman, "The Song of Wandering Aengus" features a supernatural woman bewitching the natural man. Yet both poems represent a compromise in terms of actual possibilities: their fulfillment occurs either in myth or in a mythic landscape. "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" seems to be the only early poem wherein Yeats employs alchemical symbolism to christen, rather than exclude, the value of romantic love. Once having made this claim, however, it needs to be qualified by pointing to the region of fantasy in which such hermetically sanctioned love may be transacted.

The wandering Aengus crosses and recrosses the borders of the tangible and intangible world several times within the

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poem. The first stanza is entirely naturalistic except for the second line:

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

(*TP* 59; *VP* 150)

The fire in Aengus's head, according to Yeats's gloss, stands for imagination: "Hanrahan is the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather possession, or the adoration of the shepherds; Michael Robartes is the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or the adoration of the Magi; while Aedh is the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves" (*VP* 803). All three envoys of the imaginationHanrahan, Robartes, and Aedhwork together in Aengus's imagination. The first stanza depicts the rugged yet enchanted simplicity of Hanrahan; the second stanza shows Aengus brooding upon the greatness of the phantasm that materialized when he "went to blow the fire aflame"; and the third stanza shows him offering the fruits of heaven to his beloved.

In stanza two, "a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair" (*TP* 60; *VP* 150) materializes out of something rustling on the floor. Critics have connected the image of apple blossom with Maud Gonne, yet Maud seems to have little if any pertinence to the poem. 13 The glimmering girl is not flesh and blood; she is a herald out of Aengus's own imagination.

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To employ a Jungian term, she is an anima figure. However, if we choose to see the girl as an embodiment of Maud, then the poem reads as a gauge of Yeats's longings for the fiery heroineimpossible to attain, impossible to relinquish.

Stanza 3 introduces alchemical symbology to represent the highest union between masculine and feminine principles:

> Though I am old with wandering
> Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
> I will find out where she has gone,
> And kiss her lips and take her hands;
> And walk among long dappled grass,
> And pluck till time and times are done
> The silver apples of the moon,
> The golden apples of the sun.
>
> (*TP* 60; *VP* 150)

Whether we interpret the girl as a veiled Maud or siren of the imagination, Aengus's union with her is postponed for a future time and setting. The silver and golden apples symbolize the alchemical conjunction of solar and lunar consciousness, of the day's labor and the night's dream. Though some critics interpret the poem as achieving this union, this sacred marriage or *hieros gamos* exists only as an imagined possibility of the future, of eternity. 14

Although "The Travail of Passion" and "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" strive toward union of above and below, their attainment is, at best, provisional, possible only in the artist's imagination. Yeats's primary stance toward the supernatural in the early poems is probably best discovered in the prefatory poem of *The Rose*, "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time." The poet who would sing the "ancient ways" of Ireland asks his muse,

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Come near, come near, come nearAh, leave me still
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
Lest I no more hear of things that crave;
The weak worm hiding down in its small cave;
The field-mouse running by me in the grass,
And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass[.]

(*TP* 31; *VP* 101)

That is, the symbolic dimension of the mystical rose, to which spiritual alchemy provided a portal, contained power sufficient enough to prompt Yeats to take up a position of negotiationor resistancein relation to it. The rose symbol, the forces of its signification, is Yeats's Mephistopheles, to which he is unwilling to contract himself body and soul.

In the next chapter, as we turn to "Rosa Alchemica," we will see how Yeats graphically portrays the transcendence and union of spiritual alchemy. With a freer hand in the medium of prose fiction, Yeats dramatizes how entering the "other" world poses an overwhelming threat to his character's existence.

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3

Avoidance And The Void

I came to believe in a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation. But that was not enough, for these images showed intention and choice. They had a relation to what one knew and yet were an extension of one's knowledge. If no mind was there [i.e., a greater mind], why should I suddenly come upon salt and antimony, upon the liquefaction of the gold, as they were understood by the alchemists and who can have put together so ingeniously, working by some law of association and yet with clear intention and personal application, certain mythological images? [T]his study had created a contact or mingling with minds who had followed a like study in some other age, and that these minds still saw and thought and chose. Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea.

Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*

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I

If Yeats's early poetry contains an oblique but palpable resistance to his transcendent ideals, this resistance becomes all the more clear and dramatic in his fin de siècle fiction. The three stories "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "Adoration of the Magi," composed in 189697, appear at the close of *The Secret Rose*, Yeats's collection of tales about Irish history ranging over the entire Christian era. Of the above three alchemical stories which this chapter studies, Stephen Putzel writes: "As the stories begin, the serpentine path of time has formed the final coil, has twisted into the *fin de siècle*. As the two thousand years of Irish history outlined in the volume approach the end, the cataclysmic movements of history appear as prefigurations of a universal apocalypse that will signal not just the end of one coil and the beginning of a new one, but the last coil of the Christian era." 1 As valid as Putzel's argument is for the historical structure of *The Secret Rose*, these three stories avoid grounding their fictional realities in modern Ireland. Yeats veers away from any detail that might set the reader firmly in the fin de siècle, such as Joyce portrayed in *Dubliners*. Instead, as their titles suggest, "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "Adoration of the Magi" deal more with archetypal spiritual orientation. What is significantly modern, though, is the form in which the supernal quest reveals itself. The earlier stories in *The Secret Rose* presented their spiritual heroes in the guise of stalwart Christian knights armed with faith and a sword, or in that of a simple mystic such as Olioll, who has unburdened his soul of its last ounce of pride and, "having grown nothing,"

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has come to God. The spiritual representatives of these last stories, however, employ unorthodox approaches to salvation and transformation.

These pioneers of spirit are Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, whose appearance throughout Yeats's canon signals the artist's struggle to articulate a new depth of understanding, which Yeats's contact with the occult had hatched. Both Robartes and Aherne contain elements of the holy Crusader, druidic wizard, and self-effacing mystic. And though the form of their quests vary greatly, Robartes and Aherne are both members of the Order of the Alchemical Roseclosely resembling the Order of the Golden Dawnan occult society devoted to preparing the ground for the new spiritual dispensation that was supposed to emerge at the turn of the century.

In the previous chapter, we examined a world structure based on the alchemical principle of correspondences (i.e., alchemy spatialized as landscape). In turning to these prose fictions, we can see Yeats's alchemy advancing to a larger stage of conception, wherein the movement of time (or cycles of history) hastens a refining transformation of civilization. Just as the skeleton key of "as above, so below" unlocked the mysteries of the macrocosm and microcosm, a similar principle operates in regard to alchemical time: *The way forward is also the way back*. Frances Yates explains this principle as it affected the Renaissance spirit:

> The great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigor, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards. The cyclic view of time was a perpetual movement from pristine golden ages of purity and truth through successive brazen and iron ages and the search for truth was thus for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the baser metals of the present were corrupt degenerations.

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> Man's history was not an evolution from primitive animal origins through ever growing complexity and progress. The past was always better than the presentprogress was revival, rebirth, renaissance of antiquity. 2

This simultaneous forward and backward movement is highlighted in "Rosa Alchemica" when Michael Robartes claims that the new era, which will supplant Christianity, will be a "multiform influx," hearkening back to the Greek pantheon. By expanding the application of alchemy to the movement of history, Yeats also widens the context and purpose of the individual's alchemical quest. That is, the individual's transformation can and should affect society; the questing soul becomes a retort, or vehicle, for the forces of eternity to enter into time.

Even though these stories depict society at the crossroads of change, Yeats does not articulate a precise criticism of the present era, nor does he prophesy with any clarity the dimensions of the coming age. Yeats's essays and *Autobiography* provide more specific material on these points. "The Body of Father Christian Rosencreutz" (1895), for example, suggests how the spiritual influx will reveal itself as a rebirth of the Romantic imagination in the arts. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imagination was "laid in a great tomb of criticism. I cannot get it out of my head that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of revelations, about to come in its place; for certainly a belief in a supersensual world is at hand again" (*E&I* 196, 197). The language here calls up those millenarian lines Yeats would utter twenty-four years later in "The Second Coming": "Surely some revelation is at hand, / Surely the second coming is at hand" (187; *VP* 402). The now famous "rough beast" of that poem signals some form of apocalypse. However, Yeats's Second

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Coming does not predict the return of Christ. Rather, Christianity will be replaced due to its insufficiency for the modern world:

> Why are these strange souls born everywhere today?With hearts that Christianity, as shaped by Christianity, cannot satisfy. Why should we believe that religion can never bring round its antithesis? Is it true that our aim is disturbed by the "trembling of the veil of the temple," or "that our age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book"? Some of us thought that book near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again. (*Au* 210)

Here Yeats's reference to a sacred book results from a hybridizing of his occult experiences and his stake in the Symbolist movement, whose aesthetics, as informed by Mallarmé, were future oriented in their impossible project to represent the "world of essences" beyond the register of the senses. The idea of a sacred book appears in variant forms in "Rosa Alchemica" and "Tables of the Law." In both instances, though, the books do not contain new revelations; their revelations are associated with the Middle Ages, an age when hermeticism infiltrated and joined forces with Christian mysticism. That is, just as the Renaissance took its inspiration from the classical past, so does Yeats take his impetus for renewal from the hermeticism of the Middle Ages (as well as from Greek antiquity).

Yeats chose the same anonymous narrator for all three stories. He is the focal point for resistance to the radical change that Yeats intimated in his contemporaneous essays. The narrator relates that he had once been a member of the Order of the Alchemical Rose but became disaffected because the order's practices brought him to the brink of terror. Though

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some critics maintain that the narrator is a stand-in for Yeats, I would clarify this by stating that Yeats used his creative work to give form to the dissenting, cautioning voices that his declamatory stances in his essays would not allow. The fact that Yeats chose to suppress the narrator's identity argues that this posture of anonymity provided safe harbor; that is, Yeats never fully discloses to himself his own resistance. As we have seen Yeats in relation to his early poems, he endorses the truth of transcendent worldviews but, when put to the test, the poet finds the experience of transcendence too threatening. The narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" plays the same role: he is fascinated by alchemical theory yet becomes terrified when theory becomes reality.

The narrator's aesthetic and conservative streaks are clear endowments from Yeats's own character. The narrator's aestheticism is exaggerated and parodic: he spends all his waking hours in contemplation of artworks. Robartes and Aherne threaten the comfortable contemplation to which the narrator has become wearily accustomed. To escape their disruptive influence, the narrator clings to an "orthodoxy of the multitude" that seems inappropriate for an educated man who has traveled some distance on the path of the occult.

Thematically, the narrator embodies the conflict central to most fiction: change versus the status quo. Orthodoxy represents shelter, anonymity, safe harbor; the occult symbolizes change, disorder, anarchy. The narrator thinks the occult forces harnessed by the Order of the Alchemical Rose will erase his human identity, rendering him an empty puppet to do the bidding of alien divinities. Conceiving that such service would strip him of autonomy and will, he imagines he would become a hypnotized slave. And because Yeats's first-person narrational strategy compels the reader to sympathize

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with the narrator, the reader is persuaded that alchemical transformation leads to an abortion of the self.

Although the narrator appears to invest in the institutions of religion and cultural heritage to give a meaningful order to his life, the highest ordering principle in the narrator's world is his own ego, and he is not prepared to surrender its sovereignty. In Jung's psychological conception of alchemy, the process of refinement and transformation means the gradual displacement of the ego (lead) in favor of a higher, more embracing viewpoint (gold). In order to progress on this alchemical journey, the individual must cease to depend on the sustenance offered by the orthodox, the collective, and the institutional, and must tread the dark, uncharted territories of the psyche to reach the "self" (i.e., the possibility of becoming one's own authority). Therefore the narrator's dependence on the "multitude" demonstrates a retardation of the subject's developmental process. His conversion to orthodox religion allows him to retain his spiritual interests, while forgoing any stiff commitment or sacrifice. His ego can remain intact, and he can remain anonymous in the orthodox multitude, feeling strength in numbers. Moreover, the narrator alleges that Michael Robartes and the Order of the Alchemical Rose pose a threat not only to the narrator's personal identity but to the entire Christian civilization. He fears that Robartes' alchemy will bring about anarchy on all levels of human existence.

Anarchy, to pose a definition in alchemical terms, represents the dissolution of an established ordereither psychological or politicalin order to make it regress to its original form, the *prima materia* or the *massa confusa*. Anarchy is the process of decrystallization that precedes a new, more refined formation. On the scale of society, anarchy might appear as a return to a state of brute chaos. Prior to the "mere anarchy"

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that World War I "loosed upon the world," and prior to the chaotic uprisings on the Irish scene between 1913 and 1916, yeats wrote about the threat of anarchy in relation to the Order of the Golden Dawn at the turn of the century. And although the events surrounding this anarchy were not connected to government per se, the matter was nonetheless political because it involved struggles for power and authority.

In April 1901, Yeats delivered to the Golden Dawn a stern and impassioned speech, "Is the Order of R. R. & A. C. to Remain a Magical Order?" 3 What appealed to Yeats as an ordering principle in government was an aristocratic hierarchy, and this same principle applied to his thinking about occult societies. This speech demonstrates how important he thought hierarchy was to the structure of the Goden Dawn (and hence we can find resonances in the fictional "Order of the Alchemical Rose"). He never published this address, since an oath of secrecy concerning the order's practices was binding upon all members. Yeats composed it for an audience of familiars learned in the hermetic arts, and its purpose was to persuade the Golden Dawn's members to preserve their order's hierarchical structure. This speech bears study at this juncture because it presses home how clearly Yeats viewed the occult group in alchemical terms, as a microcosm that must maintain the form of the macrocosmas above, so below. Hence, the speech provides background for the structural dynamics of the fictional "Order of the Alchemical Rose."

In 1901 the Golden Dawn was suffering from internecine strife over the expulsion of its leader, MacGregor Mathers, and over the varying opinions concerning the infrastructure of the group. Yeats takes an adamantly conservative stance in his address and advises against any reform that would dismantle the hierarchy of "grades" that comprised the order's

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foundation. The grades, ranging from 1 to 9, theoretically conformed to supernatural laws and symbolized the passage from lower to higher levels of mastery. Yeats thought that the influx of spiritual powers were channeled through human conduits, flowing from the most highly developed souls to those less practiced in the hermetic arts. This channel is a dynamic form of the alchemical chain of being stretching from God to stone. To pass the exams for each grade, the adept undertook a program of spiritual refinement: "The passing by their means from one Degree to another is an evocation of the Supreme Life, a treading of a symbolic path, a passage through a symbolic gate, a climbing towards the light which it is the essence of our system to believe, flows continually from the lowest of the invisible degrees to the highest." 4 Yeats insisted on a quite literal reading of the medieval world view of correspondences, maintaining that spirit and structure had to be well-fitted if the Golden Dawn were not to fall prey to "evil magic":

> Because a Magical Order differs from a society for experiment and research in that it is an Actual Being, an organic life holding within itself the highest life of its members now and in past times, to weaken its Degrees is to loosen the structure, to dislimn, to disembody, to dematerialize an Actual Being; and to sever the link between one Degree and another, above all between the Degrees that are in the heart is to cut this being in two, and to confine the magical life of its invisible Adepti to the lower substances of this being. To do this last thing is to create an evil symbol, to make the most evil of all symbols, to awake the energy of an evil sorcery.5

According to this theory, not only do individual men and women represent microcosms of the great macrocosm, but

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the hierarchical order of a magic society constitutes a cosmic body on a scale larger than a single human being. The magical order gives the individual greater access to the spiritual levels of the universe. Yeats's ideal of Unity could be attained only by keeping a foothold on this ladder that linked the coarse to the fine.

The adepts whom Yeats addressed were trying to change the Order to a democratic structure, which mirrored what was occurring on the political scene at the time. Yeats argued that this structural change (composed of small groups focusing on different interests) would unleash a negative, anarchic force into their midst.

> If indeed we must change, this transference of influence from Degrees, which are like wheels turning upon a single pivot, to "groups" which will be like wheels turning upon different pivots, like toothed wheels working one against the other, this surrender of ancient unity to anarchic diversity, let us make it as complete as possible. 6

Yeats further links the contemporary political climate and the proposed structural renovation when he attributes the impulse for this change to the contemporaneous cry for freedom:

> Those who would break this unity would do so in the name of freedom. I too might talk of freedom but I have preferred to talk of greater things than freedom. In our day every idler, every trifler, every bungler, cries out for freedom; but the busy, and weighty minded, and skillful handed, meditate more upon the bonds that they gladly accept than upon the freedom that has never meant more in their eyes than the right to choose the bonds that have made them faithful servants to the law. We have set before us a

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> certain work that may be of incalculable importance in the change of thought that is coming upon the world. Let us see that we do not leave it undone because the creed of the triflers is being cried in our ears. 7

To Yeats this binding hermetic order was alchemy in human action, alchemy politicized. However, such a tightly knit order is precisely what prevents the narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" from committing himself to the Alchemical Rose and its authorities. The narrator's fear of being overpowered either by a magus, Michael Robartes, or by invisible beings leads him to flee occultism and seek refuge in the "clamorous multitude." Politically speaking, the multitude is democracy; spiritually, it is orthodox Christianity.

Yeats also thought that democracy had another spiritual correlative in mysticism. That is, Yeats thought the soul's union with God would eschew all distinctions of a separate self. The only brand of spiritual development that Yeats could personally endorse was one in which the soul maintained its uniqueness, or "self-delighting." In these subtle distinctions of the politics of spirituality, Yeats contrasted himself with his good friend George Russell: "[It] is the essence of that genius that all souls are equal in [God's] eyes. Queen or apple woman, it is all one, seeing that none can be more than immortal soul. Whereas I have been concerned with men's capacities, with all that divides man from man" (*M* 30). Whereas Russell, the democratic mystic, would erase from God's eyes all measure of the greater or lesser, Yeats affirms an aristocratic bias of the spirit. Further, we can see numerous instances in Yeats's poetry wherein he forgoes the allurement of mystic solvency in the being of God in favor of retaining the individual voice of the poet entrenched in history, as in "Vacillation" and "Dialogue

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of Self and Soul." Therefore, in the following study of "Rosa Alchemica," we will see how Yeats makes more explicit his resistance to the transcendent impulse he avowed in his essays.

II

"Rosa Alchemica," the initial and longest of the three stories, is narrated in the first person by an Irishman of the 1890s. A world-weary aesthete, the narrator has also become weary in his contemplation of the artworks with which he has surrounded himself. Ten years past, he had participated in occult arts but withdrew from them in fear. Michael Robartes, his former teacher in the hermetic arts, returns to attract the narrator back to the occult. They go to western Ireland where the Order of the Alchemical Rose has its temple. During a dance of initiation, the narrator comes to the brink of a higher world but faints away in terror. He awakens the next day to find the temple and its initiates are a decayed, sordid remnant of the previous night's splendor. As he flees, a mob of Christian peasants converges on the temple to stone Robartes and his disciples. The story closes with the narrator's account of his conversion from esoteric spirituality to orthodox religion.

The story is partitioned into five sections, and the prefatory epigram by Euripides has its importance for each section: "O blessed and happy he who, knowing the mysteries of the gods, sanctifies his life, and purifies his soul, celebrating orgies in the mountains with holy purification" (*Myth* 264). This quotation, from Euripides' Dionysian tragedy *The Bacchae*, employs the same paradoxical language as found in "The Travail of Passion." The word orgy cannot help but conjure a

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welter of sexual activity, as Yeats later imaged in "News for the Delphic Oracle," wherein "nymphs and satyrs copulate in the foam" (338; *VP* 612). Here, though, the orgy must be examined in the context of spiritual purification. This juxtaposition of sense and spirit signals the yoking of opposites that the story tentatively promotes. "Rosa Alchemica" maintains and insists upon that tension represented by spiritual and sexual union, and Yeats's stylistic deviceemploying the sensual to adumbrate the spiritualreinforces his thematic concern to unite the opposites. Further, by setting the earthly in a cosmic context, by spiritualizing matter, Yeats is aesthetically demonstrating the hermetic key "as above, so below."

In the 1896 *Savoy* edition of "Rosa Alchemica," Yeats opened the story with explicit disclosures about Michael Robartes and his sect that resemble the Greek tale of Dionysus and his tragic attempts to establish his new brand of divinity in Thebes. The later printings simply encapsulate the past without revealing much: "It is now more than ten years since I met, for the last time, Michael Robartes, and for the first and the last time his friends and fellow students; and witnessed his and their tragic end" (*Myth* 267). The original version, however, disclosed this critical information:

> A few years ago an extraordinary religious frenzy took hold upon the peasantry of a remote Connemara headland; and a number of eccentric men and women, who had turned an old customhouse into a kind of college, were surprised at prayer, as it was then believed, by a mob of fisherman, stone masons, and small farmers, and beaten to death with stones, which were heaped up close at hand to be ready for the next breach in the wave-battered pier. Vague rumors of pagan ceremonies and mysterious idolatries had for some

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> time drifted among the cabins; and the indignation of the ignorant had been further inflamed by a priest, unfrocked for drunkenness, who had preached at the road-side of the secret coming of the Anti-Christ. I first heard of these unfortunates, on whom the passion for universal ideas, which distinguishes the Celtic and Latin races, was to bring so dreadful a martyrdom, but a few weeks before the end. (*VSR* 126)

Yeats's revision of this passage omits the religious frenzy, pagan ceremonies, and mysterious idolatries, all of which would have reinforced the Bacchic influence: the tale of a modern Dionysus, it seems, did not accommodate Yeats's primary agenda. In the ancient Bacchanalia the devotees went into trance states, donned animal skins, and surrendered to psychic energies of a bestial ferocity that often led to violence. The initiates of the Alchemical Rose, though, do not yield to such forces. Michael Robartes' mission is not the renewal of a primitive godhead but the expansion of godhead beyond the precincts of Christianity, and this expansion draws part of its impetus from the Greek religious impulse.

Although we have already discussed the narrator's choice to follow orthodox religion, the first section of the story provides the intellectual background of the narrator's true spiritual fabric. In the opening paragraph we learn that he has written a small book, itself entitled *Rosa Alchemica*, "somewhat in the manner of Sir Thomas Browne" (*Myth* 267). This detail of authorial influence is significant in that, as evidenced by *Religio Medici* and *Hydrotaphia*, Browne's style, at once contemplative yet encyclopedic, is a likely precursor to Yeats's discursive prose writings; and further, Browne's subject, which blends science and spirit, manifests Yeats's strong impulse to unite the opposites:

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"contraries though they destroy one another, are yet the life of one another." 8 In preparing this book, the narrator had discovered that the doctrine of the alchemists was

> no mere chemical phantasy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements, and to man himself; and that they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as a part of a universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance; and this enabled me to make my little book a fanciful revery over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences. (*Myth* 267)

Here the narrator conflates Platonism, hermeticism, and Paterian aesthetics into a new doctrine of his own. Platonism posits the existence of an invisible dimension of essences, in which are stored the templates for all created beings and things; the alchemists tracked the passage from the visible to the invisible worlds, from the perishable to the imperishable. It is not difficult for the narrator to take these ideas in an aesthetic direction, resonant of Pater, with the simple conversion of the transmutation of life into art. As he equates "essence" with the work of art, the narrator therefore invents his own form of aesthetic alchemy. Indeed, reverence for the work of art as the highest possible manifestation of human creativity is a recurrent theme in Yeats's work. It especially underscores the idea of "as above, so below" because the human act of creation microcosmically copies the act of God creating.

In exploring the relationship between artist and adept, Yeats is making a comment about the insufficiency of art for art's sake, which results in creative sterility, as when the narrator attempts to live his spiritual life through art alone. His regimen of aesthetic contemplation has come into being as a

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bulwark against his former experiences with Michael Robartes, who had pushed him to the edge of a metaphysical void. To keep at bay the threat of the void, the narrator closes himself in his room and concentrates on the various cultural icons he has collected. As discussed in chapter 2, Yeats distanced himself from the uncertainties of mystical transcendence through artistic representation of his beloved terror; here, however, the narrator exaggerates this mental distancing to the point of complete isolation from society, as well as from his own creative force.

