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Religion as Aesthetic Creation: Ritual and Belief in William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley

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Religion as Aesthetic Creation: Ritual and Belief
in William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father and late mother and thank them for always aiding and encouraging me in all my academic and creative pursuits. I also thank my late aunt, June Stillman; she influenced my educational path perhaps more than she knew. Finally, I thank my entire family for their love and support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**Crowley**

<i>EG</i>	<i>Equinox of the Gods</i>
<i>Lies</i>	<i>Book of Lies</i>
<i>MTP</i>	<i>Magick in Theory and Practice</i>
<i>MWT</i>	<i>Magick Without Tears</i>

Yeats

<i>AVA</i>	<i>A Vision (1925)</i>
<i>AVB</i>	<i>A Vision (1937)</i>
<i>E&I</i>	<i>Essays and Introductions</i>
<i>YVP</i>	<i>Yeats Vision Papers</i>

Mircea Eliade

<i>SP</i>	<i>The Sacred and the Profane</i>
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ABSTRACT

William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley created literary works intending them to comprise religious systems, thus negotiating the often-conflicting roles of religion and modern art and literature. Both men credited Percy Bysshe Shelley as a major influence, and Shelley's ideas of art as religion may have shaped their pursuit to create working religions from their art. This study analyzes the beliefs, prophetic practices, myths, rituals, and invocations found in their literature, focusing particularly on Yeats's *Supernatural Songs*, *Celtic Mysteries*, and *Island of Statues*, and Crowley's "Philosopher's Progress," "Garden of Janus," *Rites of Eleusis*, and "Hymn to Pan." While anthropological definitions generally distinguish art from religion, Crowley's religion, Thelema, satisfies requirements for both categories, as Yeats's *Celtic Mysteries* may have done had he completed the project.

Chapter One

Introduction

Art and religion, two of the most important expressions of human culture, have a complex and changing relationship. Some of the earliest examples of visual art—the cave paintings and sculptures of the Paleolithic era—were, according to most archeological theories, created for religious or magical ritual purposes, and the earliest known dramas are the religious “Passion Play” of middle-kingdom Egypt and the Greek tragedies associated with the worship of Dionysus in ancient Athens. As Jane Ellen Harrison affirms, “Athenian theatres were on holy ground, [and] attendance at the theatre for the Spring Festival of Dionysus was considered an act of worship” (10). Among many examples of the linkage between art and religion, she provides one from Egypt:

Countless bas-reliefs that decorate Egyptian tombs and temples are but ritual practices translated into stone. [...] Ancient art and ritual are not only closely connected, not only do they mutually explain and illustrate each other, but [...] they actually arise out of a common human impulse. (18)

Purely secular works of art (beyond utilitarian objects) were to evolve later in human history. When more recent art forms have been linked to religion, they have often been seen occupying a subservient role: aesthetic expressions of religious beliefs; however, this assumed position of the arts was questioned in

the Romantic era when poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley suggested that art should fill the role of religion in society. While Shelley never fulfilled this idea in any literal sense, the conjoining of art and religion was later pursued by William Butler Yeats and his contemporary, Aleister Crowley. Yeats and Crowley, despite their mutual animosity, both sought to unify their art with their occult pursuits by creating new religions from their art.

This dissertation will investigate how William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley created literary works intended to function as religious systems and will explore how these works negotiate the often-conflicting roles of religion and modern art and literature. I will examine the negotiation and construction of the changing relationship between religion and art (particularly literature and drama) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the writings of Yeats and Crowley, as well as Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley. By exploring these influences and relationships, I intend to contribute to interdisciplinary investigation of the roles of literature, art, and religion in modern Western culture. Very little research exists on Crowley's literary works; thus I will extend this previously unexplored area. Studies such as mine expand the field of religious literary criticism, a discipline propounded by Dennis Taylor who contends that religious language has been "suppressed, distorted, and dismissed [by critics] at least since Nietzsche." Taylor asserts that "the problem of the religious voice is that it used to be the hegemonic standard, and now is occluded by the current standard"; sociological or historical methods alone cannot fully interpret religious values present in literature such as meditation, silence, and vision, as well as the

intersection of the sacred and the secular. Using an approach that is “interested,” yet “detached,” as Taylor recommends, I intend to examine the central role of religion in the art of Yeats and Crowley.

Yeats’s contemporaries and early critics had long dismissed his occult practices and philosophies as “embarrassing”; however, the importance of Yeats’s interest in the occult is no longer questioned, since research and criticism on the mystical, spiritual, magical, religious, and philosophical aspects of Yeats’s work has abounded since the 1950s.¹ Nor can these aspects be entirely separated from the political and personal influences permeating his work, as Yeats’s striving for Unity of Being is revealed through the complex web of interconnected themes, which can be discovered throughout his oeuvre.

Despite his lifelong involvement in the occult, Yeats is far better known for his literary accomplishments than his esoteric pursuits; the opposite can be said for his contemporary (and adversary) Aleister Crowley, as scholarship on Crowley is primarily comprised of biography and studies of his contributions to Twentieth century occultism. Less scholarship has been devoted to Crowley’s literary work, the majority of it concentrating on his plays with very little devoted to his poetry. Nevertheless, Crowley envisioned himself as a great poet and playwright, and, as with Yeats, many of his literary works are intrinsically linked to his occult practice.

¹ For example, Ted Hughes reported that W.H. Auden had called Yeats’s interest in the mystical “embarrassing nonsense” (Hughes 424).

Review of Literature

The earliest major work seriously and respectfully to address Yeats's occult involvement, Virginia Moore's *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* (1952), seeks to elucidate the role of the occult in Yeats's poetry. She claims to attempt "something never before attempted: a close scrutiny of the religion intermixed with his art" (2). Countering prior critics, she explains that "Yeats's System is neither private nor obscure; belonging to a stream of thought which—flowing through many lands and centuries—has had and still has a vast concourse of adherents" (4). Moore outlines Yeats's influences in roughly chronological order: the nature of his religious upbringing, Irish folklore and Druidism, William Blake, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, philosophies of duality, spiritualism, his system in *A Vision*, and his late-life studies of philosophy. Similarly, the 1975 anthology, *Yeats and the Occult*, edited by George Mills Harper, provides a broad-based examination of Yeats's occult enterprises. The book assumes the value of understanding Yeats's occultism for reading his poetry and plays, but at least one early reviewer, Denis Donaghue, criticized the book for not taking a more skeptical approach. Donaghue seems to state that the goal of the anthology's writers should have been to evaluate the validity of Yeats's occult beliefs. A more valuable approach would be to discuss impartially the nature of Yeats's beliefs and their connection to his literary works, for, as reviewer Vincent Mahon maintains, "Surely the best poems and plays depend on a successful articulation of Yeats's deepest ideas and beliefs" (240). As

Margaret Mills Harper observes in *Wisdom of Two* (2006), a text analyzing W.B. Yeats's spiritual and literary collaborations with his wife:

Through several generations of Yeats scholarship, discussion of the Yeatses' occult experimentation still tends to begin, and often end, at the question, Did they, or Do you? believe it?, with lines between camps drawn on the basis of the answer to the latter. (21)

She concludes, "The Yeatses themselves were by no means distracted by such compulsion" (21). Academic debates over the "truth" of a writer's claims of paranormal experiences are indeed a distraction, as such questions can never be satisfactorily answered.

This dissertation will not attempt to evaluate the validity of Yeats's and Crowley's beliefs nor the veracity of their assertions concerning their experiences. Considering the impossibility of ascertaining each man's "true" state of mind, I will accept Yeats's and Crowley's many statements of belief as accurate representations of their opinions for the moment that they were written. This acceptance should not be confused with endorsement, but instead should be seen as an agnostic approach to material that cannot be objectively substantiated.

Graham Hough, in *The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats* (1984), traces Yeats's place in the occult tradition, the formation of his beliefs, and the relationship between his beliefs and his literary work. While the title of the book refers to religion, Hough maintains that Yeats's development of a system was less systematic and tradition-bound than might be implied by the term religion:

“Tradition means something handed down, and it tends to suggest a lineal descent. [...] Yeats’s heritage of beliefs, themes, myths and symbols is too various to be compressed within such limits [...]” (8). Furthermore, Hough distinguishes Yeats’s work from other occult systems that focus on direct “mystic vision” or “mediations between earthly life and the celestial state” (118), because Yeats’s “interest seems to be more in the process than in the goal” (118). According to Hough, Yeats’s system is “continually being worked at and developed, but the relation between the system and the poetry is intricate and indirect” (82-83). And yet, Hough points out that Yeats did seek to create a single system that could unify all that his imagination produced as “part of one history, and that the soul’s” (Yeats, qtd. in Hough 83). Hough’s study supports my argument that Yeats strove to create a religion but never completed it.

In addition to works that broadly cover Yeats’s occult involvement, several important studies focus on the relationship between his Celtic Mysteries and his poetry and plays. The actual rituals and other texts of the Celtic Mysteries have never been published except in Lucy Shepherd Kalogera’s dissertation “Yeats’s Celtic Mysteries” (1977). Her transcription of the unpublished manuscript and typescript rituals and other materials forms the basis for my analysis of Yeats’s proposed magical order. Furthermore, two books extensively trace connections between Yeats’s Celtic Mysteries and his literary works: Reg Skene’s *The Cuchulain Plays of W.B. Yeats* (1974) and Steven Putzel’s *Reconstructing Yeats: The Secret Rose and the Wind Among the Reeds* (1986). Skene argues that Yeats’s Cuchulain plays are a continuation of the rituals that Yeats created for his

Celtic Mysteries and thus form a link between his early and later work. Skene also connects Yeats's Cuchulain cycle with his system in *A Vision*, exploring Yeats's experiments with ritual drama, including his Celtic Mysteries rituals and the influence of Japanese Noh drama upon his writing. Functioning as a corollary to Skene's work, Putzel's *Reconstructing Yeats: The Secret Rose and the Wind Among the Reeds* proposes that these early books of Yeats's fiction and poetry operate as ritual liturgy. Like Skene, Putzel also links these earlier works to the system Yeats later outlined in *A Vision*. Putzel "interweave[s] references to Yeats's unpublished 'Celtic Mystery' ceremonies with [...] the poems to demonstrate the ritualistic quality of the 1899 *The Wind Among the Reeds* and its relationship to the stories and system of *The Secret Rose*" (7). Both Skene and Putzel provide a foundation upon which I will construct my own examination of Yeats's linking of religion and art.

Yeats's and Crowley's early membership in the Golden Dawn offered an impetus for the creation of their own occult religious orders: Yeats's Celtic Mysteries and Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.; Order of Oriental Templars, or Order of the Temple of the East) and Argentum Astrum (A.A.; Silver Star).² Specific information on the practices of the Golden Dawn appears in Israel Regardie's *The Golden Dawn* (1989), and Yeats's long involvement with the Golden Dawn through its many conflicts and incarnations is first extensively treated by George Mills Harper's 1974 text *Yeats's Golden Dawn*.

² While Crowley did not found the O.T.O., under his leadership it was transformed to reflect his beliefs.

Literary scholarship on Crowley centers primarily on his 1910 series of plays, the *Rites of Eleusis*. Several works focus on performance analysis of these plays, including J.F. Brown's "Aleister Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis*" (1978), which provides useful descriptions of the actual performances that cannot easily be surmised from the scripts alone. J.F. Brown also includes valuable discussion of the plays' reception and quotations from contemporary reviews. Tracy Tupman posits in her 2003 dissertation "Theatre Magick: Aleister Crowley and the *Rites of Eleusis*" that Crowley's plays demonstrate "one of the first attempts in the twentieth century to consciously create a psychological connection between theatrical and religious practice within western hegemonic society" (ii-iii).³ Tupman outlines the historical context of Crowley's endeavors, examining symbolist traditions in art, the ritual-theatre of the Golden Dawn, and Crowley's earlier plays. Her investigation includes Crowley's distribution of pharmaceuticals for mystical effect during the plays, and a detailed performance analysis of the *Rite of Saturn*. While Brown and Tupman address the original performances of the *Rites*, Edmund B. Ligan in "Contemporary Forms of Occult Theatre" explores contemporary performances of Crowley's *Rites* and the influence of the *Rites* on more recent ritual-theater.

The only significant study on both Yeats and Crowley is William Heim's 1974 dissertation "Aleister Crowley and W. B. Yeats: A Study in Magic and Art." Heim traces the influence of the Golden Dawn on their writing and argues that while Yeats was the superior poet, Crowley was the superior magician. Heim

³ Crowley used the spelling *magick* to distinguish occult or ritual magic from the stage performances of illusionists.

analyzes the use of sound for psychological and magical effect in Crowley's poems and postulates that sound effects are more important than meaning in Crowley's poetry. While all biographies of Crowley detail his conflicts with Yeats over the Golden Dawn, Lawrence Sutin devotes several pages of *Do What Thou Wilt* (2000) to comparing themes in Yeats's work to those in Crowley's, including Yeats's description of his muse compared to Crowley's conception of the Scarlet Woman, and the ideas expressed in *A Vision* to those in *Liber AL vel Legis*. The primary commonality he notes is their similar belief in "a sequential progression of spiritual eras or aeons that governed human consciousness" (137). Following Kathleen Raine, Sutin also suggests that Crowley may have been the "rough beast" that Yeats envisions in "The Second Coming" (138). Although Sutin's comparisons are an instructive beginning, my dissertation will compare the ideas of Yeats and Crowley in much greater depth.

Several works investigate Crowley in light of modern and postmodern ideals. Most prominently, Hugh B. Urban maintains that Crowley exemplifies the late modern era, contending (following Paul Heelas) that many new religious movements such as Crowley's "do not represent so much a rejection of modernity; rather, they are often better described as powerful affirmations of certain basic modern ideals, such as progress, individualism, and free will" (8). Urban states that Crowley's work illustrates "what Georges Bataille calls the power of transgression, [...] the dialectic or play between taboo and transgression, sanctity and sacrilege, through which one systematically constructs and then oversteps all laws" (13-14). Urban ultimately asks if Crowley

is the “last great modernist or the first ‘postmodern’?” concluding that Crowley also embodied postmodern traits of fragmentation and disillusionment; however, this portion of his thesis seems based on contested accounts of Crowley’s later life of poverty and drug addiction, rather than the content or style of Crowley’s literary work or the beliefs or practices of his religion.

A more nuanced look at the modern and postmodern qualities of Crowley’s writing and practices can be found in Joshua Gunn’s *Modern Occult Rhetoric* (2005). Gunn asserts the occult claims to contain hidden and ineffable knowledge impossible to express through words, even though language is the primary medium for communicating occult knowledge. Nonetheless, the use of language in occult texts obscures meaning and allows for the “creation of authority [for the author of the occult text and the philosophy or practice being promulgated] through novel vocabularies and a stress on allegorical and figurative language” (125). Gunn specifically compares occult rhetoric with postmodern rhetoric, proposing that the occult, supernatural, or ineffable quality of authority or legitimation in occult texts is akin to the “notion of post-truth ineffability that is so central to the project of the posts (e.g. poststructuralism, postmodernism, and so on)” (118). He furthermore suggests that Crowley’s practice of self-referentiality and recourse to the endless chain of symbolism found in the Qabala both create an impression of authority while simultaneously threatening to undermine it: “this occult hermeneutic unwittingly happened upon the significance of the meaningful regress of open semiotic theory” (134).

According to Gunn, the structure and context of occult literature such as Crowley's can be seen to pre-figure postmodern ideas.

Art and Religion

For the purpose of this dissertation, I define art as human creations concerned with aesthetic goals: things created by people that, while expressing emotion or conveying meaning, do so in a manner that appeals to aesthetic sensibilities. While *aesthetics* is most often defined as an appreciation of the *beautiful*, an aesthetic sense is more encompassing. An artwork may indeed be "ugly" in the common sense of the word, but can still be aesthetically appealing if its "ugliness" is unified with the meaning or emotion it conveys, and this unity itself appeals to aesthetic sensibilities. Comparatively, the uneasiness that may be caused by disjunction or dissonance in a work or between the work and its viewer or reader can also be an aesthetic experience, as in the experience of the sublime. As Earle J. Coleman eloquently states, "the aesthetic rewards the act of apprehension, be it perception or conception" (183). Whether or not an artwork is beautiful in any conventional sense, the emphasis on its formal characteristics in conjunction with any subject or content it may express distinguishes it from more practical or utilitarian human creations. The artist (including the poet, playwright, and author) moves beyond merely utilitarian expressions of meaning and seeks to arrange and elevate the formal characteristics of his or her creation as well.

Furthermore, in Western culture, the concept of art has evolved from an anonymous, collaborative, or cultural expression to the creation of an individual genius. Art in the modern Western sense of the word conveys an individual's

personal expression. Writing in the early twentieth century, George Lansing Raymond summarized this modern Western idea of art:

The truth of art is surmised and embodied according to the methods of imagination and expression peculiar to the temperament of one man; and it becomes the property of all mainly on account of the individual influence of this man whose intuitive impressions have been so accurate as to recommend themselves to the aesthetic apprehensions, and to enlist the sympathies, of those about him. (235)

The mythologist Jane Ellen Harrison describes the Modern perception of the conflict between art and religion in her 1918 book *Ancient Art and Ritual*:

The ritualist is, to the modern mind, a man concerned perhaps unduly with fixed forms and ceremonies, with carrying out the rigidly prescribed ordinances of a church or sect. The artist, on the other hand, we think of as free in thought and untrammelled by convention in practice; his tendency is towards licence.” (9)

She concludes, however, “It is at the outset one and the same impulse that sends a man to church and to the theatre” (9-10).

Not all societies have made such clear delineations between cultural expressions such as art and religion; the perspective of art as the personal expression of an individual is relatively recent. Medieval England and Europe, as well as many ancient and Eastern cultures, have conceived of art as the creation

of a collaborative group, an unidentified craftsman. Other cultures, like the Balinese, have not distinguished artworks from other human creations at all.

Similarly, theorists on religion generally interpret religion as a cultural or societal creation, even when it is ostensibly based on the prophecies or teachings of a single person. Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, describes religion as “eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities” (10). Clifford Geertz, in “Religion as a Cultural System,” begins his extensive definition of religion by specifying that it is a “system of symbols” and clarifies this definition by stating that these systems are “cultural patterns” that “lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism” (90-92). Comparatively, Durkheim specifies that “religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities,” and religious categories of understanding “should be social affairs and the product of collective thought” (10). These qualities of religion would seem to contrast with the modern view of art as the personal creation and expression of an individual, as Geertz furthermore argues when he distinguishes the “religious perspective” from the “aesthetic perspective” (110). Geertz’s description of the aesthetic, however, seems entirely derived from the Modernist creed “art for art’s sake.” For Geertz, the aesthetic perspective disregards “questioning the credentials of everyday experience “[...] in favor of an eager dwelling upon appearances, an engrossment in surfaces, an absorption in things [...] ‘in themselves’” (111). Geertz developed a comprehensive description of religion, but he presents a limited view of the arts few poets would

accept, perhaps least of all Yeats, who declared, “[...] we are seeking to express what no eye has ever seen” (*E&I* 305).

Durkheim furthermore characterizes religion as “systems of representations” through which humans understand the world and their place within it. He divides religious phenomena into beliefs, or “states of opinion,” and rites, or “modes of action,” which are centered or based on beliefs. The organization of these beliefs forms the crux of Durkheim’s theory, “the division of the world into two domains:” that which is sacred, and that which is profane (37).

Mircea Eliade extended and adapted Durkheim’s categories of belief in the sacred and profane. For Eliade, “the sacred is equivalent to a power, and [ultimately] to reality. The sacred is saturated with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy” (*SP*, 12). Religion allows humans to live in connection with this power, and this ability to “live in the sacred” allows a person to “take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion” (*SP*, 28). In developing his conception of the sacred, Eliade also refers to the theories of Rudolph Otto, who proposed that religion deals with “numinous,” that which humans encounter as “wholly other” and outside their normal or natural experience (Pals 199-200). Since, in religious belief, the sacred is entirely different from the profane, it cannot be sufficiently or directly described in terms of normal experience. Instead, the sacred can be communicated indirectly, through symbolism and myth (Pals 204), and thus, through art. Eliade’s term for

the interaction between the sacred and profane is *hierophany*, “anything which manifests the sacred” (*Patterns* xviii). The sacred can appear within otherwise profane objects such as trees, or rocks, temples, or myths, and thereby imbue them with sacredness.

After belief, Durkheim’s second phenomenon of religion is rite, or ritual. As generally construed by anthropologists and sociologists, ritual is a broad category which can include many secular, social, and political activities in addition to specifically religious ones. While this dissertation will be concerned with religious ritual, more general research on ritual applies to this discussion as well. According to Richard Schechner, all rituals involve behaviors that are removed from their normal context and usage, and these behaviors are “exaggerated and simplified.” Other species will use specialized body parts for display, whereas humans will commonly employ costumes, implements, or adornments. Furthermore, these behaviors are performed in particular circumstances in response to specific cues (65). Similarly, Catherine Bell identifies “formalism” as a key quality of ritual-like behavior. Formalism, in particular formal speech, is “different from ordinary speech,” involves stylization, and has an “aesthetic dimension” of “beauty and grace” (140-1). Religious ritual, specifically, is characterized by symbolically significant, stylized or exaggerated actions performed by the members of a religion, or by their specialized representatives, priests or magicians. These formal aspects and aesthetic dimensions of ritual align it with the definition of art as a human creation which focuses on formal or aesthetic qualities. Eliade, however, asserts that art, unlike

religion, is missing “one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred” (*Patterns* xvii). Nevertheless, as Ruth-Inge Heinze points out, the word “ritual” comes from the Sanskrit *ṛta* “which refers to both art and order” (1).

Traditional theories of religion commonly attempt to create clear demarcations between religion and other cultural practices such as art, but such clear distinctions have been called into question.

Despite the boundaries drawn by Eliade and Geertz, other scholars have explored the similarities between art and religion. Jane Ellen Harrison, a contemporary of Yeats and Crowley, argues “Ancient art and ritual are not only closely connected, not only do they mutually explain and illustrate each other, but [...] they actually arise out of a common human impulse” (18). She does not limit this link to ancient cultures, as she concludes:

At the bottom of art, as its motive power and its mainspring, lies, not the wish to copy Nature or even improve on her [...] but rather an impulse shared by art with ritual, the desire, that is, to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing, by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired. (26)

More recently, Earle J. Coleman, in *Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds between Art and Religion* (1998), draws connections between art and religion. For Coleman the most prominent commonality is “a quest for union, unity or oneness. [...] Indeed, one basic purpose of aesthetic experiences is to restore harmony, integration, balance, equanimity, proportion, or wholeness” (xvii). Furthermore, he goes on to assert that “one can fruitfully compare religions to artworks, for

both, at their best, are particular expressions of universal truths” (5).

Nevertheless, he also addresses other theorists of religion who, like Eliade, argue for the precedence of religion over art. Rudolph Otto, Coleman states, “regards the aesthetic category of the sublime as ‘a pale reflection’ of the religious category of the numinous” (185). Similarly, Paul Tillich places religion above other human endeavors such as law, philosophy, or art because religion is “... the experience of a quality in all of these areas, namely, the quality of the holy or that which concerns us unconditionally” (qtd. in Coleman 185). Coleman does concede that enjoying “art for art’s sake” is “a lower end than enlightenment or spiritual rebirth and lower ends are means” (188). He concludes, however, “Art is a means to spiritual states of mind, but the resultant spiritual consciousness is itself aesthetic” (196). This experience of the sacred or the numinous as aesthetic recalls Romantic attitudes towards art. For the subjects of this study, William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley, such aesthetic experience is both means and end; their spiritual and artistic quests culminated in the creation of religions as aesthetic objects, and aesthetic objects as religions.

