

III. A VISION AND "THE SYSTEM"

1. Introduction

The world of William Butler Yeats and his wife George Yeats was one of immense challenge and change on all fronts. The Industrial Revolution, although not predominant in Ireland, had blighted the English urban environment, enslaved the common worker, and produced immense profit for an extreme few. The Great War, which was supposed to last just a few months, perverted technology into the indiscriminate killing of both combatants and non-combatants, and quickly became a pointless exercise in death and suffering for previously unimaginable numbers. The inherent rule of monarchs began to die literally and figuratively with the Russian Revolution. Fascism and Communism challenged Democracy's social model.

Closer to home, impoverished Ireland desperately sought independence from oppressive English economic and political exploitation, and looked for a unique national identity in Irish tradition, folklore, and literature. Political outcry, rebellion and violent suppression split Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, which eventually led to an Irish Senate that was split by blood and bitterness.

Through his poetry and essays, his work with drama and the Abbey Theatre, his emphasis on Irish/Celtic folklore, stories and mysticism, and his lecturing throughout Britain and the United States, Yeats became artistically and politically influential. Recently, his brilliant wife and co-writer of *A Vision*, Georgie Hyde Lees Yeats (later shortened to George Yeats.) has become much more recognized for her contributions and support of her husband's work. The European artistic community of which WB and George were a part rejected the old established aesthetics and sought new directions in literary themes, structures, and heroes. Psychology opened the sub-conscious, examining neurosis and treatment. Established religion was confronted by Darwinian evolution and Nietzsche's ideas about the death of god. As early as the mid-19th century, individuals began to seek more immediate experience of the spiritual. The manifestation of spiritualism as a religion, including séances intended to contact the deceased and seek answers to the questions of afterlife, became popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Secret hermetic societies were founded, including perhaps the most famous, The Order of the Golden Dawn, into which both WB and George were initiates.

From their close working together came a complex, esoteric system of thought entitled *A Vision*, generated from three years of automatic writing produced by George and later two years of dream recall from her sleeping state. The genetic material of the automatic writing and the "sleeps" pulls threads from the Yeats' experience with the Western hermetic/magical tradition, philosophy, non-Western religions, Blake's mystical system and many other sources, both occult and philosophical. Yeats would continue to refine the ideas communicated through George's trances, creating two versions of *A Vision*. The first published version, appearing in 1926 (though dated 1925), was significantly revised and was re-published in 1937; the earlier version is typically designated (A) and the later (B) to distinguish between the two.

It could be argued that *A Vision* is the magnum opus of Yeats' oeuvre, given that he spent 20 years of his life receiving, wrestling with, writing and revising the ideas it ultimately contains. And yet, to many, the book is bizarre, incomprehensible, fragmented, alien. Some shy away from its origins in the occult, or find it embarrassing that Yeats relied on automatic writing to produce the genetic material of the text.

However, as Margaret Mills Harper recently pointed out, to ignore the occult influence on Yeats' life is to be unable to fully engage with the poet's work. While *A Vision* has certainly not been ignored entirely by scholars, this paper will argue that—now that we have access to the full "story" of the text, from the automatic script to a new edition (forthcoming) of the 1937 version—there are profitable areas for further investigation of the several parts of *A Vision* that can add depth to our understanding of both Yeats and his contexts.

2. *A Vision*: Scholarship as of 2008

We will begin with an overview of current scholarship on *A Vision* and its genetic material. One of the circumstances that make new work on *A Vision* possible is the availability of good critical editions. George Mills Harper began the work in the '70s by editing *A Vision* (A) and Yeats's "occult papers," and moved on to work on producing edited editions of the automatic scripts, which appeared in three volumes (*Vision Papers*) in the early 90s. Just recently (2008), Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine Paul edited a new edition of *A Vision* (A) for the Scribner series, and their edition of *A Vision* (B) is forthcoming in the same series.