Works of art become pearls of great price for which the narrator has sold most of what he possesses: he mortgages his house just to buy some antique bronze gods and goddesses. The anti-Platonism of Pater is evident in the narrator's material approach, making his rooms into "an expression of this [alchemical] favorite doctrine" (*Myth* 268). His understanding of how to transform life into art is completely literal, and to this end he surrounds himself with artistic perfection. In his zeal to be like Pater's Marius, to "be perfect to what is here and now," 9 the narrator has blotted out all vestiges of his ancestors, whose house was made "almost famous through their part in the politics of the city and their friendships with the famous men of their generations" (*Myth* 26768). He replaces the ancestral portraits with his own philosopher's stone: paintings by Crivelli and Francesca. Exchanging his ancestral lineage for artworks, the narrator is severing his genealogical extension in time to exist in a museum of eternity.

Even though the narrator has paid dearly for his own private museum, his contemplations on these objects fail to yield his desired result. The coin in which he paid cannot buy him any bread in heaven. All his initial tastes of the sublimea Christian's ecstasy, a pagan's delighthad been extended to

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him on credit, as it were: no suffering, labor, or sacrifice necessary. He committed himself to nothing: "I had gathered about me all gods because I believed in none, and experienced every pleasure because I gave myself to none, but held myself apart, individual, indissoluble, a mirror of polished steel" (268). The narrator has withdrawn into a cocoon to protect his tenuous sense of self and, in alchemical terms, has refused to submit himself to the fires of the crucible. Although he obviously desires the transformation that alchemy represents, he is trying to sidestep the process of transformation, especially so, as Yeats here conceives it, since submission to the fires entails yielding to an unknown power, an "Other." Just as in chapter 2 we studied a number of poems in which Yeats cast doubt upon the experience of transcendence because it seemed to preempt physical existence, here we see the resistance to transcendence become primarily psychological: the narrator fears losing his identity, his very self, in the void of "the above." Therefore, his energy is devoted to hardening the shell of his isolation, to making himself "indissoluble" like a mirror of steel.

Yeats borrowed the image of the mirror from Pater, who used the mirror in discussing the creative process. In Pater's 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*, he employs alchemical metaphors to describe how visual impressions become artistically transformed into linguistic works: "Had he not come to Rome partly under poetic vocation, to receive all those things, the very impress of life itself, upon the visual, the imaginative organ, as upon a mirror? To reflect them, to transmute them into golden words?" 10 Yet the narrator can transmute nothing when he makes himself into a mirror. It only divides him in two: "The one watching with heavy eyes the other's moment of content" (*Myth* 269). Reflection is too passive a process either for artistic creation or creation of a soul. Yeats later articulated

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his deprecation of the passive mirror, connecting it to the eighteenth century's "mechanical philosophy" and to Pater's cultural ideal, which could only produce "feminine" souls. In becoming a mirror, the soul loses its own inner fire.

Moreover, the narrator's world-weariness embodies the spirit of isolation that convenes over Pater's epistemology. Pater defines "experience" as such:

> Experience is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of these impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner in its own dream world. 11

It is through aesthetic alchemy that the narrator intends to transcend this prison of Paterian construction. However, this alchemy having failed, he then meets up again with Robartes' spiritual alchemy, which contains the possibility of breaking the shackles of his self-imprisonment. We may speculate that Yeats's choice to have the narrator flee from the influence of Robartes attests to Yeats's own grave misgivings about the "world of essences." Perhaps, like the narrator, he fully believed in higher worlds but feared that his personal power was not adequate to withstand those influences.

The narrator bitterly acknowledges that as either artist or alchemist he has created nothing: he has only heaped about him "the gold born in the crucible of others" (*Myth* 269). His vicarious alchemy brings him a suffering that outweighs his feeble foretastes of ecstasy; in turn, he begins a new search "for an essence which would dissolve all mortal things" (270). Dissolution, or *solutio* in alchemical terms, refers to the stage of the opus wherein the various elements comprising the *prima*

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materia are separated from each other before they can reunite. Jung correlated this action to that stage in analytic psychology when the unconscious complexes in an individual's psyche become "constellated," or rise to the level of consciousness. As we saw in the previous chapter, Yeats employed the trope of alchemical dissolution as a critical hermeneutic: "Certain alchemical writers say that the substance left behind in the retort is the philosopher's stone, and the liquid distilled over, the elixir [that] dissolves everything into nothing " (*UCP* 344).

In this connection, the narrator recalls a passage from Basilius Valentinus, a medieval alchemist: "I repeated to myself the ninth key of Basilius Valentinus, in which he compares the fire of the Last Day to the fire of the alchemist, and the world to the alchemist's furnace, and would have us know that all must be dissolved before the divine substance, material gold or immaterial ecstasy, awake" (*Myth* 270). Yeats found Valentinus attractive due to the apocalyptic emphasis that he brought to alchemy. Valentinus was a Benedictine monk in sixteenth-century Germany; after practicing alchemy in his spare time, he claimed to have found in its mysteries the heart of Christianity. The fourth keynot the ninthof his *Golden Tripod* demonstrates how Valentinus mixed alchemy with the Book of Revelation:

> At the end of the world, the world shall be judged by fire, and all those things that God made of nothing shall by fire be reduced to ashes, from which ashes the Phoenix is to produce her young. After the conflagration, there shall be formed a new heaven and a new earth, and the new man will be more noble in his glorified state. 12

Whereas Valentinus clearly intends this holy fire to purge all mankind, the narrator has reduced the scope of the transforming

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flames to himself alone. He resists any notion of a new world order coming about, especially the one that Robartes proposes. For the narrator, the fires of the "Last Day" do not pose any real threat, as they belong to the domain of the afterlife. But Robartes' alchemical flames threaten both subject and civilization with actual dissolution.

The narrator, though, is under the illusion that he has already enacted the dissolution; he thinks that he has dissolved the "mortal world and lived among immortal essences." Yet, he cannot understand why he has "obtained no miraculous ecstasy" (*Myth* 270). The failure to achieve the goal of the alchemist shows his search has been misguided; he cannot dissolve the mortal world by cloistering himself in aesthetic contemplation. By avoiding the flames of the athanor, he has forgone the suffering necessary to be born anew. Therefore, his weariness of heart remains unabated. Finally, the only real achievement the narrator has gained is a disenchantment of his hyperbolic hopes.

The second section of "Rosa Alchemica" introduces the reader to Michael Robartes and his doctrine. In appearance and interests, Robartes resembles MacGregor Mathers, that "figure of romance" Yeats described in "The Trembling of the Veil." 13 It was through Mathers that Yeats "began certain studies and experiences that were to convince [him] that images well up before the mind's eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory" (*Au* 124). Yeats also writes of Mathers as a dubious character who carried his predilections perhaps too far, such as his belief in physical alchemy. However much

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Robartes may be modeled after Mathers, Yeats, ironically, portrays Robartes' disinterest in concocting the elixir. It is the narrator who maintains an interest in physical alchemy, having purchased a set of alchemical apparatus alleged to have been used by Raymond Lully (12351316), the Catalan churchman and alchemist. The narrator uses the various implementsalembic, athanor, cruciblemuch as he uses his works of art: as symbols on which to meditate. Yet, in the scene of his reacquaintance with Robartes, the narrator uses the alchemical apparatus as a weapon. Seized with rage, he threatens to throw the alembic at Robartes. The narrator's act of anger casts him in an ironic light; he converts a symbol of his sacred philosophy into an implement of destruction. Further, his vulnerability and vehemence toward Robartes militates against the narrator's professed transcendence of the mortal world.

Aside from the actual influence that Yeats felt Mathers exercised over him, there is much in the figure of Robartes that Yeats owed to nineteenth-century French writers. The magus Janus of *Axel* 14 as well as Balzac's intense Louis Lambert15 are models of the heroic mystic. The narrator in *Louis Lambert* concludes his story about Louis in a way reminiscent of Yeats's narrator "remembering the magnetic power [Robartes] once possessed over me":

> I went to see Lambert once again I came back a prey to ideas so antagonistic to social existence that I renounced, in spite of my promises, another visit to Villenoix. The sight of Louis exercised a mysterious and dangerous influence over me. I feared to put myself again in that intoxicating atmosphere, where ecstasy was contagious. Every man would have felt, as I did, a desire to plunge into the infinite.16

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The phrase "ideas so antagonistic to social life" reminds us of the narrator's fears that Robartes' prophecies are inimical to Christian orthodoxy and to institutional patterns that stabilize social order. Though Robartes and his fictional predecessors live on the fringes of society, they are admirable men of actionvisionary radicalsin contrast to the narrator, who withdraws into contemplative impotence.

Upon their reunion, Robartes presses the same question that he posed to the narrator some time beforethat is, will he become an initiate in the Order of the Alchemical Rose? The narrator declines with even greater force this time: "I would not consent in Paris, when I was full of unsatisfied desire, and now that I have at last fashioned my life according to my desire, am I likely to consent?" (*Myth* 273). Yet he softens his emphatic tone when, admitting the need for some form of worship, he asks Robartes why he should go to "Eleusis and not Calvary?" The introduction of Eleusis reminds us of the mysteries of the Greek gods and the celebratory orgies referred to in the opening epigraph from Euripides. The narrator, fearing that he might lose himself in Bacchanalian revelry, reasserts his allegiance to Christianity.

At this point in the narrative, Yeats introduces the alchemical phase of the *nigredo*. The narrator begins "to struggle again with the shadow, as of some older night than the night of the sun, which began to dim the light of the candles and to blot out the little gleams upon the corner of picture frames and on the bronze divinities, and to turn the blue of the incense to a heavy purple; while it left the peacocks to glimmer and glow as though each separate color were a living spirit" (*Myth* 274). This overpowering shadow signals the onset of cultural anarchy. The shadow's power to blot out the light illuminating the picture frame and the figured divinities suggests that the

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register of symbolic representation is being submerged into primal darkness, into a prefigured imaginary space. The image of the shadow then induces a trance state in the narrator, which is of interest because this transformation reveals how Yeats had modernized alchemy, prefiguring Jung's psychological treatment of the subject. Yeats clearly rejected physical alchemy in favor of metaphysical or spiritual alchemy. However, his spiritualized version of alchemy surpasses the medieval allegorical rendering of the opus, which depicted the "Great Work" in terms of the soul's salvation. Yeats's conception incorporates a psychology of the soul, which includes many levels of consciousness as well as a pantheistic model of character (such as James Hillman has developed).

According to Jung, the *nigredo* is the first stage of the opus. It is a "blackening" of the *prima materia*, or rather a dimming of the conscious mind that renders the archetypes in the unconscious more apparent via their own luminosity, as suggested by the colors of the painted peacocks. At the least, the *nigredo* represents a partial surrender of the ego's conscious control in order to admit different orders of influence. This surrender is just what the narrator fears in regard to Robartes: "I would not acknowledge that he could overcome my now mature intellect" (*Myth* 274). The narrator's stated fear is interesting in that it negates the positive concerns of Yeats's speech regarding the Golden Dawn hierarchy, in which occult powers were to be transmitted from the more advanced initiates to the less advanced. Perhaps in the register of biography, we can gather some hint of a reenactment of Yeats's own resistance toward his father, J. B. Yeats, and his often overbearing influence.

The *nigredo* is further likened to black soil in which the seed of wisdom may germinate. Michael Robartes plants such

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a seed in response to the narrator's query about Eleusis and Calvary. When the ancient shadow falls over the narrator, he falls into "a profound dream-like reverie in which [he] hear[s] [Michael Robartes] speaking as at a distance" (*Myth* 274). I will quote the complete passage, since it contains the salient features of that alchemical philosophy which Yeats advances through "Rosa Alchemica":

> And yet there is no one who communes with only one God and the more a man lives, in imagination and in a refined understanding, the more gods does he meet and talk with, and the more does he come under the power of Roland, who sounded in the Valley of Roncesvalles the last trumpet of the body's will and pleasure; and of Hamlet who saw them perishing away, and sighed; and of Faust, who looked for them up and down the world and could not find them; and under the power of all those countless divinities who have taken upon themselves spiritual bodies in the minds of the modern poets and romance writers, and under the power of the old divinities, who since the Renaissance have won everything of their ancient worship except the sacrifice of birds and fishes, the fragrance of garlands and the smoke of incense. The many think humanity made these divinities, and that it can unmake them again; but we who have seen them pass in rattling harness, and in soft robes, and heard them speak with articulate voices while we lay in deathlike trance, know that they are always making and unmaking humanity, which is indeed but the trembling of their lips. (*Myth* 27475)

The ideological foundation underlying this passage argues that the human mind is a part of, and depends upon, a greater mind. The divinities that wander through the depths of that mind are creative agents, influencing human action. Further, in disabusing

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the narrator of the idea that the gods are but the anthropomorphic fantasies of man's imagination, Robartes proposes that the gods, not men, turn the wheel of history.

The recurrence of the old divinities is vital to Yeats's alchemized version of history. The most illuminating remark that Robartes makes concerning the return of the old divinities is that "since the Renaissance [they] have won everything of their ancient worship except the sacrifice of birds and fishes, the fragrance of garlands and the smoke of incense." Although the gods of antiquity enjoy a revival in modern times, their rejuvenation at this period in history does not require the sacrifice of animal flesh upon the altar. If to extract the fine from the coarsethe gold from the leadconstitutes the working hypothesis of alchemy, then the return of the classical pantheon stripped of its sacrificial diet becomes a historical parallel to metallurgical refinement. Hence, we can understand Yeats's aversion to physical alchemy as a coarse, primitive anachronism. However, just as the narrator has purchased his alchemical apparatus, Yeats thinks ancient ideas might return with vestiges of their old carapaces still clinging to them. In "The Tragic Generation" Yeats records an incident concerning gold-making that occurred during his 1894 stay in Paris:

> I am at Stuart Merrill's, and I meet there a young Jewish, Persian scholar. He has a large gold ring, seemingly very rough, made by some amateur, and he shows me that it has shaped itself to his finger, and says, "That is because it contains no alloyit is alchemical gold." I ask who made the gold, and he says a certain Rabbi, and begins to talk of the Rabbi's miracles. We do not question himperhaps it is trueperhaps he has imagined it allwe are inclined to accept every historical belief once more. (*Au* 233)

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It is in this light of a refined return of historical belief that we are to read the Greek resurgence in "Rosa Alchemica." For example, the orgies of the Euripidean epigraph are not literally reenacted. The members of the Alchemical Rose do not stage a bacchanal; they become Dionysians of a higher caste.

As much as Robartes' many-tiered universe entices the narrator, he feels safe only in the measure to which he can reduce the world to the flat surface of a Paterian mirror. "You would sweep me away into an indefinite world which fills me with terror; and yet a man is a great man just insofar as he can make his mind reflect everything with indifferent precision like a mirror." Inflated with false confidence, the narrator orders Robartes from his presence: "Your ideas and phantasies are but the illusions that creep like maggots into civilizations when they begin to decline, and into minds when they decay." As representative of the fin de siècle, the narrator knows that both he and his civilization are on the way out; decline and decay are in season. However, at the height of his rage, a distant voice speaks to the narrator and another surge of greater consciousness overwhelms him. The voice delivers an axiom from the Greater Mind to balance the assertions the narrator is making about decay: "Our master Avicenna has written that all life proceeds out of corruption" (*Myth* 276).

Yeats read about Avicenna in Waite's *Alchemystical Philosophers*, 17 but nowhere does Waite mention corruption. Yeats himself created the axiom based on Avicenna's legendary profanity. A learned physician and philosopher in tenth-century Persia, Avicenna was placed in service to the sultan and grand vizier. However, "he drank so freely, and his intemperance led to such immorality and disorder, that he was deprived of his dignities and died in comparative obscurity at the age of fifty-six."18 The axiom, then, is altogether fitting, and Yeats

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employed its essence throughout his career, as we will see later.

To the alchemists, corruption meant the fundamental condition of matter disjointed from the spirit. They often symbolized corruption as wine, dung, or any refuse cast into the street. Corrupted matter became synonymous with the *prima materia*, a ubiquitous substance that only the alchemist could appreciate. Yeats would not fully exploit the motif of corruption until the 1920s, with *A Vision* and his later poems. Consider "Crazy Jane" telling the Bishop that "love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement" (*TP* 25960; *VP* 513), or the final stanza of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" in which Yeats gives an alchemical recipe for creating "those masterful images" out of "a mound of refuse."

We must consider also that Yeats employs in the construction of his narrative the iconography basic to alchemical tradition. Therefore, it must not be overlooked that the proclamation regarding corruption is bracketed by the image of painted peacocks glittering into life. Alchemically, the peacock's tail (*cauda pavonis*) signals a death and resurrection; the many colors merge into "the one white color that contains them all." 19 Hence, to the reader acquainted with hermetic thought, this passage might signify the need for a descent, a dark night of the soul, before emerging into the next phase of spiritual development. Moreover, the narrator later removes an occult text from a box engraved with the "peacocks of Hera." Although Hera plays no role in this story, her peacocks provided Yeats yet another opportunity to collate alchemy with Greek myth and thereby fortify his position that a new polytheism would replace Christianity.

Following the axiom on corruption, the narrator sinks into a "sea of flame," representing the crucible's fire on a cosmic

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scale or, psychologically, that the membrane of waking consciousness gives way and the personal mind is penetrated and engulfed by the greater, archetypal mind. Although the gods no longer require a smoking carcass burned in their favor, the process of transmutation still mandates a submission to the spiritual flames of the alchemist's furnace.

During his descent into the flames, the narrator hears a voice, this time announcing, "The mirror is broken in two pieces the mirror is broken in four pieces the mirror is broken into numberless pieces" (*Myth* 276). The mirror symbolizes the intellect's capacity to "reflect with indifferent precision" only that layer of reality which the senses can register. This dissolution, or deconstruction, of the narrator's sensual reality marks the nadir of his incendiary descent. The baptismal fires he endures belong to the stages of the opus named *purificatio* and *ablutio*, wherein the *prima materia* is purged of any impurity. 20 Yeats retains the diction of medieval alchemy, yet he presents a totally psychological version of the purgative process. He casts the narrator's agony and subsequent ecstasy in the rhetoric of mystical experience. "I was being lifted out of the tide of flame, and felt my memories, my hopes, my thoughts, my will, everything I held to be myself, melting away" (277). The "I" here is being extracted from the personal psychology and history that was essential to the very formation of that "I." This extractionbeing "lifted"is a radical separation of identity from the symbolic register, rendering the subject adrift in a nonlinguistic order. That is, the narrator is repositioned in the realm of the mystical Other.

The nadir is also the turning point, signaling an ascent in consciousness. Once stripped of the impediments of identity, he feels himself "rise through numberless companies of beings who were each wrapped in his eternal moment in

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dreaming with dim eyes and half-closed eyelids." The beings wrapped in their own moments echo Pater's bleak assessment of human perception, that "the individual [is] in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner in its own dream of a world." However, the narrator gives a radically different value to isolation as experienced in eternity: "I passed into that Death which is Beauty herself, and into that Loneliness which all the multitudes desire without ceasing." His ontological vistas expand in the apotheosis of his revery, so that "[a]ll things that ever lived seemed to come and dwell in my heart, and I in theirs" (ibid.). Once again, we see Yeats's insistence on individuality. That is, the narrator does not lose himself in God or languish in a sea of undifferentiated numinosity; he retains a sense of self in league with other selves. However brief the moment, the narrator perceives the Many united in the One.

The narrator's merger with divine Otherness marks his descent back to physical consciousness. If we recall the Emerald Tablet, the seventh key reminds the adept that the world above must be integrated with the world below: "Ascend with the greatest sagacity from earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth, and unite together the power of things superior and things inferior." The narrator traces this movement as a trajectory of consciousness. He becomes "a drop of molten gold falling with immense rapidity" (ibid.). This alchemical rise and fall entices the narrator to follow Michael Robartes' lead. Previously, Robartes had qualified the narrator's life choices as two: "a man must forget he is miserable in the bustle and noise of the multitude in this world and in time; or seek a mystical union with the multitude who govern this world and time" (*Myth* 273). In the wake of his union with the mystical multitude, the narrator chooses the latter. However,

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his further initiation into the Order of the Alchemical Rose will overturn this decision.

In the third section, the narrator journeys with a sleeping Robartes to Ireland's western coast. There is no sign of modern life in the new setting. Outside the order's temple, the narrator encounters a belligerent peasant who becomes the symbolic emissary of orthodox Christianity, whose legion the narrator will eventually join. The old man vilifies Robartes as an evil spirit: "Idolaters, idolaters, go down to Hell with your witches and your devils; go down to Hell that the herrings may come into the bay" (28081). Once inside the temple, the narrator samples the library filled with medieval texts of alchemical mystics: Morienus, Avicenna, Alfarabi, Lully, and Flamel. No doubt Yeats derived this catalog of alchemists from Waite's *Alchemystical Philosophers*. This selection is instructive, because Waite endowed these alchemists with romantic or heroic traits, and they appealed more to Yeats than the alchemists who made contributions of a scientific nature. As we have already seen with his treatment of Basil Valentinus and Avicenna, Yeats does not quote directly from Waite but accurately converts Waite's flaccid tales into vivid cameos of the alchemists. Yeats's portraits of Morienus, Alfarabi, Lully, and Flamel each reveal one trait that he found most appealing. For example, Alfarabi is chosen for his consummate musical ability to evoke any emotional state in his auditors. 21 With Morienus, Yeats transforms Waite's phrase "perpetually youthful frame" to an "immortal body," thereby highlighting the

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romantic aspect of physical alchemyimmortalitythat he disdained but made use of in his poetry. 22 We see this tendency to sublimate the flesh of sages in his later poetry, as in the "Sages standing in God's holy fire," "golden-thighed Pythagoras," and the revered company of Plato and Plotinus, "the golden codgers." And both Lully and Flamel were noted as great lovers in the alchemical tradition.23 Decidedly, Yeats chose to fill the shelves of the Alchemical Rose's library with alchemists who had some share in his own poetic mask, which included the artist, the philosopher, and the lover.

The most important book is saved for last. A box decorated with the "peacocks of Hera" contains a text whose cover bears "in gold, the Alchemical Rose with many spears thrusting against it" (*Myth* 283). As Putzel demonstrates, this emblem replicates the cover of *The Secret Rose* in its first publication.24 The narrator likens the book's construction of symbolic illuminations to the *Splendor Solis*.25 The order's sacred book is divided into three parts: first, the mythical account of how the order was founded; second, the theoretical basis of their knowledge; and third, a section containing symbols and formulae "so that the initiate might fashion a shape for any divinity or any demon" (286). The first chapter describes how six Celtic students of the occult each chose to solve one mystery about alchemy, though only five mysteries are named: that of the Pelican, the Green Dragon, the Eagle, Salt, and Mercury. Stephen Putzel clarifies what these figures represent:

> The Pelican, traditionally said to feed her young with her own blood, is a symbol of self-sacrifice and in alchemy the vessel containing the spiritual distillation is called the Pelican. The "green dragon" is the Draco virdis or mercurial serpent, one of the alchemist's familiar spirits. The alchemical "Eagle" is the symbol of volatilization or the spiritualizing

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force. Salt is one of the three arcane substances of alchemical sulphur, salt, and mercury. 26

The theoretical discussion in the second part contains the germs of what Yeats developed more explicitly in his 1901 essay "Magic." The narrator attributes the power of "moods" and the evocation of spiritsand the functions that artist and magician render to the invisible worldto the doctrine of "the independent reality of our thought" (*Myth* 284). In "Magic" Yeats details further ramifications of this doctrine:

1. That the borders of the 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. (*E&I* 28)

In "The Trembling of the Veil" (1922), Yeats disclosed his practice of using symbols to evoke spirits. However, due to his vows of secrecy to the Golden Dawn, Yeats suppressed any detailed account of this practice in "Magic" as well as in "Rosa Alchemica." The following quotation addresses the first postulate, that many minds converge to form a single, greater mind: "There is no reason to doubt that men could cast intentionally a far stronger enchantment, a far stronger glamour, over the more sensitive people of ancient times, or that man can still do so where the old order of life remains unbroken" (*E&I* 42). But the old order is broken, and the people are no longer sensitive, and Yeats depicts himself in "Magic" as a strongly independent modern mind willingly submitting to

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the enchanting vision of MacGregor Mathers. "Rosa Alchemica's" narrator, however, may embody the expression of Yeats's hidden resistance to this relationship. In terms of spiritual alchemy, Robartes (Mathers) is the alchemist attempting to refine the *prima materia* of the narrator's (Yeats's) mind.