Yeats, Crowley, and the Occult

The multifaceted work of William Butler Yeats reflects his interests in Irish folklore, Eastern mysticism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, his studies of William Blake, Hermeticism, Cabala, and systems of western magic. As Yeats expressed in a letter to John O’Leary, these practices were central to his life: “The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write...” (qtd. in Flannery 6). Raised in an Anglo-Irish family with a history of strong Church of

Ireland ties, Yeats's upbringing was nonetheless more rational than religious, especially since Yeats's father was a positivist, a "disciple of John Stuart Mill's" (Yeats, *Memoirs* 19). John Butler Yeats, who studied law but rejected his call to the bar to become a painter, encouraged his children's artistic and literary education, reading poetry to William, but dismissing "all verse of an abstract or ethical kind" (Yeats, qtd. in Allt 626). Peter Allt observes, "the poet [William] found the ban upon 'abstractions' almost impossible to observe. He felt increasingly his need for a philosophy of life; and, lacking any, he was constrained to adumbrate one for himself" (626), for Yeats claimed, "I did not think that I could live without religion" (qtd. in Allt 626).

Yeats began to develop what would become his lifelong connection to the Irish peasant and pagan tradition that would feed his spiritual longing and lead to his searches into the occult. According to Terrence Brown, Yeats's mother, Susan, "was the conduit through whom flowed to the poet-to-be the energy of a folk tradition that had its roots in pagan, pre-Christian Ireland. [...] She introduced him to a tradition in story, narrative, myth, folk-custom and belief" [...] (16-17). Furthermore, as a young man, Yeats explored his occult interests through a brief period in Madame Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. He later met one of the founders of the Golden Dawn, MacGregor Mathers, and was initiated into this magical order in 1890. He continued working with the Golden Dawn (and its subsequent offshoots) for over thirty years, even serving as one of its leaders for twenty of those years. It was through the Golden Dawn that he met his wife,

George Yeats (*nee* Hyde-Lees), and their spiritual collaborations would lead him to produce his philosophical treatise *A Vision*.

Yeats never seemed satisfied with the religious or spiritual systems that were available to him: “An obsession more constant than anything but my love itself was the need of mystical rites—a ritual system of evocation and meditation—to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty.” For Yeats, “natural beauty” meant specifically the natural beauty of Ireland. While the rituals of the Golden Dawn had provided him with an adequate magical system, they had no anchor in any geographical place other than the temple halls in London. Consonant with his goals of the Celtic Twilight, Yeats sought a religio-magical system specifically for Ireland: “I believed that instead of thinking of Judea as holy we should [think] our own land holy, and most fully where most beautiful” (*Memoirs*, 123-4).

Aleister Crowley, Yeats’s contemporary and a fellow *frater* in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was dubbed “the wickedest man in the world” by a tabloid journal (“Wickedest”), and Yeats himself called Crowley “a quite unspeakable person” (*Letters*, To Lady Gregory, 25 April [1900]). This dislike was mutual; in his novel *Moonchild*, Crowley characterizes his fictional Yeats (“Gates”) as an evil magician who meets his end by being magically cast off a tower (170). Crowley’s primary reputation is as an occultist and magician (and in the popular mindset, a Satanist); he is less well-known for the fiction, plays, and volumes of poetry he wrote throughout his life. Born in Warwickshire, England in 1875, Crowley was the child of conservative Christian parents and his early

education consisted of a mixture of private tutors and evangelical schools. He went on to study at Kings College and Trinity College, although he never completed final examinations because he felt that obtaining the actual degree “unbefitting of and unnecessary to a gentleman” (Sutin 35). From his youth Crowley was inspired by the work of Shakespeare, Shelley, and Swinburne, and he sought to achieve fame as a poet (Sutin 31), ultimately coming to believe that he was “the greatest poet of his time” (Crowley, *EG* 46). According to Crowley, his interest in magico-religious poetry began early in his career, “From the beginning I had wanted to use my poetical gift to write magical invocations” (*Confessions*, 273). Crowley wrote a prodigious number of literary works, including poetry, fiction, and drama, and his prophetic revelation *Liber AL vel Legis*, or *The Book of the Law*, was created under circumstances bearing remarkable similarities to Yeats’s production of *A Vision*.

The two men met as initiates of the Order of the Golden Dawn, which was founded in London by Dr. William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, and Dr. William Robert Woodman in 1888. Yeats was initiated into the Order in 1890, and Crowley joined eight years later. The foundations of the Order’s structure, practices, and teachings come from the Masonic and Rosicrucian traditions; prior to forming the Golden Dawn, Westcott and Woodman were members of the *Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia* (S.R.I.A.), a Rosicrucian order, and Westcott was also a Master Mason. The Order’s practices and teachings included Hermeticism, Qabala, astrology, Tarot, alchemy, and, of course, magic. Initiates were taught methods of calling upon (and banishing)

angels and spirits. Members would progress through a series of grades wherein they would learn increasingly more advanced material and pass an examination before undergoing an initiation or grade ceremony that would elevate them to the next grade. The Order based its structure upon the Qabalistic Tree of Life, a glyph derived from the esoteric tradition of Judaism. While the origins of the symbol are Hebrew, its use in the Golden Dawn was filtered through the Christian adaptations of Hebrew mysticism that occurred in the Renaissance.⁴ The Golden Dawn provided training from which both men drew symbols for their art and upon which they built the foundations of their own religious and occult orders.

Beyond their membership in the Golden Dawn, their common interest in the occult, and their common animosity toward each other, Yeats and Crowley shared a passion for poetry of the English Romantics, Yeats even having claimed to have been the last of them. The next chapter will explore Romantic perspectives on religion and art, particularly those of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and how these ideas are reflected by Yeats and Crowley.

⁴ In a Neo-platonic fashion, the Tree of Life diagrams the relationship between the spiritual and the material universe. See the Appendix for a brief explanation of the Tree of Life.

Chapter Two

The Romantic Idea of Poetry as Religion:

Shelleyan Influence on Yeats and Crowley

Percy Bysshe Shelley, in particular, influenced both Yeats and Crowley. Yeats, in his 1900 essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” wrote, “I have re-read *Prometheus Unbound*, which I had hoped my fellow-students [in the Golden Dawn] would have studied as a sacred book, and it seems to me to have an even more certain place than I had thought among the sacred books of the world” (*E&I*, 65). Crowley refers to Shelley frequently throughout his memoir *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, and even insisted upon carrying a copy of Shelley’s works on a mountain-climbing expedition (Sutin 101). As a young man Crowley paid homage to the earlier poet by writing “In the Woods with Shelley”:

[...]

Life is a closed book behind — Shelley an open before me.

Shelley’s own birds are above

Close to me (why should they fear me?)

May I believe it — that love

Brings his bright spirit so near me

That, should I whisper one word — Shelley’s swift spirit would hear me.

[...]

Crowley's respect for Shelley seems to have continued unabated throughout his life; however, Yeats's attitudes toward Shelley had changed by 1932 when he wrote the essay "Prometheus Unbound"; he then considered Shelley too intellectual to be a mystic (Merritt 182). Nonetheless, he still admitted that Shelley had been a greater influence upon his life than even Blake (*E&I* 424).

In reaction to the ideals of the Enlightenment, which extolled reason and questioned traditional ideas of Christianity, the English Romantic poets championed poetry and art as the new religion. They sought to create new mythologies, or to appropriate old mythologies for their own purposes. The questioning of the Christian faith introduced by the Enlightenment created "a vacuum of metaphysical meaning" which the Romantics attempted to fill, thereby transforming and combining Christian and Enlightenment traditions. The Bible was re-imagined as art or poetry, and man was seen as "(God-) creator," becoming, through his creation of words and images, "maker of his own world." For the Romantics, poetry was "redemptive and relevatory," and "the creation of meaning [became] an individual act of faith" (Oergel 116-126).

The Romantic poet was to be both prophet and priest, with nature as the holy text to be revealed (Reider 785). These ideas, however, did not originate with the Romantic poets, as Brian Shelley contends, "Writers as different as Sir Phillip Sydney and Thomas Paine had linked poets with prophets, chiefly by referring to the magical and musical facility of prophetic writers" (121). According to M.H. Abrams, William Wordsworth's conception of the holy marriage of mind and nature is not uniquely his but "was a prominent period metaphor" serving the

"role of visionary poet as both herald and inaugurator of a new and supremely better world" (Abrams 31). Abrams argues:

Friedrich Schelling agreed that at the present moment "each truly creative individual must invent a mythology for himself," and saw in contemporary *Naturphilosophie* the adumbration of a universal mythology that would harmonize Greek myth and the seemingly antithetic claims of Christianity. (67)

This perspective was later echoed by Yeats, who sought to unite Celtic mythology with Christian ideals in his *Celtic Mysteries*. Abrams furthermore cites Shelley's admiration for the "systematic form" provided to mythology by Dante and Milton and asserts that Shelley "set out to assimilate what seemed intellectually and morally valid in this mythology to his own agnostic and essentially skeptical world-view" (67). While the link between religion and poetry, prophet and poet was common in the Romantic era, Percy Bysshe Shelley was particularly influential for both Yeats and Crowley.

A full discussion of Shelley's changing and sometimes seemingly contradictory attitudes toward religion is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, some of his points are relevant to the extent that they contextualize his beliefs on the relationship between religion and poetry and lead to a demonstration of how these attitudes would play a germinal role in the development of the work of Yeats and Crowley. Shelley outlines the relationship between poetry and religion, poet and priest most explicitly in "A Defence of Poetry," claiming, "Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in

which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters” (112). Poetry, for Shelley, contains “eternal truth” and performs the moral function once ascribed to religion: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.” Thus, poetry inspires and encourages the imagination, which in turn inspires morality, although not necessarily through the poet’s own conceptions of right and wrong. According to Shelley, a poem should not be didactic, but instead work by “strengthening the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man” by allowing us to identify with “the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (“Defence,” 115-118). Poetry, by activating our imagination, allows us to empathize with the beautiful, Shelley’s highest moral good. In the preface for *The Cenci*, he declares, “imagination is as the immortal god which should assume flesh for the redemption of moral passion” (qtd. in Brian Shelley 121). Ellsworth Barnard, in *Shelley’s Religion*, states that Shelley believed “that men must be born anew, and baptized not with the water of reason but with the fire of Imagination—which is in the most sense the gift of God to men to redeem them from their slavery to the powers of evil” (251). Quoting Shelley’s discussion of Dante in which Shelley declares “all high poetry is infinite,” Barnard comments in a footnote, “no Christian ever believed more literally in the divine inspiration of scripture than Shelley in the divine origin of great poetry” (7).

Yet Shelley claimed from early adulthood to be an atheist and disdained organized religion, pronouncing, “An established religion returns to death-like

apathy the sublimest [sic] ebullitions of most exalted genius, and the spirit-stirring truths of a mind inflamed with a desire to benefit mankind” (qtd. in Barnard 4), and, as Barnard affirms, “ritual and dogma [...] had no place in Shelley’s scheme of things.” In the expanded version of his controversial essay “On the Necessity of Atheism” found in *Notes on Queen Mab*, he argues:

All religious ideas are founded solely on authority; all religions in the world ban inquiry and do not want people to use their rational abilities; said authority demands that we believe in God; this God himself is only founded on the authority a few men who claim to know him and to come on his behalf to proclaim him on earth. A God made by men doubtless has need of men to make himself known to mankind. (Note 13, 271, trans. Patrick O'Brien)

Furthermore, in *Notes on Queen Mab*, Shelley demonstrates the failures of organized religion (Christianity, in particular):

The state of society in which we exist is a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilization. The narrow and unenlightened morality of the Christian religion is an aggravation of these evils. (Note 9, 252) [...] religion and morality, as they now stand, compose a practical code of misery and servitude. (Note 9, 255)

Clearly, Shelley distrusted organized religion and its power-structures; however, his position as an atheist is more nuanced than simply denouncing belief in God.

While Shelley begins “Atheism” with the statement “There is no God,” he immediately continues with this qualification: “This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken” (Note 13, 263). Furthermore, Christopher Miller attests that *Queen Mab* praises a goddess: “Mab functions as a kind of goddess—a human face and voice for the otherwise invisible vaguely feminized ‘spirit of nature’ that Shelley exalts as the ultimate power in the universe” (74). Shelley opposed the concept of an omnipotent creator god; however, he seemed to embrace the idea of a pantheistic deity, at least metaphorically.

Shelley also exalts humanity instead of an authoritarian God, acclaiming “the metaphorical power of the self as a god ‘which creates the world’” (Brian Shelley x). According to Abrams, the myth that Shelley creates in *Prometheus Unbound* conveys that “man is ultimately the agent of his own fall, the tyrant over himself, his own avenger, and his own potential redeemer” (302). As previously discussed, Shelley’s other deity is the human imagination: “the immortal god which should assume flesh” (qtd. in Brian Shelley 121). Of course, this argument is Shelley’s primary thesis in “A Defence of Poetry.” Poetry exercises the imagination, which in turn allows humankind to experience empathy for others: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own” (“Defence” 118). The poet acts as a priest or prophet, providing the holy words that inspire man to goodness.

Shelley asserts, however, that poets are not to be considered prophets “in the gross sense of the word.” He does not claim they can “fortell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events,” disregarding this idea as “superstition.” The poet, however, can access “eternal truth” and “participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.” For Shelley, a poem is “a creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds” (“Defence,” 112-115).⁵ Yeats surely had a similar conception in mind when he called the “laws of art [...] the hidden laws of the world” which “can alone bind the imagination” (*E&I* 163). Crowley directly compares the “mental state of him who inherits or attains the full consciousness of the artist” with “the divine consciousness” (*Absinthe*, 16). Along with Shelley, Yeats and Crowley embraced the conception of poetry (and the poet) as a conduit for eternal truths.

The young Yeats was seized by the religious feeling and imagery in Shelley’s poetry. In his essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” Yeats calls Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* a “sacred book” (*E&I*, 65) which “utters a faith as simple and as ancient as the faith of those country people, in form suited to a new age” (*E&I*, 78). Yeats, however, insisted that art, if it is to aid the soul, must be systematically symbolic, “consistent with itself,” and must have “emotion [...] related to emotion by a system of ordered images” (*Discoveries*, 36). Yeats felt the symbolism of Shelley’s poetry lacked an inherent system:

⁵ Shelley seems to use the term *Creator* as Platonic ideal, rather than an anthropomorphic or personal god.

I only made my pleasure in him contented pleasure by massing in my imagination his recurring images of towers and rivers, and caves with fountains in them, and that one star of his, till his world had grown solid underfoot and consistent enough for the soul's habitation. ("Religious" 40)

Yeats continues by stating that his own imaginary systemization of Shelley's symbols was not sufficient:

[...] I lacked something to compensate my imagination for geographical and historical reality, for the testimony of our ordinary senses, and I found myself wishing for and trying to imagine [...] a crowd of believers who could put into all those strange sights the strength of their belief and the rare testimony of their visions. A little crowd had been sufficient, and I would have had [for] Shelley a sectary that his revelation might have found the only sufficient evidence of religion, miracle.⁶ (*Discoveries*, 40)

While Yeats gives "miracle" as a specific requirement for religion, more importantly he identifies a key element that Shelley's poetry lacked in order to qualify as a religion: believers. In his next statement, Yeats suggests that Shelley's poetic religion was merely metaphorical and not complete: "All symbolic art should arise out of real belief, and that it cannot do so in this age proves that this age is a road and not a resting place for the imaginative arts" (*Discoveries*,

⁶ sectary, *n.* **1.** A member of a sect; one who is zealous in the cause of a sect.

40). In a poignant passage in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” Yeats wishes that Shelley had discovered “one image” that

he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul,
disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow
of the world, into that far household where the undying gods await
all whose souls have become simple as flame, whose bodies have
become quiet as an agate lamp. (95)

Shelley, however, died without having found that one image, and, in Yeats’s view, his poetry never achieved the unity required of religion, for “he was born in a day when the old wisdom had vanished and was content merely to write verses, and often with little thought of more than verses” (*E&I*, 95), thus Shelley’s poetic religion never grew beyond metaphor, but the idea of art serving as religion would be reified in the works of Yeats and Crowley.

Chapter Three

Prophecy and Belief: Creating Sacred Texts

Yeats's and Crowley's systems fulfill Durkheim's requirement that religion contain specific beliefs, and both men promulgated these beliefs through texts that manifested the Romantic ideal of poetic prophecy in a literal fashion. Each man used his poetic voice to transmit ideas that he claimed to have received from spiritual sources; because these received works and the poetry informed by them concern interpreting history and imaginatively projecting future historical trends, William Blake's conception of prophecy is particularly apt: "Prophecy for Blake entails more than simple prediction: prophecy is an imaginative engagement with history in which the vision of outward things, historical events, is joined with inward vision, which is imaginative and value laden" (Schleifer 569). Furthermore, Shelley spoke of poetry as "the most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution." Yeats and Crowley believed they lived in a period of great transition, the beginning of a new age, to which they sought to awaken their readers. Of such times, Shelley wrote, "there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature" ("Defence" 140). Yeats and Crowley both claimed to derive the beliefs, the "impassioned conceptions," of their poetic religions through prophetic spiritual practices.

According to Yeats's and Crowley's own extensive accounts, the primary texts of each man's religion came to him in similar fashion: channeled from the voices of spirit guides or incorporeal intelligences. Crowley, while traveling in Cairo with his new wife Rose in March 1904, was contacted by a being that ultimately identified itself as "Aiwass." The first contact with this entity came through Rose, whom Crowley described as untrained in any spiritual practices and completely ignorant of mythology. Despite her inexperience, she repeated the phrase, "They're waiting for you;" upon being questioned by Crowley, she revealed the statement was, "all about the child," and "all Osiris." The "child," as Crowley would confirm, was the Egyptian god Horus, son of Osiris (Crowley, *EG* 70). Rose was able to answer questions about Horus and Crowley's past experiences with the god of whom she could have no conscious knowledge. Of Rose, Crowley comments, "here was a novice, a woman who should never have been allowed outside a ballroom, speaking with the authority of God, and proving it with unhesitating correctness" (*EG*, 72). Rose instructed Crowley to perform an invocation of Horus and provided the procedure, directing him to omit many conventional ritual actions that he would have normally observed. According to his notes, Crowley successfully performed the ritual on March 20, 1904; he does not describe the exact nature of his "success," but he concludes, "I am to formulate a new link of an Order with the Solar Force" (*EG*, 76). Then, around April 7, Rose commanded him "to enter the 'temple' exactly at 12 o'clock noon on three successive days, and to write down what he should hear, rising exactly at 1 o'clock" (*EG*, 87). The result of his transcriptions became known as *Liber AL vel*

Legis, or *The Book of the Law*, which proclaims the new religion of *Thelema*, or *Will*.⁷

The production of Yeats's spiritual treatise *A Vision* bears some remarkable similarities to Crowley's experience in writing *Liber AL*. Yeats, too, reports receiving communications from incorporeal entities with the help of his new wife. In 1917 an astrological reading indicated that he should marry that year, preferably in the month of October. Yeats, still a bachelor at age fifty-two, proposed once again to Maud Gonne, who again refused. He then proposed to Gonne's daughter, Iseult, who considered the offer but then concluded that her love for Yeats was platonic. Finally, Yeats turned to the twenty-nine year-old Georgina Hyde-Lees, a woman whom he knew through their membership in the Golden Dawn. Despite her mother's disapproval, "George" accepted, and she and Yeats were married on October 20. Yeats immediately regretted his decision, writing to Lady Gregory that he felt the marriage had been a mistake. George, however, must have sensed his trepidation, for only days into their marriage she decided to catch her new husband's interest by experimenting with automatic writing, a process of contacting spiritual entities and writing their words without conscious control of the action. Although George later claimed that she had at first intended to only fake automatic writing, she had been surprised to find herself "seized by a superior power" (qtd. in T. Brown 252). Her efforts were a success, both in writing material that Yeats would use in his poetry and spiritual

⁷ *Liber AL vel Legis* is commonly referred to as *Liber AL*. I will follow this convention throughout the rest of the dissertation.

philosophy for the remainder of his life and in capturing Yeats's devotion. The Yeatses would continue their automatic writing sessions for many years.

The Nature of Belief

Despite the life-long commitment of Yeats and Crowley to occult practices, critics have questioned the nature and sincerity of their beliefs; however, although both Crowley and Yeats were immersed in a Christian society, and both used Christian imagery and references in their work, they both were concerned with creating religions that moved beyond the Christian paradigm. Nonetheless, the issue of Yeats's relationship with Christianity has been the subject of ongoing debate. Virginia Moore explores this question, ultimately arguing that Yeats was indeed a Christian, albeit an unconventional one. She supports this thesis by pointing out that Yeats's most unorthodox beliefs regarding religion have been held at one time or place by prominent Christians or Christian sects. Moore also cites the use of Christian symbolism by the Golden Dawn. She furthermore bases her conclusion on her interpretation of Yeats's cycles of history in *A Vision*, for which she claims that the position of Christ's birth "means that Christ has a special relation to the entire Wheel, whether Solar or Lunar; in a unique way he represents the *whole*" (391). She does qualify her argument by acknowledging that Yeats conceived of more than one Great Year, but disregards the significance of this point, for "Christ was the center and meaning of this one [this Great Year]" (400). Nonetheless, her contentions appear strained, for Yeats's spiritual and religious attitudes were wide-ranging and do not seem to give primacy to any one set of teachings. Yeats was a spiritual seeker throughout his

life, and adherence to a single, exclusive doctrine or manifestation of God, as is required by Christianity, would have been alien to him. While Christian ideas and symbols influenced Yeats, pagan sources were equally or even more greatly important for his work, especially the Celtic Mysteries.

Kathleen Raine counters Virginia Moore's conclusions on Yeats's Christianity. She contends, "But if Eliot was the last great poet of European Christendom, Yeats looked toward the uncharted New Age...", arguing that Yeats used the language of "a metaphysical eclecticism based upon the universal tradition of the Perennial Philosophy" rather than the old language of Christian theology ("Hades" 83); however, it must be noted that Raine has received criticism for her unqualified and unsupported acceptance of the importance of Yeats's occult philosophies to contemporary thought (Barnwell 173 and Donaghue 629) .

Grahame Hough addressed Yeats's attitudes toward Christianity prior to either Moore or Raine:

Yeats in his early days is not so much opposed to the Christian tradition as indifferent to it. The Erastian Irish Protestantism which was his native background could hardly offer much to the imagination; and for the same social and historical reasons he was irrevocably on the other side of the barrier from the Catholic Church. Once only in later life he records an attraction to it: but it comes through the agency of the hardly orthodox Hugel; and it is soon dismissed. ("Last Romantics" 227)

Hough quotes a passage from “Vacillation” (published in Yeats’s 1933 book *The Winding Stair*) to illustrate Yeats’s flirtation with and rejection of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity:

I—though heart might find relief
 Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
 What seems most welcome in the tomb—play a predestined part.
 Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

Furthermore, Hough states that Yeats joyfully embraces a belief in reincarnation as an “eternally recurrent” return to the world of the senses, with no eager anticipation of leaving the cycle of rebirth, concluding “the irrevocable choice, the final judgment of Christian eschatology would have been infinitely repugnant to him” (259). Yeats himself claimed to “understand faith to mean that belief in a spiritual life which is not confined to one Church [...]” (*E&I* 208). While Yeats intended his *Castle of Heroes* to reflect the best parts of the Christian and pagan traditions, the beliefs he espoused are far removed from the essential tenets of Christianity. Critics’ attempts to shoehorn Yeats into the Christian religion seem motivated by the desire to make his beliefs as palatable as his poetry.