Literary critics in the 1950s and '60s looked to *A Vision* primarily as a tool with which to explicate the work of Yeats' canon. Today, however, there has been more interest in looking at the production of the text itself, in the automatic writing in particular, as a collaborative or performative piece produced by W.B. and George Yeats. While Ann Saddlemeier's biography *Becoming George* has been critical in helping us understand who George Yeats really was, Margaret Mills Harper has led the way in the critical work on the automatic scripts, looking at the ways in which George both resisted identification with and yet at the same time created identities within the automatic script, and the larger ways in which the historical context of spiritualism and mediumship may have shaped the automatic script. See especially her *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W.B. Yeats*. Brenda Maddox's 1999 book *George's Ghosts: A New Life of W. B. Yeats* is also a useful, if more popular, account.

It is almost impossible to talk about *A Vision* without reference to the automatic script, which has led many scholars to look at the occult influences on and connections to the text itself. Indeed, this is one of the largest areas of extant scholarship on *A Vision*. Much of the scholarship in this area has concentrated on explaining Yeats' own occult connections/experiences, books like Kathleen Raine's *Yeats, The Tarot and the Golden Dawn* (1976), as well as her work on Yeats' astrology (1978), Mary E. Bryson and R. G. Chabria's work on theosophy and Yeats (1977, and 1971 respectively), and George Mills Harper's own work: *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (1974) and *Yeats and the Occult* (1975). Some of the most helpful books in this line might be H.R. Bachchan's *W.B. Yeats and Occultism: A Study of His Works in Relation to Indian Lore, the Cabbala, Swedenborg, Boehme, and Theosophy* (1965) and Graham Hough's *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (1984).

More recently, several scholars have looked at the occult connections as a system of poetics: articles on Yeats' "magical" or "metaphysical" poetics by D.S. Lenoski (1981) and Barton Friedman (1990) follow this line of thinking, as well as Barbara Croft's *Stylistic Arrangements: A Study of William Butler Yeats' A Vision* (1987) and Susan Dobra's *The Rhetoric of Belief* (1999). One scholar taking a different approach, however, is Ted Spivey, who argued in the late '70s/early '80s that Yeats' work in *A Vision* was a forerunner of modern occult movements, an area that seems promising for further study. Such volumes as Alex Owen's study, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, add both historical context and contemporary critical sophistication to our understanding of Yeats's occult milieu, as does Marina Warner's *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media*. (Warner's forthcoming book on magic and magicians, to be called *Stranger Magic*, should be especially welcome to Yeats scholars.)

Another paradigm for making sense of *A Vision* has been to see its connections with psychology, particularly that of Carl Gustav Jung. Perhaps the seminal work in this area was done by James Olney in *The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy - Yeats and Jung* (1980).

Yet another way of contextualizing *A Vision* has been to look at it as a modernist text—a production of the aesthetic climate in which it was created. The first scholar to address this issue was Arup Rudra in "A Vision: Between Romantic and Modern" in 1984; since then, Hazard Adams, Tom Gibbons, Margaret Mills Harper and Daniel Albright have looked at the issue of modernity in the text itself, and/or as part of a body of work that also includes Eliot and Pound.

Finally, there is the question of the text itself, not as a construct of the author(s) socio-historical context, nor as a system of poetics, but as a "scripture," if you will—a text intended to impart spiritual wisdom or knowledge to its readers. Very few attempts have been made to talk about the text in this light: Busteded, Richard and Wergin's *Phases of the Moon: A Guide to Evolving Human Nature* (1974) is perhaps the most ambitious - the authors are astrologers, not scholars, who attempt to adapt the system presented in *A Vision* to the lives of modern readers. Colin McDowell has, from 1985 on, written several articles appearing in *Yeats Annual* and *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* on interpreting *A Vision*, including "To 'Beat Upon a Wall': Reading *A Vision*" (1986) and "The Completed Symbol: Daimonic Existence and The Great Wheel in *A Vision* (1937)" (1988). His most recent work has looked closely at the Harper edition of the *Vision Papers*, offering the critique that the published text has been too selective—in essence calling for an even more complete access to all the genetic materials. Susan Graf's 2000 book, *W. B. Yeats - Twentieth-Century Magus: An In-depth Study of Yeats's Esoteric Practices & Beliefs, Including Excerpts from His Magical Diaries*, might well fit into this line of thinking about the text.