The narrator's newfound definition of alchemy as "the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul" (*Myth* 28384) thus needs to be viewed within the group dynamics of a magical order. To reiterate, the Golden Dawn operated via a hierarchical structure that mirrored the great scaffolds of the macrocosm, and the adept was able to climb that spiritual ladder only by submitting to the will of those who stood on higher rungs. In this light, we can better understand the narrator's ambivalent attitude toward the opus and the alchemist.

The fourth section of the story converts the above theory into action. While the narrator waits for his initiation ceremony, he smells incense burning, which signals the onset of an altered state of consciousness. In this state, the narrator's self-definition suffers a further diminishment. This time he experiences himself as "a mask, lying on the counter of a little Eastern shop. Many persons, with eyes so bright and still that I knew them for more than human, came in and tried me on their faces, but at last flung me into a corner laughing" (*Myth* 28687). At this point in Yeats's career, his doctrine of the mask was at best incipient. However, while riding from Dublin to Ireland's western coast, the narrator had perceived Robartes' sleeping face as a mask, and that "the man behind it had dissolved away like salt in water, and it laughed and sighed, appealed

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and denounced at the bidding of beings greater or less than man" (279). The narrator concludes that Robartes has been dead for ten or twenty years. That is, the spiritual path of the Alchemical Rose demands the forfeiture of identity in order to serve the powers that shape human destiny. As previously discussed, the narrator had a foretaste of such dissolution when the mirror of physical reality was shattered and he was propelled into a timeless dimension. And even though that denuding of self led to the narrator's assumption into a blissful world, he coldly eyes those altered states when planted back on earth. The narrator wonders if Robartes is but a marionette, without a will of his own. And if so, then is the narrator but a puppet in the hands of a more advanced puppet? Because he cannot decide on these questions, the narrator will finally choose to maintain the illusion of self-control over his life, no matter how sterile that life has become.

The mask instance happens in a momentary trance, as the narrator, his hand poised on a doorknob, is about to enter the room of his initiation. It is noteworthy that the narrator does not tell the reader (until section 5) that all the events in section 4 happen to the narrator in a trance. Therefore, the narrator's awareness of the mask as a momentary trance multiplies the tricks of consciousness that Yeats is conjuring within his fiction. It is a trance within a trance. In previous sections of "Rosa Alchemica," the narrator had taken pains to cue the onset of mystical transport. Whether Crevelli's virgin or the assemblage of alchemical apparatus, whether the smell of incense or Michael Robartes' spellbinding voice, there is always some external, physical catalyst affecting change in the narrator's psychic state.

In section 4, however, Yeats omits these cues, therefore leaving the reader to assume that the narrator's state is one of

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ordinary, sense-based consciousness. Yeats further reinforces the illusion of mimetic reality as the narrator reflects on his environs: "I passed on, marvelling exceedingly how these enthusiasts could have created all this beauty in so remote a place, and half persuaded to believe in a material alchemy, by the sight of so much hidden wealth " (*Myth* 287). And later on, he gradually "sank into a half-dream, from which I was awakened " (288). Yet from the perspective that section 5 adds, the narrator has awakened from one dream into another dream, one that he mistakes for waking existence. By depriving the reader of the narrator's full retrospective knowledge, Yeats is playing a trickster role himself in that the reader must share directly in the narrator's naked experience. Both narrator and reader are in a trance without knowing it. Aside from its dramatic effect, however, this strategy endorses the reader's identification with the narrator, thereby making his subsequent terror and escape seem reasonable and obligatory.

Yeats's narrative strategy of deliberately blocking the reader's knowledge of the narrator's trance prefigures later Postmodernist techniques. Brian McHale's formulation of the trompe-l'oeil strategy and its purpose will help resolve the enigmas in "Rosa Alchemica":

> What is striking about many postmodern texts is the way they court confusion of levels, going out of the way to suppress the "difference in flavor" we depend on for keeping levels distinct in our minds. Postmodernist texts, in other words, tend to encourage trompe-l'oeil, deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world. Typically, such deliberate "mystification" is followed by "demystification," in which the true ontological status of the supposed "reality" is revealed and the ontological structure of the text laid bare. 27

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The dream within the dream, and other trance states, also relate to the Golden Dawn practice of "skrying," which was performed in the ritual for alchemy (as well as in other rituals). Israel Regardie gives the following instructions for skrying:

> You can commence the operation simply not projecting the astral beyond the sphere of sensation into the Macrocosmos, but retaining it and perceiving some scene in the Universe reflected in the symbol which you hold, this latter being to you as a mirror which shall reflect to you some scene not within range of sight. And secondly, you can continue the operation by using the same symbol, and by passing through it project yourself to the scene in question, which before you had perceived only as a reflection. The latter process will probably appear more vivid to the perception than the prior one, just as in material vision one is less likely to be deceived by going to a place and actually examining it, than by obtaining knowledge of it from a reflection in a mirror. 28

In *A Vision,* Owen Aherne reports that he went to Cracow "because Dr. Dee and his fiend Edward Kelly had practiced alchemy and scrying" there (*AV* xvii). The trances in "Rosa Alchemica," however, differ from the written accounts of skrying in that no evocation is made, no symbol chosen. By omitting the proper procedures for the alchemical ritual, Yeats is creating an atmosphere of surrealism and, from the narrator's vantage, of manipulation.

After marveling at the splendors of the Alchemical Rose temple, the narrator stands with Robartes before the door of initiation. A voice asks, "Is the work of the Incorruptible Fire at an end?" Michael Robartes answers, "The perfect gold has come from the athanor" (*Myth* 287). This exchange is perhaps

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more ceremonial than substantiveit suggests that the opus has already been achievedand more than likely simulates the hieratic gestures of Golden Dawn ceremonies. The narrator then enters into the temple's central chamber, wherein he must participate in an "exceedingly antique dance" (286). We know from Yeats's plays that he often used dance to embody, to express rhythmically, what the players spoke in words. Maurice Ariane suggests this connection between alchemy and dance:

> Alchemy [was related to] the dance which expressed the sacred rhythm of nature, showed the worshipful circling of the dancers to be the same as that of the stars, and, in the sudden immobility of the body, "transmuted" time, the sleep of lead, into the pure gold of a moment of eternity. 29

The pattern of the initiation dance is also circular, copying the roseate mosaic wrought on the temple ceiling. The mosaic replicates the symbol of the order's sacred book, which in turn mirrors the cover design of *The Secret Rose,* suggesting the interwoven knot patterns of Celtic illuminated manuscripts and illustrating the alchemical unity of the One and the Many.

However, the dance takes place atop a floor inlaid with the symbol of "a pale Christ on a pale cross." Robartes informs the narrator that their dance will "trouble His unity with their multitudinous feet" (288). The temple chamber becomes not only the initiation hall for the narrator; it doubles as the battleground for the struggle between contrary spiritual movements. The new spiritual influence, represented by the rose on the ceiling, is appointed primacy in its struggle against Christianity. The dancers, then, are pressing the image of Christ back down into the unconscious depths. Eleusis replaces

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Calvary. Yet, as emphasized earlier, the Greek religious spirit will be revived in a new form.

The dancers wear robes of crimson, reminding the narrator of Greece and Egypt, yet this crimson bears "a more passionate life than theirs" (286). And during the dance, when the wheel of eternity moves and time stops, the petals of the rose begin to fall from the ceiling and change into dancers with "Grecian faces and august Egyptian faces" (288). This union of Greece and Egypt recalls the father of alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus. For Yeats's purpose, the ancient Greek pantheon represented those mythical personages who still live in the "great mind and the great memory"; Egypt, to Yeats, possessed the knowledge of how to gain access to that ancestral mind of light. Therefore the marriage of myth and magic, Greece and Egypt, yielded Yeats a hermeticism enriched with cultural antecedents absent from Golden Dawn practices. And on the narrative plane, we must recall that the narrator's reportage of petals turning into dancers occludes from the reader the knowledge that this phantasmagoria results from a trance state. The surreality thereby produced is as much Ovidian in its shape-shifting as it is congruent with other fin de siècle occult gothic fictions of the late nineteenth century. As Patrick Brantlinger demonstrates in *Rule of Darkness,* such fictions employing occult gothic motifs display anxieties surrounding exploration outside the confines of imperialistic hegemony and "about the waning of religious orthodoxy" (229). Fin de siècle readers would have seen in the Order of the Alchemical Rose's occult practices an atavism tantamount to the primitive magic depicted in more popular works, such as Haggard's *She*.

The dance, being the rose symbol set in motion, also becomes the alchemist's furnace wherein the narrator is tried.

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Among the dancers, the narrator sees a veiled figure whom he discovers to be Eros:

> Eros himself, and his face was veiled because no man or woman from the beginning of the world had ever known what Love is, or looked into his eyes, for Eros alone of divinities is altogether a spirit, and hides in passions not of his essence, if he would commune with a mortal heart. (*Myth* 289)

Again, Yeats takes the opportunity to correlate alchemy and Greek myth. Eros, god of love, is equated to the alchemical symbol of the rose: both combine spiritual and sensual elements. Eros's love will replace Christ's purely spiritual love. The crucial distinction about Eros's love is that it lies behind every other manifestation of less-than-spiritual love: "So that if a man love nobly he knows Love through infinite pity, unspeakable trust, unending sympathy; and if ignobly through vehement jealousy, sudden hatred, and unappeasable desire; but unveiled Love he never knows" (ibid.). This conception of love is essentially alchemical, showing that love's essence is present on all levels of experience, and that humanity may experience its range from coarsest to finest.

The dance furnishes a juncture for the temporal and the eternal: "soon every mortal foot danced by the white foot of an immortal" (ibid.). That the adepts are dressed in crimson and the immortals dressed in white depicts the alchemical union of opposites, as already discussed in relation to Yeats's rose and lily motif in the early poems. Here, however, the thrust goes beyond the union of opposites to include the interpenetration of higher and lower levels in the cosmic scale, "as above, so below." Section 4 builds to a crescendo when a voice prompts the narrator, "[I]nto the dance! that the gods

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may make their bodies out of the substance of our hearts" (ibid.). That is, the gods need the density of man to make their bodies, and man needs the lightness of the gods to make his soul. We can find evidence for this idea in Waite's *Lexicon of Alchemy:*

> The chemical Philosophers sometimes give this name [angels] to the Volatile Matter of their Stone. They then say that their body is spiritualized, and that one will never succeed in performing the Grand Work unless one corporifies spirits, and spiritualizes bodies. This operation is philosophical sublimation, and it is certain that the fixed never becomes sublimated without the assistance of the volatile. 30

Yeats depicts this philosophical sublimation when "a mysterious wave of passion" sweeps the narrator into the dance, and there he meets his own dance partner. His partner is "an immortal august woman," and while the narrator is captivated by her celestial beauty, their dance seems a cataclysm of sexual passion:

> [H]er dreamy gesture seemed laden with a wisdom more profound than the darkness between star and star, and with a love like the love that breathed upon the waters; and as we danced on and on, the incense drifted over us and round us, covering us away as in the heart of the world, and ages seemed to pass, and tempests to awake and perish in the folds of our robes and in her heavy hair. (*Myth* 290)

The hair motif leads us back to the fusionor confusionor sense and spirit that characterized the contemporaneous poem "Travail of Passion." The psychoanalytic critic Brenda Webster sees the narrator as an extension of Yeats's psychological complexes

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and suggests that "Yeats seems to be trying out ways to tolerate his instincts without being overwhelmed by them." 31

The narrator, however, is overwhelmed and shocked out of his circling ecstasy when he thinks that his partner, "more or less than human," is "drinking up his soul as an ox drinks up a wayside pool" (*Myth* 290). There is much critical discord surrounding this action. Some have asserted that the dance partner is a succubus, while others think that it would be an error to interpret the sexual nuances as erotic. More biographical readings, such as Webster's, see this scene in terms of Yeats unconsciously working out a sexual conflict in himself. Thomas Whitaker focuses on the narrator alone: "[F]orced to descend into the Dionysian abyss, the narrator flees from the terrifying shadow that is the projection of his own dark longings."32

Whitaker's reading tends to dismiss the dialectical tensions that Yeats's fiction insistently maintains. We have already seen that to emphasize the sexual to the exclusion of the spiritual is to undermine the idea of alchemy as a process of refinement. Conversely, to pass over the sexual as but a metaphor for the spiritual would be to ignore Yeats's own psychological ambivalence. Whether one emphasizes sexual or mystical union, both are unions and hence imply the alchemical action of harnessing the opposites. Perhaps it is the paradoxical tugging of the opposites, rather than a Dionysian abyss, that the narrator cannot endure. The following quotation from Jung testifies to the immense effort involved in joining the opposites:

> [I]n the Self good and evil are indeed closer than identical twins! The reality of evil and its incompatibility with good cleave the opposites asunder and lead inexorably to the crucifixion and suspension of everything that lives. In practice

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> this is only possible up to a point, and apart from that it is so unbearable and inimical to life that the ordinary human being can afford to get into this state only occasionally, in fact as seldom as possible. 33

Though good and evil are not quite the issue here, the fusion of mortal and immortal, man and woman, and sex and spirit proves to be unbearable to the narrator, who concludes "and I fell, and darkness passed over me" (*Myth* 290).

"Rosa Alchemica" concludes with a whimper. In section 5, the narrator awakens to find the once-glorious temple now "roughly painted" and "half painted." These sobering impressions of physical reality inform the reader that the initiation episode in section 4 occurred in a state of trance, and hence we are made to question the validity of the experience. Michael Robartes and the other adepts are lying unconscious and heaped body upon body, as in aftermath of Bacchic revelry. The narrator flees as he hears a mob of angry peasants nearing the temple. And though we know the peasants will stone the adepts, their death is not tragic because Robartes has already appointed sacred significance to their end: "I and mine being incorporate with immortal spirits, when we die it shall be the consummation of the supreme work" (*Myth* 281). Just as Christ's death was the fulfillment of the supreme work of the Christian dispensation, so Michael Robartes' death will guarantee the entry of the new dispensation, a new form of polytheism. And the master narrative of Christianity (with its one God, its one protagonist, and its telos of salvation or damnation) that binds together the historical fragments of *The*

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Secret Rose is having to yield to a new narrative with pagan referents, claiming as its ordering principle a multivalenced, many-centered unity.

In order to protect himself against any continuing influence from the Order of the Alchemical Rose, the narrator wears a rosary as a talisman to ward off evil spirits. His final prayer demonstrates which forces have more power in the narrator's mind: "He whose name is Legion is at our doors deceiving our intellects with subtlety and flattering our hearts with beauty, and we have no trust but in Thee" (292). So, on the one hand, the purported deaths of Michael Robartes and the initiates of the Alchemical Rose insure the entry of the new spiritual age. A further stage of refinement has been attained in the grand alchemy of human history. However, the narrator's abstention from this process shows a certain shadow of reluctance on Yeats's part to be an active participant, especially if the "supreme work" exacts a price of total devotion and surrender. As evidenced by his essays, Yeats chose to be a herald of future good, a spokesman for a new age, but not its sacrificial lamb.

III

The narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" returns in "The Tables of the Law," this time to relate the quest of Owen Aherne. Aherne replaces Robartes as the spiritual guide whom the narrator admires but ultimately rejects. William O'Donnell has noted that this story represents the attempt to "attain immortal wisdom without renouncing Christianity." 34"The Tables of the Law" employs the same two-tiered dialectic as in "Rosa Alchemica"i.e., historical change and individual transformationbut

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uses Christianity, rather than Hermeticism, to arrive at that end. The principle theme, however, rests on the definition of alchemy as formulated in "Rosa Alchemica": "the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul."

The story is divided into two sections. In the first part Owen Aherne explains his reasons for discontinuing his initiation into the priesthood. Or, in terms that address the narrator's concerns, Aherne justifies his swerving away from the confines of orthodoxy while still maintaining his spiritual allegiance to Christianity. However, this section deals specifically with change on the scale of history.

Aherne cites a twelfth-century Christian mystic, Joachim of Flora, to introduce a concept of historical evolution (which parallels the ideas of Michael Robartes). Joachim of Flora's chief doctrine concerned his spiritual perception of history. He theorized that history was divided into three eras: the first belongs to God the Father, the second to the Son, and the third to the Holy Spirit. Owen Aherne extrapolated that western civilization was about to enter the era of the Holy Spirit, an era that would be punctuated by apocalypse. Since the Holy Spirit had not yet disclosed its commandments, Joachim entitled the third section of his book *Lex Secreta*. Aherne sees artists as servants of this secret law, "so long s they embody the beauty that is beyond the grave" (*Myth* 300). All life in the material world"terror and content, birth and death, love and hatred"is merely the *prima materia* for "that supreme art which is to win us from life and gather us into eternity" (300301). No doubt the reader will detect in this last phrase the precursor to "and gather me / Into the artifice of eternity" from "Sailing to Byzantium," a poem written thirty years later on the subject of alchemical refinement and also, like Joachim's three eras, on "what is past, or passing, or to come."

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Aherne amends Joachim's concept by individualizing the *lex secreta*. Like the artists who have labored for the Holy Spirit, Aherne plans to go away to gather experience in the hope of discovering a secret law of his own. He will then return like the hero with his boon, "and will gather pupils about me that they may discover their law in the study of my law, and the kingdom of the Holy Spirit be more widely and firmly established" (301). When Aherne does return, ten years later, having discovered the law of his own being (or the uniqueness of his own soul), it has not brought about the hoped-for renaissance.

The second part of "Tables" portrays Owen Aherne upon his return. His attainment of individuality is blackened by a realization that he is now at odds with God's plan. By obeying the law of his own soul, he has disqualified himself from receiving God's grace: "I understood that God has made a simple and an arbitrary law that we may sin and repent" (305). These statements are not understandable in themselves, and no critic has yet explained the paradox that Yeats is working out here. Although Aherne does not define what his soul's *lex secreta* is, we may assume that Yeats is referring to the concept that each soul is unique and fulfills a need in God that no other soul could fulfill. In arriving at the revelation of his unique purpose, it might further be assumed that Aherne has found his own commandments, that God would speak directly to him rather than through an ancient description of God's law. Yet Aherne finds that he cannot dispense with orthodoxy; he cannot circumvent the arbitrary law that man must sin and repent.

The original *Savoy* edition of "The Tables of the Law" (1896) contains passages that explain more clearly Aherne's thoughts:

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> I am outside the salvation of Him who died for sinners, because I have lost the power of committing a sin. I found the secret law of my life, and finding it, no longer desired to transgress, because it was my own law. Whatever my intellect and soul commanded, I did, and sin passed from me, and I ceased to be among those for whom Christ died. At first I tried to sin by breaking my law, although without desire; but the sin without desire is shadowy, like the sins of some phantom one has not visited even in dreams. You who are not lost, who may still speak to men and women, tell them it is necessary to make an arbitrary law that one may be among those for whom Christ died. (*VSR* 161)

Once again, Yeats is forcing the reader into sympathetic alignment with the narrator and his unchallenging orthodoxy, even though the startling ideas of Aherne (and Robartes) are more appealing. Since Aherne must pay an ineradicable penalty for obeying his own lawwhich, however, forbids him to transgress God's lawhe is a fallen Adam without assurance of redemption. This punitive consequence reinforces the narrator's convictions that he has made a safe choice in worshipping a God whose caprice and tyranny has arranged a universe ruled by arbitrary laws.

Fortunately, Yeats does not allow the reader to identify with the narrator for too long. Soon after Aherne's confessions, emissaries from the "indefinite world" appear in the form of purple-robed phantoms bearing torches, and directing their gazes upon Aherne, they address him: "He has charged even his angels with folly, and they also bow and obey; but let your heart mingle with our hearts, which are wrought of Divine Ecstasy, and your body with our bodies, which are wrought of Divine Intellect" (*Myth* 305). The narrator divines that these phantoms are none other than the members of the

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Alchemical Rose who have passed into the spirit realm: "I understood that the Order of the Alchemical Rose was not of this earth, and that it was still seeking over this earth for whatever souls it could gather within its glittering net" (307). The narrator is overcome with terror again, assuming himself to be their target. He fears that the phantoms will throw their torches at him, burning up "all that bound me to spiritual and social order." However, the response of the robed beings is quite interesting, as it links the Alchemical Rose to Christianity: "Why do you fly from our torches that were made out of the trees under which Christ wept in the Garden of Gethsemane?" (ibid.) This Christian allusion takes the reader back to "Rosa Alchemica," in which Robartes discusses the new spiritual order as historically mandated, as destiny. Joachim of Flora's three periods of history reinforce the idea that each era calls into being a spirit that meets its unique needs. Yet the narrator still resists any new impulses; he would rather maintain the sharp distinctions between good and evil that belong to Milton's God and that result in a fragmented universe without any promise of rapprochement. In this spiritual geography, the narrator sights Aherne in "some distant country," driven there "by spirits whose name is legion, and whose throne is in the indefinite abyss" (ibid.).

In 1908, Yeats looked back at this story, commenting on its problems and renewing his own questions about the spiritual search:

> I now see what is wrong with "The Tables of the Law." The hero must not seem for a moment a shadow of the hero of "Rosa Alchemica." He [Aherne] is not the mask but the face. He realizes himself. He cannot obtain vision in the ordinary sense. He is himself the center. Perhaps he dreams he is speaking. He is not spoken to. He puts himself in place

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> of Christ. He is not the revolt of multitude. What did the woman in Paris reveal to the Magi? Surely some reconciliation between face and mask? Does the narrator refuse the manuscript, and so never learn its contents? Is it simply the doctrine of the mask? The choosing of some one mask? Hardly, for that would be the imitation of Christ in a new form. Is it becoming mask after mask? Perhaps the name only should be given, "Mask and Face." Yet the nature of the man seems to prepare for a continual change, a phantasmagoria. One day one god and the next another.
>
> The imitation of Christ as distinguished from the self-realization of "The Tables of the Law." What of it? Christ is but another self, but he is the supernatural self. (*M* 138)

While "Rosa Alchemica" and "The Tables of the Law" presented two variant enunciations of the coming age, "The Adoration of the Magi" certifies that the new era has been born. By and large, critics have panned this story. William O'Donnell writes: "Yeats had not made himself into a consistently skillful writer of prose fiction. Its flaws help explain why over thirty years would pass before he again wrote a short story." 35 While this judgment seems a bit harsh, it is evident that "The Adoration of the Magi" does not stand on its own. The two preceding stories create an indispensable context for reading this final story of *The Secret Rose*.

Though Yeats retains the same narrator for "The Adoration of the Magi," his direct involvement in the story's action has diminished. The purpose of his presence here is to recount the story that three old Irishmen have told him. The narrator's distance from the central action proves that he has been successful

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in steeling himself against the supernatural forces that threatened his identity. Further, now that the narrator's psychology has been removed as a subject of concern, Yeats shifts the emphasis almost totally to the transformation of the social order. Although the story spotlights a dying, dissolute woman in a Parisian brothel, she, like Mary in the stable, symbolizes the humble beginnings of the new spiritual influx that will reign for centuries to come. Instead of a Christ child heralding the new era, the woman in the brothel gives birth to a unicorn.