It is unlikely that anyone has ever argued that Crowley was Christian; Crowley instead must be defended against accusations of Satanism. Of course, Crowley himself is entirely at fault for this misconception; he relished the title his mother had given him as a child, “the Great Beast 666,” and often used inflammatory language to describe his activities, such as recommending one sacrifice children, by which he actually meant one should masturbate. Crowley

desired to shock his audience and undermine what he considered the prosaic Christian values of his day; he often used Christian (and anti-Christian) imagery, but he did not advocate a literal belief in hell or Satan. Furthermore, while his most prominently practiced ritual, the Gnostic Mass, might be viewed from an orthodox Christian perspective as a blasphemous mockery of a Christian rite, Crowley did not intend it as a Black Mass. The ritual conveys an elevated and serious—rather than debased or mocking—tone, despite all of its sexual and pagan symbolism.

Not only has Yeats's religious affiliation been questioned, but prominent critic Helen Vendler minimizes the occult or religious content in *A Vision*, preferring to view it as a work of pure fiction. Despite Yeats's long-standing commitment to occult practice and detailed descriptions of the processes of receiving the material that would become *A Vision*, Vendler argues in her 1961 book *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays* that "Yeats explicitly disclaimed any mystical orientation in *A Vision*," quoting as evidenced Yeats's statement, "there was nothing in Blake, Swedenborg, or the Cabbala to help me now." Vendler interprets this statement to mean "*A Vision* is something not supernatural in its concerns, but natural" (3). Yeats's statement, however, might as likely indicate that he knew he was embarking on a new system, which must be understood on its own terms. Yeats's communicators had enjoined him from comparing the system they revealed to any previous one.

Vendler also quotes a comment on Blake made by Yeats's father: "His [Blake's] mysticism was a make-believe, a sort of working hypothesis as good as

another. [...] In his poetry, it was only a device, a kind of stage scenery [...].”

Vendler concludes that Yeats “probably would not have printed an opinion on Blake unless he concurred with it” and maintains that the statement could apply to Yeats’s *A Vision* as well (2-3). Vendler argues that Yeats only intended *A Vision* to provide a system or foundation of symbols for his literary work.

Certainly, Yeats’s spirits directed him to only use their communications as sources for his poetry, but his statements about *A Vision* indicate that he did not heed their advice. As Stella Swain argues, Yeats himself considered *A Vision* his “book of books,” and wrote to Ezra Pound that it would “proclaim a new divinity” (qtd. in Swain 198).

The question of belief is more complex than such framings make it appear. Vendler asserts that Yeats himself claimed that his instructors did not take credit for the system they presented him, but insisted it was “the creation of my wife’s Daimon and mine” (4). Vendler’s interpretation of this statement would reveal it as an admission of the entirely fictional nature of Yeats’s text. Indeed, Yeats did express skepticism, once stating in regard to an automatic writing session with his Daemon, “I am not convinced that in this letter there is one sentence that has come from beyond my own imagination...” Yeats, like many occultists including Crowley, often worked in a state of suspended disbelief, believing in the effectiveness of occult practices if not the literal reality of the spiritual beings involved. Yeats concluded, “Yet I am confident now as always that spiritual beings if they cannot write & speak can always listen. I can still put by difficulties” (“Correspondence,” 38). Nor does George Yeats’s initial

skepticism about automatic writing, which Vendler cites, invalidate or falsify their practice of it or their belief in its results. George Yeats explained this attitude in a conversation recounted by Virginia Moore:

In the beginning, Yeats (and presumably herself [George]) did think the messages spirit-sent, and therefore proof of communion between the living and the dead, he saw them later as a dramatized 'apprehension of the truth.' If not from the dead, from whom, from what, this 'truth'? From their own higher selves. (277-8)

The Yeatses' uncertainty about their communicators did not attenuate their faith in the information they received. Furthermore, *A Vision*, like the Christian Bible, can be considered a religious text, a source of poetic symbolism, and a work of literature simultaneously; its use for one of these purposes does not invalidate its use for the others.

Although many people commonly assume that a belief in God or gods is essential to religion, scholars of religion generally do not specify such a requirement; therefore, Yeats's and Crowley's systems cannot be discounted as religions because of their occasional skepticism about the objective existence of spiritual entities. Instead of gods, Eliade requires that religion contain an idea of the "sacred," and Geertz defines religious beliefs as "conceptions of a general order of existence" that are clothed with "such an aura of factuality" that they create the impression of being "uniquely realistic" (90). Therefore, religious beliefs pertain to a world view and ontological concerns, but do not necessarily involve recourse to a being or beings that might commonly be thought of as

“God” or “gods.” Despite their use of these terms, neither Yeats nor Crowley focused their systems of belief on the worship of gods. As Neil Mann observes, Yeats did not promulgate “the concept of any personal God,” but was inclined to see God “as the greater cosmos rather than the shepherd of the stars, let alone the listener to prayers” (“Thirteen”). Crowley also expressed a nontraditional view of the divine: “My observation of the Universe convinces me that there are beings of intelligence and power of a far higher quality than anything we can conceive of as human; that they are not necessarily based on the cerebral and nervous structures that we know [...]” (*Magic Without Tears* XXX). Crowley refers to the gods of the Aeons as “aggregates of experience,” which suggests his concept of deity holds similarities to the archetypes emerging from the collective unconscious as described by Carl Jung (“Introduction,” 15).

While neither Yeats’s nor Crowley’s religions promulgate belief in a specific deity, both systems fulfill Durkheim’s requirement that a religion incorporate beliefs. Yeats’s *A Vision* outlines his system of the Great Wheel, a cycle diagramming “every completed movement of thought or life,” at both the individual and historical levels, complex divisions of the parts of the human being on physical, mental, and spiritual levels, and the processes that a person undergoes between lives (AVB, 81). While the text implicitly expresses values such as the importance of the imagination and of seeking unity (which will be discussed in depth below), it does not offer instruction on how one should live. As with many of Yeats’s poems, it seems to pose as many questions as it answers. Yeats’s system shows how individuals and historical events function, but does

not proscribe actions. This lack is consistent with one of Yeats's early statements of his principles for his work:

[...] art is not a criticism of life but a revelation of the realities that are behind life. It has no direct relation with morals. It does not seek to make us see life wisely or sanely or clearly as the moralists believe; but it make[s] us see God [...]. (*Letters, To Richard Ashe King, 5 August [1897]*)

In direct contradiction to Shelley's primary "defence" of poetic art wherein poetry serves morality, Yeats intends his poetry to have a mystical, but not moral, purpose. Crowley's *Liber AL* and related books of Thelema, however, explicitly proclaim an ethos for living.

The major precept of Thelema is the arrival of a "New Aeon" of which the key concepts are Love (*Agape*) and Will (*Thelema*). The values of each of these two words in Greek, when calculated through numerology, equal 93. Thus, according to occult philosophy, love and will are equal to each other. This concept leads to the Thelemic code: *Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law. Love is the law. Love under will.* The essential interpretation of this code is that each person is obligated to fulfill his or her own destiny, which, due to the numerical equivalence of love and will, is by necessity aligned with love. Crowley, however, does not equate this love with "sentimentality nor romantic love nor even the idealized love of all humankind" (Sutin 127). The love to which he refers is the Kundalini energy—the sexual power, characterized as feminine, which in Hinduism is symbolized as a snake coiled at the base of the spine. In Yogic

philosophy, Kundalini is the source of prana, or the life force. According to Crowley, the “serpent love, the awakening of the Kundalini” is the love of the New Aeon (“Liber Legis The Comment” I.57).

Crowley clarified passages from *Liber AL* to explicitly resolve that the dictum “Do what thou wilt” does not mean that people should simply do whatever they like.

‘Thou hast no right but to do thy will. Do that and no other shall say nay. [...]

[...] if every man and every woman did his and her will—the true will—there would be no clashing. ‘Every man and every woman is a star,’ and each star moves in an appointed path without interference. There is plenty of room for all; it is only disorder that creates confusion.

From these considerations it should be clear that ‘Do what thou wilt’ does not mean ‘Do what you like.’ It is the apotheosis of Freedom; but it is also the strictest possible bond. (Liber II)

Crowley furthermore advises “The obvious practical task of the magician is then to discover what his will really is [...]” One’s True Will can be discovered through a disciplined pursuit termed *Knowledge and Conversation with One’s Holy Guardian Angel*, or connection with what might be termed one’s higher, spiritual, or eternal self (although Crowley intentionally spurned such terms). When one has accomplished this connection with the Holy Guardian Angel, one discovers

one's True Will and is enabled to "Do as thou wilt, as a great god can" ("Hymn to Pan," line 48).

Crowley would later identify the being that revealed to him *Liber AL* as his Holy Guardian Angel. Neither Crowley nor Yeats, however, believed that the revelations that each received were directly from God or gods, as neither accepted the idea of a personal deity. The Yeatses divided the beings, or "communicators," whom they contacted into two types: "controls" and "guides." Controls, whom were mostly male, had "more or less human names" and seemed to "wield more authority" than the other spirit guides. The "less articulate" guides were named for objects in nature, such as "Apple," "Fish," "Leaf," and "Rose." George noted in one of the notebooks of automatic writing that the controls "who have been men" were given human-like names (M.M. Harper 12-13).

Rather than emphasizing worship, Yeats and Crowley see their esoteric religions as paths for accomplishing the Great Work. Crowley describes the Great Work in *Magick Without Tears*:

The Great Work is the uniting of opposites. It may mean the uniting of the soul with God, of the microcosm with the macrocosm, of the female with the male, of the ego with the non-ego—or what not. (7)

Nor is the Great Work necessarily conceived as a task to be achieved in one lifetime, as both men embraced the idea of reincarnation which is nearly ubiquitous in Western occultism.

Reincarnation and Unity

Both Yeats and Crowley accepted a belief in reincarnation to the extent that their texts assume its existence rather than presenting a rationale in favor of it; instead they focus upon the purposes or processes of reincarnation, agreeing that a state of unity is its ultimate result. While both Yeats and Crowley were influenced by the Eastern philosophies of Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, Yeats having belonged to the Society and Crowley having published commentary on several of Blavatsky's works, Crowley nonetheless dramatically contrasts his understanding of reincarnation from that of Blavatsky. Blavatsky offers an explanation similar to Buddhism:

We say that man and Soul have to conquer their immortality by ascending towards the unity with which, if successful, they will be finally linked and into which they are finally, so to speak, absorbed. (Blavatsky 103)

Crowley, however, argues:

I think we are warned against the idea of a Pleroma, a flame of which we are Sparks, and to which we return when we 'attain'. That would indeed make the whole curse of separate existence ridiculous, a senseless and inexcusable folly. [...]

The idea of incarnations "perfecting" a thing originally perfect by definition is imbecile. The only sane solution is as given previously, to suppose that the Perfect enjoys experience of (apparent) Imperfection. We are not to regard ourselves as

base beings, without whose sphere is Light or "God." (*Liber AL*, Commentary 8)

Despite Crowley's cautioning against seeing unity as a transcendent totality that the individual must seek to rejoin, he does see unity as an ultimate goal, as he comments in *Liber CL*:

[...] all things, being in sorrow caused by dividuality [sic], must of necessity will Oneness as their medicine.

Yet since each star is but one star, [...] so must the aspirant to our holy Science and Art increase constantly by this method of assimilating ideas, that in the end, become capable of apprehending the Universe in one thought, he may leap forth upon It with the massed violence of his Self, and destroying both these, become that Unity whose name is No Thing. (109)

For Crowley, unity is still the ultimate goal, yet he frames the relationship between the individual self and the ultimate unity as a one of violently assimilating all antimonies and thus transcending and destroying both the individuality and its opposites. The individual, in Crowley's understanding, is not imperfect, only incomplete, and must absorb all things rather than being absorbed. Despite the extreme contrasts he presents, Crowley's picture of reincarnation differs from that of Theosophy in tone and perspective, rather than in detail.

Yeats, like Blavatsky, sees the goal of reincarnation as unity, but for Yeats this unity takes several forms: "Unity of Being," the "Thirteenth Cone," and the

“Sphere.” Yeats explains that Unity of Being can be achieved by an individual while incarnate, but he is less clear on the nature of the Thirteenth Cone and the Sphere. If Unity of Being is a state that can be reached by the individual, the microcosm, the Sphere seems to be unity on the macrocosmic level. During one spiritualist session with George, Yeats asked one of his communicators, “What is unity of being?” and the spirit Thomas replied, “Complete harmony between physical body [,] intellect & spiritual desire...” (YVP4 248). Furthermore, it is described by Yeats as a condition when the physical, spiritual, and mental parts of a person are like “an instrument so tuned that when one string is touched all strings sound in unison, a condition of the soul symbolized by an awakening of consciousness [which] is the center of the great wheel...” (YVP4 189). Even if the soul attains Unity of Being, this state is not the ultimate form of unity. Yeats refers to the ultimate unity or state of oneness as the Sphere or the Thirteenth Cone. As explained by Hassett:

The entire system of *A Vision*, Yeats said was based upon the belief that the sphere of ultimate reality, which is neither one, nor many, nor love, nor hate—‘concord or discord’ as Yeats puts it— falls in human experience into a series of antimonies. The Thirteenth Cone, then, is the sphere where the antimonies are resolved. (105)

Thus, it is only beyond death that that ultimate unity can be achieved. Contraries can only be united “when the world ends” (Hassett 76). Like the Sphere, the Thirteenth Cone is one of Yeats’s conceptions of the divine; while the Sphere

contains and resolves all antimonies, the Thirteenth Cone is antithetical to all manifestation, like a sort of “anti-matter.” The Thirteenth Cone seems to be the transcendent divine, while the Sphere represents the immanent. Yeats and scholars have referred to both the Thirteenth Cone and the Sphere as “God,” but, regardless of the term, Yeats gives neither much attention. Mann stresses that “To the antithetical Yeats the divine is largely irrelevant to the human,” and Yeats stated he preferred to “keep as much as possible to the concrete & the phenomenal” (qtd. in Mann, “Thirteen”). Thus, *A Vision* concentrates more on the process of reincarnation than its goal. Many of the stages in Yeats’s progression of lunar phases do not admit the possibility of Unity of Being, nor is this state only to be accomplished at the end of the cycle of twenty-eight phases. While Unity of Being may be a goal of reincarnation, the cyclical process of incarnation seems as important to Yeats as its completion.

Yeats conceived an essential part of the process of incarnation as the search for one’s mask: “a form created by passion to unite us to our selves” (qtd. in G.M. Harper, *Making*, 283). Yeats would meditate upon the image of a mask in order to become what he called the “antithetical self.” This, in turn would attract his “Daemon” or “Daimon” (Yeats’s spelling varied), a spiritual being that would bring him inspiration. In the western magical tradition, the concepts of the Higher Self and Holy Guardian Angel correspond with Yeats’s Daemon. As Yeats’s system calls for communicating with one’s Daemon, a goal of The Great Work is to contact one’s Holy Guardian Angel. Crowley describes the Holy Guardian Angel in his commentary on *Liber AL*:

[...] this same "Holy Ghost", or Silent Self of a man, or his Holy Guardian Angel.

He is almost the "Unconscious" of Freud, unknown unaccountable, the silent Spirit, blowing "whither it listeth, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth". It commands with absolute authority when it appears at all, despite conscious reason and judgment. (*Commentaries of AL*)

Yeats describes the Daemon in his notes as "a unique and self-creating power, contributing to the human being what is personally unique," (Mann, "The Daemon"), and while one's Daemon is dramatically different or antithetical to one's personality, the "Daimon & man [are] two beings interlocked for the 12 Cycles" (*YVP3*, 187) meaning that one retains the same Daemon from life to life.

Yeats does not make the relationship between the Daemon and what he terms the "antithetical self" entirely clear. Both form contraries to one's conscious self, but it seems that the antithetical self may be the part of one's personality that seeks connection with the Daemon. Yeats's communicators construed the antithetical self as "the purely instinctive & cosmic quality in man which seeks completion in its opposite" (*YVP1* 65). Crowley does not construe the Holy Guardian Angel as being one's opposite; however, Yeats and Crowley share the goal of seeking union between opposites in order to induce ecstatic states or spiritual realization.

Unity and Ecstasy

Yeats describes the meeting of the self and the antithetical self in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*: “[...] for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word-- ecstasy” (30). Crowley also characterizes the joining of opposites as ecstasy: “Now Love is the enkindling in ecstasy of Two that will to become One. It is thus an Universal formula of High Magick” (*Liber CL*, 109), but, as he often does, Crowley adopts a more extreme tone:

Seek ye all therefore constantly to unite yourselves in rapture with each and every thing that is, and that by utmost passion and lust of Union. To this end take chiefly all such things as are naturally repulsive. For what is pleasant is assimilated easily and without ecstasy [sic]: it is in the transfiguration of the loathsome and abhorred into The Beloved that the Self is shaken to the root in Love. (*Liber CL*, 109)

This idea, of achieving ultimate unity and ecstasy by uniting with the loathsome or repulsive, is not without parallel in Yeats's philosophy. Yeats's metaphysics of hate has been extensively discussed, and he illustrates its use in achieving spiritual unity in the poem “Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient,” in which the speaker claims, “Hatred of God will bring the soul to God.”⁸

Both Yeats and Crowley emphasize the conjoining of contrarities: opposite, yet complementary pairs. It is important to note that they do not ascribe a simple dualistic meaning to these opposites: they are not inherently good or

⁸ See Hassett.

evil. Rather, they are dynamic pairs that balance each other and whose interactions are the basis for creation and manifestation. Yeats was perhaps first exposed to this idea during his studies of Blake, as Blake states in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without Contraries there is no progression” (3). Contrariety implies things opposing or conflicting in a creative manner; it is not the same thing as negation, which implies a dualistic opposition such as heaven and hell or good and evil (Adams 152). Yeats said, “I never thought with Hegel that the two ends of the seesaw are one another’s negation...” (AVB 72-73). In *A Vision* he describes the principle duality as the “primary” and “antithetical.” These terms are applied to everything from states of human thought to cycles of history.

The Progression of Ages

Of Crowley and Yeats’s stated beliefs, the most strikingly similar is a progression of ages in human history, called by Crowley “aeons” and by Yeats “gyres,” each approximately 2000 years in length. As Neil Mann elucidates, a cyclical organization of history is not original to Yeats; Mann cites predecessors such as Trithemius in 1508, Giambattista Vico in 1725, Rudolf Steiner, G. W. F. Hegel, and Oswald Spengler, among others, and most prominently the classical system that Yeats discusses in *A Vision*, “The Great Year of the Ancients” (Mann “The Cycles of History”).

Yeats divides his gyres into two contrary types: primary and antithetical. These categories are not simply organized into chronological periods; each secular historical age contains a “religious dispensation” of the contrary type:

Before the birth of Christ religion and vitality were polytheistic, *antithetical*, and to this the philosophers opposed their *primary*, secular thought. Plato thinks all things into Unity and is the “First Christian.” At the birth of Christ religious life becomes *primary*, secular life *antithetical* [...]. (AVB, 262-3)

The religious expression of antithetical historical ages is characterized by a “*primary* dispensation looking beyond itself towards a transcendent power,” which “is dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peace its means and end,” whereas the religious aspects of primary historical ages are antithetical, “[obeying] imminent power, [...] expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical” (AVB 263).⁹ When Yeats refers to ages as primary or antithetical, he is generally referring to the quality of their religious dispensation, rather than the secular characteristics, which receive less emphasis. Therefore, the polytheistic age of Classical Greece and Rome represents the last dispensation of an antithetical age, whereas the age of Christianity is primary. This age is now ending, to be replaced by a new antithetical age.

Crowley also describes a procession of ages, or aeons, each ruled by a god:

In the history of the world, as far as we know accurately, are three such Gods: Isis, the mother, when the Universe was conceived as simple nourishment drawn directly from her; this period is marked by matriarchal government.

⁹ Because Yeats describes primary dispensations as “transcendent,” he most likely intended the word *immanent* in his description of antithetical dispensations .

Next, beginning 500 B.C., Osiris, the father, when the Universe was imagined as catastrophic, love, death, resurrection, as the method by which experience was built up; this corresponds to patriarchal systems.

Now, Horus, the child, in which we come to perceive events as a continual growth partaking in its elements of both these methods, and not to be overcome by circumstance. This present period involves the recognition of the individual as the unit of society. ("Introduction," 16)

The earlier ages as characterized by Yeats and Crowley have few corresponding attributes. In fact, Yeats's harsh, masculine, hierarchal, antithetical pagan age seems to better correspond with Crowley's second age of Osiris than to the age of Isis with which it would be chronologically linked. Furthermore, Crowley's age of Isis seems better aligned with Yeats's "peaceful" age of Christianity, so the correlations between these early eras seem to be directly reversed.

The New Aeon of Horus described in Crowley's *Liber AL*, however, shares remarkable similarities with the new gyre envisioned by Yeats. Yeats's list of antithetical qualities: expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical, is mirrored by Crowley's New Aeon, for which the ruling god Horus proclaims, "Now let it first be understood that I am a god of War and Vengeance" (*Liber AL* III.3), and "Worship me with fire & blood; worship me with swords & with spears. Let the woman be girt with a sword before me: let blood flow to my name" (*Liber AL* III.11). Yeats's most famously provides a poetic description of

this new gyre in his poem “The Second Coming.” Yeats, however, chose a markedly more negative tone for his prophetic poem than Crowley takes when interpreting the seemingly horrific description of the New Aeon in *Liber AL*. Yeats seems to lament the coming age upon which “mere anarchy” and “the blood-dimmed tide” are loosed. Crowley’s *Liber AL* describes markedly similar conditions, but adopts a reassuring or even celebratory tone: “It [*Liber AL*] tells us the characteristics of the Period on which we are now entered. Superficially, they appear appalling. We see some of them already with terrifying clarity. But fear not!” (“Introduction,” 15). Crowley advises optimism because he can recommend a remedy for dealing with the horrors of the modern age: “The establishment of the Law of Thelema is the only way to preserve individual liberty and to assure the future of the race” (“Introduction,” 21). Yeats ends “The Second Coming” as he ends many of his poems: with a question. Crowley instead purports to provide the answers.

Yeats famously asks, “what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Crowley’s *Liber AL*, written some seventeen years earlier, seems to provide the answer. For Crowley, the new aeon will be ruled by the falcon or hawk-headed god Horus. The symbolic representation of this god forms a striking parallel to the imagery in “The Second Coming;” just as Yeats uses the swan (of “Leda and the Swan”) and dove (who, as a form of the Holy Ghost, impregnates the Virgin Mary) as heralds of preceding gyres, the new gyre is heralded by the falcon.

Both Yeats's "The Second Coming" and *Liber AL* refer to innocence, but, again, differ in perspective and tone. "The Second Coming" famously repines "the ceremony of innocence is drowned," whereas Crowley's texts adopt a more measured view of innocence in the new age. Horus takes the form of Harpocrates, the Child,

who rules the present period of 2,000 years, beginning in 1904.

Everywhere his government is taking root. Observe for yourselves the decay of the sense of sin, the growth of innocence and irresponsibility [...], the childlike confidence in progress combined with nightmare fear of catastrophe [...]. ("Introduction," 17)

Rather than bringing about the destruction of innocence, Crowley's New Aeon champions a child-like (although perhaps also ignorant or foolish) innocence as an end to the restrictive, shame-filled era that preceded it. The cyclical nature of Yeats's gyres does not seem to be mirrored in Crowley's aeons. For Crowley, one aeon will always be replaced by another, but he gives no indication that the characteristics of the aeons will reoccur in any regular pattern.

Antimonies

Although Crowley's eras do not seem controlled by antimonies, the interaction and resolution of antimonies plays as crucial a role in Crowley's system as in Yeats's. This idea forms a thread that permeates a number of their poetic works, such as Yeats's 1937 series of poems, *Supernatural Songs*. The overarching theme that runs throughout these poems is the joining or interaction of opposites to produce unity: a state of oneness that confers ecstasy. Yeats was

not alone in expressing these ideas poetically, however, as Crowley explored similar concepts in his 1905 poem “The Philosopher’s Progress,” and “Garden of Janus” published in 1909.