All this is to say that while much work has been done with *A Vision*, there remain promising areas of investigation, including more thorough work on the broader historical contexts in relation to world religions and the occult in which *A Vision* (including the generation of the automatic scripts) appears; ways in which the text is not only modern but perhaps postmodern in its esthetics; ways in which the text(s) provide a foundation for or look ahead to contemporary movements in "new" spiritualism; and ways to bring new audiences to the text, including how to effectively teach the text to undergraduates at varying stages of their studies.

3. Postmodern *Vision*

For students of Yeats, the early 21st century may indeed represent a Golden Dawn. Already on the horizon is a generation of scholars eager to interpret Yeats in terms of postmodernity, a generation that need look no further than *A Vision* for its golden critical opportunities.

One reason for the rise of interest in this direction surely has to do with the surprisingly postmodern texture of *A Vision*. For the generation of scholars that cut its eyeteeth on the instability of binary polarities, *A Vision* is the text *par excellence* for testing the play of antimonies and observing the blending of dancer into dance. (For an early example of a critical excavation from precisely this vein, consider Daniel Albright's *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*.) Or again: how may the provisional, postmodern self be mapped onto Yeats's shifting configurations in *A Vision* of Will, Body of Fate, Creative Mind, and Mask? Or yet again: to what extent does the human mind invent the world it lives in? A postmodern question indeed—and an especially Yeatsian one, as well, particularly when brought to bear not on *A Vision* alone, but on the automatic script which lies behind and beneath it.

It is the automatic script itself, in fact, which may well prove to be the most significant site of discovery in the next wave of *Vision* studies. The earliest generation of serious *Vision* scholars was occupied of necessity with the task of spadework, of assembling, transcribing, recording and archiving the raw material of the Yeats's own notebooks, card files, and related paper ephemera. It remained to the following generation to move these materials toward definitive publication, and to continue the task of arguing for their significance and validity.

It will fall to a "third wave" of researchers to move beyond the inherent fascination of the automatic script as gnomic genetic material for *A Vision* and to consider it more carefully as a rich text in its own right, complicatedly metatextual down to its very bones, alive with experiments in gender, tantalizingly mysterious for its performative context, a challenge to even the most fundamental assumptions about narrativity.

4. Occult *Vision*: New Directions

To cite just one possibility among many: the nature of the spirit communicators of the automatic script constitutes a wide open field for *Vision* scholars. What are we to make of Ameritus, and Thomas of Dorlowicz, and Leo, of Rose, Fish, and Leaf, of that whole cast of spirits, daimons, controls, and guides? As Margaret Mills Harper observes, in her Introduction to *Wisdom of Two*, the Yeatses' acceptance of the joint authorship of the spirit communicators raises endlessly interesting questions about "conventions of authorship, technologies of representation or communication...about performance, authority, and subjectivity, all simmering in an ontological, epistemological and ideological stew."

As early as 1909, in his essay "The Last Report: The Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher," William James observed that "I have come to see in automatic writing one

example of a department of human activity as vast as it is enigmatic." A century later, we may at last be prepared to give the Yeatsian experiments in that department the attention they deserve.