For the first time in his storytelling, the narrator now articulates his purpose in writing down the story of the three Irishmen:

> I have let some years go by before writing down this story, for I am always in dread of the illusions which come of that inquietude of the veil of the Temple and only write it now because I have grown to believe that there is no dangerous idea which does not become less dangerous when written out in sincere and careful English. (*Myth* 309)

It is not difficult to extend this authorial intention to the other stories as well. Just as we saw the narrator in "Rosa Alchemica" pressing the rosary to his heart and murmuring a prayer in safeguard, so too, pressing pen to paper becomes a talismanic gesture. The warding off of evil, rather than catharsis or clarification, motivates the narrator to write. Once again, though, he plays the veiled gospeler for Yeat's ideas of individual and social apocalypse while maintaining staunch resistance.

To avoid repeating O'Donnell's rather exhaustive researches for this story, I want to concentrate on the two motifs that find their sources in alchemy: the whore and the unicorn. On the surface, the Parisian brothel would lead us to see this conception of the new age as the devil's spawn. However, keeping intertextual threads in mind, we may apply Avicenna's axiom

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here: "All life proceeds from corruption." And looking forward to the Crazy Jane poems and to "The Circus Animals' Desertion," we see that Yeats thought the seed of the sacred germinated not in meditative exercises alone but in all that an age discarded as useless and valueless. As excremental visionaries, the alchemists often referred to the Philosopher's Stone as the most vile yet most precious of all things.

To quote Morienus, one of the alchemists that the narrator read about in the temple library of the Alchemical Rose: "Take that which is trodden underfoot upon the dung-heap; if you do not, when you wish to climb the stairs, you will fall down upon your head if a man will not accept what he has cast aside, it will force itself upon him the moment he wishes to climb higher." 36 It is easy to see how Jung would take this quotation and use it to illustrate his process of integrating the personal "Shadow," but Yeats seemed more concerned with larger, social transformation in 1897 when he composed "The Adoration of the Magi." In his 1934 introduction to the play *The Resurrection*, Yeats reflected:

> Presently Oisin and his islands faded and the sort of images that came into "Rosa Alchemica" and "The Adoration of the Magi" took their place. Our civilization was about to reverse itself, or some new civilization about to be born from all that our age had rejected, from all that my stories symbolized as a harlot, and take after its mother; because we had worshipped a single God it [the new civilization] would worship many or receive from Joachim de Flora's Holy Spirit a multitudinous influx. (*Expl* 393)

The following quotation is an oracular speech delivered to the narrator by a trance-stricken Irishman who interprets the unicorn's birth from the harlot.

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> When the Immortals would overthrow the things that are today and bring the things that were yesterday, they have no one to help them, but one whom the things that are today have cast out. Bow down and very low, for they have chosen this woman in whose heart all follies have gathered, and in whose body all desires have awakened; this woman who has been driven out of Time and has lain upon the bosom of Eternity. (*Myth* 312)

Whitaker sees Blake's harlot in Yeats's and likens the harlot to emanations or shadows that "seek to be united to states other than those from which they arose." 37 Whitaker bases this resemblance on Blake's *Milton*, in which the harlot shall join her "Lord & Husband" after the redemptive apocalypse. He links this motif to the whore in alchemy, the *meretrix* or *prima materia*, "the dark or unconscious *corpus imperfectum* that must be redeemed."38 However, we might also see the whore as a figure out of the Decadent movement. In *Daughters of Decadence*, Elaine Showalter discusses fin de siècle women writers whose work appeared in *The Savoy* and *The Yellow Book*. Showalter points out how decadent artists often portrayed women as "romantically doomed prostitutes" (xi) and that "women [were] seen as bound to Nature and the material world because they are more physical than men, more body than spirit. They appear as objects of value only when they are aestheticised as corpses or phallicised as femmes fatales" (x). This last sentence also throws light on the mysterious woman "more or less than human" who the narrator dances with in "Rosa Alchemica."

The brothel setting of the new avatar's birth competes with the manger birth of Jesus among the beasts. However, the images of harlot, "shabby streets," and "pale and untidy women" invert the Christian myth with the addition of moral

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turpitude. A surface reading would render Yeats an iconoclast. Indeed, he does shatter a sacred image; however, by maintaining the structure of the myth while skewing elements of its primary images, Yeats is building anew on a Christian foundation.

Putting new flesh on an old skeleton is certainly in keeping with Yeats's ideas about historical alchemy. The repetition of crucial events, though varied in such a way as to undermine the old and introduce new elements pertinent to modern living, shows history to be a spiraling process, which Yeats later conceived as "gyres" in *A Vision*. In later revisions of "The Adoration of the Magi" Yeats adds elements of power and radical destruction by intimating that "another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleaguer Troy" (*Myth* 310). Further, we can see Yeats's need to emphasize cataclysm when he deployed the motif of divine birth in the poem "The Magi" (1914):

> Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
> In their stiff painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
> Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
> With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
> And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
> And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.
>
> (126; *VP* 318)

The final line here seems to refer just as much to "The Adoration of the Magi" as it does to the birth of Christ. As the old Irishman tells it, the harlot gives birth to a unicorn. This motif mimics the Greek mythic impulse to have magical beasts born of woman and men born of beasts. It also hearkens back to

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the ideology of alchemy that forged a spiritual symbolism out of the repressed material of Christianity.

Jung traces the unicorn symbol in alchemy at great length, noting especially the medieval tale of the virgin and the unicorn. Unicorn and virgin represent two aspects of the completed alchemical operation: "[T]he virgin represents the passive, feminine aspect, while the unicorn illustrates the wild, rampant, masculine force of the spirit mercurialis." 39 In the ecclesiastical allegory, the unicorn stood for Christ and the virgin for Mary. Yeats, however, converts virgin to whore, thereby showing that the new era emerges from what had been rejected as corrupted matter. Yeats avoids a lengthy development of the new age's magical harbinger, the unicorn, which is described as "most unlike man of all living things, being cold, hard, and virginal." The unicorn makes only a cameo appearance, for "it seemed to be born dancing; and was gone from the room wellnigh upon the instant, for it is in the nature of the unicorn to understand the shortness of life" (*Myth* 312).

Unfortunately, this glimpse of the supernatural fails to forecast what transfiguration the future will bring. "The Adoration of the Magi" is a fictional precursor of Yeats's later compact prophetic poems, such as "The Magi," "The Second Coming," and "Leda and the Swan." These works signal the entry of superhuman forces into human life but do not foretell what the new reigning powers will be, falling short of prophecy.

However much we may decipher from Yeats's excursions through the "indefinite world," the narrator concludes "The Adoration of the Magi" with that same urgency to forestall any change he cannot comprehend. The three old Irishmen may have been "immortal demons, come to put an untrue story into my mind for some purpose I do not understand"

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(*Myth* 31415). Yeats ends his narrative with a tension of opposites: "What did the woman in Paris reveal to the Magi? Surely some reconciliation between mask and face?" In recalling these retrospective questions of 1908, we see that Yeats himself was unsettled about the larger issues his stories addressed.

As prefigurations of a universal apocalypse, these three stories contain the germs of a new order and the forces that would oppose it. The narrator and the encrusted orthodoxy fear the destruction of a familiar set of beliefs, customs, and routines; they fear transformation. While the narrator does not demonstrate a strong devotion to Christianity, we can see that he joins the church to stave off the destruction of his own ego constructs, the safe parameters by which he knows himself and the world. Therefore we may interpret his flight from change as an aborted alchemy. Resigned to an existence that neither satisfies nor suffices, he cannot blend with the universe to become "a weariless spirit." Further, Yeats fails to envision the coming era. Because he could not reconcile Christianity with the new polytheism, and because an atmosphere of millennialism stirred the fin de siècle imagination, yeats tended to depict the alchemy of civilization only in terms of its initial destructive phase, the breaking down of institutions and instituted modes of discourse.

In the next chapter we turn to Yeats near the end of the next decade, when he renewed his alchemical quest after some years of active public life. However, his return was marked by a diminished scale of vision. With "Adam's Curse" upon him, he dreamed no more of civilization's transformation. Instead, his alchemy became intensely personal, revolving around hopes and fears of attaining "spiritual marriage" with Maud Gonne.

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4
Mystical Marriage

The alchemical operation consisted essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, the body, which were then reunited in personified form in the coniunctio or "chymical marriage" the ritual cohabitation of Sol and Luna.
Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*

The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy, and were more than symbol could a man lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the same as the sleep of death.
Yeats, *A Vision*

I see the Lunar and Solar cones first, before they start their whirling movement, as two worlds lying one within anothernothing exterior, nothing interior, sun in moon and moon in suna single being like man and woman in Plato's Myth, and then a separation and a whirling for countless ages, and I see man and woman as reflecting the greater movement.
Yeats, *A Vision*

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I

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the age of imagination that Yeats had prophesied in the 1890s did not materialize. Though he still maintained his affiliation with the Golden Dawn, Yeats's most active interests, outside of literature, were not esoteric but political. His part in establishing the Abbey Theatre, his collaborations with Lady Gregory, and his defense of John Synge are all instances of his preoccupation with the artistic life of Ireland, and, more personally, of his own search for "more manful energy" that work in the theater gave him. *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910) records Yeats's labors and aggravations of this period, and the spirit that pervades the volume is best characterized by the first line of the eponymous poem, "The fascination of what's difficult" (*TP* 93; *VP* 260). The plaintive, dreamy netherworld that the poet conjured a decade earlier gave way to more urbane settings, such as in "At the Abbey Theatre" and "At the Galway Races." However, Yeats chose to open *Green Helmet* with a grouping of eight poems in bold contrast to the volume's dominantly extraverted and political tone. This group first (and erroneously) appeared under the title *Raymond Lully and His Wife Pernella*, which includes "His Dream," "A Woman Homer Sung," "Words," "No Second Troy," "Reconciliation," "King and No King," "Peace," and "Against Unworthy Praise"all poems concerning Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne. The aegis of *Raymond Lully and His Wife Pernella,* however, is enigmatic and misleading for several reasons.

An erratum concerning the "Lully" title was inserted in the first edition: "By a slip of the pen when I was writing out

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the heading for the first group of poems, I put Raymond Lully's name in the room of the later Alchemist, Nicholas Flamel" (*VP* 253). Although this clarification meant nothing to the uninitiated, Golden Dawn members and other novitiates of hermetic literature would have taken Nicholas Flamel and Pernella as a cue to the alchemical tradition of the mystical marriage, the "chymical wedding," the *hieros gamos* or, as Yeats called it, spiritual marriage. This marriage represented the bond between a male and female alchemist, and numerous Renaissance texts illustrate this motif as man and woman laboring amongst alembics and athanors, or as king and queen respectively standing atop sun and moon, hands joined. If Yeats's intention was to point toward this alchemical relationship, then his initial mix-up between Lully and Flamel is quite interesting. Accounts of both alchemists can be found in Waite's *Alchemystical Philosophers*. A thirteenth-century Catalan poet and churchman, Lully and his legend are steeped in high romance, replete with unrequited and unremitting passion that he ultimately renounces, yielding instead to service of the spirit. The picaresque outlines of the alchemist as heroic lover certainly would have appealed to Yeats, considering his unrequited ardor for Maud Gonne. However, Nicholas Flamel, not Raymond Lully, is the spokesman for the mystical marriage, and his account of alchemical union with his wife Pernella provides a sobering contrast to Lully's romantic escapades. A fourteenth-century French scrivener, Flamel characterized his bond to Pernella as virtuous, dispassionate, and sexless. Their mystical marriage is a strictly spiritual analogue to the contemporaneous chivalric tales of courtly love.

Jung exhaustively treated the alchemical male-female motif in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. 1 In this last volume of his alchemical researches, Jung demonstrates how the "science" of alchemy

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was converted into myth in the Middle Ages. The mystical marriage of king and queen, according to Jung, was the medieval representation of the final operation of the opus. And, keeping in mind alchemy's dual material and spiritual nature, we can view the mysterious conjunction both as actual marriage between man and woman, or as the harmony between the masculine and feminine aspects within the individual's psyche. Joseph Campbell summarizes the conjunction as follows:

> The fermentation, putrefaction, and sublimation of the metals will have to be matched by analogous motions in the conjoined, harmoniously cooperating hearts of the artifex and his *soror mystica*, the fundamental idea being that divinity is entrapped, as it were, in the gross physical matters of the bodies of men and women as well as in the elements of nature, and that in the laboratory of the alchemist the energies of this immanent spiritual presence are to be released. [T]he physical aspect of the distillation and union of the male and female energiesthe coniugium, matrimonium, coitustook place within the *vas hermeticum*, the sealed hermetic retort, and whatever acts on the part of the artifex and his soror might have accompanied these developments were as between two mutually respectful personalities. 2

Campbell's reading is a mixture of Gnostic and Christian ideas. Divinity trapped in matter is a Gnostic concept, and the release of the spiritual presence from the physical body is suggestively Christian: the ennobling spirit of Christ rising from the common mass of humanity. Campbell sticks closely to the Flamel version of the *hieros gamos* by claiming the union's occurrence within "harmoniously cooperating hearts," disregarding the obvious sexual overtones in the poetics of union.

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Jung, however, speaks more to the point: "In mysticism one must remember that no 'symbolic' object has only one meaning; it is always several things at once. Sexuality does not exclude spirituality nor spirituality sexuality, for in God all opposites are abolished." 3

We have already seen how Yeats attempted to depict this motif in "Rosa Alchemica" when the narrator nearly consummates a union with a spirit-woman in the initiatory dance. There the conjunction of male and female was a meeting of two levels, the above and the below. Though Yeats continued to embody the intersection of worlds in this way, such as in "Leda and the Swan," he turned toward the bodily union between man and woman to suggest that sexual relationship was a gateway to spiritual attainment. And though he took the chaste Flamel and Pernella as his alchemical figureheads, Yeats's game rules did not include chastity. As we shall see, Yeats went further in his development of this motif: he sexualized the myth, designating the body and the coital act as catalysts in attracting the divine principle.

Exploring the theme of mystical marriage in Yeats's poetry necessitates a detour into his early novel *The Speckled Bird*, his unpublished journals of 19089, and his *Memoirs*. *The Speckled Bird* establishes Yeats's early fascination with this motif; the journal materialswhich include letters from Maud Gonnedemonstrate how Yeats used this motif to help him formulate his expression of perfect love between man and woman (i.e., between Yeats and Maud); and in *Memoirs* Yeats publicly formulates what he grappled with in the private journal. This detour will lay the foundation for later discussing the Lully/Flamel poems, and I will show how Yeats finally abandons, yet clings to, his ideal of spiritual marriage. Then, an assessment of Yeats's later love lyrics (from the 1920s and

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'30s) will demonstrate how Yeats adopts poetic personae who permit him to yoke together the sexual and the spiritual, thereby creating alchemical love songs that triumph over his agony-ridden attempts to form a spiritual marriage with Maud.

Further, the more Yeats applies the ideas of alchemy to matter, to the body, and to human relations, the more does his tacit resistance to transformation dwindle. The unlimited, transcendent world of essences that we examined in the early poetry and fiction was, ironically, limited because it discounted the physical realm. Yeats projected his resistance to that transcendent worldi.e., the feared loss of the immediate tangible dimensioninto his poetic speakers and narrator-protagonists. In the later love poems, however, Yeats's speakers possess unwavering devotion to their often fleshly, and sometimes bawdy, paths to transformation, and any resistance to their spiritual insight proceeds from the faltering voice of the cultural dominant that they have outgrown, such as in the Bishop's colloquies with Crazy Jane.

In composing his unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats used the idea of "chymical marriage" in a thinly disguised tale of the young poet's love for Maud, art, Ireland, and the occult. Once again, MacGregor Mathers appears as hermetic spokesman (variantly in the characters of McClagan, Dunn, and MacGregor Martin), this time addressing the protagonist, Michael, who is ripe for being romanced by legendary testimonials:

> I am only fifty and I have yet time to find the elixir. When I have found it I will disappear. People will think I am dead, but I will go to Arabia, as did Nicholas Flamel and his wife when they found the elixir, and perhaps I shall find Nicholas Flamel and his wife there. I will give you some of the elixir too and we will grow old together. (*SB* 198)

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Yeats includes notes of uncertainty as Michael rejects a literal belief in the elixir but salvages "those old ideas as symbols of the greatness of man and of man's intellect" (*SB* 63). Yet the bolder statements made in *Memoirs* argue for the powerful emotional investment Yeats placed in the hope that Maud herself would become his *soror mystica*: "I began to form plans of our lives devoted to mystic truth and spoke to her of Nicholas Flamel and his wife, Pernella. Surely if I told her all my thoughts, all my hopes and my ambitions, she would never leave me" (*M* 12425).

For a time Yeats was able to attract Maud to these interests. She joined the Order of the Golden Dawn and adopted the secret name PIAL (*Per Ignem Ad Lucem*) to signify her new spiritual status. However, she soon left the Order. She found the *fratre* and *soror* "the very essence of British middle-class dullness so incongruous in their cloaks and badges at initiation ceremonies." 4 In her autobiography, *A Servant of the Queen*, Maud omits almost all of what Yeats recorded of their spiritual partnership. Apparently, she was reluctant to publicize this aspect of her early life; instead, she emphasizes her political activities. However, she briskly depicts her brush with the late Victorian occultism in a chapter entitled "Occult Experiences." Although she mentions that "Willie" (Yeats) had introduced her to the Golden Dawn, he does not figure significantly in the more tantalizing accounts. In one instance, after smoking hashish, Maud sees an apparition who tells her, "You can now go out of your body and go anywhere you like, but you must always keep the thought of your body as a thread by which to return. If you lose that, you may not be able to return."5

Further evidence of Maud's out-of-the-body facility (or astral travel) can be found in a journal that Yeats kept in 1908.

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This journal, labeled "Private," contains sporadically dated entries by Yeats and includes letters which Maud Gonne wrote him from Paris. The first entry is dated simply "June" (1908), and the journal runs to July of 1909. It is a record of the love story between Yeats and Maud, or at least of the twists and turns their paths took in 19089. Yeats's dreams and yearnings regarding Maud, as well as his close scrutinies of her letters, are cast in alchemical images of the mystical marriage. After Yeats learned of Maud's marriage to Major John MacBride in 1902, he had no contact with her until 1908, when the two met in Paris and apparently enjoyed an intimate reconciliation after their six-year estrangement: "At Paris with PIAL: On Saturday evening she saw something that blotted away the recent past and brought all back to the spiritual marriage of 1898." 6

In the 1890s, Yeats volleyed back and forth in his confidence about Maud's feelings for him. On the one hand, "she seemed to understand every subtlety of my art and especially all my spiritual philosophy" (*M* 61); on the other hand, "she seemed to take my own work too lightly" (*M* 63). Yeats also felt that although their intimacy could not have been greater, Maud had rejected his proposals for physical marriage on the grounds that he lacked both maturity and achievement. She settled instead for a spiritual union, even though Yeats's sexual desire for her remained unabated. The foundation of their relationship, comprised of adamantly shared beliefs about Ireland, was strong enough to withstand the tensions of mismatched sexuality: "Politics were merely a means of meeting, but this was a link so perfect that it would restore at once, even after a quarrel, the sense of intimacy" (*M* 125).

Yeats also thought his relation to Maud would produce a "spiritual birth" in the form of a revelation of their historic

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mission. Exactly how deeply Maud comprehended or committed herself to Yeats's views about the daimonic renewal of history is questionable. As much as Yeats would like to portray her as his learned partner in hermetic operations for the salvation of Ireland, Maud's schooling in occult theory was not so formal or far-ranging as Yeats's. The published autobiographical accounts of both do not square: the adept's longing for his mystic *soror* versus the political heroine's disavowal of hocus-pocus.

However, Maud's letters to Yeats show that she indeed practiced a specific form of occultism with Yeats: astral projection, or astral travel. It is difficult to tell how often they attempted this, for Yeats speaks of it in an iterative manner in *Memoirs*. In the following passage, he speaks of conjuring symbols that would aid in astral travel:

> I would wake dreaming of a shower of precious stones. Sometimes she would have some corresponding experience in Paris and upon the same night, but always with more detail. I thought we became one in a world of emotion eternalized by its own intensity and purity, and that this world had for its symbols precious stones. No physical, sexual sensation ever accompanied these dreams[.] (*M* 128)

In the 1906 version of *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats fabricates just such a world of precious stones where lovers unite in an eternal dimension, wherein "old stories about mystic marriages" become true. In that place,

> Where the world ends
> The mind is made unchanging, for it finds
> Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible hope,

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> The flagstone under all, the fire of fires,
> The roots of the world.
>
> (*TP* 413; *VP* 227)

and

> She and I
> Shall light upon a place in the world's core,
> Where passion grows to be a changeless thing,
> Like charmed apples made of chrysoprase,
> Or chrysoberyl, or beryl, or chrysolite;
> And there, in juggleries of sight and sense
> Become one movement, energy, delight
>
> (*TP* 41617; *VP* 231)

The symbol of precious stones was not pure literary invention on Yeats's part. In Golden Dawn practices, precious stones were a link between alchemy and the spirit of the seven planets. Later extracts from the private journal show Yeats experimenting with images of Ruby (Mars) and Emerald (Venus) to activate, meditatively, the state of spiritual union. The following entry from Yeats's private journal (3 July 1908) gives a further mention to precious stones in an alchemical context:

> I saw on going to sleep, the old symbol of a golden sun and silver moon. They became green at the intersection I saw a child's figure. I had confused dreams. As usual a kiss. I was buying stones (in old times precious stones came with the vision of union). I had a dream of a kind of talking machine that argued out altruism and egotism. 7

His vision of sun and moon refers to the alchemical conjunction of *rex* and *regina*, resulting in the birth of the divine child.

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The parenthetical statement about precious stones is Yeats's, clarifying for us his knowledge of the mystical marriage and its psychic processes. The additional image of the talking machine, prefigured by the image of the kissor unionstresses Yeats's concern about the union of the opposites. That is, the debate over egotism and altruism, the dialogue of self and soul, the choice between saint or poet, are the continuous components of Yeats's inner opus.

After such active nights, Yeats would follow through on what had been given him in dream. He often amplified the symbolic material through further study; in the above case he consulted Basil Valentinus, the alchemist from "Rosa Alchemica" who supplied the "keys" to apocalyptic conflagrations (though he gave no specific citations). His other methods for investigating the symbols were less scholastic. Sometimes he followed a method of meditation much like Jung's "active imagination," a process for bringing the conscious and unconscious minds into creative contact. Yeats describes this action in his essay "Prometheus Unbound": "There is a form of meditation which permits an image or symbol to generate itself, and the images and symbols so generated build themselves up into coherent structures often beautiful and startling" (*E&I* 422). As Jung describes active imagination, the purpose of this process is to allow some content of the unconscious (e.g. symbols) to surface into a conscious waking state, and, without conscious interference, to let the content unfold its message or meanings, thereby enriching the conscious state with something it lacks in its usual orientation. The third and most characteristic mode Yeats used to explore his dreams and visions was the evocation of spirits, a practice he learned in the Golden Dawn.