Yeats and Crowley received many of the same basic occult premises through the influences of Theosophy and the Golden Dawn; perhaps the most essential of these tenets comes from a set of Hermetic teachings known as the “Emerald Tablet.” The most well-known principle from this occult doctrine is commonly phrased, “As Above, So Below,” or, more formally, “What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like to that which is below, to accomplish the wonders of the one thing” (Moore 104). In most basic terms, this dictum expresses the idea that the divine realm is mirrored in the earthly realm and vice-versa. Yeats refers to this axiom in “Ribh Denounces Patrick”: “Natural and supernatural with the 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.” “The Great Smaragdine Tablet” refers to the Emerald Tablet, and the “wonders of the one thing” can correspond with creation, spiritual attainment, and Yeats’s idea of unity.

Crowley begins his “Philosopher’s Progress” by repeating this same dictum: “That which is above, is like that which is below; and that which is below is like that which is above,” and the poem recounts the “progress” of the speaker through a series of incarnations in which he journeys “below” (hell, in the poem) and “above” (heaven) to experience ecstasy and death, ultimately achieving a state of unity that transcends all of these dichotomies.

Life and death reoccur as a fundamental set of antimonies for Yeats and Crowley. The speaker in Crowley's "Philosopher's Progress" first enters hell, "the palaces of sin," to lie with "Our Lady," an allegorical figure representing Death. He dies, crushed by her embraces. Nevertheless, this death is not final, as he is then raised to Heaven to sleep on the breast of God. The antimonies of female and male, death and sleep, active (being crushed by the female) and passive (falling asleep upon the male), lust and love, represent the "below and above" of the Emerald Tablet. As in the Hermetic dictum in which "That which is above, *is like* that which is below," these antimonies are likened to each other, but are not united in the early stages of the philosopher's journey: "Death's face *is* as the face of Sleep; / And Lust is *likest* Love" (emphasis mine).

Upon his second death, which occurs in heaven, the speaker hears a voice that calls to him from beyond both heaven and hell: "a Voice that was more than God." Like Yeats's Sphere, this voice represents the resolution of all antimonies: "For in Those Hands above His head / The Depth is one with That Above, / And Sleep and Death and Lie are dead, / And Lust is One with Love." Not until the speaker's final death, however, can he experience this unity; unlike his previous incarnations, in which he forgets his previous existence, "I died, and would forget," and "tasted the Lethean breath," upon his final incarnation, he will remember his entire journey: "This last time I would not forget."¹⁰ In his final experience, the speaker both surrenders to Death completely and conquers Death. On his first visit to hell, his blood is "wasted in her [Death's] veins, / To

¹⁰ "Lethean" refers to mythological river Lethe, in which the Greeks believed the souls of the dead would be washed of all memory of their previous existence before undergoing reincarnation.

freshen them,” but when he returns his blood is no longer wasted; instead he “possessed her [Death’s] pale maternal veins.” Paradoxically, to conquer Death is to choose to die: “I died amid her kisses: so / This last time I would not forget.” His choice to die allows him to remember the process of death and rebirth and therefore transcend it: “So I attained the Life.” The footnote to this passage clarifies that Life is “that state of mind which perceives the hidden unity.” The philosopher has accomplished the Great Work, which Crowley defines as “the uniting of opposites” (*MWT*, 7).

The relationship of life and death is also illustrated in Yeats’s “A Needle’s Eye” and “Conjunctions.” The contraries in “A Needle’s Eye” are the “things unborn” and “things that are gone.” The tenor of the eye is Kether, traditionally symbolized by the point or the point within a circle; the stream would then refer to the Waters of Life that flow from Kether, and the conflict of these contraries brings about creation.¹¹ “Conjunctions” illustrates the union of these contraries with “mummy wheat,” grain placed in Egyptian tombs as food for the dead that was thought to have remained fertile during its long burial, and thus representing life emerging from death. According to Adams, this union was believed to occur at the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn (planets with opposite astrological significance: expansion and restriction): “The figures are those of life-in-death and death-in-life and suggest in the wrapping of the mummy the path of the whirling gyre” (153). Yeats explains this creative interaction between life and death through a concept borrowed from Heraclitus: “To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each

¹¹ See the Appendix for a brief explanation of the Tree of Life.

other's life, live each other's death" (*Letters*, 913). As with each gyre that expands while another contracts, so life and death fuel each other and all of existence.

The state in which unity is attained or understood is most often represented by sexual union. In the first poem of Yeats's *Supernatural Songs*, "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn," the lovers Baile and Aillinn of Celtic legend, the children of enemy kings of Ireland, strove to escape the will of their parents by planning a secret tryst. Before they could meet, a god tells each of them that the other has died, and upon hearing this news, they each die of heartbreak.¹² Upon Baile's grave was planted a Yew, and upon Aillinn's, an apple, and Druid priests took cuttings from each and grafted them together to form a single tree. Yeats' speaker in this poem, the monk Ribh, says that in death their oneness is complete in a way it never could have been in life. Their bodies are "transfigured to pure substance" and now "There is no touching here, nor touching there, / Nor straining joy, But whole is joined to whole." Their union is far beyond what could have been achieved in the physical realm, "for the intercourse of angels is a light" in which both are consumed—unified. Ribh can sometimes see the light of that oneness, even though unclearly for it is "somewhat broken by the leaves." Yeats uses the image of the light shining in a circle to symbolize that oneness and completion.

The contraries of man and woman are also presented in "Ribh Denounces Patrick," but in this poem the man and woman are divine rather than human.

¹² This god is identified in Yeats's poem "Baile and Aillinn" as Aengus, the Master of Love, who wishes them happiness together in his land among the dead.

When Ribh speaks of the divine Trinity, he does not advance the all-male Trinity of Christianity, but the trinities of pagan mythology (such as the Egyptian Isis, Osiris and Horus or the Celtic Gwydion, Arianrhod and Lugh): “Recall [that is, take back] that masculine Trinity. Man, woman, child (a daughter or a son) / That’s how all natural and supernatural stories run.” Only through the creative conjunction of opposites, male and female, in this case, can creation occur.

Mortality and Immortality also comprise an important set of antinomies negotiated in Yeats’s and Crowley’s works. The speakers in Yeats’s poems often achieve a brief form of unity and vision, but due to their incarnate state, they cannot sustain it. Similarly, Crowley instructs “the aspirant to our holy Science and Art” to assimilate contrary ideas in order to “become capable of apprehending the Universe in one thought” and “leap forth upon it with the massed violence of his Self, and destroying both these, become that Unity whose name is No Thing” (*Liber CL*, 109). This state of apprehension cannot be maintained without such self-immolation, as Yeats often illustrates in his poetic visions. In Yeats’s “Ribh in Ecstasy” Ribh has achieved a spiritual ecstasy in which he can hear the creative forces of the universe, and again Yeats uses a sexual image: “Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot Godhead.” Yet, Ribh cannot long maintain his reverie. A “shadow” falls, he returns to normal consciousness, “the common round of day,” and his soul forgets the experience. Our human consciousness bars us from directly experiencing ultimate unity.

In our terrestrial condition, we experience contraries cyclically: “day brings round night,” as Yeats illustrates in “Meru.” The hermit in Meru, who has

abandoned the ambitions of the creative man, understands that we do not have the capacity to experience ultimate wholeness. Yet, at the peak of the mountain, seemingly closest to the light of divine unity, even the hermit is “caverned in night.” For Yeats, a lasting experience of unity is impossible for one with a human body and mind.

As demonstrated in both Yeats’s “Ribh Denounces Patrick” and his “Ribh in Ecstasy,” the supernatural and natural, immortal and mortal, dead and living, and the spiritual and the earthly are contraries that recur in *Supernatural Songs*. In “Ribh Denounces Patrick” the Triune (yet single, unified, according to St. Patrick’s teachings) God is the antimony to the multiplicity of nature. The “mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity” refers to the serpent on the Tree of Life, which winds its way up the paths of the Tree from Malkuth to Kether.¹³ This is the path of Nature, taking her indirect journey back to the realm of spirit. Yeats also refers to the “many-colored serpent” in this manner in *Discoveries*, linking it with “instinct,” “the recurring,” and “the beautiful” (32). The serpent (representing nature and *prana*, the universal life source as Crowley illustrates in “Garden of Janus”) coils twined in the embrace of the sated lovers in line nine of the poem; through sex, natural beings can experience a kind of unity.

Because of his rejection of the Christian Trinity in favor of a pagan one, Ribh appears to contradict himself in the last stanza of “Ribh Denounces Patrick” when he refers to the masculine God who can love in such a way that he both “begets and bears.” Perhaps Yeats is alluding to another state of unity in which the Trinity has resolved its antimonies, containing them within itself as a whole,

¹³ See the Appendix for a brief explanation of the Tree of Life.

and thus can both “beget and bear.” Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear explaining, “We beget and bear because of the incompleteness of our love” (qtd. in Ure p) . Perhaps “Ribh Denounces Patrick” contrasts imperfect human love, which can emulate but never achieve ultimate unity, with divine love, which contains its contraries within itself.¹⁴

For Yeats, the union of the immortal and mortal heralds a new age. The theme of sexual union between mortal and immortal in “What Magic Drum” recalls Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” and echoes his “The Second Coming,” in which he speaks of the birth of a beast signaling the arrival of a new epoch. The setting of “What Magic Drum” is the Garden of Eden: “primordial Motherhood,” whose foliage obscures the light of unity. In this poem, which combines pagan and Christian imagery, the garden represents Nature, while “He,” is the serpent who will lead humanity furthermore from the unity of God. The joyful, innocent, primordial state will end, for the child (humanity), will “no longer rest;” it is the advent of our mortality. Yet, it is not God who punishes the serpent by depriving him of his limbs, but Nature. The serpent is united with Nature when he enters the Garden, and from this union, comes the offspring of a “beast.”

Crowley’s poems also treat issues of gender and sexual identity, using male and female and masculine and feminine as antimonies to be reconciled. Crowley also uses a garden, a traditional trope for sex, as an image of union, transformation, and creation in “Garden of Janus.” Sexuality and sexual identity

¹⁴ Yeats might be alluding to Plato’s commentary on the equality of men and women: “[...] but if the difference consists only in women bearing and men begetting children, this does not amount to a proof that a woman differs from a man in respect of the sort of education she shall receive [...]” (405).

in the poem are ambiguous, at times homosexual and at times heterosexual, sometimes seeming to take a male role and sometimes a female, as the speaker seems to transform or transcend gender. If the poem is interpreted biographically, the speaker can be identified with Crowley himself, who had recently had his first sexual encounter with his friend and magical student Victor Neuburg. Crowley seems to be referencing his experience with Neuburg through the speaker's lament that his lover had "stamped me with the shame, the monstrous word of wife" (that is, made him the passive partner). During their travels in Algeria in 1909, Crowley and Neuburg built an altar to Pan in the wilderness and proceeded to worship the god. Instead of sacrificing an animal, as would have been appropriate in the Classical tradition, Crowley performed an act of self-sacrifice: allowing Neuburg to take him as a sexual partner. He made this decision because, according to Richard Kaczynski, Crowley knew that "sacrifices often symbolized the sex act, the spilling of the seed of life" (158).

While his encounter with Neuburg was not his first experience with homosexual intercourse, it was, according to Kaczynski, the first time Crowley accepted his bi-sexuality and used it for magical or religious ends. This occurrence produced an ecstatic spiritual experience for Crowley because "the indulgence and transcendence of the last taboo that Victorian-Christian mores had programmed into him completely obliterated 'Aleister Crowley' and erased his ego" (Kaczynski 158). "Garden of Janus" echoes this experience.

Concepts of mind and soul also form contraries to be mediated. In "Garden of Janus" the speaker awakens to find his male lover has abandoned

him, and in searching for him falls into trance, or perhaps a daydream, wandering “into the wood, my mind” (Stanza VI). The speaker’s understanding, however, is limited at this point, as he wanders through near-darkness:

[...] The moon

Was staggered by the trees; with fierce constraint

Hardly one ray

Pierced to the ragged earth about their roots that lay (Stanza VII).

The similarities between this image and the one provided by Yeats in “Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn” are striking. Yeats’s monk has achieved spiritual vision because of the light provided by the conjoined angels above him; the circle of light, however, is “somewhat broken by the leaves,” indicating his incomplete understanding. Crowley’s speaker has achieved only partial vision because of his own experience with sexual union.

The speaker in “Garden of Janus” continues his journey, leaving the limited vision provided in the “woods” of his mind, and comes across “the well, my soul” that provides greater insight. He sees a “flying scroll” that reveals the creation of the universe, “how the globe / Of space became” (Stanza X). Crowley uses “flying scroll” as a direct allusion to the Biblical flying scroll that contains God’s curses upon liars and thieves (Zech. 5.1-4). The scroll seen by the speaker in “Garden of Janus” has similar, if not identical content, for it also contains a curse, “a word, a spell, / An incantation, a device” that brings about destruction, “Sweeping the world away into the blank of mind” (Stanza X).

The scroll also reveals the mystery of creation, and

[...] how One most white

Withdrew that Whole, and hid it in the lobe

Of his right Ear,

So that the Universe one dewdrop did appear. (Stanza X)

God has hidden the universe, allowing it to appear as a single drop, as opposed, perhaps, to a whole ocean. This illusion of division creates the contraries that are presented throughout the poem and that the speaker ultimately unifies. The speaker realizes that the results of the curse written on the scroll are not inevitable, but within his own power to control, for “Men spin / The webs that snare them.” In order to “and brake (sic) the images / That I had made,” he must no longer “Bend to the tyrant God” (Stanza XI) who hid the understanding of Wholeness from humankind. Unlike Yeats, Crowley unites contraries by absorbing or dismissing them, as revealed in Chapter One of *Liber AL*, “Bind nothing! Let there be no difference made among you between any one thing & any other thing; for thereby there cometh hurt” (l.22). The initiate must “become capable of apprehending the Universe in one thought” and “leap forth upon it with the massed violence of his Self, and destroying both these, become that Unity whose name is No Thing” (*Liber CL*, 109).

Crowley seems to link the tyrannical God of the poem with thought, calling him “the adder of Thought” in stanza XIV. This image reveals another set of antimonies, as true vision is available to the speaker when he leaves the woods of the mind to find the well of the soul. The mind and soul and the conscious and

unconscious are also contrarities presented by Yeats in *Supernatural Songs*: “Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient” contains the antimonies of mind and soul as well as love and hate. Ribh proposes that love alone is not enough to “bring the soul to God.” Hatred is also necessary-- hatred of “every thought of God mankind has had,” for the human mind cannot comprehend God. Thought is a “garment” of “trash and tinsel” in which the soul cannot hide. Nor can the soul “endure / A bodily or mental furniture.” Only when the soul is beyond mind and body can it be open to the things that can be provided by God and be united with God. Here, it is important to note that the soul is described as female. Recalling Yeats’ previous use of male and female, she (the soul) and God (he) form another pair of contraries that must be united: “How can she live till in her blood He live!” Mirroring this symbolism, Crowley uses a well, a traditionally feminine image, to represent the soul in “Garden of Janus.”

The soul reappears as “she” in Yeats’s “He and She.” In this poem, as in much occult symbolism, the soul is aligned with the moon. Crowley invokes similar imagery in “Garden of Janus;” the speaker’s spiritual vision is obscured like the moonlight through the trees. Yet when the speaker leaves the wood, which represents the mind, and finds the well of the soul, his vision is clear. The moonlight may represent the visions obscured by the mind but made available to the soul. Yeats implies the antimony to “she”: if “she” is the moon and the soul, “he” is the sun, which is aligned with the conscious mind. Yeats uses the moon and sun as symbols throughout much of his work, explaining, “The bright part of the moon’s disk, to adopt the symbolism of a certain poem, is subjective mind

[...]” (*Autobiographies*, 228). For Yeats, lunar and subjective were always the antitheses to solar and objective; the full moon is symbolic of the most subjective, antithetical state: “The greater grows my light / The further that I fly.” As the moon waxes, the poet becomes more subjective, more intuitive, more open to poetic inspiration and prophecy. But the artist’s soul, like the moon, must flee the light—“His light”—of the sun and the conscious mind for it will blind the poet (and prophet) to that inspiration.

The antimonies of pleasure and pain are often negotiated in Yeats’s and Crowley’s works. By fleeing the conscious mind, Yeats believed that the poet becomes united with the antithetical self and finds his mask. This experience of unity confers a state of creative ecstasy upon the poet: “all creation shivers / With that sweet cry” (“He and She”). Yeats also links the ecstatic experience of finding one’s mask, which he describes as one’s desire, to a process of suffering, “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat. [...] For a hero loves the world till it breaks him, and the poet till it has broken faith...” (*Per Amica* 40-41). This same attitude and symbolism seems to be expressed in Crowley’s “Garden of Janus” when the speaker has realized he is responsible for his own images of suffering, and cries, “Come, change! Come, woe! Come, mask!” (XIII).

Crowley unites the antimonies of pleasure and pain in “Philosopher’s Progress” and “Garden of Janus.” The philosopher of “Philosopher’s Progress” encounters “Our Lady of ten thousand Pains / With heavy kissing breath,” indicating the intertwining of pleasure and pain, and proclaims, “Our Lady is as

God / Her hell of pain as heaven above.” Sadomasochistic imagery recurs throughout the poem “Garden of Janus”: for example, the speaker’s lover “deigned to murder me, / Linking his kisses in a chain /About my neck; demon-embroidery!” (IV). Both the process and result of the Great Work, which Crowley proclaims a “sublime tragedy and comedy” join the antimonies of suffering and ecstasy (*Lies*, 126).

Pleasure and pain are a pair of antimonies through which spiritual ecstasy can be achieved. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats quotes an artist friend who wrote, “if I denied myself any of the pain I could not believe in my own ecstasy” (31). Passion gives a feeling of timelessness, yet it does not endure, as Yeats shows in “Whence Had They Come?” for mortal beings’ passion cannot last “For ever and for ever;” this state of ecstasy is transient. Ribh (the “passion-driven exultant man”) also discovers this fact in the poem “Ribh in Ecstasy;” through his pain the flagellant, too, can achieve a temporary state of ecstasy. On a historical scale, pain and pleasure create the state of unity that Yeats believed was achieved at the height of the Byzantine era. The inception of this era is illustrated in “Whence Had They Come?”: “The hand and lash that beat it down” represents the pain suffered by the Roman Empire during its destruction, and the pleasure is the passion of “her body” during Charlemagne’s conception. The tenors for “her body” are both the former Roman Empire and Charlemagne’s mother. Pleasure and pain on a personal level are symbolically linked with creation and destruction at the historical, or even cosmic, level, demonstrating the precept “As above, so below.”

Crowley also employs the antimonies of creation and destruction in “Garden of Janus”; the latter part of the poem contains multiple iterations of union or absorption, creation, and destruction. These events create a wave of causes and effects: through the speaker’s search for his lover (who represents his mask in Yeats’s terms), he abandons thought, and explores the visions that he finds through his soul. These visions lead him to absorb or encompass the cosmos, “All in my arms, God’s universe,” and reveal a secret word “that God himself, the adder of Thought, had never heard” (XIV). This destruction of thought achieves the union and annihilation of “Nature, God, [and] mankind” (XV).

Even after this desolation, the speaker realizes the existence of “the mighty fabric of a Mind” (XV), indicating that all thought has not yet been destroyed; this thought, however, exists in “the Abyss,” a reference to the expanse between the lower parts of the Tree of Life (which a living human may access) and the Supernal Realm of the Divine. This Mind—perhaps that of the speaker himself—still blocks the Abyss; this space must be traversed to journey to the supernal region of the Tree of Life and achieve union with Divinity, but the speaker has not yet attained this ability.¹⁵ The Mind “belch[es] a Law for That more awful than for This.” For the speaker who stands below the Abyss, the Law of *this* realm (the lower realm of the Tree of Life) is not yet united with the Law of *that* (the Supernal or Divine realm). These contraries are not yet resolved; however, Crowley’s *Book of Lies* might imply a resolution: “Beyond this is a still deeper state of mind, which is THAT” (113); the speaker in “Garden of Janus” has not yet reached the state of consciousness required to achieve union. The

¹⁵ See the Appendix for a brief explanation of the Tree of Life.

speaker has destroyed some barriers to union, but must perform assimilation and creation to achieve the greatest state of unity.

Throughout the poem the speaker has progressed toward identification with the archetypal feminine, first by taking a passive sexual role, then by embracing visions that arise from the soul instead of using rational thought. Realizing his failure to completely relieve himself of the barriers of conscious thought—"vain was the toil" (XVI)—the speaker again leaves the woods (representing the mind) and comes to "the still black sea" (XVI), which, as another water image, represents the soul. The symbol of a black sea also signifies the Sephirah of Binah on the Tree of Life: the ultimate feminine, the womb, and the principle of receptivity.¹⁶ Upon connecting with the sublime feminine energy of Binah, the speaker sees "a mask," which would in Yeats's terms represent his antithetical self.

This progression is not smooth or one-directional, as Crowley's speaker seems to progress toward spiritual unity by shifting gender and sexual identities. The gender identity of the mask in "Garden of Janus" is not clearly feminine, as one might expect for a male speaker's antithetical self if applying Yeats's system. Crowley describes it as "Hiding a face / Wried as a satyr's" (XVI), a seemingly masculine description. Perhaps it is the face beneath the mask (the speaker's face?) that can be compared to the masculine satyr and the mask itself that is feminine, but there is no additional description of the mask that would clarify this supposition. Furthermore, the fluctuating and ambiguous nature of the speaker's gender identity continues, as the speaker seems inspired by the mask to perform

¹⁶ See the Appendix for a brief explanation of the Tree of Life.

a ritual invocation that uses his own semen: "Then did I build an altar on the shore / [...] and strewed the ground / With dew-drops, children of my wand, whose core / Was trembling steel" (XVII). To perform the invocation the speaker takes an active, masculine role. The invocation summons two goat-images in turn: the Doubt Goat and the god Pan.¹⁷ Again the speaker alternates being passive and active sexual roles. He sacrifices himself to the first, "Then all this body's wealth of ambergris / (Narcissus-scented flesh of man!) / I burnt before him in the sacrifice" (XIX) in order to summon the second, whom he seduces "by that strong wand" (XXII). The speaker realizes his union with the god whose name means *all*: "for I knew / Myself was He, Himself, the first and last" (XXIII).¹⁸ These lines indicate unity of both space (for Pan is all) and time ("first and last"); the title of the poem "Garden of Janus" adumbrates this unity in time, for Janus is the Roman god of beginnings and endings.

Alternating gender identities once more, the speaker then adopts a role that would be exclusively female for a human in the physical realm: he conceives a child. The child who has for a mouth "One minute point of jet; silence" (XXV) can be identified as Horus, the god of the New Aeon, for one of Horus' emblems is his placing a finger to his lips: the "Sign of Silence" used in the rituals of the Golden Dawn. The speaker then realizes his oneness with the child he has created and both the male and female that roles he has assimilated: "Yet I that am the babe, the sire, the dam, / Am also none of these at all" (XXX).

Additionally, the poem's gender ambiguity combined with the apocalyptic imagery

¹⁷ The mythological figure of the "Doubt Goat" seems to be unique to Crowley.

¹⁸ *Pan* intimates a form of pantheism; the word is etymologically related to the Greek *Pan* ("pan-") which means *the all* ("Pan" n3).

that pervades it allows the speaker to also assume the role of the Whore of Babalon (Crowley's spelling), a reinterpretation of the Biblical personage who plays an important role in the mythology of Thelema and who is sometimes shown as the mother of Horus. Through uniting with all of these identities the speaker destroys all identity, becoming one with everything and nothing.