5. New Audiences for *A Vision*

The question of audience in *A Vision* is a perennial one. In his own day, Yeats was unsure of the number of people who might have enough interest in the work to purchase it. He seemed reluctant to allow a popularization of the work and limited access by those who were not part of his occult circle to specific parts of it (such as "The Phases of the Moon"). Add to this the ambivalence that the academic community has traditionally displayed in regard to teaching the text as a work in its own right, and the issue of audience becomes even more cloudy. Is there a place for *A Vision* in tomorrow's popular and academic culture, and if so, what work needs to be done to establish it and render it as accessible as Yeats's poems and plays? Three possibilities for developing future audiences for the concepts of *A Vision* and the system are found in three very diverse arenas: astrology, technology, and education.

In the past twenty years, there has been an amazing revival in interest in the occult and an equally amazing growth in the interest in what has been referred to as Neo-Pagan religions. People are looking for connections that go beyond the superficial bonds formed by industry and technology. Old questions are being asked in new ways and in new formats. Perhaps the part of this apparent occult revival that could be referred to as a growth industry is the practice of astrology. *A Vision* is not an astrological text; however the use of astrological symbols in connection to the system, and the cyclical vocabulary are not alien to those who study astrology. In addition, W.B., George, and their associates in the Golden Dawn constructed and consulted astrological charts frequently (note the horaries prepared by the couple).

A book written by historical scholar Richard Tarnas and published in 2006, *Cosmos and Psyche*, opens the door for *A Vision*'s emphasis on mathematical relationships in the unfolding of histories—personal and global. He revisits archetypal astrology, presents the universe as a vibrant, active entity, and ties in systems theory, referencing the work of Gregory Bateman. (System Theory is here defined as the transdisciplinary study of the abstract organization of phenomena, independent of their substance, type, spatial or temporal scale of existence. It is the investigation of the principles common to all complex entities and the (usually) mathematical models that can be used to describe them.) Tarnas views the universe as a living system having impact on both micro and macro events. Yeats would agree with this construct, but what is needed is a key to decode the formulas in *A Vision* and render them comprehensible to both the scholar and the inquiring reader/student. That leads us into the next area for creating an audience: technology.

We have the technology that would enable new audiences to engage with *A Vision*. We also have ample foundational work in texts such as those of George Mills Harper and Margaret Mills Harper. We have the *Vision Papers* even though all the automatic writings have not yet been published. What is needed is a way to compile all existing works, as well as any yet unpublished, into a comprehensive volume along with some sort of interpretive key. We live in a world that favors compressed information and graphical

explanation. This would require a huge collaborative effort among scholars, technicians, and publishers. Even more technologically centered is the possibility of creating a software program that could interpret data based on the *Vision* system. Since *A Vision* is not a tool for predicting the future but a mechanism for placing events and persons in a current framework, with a correlating link to the past, how could such software be used? That leads to the creation of the final audience for the text, which can be found in academia.

Yeats developed his work, including *A Vision*, over the entirety of a lifetime. Why would anyone believe that an attempt should be made to teach the Yeats oeuvre adequately in one semester? Yet, this is the way it is structured in most colleges. It may be time to approach the teaching of Yeats in an incremental—if not developmental—model. This is especially true if *A Vision* included in instruction. If we attempt to communicate the obscurities of the text to a group of young students who do not yet have the intellectual tools to process complicated texts, we are doomed to failure. Students are likely to be confused and may even reject Yeats' great body of work. An overview of the poems and the plays is certainly doable in freshman and sophomore classrooms. In this context, it may even be advisable to teach students about the occult interests and activities of Yeats, but an exploration of *A Vision* itself may best be reserved for a senior seminar with follow-on in graduate studies. Another way in which students may be exposed to the work, and come to view it in its own integrity, is to take it out of the English department (or at least allow it to stroll about the grounds a bit). In the previous reference to technology and software, an interpretive key would allow students to view the historical cycles in *A Vision* and cross reference them to actual events. If a timetable is established for the cycles, analysis of trends based on past data might be possible. This would not be truly predictive but merely explanatory—an asset in the study of history. Work in systems theory has implications in math and physics as well; uncharted and alien territory in Yeats studies perhaps, but still a possibility.