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In the weeks that followed the 3 July entry, Yeats had "dreams of PIAL every night." 8 He made evocations for union and also for Mars and Venus, representing the masculine and feminine forces. On the night of 25 July, having recently arrived at Coole Park, Yeats made the evocation for union and "saw it for the first time bright and shining."9 That same night in Paris, Maud had a corresponding experience. She wrote to Yeats immediately the following day, needing to know "at once if it affected you and how."10 Yet she was quick to disown any intention of supernatural flirtation, maintaining her support of Yeats's important work for Ireland. She fretted, "I don't want to do anything which will take you from your work, or make working more arduous."11 Yeats had been toiling over *The Player Queen*, which he would shortly abandon and not complete until 1919. Before plunging into an account that she must have known Yeats could not resist, she encourages him: "That play is going to be a wonderful thing and must come firstnothing must interfere with it."12 Yet, notwithstanding these admonitions, Maud continued thusly:

> Last night all my household had retired at a quarter to eleven and I thought I would go to you astrally. I thought by going to you I might be able to leave you with some of my vitality and energy which would make working less of a toil next dayI had seen a curious somewhat Egyptian form floating over me (like in the picture of Blake the Soul leaving the body)It was dressed in moth-like garments and had curious rings edged with gold in which it could fold itself upI had thought it was myself, a body in which I could go out into the astralat a quarter to eleven last night I put on this body and thought strongly of you and desired to go to you. We went somewhere in space I don't know

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> whereI was conscious of starlight and of hearing the sea below us. You had taken the form I think of a great serpent, but I am not quite sure. I only saw your face distinctly and as I looked into your eyes your lips touched mine. We melted into one another till we formed only one being, a being greater than ourselves who felt all and knew all with double intensity[.] 13

The union of two astral bodies is a hermetic concept that Maud may have learned about in the Golden Dawn. Yeats himself may have taught her about astral projection, and the interested reader is directed to Israel Regardie's description in *The Golden Dawn.*14 As suggested earlier, Maud must have guessed how irresistible "Willie" would have found her astral adventure, replete as it was with Maud's yearnings, Blakean iconography, and the apotheosis of love. Yeats was to reproduce Maud's version of astral lovemaking twenty-five years later in "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn" (1934). In that poem, the lovers Baile and Aillinn are united through death, and

> Transfigured to pure substance what had once
> Been bone or sinew; when such bodies join
> There is no touching here, nor touching there,
> Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole;
> For the intercourse of angels is a light
> Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed.
>
> (*TP* 284; *VP* 555)

In letters written around the same time as the poem, Yeats claimed Swedenborg as the source for the union of spirits, "that the sexual intercourse of angels is a conflagration of the whole being" (*L* 805): "Yet why not take Swedenborg literally and think we attain, in a partial contact, what the spirits know

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throughout their being. He somewhere describes two spirits meeting, and as they touch they become a single conflagration" (*L* 807).

On the same night of her astral visions, Maud further dreamed that she and Yeats were together in Italy. "We were quite happy and we talked of this wonderful spiritual reunion I have described. You said it would tend to increase physical desire. This troubles me a little, for there was nothing physical in that union. Material union is but a pale shadow compared to it." 15 Whether Maud was forecasting Yeats's response or merely projecting her own desires onto him is a difficult judgment call. The correspondence between them suggests that both had sexual desires, but that Maud was reluctant to acknowledge hers. Furthermore, if we are to believe the information that Richard Ellmann reports in his 1979 preface to *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Yeats had confided to his wife Georgie and friend Edith Shackleton Heald that he and Maud had been lovers around this time.

While Maud was legally married to MacBride, her emotional intimacy with Yeats was stronger than with her husband. And her dream did prove to be premonitory because these astral unions, repeated throughout 1908 and 1909, awakened sexual desire in Yeats and sexual revulsion in Maud. Yeats felt himself under unrelenting strain, wanting to "convert into earth" what was allegedly occurring between them on higher planes. As the seventh key of the Emerald Tablets puts it: "Rise from earth to heaven and come down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquire the power of the realities above and the realities below." Maud, however, would not descend to practicalities in this matter.

Upon receiving Maud's letter, Yeats went into the woods of Coole Park to do his own conjuring. The various images of

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union, especially of the sun and moon, point toward the spiritual marriage:

> Made evocation. Imagined myself a great serpent as in letter. We became one. Then suddenly we were folded in a great mouse-grey veil or shawl, shutting away the world. I looked into her being and was in a "dazzling dark" of green and red. So she is Venus (green) and I am Mars (red). And I am day and sun, and she moon and night. 16

A few days later, on 9 August, Yeats further developed the images of the alchemical marriage. He imagined a "union of gold and silver flames" and "a ruby cross on [his] head and the head of PIAL before me with an emerald cross."17 Within the same semitrance, these images were exalted to "the adept's crown with precious stones" and "a beautiful still, shining water with a swan upon it."18 The juxtaposition of adept's crown and swan would signify a reconciliation of the opposites for Yeats. The swan, a symbol of spiritualized beauty in art, was never distant from the adept, nor did the adept tarry far from the artist.

Yeats did not confront and resolve the issue of sexual tensions until January of 1909. From October 1908 the strife between the two had been increasing. Maud once again writes that "we became one being with an ecstasy I cannot describe."19 Yeats continued to practice what he called the "ceremony of spiritual union," which was probably codified in a Golden Dawn grimoire. His results must have been close to Maud's, for he commented that "union always takes place in a world where desire is unthinkable."20 However, at the same time sexual desire was stirring in him. He repeated his offers of marriage to Maud, but she refused, this time on the basis that her Catholicism would not permit her to divorce MacBride.

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And, "in addition to this, the old dread of physical love ha[d] awakened in her." 21

At this time, Yeats envisioned Maud as undergoing a transformation. On the one hand, when not under supernatural influence she still "judge[d] people and things by an exclusively political measure."22 That is, Yeats thought Maud's dominant orientation was incomplete, too extraverted, and therefore sometimes harsh and misguided. On the other hand, he thought the spiritual union was putting Maud through great suffering. He wished "her heart [to have] grown nobler under the lord of sorrow and denial."23 Compare that image to Maud the activist of "No Second Troy," who possessed a mind "that nobleness made simple as a fire" (*TP* 91; *VP* 256). No longer viewing Maud as the stern, imperious heroine, his range of feelings for her began to include the paternal.

> What end will it all have? She has all myself. I was never more deeply in love, but my desire, always strong, must go elsewhere she is my innocence and I her wisdom. Of old she was a phoenix and I fought her, but now she is my child more than sweetheart but in the phoenix nest she is reborn in all her power to torture and delight, to waste and to ennoble. She would be cruel if she was not a child, who can always say "You will not suffer because I will pray."24

During this alchemical union between Yeats and Maud we see that, at least for Yeats, something new was born out of the crucible of their tempestuous interactions. But this fiery phase of their relationship was short-lived. In *Memoirs*, we see Yeats preparing himself for the dissolution of his spiritual marriage. He manages the suffering of losing Maud by incorporating the love motif into a scheme of antinomy. That is,

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when their partnership was working, it was because Maud's spiritual nature was passive and "full of charming fantasy," while Yeats's was "passionate, even violent" (*M* 124). However, in regard to daily activity, their orientations to outer events were reversed. Maud's intemperate urgency "taught to ignorant men most violent ways" (*TP* 91; *VP* 256), but Yeats, with his predilection for solitary contemplation, confessed that he might never have left his desk if not for her.

Yeats honored Maud as a sort of negative muse, whose lack of sympathetic understanding prodded him into justifying his ways to her. Whereas in the 1890s Maud understood every subtlety of Yeats's art, in January 1909 Yeats wrote: "PIAL never really understands my plans, or nature, or ideas what matter? How much of the best I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her? If she understood, I should lack reason for writing" (*M* 14243). He expressed these sentiments in verse form in "Words":

> I had this thought a while ago,
> "My darling cannot understand
> What I have done, or what would do
> In this blind bitter land."
>
> And I grew weary of the sun
> Unitl my thoughts cleared up again,
> Remembering that the best I have done
> Was done to make it plain;
>
> That every year I have cried, "At length
> My darling understands it all,
> Because I have come into my strength,
> And words obey my call";

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That she had done so who can say
What would have shaken from the sieve?
I might have thrown poor words away
And been content to live.

(*TP* 90; *VP* 25556)

Even though Maud became disenchanted with the role of mystic *soror* or alchemical queen, she never lost her luster for Yeats. During their more supernatural phases, the relation between the sexes took on a conventional dynamic: Yeats was active, powerful, and wise, and Maud was gentle, receptive, and innocent. When this order was upended, Yeats felt himself enthralled to Maud; she became a representative of outer life, a hostess to the poet's enemies, "those industries that make a good citizen" (*M* 140).

In February 1909, Yeats's contact with Maud had cooled considerably, but his concentration on the theme of the chymical wedding remained strong. His recent submergence in the archetype of alchemical union fueled an urge to formulate a philosophy of love that was tantamount to a spiritual discipline:

> [L]ove, if it is fine, is essentially a discipline, but it needs so much wisdom that the love of Solomon and Sheba must have lasted for all the silence of the Scriptures. In wise love each divines the high secret self of the other and, refusing to believe in mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life. (*M* 14445)

Ten years later Yeats would mold these thoughts into verse. In "Solomon to Sheba" (1919) the biblical paramours are

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couched in sexual terms, but their love also constitutes a form of higher learning:

> There's not a man or woman
> Born under the skies
> Dare match in learning with us two[.]
>
> (*TP* 138; *VP* 333)

In "Solomon and the Witch" (1921), Yeats delves deeper into the learning of the lovers. Their sentimental education is compounded of strife and pain, and Yeats casts the stages of their relationship in the alchemical terms of the "blackening," the "wounding," and the returning to wholeness. And once again, he ends the account with an apotheosis, which the lovers have earned through suffering, signaling the union of the alchemical opposites. The lovers are tested,

> With cruelties of Choice and Chance;
> And when at last that murder's over
> Maybe the bride-bed brings despair,
> For each an imagined image brings
> And finds a real image there;
> Yet the world ends when these two things,
> Though several, are a single light,
> When oil and wick are burned in one;
> Therefore a blessed moon last night
> Gave Sheba to her Solomon.
>
> (*TP* 177; *VP* 388)

We must now return to Yeats's private journal to see how he reconciled himself to the decline of his unconsummated spiritual marriage to Maud. After December of 1908, Yeats no longer mentions astral projections; however, he continued to

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have alchemical visions concerning Maud. On 21 June 1909, he had been reading the alchemist Basil Valentinus. That night he dreamt of "a furnace or stove of some kind" and knew there was a wizard inside: "And someone said 'He is dead,' but I saw his thighs moving, amidst the irons of the stove." 25 The furnace, one might hazard, is the alchemist's athanor; the wizard inside its flames is the philosopher's stone; the gold that would be extracted, or released from the base metal, iron. It is interesting, however, that what alerts Yeats to the wizard's life are his moving thighs, reminding us of the sphinxlike beast "moving its slow thighs" in "The Second Coming." The instinctual, the sexual, what is animal in man predominates here. The dream continues with a voice telling Yeats that he listened too much to the "supernatural and philosophical voiceyou cannot hear us who are under your feet."26 This message seems to recapitulate the Emerald Tablet's dictum to "convert into earth" the powers of heaven. Yeats then asks the voice a question about Maud: "I have a friend who has been my friend for twenty years. Will we ever be nearer?" The voice enigmatically responds, "There will be death."27 Yeats did not try to unravel this augury. Instead, he mused upon the status of the voice, wondering, "[W]as he a voice of fermenting, instinctive lifea voice out of the alchemist's athanor?"28

The sixth key of Basil Valentinus, concerning the marriage of Sol and Luna (sun and moon), gives us a clue about Yeats's voice in the furnace. The plate accompanying the sixth key depicts the royal wedding of king and queen. The sun hangs above the king and the moon above the queen. Also, near the king stands a swan and a small athanor resting on flames. A Janus-faced head caps the furnace, and from the head's two mouths issue glasses that the alchemists called "vases," employed to capture the distilled (volatile) essences of the matter

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being subjected to the flames inside the oven. Near the queen stands an alchemist pouring philosophical water into an oven of tripartite structure. Valentinus's commentary is cast in decidedly sexual overtones:

> The male without the female is looked upon as only half a body, nor can the female without the male be regarded as more complete. For neither can bring forth fruit so long as it remains alone. But if the two be conjugally united, there is a perfect body, and the seed is placed in a condition in which it can increase. 29

The poetics of sex in this passage surely impressed Yeats, in part evoking his dream of the wizard within the furnace and in part shaping his interpretation of the dream. That Yeats appraises the voice within the athanor as "instinctive life" argues for a radical shift in his conception of alchemyand hence the goals he attached to spiritual lifefrom the previous decade as we saw in "Rosa Alchemica."

In "Rosa Alchemica" alchemy represented that process which would transport the aspirant into "a world made wholly of essences," a movement into the "above." At the door of initiation, the narrator, hearing a voice say "the perfect gold has come from the athanor," is propelled into a dance with the Immortals. In 1909, the alchemical thrust is reversing. The idea of spiritual force descending into the body and into mattera movement into the "below"gains primacy over the Symbolist ascension into the world of essences. Man need not leave his body in an astral trance; instead, the spirit bestows its voice upon blood, earth, and stone. This reversal was slow to materialize in regard to Yeats's poetic treatment of human love, as witnessed by the nine year gap between

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the Flamel-Pernella poems (1910) and the first Solomon-Sheba poem (1919) in which Yeats allowed the conjunction of sexual and spiritual loves. And seven years would pass before he married Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917. His marriage to Georgie incorporated the best from "above and below," as their union bore fruit in the form of two children and in the creative images that Georgie's automatic writing brought forth.

Yeats ended this last alchemical entry with a reconsideration of spiritual marriage. "Years ago I was told that my pursuit of the perfect love lacked the 'liquefaction of the gold.' And I found this in Basil Valentinus as a prelude to the marriage of Sol and Luna." 30 Valentinus defines liquefaction as "a liquid key, comparable to the celestial influence, and a dry water joined to the terrestrial substance: all which are one thing."31 What precedes this obscure definition is a discussion on the need for a soul in man to unite the body and the spirit. Alchemy was the process of making this soul, for without a soul the body may receive a "volatile spirit," but this spirit would have no place to reside. A soul, then, is the mediating organ, or meeting ground, which permits the union of heaven and earth.

Yeats further surmised that the liquefaction in itself was not enough; it had to be connected to the alchemical stage of "fermentation," or, as he phrased it, "fermentation resulting in nectar."32 According to Valentinus, fermentation follows directly after liquefaction. The following Valentinian formulation of fermentation employs a cannibalistic image to suggest complete assimilation of the opposites: "Then you must join together the husband and the wife, that each may feed upon the other's flesh and blood, and so they may propagate their species a thousandfold."33 A plate in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* depicts fermentation as a winged king and queen

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joined in sexual union. 34 Yeats concluded that his concentration on the liquefactionrejecting the earth in favor of the world of essenceswas imbalanced, one of "those supernatural and philosophical things that the voiced blamed [him] for." Realizing that he needed this fermentation, coming to value instinct as much as intellect, and seeing that his nocturnal flights did not a marriage make, Yeats turned away, slowly and reluctantly, from Maud and his cherished ideal of spiritual marriage.

II

We can now examine how Yeats converted biography into art. Given the dramatic intensity of these alchemical interludes, it is understandable that Yeats should want to write poems commemorative of the mystical marriage, as denoted by his original *Raymond Lully [Nicholas Flamel] and His Wife Pernella* title. However, it is highly ironic that not one of the eight poems within the series supports the hermetic title; they ignore the intimate and alchemical details of his recent experience. Perhaps this disparity between title and content is what prompted Yeats in later editions of *The Green Helmet* to drop the Flamel-Pernella title altogether, allowing the poems to stand by themselves.

Compared to the hermetic love poems of the 1890s, these poems are stylistically more stern, less lyrical. William York Tindall termed Yeats's early poetry as disembodied and ethereal.35 Indeed, in the love poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, women possess no discernible human character; they are only typified by details of physiognomy: hair, breasts, skin. In the Flamel-Pernella poems, however, the speaker yearns for a lover

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whom we clearly know is Maud. Her lineaments of character are sharply drawn, but physical descriptions are altogether absent. Many critics have already noted this shift in style, some crediting it to Yeats's more rigorous activities in outer life, some to his reading of Nietzsche, and some to his Modernist urge to rid his poetry of abstraction and archaic inversion, most notably achieved in "Adam's Curse" (1904). We can revisit Yeats's own ideas about change in style in his prefatory comments to *In the Seven Woods* (1906):

> Some of my friends do not understand why I have not been content with lyric writing. But one can only do what one wants to do, and to me drama has been the search for more manful energy, for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret. All art is in the last analysis an endeavor to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art's sake, and that is why the labour of the alchemists, who were called artists in their day, is a befitting comparison for all deliberate change of style. (*VP* 849)

Change of style is transformation, and this transformation is alchemical when, according to Yeats, it reflects a growth of the artist's psyche toward human perfection. The poems in question exemplify Yeats's efforts to condense an image of this perfection "out of the flying vapours of the world." Yet, this image does not depict the perfection of the spiritual marriage. The nearest he comes to human perfection is in the image of Maud's beauty, "Being high and solitary and most stern" (*TP* 91; *VP* 257). And the flying vapors, in this case comprised from the welter of conflicting emotion and passion that his astral intimacies with Maud had rekindled, are suppressed.

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That is, rather than testify to their union as it might have occurred in another dimension, the poems reveal Yeats's struggle to accept their lack of union on the physical plane. They are attempts to reconcile himself to the irreconcilable, love poems to a woman beyond his grasp.

"A Woman Homer Sung," "Peace," and "No Second Troy" are devoted to condensing an image of Maud's beauty and to fixing it for posterity's sake. In "A Woman Homer Sung," Maud is cast as a Helen for Yeats, the Irish Homer. In the second stanza the speaker, "being grey," reflects how future generations will value his accomplishments:

> I dream that I have brought
> To such a pitch my thought
> That coming time can say,
> He shadowed in a glass
> What thing her body was.
>
> (*TP* 90; *VP* 255)

These lines are highly ironic. On the one hand, it seems the poet has forged an enduring image out of the transient phenomena of the woman's body. The poet's act of creation is an alchemical performance, redeeming the essential beauty from corruptible matter, creating something permanent from the impermanent. On the other hand, though, a series of displacements calls the entire artistic process into question. First, the poet only "dreams" that he has brought his thought to such a revered pitch; second, we are displaced into a dream of future generations and their appreciation of the woman's image (or, rather, of the poet who created the image). Third, it is this displaced, imagined future that will then say he "shadowed"that is, the poet's act of representation is marked by its insubstantiality. Fourth, the poet imagines that the future will say he shadowed

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in a "glass," suggesting a mirror, a further displacement, a heightening of insubstantiality. However, the insubstantial, the weightlessthe imagehave the greatest value and impact.

The third and final stanza carries this supposition to its logical conclusion:

> For she had fiery blood
> When I was young,
> And trod so sweetly proud
> As 'twere upon a cloud,
> A woman Homer sung,
> That life and letters seem
> But an heroic dream.
>
> (*TP* 90; *VP* 255)

The entire stanza represents an act of memory, a further displacement. But the image carried in memory is so forceful and persuasive that by comparison "life and letters," the world of actualities, is the dream. That is, although through the journal entries we can see a shift occurring in Yeats's scheme of valuesthe movement from liquefaction to fermentationhe has yet to incorporate it into his art. The world of ghostly paradigm still holds sway.

In "Peace" Yeats describes the difficulty that painters would encounter in trying to create an image of the mercurial Maud. Once again, he captures her essence in word-pictures: "Were not all her life but storm, / Would not painters paint a form / Of such noble lines " The difficulty comes when the poet considers the combination of opposites that the painters would have to transpose: "All that sterness amid charm, / All that sweetness amid strength" (*TP* 92; *VP* 25859). The essence distilled here is similar to that in the poem "No Second Troy," a magnetic fusion of opposites. In this poem, which is more

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grounded in actual circumstances, Maud is portrayed as Yeats's unwitting torturer: "Why should I blame her that she filled my days / With misery" (*TP* 91; *VP* 256). In placing Maud on a pedestal for her heroic action and uncanny beauty, her power to influence the masses, the poem makes clear how far Maud remained from Yeats's grasp. He "shadows" her as a historical person that may be courted but never bound. However, his efforts to concretize her in verse seem to have provided a partial compensation: his artistic grasp could better control what eluded his physical and emotional grasp.

"King and No King" is especially interesting in light of the journal material. The following lines are dense with irony:

> And I that have not your faith, how shall I know
> That in the blinding light beyond the grave
> We'll find so good a thing as that we have lost?
>
> (*TP* 92; *VP* 258)

Staunchly Catholic, Maud would find the afterlife of heaven's "blinding light" a suitable substitute for their meetings in the astral light. It is interesting that Yeats dispensed with the matter of his alchemical reveries, and instead struck a note of contentment with simple earthly existence. Perhaps his memory was a bit selective when he recalls what he and Maud have lost:

> The homely kindness, the day's common speech,
> The habitual content of each with each
> When neither soul nor body has been crossed.
>
> (*TP* 92; *VP* 258)

The absence of strife from this scenario of their common life is noteworthy; "the habitual content of each with each" could have been no more than a moment's respite.

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These poems, then, ironically deny their original title. The voice of "fermenting, instinctive life" was still just a presentiment in Yeats's life. His spiritual marriage to Maud, though perhaps consummated on the astral plane, was both impossible and unsatisfying on earth. In his later love poems we will see how Yeats considered sexual union a vital gateway to the alchemical union of opposites. His myth and philosophy will become fully rooted in the body, in matter.

III

In the late 1920s Yeats resurrected the theme of spiritual marriage. This time he cast his alchemical lovers in the unassuming personae of Crazy Jane (from *Words for Music Perhaps*) and A Woman Young and Old. His treatment of spiritual marriage takes a dramatic leap from the heroic and noble to the lowly and bawdy. Gloria Kline in *The Last Courtly Lover* ascribes this transformation to his changing attitude toward courtly love:

> The repudiation [of courtly love] began in the sterility of "spiritual marriage" and the satiety of real marriage. courtly love as myth and symbol of cultural order also proved to have its limits in that the lady around whom the culture is organized represents only the positive aspects of Virgin and Good Mother. 36

Unfortunately, Kline does not apply her sharp insights to the Flamel-Pernella poems. In that group, the ideal of courtly love works in both positive and negative ways for Yeats. Positively, it gave him a traditional mold in which to cast his union with Maud. By uniting his soul to Maud's, they might exert a creative pressure on the destiny of Ireland. Negatively, however,

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courtly love worked against Yeats in that it allowed him to compromise his own impulses and accept a union with Maud that did not allow passion. The result was a sublimation, or a disembodiment, of impulse.

In 1926, after nine years of marriage and the completion of *A Vision*, Yeats attempted in verse a new union of man and woman that included both the natural and the supernatural. Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare:

> We are at our Tower and I am writing poetry as I always do here, and as always happens, no matter how I begin, it becomes love poetry before I am finished with it. I have lots of subjects in my head including a play about Christ meeting the worshippers of Dionysus on the mountainsideno doubt that will become love poetry too. One feels at moments as if one could with a touch convey a visionthe mystic way and sexual love use the same meansopposed yet parallel existence. (*L* 715)

The poems gathered under the title "A Woman Young and Old" (hereafter "A Woman"), and a few of the Crazy Jane poems, exemplify that conjunction between the mystic way and sexual love. The two female personae are certainly sisters, two faces of the same Eve. Crazy Jane was created in 1929, while Yeats was recovering from a long illness. "Then in the Spring of 1929 life returned to me as an impression of the uncontrollable energy and daring of the great creators; it seemed to me that but for journalism and criticism, all that evasion and explanation, the world would be torn in pieces" (*VP* 831).