Having achieved such unity, even life and death fall under the speaker's control: "Though Death came, I could kiss him into life; /
Though Life came, I / Could kiss him into death, and yet nor live nor die!" (XXIX).
Antimonies fall into balance:

The blacks were balanced with the whites;
Satan dropped down even as up soared God;
Whores prayed and danced with anchorites.
So in my book the even matched the odd. (XXXI)

Finally, the speaker leaves his prophetic message within a scroll so that others

[...] may'st behold
Within the wheel (that alway seems to spin
All ways) a point of static gold.
Then may'st thou out therewith, and fit it in
That extreme sphere
Whose boundless farness makes it infinitely near (XXXII)

thereby uniting the contraries of inward and outward, nearness and farness for themselves. Crowley offers this experience to those "whose eyes are blind,"

perhaps indicating those, like Yeats's monk Ribh, who rely upon interior visions for understanding rather than physical sight.

Crowley and Yeats used the written word to express their prophetic visions and explain the beliefs, values, and ethics of their spiritual systems. Texts and beliefs alone do not, however, comprise a religion. In order to move beyond the realm of philosophy, each man had to establish religious practices. The next chapter will explore some of the rituals created by Crowley and Yeats and investigate the mythologies revealed by them.

Chapter Four

Ritual and Myth: Performing Religion

Ritual and myth, essential components of religion, comprise crucial elements of the aesthetic and spiritual work of both Crowley and Yeats. As will be demonstrated, scholars of religion often characterize ritual and myth as conservative elements of religion, preserving and transmitting social codes and structures. The rituals created by Yeats and Crowley fulfill the requirements for religious ritual, but, as new rituals for new religions, function more to subvert commonly accepted social structures and values than to conserve them.

Scholars of religion have long understood that ritual and myth are closely related; however, the nature of this relationship and the demarcations of these categories are issues still debated. Many early anthropologists and mythologists such as Jane Ellen Harrison theorized that myths arose as explanations for ritual actions, and that all true myths were directly connected to ritual. Later scholars have tempered this theory, stating that while myth and ritual can be closely related, myths can arise without having ritual origins.

Many definitions have specified that a myth must be “a traditional tale” (Csapo 9). Percy Cohen’s 1969 definition of myth reflects this position:

a myth is a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor

exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations. The narrative quality distinguishes a myth from a general idea or set of ideas, such as a cosmology. The sacred quality and the reference to origins and transformations distinguish myth from legend and other types of folk-tale. The narration of events and reference to objects unknown outside the world of myth differentiates myth from history or pseudo-history. (Cohen 337)

While Cohen's definition provides a strong basis for discussing myth, the definition of myth and its relationship to legend, folktale, and creative fiction is still debated.

Cohen outlines seven theories of myth, some, but not all of which, are compatible with the others, as they may seek to explain different aspects of myth:

1. Myth is used by traditional or primitive cultures as a form of explanation for natural phenomena; main proponents of this theory include Sir James Frazer and E.B. Tylor (Cohen 338-9).
2. Myth-making or mythopoeia is a specialized kind of thought process.

Theorists have used the term "mythopoeia" in several ways. Henri Frankfort and Max Müller continued the Frazerian perspective on myth, characterizing mythopoeic thought as a pre-rational method of explanation that would be replaced by philosophical or scientific thought. Ernst Cassirer, however, saw myths as a form of expression like art, which "can no more be explained or explained away than can the making of poetry or music: myth is one way of using

language for expressive purposes [...] and myth-making is, in some respects, an end in itself” (Cohen 339-340).

3. Myth is an expression of the unconscious, as demonstrated in the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (Cohen 340).
4. Myth is a process for “creating and maintaining social solidarity, cohesion, etc.”

This theory was forwarded by Emile Durkheim, for whom myth “expresses in words what ritual expresses in actions: both have a social function of maintaining and expressing solidarity.” Both myth and ritual, for Durkheim, “[represent] certain values which are embodied in social life” and “[reflect] certain features of social structure” (Cohen 343-4).

5. Myth is a process for “legitimizing social institutions and social practices.”

This theory, proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski, expands upon that of Durkheim.

Cohen summarizes Malinowski’s argument:

The rules which govern everyday life are always, in some respects and to some extent, in doubt: real history, real patterns of migration and settlement, real claims to property and power, always involve inconsistencies and irreconcilable demands: myths, in recounting the events of an invented or partly-invented past, resolve these inconsistencies and affirm one set of claims as against another.

The introduction of imaginary events takes the point of origin out of the realm of memory; and the introduction of unreal events gives the story a quality which transcends the mundane. (344)

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6. Myth is a symbolic “statement about social structure, possibly linked with ritual.”

Like Durkheim, Edmund Leach argues that “myth and ritual are different modes of communicating the same message;” however, Leach contends that myth and ritual contain “symbolic, cryptic assertions about social structure” (Cohen 345).

7. Finally, Cohen lists the structuralist theory of Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss asserted that myth “is a device for 'mediating contradictions' or 'oppositions' as experienced by men.” For Levi-Strauss it was not the narrative or plot of a myth that was significant, but its structure, “in which significant 'contradictions' are posed and 'mediated'” (Cohen 346).

Cohen, writing in 1969, did not outline post-structuralist theories that enlarge the definition and understanding of myth. The above descriptions of myth tend towards conservatism, seeing myth as a legitimating and reifying agent that supports the current social structure and values of the culture from which it arises. Eric Csapo explains in *Theories of Mythology* that narrow definitions of myth function more by limiting what a researcher considers worthy of study as myth or ritual, rather than creating a comprehensive definition based on the varying ways these categories function in different cultures. More recent post-structuralist analyses of mythology link it with ideology. Csapo, who defines myth as “anything which is told, received, and transmitted in the conviction of its social importance,” also quotes B. Lincoln’s definition of myth as “ideology in narrative form” (278). Thus, in post-structural analysis, the line between myth, legend,

folklore, and fiction is blurred, as all of these categories of narrative can express socially relevant ideologies.

Like previous theorists, Csapo draws a connection between the function of myth and ritual, presenting ritual acts as another method of communicating ideology: "Ritual and myth, when related, are not related as practice to theory. They are related as two different ways of communicating a message." Myths communicate through "language and symbols" whereas rituals communicate through "action and symbols" (161).

Like myth, ritual is both symbolic and social; however, action serves as a distinguishing quality of ritual. Robert Bocoock emphasizes action in ritual, which he defines as "the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning" (37). Ritual uses action to perform and reify the ideologies contained in myth and religion. Catherine Bell asserts that "ritual is to the symbols it dramatizes as action is to thought; on a second level, ritual integrates thought and action; and on a third level, a focus on ritual performances integrates our [the spectators'] thought and their [the performers'] actions" (Bell 32). Bocoock also discusses the integration of bodily action and thought, performer and audience, in his analysis of Peter Brook's 1971-72 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of which he concludes,

in that it represented life in the body, it has the central positive function of rituals for modern men and women, of showing ways of relating to the body. This is unlike literary theater which treats

people, via the actors, as people who only talk and feel through words, rather than through their bodies as a whole. (153)

Bocock adds that Brook's incorporation of the audience in the action of the play also ties it to ritual (154). Nonetheless, not every action qualifies as ritual action, even if the actions are symbolic. Ritual, according to Csapo,

must always already involve some degree of abstraction and stereotypification beyond mere emotional reaction; it must always already contain mental imagery and symbolism; arguably it should always already require an intention to sway nature or the divine will; and normally it includes words and ideas as well as actions. (157)

Of these qualities, only the "intention to sway nature or the divine will" in religious ritual might be used to delineate the use of action in ritual from artistic performance such as Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but just as the categories of ritual and myth overlap, so do the categories of ritual and art, particularly in the works of Yeats and Crowley.

Ritual, Myth, and Art

Ritual and art, particularly theater, have many overlapping qualities and functions; however, even theorists such as Bocock who focus on these linkages carefully point out distinctions between ritual and art. Bocock states that his definition of ritual—"the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning"—is intentionally inclusive of aesthetic experiences (39), and he devotes an entire chapter of *Ritual in Industrial Society* to aesthetic ritual. He brings together religion and art as "two

major examples of ritual action which some people will regard as ends in themselves, not just means to ends, such as health, wealth, or success—but what life is for” (51-2). Nevertheless, although Bocock catalogs the ritual actions in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, including two performances of the Holy Communion, he indicates that it is not genuinely sacred ritual, because “it does not involve the use of priests, that is, ‘real’ sacred figures who can ‘really’ consecrate the bread and wine in the Mass” (158). Thus, for Bocock, true religious ritual is distinguished from purely aesthetic ritual since a religious ritual must conform to the requirements of the religious system of which it partakes. It must be performative in a real sense; its actions must not simply *display* an experience of the sacred or numinous, but actually *create* such an experience for its participants, who can never act as entirely passive viewers, as might the audience of a play. Bocock specifies that in religious ritual people should act as participants who are “highly involved in the meaning of the ritual” which is “not an empty form which should be performed with no inner, subjective awareness” (65).

The differences between myth and art are also a point of contention for theorists, but more current scholarship has re-framed some of the distinctions between them. Bocock, who follows the “traditional story” definition of myth, argues

Myth is produced by groups of people living in relatively stable communities, by processes no one seems to have been able to conceptualize, let alone document. In the realm of the arts, the use

of an established myth by recent artists makes analysis and documentation much more possible, but is obviously not to be seen as necessarily yielding any insights about myth creation as such.

The use of myth by an artist is not the same as the emergence of a myth into the lives of people. (159)

For Bocock, religious experience is dependent on religious groups and their cultures; it does not arise initially from within an isolated psyche (26-7).

Nonetheless, an ideological view of myth, such as advocated by Csapo, would not admit Bocock's point; myths—as narratives repeated because of their perceived social importance—are created in modern, heterogeneous, rapidly-changing societies as well as “traditional” ones. In this sense, artists can not only use traditional myths and rituals, but actively create new ones. The context and manner in which myth and ritual are used as elements of religion is more relevant than their origin.

Yeats and Crowley, like many writers, transformed traditional myths to suit their own purposes, sometimes to the point of near-unrecognizability; in the *Celtic Mysteries* and the *Rites of Eleusis* they borrow and adapt myths and mythological symbolism from the earlier cultures of the Celtic and Classical worlds. Counter to the theory that myth arises from ritual, their rituals arise from or are centered on pre-existing myths which they adapted to suit their own purposes.

Yeats's Celtic Mysteries

Yeats began working on his own ritual system, variously called The Castle of Heroes or the Celtic Mysteries in 1895 (Kalogera 9), after five years of studying with the Golden Dawn. While the Golden Dawn provided Yeats an outlet for magical practice that Blavatsky's Theosophical Society had not, its rituals were based on Judeo-Christian, Greek, and Egyptian symbols and mythology. Furthermore, the Order conducted its rituals in its Isis-Urania Temple in London, far from Yeats's romantic spiritual home in the West of Ireland. Just as Innisfree called to his "deep heart's core" while he despaired of city-life in London, so the island of Castle Rock in Lough Key, located just thirty-eight kilometers south of Sligo town in Roscommon, called to his spiritual imagination. The island was (and is) dominated by the presence of a "folly castle" built in the early nineteenth century, "the invention of some romantic man" (*Autobiographies* 204), on the site of the ruins of a castle originally erected centuries earlier by the MacDermots (Hennessy 369-70). Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies*,

I planned a mystical Order which should buy or hire the castle, and keep it as a place where its members could retire for a while for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace; and for ten years to come my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create ritual for that Order. (204)

This Order seems a natural extension of Yeats's efforts towards the Celtic Revival; if Ireland were to proclaim its right to independence through its Celtic heritage, language, literature, folklore, and sport, why should it not also revive in some fashion its native spirituality? In *Autobiographies*, Yeats wrote "have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?" (167). As Virginia Moore explains,

as Yeats conceived it, the agent for coherence was emotional intensity; and certainly countries like men could be emotionally intense only about the things they believed in and loved. [...]

Hence his search for Irish gods, Irish heroes, Irish themes... (30).

Lucy Kalogera asserts that Yeats sought to create a "uniquely Irish body of occult knowledge and ritual" (27). Yeats felt that such rituals and myths would be more suited for the Irish than those of either the Catholic Church or the Golden Dawn. He sought to create an Irish religion that would appeal to the Irish through symbol, art, and connection with the land rather than through dogma:

For years to come it was in my thought, as in much of my writing, to see also to bring again in imaginative life the old sacred places—Slievenamon, Knocknarea—all that old reference that hung above all—about conspicuous hills. But I wish by my writings and those of the school I have founded to have a secret symbolical relation to these mysteries, for in that way, I thought there will be of greater richness of greater claim upon the love of the soul, doctrine without

exhortation and rhetoric. Should not religion hide within the work of art as god is within his world [...]? (*Memoirs* 124)

Yeats's Celtic Mysteries, however, were not to be a revival of actual Celtic or Druidic religion, but a new creation as syncretic in its nature as the Golden Dawn.

Moore lists the many sources that Yeats hoped to incorporate into his Order:

the Chaldean Oracles, Book of the Dead, Corpus Hermeticum, early Christian fathers, Plato, Plotinus, the Zohar, Reuchlin, Pico della Mirandola, Joaquim of Floris, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Fludd, Flamel, Eugenius Phololetes, Henry Moore, Boehme, Swedenborg, and Blake... (30)

Although he abandoned the unfinished project and never integrated all of the sources above into the materials produced for the Order, Yeats intended his Celtic Mysteries to be a new creation synthesizing ideas from across the Western occult tradition.

Yeats never completed his Celtic Mysteries, and the extant rituals and other materials have never been published in their entirety outside the 1977 doctoral dissertation of Lucy Shepherd Kalogera. Kalogera compiled and edited the collection of handwritten and typed manuscripts that resulted from Yeats's collaborations with Maud Gonne, MacGregor Mathers, Florence Farr, Annie Horniman, and other members of the Golden Dawn, as well as his friend AE (George Russell).

Yeats's process for creating these rituals prefigures the metaphysical approach that he and his wife would use to produce *A Vision*:

I did not wish to compose rites as if for the theater. They must in their main outline be the work of invisible hands.

My own and seership was, I thought, inadequate; it was to be Maud Gonne's work and mine. [...] I knew that the incomprehensible life could select from our memories and, I believed, from the memory of the race itself; could realize of ourselves, beyond personal predilection, all it required, of symbol and of myth. I believed we were about to attain a revelation. (*Memoirs*, 124-5)

Unlike his later work with George, his process with Maud and others did not center on automatic writing, but on methods of scrying on symbols that he and his colleagues had learned in the Golden Dawn. Yeats describes their results in his *Memoirs*:

At every moment of leisure we obtained in vision long lists of symbols. Various trees corresponded to cardinal points, and the old gods and heroes took their places gradually in a symbolic fabric that had for its centre the four talismans of the Tuatha de Danann, the sword, this stone, the spear and the cauldron, which relate themselves in my mind with the suits of the Tarot. George Pollexfen, though already an old man, shared my plans, and his slow and difficult clairvoyance added certain symbols. (125)

The rituals include a series of initiations (most with multiple versions) organized similarly to elemental grade rituals of the Golden Dawn. The first, which corresponds to the Golden Dawn's Neophyte ritual, has three versions in

varying stages of apparent completion. As in the Neophyte ritual, the candidate for initiation is led into the ceremony blindfolded. The first, most simple, version of this ritual involves only two other participants, the Teacher—alternately called “Master” in the handwritten manuscript (Kalogera 160)—and the Guide. This version contains little to no overt Irish myth or symbolism. The second, far more complex, version involves eight officers and the candidate, who is now called the Wayfarer. The officers seem to correlate with the similar officers in the corresponding Golden Dawn ritual, while replacing the Greek titles used by the Golden Dawn with names that honor Irish peasant or craftsman culture (Herdsman, Soldier, Mason, Weaver) or that define the participants’ roles (Light-bearer, Incense-burner, Water-bearer). The similarities in the officers in the two orders appear in their roles in the rituals, and the tools or other implements they use.

Officers		Tool, Weapon, or Associated Prop		Role in Ritual	
Celtic Mysteries	Golden Dawn	Celtic Mysteries	Golden Dawn	Celtic Mysteries	Golden Dawn
Wayfarer	Candidate	hood	hoodwink	new initiate	new initiate
Herdsmen	Hierophant	Crook	Sceptre	leader	leader
Soldier	Hierus	Spear	Sword	Speaking parts, but no distinct roles beyond wielding their elemental powers.	keeps the “Gateway of the West” (Regardie 119)
Mason	no direct parallel	Sod	n/a		n/a
Weaver		Cauldron	n/a		n/a
Light-bearer	Kerux	Lamp	Lamp and Caduceus wand	Speaks words to officially open ritual: “let the light shine” (Kalogera 202)	Speaks words to officially open ritual: “Hekas! Hekas! Este Bebeloi!”†; guards inner side of portal; “lead[s] all mystic circumambulations” (Regardie 118- 119)
Incense-bearer	Dadouchos	incense	thurible	“purify with fire” (Kalogera 203)	“consecrate with fire” (Regardie 120)
Water-bearer	Stolistes	water	cup	“purify with water” (Kalogera 203)	“purify with water” (Regardie 120)
Messenger	Sentinel and Hegemon	n/a	Sentinel: Sword Hegemon: Sceptre	leads and speaks for new initiate; not an official officer	Sentinel: guards outer side of portal; not an official officer Hegemon: leads and speaks for new initiate

† “Be far away, profane ones.”

Unlike the first version of the ritual, the second version revolves around Irish myth and legend. It enacts the successive waves of legendary peoples who fought for and conquered Ireland: an unnamed race for whom “Casar was their Queen,” the Formor, the children of Nemedh, the Children of Parhelon, the Tuatha de Danaan, the Firbolg, and the Children of Mil. The Herdsman compares the Wayfarer to the children of Lir, whom in Irish myth were transformed into swans by their evil stepmother. Like the children of Lir, the Wayfarer is said to be “wandering among the waters and the form of his soul had been broken and he has been put into a strange shape” (205). The third version of this ritual retains these mythological elements, but adds the Hebrew angels and colors that correspond with the seven ancient planets, symbols commonly used in Golden Dawn rituals. It also mentions the “Hound of the West,” which may refer to the Irish hero Cuchulain, a reoccurring figure in Yeats’s work (216).

The subsequent rituals center around one of the four classical elements (earth, air, water, fire), just as do the four elemental grade rituals of the Outer Order of the Golden Dawn; however, instead of linking the rituals explicitly with their elemental correspondences and the associated Sephiroth on the Hebrew Tree of Life, Yeats ties each to one of the legendary four Jewels of the Tuatha de Danaan: the Cauldron (water), the Stone (earth), the Sword (air), and the Spear (fire). The elemental initiations are also performed in a different order than the Golden Dawn rituals, which are based on Qabalistic correspondences; the Celtic Mysteries instead follow the order of the cardinal directions from west to south as they correspond to the element of each ritual.

Celtic Mysteries				Golden Dawn		
Order	Jewel of the Tuatha de Danaan	Element	Cardinal Direction	Order	Qabalistic Sephirah	Element
1	Cauldron	Water	West	1	Malkuth	Earth
2	Stone	Earth	North	2	Yesod	Air
3	Sword	Air	East	3	Hod	Water
4	Spear	Fire	South	4	Netzach	Fire

Each of these rituals of the Celtic Mysteries also has two versions, none of them as complete as the rituals written for bringing the Wayfarer into the Mysteries. As can be seen by Yeats's deviation from the order of the Golden Dawn rituals, these rituals seem to borrow fewer elements from the Golden Dawn than the previous ones: the officer roles no longer correspond with the Golden Dawn officers, and while the seven ancient planets are used in several of the rituals, they are no longer linked with the Hebrew angels. It appears that the longer Yeats and his collaborators worked on creating the Celtic Mysteries, the more freed from the Golden Dawn model they became.

Yeats adopts the legend of the waves of conquerers of Ireland, (as is related in the medieval tale *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book Of The Taking Of Ireland*) and the tale of the Children of Lir and recasts these myths to reflect the ideology of the Celtic Revival. In the last two versions of the initial ritual of the Celtic Mysteries, the officers progressively light and extinguish lamps representing the conquering races of Ireland; they finally vow to protect the flame

of the last of the seven lamps. At the time of the rituals' creation, Irish culture had been under threat of destruction by the British for centuries, and Yeats conceived his order as part of the broader movement toward Irish political and cultural independence.

The second version of the ritual also incorporates the traditional Irish symbol of the apple bough: long associated with immortality and used as an emblem the bards of Ireland. Eleanor Hull elaborates:

The branch performs the double function of sustaining life by providing nourishment and of producing sounds of entrancing harmony. There may be a connection, conscious or unconscious, between this latter power possessed by the branch and the symbolic branch carried by the bards as a sign of their profession.

(439)

The "sounds of enticing harmony" refer to the music that, according to Hull, accompanies magical apple boughs in many legends. In Yeats's ritual the Water-bearer and Incense bearer carry bare and blossoming apple boughs and follow the Lamp-bearer, who holds "a lamp of White Light" (apparently distinguishing it from all the previous lamps). The Water-bearer places the bare bough on the black altar next to the lamp representing the Children of Mil (the race of Ireland preceding the current one) and extinguishes the lamp. The Light-bearer and the Incense-bearer place the "lamp of White Light" and the blossoming bough upon the white altar. The Herdsman calls these objects "images of the Perfect Light and the Perfect Beauty" (Kalogera 213). This last lamp seems to be significant on

two levels: first, as representative of the current race of people in Ireland (or perhaps all the successive races of Ireland), and second, as representative of spiritual attainment. The placement of the blossoming bough beside it indicates the immortality of the Irish race and the power of beauty and the arts to ensure the spiritual attainment of both the individual initiate and Irish culture as a whole.

Yeats's inclusion of the Children of Lir may also reflect this dual significance, as the children can be seen to represent both the Wayfarer and all of Ireland. The use of this myth to communicate political ideology continues into contemporary times, as this story was memorialized in 1971 as a statue in Dublin's Garden of Remembrance, which honors soldiers who died for the Irish cause. According to the tale, the children of Lir became victims of a jealous and treacherous stepmother-aunt who resented her husband's devotion to the children of her dead sister; she cursed the children to live as swans for nine hundred years, retaining nothing of their humanity but their memories, their voices, and their songs. While the story is ancient, the children's plight easily parallels the conditions of the predominantly Catholic people of modern Ireland, whom British legislation had long denied equal political, educational, economic, and religious rights. Like the apple boughs of the bards, the swan-children's retention of their voices and songs presents an excellent trope for the Irish literary revival. Yeats's officer titles also reflect this ideology; the officers are not labeled "priests" or provided grandiose titles. Yeats, descendant of a reputable family of landed Anglo-Irish, seems to be honoring the heritage of the working class and peasants of Ireland, the people most oppressed by British rule.

Yeats hoped that his rituals would provide a personally meaningful spiritual experience for their participants, all of whom would be engaged in the entire process. In his instructions for the rituals, Yeats specifies, "There may be as many members [of the order] appointed to each office as is convenient, but only one may be present at the ceremony" indicating that, unlike a theatrical performance, there would be no spectators present for the rituals, but only active participants (qtd. in Kalogera 214).

The political dimensions of the mythological symbolism in Yeats's rituals secure their intended cultural importance. Their ideology, however, is less conservative than structuralist and earlier theories of myth and ritual would require. While the Celtic Mysteries seek to create a sense of Irish unity, fulfilling Durkheim's requirement of "maintaining and expressing solidarity," the social structure the rituals express is desired rather than actual. Because the ideology of the rituals favors Irish independence, a cause not universally supported in Ireland nor fully achieved until 1948, the rituals are more liberal than Malinowski's and Leach's definitions would specify.

Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis*

Like Yeats, Crowley created rituals derived from various mythological and occult sources. Crowley outlines his early ritual practices in some detail in his *Confessions*, but does not mention his actually composing a ritual until 1900, shortly after the schism in the Golden Dawn. He was traveling in Mexico at the time and was introduced to an initiate of Scottish Rite Freemasonry, Don Jesus Medina. Crowley claims to have been rapidly initiated up through the final thirty-

third degree prior to departing Mexico. Crowley then states that since MacGregor Mathers had given him the authority to perform initiations, he decided to found his own magical order, "The Lamp of the Invisible Light" (*Confessions* 203). He explicates its basic principles:

The general idea was to have an ever-burning lamp in a temple furnished with talismans appropriate to the elemental, planetary and zodiacal forces of nature. Daily invocations were to be performed with the object of making the light itself a consecrated centre or focus of spiritual energy. This light would then radiate and automatically enlighten such minds as were ready to receive it.

(*Confessions* 203)

He describes an initiation ritual, the first incidence of ritual-writing he mentions in *Confessions*: "I devised a Ritual of Self-Initiation the essential feature of which is the working up of spiritual enthusiasm by means of a magical dance. This dance contained the secret gestures of my grade, combined with the corresponding words" (203). The ritual contains an original invocation to Isis, but, as with Yeats's early efforts in creating ritual, its primary structure, terminology, and symbolism are borrowed from a number of Golden Dawn rituals: the Adeptus Minor Ritual, the Bornless Ritual for the Invocation of the Higher Genius, the Ritual for Invisibility, and the Ritual for Self-Transformation. In *Confessions*, Crowley's next mention of creating a ritual occurs ten years later, although he almost certainly wrote other rites in the intervening years. In 1909 Crowley composed an invocation to the spirit Bartzabel: "I wrote, moreover, a ritual on

entirely new principles. I retained the Cabbalistic names and formulae, but wrote most of the invocation in poetry. The idea was to work up the magical enthusiasm through the exhilaration induced by music" (*Confessions* 630). The successful use of music in this ritual led Crowley to compose a series of ritual plays titled the *Rites of Eleusis*, which, as will be discussed, featured music and dance extensively. Beginning after 1922, he adapted and created rituals for the magical order he would transform into his own, the Ordo Templi Orientis, or O.T.O., and its more elite inner order, the A.A. (Argentum Astrum, or Silver Star). The symbols and myths in Crowley's rituals are primarily drawn from Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew/Qabalistic traditions, eliminating most of the Christian symbolism used by the Inner Order rituals of the Golden Dawn.

Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* is a series of seven ritual plays that correspond with the seven classical planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. Performed over the course of seven weeks in the fall of 1910, the rituals contain a combination of poetry, drama, music, dance, and shorter rituals borrowed from the Golden Dawn which Crowley intended "to illustrate the magical methods followed by a mystical society which seeks for illumination by ecstasy" (Tupman 2). Crowley had written rituals previously for private use, but he created the *Rites* specifically for public performance. Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* share little more with their namesake in ancient Greece than the goal of creating an ecstatic experience. The original Eleusinian Mysteries centered on the myth of the Corn goddess, Demeter, and her abducted daughter, Persephone, neither of whom are featured in Crowley's plays. The ancient rites,

unlike Crowley's, were restricted to people who had performed a ceremony of initiation; however, as Tupman notes, "Crowley's goal was a recreation of the spiritual essence of the original performances and a rebirth of the recognition of the role of pagan religious practice in contemporary life" (17). Crowley devised his Rites expressly as public performances with the goal of inducing trance states and mystical experiences in the audience.

Each of the seven rites focuses on the energies and correspondences of one of the seven ancient planets. Crowley ordered the performances according to the Qabalistic correspondences of the planets so that the earlier rites call upon energies from near the top of the Tree of Life and travel down the Tree in order. Therefore, the first ritual, Saturn, corresponds with the Sephirah Binah, the third of the Sephiroth on the Tree of Life, and the first that corresponds with a particular planet. The next ritual, Jupiter, corresponds with Chesed, the fourth Sephirah on the Tree, and so on. Crowley apparently wanted the Rites to progressively invoke energies from the highest spiritual planes toward the material realm, a procedure that differs from the grade rituals of the Golden Dawn, which seek to elevate the candidate or initiate progressively up the Tree.

In *Rites of Eleusis* Crowley uses many figures from Classical mythology, but the *Rites* enact narratives of his own creation. The basic structure of the *Rites* follows the arrangement of the seven ancient planets as they are associated with the Sephirah on the Tree of Life. As previously mentioned, the order of the Rites follows the path of energy that travels down the Tree, from Binah to Yesod. Crowley established the narrative in each Rite on sets of

correspondences, such as those he lists in the numerous tables of his book 777. For example, the *Rite of Jupiter* corresponds to the Sephirah Chesed, which corresponds to the number four, represented by the ringing of bells or gongs in sets of four; and Jupiter corresponds to the Tarot card Fortune, and so on.

For his narratives, Crowley creates a syncretic mix of myths from the Greek, Roman and Egyptian pantheons. While employing many elements from traditional myths, Crowley adapts the characters and tales to suit his own purposes. Furthermore, he presents the gods' identities as amorphous, often changing one god into another, or presenting different aspects of the same deity at different points in the series of Rites. This phenomena can also be attributed to Crowley's use of correspondences, which, paradoxically, he has recommended as completely arbitrary, yet vitally important for the student of magick:

All is arbitrary; [...] The same difficulty [of the arbitrary connections between symbols such as letters] in another form permeates the question of gods. Priests, to propitiate their local fetish, would flatter him with the title of creator; philosophers, with a wider outlook, would draw identities between many gods in order to obtain a unity. Time and the gregarious nature of man have raised gods as ideas grew more universal; sectarianism has drawn false distinctions between identical gods for polemical purposes.

Thus, where shall we put Isis, favouring nymph of corn as she was? As the type of motherhood? As the moon? As the great goddess Earth? As Nature? As the Cosmic Egg from which all

Nature sprang? For as time and place have changed, so she is all of these! (777, iii)

Therefore, the Isis of the *Rites* is also Artemis, Saturn at one point represented by Vulcan, and Jupiter represented by his son, Dionysus. Furthermore, each rite presents characters that personify the astrological signs associated with each planet and god. Therefore, the attendants of the god embody the energies of the astrological signs ruled by that god's planet: the Gemini twins and Virgo serve the god Mercury, and so forth.

Just as the myths and gods form an eclectic mix, Crowley's text also derives from a variety of source materials. Far from being entirely original compositions, the *Rites* are more a postmodern amalgamation of existing poetry and music combined with works Crowley had previously written. A relatively small percentage of the spoken lines seem to have been created specifically for the *Rites*. Crowley most frequently quotes Swinburne, but other sources include poets such as Shelley and Thomas Hardy.

Crowley specifies that the *Rites* function as "seven acts of one play;" therefore, it is necessary to perform them in order. The *Rites* seem to represent progressive eras or aeons, albeit not the same Aeons described in *Liber AL*. Although Crowley had received *Liber AL* several years earlier, it would be several more years before he would claim to accept the importance of their revelations. With one exception (the Rite of Mercury), each era replaces the prior one through violent revolution, and the powers of each era balance the ones that precede and

follow it. As with Yeats's gyres, each Rite seems to contain the seed of the next, and the narratives depict alternating states of upheaval and equilibrium.

The Rite of Saturn begins the cycle by presenting male and female representatives of Saturn: Magister Templi ("Master of the Temple") and Mater Coeli ("Mother of Heaven"). Crowley explains the dual nature of Saturn in his discussion of the Tarot card, The Universe: "Saturn, therefore, is masculine; he is the *old* god, the god of fertility the sun in the south; but equally the Great Sea, the great Mother" (*Thoth*, 118). The Great Sea is an appellation of the Sephirah Binah, with which Saturn corresponds. Crowley describes the atmosphere of the rite as one of impenetrable gloom:

The omens are disquieting, but no one knows their import. Every question is answered in terms which imply ineluctable doom, every hope instantly crushed to the earth by despair against which no appeal can possibly succeed. All aspiration, all ambition ends equally in death. (*Confessions*, 637)

The Magister Templi declares "There is no god," and his statement is supported when he and Mater Coeli proceed together behind the veil to discover an empty shrine. At first, the Magister Templi reluctantly declares the absence of God ("Alas"), but after finding the empty altar, stands upon it and, quoting Thomas Hardy, celebrates atheism:

Good tidings of great joy for you, for all:
There is no God; no fiend with names divine
Made us and tortures us; if we must pine,

It is to satiate no Being's gall.

It seems that Crowley identifies this non-existent god with the authoritarian god of judgment and sin that he first rebelled against in his youth. Yet, this declaration of atheism destroys its herald, for the Magister Templi is then discovered dead in the arms of the weeping Mater Coeli. Crowley vividly describes the end of the rite:

Darkness falls, complete and sudden; a wild dance to the tomtom ends in the crash of the dancer's body at the foot of the altar. Silence. A shot. The ghastly flickering of incandescent sodium vapour then lights up the veil. The officers are seen with all the colour of their robes, and faces transformed to livid greens. The veil is drawn aside once more and there lies the Master himself, self-slain upon the altar, with the principal woman officer bending over him as Isis lamenting for Osiris. The light goes out once more and in the darkness the final dirge of utter helplessness wails on the violin. Silence again succeeds. (*Confessions*, 637-8)

While the tyrant-god described in the *Rite of Saturn* is never again mentioned in the Rites, the next ritual reveals the god that will ultimately overthrow Saturn: Jupiter.

As with each play in the cycle, the *Rite of Jupiter* commences by linking its narrative to the previous rite: the character Hermanubis announces, "Know that Saturn hath been deceived, having swallowed a black stone, thinking it to be his son, the child Jupiter. But Jupiter is enthroned, and shall overthrow his father."

The traditional mythological narratives such as this are never enacted in the Rites; Crowley's characters seem to mention them to remind the audience of these traditional associations, but Crowley instead focuses on his re-casting of mythological figures.

Thus, the Jupiter of this rite is not the Roman god of thunder, but an unknowable abstraction represented by a character titled "Centrum in Centri Trigono" (C.I.C.T.), or the "Point in the Center of the Triangle." Although Jupiter usually corresponds with the Sephirah Chesed, Crowley also links Jupiter with the uppermost Sephirah, Kether, which is symbolized by a point in the center of a circle (777, 10). Astrologically, Jupiter denotes expansion, and Kether is the source from which all other Sephiroth emanate. Jupiter as Kether represents expansion and emanation, forces which balance the restrictive and solidifying powers of Saturn and Binah. Therefore, the violent overthrow of Saturn by his son Jupiter will produce a new equilibrium.

Crowley bases the imagery of this Rite on his design of the tarot card "Fortune," of which Jupiter is the ruling planet. The card represents "the Universe in its aspect as a continual change of state" (*Thoth*, "Fortune"). The card's illustration depicts an eight-spoked wheel around which three figures rotate; Crowley presents these figures as characters in the ritual: Hermanubis, Typhon, and the Sphinx. Hermanubis embodies thought and activity, Typhon, feeling and lethargy, the Sphinx, ecstasy. The narrative centers on the characters' desire to reach the center of the wheel, Jupiter or Kether. Kether is the source that the

characters in this Rite seek, but which their fundamental natures prevent them from reaching, as C.I.C.T declaims:

Feeling, and thought, and ecstasy
Are but the cerements of Me.
Ye are but satellites of the One.
But should your revolution stop
Ye would inevitably drop
Headlong within the central Soul,
And all the parts become the Whole. (*Jupiter Part II*)

The characters cannot directly approach the source without abandoning their natures and being wholly absorbed, so instead they follow the wisdom of the Sphinx, who advises they “invoke the Father [Jupiter] to manifest in the Son” (*Jupiter, Part III*).

This choice seems to echo Jesus’ statement, “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (*Holy Bible, KJV, John 14:6*), but Crowley draws his manifestation of the father-god from Classical myth: Dionysus. According to one version of the myth, Dionysus was the son of Jupiter (Zeus) by the underworld goddess Persephone, and immediately after his birth, he climbed upon his father’s throne and “brandish[ed] the lightning” (Frazer XLIII). Thus, the highest god is represented on earth by a son conceived in the underworld, again achieving a balance. Dionysus also characterizes ecstasy, the quality of the Sphinx, and the method for humanity to commune with the divine.

The Rite of Mars begins with Mars preparing to war upon Saturn on Jupiter's behalf, and it resumes the debate on the existence of God. Brother Capricornus from the Rite of Saturn proclaims "There is no God," to which Mars replies "There is no God—but God!" (*Mars*, Part I). Mars then recites from Demogorgon's speech in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which in its original context lauds the overthrow of Zeus:

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory!

In Crowley's re-contextualization of these lines, Mars overthrows the restrictive Saturn in favor of Jupiter.

Following the structure of the Rites, this upheaval must be followed by equilibrium, which Crowley creates by drawing upon the myth of Mars' love for Venus. As they are united in each other's arms, Brother Capricornus, first seen in the *Rite of Saturn* and here representing Venus' spouse Vulcan, discovers their adultery and is chased away. Thus Saturn is defeated both through battle, and, in the form of Vulcan, through love.

Mars declares victory not for himself or for Venus, but for the "true God hidden;" however, he proceeds to honor and invoke not Jupiter, but Sol (the sun).

Furthermore, his long declamation seems to describe the qualities of many gods: Ra, Osiris, Horus, and Hermes (the only deity actually named in the speech). As Mars speaks, he gradually approaches the altar upon which stands the character Sol in Aries. Astrologically, Mars is the ruling planet of Aries, so this character seems to embody both Mars and the Sun. Mars finally kneels before Sol in Aries, then rises facing the altar, declaiming: "I have risen! I have risen! as a mighty hawk of gold!" and "[...] the God and I are One." Mars, his power balanced by Venus, achieves unity with God.

Sol in Aries then rises and, quoting Shelley's *Hellas*, calls for the beginning of a new age:

O cease! must hate and death return?

Cease! must men kill and die?

Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn

Of bitter prophecy.

The world is weary of the past.

Oh, might it die or rest at last!

Now that the war of Mars has been balanced by the love of Venus, Sol in Aries invokes a new age of peace, and then declares, "The victory is indeed won." Mars ends the rite by declaring "Let us depart in peace," confirming his transformation.

Sol, having been invoked in the previous rite, sits enthroned within the shrine in the next rite. Crowley uses costuming to link Sol to Dionysus, describing both as wearing a leopard skin and a white and gold nemyss (ceremonial

Egyptian headdress). Sol, the sun, corresponds with the Sephirah of Tiphareth, the seat of the dying or sacrificed god; gods typifying this archetype include Dionysus, Osiris, Mithras, and Christ.

The characters Leo and Aries (astrological signs ruled by the sun) recite adorations to Sol, but are soon approached by Scorpio-Apophis; Apophis is another name for the Egyptian god Apep, the adversary of the sun god Ra who was later identified with Set, the killer of Osiris. Scorpio-Apophis, characterized as female in Crowley's rite, is later joined by Satan-Typhon; Typhon was a Greek monster personifying the "destructive forces of nature" and also identified with Set (777, 52). Leo initially bars these characters from approaching the throne of Sol, but seemingly relents when Sol summons them forward with a series of ten knocks (or chimes; the stage directions are unclear). Perhaps this action indicates that Sol is aware or even accepting of his fate: Typhon casts down the throne of Sol, revealing within the shrine a black veil with "a great red cross, whereon SOL has been crucified."

This violent upheaval is balanced by Scorpio-Apophis who, shifting identities in the manner characteristic of the Rites, declares herself goddess of nature: "I am the Mother of the Gods and the Sister of Time and the Daughter of Space. I am Nature that holdeth sway when the effort of man is exhausted [...]." Therefore, the rule of the sun god is supplanted and balanced by a Nature goddess, again achieving a brief equilibrium.

The Rite of Venus corresponds with the Sephirah Netzach, the seat of emotion and the planetary influence of Venus. Therefore, the goddess of nature

from the *Rite of Sol* returns here as Venus. Again, Crowley depicts the deity as a syncretic mix of gods; the character Brother Libra (an astrological sign ruled by Venus) is commanded to declare “the Secret of Venus” and recites the poem *Hertha* by Swinburne. Through the poem, Hertha, the Roman goddess of the hearth, describes herself as an all-powerful, ever-present mother goddess; Venus has grown to encompass the archetype of Earth Mother as well as the goddess of Love.

The character Libra, quoting from *Atalanta* by Swinburne, chides Venus for the suffering she causes “for bitter was thy birth, / Aphrodite, mother of strife;” “For against all men from of old / Thou hast set thine had as a curse, / and cast out gods from their places.” Spurning the advances of Venus, Libra declares, “Holier than pleasure is pain; nobler is abstinence than indulgence; from sloth and faith we turn to toil and science; from tame victories of the body to the wild victories of the mind.” At this declaration, all of her attendants turn on her; Taurus, the most trusted of her companions, transforms into Mercury and “tramples her beneath his feet.” The other characters in turn proclaim, “The mind is nobler than the body;” “Friendship is holier than love;” “Nature is overcome by wit.” Libra, the sign of balance, has incited upheaval in order to create a new equilibrium: the mind to balance the heart.

Mercury corresponds with the Sephirah Hod, the sphere of mind, and as messenger of the gods Mercury (called Hermes by the Greeks) symbolizes the transmission of divine knowledge. In *The Rite of Mercury*, Crowley again expands the god's identity to encompass other names and powers: Mercury is

addressed as the Egyptian deities Thoth, god of knowledge and wisdom; Ra, god of the Sun; Khephra, the scarab bearing the sun; and the Norse god Odin, chief god of that pantheon. Perhaps most significantly, he is Hermes Trismegistus, the Thrice-Great Hermes, renowned as the author of ancient texts of magical (“Hermetic”) wisdom.

The probationers in the rite honor him for his wisdom, calling out, “Thou who hast brought unto us the divine seeds of self-knowledge [...] we call on Thee to lead us out of our Ignorance!” They hail him as, “Thou that knowest the Supreme Mysteries!” and “O Thrice Holy!” When they call him “All Good,” however, they are corrected by the character Virgo who declares that he is “Not Good alone, Brethren! But all complete in the perfect Equilibrium,” and Frater Gemini who agrees, “Ay, The Balance must be kept even.” Mercury repeats the theme of balance: “between the Light and Darkness did he stand,” and “the winged heels are fiery with enormous speed, / One spurning heaven; the other trampling hell.” The presence of Frater and Soror Gemini, the twins, robed in black and white, respectively, also indicates the theme of balance.

In his wisdom Mercury knows that for equilibrium to be reached, all things must end, even his own reign. Like Jesus, he announces to his followers, “Yet, ye will betray me!” and declares:

We know too well
How no one thing abides awhile at all,
How all things fall,
Fall from their seat, the lamentable place,

Before their face,

Weary and pass and are no more [...]

Because Mercury realizes that his time must end, there is no need for violent revolution; he abdicates his throne to Soror Gemini (the female twin of Frater Gemini), transferring power from a masculine symbol of balance to a feminine one.

Luna is the planetary attribution of the Sephirah Yesod, the sphere associated with the generative aspects of sex, and in *The Rite of Luna* Crowley characterizes Luna as the virgin goddess Artemis, “The Lady of the Moon.” The rite also attributes to her the quality of silence (“Silence is the secret of our Lady Artemis”), a trait which balances the speech of Mercury, and which also seems to be a sign of her virginity. While the character Taurus lists Artemis’ nine servants and her four “Officers,” he is interrupted by a surprising addition: the god Pan. Pan, commanded to honor the goddess, recites from Swinburne’s *Atalanta*, calling to her as he celebrates the coming of spring. The poem, while honoring the “Maiden most perfect, lady of light,” also hints at Pan’s intentions:

[...]

The laughing leaves of the trees divide,

And screen from seeing and leave in sight

The god pursuing, the maiden hid.

The ivy falls with Bacchanal’s hair

Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;

The wild vine slipping down leaves bare

Her bright breast shortening into sighs;

[...]

The god, however, realizing the challenge in store for him after his poem does not cause her to stir, asks “Hath no man lifted her veil?” The character Cancer replies in the negative, indicating her virginity.

Pan proceeds to invoke the goddess, first reciting a poem by Elaine Carr that calls for a sacrifice worthy of the goddess, requesting “a vehicle of thy vice.” Again the goddess does not stir from sleep. In his next invocation, he points out the disharmony caused by her silence, “Silence and speech are at odds; / Heaven and Hell are at stake,” and calls her to “Reveal us the riddle, reveal! / Bring us the word of the Lord.” In the course of his invocations, Pan asks her to relinquish both her virginity and her silence, linking the two; Artemis’ virginity is the sign of sacred knowledge that Pan is calling her to reveal. The character Taurus replies to Pan, “In vain thou askest speech from our Lady of Silence;” Taurus and Cancer protect her virginity at the cost of disrupting the cosmic balance.

Pan orders his satyr to scourge Taurus and Cancer because they “profane the sanctuary of our Lady: for they know not the secret of the shrine. Once their banishment is accomplished, he invokes again:

[...]

O virgin in armour

Thine arrows unsling,

In the brilliant resilient
First rays of the spring!
No Godhead could charm her,
But manhood awoke ---
O fiery Valkyrie,
I invoke, I invoke!

At these words he “tears down the veil” that has concealed her shrine (symbolic of sex), and she ends her silence: “Luna plays [violin] accordingly.”

Through enacting alternating stages of upheaval and equilibrium, Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* trace the lightning path of energy that travels down the Tree of Life, culminating in a balanced creative union of male and female forces. *The Rites of Eleusis*, however, were not intended to merely enact these mythological and symbolic events; Crowley staged the *Rites* as public performances, but not as traditional theater with expectations of a passive audience. Audiences were requested to wear clothing of appropriate colors to each performance (again, based on magical correspondences), to observe silence, not only as a matter of theater etiquette but as a manner of “obtaining effects,” and to behave as would be appropriate for “the most solemn religious ceremonies” (Crowley, qtd. in J.F. Brown 5). J.F. Brown lists some of the many elements that Crowley combined to produce an altered state of consciousness in the audience members: “rhythmic music, repetitive prayers, and hypnotic poetry [...] dim light, veiled action, and flickering flames [...] incense and perfumes” (26). Near the beginning of each rite, audience members were presented a “Cup of

Libation” containing “a mixture of fruit juices, alcohol, an infusion of mescal buttons, and either morphine or heroin” (J.F. Brown 8).

Crowley’s audiences may have come expecting avant-garde theater, but Crowley wanted to give them an experience more akin to a religious service. As with many religious rites, portions of the service were hidden from the assembly; the action taking place in a number of the rites is not in full view of the audience. Crowley staged the rites with multiple veils, frequently separating the performers from the audience and delineating sacred spaces or levels of reality that the uninitiated cannot access.

The results of Crowley’s rituals did not generally live up to his intent. He described the performances of some of his amateur actors as “histrionic incompetence,” noting how the public audience and location diminished the rituals’ effect: “But what was sublimely effective when performed in private lost most of its power to impress when transferred to unsuitable surroundings”; however, he did declare the performances of Saturn and Jupiter to be “admirable” (*Confessions*, 636-7).

Despite uneven results, Crowley intended throughout to use the art form of theater to create states of religious ecstasy for his performers and his audience. His initial inspiration for the rites arose from a night of impromptu poetry reading and musical performance with his lover and magical student Leila Waddell:

I read a piece of poetry from one of the great classics, and she replied with a piece of music suggested by my reading. I retorted

with another poem; and the evening developed into a regular controversy. The others were intensely interested in this strange conflict, and in the silence of the room spiritual enthusiasm took hold of us; so acutely that we were all intensely uplifted, to the point in some cases of actual ecstasy, an intoxication of the same kind as that experienced by an assistant of the celebration of the Mass or the performance of *Parsifal*, but stronger because of its naturalness and primitiveness. (qtd. in J.F. Brown 6)

The Rites of Eleusis grew from this combination of music and poetry.