Moving away from courtly love toward a more elemental grasp of woman, Yeats discovered a new intimacy of expression that surpassed all his previous love poems. According to

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Kline's Jungian analysis of Yeats's situation, "his course took him for a time into a 'feminine underworld'." 37 It was on this underworld journey that he met the negative counterparts of the positive mother and virgin. Though Kline calls these counterparts "the negative aspects of the feminine,"38 they provide the complementary forces of disintegration and chaos necessary to the cosmic rhythm. Further, charting the feminine psyche on the wheel of *A Vision*, Kline places Crazy Jane near Phase 1 as an image of chaos. Though she does not pinpoint where "A Woman" sits on the wheel's rim, Kline's following remarks would argue that "A Woman" probably hovers near Phase 15, opposite to Jane: "There, seeing through the eyes of his female personae, he comprehended that a woman cannot have Unity of Being without her own intellect."39"A Woman" does possess a stronger measure of intellect than Crazy Jane in that she contextualizes her expressions of love within a cosmic framework. She brings philosophy to her love song. Crazy Jane's formulation of esoteric principle, on the other hand, confers integrity and sanctity upon the earthly plane. She consecrates sexual love; she will not be repressed by the culture's (i.e., the Bishop's) condemnation of the physical. And though unlearned in hermetic theory, Crazy Jane is the disciple of Avicenna, who declares that all life proceeds from corruption:

> But love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement,
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent.
>
> (*TP* 25960; *VP* 513)

Jane's virtue is her utter acceptance of the wholeness of life, especially the black and bitter aspects of herself. She makes

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no excuse for her lack of saintliness. As she addresses God in "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment," Jane's self-portrait sounds like an alchemist's recipe:

> Take the sour
> If you take me,
> I can scoff and lour
> And scold for an hour.
>
> (*TP* 257; *VP* 510)

Jane understands that it is the value of the feminine to live a wretched life on earth, even though that life is all opacity and mystery. She understands that "All could be known or shown / If Time were but gone."

In "A Woman Young and Old," the poems which sound the most resonant chords of mystic and sexual love are "Before the World Was Made," "A First Confession," "Consolation," "Chosen," and "A Last Confession." Since these poems are generally brief (anywhere from twelve to twenty-four lines), Yeats is economic in his strategies, almost to the point of being epigrammatic. In comparison to the early love poetry, his style has been raked clean of descriptive adjectives. The lovers are unadorned both physically and psychologically. The anonymous speaker cannot be compared to the ethereal Pre-Raphaelite women of the fin de siècle poems nor with the noble lineaments of Maud. Yeats has reduced his speaker to an archetypal woman so that her naked emotional utterance may also bear the echoes of transcendent philosophy. In this way, the alchemical marriage occurs most significantly within the individual woman herself. And the act of sexual love becomes a necessary agent for her highest realization that visible and invisible, man and woman, above and below, are one.

"Before the World Was Made" provides the reader with a

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fragment of the philosophy that underlies the entire group of poems. The first stanza contains a paraphrase of the Zen koan, "What face did I have before I was born?" 40

If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet
Or ask if all be right
From mirror to mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.

(*TP* 270; *VP* 53132)

Yeats is operating on the high paradox that earmarks much of spiritual poetry. The woman's mirror-searchings indicate the opposite of what might normally be assumed. That is, what motivates her vanity is the search for her original ontological form, the soul's unique, unconditional beauty or "radical innocence." Further, the woman argues that the sexual act should be aimed at loving "the thing that was" before the world was made. Bodily existence, the physical world, is not to be trusted as reality, at least not as ultimate reality. The unconditional state, prior to bodily creation, is a condition of unity that sexual union can only foreshadow.

In "A First Confession," the woman reveals the separation of spirit and body that at first seems to prevent her from attaining Unity of Being.

I long for truth, and yet
I cannot stay from that
My better self disowns,
For a man's attention

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Brings such satisfaction
To the craving in my bones.

(*TP* 271; *VP* 533)

Here the longing for truthor union with Godand the cravings of the flesh represent the conventional conflict of the *homo duplex*, matter versus spirit. However, in the next stanza the woman expands the horizons of her experience, providing a cosmic context within which to view her situation:

Brightness that I pull back
From the Zodiac,
Why those questioning eyes
That are fixed upon me?
What can they do but shun me
If empty night replies?

(*TP* 271; *VP* 533)

Turning her sights on the Zodiac, she tries to apply the hermetic key "as above, so below." The nourishment that she may draw from the heavens feeds her search for ontological completion and softens any buffet she may suffer in the flesh.

"Consolation," however, offers a prescription for healing the schism between body and soul, heart and mind, man and woman, heaven and earth. Having first tested out her philosophy, the speaker is now ready to add some proofs of her own. From her own earthbound experience she will teach "the sages where man is comforted":

How could passion run so deep
Had I never thought
That the crime of being born
Blackens all our lot?

(*TP* 272; *VP* 534)

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That is, being born into matter, the spirit becomes a prisoner. The last two lines intimate what measures may console us during our incarceration in the body, wherein the divine is hidden from human vision: "But where the crime's committed/ The crime can be forgot" (*TP* 272; *VP* 534). Conception, and so sexual union, locates both prison and freedom. In terms of the poem's images, if passion leads to "blackening" or the *nigredo*, it may also lead to "enlightenment."

In "Chosen," Yeats begins to weave together strands from the previous poems. Here the crime of sexual union is raised to a divine act within a cosmic contextthe Zodiacas suggested in "A First Confession." In 1928, Yeats wrote this gloss to "Chosen":

> I have symbolized a woman's love as the struggle of the darkness to keep the sun from its earthly bed. In the last stanza of "Chosen" I change the symbol to that of the souls of man and woman ascending through the Zodiac. In some Neoplatonist or Hermetistwhose name I forgetthe whorl changes into a sphere at one of the points where the Milky Way crosses the Zodiac. (*VP* 830)

The speaker of the poem now proposes herself to be a wise old woman, formulating how she would respond "If questioned on / My utmost pleasure with a man." In the following lines her intellectual command becomes scholarly, as the woman chooses for her theme that "stillness,"

> Where his heart my heart did seem
> And both adrift on the miraculous stream
> Wherewrote a learned astrologer
> The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.
>
> (*TP* 273; *VP* 535)

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The stillness of unity, when man and woman, the opposites, are merged is the moment that propels the speaker into a higher dimension, a greater context of being, symbolized as a sphere of light. The complexity of this image, compounded by the speaker's authoritative tone, shows "A Woman" at her greatest expression.

"A Last Confession" also continues the themes of preceding poems. Its vision, however, is certainly not as unified as "Chosen." Rather, it hearkens back to "Before the World Was Made," wherein the physical world is but a depot, a separation from the freedom of bodiless essence. Physical love, represented in stanzas 1 and 2, becomes the analogue to consummation in the unconditional world:

> But when this soul, its body off,
> Naked to naked goes,
> He it has found shall find therein
> What none other knows.
>
> (*TP* 275; *VP* 538)

Just as in John Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV," the naked soul is the feminine bride, and God is the masculine lover-creator who would "give his own and take his own / And rule in his own right" (*TP* 275; *VP* 538). In this example of spiritual marriage, the union occurs totally within the individual's psyche.

While the fragments of philosophy gathered in "A Woman Young and Old" constitute the loftiest expressions of any female persona in Yeats's canon, the "Ribh" poems of *Supernatural Songs* provide a male version of the mystical marriage. 41 Written in 1934 and included in *A Full Moon in March*, Yeats gave his dialectical skills much freer rein than in "A Woman." In these "Songs," the sexual motif is entirely subordinated to

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formulations of spiritual truths. Whereas Crazy Jane and "A Woman" value the physical expression of sex as a necessary ingredient to experience unity, the celibate Ribh employs sex only as a metaphor for his interiorized union between soul and God.

Ribh draws his visionary inspirations from an ancient sourcemost likely druidic. Yeats wrote: "Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics of those older faiths that have become so important to our invention" (*VP* 837). The ancient Egyptian springs of wisdom would suggest that Ribh's spiritual heritage stretches back to Hermes Trismegistus, legendary father of alchemy. Yeats cautioned that he would not explain Ribh's poems, but in clarifying his venerable persona he admitted this ironic note: "I would consider Ribh, were it not for his ideas about the Trinity, an orthodox man" (*VP* 838). Ribh is anything but orthodox, at least in the Christian sense; he is an unconventional composite of hermetic philosophy and Eastern meditational practices.

Ribh proves himself a spiritual alchemist in "Ribh Denounces Patrick" when, using the Emerald Tablet as his authority, he posits his revisionary syllogisms about the Trinity. Ribh denounces the all-male Trinity of Christianity, calling it an "abstract Greek absurdity." Instead, Ribh's conception of the Trinity is based on natural law: a creative juncture between male and female forces resulting in offspring, or a third force. Adding to this natural event the supernatural law "as above, so below," Ribh extrapolates that Godhead procreates through a similar procedure. The sexual principle of increase and multiplication governs both earth and heaven: as below, so above.

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Natural and supernatural with self-same ring are wed.
As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead
begets Godhead,
For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet
said.

(*TP* 284; *VP* 556)

The final stanza addresses the paradox of the One and the Many. Sexual nature represents the many in contrast to the unitive being of God, which is self-creating.

The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity,
But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air,
share
God that is but three
And could beget or bear themselves could they but love
as he.

(*TP* 283; *VP* 556)

Here love is the force that creates both unity and multiplicity. On the physical plane, human capacity for love is expressed sexuallyto be fruitful and multiplywhereas God's creative genius is the unitive power of love itself.

The sexual and mystic strands are woven together again in "Ribh in Ecstasy" and "Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient." These poems echo "A Last Confession" and "Before the World Was Made" in their premise that the soul discovers its completion only in God.

"Ribh in Ecstasy" depicts the old hermit's rise and fall from cosmic consciousness. Ribh casts his meditative episode in terms of a lover's sexual abandonment.

My soul had found
All happiness in its own cause or ground.

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Godhead begot Godhead in sexual spasm begot
Godhead. Some shadow fell. My soul forgot
Those amorous cries that out of quiet come.

(*TP* 285; *VP* 557)

Here the mystical marriage occurs between levels, between the part and the whole. The union of soul and Godhead is both profoundly private and tumultuous. Privacy is not due to singularity of body but to the state of consciousness passing from the sensory world to a supersensual dimension. Unfortunately, Ribh's return to this world creates a state of forgetfulness regarding his meditative ecstasy. Further, and perhaps ironically, the sexual spasms of the Godheadthe sustaining creative forces of the universeare accessible to Ribh because of his state of celibacy, unlike Crazy Jane and "A Woman," who experience the divine through sexual communion.

A companion piece to "Ribh Denounces Patrick" is "Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient." In this poem, Ribh criticizes the Christian theological tenet of love, instead heretically endorsing hatred as the passion that can bring the soul of man to God.

I study hatred with great diligence,
For that's a passion in my own control,
A sort of besom that can clear the soul
Of everything that is not mind or sense.

(*TP* 286; *VP* 558)

Ribh also seeks to "discover impurities" in the soul that human concepts of God have embedded there. In this shedding of intellectual constructs, the soul reaches a "darker knowledge," the ground of being. The final stanza depicts the sacred union in this darkness:

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At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure
A bodily or mental furniture.
What can she take until her Master give!
Where can she look until He make the show!
What can she know until He bid her know!
How can she live till in her blood He live!

(*TP* 286; *VP* 558)

Yeats reinforces the motif of marriage, as feminine and masculine referents appear in the last four lines. The preposition "until" not only clarifies the state of utter dependence that the soul must endure and rejoice in, but its repetition between the terms of "she" and "He" creates a ceremonial rhetoric, as in the exchange of vows.

While Yeats was unable to depict the *mysterium coniunctionis* in the Flamel-Pernella poems, he was able to render his vision of this motif later in his life. His wish to attain with Maud Gonne a bond fashioned on the medieval alchemist and his wife had first to be extinguished before an actual marriage and an artistic embodiment of heaven and earth could be attained. Yeats's later poetic personae demonstrate that human ontology is, potentially, a canon of levels in which above and below are interdependent. These personae have attained self-knowledge in that they experience themselves as microcosms of the whole. Whether through the voice of a sexual Crazy Jane or a celibate Ribh, their utterances of radiant union tend to muffle Yeats's earlier laments of a frustrated alchemist who labored for naught.

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5
Philosophical Stones In The Dung Heap

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,

Old iron, old bones, old rags,
that
raving slut

Who keeps the till. Now that
my
ladder's gone,

I must lie down where all the
ladders
start,

In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the
heart.
Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

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We have been exploring the various ways in which Yeats adopted the ideas of alchemy and translated them to his own creative ends. Yeat's deployments of this tradition, both in his personal and literary life, suggest, first, that alchemy provided the poet with a flexible and comprehensive metaphor for illustrating the human quest toward the divine and, second, that instances of alchemy in his creative work are often overshadowed by fear and resistance to the sought-after alchemical transformation. Yeats's yearning for transcendence is tethered to fear of loss insofar as he conceives the spiritual quest as a threat to bodily existence. In his early poems, for instance, Fergus's illumination leads to impotence; the "Stolen Child" is deprived of the comforting details of daily life; and the lover in "The White Birds" hopes to escape the threat of the hermetic lily and rose. In his early fiction, the narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" who desires "a world made wholly of essences" is seduced, then terrorized, by the prospect of radical transformation, both for himself and for civilization. In the preceding chapter on "Mystical Marriage," however, we saw a shift in attitude occur as Yeats began to include the physical body as a necessary factor in the alchemical equation.

In examining the work of the 1920s and '30s, this final chapter argues that Yeats continued to alleviate the dialectical tension between spirit and matter that his early work posited. In chapters 2 and 3, we found evidence for Yeats's ambivalence toward spiritual alchemy in the contradictions between his prose essays and his creative work. In the last two decades of his life, however, Yeats closed the gap between rhetorical and poetic assertions: the essays and poems support each other.

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The key, once again, is sanctification of the physical body, of sex, of instinct, and by extension, of the entire world of matter.

Yeats's mature alchemy becomes, as it were, the act of perceiving the unity between these traditional opposites. If we recall the Emerald Tablet here, keys 4, 6, and 8 attest to the hermetic basis for this shifting emphasis from spirit versus matter to spirit inherent in matter.

4. Its father is the sun, its mother the moon; the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.
6. Its power is perfect, if it be changed into earth.
8. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth, and unite together the power of things superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly far away from you.

Yeats's early conception of spiritual alchemy seems to ignore these keys. Further, as his early alchemy gave priority to spirit at the expense of matter, his philosophy was an unwitting extension of the Christianity he purportedly wished to replace. It is pertinent also to recall Whitaker's view that "precisely because the young aesthete longed to transmute or escape the temporal world, he began hesitantly to transform himself into one who could accept that world." I would turn Whitaker's proposition around, however, and assert that Yeats transformed his view of the temporal world, making it into a spiritual world, and therefore made it acceptable. In his deepening contact with physical realityin marriage, in fatherhood, as

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an Irish Senator, and as a man of propertyhis alchemy has dispensed with attempts to transcend the dimensions of time and space. Yet as we will see in *A Vision*, Yeats retains a contingency clause in his cosmology for a transcendent sphere, where the soul can take its leisure upon being liberated from the body. While on earth, though, Yeats no longer seeks disembodied ecstasy, nor does he travel through astral strata; his feet are firmly planted, beholding the glory of the world, as well as its horror. And, in rooting deeper into the earth, he goes higher up in his vision. Like the imaginary Chinamen atop the mountain in "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats's act of perception seems to place him in a visionary precinct somehow in the world, but not of it.

By granting spirit's presence in matter, Yeats develops a philosophy that is drawn from the alchemist's practice of salvaging the philosopher's stone from the dung heap. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1933), Yeats creates dialectical strife between two variant approaches toward redemption. The Soul seeks transcendence of the temporal world via meditation, leading to an experience of eternity, which Yeats depicts as a nonlinguistic realm: "But when I think of that my tongue's a stone." On the contrary, the Self, who gets the last word in the dialogue and is the obvious champion, works for redemption by accepting and affirming his entire life. In reviewing the ignominy and bitterness of his youth, the Self reclaims all the events he had suffered in the "ditch," a metaphor for the alchemist's dung heap:

> I am content to live it all again
> And yet again, it be life to pitch
> Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
> A blind man battering blind men;

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Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

(*TP* 236; *VP* 479)

Out of this ditch or dung heap, the Self discovers the philosopher's stone. For, concluding that his suffering is necessary, the Self becomes illuminated. The final stanza shows us a psychological process of redemption that parallels the alchemical operation of *illuminatio*:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

(*TP* 236; *VP* 479)

Self (representing embodied existence), as opposed to soul (which implies transcendence), gains primacy in Yeats's thought. The Self's biography is the *prima materia* out of which the aging poet redeems meaning. The ditch, rather than the heavens, is the place to search for gold.

Hence, in this final chapter we will study Yeats's ideas about matter, or the *prima materia*, to see what part they play in his poetic landscapes, wherein the densest matterrock or stonecontains the logos. The stone motif, as it appears in *Last Poems*, offers a symbol of the perfected opus, the philosopher's stone. First, though, we turn to *A Vision* for its

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alchemical themes and their subsequent appearance in the Byzantium poems.

Just a few days after Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917, she began to go into trance, during which she performed automatic writing at the behest of several "Instructors." These unknown guides told Yeats, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry." However, they imparted a system for the progression of the soul and of history that resulted in *A Vision*. Yeats called his system a doctrine of the soul's journey through the "circuits of the sun and moon," a definite alchemical marker. "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends," which prefaces *A Vision*, mimic alchemical allegories such as the "Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz." The purpose of "Stories" is to introduce via narrative the ideas that later appear in books 1 to 5 in the guise of diagram and geometrical symbol. The return of Michael Robartes and his friends (one of whom is Owen Aherne) signals the presence of occult practices, and the ideas of individual and societal transformation still occupy Robartes' interest. As we study "Stories" it will become evident that "Rosa Alchemica" contained the rudiments of Yeats's later alchemical ideas, which in *A Vision* maintain only a thin veneer of their hermetic origin.

Although Michael Robartes was reported to have been murdered in "Rosa Alchemica," we learn in "Stories" that this incident was fabricated on very slim evidence:

> Robartes, then a young man, had founded a society, with the unwilling help of my brother Owen, for the study of

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> the *Kabala Denudata* and similar books, invented some kind of ritual and hired an old shed on Howth Pier for its meetings. A foolish rumor got out among the herring and mackerel sorters, and some girls broke the window. You [Yeats] hatched out of this the murder of Robartes and his friends, and though my brother incorporated Christ in the ritual, described a sort of orgy in honor of pagan gods. (*AV* 5455).

Michael Robartes says of the Order of the Alchemical Rose that he had "founded a small Cabalistic society in Ireland; but, finding time and place against me, dissolved it and left the country" (*AV* 37). His use of the word Cabalistic to characterize the Alchemical Rose is significant in light of a later appearance of the same word, when Robartes articulates a philosophical departure from his former hermetic ideas:

> Life is no series of emanations from divine reason such as the Cabalists imagine, but an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall but a whirlpool, a gyre. (*AV* 40)

What Robartes calls a Cabalistic society with its doctrine of orderly emanation accurately describes the philosophy of the Golden Dawn, which, making all mysteries intelligible and therefore masterable through their magic practices, cherished the will as the most powerful human faculty. Robartes' admission of irrational bitterness into the divine scheme, though, proves the universe more mysterious than the human intellect can unravel and more powerful than human will can master. In "Rosa Alchemica" Yeats described alchemy as the gradual distillation of the soul's contents and likened history's

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unfolding to this same distillation. However, with the additional insights provided by the Instructors, Yeats enlarged his view of alchemy to include a descending movement toward chaos, destruction, and irrational bitterness.

This enlargement is much truer to the spirit of alchemy, which, although it spoke of refinement, order, and divine completion, also stressed dissolution and demolition of existing forms, a blackening of consciousness. Yeats was certainly on to this duality in "Rosa Alchemica" when the narrator asserts to Robartes, "[Y]our ideas and fantasies are but the illusions that creep like maggots into civilizations when they begin to decline, and into minds when they begin to decay," and when the voice responds, "Our master Avicenna has written that all life proceeds from corruption." The alchemist's dung heap is just this corruption. In the 1890s Yeats had as yet no suitable representation for this corruption, as it would have violated the Symbolist ambience that predominated in his early writings. Instead, Yeats fully conceived only the upward movement, the transcendent leap into "a world made wholly of essences." Yet the gradual acceptance of earth, body, and the movement toward chaos prompted Yeats to conceive corruption in poetic terms. The trend toward death and ruin, then, is viewed as positive and necessary for continued growth. Michael Robartes updates the above condemnations of the narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" when he asks his pupils, "'Have I proved that civilizations come to an end when they have given all their light like burned-out wicks, that ours is near its end?' 'Or transformation,' Aherne corrected" (*AV* 50).

Yeats thought that the spiraling motion of history, symbolized by gyre or cone, had its effects on artistic trends as well. He targets his own overwrought prose in "Rosa Alchemica"

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as a literary instance whose cycle of expression had reached its end. Yeats pokes fun at himself through the vehicle of a letter written by Owen Aherne's brother, John:

> [Robartes] is bitter about your style in those stories and says that you substituted sound for sense and ornament for thought that such prose was the equivalent of what somebody had called "pure poetry" that romance driven to its last ditch had a right to swagger. [Robartes] answered that when the candle was burnt out an honest man did not pretend that grease was flame. (*AV* 55)

We can here invoke Yeats's 1906 statement, aligning alchemy and artistic style: "[T]hat is why the labor of the alchemists, who were called artists in their day, is a befitting comparison for all deliberate change of style" (*VP* 849). Book 5 of *A Vision*, "Dove or Swan," specifically addresses change of style in the arts between 2000 B.C. and the present, claiming the interdependency of artistic form, spiritual influence, and political rule.

While Yeats represented history's dual trends of ascent and descent as a pair of interpenetrating gyres, he links this symbol to definite alchemical symbols: sun and moon, king and queen.

> But one must consider not the movement only from the beginning to the end of the historical cone, but the gyres that touch its sides, the horizontal movement. There is that continual oscillation which I have symbolized elsewhere as a King and Queen, who are Sun and Moon also, and whirl round and round as they mount up through a Round Tower. (*AV* 182)

Here Yeats has converted his geometrical scheme of history into an alchemical dance. In "Rosa Alchemica" the initiatory

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dance between the narrator and the "immortal august woman" was an intimation of the whirling King and Queen. As we saw earlier, the narrator fainted in terror at the thought that the woman, like a succubus, was drinking up his soul. That dance is not completed, the union not consummated. Yeats explains, "The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy, and were more than symbol could a man there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the same as the sleep of death" (*AV* 52).

In the poem "Under the Round Tower," Yeats depicts the dance of King and Queen (who are also sun and moon). Structurally the poem opens and closes with stanzas containing speeches by "Billy Byrne," who is an old jailbird, and the three intervening stanzas contain a dream that Billy Byrne has while asleep on his great-grandfather's tomb:

> "Although I'd lie lapped up in linen
> A deal I'd sweat and little earn
> If I should live as live the neighbors,"
> Cried the beggar, Billy Byrne;
> "Stretch bones till the daylight come
> On great-grandfather's battered tomb."
>
> Upon a grey old battered tombstone
> In Glendalough beside the stream,
> Where the O'Byrnes and Byrnes are buried,
> He stretched his bones and fell in a dream
> Of sun and moon that a good hour
> Bellowed and pranced in the round tower;
>
> Of golden king and silver lady,
> Bellowing up and bellowing round,
> Till toes mastered a sweet measure,

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Mouths mastered a sweet sound,
Prancing round and prancing up
Until they pranced upon the top.

That golden king and that wild lady
Sang till stars began to fade,
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,
Hair spread on the wind they made;
That lady and that golden king
Could like a brace of blackbirds sing.

"It's certain that my luck is broken,"
That rambling jailbird Billy said;
"Before nightfall I'll pick a pocket
And snug it in a feather bed.
I cannot find the peace of home
On great-grandfather's battered tomb."

(*TP* 13738; *VP* 33132)

Billy Byrne, beggar, transient, pickpocket, seems an unlikely candidate for this alchemical vision of the mystical marriage. The dance of golden king and silver lady is the conjunction of Sol and Luna, and its occurrence within a tower is a distinctively Yeatsian twist: "I have used towers as symbols and have compared their winding stairs to philosophical gyres" (*VP* 831). "Under the Round Tower" was written in 1918, and its nexus of symbols reveals the influence of the materials Yeats received from the instructors. However, the purpose of sun and moon, king and queen, is not evident in the poem itself. As a point of comparison, we can look back to "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," as that poem also features a rather threadbare Irishman, whose flashes from the supernatural realm divert his mind from "money cares and fears." For instance, a lugworm entrances the man with a hermetic vision:

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There dwelt a gay, exulting, gentle race
Under the golden or silver skies;
That is a dancer stayed his hungry foot
It seemed the sun and moon were in the fruit:
And at that singing he was no more wise.

(*TP* 44; *VP* 127)

In the above poem, the man who dreamed of faeryland, like Billy Byrne, is a man without spiritual aspirations, and his otherworldly experiences are a cause for misgiving, for even in death "The man has found no comfort in the grave." Similarly, Billy Byrne fails to grasp his dream's supernatural significance. That the dream occurs atop an ancestral tomb suggests that the riches of silver and gold are an inheritance"gifts of the spirit"which Billy swaps for thievery, hard currency, and a soft bed. However, because all human beings have a connection to Greater Mind, even the derelict Billy becomes a host to the mystical marriage. Like the dance of the Immortals in "Rosa Alchemica," the whirling union of masculine and feminine forces disturbs Billy's sleep. The alchemical opus remains inconclusive: Billy's dream needs an interpreter, a mediator. The above and below, the dreamer and the dream, though they contain one another, make no contact.

In "The Tower" (1926), Yeats invokes the alchemical union of Sol and Luna for bardic inspiration: "O may the sun and moonlight seem / One inextricable beam, / For if I triumph I must make men mad" (*TP* 196; *VP* 441). To make men mad: to inspire, to transform. In "Those Dancing Days Are Gone" (1931), sun and moon are employed as spiritual elixirs for the inexorable ruin of physical existence. In each stanza, the speaker describes images of decline and death, only to be countered by the simple joy of the refrain:

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Come, let me sing into your ear;
Those dancing days are gone,
All that silk and satin gear;
Crouch upon a stone,
Wrapping that foul body up
In as foul a rag,
I carry the sun in a golden cup,
The moon in a silver bag.

Curse as you may I sing it through;
What matter if the knave
That the most could pleasure you,
The children that he gave,
Are somewhere sleeping like a top
Under a marble flag?
I carry the sun in a golden cup,
The moon in a silver bag.

I thought it out this very day,
Noon upon the clock,
A man may put pretence away
Who leans upon a stick,
May sing, and sing until he drop,
Whether to maid or hag:
I carry the sun in a golden cup,
The moon in a silver bag.

(*TP* 26667; *VP* 52425)

It is the march toward dissolution and decay that makes the illumination of sun and moon apparent, and hence, the cause for rejoicing. Though Yeats credits the sun image to a line from Pound's *Cantos* (*VP* 831), what is more important here is the sun as elixir, the *aurum potabile*, the liquid gold of the alchemists. By making the sun potable and the moon portable,

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Yeats provides a macrocosmic purpose for our inevitable microcosmic demise: all life proceeds from corruption.

However, the conjunction of sun and moon or the royal couple is a fleeting condition, eventually subverted by the conflict of warring opposites or (in a term Yeats borrowed from Kant) "antinomy." Falling away from the conjunction leads back to the *prima materia*, back to whirlpool and gyre. Since Robartes has relinquished the orderly universe of Cabalism, he sees fundamental issues of existence as irresoluble paradoxes.

> Every action of man declares the soul's ultimate, particular freedom, and the soul's disappearance in God; declares that reality is a congeries of beings and a single being; nor is the antinomy an appearance imposed upon us by the form of thought but life itself which turns, now here, now there, a whirling and a bitterness. (*AV* 52)

Yeats further comments that "a system symbolizing the phenomenal world as irrational because a series of unresolved antinomies, must find its representation in a perpetual return to the starting point. The resolved antinomy appears not in a lofty source but in the whirlpool's motionless center, or beyond its edge" (*AV* 19495).

Irrational bitterness and whirlpool coincide accurately with the alchemical *massa confusa*, which is the *prima materia* wherein the opposites revert to a state of unfettered, undifferentiated chaos. Jung observes that the *massa confusa* is a "shapeless life-mass which has contained the divine seeds of life ever since the Creation." Further, "[I]f the life-mass is to be transformed, a circumambulation is necessary, i.e., exclusive concentration on the center, the place of creative change." 1 The circumambulation, or circular movement around a central

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point, echoes Yeats's idea that solved antinomy is found in the whirlpool's motionless center. In 1930, Yeats wrote, "Two men of great ability have said to me that the ultimate reality must be anarchy. I remember Madame Blavatsky talking of 'God-chaos,' the which every man is seeking in his heart. Dissatisfaction with the old idea of God cannot but overthrow our sense of order" (*Expl* 310).

In "Byzantium" (1930), Yeats pits chaos and bitterness against the creative process. Creation and destruction are to be viewed as unalterable cycles, whose energy and magnitude are greater than the individual's capacity to control or transcend them. The poem works simultaneously in the spheres of the artist and the adept. Artistically, the poet's act of creation may reach into a realm that transcends time, but he cannot indefinitely maintain his contemplation from that height. Spiritually, the adept's meditation may lead him to supersensual dimensions in which he too cannot exist permanently but is forced to return to earth, to incarnate time after time until the soul has completed its opus. In preparatory notes for *A Vision*, Yeats discusses the artistic-spiritual motifs embodied in "Byzantium":

> At first we are subject to Destiny but the point in the Zodiac where the whirl becomes a sphere once reached, we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame, where there is nothing but the state itself, nothing to constrain it or end it. We attain it always in the creation or enjoyment of a work of art, but that moment, though eternal in the Daimon, passes from us because it is not an attainment of our whole being. Philosophy has always explained its moment of moments in much the same

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way; nothing can be added to it, nothing taken away; that all progressions are full of illusion, that everything is borne there like a ship in full sail. 2

The first stanza of "Byzantium" sets the stage of nighttime: the overarching starlit sky represents an eternal dimension that contains the *massa confusa* of human life.

The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonances recede, night walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

(*TP* 248; *VP* 497)

"Unpurged" refers to the images, or impressions received in the active state of daily life, pointing to a state of being that is impure, "drunken." The "mere complexities" and "the fury and the mire" suggest the jumbled collection of warring opposites that comprise human nature in the state of the *massa confusa*. Eternity is in the superior position, looking down with disdain. Here Yeats has given eternity new attributes. In place of a heavenly realm traditionally considered loving, peaceful, blissful, Yeats creates a mocking, cantankerous eternity. The above and the below are set in warring contrast to one another.

The second stanza introduces an "image" from a level superior to those of the unpurged images of day. This stanza represents the first stage of the creative process, wherein two levels come into contact, penetrating each other.

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Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

(*TP* 248; *VP* 497)

The "winding path," which Hades' afterlife reveals, simulates the motion of a gyre. What Yeats termed the eternity of the Daimon we might understand as genius, the informing "superhuman" spirit who fashions a work of art or dispenses bliss upon the meditator. "Death-in-life and life-in-death" philosophically embodies this solved antinomy.

The third stanza represents the artistic fruition of this creative juncture, whereas the fourth stanza emphasizes the spiritual process of purgation, symbolized here by the Heraclitean flames wherein the spirit dwells.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flame begotten of flame,

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Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

(*TP* 248; *VP* 49798)

Yeats conveys the alchemical transmutation of lead into gold as "changeless metal." Yet he once again ascribes contempt to this transcendent level when the bird "scorns aloud" the human condition, in order to highlight eternity's superiority over time. In the fourth stanza, though, this condition seems to change as "all complexities of fury leave," as spirit's fire transforms the aspirant. The images of dance and trance recall the alchemical dance and trance of "Rosa Alchemica" from which the narrator fainted away in terror.

The final stanza, however, does not allow the artist or adept to linger in eternity, because, as Yeats explained, the opus is unstable unless it is "an attainment of the whole being." The presence of the "golden smithies"i.e., alchemists who renew the process of destructiondemonstrates that Yeats's alchemy has grown far beyond his youthful dreams of transcendence.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin torn, that gong-tormented sea.

(*TP* 249; *VP* 498)

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The antinomies return to a state of chaos, and the turbulent, "gong-tormented sea" drowns out the song of the eternal bird wrought from changeless metal. "Spirit after spirit" shows that the cycle of birth and death must be repeated, just as the creative urge of the images must continue. The *massa confusa* is the shapeless shape of the entire universe, the whole of human history. Jung states, "The alchemists understood the return to chaos as an essential part of the opus. It was the stage of *nigredo* and *mortificatio*, which was then followed by the purgatorial fire and *albedo*. The spirit of chaos was indispensable to the work." 3 In "Byzantium," with the insistent return to creative chaos, recurrence triumphs over transcendence, universal power overcomes momentary perfection.

If, however, an individual were to arrive at a transformation that encompassed the whole beingunity of being, in Yeats's termsthat soul would be exempt from further incarnation and would graduate to the thirteenth cone (or cycle or sphere). Richard Ellmann comments on Yeats's nondescript terminology: "The embodiment of divinity in so unprepossessing a term as Thirteenth Cycle stood in ironic and urbane contrast to Yeats's claims for the cycle's unlimited power. To give God so mechanical a title was to ensure that He would be discussed only as an 'it', never as a personal deity, least of all a Christian one."4 In some preparatory notes for *A Vision*, Yeats discusses the thirteenth cone:

> [A]ll whirling at an end, and unity of being perfectly attained. There are all happiness, all beauty, all thought, their images come to view taking fullness, to such a multiplicity of form that they are to our eyes without form. They do what they please, all [struggle] at an end, daimons and men reconciled, no more figures opposing one another in a demoniac dance,

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> and it is these who create genius in its most radical form and who change the direction of history. 5

Yeats compressed this description into four images for a poem whose title, "There" (1935), bears little significance if unmoored from the above description of the thirteenth cone:

> There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
> There all the serpent tails are bit,
> There all the gyres converge in one,
> There all the planets drop in the sun.
>
> (*TP* 285; *VP* 557)

The nondescript "There" points toward the ineffable and remote ideal for which unity of being stands. Each of the four images contains some form of the circle, suggesting wholeness. Barrel-hoops measure the circumference of all that is contained; the serpents with tails in mouths, the *ouroboros*, shows the beginning and the ending occupying the same point, or the transformation of time into eternity; convergence of the gyres suggests antinomial reconciliation; and the solar consumption of the planets symbolizes a return to the source of light, or zodiacally, all sides of man's nature unified. Robert Schuler explains, "[A]ll the base metals [planets] are transformed by fire, fuse with the sun, and become part of it as transmuted gold."6

"Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) contains alchemical motifs that, like "Byzantium," consider the relation between artistic and spiritual refinement. "Sailing to Byzantium" portrays alchemical purgation from the realm of sense and action, poising the artist-adept at the juncture of time and eternity. Unlike "Byzantium," which plunges the artist and his creation

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back into the turbulent sea of the *massa confusa*, "Sailing to Byzantium" depicts the indefatigable progress of time yet offers the prospect of a conditional eternity located just on the edge of time. According to Yeats's historiography, Byzantium symbolizes "unity of culture," its unique equipoise due to time and eternity coupled in a momentary dance on earth:

> I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers spoke to the multitude and the few. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people. (*AV* 27980)

The third stanza takes the form of a prayer, with the speaker invoking not God but his intermediaries, i.e., those who have passed into the thirteenth cone. Images of fire and gold emphasize the purgatorial flames of the alchemist's retort:

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaics of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
> And be the singing masters of my soul.
> Consume my heart away, sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity.
>
> (*TP* 193; *VP* 408)

The "artifice of eternity," a phrase which Yeats rehabilitated from "The Tables of the Law," is another way of phrasing

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spiritual alchemy. The sages in the holy firethe Daimons or man's spiritual counterparthelp to create the highest work of art, the completed soul, the human heart tinctured with divine love. But first the soul must be separated from the dross of the physical body; soul and animal, though they rhyme, are antithetical here. Yeats would later soften the dichotomy between body and soul as he firmly grasped that transcendence of the physical was inimical to wholeness of being.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker fancies a future existence for himself as an immutable golden bird, perched in the cultural unity of Byzantium.

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
>
> (*TP* 194; *VP* 408)

The figure of the goldsmith is an alchemical motif stretching back to ancient Egypt, with its metallurgy and enameling practices. Mircea Eliade, in *The Forge and the Crucible*, refers to the metalsmith as *homo faber*, man the maker, from which alchemy derived its original kinship to metals, turning lead into gold. Yeats was familiar with this motif from Golden Dawn literature, as well as from the Egyptian department at the British Museum, located just around the corner from the Golden Dawn's London temple. 7 In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats imagines "an ancient mask, where perhaps there lingered something of Egypt gilding the eyebrows or putting a gilt

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line where the cheek-bone comes" (*Myth* 335). Although the subject of the poem is Byzantium, Yeats is actually making a transposition of Egyptian occult ideals. Florence Farr, a Golden Dawn friend of Yeats whom he addresses in "All Souls' Night," opened her book *Egyptian Magic* with this paragraph:

> To the Ancient Egyptians the most eminent man was he who had by hard training gained supremacy over the Elements, from which his own body and the Manifested World were alike formed; one whose Will had risen Phoenix-like from the ashes of his desires; one whose Intuition, cleansed from the stain of material illusion, was a clear mirror in which he could perceive the Past, the Present and the Future. 8

Yeats's poem is a poetic transcription of this paragraph, which was standard fare in Golden Dawn philosophy. However, he transmutes the phoenix, which must inevitably descend into flame again, into a golden bird who stays outside the loop of time. We can see another example of this alchemical bird, and its relation to the elemental world, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

> [O]ne thought of one's own life as symbolized by earth, the place of heterogenous things, the images as mirrored in water, and the images themselves one could divine but as air; and beyond it all there were, I felt confident, certain aims and governing loves, the fire that makes all simple. Yet the images themselves were fourfold, and one judged their meaning in part from the predominance of one of the four elements, or that of the fifth element, the veil hiding another four, a bird born out of the fire. (*Myth* 34647)

The bird as a fifth element suggests quintessence, i.e., the fifth and highest element in ancient and medieval philosophy that

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permeates all nature and composes the substance of celestial bodies. Unlike the golden bird of "Byzantium" who scorns aloud, the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" is quintessential, prophetic because "cleansed from the stain of material illusion." And since this bird relinquishes its place in eternity, preferring to stay within the precincts of time, Yeats seems to suggest the ideal of the bodhisattva who forgoes Nirvana to deliver all sentient beings from suffering, or of the Gnostic alchemist who performs his operations to redeem all nature, to sanctify matter.

In 1906, Yeats fretted that he had chosen the wrong subject for his art: "I am a little disappointed with the upshot of so many years, but I know that I have been busy with the Great Work, no lesser thing than that although it may be the Athanor has burned too fiercely, or too faintly and fitfully, or that the *prima materia* has been ill-chosen" (*VP* 849). As defined previously, the *prima materia* is the alchemist's alpha and omega, the undifferentiated life-mass where spirit and matter commingle, from which individuals arises and to which they return in a perfected state. In his essays of the 1930s Yeats makes a number of statements about the nature of physical matter that seem to reference the alchemical *prima materia*. With his usual eclecticism, Yeats drew from Balzac, ancient Hindu texts, and contemporary chemists to postulate a spiritual basis for all matter. We will see how the alchemical theme of unity between spirit and matter became the scrim for many of his later poems.

As discussed earlier, Jung saw alchemy as a compensating

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undercurrent of Christianity. This undercurrent redeemed the values of body, earth, and matter that Christianity had denigrated in privileging soul, heaven, and spirit. Yeats's early desire for a world of essences perpetuated that Christian preference for the abstract logos. But we see this balance shift after his marriage in 1917, when spiritual and physical come together in his vision. As Crazy Jane succinctly states, love will be unsatisfying unless it "take the whole / Body and soul." However, this newly resolved antinomy was arrived at by first elevating matter to a spiritual principle. In his 1934 introduction to Purohit Swami's *Holy Mountain*, Yeats restates the Hindu concepts of *purusha* (spirit) and *prakriti* (matter) in Western terms:

> The Spirit, the Self, is in all selves, the pure mirror, is the source of intelligence, but Matter is the source of all energy, all creative power, all that separates one thing from another, not Matter as understood by Hobbes and his Mechanists, Matter as understood in Russia, where the Government has silenced the Mechanist, but interpreted with profound logic almost what Schopenhauer understood by Will. (*E&I* 43839)

Yeats thought that the eighteenth-century mechanistic conception of matter transformed the physical world into a dead world, which had its final burial in the death of the human imagination in the Victorian era. Therefore, reconstituting the natural world as a manifestation of divine energy was tantamount to a renewal of human creative powers. We are reminded here also of Yeats's division between himself and George Russell, claiming that Russell's genius was in seeing that "all souls are equal in God's eyes seeing that none can

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be more than immortal soul. Whereas I have been concerned with men's capacities, with all that divides man from man" (*M* 30). Matter, then, is the source of strength, will, capacity, creativity, and energy, and represents all that human beings may make of themselves.

In an essay on Balzac's *Louis Lambert* (1934), Yeats writes of the *prima materia* as it appears in diverse sources. "Louis Lambert gives, as it seems, this ancient doctrine, Greek in origin, a materialistic turn by substituting for that first formless matter something that is less the ether of science, which began to take its place at the close of the 17th century, than the common element without attributes described by Crookes, that material Absolute sought by Balthazar Cloes in crucible and retort" (*E&I* 43839). William Crookes (18321919) was an English Spiritualist and experimenter in chemistry and physics. Yeats may have actually known him, as Crookes was a member of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical movement and later of the Society for Psychical Research. Crookes's main scientific contribution was the study of matter in what he called "the fourth state," or "radiant matter": "In studying the Fourth State of Matter we seem at length to have within our grasp the little indivisible particles which are supposed to constitute the physical basis of the Universe. We have actually touched the borderland where Matter and Force seem to merge into one another." 9

The idea of a material absolute, or radiant matter, gave Yeats a further basis for solving the antinomy of the One and the Many. Balzac's *Louis Lambert* captivated Yeats because it resurrected this daring concept, and did so by viewing nineteenth-century scientific findings through the lens of hermeticism. Louis Lambert claims, "Here below, all is the product of an Ethereal Substance, the common base of Electricity,

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Heat, Light, Galvanic and Magnetic Fluid, etc. the transmutations of this Substance constitute matter." 10 Yeats applies this material absolute to the process of human perception, when paraphrasing an alchemical passage of Balzac's that begins, "The brain is a retort":

> Louis Lambert is more or less materialistic; all things originate in a substance which is the common element of electricity, heat, and light. In the brain the animal transforms it, in proportion to the strength of the brain, into will. This will clears out of itself thought and sense and by their means absorbs more and more of the parent substance. Though we speak of the five senses there is only onelightfor tasting, hearing, smelling are light or sight transformed by different mutations of the substance. (*E&I* 438)

Finally, Yeats thought the material absolute was a necessary concept for an aesthetic that was committed to unity of being:

> I once heard Sir William Crookes tell half a dozen people that he had seen a flower carried in broad daylight slowly across the room by what seemed an invisible hand. His chemical research led to the discovery of radiant matter, but the science that shapes our opinions has ignored his other researches that seem to those who study it the slow preparation for the greatest, perhaps the most dangerous, revolution in thought Europe has seen since the Renaissance, a revolution that may, perhaps, establish the scientific complement of certain philosophies that in all ancient countries sustained heroic art. (*Expl* 374)

Yeats's critique of modern science attacks it for its impoverishing influence on the human intellect. If modern science were

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to "glance at that slow-moving flower" and be caught without an easy explanation, it might plunge into "a fabulous, formless darkness" (*Expl* 377). The revolution being called for here entails the recognition of the sacred in that matter which the Mechanist philosophers pronounced dead. Yeats jubilantly signals the onset of this revolution in the introduction to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*: "All about us there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred" (*Expl* 369). This vision appeared as the fruition of a long-held belief that, "all my art theories depend upon just thisrooting of mythology in the earth" (*LTSM* 114). No doubt the sixth key of the Emerald Tablet had some influence here: "The spirit's power is perfect if it be changed into earth." Yeats cast this alchemical aesthetic into verse in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited":

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
>
> (*TP* 321; *VP* 603)

And, taking the human body as the microcosmic analogue to earth, Yeats hails the life-affirming conjunction of body and mind in "A Prayer for Old Age":

> God guard me from those thoughts men think
> In the mind alone;
> He that sings a lasting song
> Thinks in a marrow bone.
>
> (*TP* 282; *VP* 553)

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I now turn to four poems composed in Yeats's final years"The Gyres," "Lapis Lazuli," "The Man and the Echo," and "Under Ben Bulben"to explore how Yeats embeds the trope of the philosopher's stone in his poetic frames. To the alchemists this stone symbolized the divine logos penetrating the densest matter. In the above poems, Yeats represents this conjunction of spirit and matter in colloquies with oracles, in rock which speaks.

The first poem in this volume, "The Gyres," addresses "Old Rocky Face," Yeats's renaming of the Delphic Oracle, who spoke through a cleft in the rock. 11 The oracle speaks only one word in the poem"Rejoice!"and this in response to a reckoning of the civilization's downward spiral to destruction. The oracle is able to arrive at this emotionally positive response due to its wide-lens vantage of history. The oracle as *lapis philosophorum* lies outside of time, much like the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium."

> The gyres! The gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth;
> Things thought too long can no longer be thought,
> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out.
> Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;
> Empedocles has thrown all things about;
> Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;
> We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.
>
> What matter though numb nightmare ride on top,
> And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?
> What matter? Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,
> A greater, a more gracious time has gone;

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For painted forms or boxes of make-up
In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again;
What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice,
And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice!"

(*TP* 294; *VP* 564)

At this point in the poem, we have not yet been prepared to receive the word "Rejoice!" as a logical response. All the images center on death, and a resurrection is not transacted until we come to the poem's last line. Richard Ellmann sees the poem in terms of good and evil, arguing that "Yeats succeeds in transforming one's horror at the indifferent survival of evil as well as good into delight that good must survive as well as evil." 12 However, in addition to Ellmann's reading, we might also consider the alchemical thrust of the poem, which is to grant a rightful place to the process of dissolution, moving from fine to coarse, reiterating that "all life proceeds from corruption."

The images of stanza 2 lead us from the surface, "though numb nightmare ride on top," to beneath the surface in "ancient tombs," then still deeper inside the earth into the cavern. We progress from the scene of present death to ancient death, then to the scene of emptiness and darkness, a universal condition of death. Tomb and cavern become pregnant wombs of vision, though, and the condition of rejoicing arises from the knowledge that death has no finality.

The final stanza depicts civilization collapsing back into chaos, a "rich, dark nothing" signaling the *prima materia* out of which new beings acquire lineaments. The word "coarse" in this stanza clues us to the alchemical dimensions of the poem:

Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul,
What matter? Those that Rocky Face holds dear,
Lovers of horses and of women, shall,

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From marble of a broken sepulchre,
Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl,
Or any rich, dark nothing disinter
The workman, noble and saint, and all things run
On that unfashionable gyre again.

(*TP* 293; *VP* 56465)

Who then are these three anomaliesworkman, noble, saintrising from the dead? In earlier drafts of the poem, they appeared in the opening lines and were addressed as representatives of a more gracious time: "Old Rocky Face if you can find the three / That can perfect a work, a life, the soul." 13 The coarse state of work, conduct and soul, then, are directly linked to the disappearance of workman, noble, and saint. And the gyre upon which their resurrection occurs is unfashionable because it suggests a bygone society wherein hierarchy and aristocracy reign, as opposed to democratic and fascist states.

"Lapis Lazuli" directly follows "The Gyres," and the two poems are companionable in their vantage points outside of time and their insistence on tragic gaiety. Thomas Whitaker claims, "[T]he most comprehensive rendering of the lapis which climaxed in Yeats's reenactment of the Great Work is 'Lapis Lazuli'."14 The poem elucidates the nature of tragedy and repeats that joy is the natural response to tragedy when viewed from a broader perspective.