Significantly, Crowley compares the experience to both Wagner's *Parsifal*, and a celebration of Mass, particularly to the experience of an assistant to the Mass.

Crowley phenomenologically links religious ritual with artistic performance. He also links magick to art, stating "All art is magick" (*MTP*, 82). For Crowley, magick was intrinsically tied to religion; his magick rituals focused on invoking gods and other non-corporeal entities in order to expand his own consciousness and spirit. With the creation of the *Rites of Eleusis*, he thoroughly incorporates art into this process, creating religious ritual and art simultaneously.

Unlike a performance of *Parsifal*, which Bock attests cannot be an actual Mass because it is performed by an actor instead of a priest, the primary performers of the *Rites of Eleusis* were trained in performing effective magical ritual. Crowley (reciting most of the poetry), Waddell (playing violin), and Victor Neuburg (dancing), were all trained in occult techniques and reputedly experienced in entering trance states to varying degrees. While the supporting

actors may not have competently executed their roles, the performances of the three primaries were reported to be impressive. Both Waddell and Neuburg gave performances during the rites that were said to far outshine their usual capabilities. Neuburg, especially, seemed to overcome his personal handicaps during the *Rites*:

Neuburg had a curvature of the spine which set his shoulders at a slant [...] an uneven gait, and was said [...] to be particularly clumsy. Yet, when he danced in the *Rites*, no mention is made of any manifestation of these physical defects by spectators. Rather, he is recorded as having been extraordinarily graceful. (J.F. Brown 18)

The primary performers seem to have entered into altered states of consciousness that provided them greater artistic ability during the performances, which may indicate the rituals' efficacy. Further evidence of the rituals' potency is revealed by a mistake reportedly made by Crowley during a performance of the *Rite of Luna*. According to J.F. Brown:

Neuburg told a friend that Crowley failed to speak the ritual words that would have released him from the possession before the end of the *Rite of Luna*. He "dismissed" the deity himself as best he could but said that for years afterwards he seemed to suffer from a greater than usual possession by the moon (16).

Crowley and his assistants believed they were not only enacting myths, but that they were also literally embodying and communing with the deities they invoked,

meeting Csapo's qualification that religious ritual should "arguably" contain "intention to sway nature or the divine will" (157). For the performers, if not all of the audience members, the *Rites* provided a genuine religious experience.

As with Yeats's Celtic Mysteries, the *Rites* perform the sociological functions of ritual, particularly Durkheim's specification that rituals "[represent] certain values which are embodied in social life" (Cohen 343-4). The values presented in the *Rites*, however, are transgressive, and undermine what Crowley saw as restrictive Victorian values, especially the Puritanical religion in which he was raised. While tame by today's standards, the very depiction of pagan rites violated the conventional morals of Crowley's time. In its review of the *Rites*, *The Looking Glass* called Crowley's magical order "a blasphemous sect whose proceedings conceivably lend themselves to immorality of the most revolting character" (qtd. in J.F. Brown 22). Exaggerated reports inspired by the sexual imagery of the *Rites* were published by the tabloid press, suggesting that the performers were having sex in the dimly lit room, and one reviewer claiming a performer had "embraced" and kissed him (J.F. Brown 22). More radically than Yeats, Crowley used what social scientists traditionally considered a conservative medium—ritual—to contravene and attenuate the common values of his society. Anthropologists and sociologists who see ritual as conservative (Durkheim, Malinowsky, and Leach, among others) most commonly studied rituals whose origins have been lost; perhaps new rituals, like new religions, can function to question old social structures in order to establish new ones.

Chapter Five

Invocation and Magic:

Performative Language in Religious and Occult Practice

Magic played a central role in the religious practices of both Crowley and Yeats, and both men used invocation in their literary works as a performative device meant to produce actual results rather than to function simply as a literary trope. Their works link art, religion, and magic, even though scholars of religion such as Frazer drew clear distinctions between magic and religion. Frazer's discussion of magic in *The Golden Bough* describes it as a primitive and false form of science. For Frazer, the magician works as a practitioner of a technology, which would be the hallmark of religion. More recently, scholars have found such clear distinctions untenable:

Magic—if distinguishable at all from religion—is merely an aspect of it. In that case magic is not to be contrasted with religion itself but to be compared with or opposed to other components of religion, for instance prayer or sacrifice. (Versnel 181)

Many religions incorporate magical practices—a prime example, from an anthropological perspective, would be the Catholic Mass—and many magical practices rely on appeals to gods or spirits. Furthermore, magical systems generally comply with the qualities listed in Geertz's definition of religion: symbol

systems dealing with questions of ultimate concern that result in uniquely realistic feelings and actions (Angrosino).

In his *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929) Crowley defines magic as “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will” (*MTP*, XII). Continuing, Crowley explicates his theory of magic in great depth, demonstrating that he does not see it as supernatural, for “every intentional act is a Magical Act” (*MTP*, XIII) and “nature is a continuous phenomenon” (*MTP*, XV). Furthermore, humanity is united with the cosmos as part of this continuous phenomenon; any sense of division is illusory, for “man’s sense of himself as separate from, and opposed to, the Universe is a bar to his conducting its currents” (*MTP*, XVIII). In accordance with Crowley’s emphasis on *doing* one’s Will, his definition of magic stresses action. Yeats’s discussion of the subject in his essay “Magic” (1901) presents a more passive, mystical view focusing on visionary trance. He outlines the following doctrines:

1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, [...] 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.
- (*Memoirs*, 28)

Although Yeats does refer several times to the mind of a “supernatural artist” (by which he means a person with the ability to enter trance states or induce visions), his doctrines, like Crowley’s, emphasize nature. While he argues for the influence of “invisible beings,” he also asks, “What matter if the angel or devil [...] first wrapped itself with an organized shape in some man’s imagination?” (40). His definition of magic stresses the power of the human mind and imagination to connect with the “great mind” of nature. In other essays, he often abjures the term *supernatural* in favor of *supersensual*, referring to a reality not beyond nature, but beyond the reach of one’s ordinary senses. While Yeats never entirely abandons the term *supernatural*, he does seem to remain agnostic on the nature (or “un-nature,” as the case may be) of the incorporeal beings he speaks of. His definition of magic, however, like Crowley’s, refers entirely to the powers of the human mind as part of nature.

As a common method for performing magic, invocation functions as a specific kind of prayer, containing, according to Thomas Greene, “both an apostrophe, an address to an absent but powerful being, and a summons to appear or make its influence felt in the invoker’s presence.” Greene attests to the distinction often made between magical rites, which have been regarded as “coercive,” and poetic invocations, which are generally “not expected to produce the literal results they request.” He argues, however, that this separation has not always been so marked because “poetic invocations pretend to behave as if the speaker had magical power, and there exists strong evidence that the verbal techniques we associate with versification did not in fact first enter human culture

to gratify esthetic pleasure but rather to make something happen.” Greene cites etymological evidence, pointing out that in many languages the word for *poem* initially meant *charm* (43-44).

Hearkening to the traditional use of poetry cited by Greene, Yeats and Crowley treat invocation as more than a literary trope. Crowley explains in *Confessions*, “from the beginning I had wanted to use my poetical gift to write magical invocations. Hymns to various gods and goddesses may be found scattered through my works (273); Crowley’s invocations generally follow a pattern established in classical literature. In contrast, Yeats’s oeuvre contains only a few invocations exemplifying the classical style; the presence of invocation in his work is more subtle and reflects Yeats’s more mystical approach.

Crowley’s “Hymn to Pan”

“Hymn to Pan,” perhaps the most well-known of Crowley’s poems, was written while he was visiting Moscow in 1913 (Sutin 233-4) and was first published in 1919 in the *The Equinox*; however, the poem is perhaps more widely known through its publication as an introductory poem in Crowley’s occult treatise, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, first published in 1929. In “Hymn to Pan” Crowley uses powerfully rhythmic language and evocative descriptions to invoke the god, as well as to espouse his own religious philosophy of Thelema.

Crowley places “Hymn to Pan” in direct comparison with classical invocation by quoting a small portion of an invocation to Pan from Sophocles’s *Ajax* as the epigraph to the poem. Translated, the quote reads:

I thrill with rapture, flutter on wings of ecstasy.

Io, Io, Pan, Pan!

O Pan, Pan! from the stony ridge,

Snow-bestrewn of Cyllene's height

Appear roving across the waters,

O dance-ordering king of gods, (Sophocles)

Sophocles' invocation continues with a call for the god to come to the speaker.

Classical invocations follow this standard pattern: calling upon the god, describing his or her attributes and deeds, and beseeching the god to bestow what the speaker desires (Graf 189, Furley 35). Crowley follows this basic pattern in "Pan," first calling to the god, describing Pan and his attendant gods, and then asking the god for what he desires. According to Graf, the second section of an invocation—the description of the god and his attributes—also "gives the credentials of the persons who pray, establishes their right to ask something from the divinity" (189). Crowley does this in "Hymn to Pan" when he states directly,

Am I not ripe?

I who wait and writhe and wrestle [...]

My body weary of an empty clasp

Strong as a lion and sharp as an asp (32-36)

In the third section, however, lies a crucial difference between the ultimate goal of Crowley's invocation and the typical invocation of the ancient Greeks: Crowley

does not merely seek to call the god into his presence and to ask a boon, but to call the god into his body, to become one with him.

Of course, Crowley was not the first poet to draw upon the classical hymns for inspiration: “Pan” also conforms with the Romantic tradition of composing hymns and odes. A key example, which was certainly familiar to Crowley, can be found in Shelley’s “Ode the West Wind.” As in “Pan,” “Ode to the West Wind” follows the classical pattern of calling upon the wind, describing it, and beseeching it. Just as Crowley would do nearly a century later, Shelley also seeks to become one with what he invokes: “Be thou, Spirit fierce, My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” (61-62). Furthermore, both Shelley and Crowley allude to the death of the self as preparation for bringing the invoked into themselves. Shelley writes, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (54), and Crowley states, “I am borne / to death on the horn / of the Unicorn” (54-56). Again, however, the crucial difference lies in the purpose of the invocation. For Shelley, the West Wind is a *symbol* of freedom and inspiration that he wants to embody within himself; for Crowley invocation acts as more than a poetic trope, instead functioning as a prayer.

Also in accordance with the Romantic tradition of invocation, “Pan” expresses a form of pantheism. This word itself is etymologically related to *Pan* (“pan-”), which means *the all* (“Pan” n3). The god Crowley invokes is not (solely) transcendental, but the embodiment of the world. Crowley seeks union with not only with the god (and his own spiritual self) but with *the All*. As Crowley describes “Pan,” he is the “All-devourer; all-begetter” (41) and his essence is

present in “[...] the living tree that is spirit and soul / And body and brain [...]” (22-23).

“Pan” is a Romantic poem in terms of its theme, but unlike the typical Romantic invocation, Crowley intends for his invocation to have a literal effect. This goal of uniting himself with the god is the primary goal of ritual in western esotericism:

There is a single main definition of the object of all magical Ritual. It is the uniting of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel, or in the language of Mysticism, Union with God.
(MTP 11)

According to occult philosophy, man is a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe. When the magician invokes a god into himself, this unites the magician with the greater whole of whom he is a reflection. *Holy Guardian Angel* is the term Crowley chose to use for what otherwise might be called one’s higher or eternal self. Crowley describes it as “holiest, mine inmost self” (*Confessions* 622) and clarifies that he “might have called this ‘God,’ or ‘The Higher Self,’ or ‘The Augoeides,’ or ‘Adi-Buddha,’ or 61 other things—but He [Crowley] had discovered that these were all one [...]” (*MTP* 20). Ultimately, there is ultimately no real distinction between the invocation of one’s Holy Guardian Angel and the invocation of a god.

The invocation of a god (unlike the summoning of a lesser spirit, which would be *evoked*—called into visible presence *outside* the magic circle where the

magician stands) involves calling the god *into* the magic circle, and, in many invocations, such as “Pan,” into the magician’s body. As Crowley explains, “in invocation, the macrocosm floods the consciousness,” and “identity with the God is attained by love and surrender, by giving up or suppressing all irrelevant (and illusionary) parts of yourself” (*MTP* 15). This suppression is described as a form of death; the magician’s individual personality must “die” in order for the god to enter. In “Pan,” the magician commands, “Thrust the sword through the galling fetter” (40), and exclaims, “I am borne / to death on the horn / of the Unicorn” (54-56). Crowley expounds in one of his rituals, “The Paris Working,” how this form of death is particularly significant in an invocation to Pan: “The only way to be really born is by an annihilation—to be born into Chaos, where Pan is the Saviour” (“The Paris Working”).

In *Magick in Theory and Practice* Crowley lists three forms of invocation, the third being “the assumption of the form of the god—by transmuting the astral body into his shape” (131). Crowley describes this most advanced method of invocation as “a real identification of the magician and the god” that requires the “attainment of a species of Samadhi” (*MTP* 17). Crowley explains this state “as the ecstatic union of a subject and object in consciousness [...]” (“Liber Astarte”).

In order to create this identification between the magician and the god, the magician must first be able to perfectly visualize the god and then compose and memorize a prayer to the god that commemorates “his physical attributes, always with profound understanding of their real meaning” (*MTP* 17). It is then that the “voice of the god is heard” (*MTP* 17). Crowley furthermore explains the

experience of hearing this voice: "The magician should imagine that he is hearing this voice, and at the same time he is echoing it, that it is also true of himself" (MTP 18). This echoing of the god's voice is the first step toward identifying with the god. Next, the magician verbally "asserts the identity of himself with the god," at which point "he loses consciousness of his mortal being; he is that mental image which he previously but saw" (MTP 18). Finally, the god is again invoked, but "as by Himself, as if it were the utterance of the will of the god that He should manifest in the magician" (MTP 17-18).

"Pan" clearly has all of the characteristics of a classical invocation. The god's physical attributes and deeds are described throughout the poem. The god is heard to speak his "characteristic utterance" through the statement "Io Pan," which is not only the call of the magician to the god, but, as William Heim points out (Heim 102), seen by Crowley as "the utterance of the God in him" (MTP 70). The magician asserts his identity with the god when he states, "I am awake" (50). The magician is no longer in a state of unconsciousness; he has achieved the awareness of the god. Finally, at the end of the invocation, the god speaks for himself: "I am thy mate. I am thy man" (58). The ultimate result is a union that is described in physical and sexual terms: "Flesh to thy bone, flower to thy rod" (60).

Of course, the choice of deity to be invoked is also vital to the achievement of the magician's goal. Crowley advises that one choose to devote oneself to a deity "suited to thine own highest nature" (Liber Astarte). Crowley wishes to link with Pan (the all) who, on a more earthly level, is the divine being

of wantonness and lust--characteristics that can certainly be said to suit Crowley's earthly personality.

Nevertheless, beyond the structure of the invocation, the sounds of the words themselves are crucial elements in the effectiveness of the ritual. Heim argues that it is primarily the rhythm and the sound of "Pan" that produce the desired magical effect rather than the choice and meaning of the words (105). Admittedly, Crowley states that he once resorted to reciting "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" as a magical invocation, and it was the very absurdity of the act brought about the desired effect:

It is therefore not quite certain in what the efficacy of the conjuration really lies. The peculiar mental excitement required may even be aroused by the perception of the absurdity of the process, and the persistence in it, as when one Frater Perdurabo [Crowley] at the end of his magical resources recited "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" and obtained his result. (*MTP* 69)

Crowley also recommends the use of "long strings of formidable words which roar and moan [...]" (*MTP* 69) indicating the importance of the sounds used in an invocation.

Heim claims that the key to the efficacy of the invocation is in its "proper recitation" (99). As Heim explains, the theory behind the use of sound in magic is that sound vibrations affect not only the body and the environment, but the subconscious mind of the magician, which, as a microcosm of the universe, then affects the macrocosm (99-100). Since the subconscious mind, Heim argues, is

only aware of the sound of the words, not their meaning, it is sound that produces the desired effect.

A crucial use of sound in “Pan” is the repeated chanting of “Io Pan!” *Io* is a Greek term used to call upon a god in invocations such as the example from Sophocles quoted by Crowley. Heim notes that the word has been used this way in English literature since at least the 17th century; however, Heim distinguishes Crowley’s use of the word by connecting “Io” with the magical chant *IAO*, “the supreme name symbolic of our entire subconscious, being all of the divine aspects of the Tree of Life which make us the microcosmic image of god.” Correct pronunciation of each sound in the word is crucial for its effectiveness and Heim emphasizes that “the sound, not the intellectual meaning, is most important” (101).

Many of Crowley’s statements seem to support this thesis: he emphasizes the necessity of rhythm and sound in an invocation, recommending the use of iambic tetrameter and both internal and external rhyme (MTP 69). “Pan” meets these qualifications and employs other sonorific devices as well, most notably alliteration, which occurs throughout the poem. In addition to the actual sounds of the words, Crowley also includes descriptions of sounds: “drums low muttering” (29), “Come with flute and come with pipe” (31), and “With hooves of steel I race on the rocks” (61).

Furthermore, Crowley remarks, “[...] the most potent conjurations are those in an ancient and perhaps forgotten language, or even couched in a corrupt or possibly always meaningless jargon” (MTP 68). However, “various

considerations impelled him [Crowley] to attempt conjuration in the English language” (MTP 69). Crowley does not elaborate upon these reasons, but if sound is more important than meaning, and unintelligible invocations are truly the most effective, why did Crowley compose “Pan” in English and call it “...the most powerful enchantment ever written” (*Confessions*; Ch. 86, 841)?

There are several ways in which the words chosen in “Pan” are significant beyond their sound. First, the words are descriptive and evocative. Some phrases describe colors:

And wash thy white thigh, beautiful God,
 In the moon of the woods, on the marble mount,
 The dimpled dawn of the amber fount!
 Dip the purple of passionate prayer
 In the crimson shrine, the scarlet snare,
 The soul that startles in eyes of blue (14-19)

Others evoke feelings (“weary,” “strong,” “numb”); they all create an emotional reaction in the magician, and this heightened emotional state is crucial to producing a magical effect. The descriptive phrases are also important for the magician’s visualization of the god and his actions and deeds: “come careering out of the night,” “to watch thy wantonness weeping through” (20), “token erect of thorny thigh” (43), and “I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend” (63) are just a few examples. A string of nonsense or unintelligible words, no matter how sonorous, would not produce the same effect.

More importantly, the specific words and descriptions aid in the invocation because of the magical principle of correspondence. As Crowley explains:

There is a certain natural connexion [sic] between certain letters, words, numbers, gestures, shapes, perfumes and so on, so that any idea or (as we might call it) "spirit," may be composed or called forth by the use of those things which are harmonious with it [...]."

(*MTP* 8)

Crowley considered magical correspondences so important that he compiled a book, *777*, as a compendium of correspondences that link things such as god names and Tarot cards with Qabalistic symbols. Although Crowley claims in the introduction to this book that the correspondences are ultimately arbitrary (*777*), he seems to contradict this statement in *Magick and Theory and Practice* when he recounts an incident in which he recited in Greek Sappho's "Ode to Venus" in the presence of a student who did not understand Greek. The student "went on an astral journey and everything seen by him was without exception harmonious with Venus." From this experience, Crowley concludes, "the correspondences in *Liber 777* really represent facts in Nature" (*MTP* 21). Crowley resolves this apparent contradiction when he explains that symbols are beyond the realm of reason: "the variations of expression, even when contradictory in appearance, should lead to an intuitive apprehension of the symbol by a sublimation and transcendence of the intellectual" (*Thoth* 67).

In *Magick in Theory and Practice* Crowley employs the god Bacchus as an example of how correspondences are used in invocation:

We find that the symbolism of Tiphareth [the sixth sphere on the Qabalistic Tree of Life] expresses the nature of Bacchus.¹⁹ It is necessary then to construct a Ritual of Tiphareth. Let us open the Book 777; we shall find in line 6 of each column the various parts of our required apparatus. Having ordered everything duly, we shall exalt the mind by repeated prayers or conjurations to the highest conception of the God, until, in one sense or another of the word, He appears to us and floods our consciousness with the light of His divinity. (MTP 13)

This particular example of an invocation is particularly pertinent to “Pan,” for, echoing Sir James Frazer, Crowley links the identity of Pan with Dionysus (who is called Bacchus in Roman mythology): “Roaming as Bacchus [...]” (7). Both Pan and Dionysus are gods of wild abandon and divine ecstasy, and, like Pan, one of the animal forms assumed by Dionysus was the goat (Frazer XLIX.1).

There are two correspondences listed for line six (Tiphareth) in 777 that are used in “Pan”: Apollo (9), who is invoked as a deity accompanying Pan, “Come with Apollo” (11), and *Eheieh*, a Hebrew name for God that translates as “I am” (23)—a phrase repeated throughout the poem.

In addition to the correspondences to Tiphareth, 777 lists both Pan and Bacchus as corresponding with the twenty-sixth path on the Qabalistic Tree of Life (10), which in turn corresponds with the Tarot card The Devil (*Thoth*, 105). Thus, the poem’s references to the devil—“Devil or god” (25) “lonely lust of

¹⁹ Crowley most likely came to this conclusion because Tiphereth is associated with the sacrificed god, and Bacchus/Dionysus is a vegetation god who dies and is reborn (Frazer XLIII).

devildom” (39)—are not merely Crowley’s attempts to be shocking. The Devil is “creative energy in its most material form,” “the goat leaping with lust,” and “divine madness” (*Thoth*, 105). Crowley says of the image of this card that The Devil is “the finding of ecstasy in every phenomenon [...] he transcends all limitations; he is Pan; he is All,” and “the horns of the goat are spiral to represent the motion of the all-pervading energy” (*Thoth*, 106-7). He is depicted with a third eye in the center of his forehead, and, not coincidentally, the Hebrew letter corresponding with this card is *ayin*, the eye (*Thoth* 105). Herein lies the significance of Crowley’s reference, “Give me the sign of the Open Eye” (42). Crowley is seeking union with the macrocosm and the understanding that this union brings.

Crowley also identifies Dionysus with the Tarot card *The Fool* (777, 9). *The Fool* corresponds with the number zero, which is the number of unity and wholeness as well as nothingness. One of the goals of the magician is to move beyond duality to a state of unity. Crowley describes the “Ipsissimus,” the highest grade of magical attainment, as “wholly free of all limitations” (MTP 234), “he has no will in any direction, and no Consciousness of any kind involving duality, for in Him all is accomplished; as it is written ‘beyond the Word and the Fool, yea, beyond the Word and the Fool’” (MTP 234). Thus, the magician’s identification with the Fool (Pan/Dionysus), which Crowley describes as “boundless air...with possibilities” (MTP 336) is a step on the way to the attainment of this unity.

The correspondences for Pan in 777 also list the Hindu god Shiva (9), who like Pan is god of sexual energy as well as destruction. Shiva's dance represents

the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Pan, too is called upon as the "dance-ordering king of the gods" in the Sophocles invocation that introduces "Pan," and called by Crowley, "All-devourer; all-begetter" (41). Just as Shiva possesses a third eye from which upon opening will issue a divine light that will destroy the universe, Crowley depicts (in his Thoth tarot deck) Pan with a third eye. It is this eye of enlightenment and destruction that he refers to in "Pan" when he calls to the god, "Give me the sign of the Open Eye" (42). Both gods rule the sphere of animal life, Shiva as "Master of Beasts" (Maxwell 45), and Pan as "Lord of the Wood" (Frazer XLIX.1). Shiva's symbol, the phallic linga (or lingam), represents the masculine force of the universe; this is the "token erect of thorny thigh" (43) in "Pan." The linga originally symbolized eternity (Maxwell 63), and in "Pan," Pan's destructive, masculine force is called "everlasting" (64). Obviously, the deity Crowley invokes is far more encompassing than a bawdy piper and shepherd-god.