The first stanza reveals an awareness of pre-World War II hysteria, and the pragmatic tendency to take drastic measures to stave off the impending destruction of the evil enemy. In stanza 2, Yeats begins to show us the error of this approach. He employs Shakespearian tragic characters to lead the reader to the conclusion that the nature of human life is tragic:

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All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;

If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep,
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

(*TP* 294; *VP* 565)

Why should the players know that Hamlet and Lear are gay, (i.e., joyous)? In "Rosa Alchemica" Michael Robartes explains the status of Hamlet and Lear to the narrator:

> [T]he more a man lives in imagination and in a refined understanding, the more gods does he meet with and talk with, and the more does he come under the power of Roland and of Hamlet and under the power of all those countless divinities who have taken upon themselves spiritual bodies in the minds of modern poets. There is Lear, his head still wet with the thunderstorm, and he laughs because you thought yourself an existence who are but a shadow, and him a shadow who is an eternal god. (*Myth* 274, 275)

Knowledge of eternity creates an alchemy of the emotions, "gaiety transfiguring all that dread." Yeats universalizes his theme of destruction as he confers a similar tragic fate on "All men." Unlike Macbeth, who sees his life as a poor player in a tale which signifies nothing, Yeats suggests that there is a purpose to tragic fate, though he does not disclose this purpose. And, however all men might rage against tragedy, their fate is sealed: "It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce" (*TP* 294; *VP* 565).

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With the deterministic outlook established by this last line, the third stanza recounts the tragic fate of old civilizations that were razed by the sword. Not only do all men meet their destruction, but so too all that they made, all forms that constitute civilized life. Yet, the stanza ends on a debatably positive note, as Yeats assures us with a Sisyphus-like image that reconstruction is sure to follow destruction.

The carved piece of lapis lazuli figured in stanzas 4 and 5 symbolizes Yeats's philosopher's stone, depicting two Chinamen and a serving man climbing a mountain, with "a long-legged bird, / A symbol of longevity" flying overhead. Yeats imagines them at the top of the mountain looking down,

> On all the tragic scene they stare.
> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.
> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.
>
> (*TP* 295; *VP* 567)

The Chinamen are the eastern counterparts to Yeats's Byzantine "sages standing in God's holy fire." Their ascent places them in a visionary precinct outside of time, and the bird, like the transmuted bird in Byzantium, represents a symbol of eternity, duration. That Yeats concentrates on the Chinamen's eyes in the last two lines, repeating the image three times, suggests that their joy is the result of metaphysical vision. Their mountaintop vantage gives them a perspective that encompasses the reaches of space and history.

"The Man and the Echo" (written in 1938, the year before Yeats's death) employs the stone motif to press forward a conclusion that is neither confident nor universal. It reveals instead a more self-doubting and personal turn of mind. This

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poem also features the merger of stone and logos, but, as the title suggests, the theme concerns individual human consciousness reflecting on its own existence. The Man herein is undoubtedly Yeats himself, as we learn from biographical incidents in the first stanza. He reviews his life as a player on the tragic stage, on which his actions have resulted, unintentionally, in evil consequences. Like "The Gyres," "The Man and the Echo" opens by addressing an oraclethis time at an Irish site, Alt. The image of the speaking mountain, the voice within the earth's dark womb, once again symbolizes the union of spirit and matter.

> In a cleft that's christened Alt
> Under broken stone I halt
> At the bottom of a pit
> That broad noon has never lit,
> And shout a secret to the stone.
> All that I have said or done,
> Now that I am old and ill,
> Turns into a question till
> I lie awake night after night
> And never get the answer right.
>
> And all seems evil until I
> Sleepless would lie down and die.
>
> (*TP* 345; *VP* 632)

The image of a man shouting his secrets into a stone pit creates two levels of discourse. On the first level, the darkness of night that fails to answer the man's questions of conscience suggests that his own mind is unfit to settle such delicate matters. The Echo, or discourse within his own "cavern of mind," proves impotent. Sharing his secret with the stone where

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daylight has never shone suggests that the deeper, perpetual darkness might contain a wisdom that his own mind lacks. Therefore, we could qualify the pit as suprapersonal and transfinite: the great unconscious. The Echo, however, only repeats the final words of the man, "Lie down and die." The hoped-for colloquy with greater mind does not materialize. As in "The Sad Shepherd," his self-concern can only evoke itself in the form of an echo. The man cannot awaken from the night-mare of his personal history.

His confidence is further undermined in stanza 2. He realizes that he has not completed the "great work" of the spiritual intellect and that completing that work will provide him with the framework to answer the questions that now plague his nights. In answer to the Echo's injunction "lie down and die," the Man says:

> That were to shirk
> The spiritual intellect's great work,
> And shirk it in vain. There is no release
> In a bodkin or disease,
> Nor can there be work so great
> As that which cleans man's dirty slate.
>
> (*TP* 345346; *VP* 63233)

In book 3 of *A Vision*, "The Soul in Judgment," Yeats outlines the process of the life-review that the soul undergoes after death. The term "great work" suggests the alchemical nature of this action or, as stated in "Rosa Alchemica," the gradual refinement of the soul's contents, the spirit's thorough understanding of all actions taken while in the body.

The final stanza of "The Man and the Echo" seriously undermines the certainty of tragic gaiety that shored up the ruins in "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli." Instead of rejoicing at

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the prospect of death, the speaker questions the epistemological status of his afterlife fate. Uncertainty and incompleteness trouble his meditations:

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place?
But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

(*TP* 346; *VP* 633)

The guarantee of renewal that Old Rocky Face promised in the "The Gyres" is absent here. What Yeats seems to be calling into question is whether or not his philosophy will stand up to death. What, after all, will he face in that great night? Meanwhile, in the lesser night of earth, a predatory act occurs within earshot of the pondering speaker, and he seems to identify himself with the prey. This scene could represent a natural analogue to Yeats's imagined end. Hawk and owl, dropping out of "sky or rock," symbolize emissaries of higher power and wisdom, of death descending from a greater dimension to pluck a soul, the rabbit's cry signifying the separation of spirit from body. That this cry distracts the speaker's thought suggests that Yeats's emotional and instinctive response to his imminent death could still dismantle the philosophical ramparts his intellect constructed to explain the cosmos. Daniel O'Hara cites similar disturbances in Yeats's *Autobiography* as erupting "into his life meditation to be symbolically amplified, so that

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the sterility of both habitual defense and blind idealizations are exposed, as more imaginative possibilities are inspired." 15

Yeats wrote "Under Ben Bulben" in September of 1938, five months before he died, and considered it a sort of last will and testament. Like so many of Yeats's major poems, "Under Ben Bulben" has been written on extensively; my consideration looks only at the alchemical aspects and is, therefore, not meant to be exhaustive.

In "Under Ben Bulben" Yeats transcends the fear and uncertainty that he faced in "The Man and the Echo." In this poem he overcomes death and insures his immortality through various means: through "the two eternities" of race and soul, and through the artifact of the poem itself. And, in conclusion, through the text of his epitaph and the materials of his tombstone, Yeats creates a philosopher's stone to crown his canon. A diary entry from 1930 contains many aspects of what Yeats later achieved in "Under Ben Bulben": "I have before me an ideal expression in which all that I have, clay and spirit alike, assists; it is as though I most approximate towards the expression when I carry with me the greatest possible amount of hereditary thought and feeling, even national and family hatred and pride" (*Expl* 293). Clay and spirit alike, the merged opposites create the most resonant form of expression. Yeats's inclusion of hatred and pride demonstrates how remote his early ideal of transcendent perfection had become. It is the journey through the bowels and the dung heap, as well as through the halls of intellect's "unaging monuments," that tells the whole story.

Yeats has made the mountain Ben Bulben into the Irish "Meru" or holy mountain, the *axis mundi*. It is here that horsemen and women, who have proved themselves "superhuman," reveal their wisdom, here that natural and supernatural intersect.

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And it is in this crossway between the eternity of race and the eternity of soul that Yeats conceives his ultimate apothegms on life and death.

The eternity of race is perpetuated figuratively by thrusting "their buried men / Back in the human mind again," or into *anima mundi*. The dead continue to exist in the thoughts of the living, therefore creating a psychic basis for heritage. Giving body to the dead in the form of our thoughts allows them passage in the flow of time, and hence Yeats's perennial return to heroic images that might guide modern Ireland out of turmoil. To create poems and plays based on legendary figures, such as Cuchulain, sparks their heroism back to life in human consciousness.

Yeats then directs up-and-coming poets and sculptors to "do the work." In prescribing what constitutes their proper work, he gives a lesson in aesthetic history that places Irish artistry within a tradition dating back to ancient Egypt. The highlighted aim of this artistic tradition is to "Bring the soul of man to God."

> Measurement began our might
> Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
> Forms that gentler Phidias wrought.
> Michelangelo left a proof
> On the Sistine Chapel roof,
>
> Proof that there's a purpose set
> Before the secret working mind:
> Profane perfection of mankind.
>
> (*TP* 326; *VP* 63839)

As an illustration of measurement's "might" in art, Yeats describes how Quattrocento paintings contain forms that might

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inspire higher states of consciousness, "When sleepers wake and yet still dream." That is, the power of artistic exactitude can jettison the human mind into infinite consciousness where we can declare "the heavens had opened." Between the opposites of artistic measurement and the vague immensities of open heavens, Yeats embodies the paradox of the spiritual poet.

In a letter written one month before he died, Yeats uses similar figures, though ironically, to portray these oppositesmeasurer and mysticwithin his own character. "Am I a mystic? No, I am a practical man. I have seen the raising of Lazarus, and the loaves and fishes and have made the usual measurements, plummet line, spirit-level, and have taken the temperature by pure mathematic" (*L* 921). As mystic of matter or surveyor of spirit, Yeats has privileged himself with knowledge of both above and below.

Striking the same directive pose as he did in "The Gyres," he instructs Irish poets to "learn their trade," as they might have, had they been born from that unfashionable gyre of workman, noble, and saint. That today's poets produce "base born products of base beds" attests to their creative impotence; that is, they fail to create beauty and order out of corruption. And in Yeats's feeling of hope and responsibility for the future, he completely abandons the personal uncertainty and unrest of "The Man and the Echo." No longer dwelling on the effects of past actions committed in ignorance, Yeats claims to speak with the fullness of wisdom that stems from both race and soul.

Yeats concludes the poem with his epitaph, allowing him to speak to us from beyond the grave. And as much as "Under Ben Bulben" relies on the idea of tradition for its authority, the idea of a grave marker ran contrary to Yeatsian family tradition:

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> I told my sister, the embroideress, that I had described my own burial and tombstone in a poem. She said "This is a break with tradition. There has not been a tombstone in the Yeats family since the eighteenth century. The family has always been very gay." It seems that we let the grass grow over the dead and speak to them no more. Yet we are pious and affectionate. (*L* 915)

However, like the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats would have the colloquy continue. According to the dictates of part 6, he commands this epitaph to be carved "on limestone quarried near the spot":

> Cast a cold eye
> On life, on death.
> Horseman, pass by!
>
> (*TP* 328; *VP* 640)

Yeats has rooted his last utterance in local earth, but the text is universal, indeed, transcending both life and death. The epitaph's brevity, scope, and impartial tone is resonant of "There" and its companion "A Needle's Eye." As in those "Supernatural Songs," Yeats creates a perspective of the still point from which to view the passing stream of impermanence. To "Cast a cold eye" implies a Buddha-like unbinding of the fetters of existence, neither grasping at life nor fearing death. Perhaps Yeats is indicating a discipline to lead to the thirteenth cone, to freedom, impartiality. Yet, he addresses this Eastern dictate to a horseman, symbol of instinctual, active participation in the world. 16 Once again, spirit and matter are merged. Speaking what ancient Ireland knew at the crossways of life and death, instinct and vision, flux and stillness, the limestone text is Yeats's philosopher's stone.

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Yet, is not Yeats's selection of stone a final stroke of irony? The symbolic permanence of the logos, the voice echoing from beyond the grave, is etched in a very soft stone, comparatively quick to dissolve. Has not Yeats acted in an alchemically responsible manner by intimating, figuratively, the dissolution of his last utterance? And, by suggesting the dissolution of this inscriptionheadstone to his canonYeats seems to point back to the *prima materia*, to that "rich, dark nothing" from whence image, gyre, and ladder start.

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Notes

1. No Mere Chemical Fantasy

1. George Mills Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), gives much information surrounding the creation of the Golden Dawn and recounts the internal political discord the order suffered through around the turn of the century. Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), poses the question "Was Yeats a Christian?" She details the hermetic and Rosicrucian influences in Yeats's background, but her presentation is somewhat skewed due to her agenda to prove Yeats's Christianity. Mary Catherine Flannery, *Yeats and Magic: The Earlier Works* (London: Colin Smythe, 1977), argues that Yeats imports the principles of ceremonial magic into the structures of his early poems. Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), brings her considerable background as a Platonist and Blake scholar to the study of Tarot images in Yeats's poetry. See part 2 of the bibliography for a full record of works on Yeats and the occult.

Further, there are five articles that address the specific influence of alchemy in Yeats. Kevin McGrath's "'Rosa Alchemica': Pater Scrutinized and Alchemized," *Yeats-Eliot Review* 5, no. 2 (1978): 1320, shows the coincidence of Pater's aesthetic influence and hermetic theory. L. C. Park's "The Hidden Aspect of 'Sailing to Byzantium'," *Etudes Anglaises* 16, no. 4 (1963): 33345, claims that a Golden Dawn ritual bearing alchemical significance informs the four-stanza structure of the poem. Thomas Parkinsons's "The Sun and Moon in Yeats's Early Poetry," *Modern Philology* 51 (August 1952), demonstrates the alchemical symbolism in a number of Yeats's early poems. Robert Schuler's "W. B. Yeats: Artist or Alchemist?" *Review of English Studies* 22, no. 85 (February 1971): 3750, serves as a good introduction to alchemical influence in Yeats's work, citing several poems that employ alchemical symbols or themes. Thomas Whitaker's "Yeats's

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Alembic," *Sewanee Review* 68, no. 4 (December 1960): 57694, concentrates on Yeats's early work, including "Rosa Alchemica," claiming that spiritual alchemy is the central concern of Yeats's work. Whitaker incorporated a revised version of this article into his important book, *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), which employs the terms of alchemywith the assistance of Jungas a hermeneutics for reading Yeats's entire canon.

2. Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), xii.

3. T. L. Dume, "W. B. Yeats: A Survey of His Reading" (Ph.D diss., Temple University, 1950). Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats's Library* (New York: Garland, 1985).

4. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 23.

5. Mircea Eliade, "The Myth of Alchemy," *Parabola* 3, no. 3 (August 78): 11.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. Marie Louise von Franz, *Alchemy* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), 80.

8. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 190826).

9. Von Franz, *Alchemy*, 21.

10. Ibid., 113.

11. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 149.

12. Florence Farr, *Egyptian Magic* (Wellingborough, U.K.: Aquarian Press, 1982).

13. See O'Shea, *Descriptive Catalog*, 12425, for Yeats's extensive marginalia in Walter Scott, ed., *Hermetica*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924). Since Yeats probably read this work in the late 1920s, his marginalia are primarily devoted to aligning the philosophy of Hermes with the ideas in *A Vision*.

14. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2d ed., Bollingen Series 20 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 23.

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15. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, chap. 5, "The Lapis-Christ Parallel."

16. A. E. Waite, *Alchemists Through the Ages* (New York: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1970).

17. Franz Hartmann, *The Life and Doctrines of Paracelsus* (New York: John W. Lovell Co., 1891).

18. Mary Atwood, *Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

19. Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn* (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 1986), 395400.

20. For a full description of Ayton, see *W. A. Ayton, The alchemist of the Golden Dawn* (Wellingborough, U.K.: The Aquarian Press, 1985).

21. Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

22. Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, 60.

23. Hartmann, *Life and Doctrine of Paracelsus*, 94.

24. Ibid., 163.

25. Ibid., 163.

26. Walter Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds., *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 904.

27. Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, 37.

28. Waite, *Alchemists*, 14.

29. Ibid., 21.

2. The Poem as Hermetic Laboratory

1. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 29091.

2. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 32.

3. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23.

4. Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 117.

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5. Jacob Boehme, *The Signature of All Things* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1969), 91.

6. Franz Hartmann, *Life and Doctrines of Paracelsus*, 84.

7. Other critics have also noted alchemical symbolism. F. A. C. Wilson notes that "in the gold-silver antithesis Yeats uses a favorite symbol from alchemy: fused silver and gold, the solar and lunar principles indissolubly knit, as an alchemical emblem of perfection" (*Yeats and Tradition* [New York: Macmillan, 1958], 219). However, Bloom sees the alchemical symbolism "which has excited scholars who delight in such arcana as mere clutter, as it mostly is elsewhere in Yeats" (*Yeats*, 115).

8. Schuler, "W. B. Yeats," 37.

9. Ibid., 45.

10. Ibid., 45.

11. For a discussion of the motif of women's hair in PreRaphaelite paintings, see Elizabeth Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 7274.

12. Schuler, "W. B. Yeats," 45.

13. John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Cudahy, 1962), 91.

14. Thomas Byrd ignores the linguistic suggestions of incompletionfuture tenseand focuses on the richness of the symbols to inform his conclusion. The poem "combines mortal and immortal. The object is immortal, but the actions are those of earth. The silver and gold apples suggest the richness and permanence of precious metals; their materials also suggest the craftsmanship of the artistthe goldsmiths of Yeats's later Byzantium concept" (*The Early Poetry of W. B. Yeats* [Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978], 137).

3. Avoidance and the Void

1. Stephen Putzel, *Reconstructing Yeats: "The Secret Rose" and "The Wind Among the Reeds"* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 103.

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2. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 1.

3. Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, 26068.

4. Ibid., 260.

5. Ibid., 26162.

6. Ibid., 264.

7. Ibid., 26768.

8. *Seventeenth-Century Verse and Prose*, vol. 1: *16001660*, ed. Helen White (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 334.

9. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (New York: Garland, 1975), 156.

10. Ibid., 193.

11. Ibid., 235.

12. Basil Valentinus, *Golden Tripod*, in A. E. Waite, ed., *The Hermetic Museum*, vol. 1 (London: James Elliott and Co., 1893), 331.

13. See Yeats's *Autobiography*, 11215. Further, Peter Kuch theorizes with some convincing evidence that the character of Michael Robartes may be based on George Russell (AE) rather than on Macgregor Mathers. See *Yeats and AE* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1986).

14. We know that Yeats saw *Axel* performed in Paris in 1894. See Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, 32025.

15. Yeats read the novels of Balzac early and late in life. "Sometimes I meet somebody who read *Louis Lambert* in his teens and find that he and I have put it among our sacred books, those books that expound destiny with such a mysterious authority that they furnish texts for pious meditations" (*Essays & Introductions*, 438).

16. Honoré de Balzac, *The Short Novels of Balzac* (New York: Dial Press, 1948), 324.

17. This book was reprinted under the title of *Alchemists Through the Ages* (New York: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1970).

18. Waite, *Alchemists*, 51.

19. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 231.

20. Ibid., 228. Jung gives a brief synopsis of the various stages of the alchemical process.

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21. Waite, *Alchemists*, 5152.

22. Ibid., 5356.

23. Ibid., 6887, 95117.

24. Putzel, *Reconstructing Yeats*, 111. See also Putzel's "The Systematic Rose," in Warwick Gould, ed., *Yeats Annual No. 4* (London: Macmillan, 1986), for further connections between the rose symbol and Yeats's occultism.

25. William O'Donnell, *A Guide to the Prose Fiction of W. B. Yeats* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), 9899.

26. Putzel, *Reconstructing Yeats*, 229 n. 9.

27. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), 11516.

28. Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, 467.

29. Maurice Ariane, "Notes on Alchemy: The Cosmological 'Yoga' of Medieval Christianity," *Material for Thought*, Spring 1976, 56.

30. A.E. Waite, *A Lexicon of Alchemy* (London: Watkins, 1964), 336.

31. Brenda Webster, *W. B. Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Reading* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973), 94.

32. Thomas Whitaker, "Yeats's Alembic," *Sewanee Review*, 68, no. 4 (Dec. 1960): 582.

33. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 21.

34. O'Donnell, *Guide*, 111.

35. Ibid., 129.

36. Carl Jung, *The Integration of Personality*, trans. Stanley Dell (London: Lowe & Brydone, 1940), 268.

37. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, 46.

38. Ibid.

39. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 438.

4. Mystical Marriage

1. Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series 20 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

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2. Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 271.

3. Ibid., 272.

4. Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant to the Queen* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1938).

5. Ibid., 250.

6. William Butler Yeats Microfilmed Manuscripts Collections (MS 294), Department of Special Collections, Library, State University of New York at Stony Brook. Since all following citations from this special collection derive from the same reel and volume, I have abbreviated the form to read hereafter, "Yeats, image #".

7. Yeats, image 203.

8. Yeats, image 211.

9. Yeats, image 214.

10. Yeats, image 215.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Richard Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William Murray, eds., *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 2012.

14. Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, 467.

15. Yeats, image 21516.

16. Yeats, image 216.

17. Yeats, image 21718.

18. Yeats, image 218.

19. Yeats, image 222.

20. Ibid.

21. Yeats, image 224.

22. Yeats, image 223.

23. Ibid.

24. Yeats, image 225.

25. Yeats, image 232.

26. Yeats, image 225.

27. Yeats, image 233.

28. Ibid.

29. A.E. Waite, *The Hermetic Museum*, vol. 1 (London: Janus Elliott and Co., 1893), 336.

30. Yeats, image 233.

31. Waite, *Hermetic Museum*, 319.

32. Yeats, image 233.

33. Waite, *Hermetic Museum*, 320.

34. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 478.

35. William York Tindall, *W. B. Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 7.

36. Gloria Kline, *The Last Courtly Lover* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI University Press, 1983), 37.

37. Ibid., 163.

38. Ibid., 124.

39. Ibid., 167.

40. Norman Jeffares suggests Plato, rather than Zen, as the possible source for the motif of one's face prior to birth. See Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), 325.

41. Just as Crazy Jane can be seen as a more physically oriented version of "A Woman," so, too, "Tom the Lunatic," of Yeats's "A Man Young and Old," can be viewed as presenting the earthly version of what Ribh demonstrates supernaturally. Kline makes the comparison between the two speakers in terms of Primary (Tom) and Antithetical (Ribh) visions. See Kline, *Last Courtly Lover*, 137.

5. Philosophical Stones in the Dung Heap

1. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 14445.

2. Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 221.

3. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 197.

4. Ellmann, *Identity of Yeats*, 159.

5. Ibid., 166.

6. Schuler, "W. B. Yeats," 50.

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7. Farr, *Egyptian Magic*, xii.

8. Ibid., 1.

9. For information on Sir William Crookes, consult Charles C. Gillispie, ed., *The Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1971), 3:47482.

10. Honoré de Balzac, *Short Novels*, 319.

11. Ellmann, *Identity of Yeats*, 154.

12. Ibid., 155.

13. Curtis Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 14647. It is interesting that Yeats increased his "perfections" by one. Whereas in "The Choice" he had to choose between perfection of the life or the work, Yeats now adds perfection of the soul. He thereby differentiates between conduct (represented by the noble) and soul (saint). In "The Choice" perfection of the life was associated with a "heavenly mansion," suggesting saint or soul.

14. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, 276.

15. Daniel O'Hara, *Tragic Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 118.

16. For an exhaustive study of the highly compressed symbol of the horseman, see James Lovic Allen, *Yeats's Epitaph* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), chap. 3. Allen examines the horseman in the light of other appearances of horsemen in Yeats's work. This sentence, however, captures the gist of Allen's researches: "The horseman is the sensitive, proud, and courageous individual who has so successfully saddled and bitted reality that he is in complete control of his own soul's shape and hence of its ultimate destiny" (p. 140).

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