Heim proposes that the words of "Pan" do not have meaning beyond their use as tools of invocation, as he distinguishes between the use of image and symbol in poetry and in magic: "In magic, the perceptions of the imagination acquire a concrete... reality; they enter the entirely objective world" (94). Thus, he concludes, magical symbols cannot imply meanings beyond themselves, and "if they cannot imply, they cannot really function as symbols and metaphors" (94). Therefore, in Heim's view, Crowley's poem "Pan" does not address the "real business of poetry" (105) because, as a poem written for the purpose of magical invocation, it cannot convey its meaning metaphorically. Taking a contrary

perspective, I will demonstrate that “Pan” functions on a metaphorical as well as a magical level.

The magical effectiveness of “Hymn to Pan” does not limit its ability to metaphorically convey the essence of Thelema. One of the major precepts of Thelema is to find connection with one’s Holy Guardian Angel, and one of the purposes of “Pan” is to aid the magician in making this link (in this case, with the HGA in the guise of the deity). In “Pan,” the individual self, “the soul,” is *startled* by the presence of the deity/Holy Guardian Angel “weeping through” (20) all aspects of the magician’s being: “the living tree that is spirit and soul and body and brain” (23). Furthermore, “Hymn to Pan” heralds the New Aeon by poetically describing its characteristics and calling upon Pan, the god whose destructive force will tear away the remnants of the old so that the new may take its place. The transition from one aeon to another is marked by the arrival of a new key word, a practice Crowley most likely borrowed from the Golden Dawn, which would adopt a new key word as a password at each Equinox. Crowley references this practice when he describes the coming of a new aeon and a new key word as the “Equinox of the Gods.” It is this key word that Crowley desires when he demands the “word of madness and mystery” (44). “Pan” also alludes to the New Aeon when Pan announces, “with hoofs of steel I race on the rocks from solstice stubborn to equinox” (61), suggesting that at the equinox, all will change and a new cycle will begin. The New Aeon marks the beginning of the reign of a new god, which *Liber Legis* announces as Horus, but it is Pan who will bring about the New Aeon (Sutin 210), for he, the “spirit of the Infinite All, great Pan, tears

asunder the veil and displays the hope of humanity, the Crowned Child of the Future [Horus]" ("Rites of Eleusis").

Yeats's *Island of Statues*

None of Yeats's known poems seem to explicitly invoke a god using this classical form. In his letters, Yeats mentions performing many invocations, but the exact words and style he used are unknown; perhaps he did not describe them because of the vows of secrecy required by the Golden Dawn. He does, however, present a dramatic example of invocation in his early play *Island of Statues*, which enacts an invocation that conforms to the classical structure.

One of Yeats's earliest works, *The Island of Statues* was first published in its entirety in *The Dublin University Review* in 1885. The play opens with two shepherds wooing a shepherdess, Naschina, and calling her to awaken. While Naschina is mortal at the beginning of the play, the shepherds' songs function as an invocation to Naschina as the "well nigh immortal" woman she will become by the play's end (1253). Naschina accomplishes the quest that her suitor Almintor fails to achieve: finding the "goblin flower," and defeating the Enchantress and guardian of the Island who tells Naschina the flower's effects:

Well nigh immortal in this charmed clime,
 Thou shalt outlive thine amorous happy time,
 [...]
 Yet ever more, through all thy days of ruth,
 Shall grow thy beauty and thy dreamless truth
 (1253)

Nevertheless, this near-immortality will not be entirely a blessing, for her lover
Almintor will die long before her, and her soul shall be

As an hurt leopard fills with ceaseless moan,
And aimless wanderings the woodlands lone,
[...]*pitiless and bright*
It is, yet shall it fail thee day and night
Beneath the burden of the infinite,
(1253)

The phrase “pitiless and bright” seems to presage Yeats’s description of the
rough beast in “The Second Coming” with its “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.”

Naschina’s transformation is marked in the play’s last stage direction: “The
rising moon casts the shadows of Almintor and the Sleepers far across the grass.
Close by Almintor’s side, Naschina is standing, shadowless” (1258).²⁰ Shadows
form a common trope in fairy-lore, perhaps most famously in Shakespeare’s *A
Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “if we shadows have offended.” Fairies are often
called “shadows” in Lady Gregory’s accounts of Irish folklore, and at least some
of the supernatural creatures in Irish fairy-lore can be seen only through their
shadows. In a tale recorded by Lady Gregory in *Visions and Beliefs in the West
of Ireland*, a mason recounts his father’s experience while he was supposedly
standing alone: “[...] the moon began to shine out and he saw his shadow, and
another shadow along with it ten feet in length” (164).

²⁰ The play was most likely intended as a closet drama; one wonders how the effect of a shadow-
less character might be staged.

The shadow is also a term for a human's spirit or soul, as mentioned in other tales in *Visions and Beliefs*: "after death the shadow goes wandering, and the soul is weak, and the body is taking a rest. The shadow wanders for a while and it pays the debts it had to pay, and when it is free it puts out wings and flies to Heaven" (191) and "The shadows of the dead gather round at Samhain time to see is there any one among their friends saying a few Masses for them" (196). Certainly, Yeats intends Naschina's lack of a shadow as an emblem of her transformation; perhaps her missing shadow indicates her loss of a human soul, for the Voices in the play sing, "A man has hope for heaven / But soulless a faery dies" (1255). Even at the beginning of the play, Naschina's demeanor is far more like that of a princess or goddess than a lowly shepherdess. She speaks commandingly, saying she will only give her love to a brave man, such as a knight who will hunt a dragon or war with an "enchanter old" (1230). She unknowingly exudes the qualities that mark her potential or latent divinity.

Like Crowley's "Hymn to Pan," the shepherds' invocation of Naschina has many characteristics of a classical invocation. The shepherds first call to Naschina; "Come forth" is repeated five times, and said once again in another variation, "Come thou, come" (1224-26). Then Colin sings of Naschina's beauty:

Oh, more dark thy gleaming hair is
Than the peeping pansy's face,
And thine eyes more bright than faery's,
Dancing in some moony place,
And thy neck's a poised lily;

See, I tell thy beauties o'er," (1226)

As would the speaker of a classical invocation, the Shepherd Colin demonstrates his worthiness to perform the invocation: "my music flows for thee, / A quenchless grieving of love melody" (1224). In fact, the structure of the invocation is formed as a competition between the two lovers, with each attempting to best the other's singing ability, sincerity, or, failing in these, volume: Thernot says, "I'll quench his singing with loud song" to which Yeats adds the stage direction, "Sings wildly" (1226), and later, "With fiery song I'll drown your puny voice" (1227). As in Crowley's in "Hymn to Pan," and Shelley's in "Ode to the West Wind," Yeats's shepherd Colin sings of his death for the sake of bringing forth what he invokes: "And my soul in waiting dieth, / Ever dieth, dieth, dieth" (1227).

The invocation ends with a request; the shepherd Colin beseeches Naschina to bestow upon him his desire: "Lift my soul from rayless night" (1227). While throughout their songs both shepherds have been describing the dawn at length and entreating Naschina to arise because the sun has already arisen, here Colin equates Naschina with the dawn, and he calls her "Music of my soul and light" (1227). This line works to reframe the previous descriptions of dawn's and nature's beauty, for if Naschina is the source of light and has the ability to "Lift [Colin's] soul from rayless night," her power either equals or exceeds that of the dawn. Thus, the natural glories intoned by the singers become part of their invocation's description of the one they invoke, and this connection between the

shepherdess and the powers of nature adumbrates Naschina's transformation into a demi-goddess or faery.

It is certainly no coincidence that Yeats sets this pastoral romance in Arcadia, the origin of the worship of the shepherd-god Pan. Naschina, as a shepherdess, is linked with Pan, and Almintor briefly invokes Pan's aid as he seeks the magic flower he hopes will win him Naschina's favor. He equivocates, however, for fear of angering or offending the "new god" (presumably the Judeo-Christian god or Christ): "If I speak low, / And not too clear, how will the new god know / But that I called on him?" (1236). Nonetheless, his temerity seems to cost him quest the aid of any god, for as he plucks the flower he is turned to stone. Perhaps his prayer would not have been heard even if he had spoken louder, for as Naschina later wakes the Sleepers who had been statues, one asks of Pan, "Does he still dwell within the woody shade, / And rule the shadows of the eve and dawn?." Naschina impatiently replies, "Nay, he is gone" (1257). Naschina perhaps becomes a replacement for both the goddess of the dawn, as intimated in the shepherds' invocation, and the god Pan, who is no longer present to rule the shadows. Considering Yeats's nascent system of gyres, the immortal Naschina with her "pitiless and bright" soul and her replacement of earlier gods may be a literary precursor to his rough beast, the god of the new dispensation.

Invocation, Trance, and Vision

Like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Yeats's overt poetic invocations call upon abstractions. Yeats's "The Secret Rose" (from *The Wind Among the Reeds*, 1899) functions in this vein, invoking the symbol of the rose that

represents, among many things, inspiration, divine beauty, and divine feminine energy. The majority of the poem follows the classical structure of invocation, first beseeching its subject by name and description, “Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose,” then asking for its presence or influence, “Enfold me in my hour of hours.” Yeats continues to directly address the Rose, and lists an account of qualities or powers it contains or controls: “Thy great leaves enfold” powerful personages from myth, all male, including the “crowned Magi,” Cuchulain, and Fergus. The speaker asks to be united by the inspiration of the Rose with these spiritual seekers and heroes. The poem, however, ultimately diverges from the classical model because it does not end by directly commanding or entreating the Rose. The speaker merely proclaims that he awaits its coming, and in a characteristic Yeatsian manner, ends with a question: “Surely thy hour has come [...]?”

Less abstract is the invocation in Yeats’s “The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers.” While the classical elements addressed by the speaker can be interpreted as symbols, they are commonly invoked as actual powers or beings in the Western Mystery Tradition. Yeats’s initial title for the poem, “A Mystical Prayer to the Masters of the Elements, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael” (Putzel 207) indicates the poem’s origins as a more overt invocation. The poem calls to the elements, “Great Powers of falling wave and wind and windy fire,” to bring “peace” and “gentle silence” to the one he loves, whom Putzel identifies as the “Rose Woman,” one of many incarnations of the Rose, Yeats’s “muse” and “goddess” (20).

Obvious invocations such as these examples are less common in Yeats's poetry than descriptions of visions and trance states, as is appropriate for Yeats's relatively passive and mystical approach to magic. "The Second Coming" is perhaps the most well-known of Yeats's depictions of a trance vision, along with "The Valley of the Black Pig," "Byzantium," "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn," and "Ribh in Ecstasy," among many others. These poems describe the experience of entering or leaving the trance state; while images of night and darkness generally indicate receptivity to trance, the trance vision itself is associated with light. The departure of a vision is associated, paradoxically, with both darkness and daytime. For example, "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn" is set in pitch darkness wherein the speaker is able to read. He describes a vision of angels above him that he claims to see because "[...] these eyes / By water, herb and solitary prayer / Made aquiline, are open to that light." In "Ribh in Ecstasy" Ribh describes a vision that ends when "some shadow fell" and "must the common round of day resume." Similarly, the vision described in "Byzantium" can begin when "the unpurged images of day recede." In "The Valley of the Black Pig" the vision before the speaker's "dream-awakened eyes" commences when "dews [perhaps of the evening] drop slowly and dreams gather," and the vision in "The Second Coming" closes when "the darkness drops again."

Yeats's poetic visions may actually be less passive and more actively magical or performative than they seem. Elizabeth Loizeaux proposes in her 1986 book, *Yeats and the Visual Arts*, that Yeats used symbolic images in his poems as methods of evocation. She distinguishes two ways Yeats uses symbol

in his work: the “re-presentation of symbolic vision” and the “use of symbol to evoke vision” (46). The first simply involves describing visions for the reader, working “from a vision already formed” (45), but the second is the use of symbol to performatively call up visions in or from the reader. This technique, instead of following the Classical pattern, draws upon the visualization methods Yeats learned through the Golden Dawn, in which the magician would summon a particular force or spirit by visualizing or meditating upon an image associated with it. Loizeaux asserts Yeats sought to use these magical techniques in his poetry: “Instead of re-presenting vision, the poet, like the magician, could evoke it in the mind’s eye of the reader by using symbol” (45). She argues, “[...] the difference between the re-presentation of symbolic vision and the use of the symbol to call up vision is frequently one of detail,” and that Yeats believed he only needed to mention a symbol (rather than providing a great deal of description) for it to create the desired effect (46). Margaret Mills Harper also describes this dual use of symbols in Yeats: “Symbols function as gateways, or jumping-off points, through which human imagination can approach a trans-material world. But they also operate in reverse, as if they were conduits by which that world can come to this” (52). Certainly, Yeats believed in the power of symbols and explicitly linked their use in magic with their use in poetry: “I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic or half-unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist” (*E&I* 49). Crowley also describes this effect, explaining the dynamic between the arts and trance states:

All expressions of the real thing [trance] must partake of the character of that thing, and therefore only that language is permissible which is itself released from the canon of ordinary speech, exactly as the trance is unfettered by the laws of ordinary consciousness. In other words, the only proper translation is in poetry, art and music.

If you examine the highest poetry in the light of common sense, you can only say that it is rubbish; and in actual fact you cannot so examine it at all, because there is something in poetry which is not in the words themselves, which is not in the images suggested by the words [...]. True poetry is itself a magic spell which is a key to the ineffable.

The question remains, however, as to the effectiveness of Yeats's poetic symbols for creating trance states or inducing visions. A problem occurs, as Loizeaux points out, for the non-initiate, who, even if experiencing a vision evoked by the poem, would not necessarily be aware of its import. This issue seems parallel to the concern Crowley expressed about the lack of effect of his *Rites of Eleusis* on the members of the general public in the audience. This precise difficulty, however, seems to point to the status of Yeats's evocations and Crowley's *Rites* as elements of religion. Very few people attending a ritual or reading a religious text from outside their own religious tradition would experience it with the same impact or intensity as one who is steeped in the

myths, symbols, and, perhaps most importantly, beliefs of that religion, as Clifford Geertz explains:

Where for “visitors” religious performances can [...] only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it—not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it. (113-114)

In this passage, Geertz explicates what he believes to be a characteristic of religious performances as opposed to aesthetic ones, as he dismisses the possibility that “religion is a form of human art” (113). Nonetheless, this attempted demarcation clearly describes the difficulties experienced by Yeats and Crowley in presenting their ritual dramas and invocatory poems to the public.

In acknowledging these difficulties, Yeats hoped that with the expanding of the “new day” or new gyre understanding and acceptance of the occult levels of his work would grow. As an initiate of the Golden Dawn, however, he understood the difference between the exoteric and esoteric—the former being material intended for the masses and the latter for the elect, and hoped for the transformation of his art from one to the other:

The drama has need of cities that it may find men in sufficient numbers, and cities destroy the emotions to which it appeal, and therefore the days of the drama are brief and come but seldom. It

has one day when the emotions of cities still remember the emotions of sailors and husbandmen and shepherds [...]; and it has another day, now beginning, when thought and scholarship discover their desire. In the first day, it is the art of the people; and in the second day, like dramas acted of old times in the hidden places of the temple, it is the preparation of a priesthood. (*E&I* 167-8)

The “first day” is that of exoteric drama or ritual, the ritual performed before the people, the “second day” is that of esoteric ritual, the hidden ritual of the priesthood. Yeats later began to realize that his plays were more appropriate for a small, intimate, hand-picked and invited audience than for the crowd at the Abbey Theater. He was to specify that his Noh plays were “intended for some fifty people in a drawing-room or studio” (*Plays*, 566). Near the end of his life, Yeats’s persona of The Old Man in *The Death of Cuchulain*, “looks back over a lifetime devoted to the attempt to re-establish ritual verse drama in the modern theatre, in the face of public preference for melodrama, realism and satire” (Skene 222). Yeats, however, never entirely gave up hope that ritual drama might take root in larger society. In 1899 he wrote, “It may be, though the world is not old enough to show us any example, that this priesthood [prepared through ritual theatre] will spread their religion everywhere, and make their Art the Art of the people” (*E&I* 168).

Crowley binds art with religion and love as methods for attaining “elevation [...] towards the godhead”—connection with god, or realizing oneself as god:

“The surplus of Will must find issue in the elevation of the individual towards the godhead; and the method of such elevation is by religion, love, and art” (*Absinthe*, 47). Traditionally, this elevation might be seen as falling exclusively under the purview of religion, but Crowley suggests that art provides superior means: “a moment’s experience of the point of view of the artist is worth a myriad of martyrdoms” (*Absinthe*, 51). Crowley compares the work of the artist to that of the enlightened individual—the Buddhist bodhisattva—who remains in the material world to guide others: “since the sole purpose of the incarnation of such Master was to help humanity, he must make the supreme renunciation [of heaven, or leaving the bounds of the material]” (*Absinthe*, 48). As Crowley explains, this renunciation is not easy:

for the genius [the artist] feels himself slipping constantly heavenward. The gravitation of eternity draws him. [...] So he must throw out anchors; and the only holding is the mire! [...] the artist is obliged to seek fellowship with the grossest of mankind. (*Absinthe*, 48)

These sentiments seem to echo themes found in many of Yeats’s poems of later life, particularly in the character of Crazy Jane. Again referring to the task of the bodhisattva, Crowley proclaims, “Art is itself too near the Reality which must be renounced for a season” (*Absinthe*, 48); this “Reality” with a capital *R* is not the material world, Assiah on the Tree of Life, but Atziluth, the realm of the ideal. Yeats also longed to “sail to Byzantium,” the ideal realm achievable through art, but found himself instead drawn to “the rag and bone shop of the heart.”

Crowley's *The God Eater*

Crowley explicates the idea of self-conscious religion in the play *The God Eater*, which he wrote in Edinburgh in 1903, a year before his experience in Egypt that would bring about *Liber AI*. The play enacts a man's creation of a goddess and her religion, adumbrating Crowley's creation of *Thelema*. Crowley, with characteristic hubris, called the play an "autohagiography" or the autobiography of a saint (*Confessions*, 360). The "saint"—the protagonist Criosda—is described as wearing a kilt and working ritual in a remote Scottish hall and is most likely a persona for Crowley, who was known for presenting himself in a kilt and who would establish himself in Scotland as "Lord Boleskine," although he had inherited no title.

Crowley points out in his comment that the play enacts "a vile and irrational series of acts" that lead to the happiness of the worshippers seen by the protagonist in his vision of the future (*Confessions*, 360). In order to create a goddess, Criosda ritually sacrifices his sixteen-year-old sister Maurya. As with many sacrificial victims of ancient cultures, Maurya seems fully aware and willing; in order for Criosda's spell to work, his sister must speak the appropriate words, for which she seems to have had no prompting: "I wish to sleep forever—I wish to die!" (23).

Crowley places the power of the gods and religion squarely in the realm of the human, as the priest Criosda declares, "Those whom we worship as our gods are gods. / The power is mine: that art no skill resists." Before her death, Maurya asks, "Why, then, am I not the Goddess Maurya?" to which he replies, "Yes! yes!

of course, but only by my making” (13-14). Criosda acknowledges, reluctantly, that chance also plays a part: “Blind are fate’s eyes, and pinioned are will’s wings. In you the whole chance lies” (14), and admits “In the beginning then / The vastness of heavens and the earth / Created the idea of God.” Gods, themselves, however, he claims are created by humankind, and he lists or alludes to a series of writers and scholars, including Eliphaz Lévi, Max Müller, Joris-Karl Huysmans (author of *Á rebours*), Herbert Spencer, and Sir James Frazer, who, according to Crowley’s character Criosda, have agreed that “men have made—since men made aught— / Their gods, and slain, and eaten” (16).

Maurya’s final deification does not seem to occur immediately upon her death; the course of the play spans forty years during which Criosda believes he has failed, even though the mummified remains of his sister have drawn a group of worshippers. Fearing his failure, he seeks the witch, or “Hag of Eternity,” Rupha, who initially provided him the spell to work Maurya’s transformation. Rupha reveals the secret she had previously withheld:

[...] Of one act the ultimatum
 Rings through eternity past the poles of space.
 Choose then what spangle on the robe of time
 Shall glitter in thine eyes [...] (31)

Not only was Maurya required to speak aloud her will to die and become Goddess, but Criosda must also proclaim it as his will: “Mother! I would see the Luck of Maurya stand / two thousand years from now.” This performative speech act brings about the thing it describes: Rupha bids Criosda look into the “globe of

crystal” and he relays a vision of “sun-white” pyramids with “countless folk, / Multitudes many-coloured, grave and tall, / Beautiful” who “doth the soul of love inhabit, them \ the light of wisdom doth inform, them peace / Hath marked and sealed her own” (31). Rupha asks, “Who then worship they?” to which Criosda replies, “Maurya!” (32). Only a year after writing *The God Eater*, Crowley would take on Criosda’s role as religion-creator, although he would use the method of art instead of blood-sacrifice.

Art as Religion

Religion, according to Clifford Geertz in “Religion as a Cultural System,” is foremost “a system of symbols,” (90) a descriptor that undoubtedly applies to the work of Yeats and Crowley, but also can be said of many other poets, writers, and artists. Yeats and Crowley’s works are distinguished from most others, however, in that they meet the other criteria in Geertz’s definition. The symbols must function together as a system to fulfill Geertz’s next criterion: “[acting] to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (90). Yeats and Crowley sought to use their systems of symbols to create emotional states, particularly ecstatic and visionary states. By “motivation” Geertz means a persistent impulse or tendency “to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations” (96), which may include the tendency toward performing ritual or for acting upon the values of the system. Both Yeats and Crowley created rituals to be performed, and furthermore, intended their symbols and rituals to inspire certain actions in their readers: inducing visions, seeking one’s higher-self (whether it be called mask, daemon,

or Holy Guardian Angel), and for Crowley, to know and do one's True Will. Both systems advocate seeking unity and spiritual ecstasy through various processes of assimilating or conjoining antimonies.

These symbol systems, according to Geertz, must also "[formulate] conceptions of a general order of existence" (90), and "be symbolic of transcendent truths" (98). Both Yeats and Crowley promulgate world views, each involving reincarnation and conceptions of cyclical or progressive aeons or gyres of time, as well as recognizing the universe as being composed of antimonies that function as creative forces.

The final characteristic of religion outlined by Geertz may be the most difficult for a symbol system to fulfill: "clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (90).

It is this sense of the "really real" upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience. [...] the imbuing of a certain specific complex of symbols [...] with a pervasive authority [...] is the essence of religious action. (112)

Geertz takes care to distinguish the "religious perspective" from the "aesthetic perspective," but the characteristics he applies to the aesthetic reflect a naïve understanding of the arts, as he limits them to "an eager dwelling upon appearances, an engrossment in surfaces, an absorption in things, as we say, 'in

themselves,” and a “disengagement from belief” (111). While both Yeats and Crowley sometimes take an agnostic position toward certain aspects of their systems—the nature of their incorporeal entities and the possible arbitrariness of their symbols—both men use their art to produce and intensify the effect of their symbol systems’ conveyance of the “really real.” Throughout their writings, the word *Reality* is generally capitalized and refers not to material existence, but to the transcendent or immanent truths behind it, and it is the experience of this Reality that their systems seek to convey.

In his clarification of the phrase “uniquely realistic” Geertz acknowledges that statements of religious belief are believed to be true within a religious context—a “different sense” of truth than that found in a common-sense perspective. This religious sense or “framework of meaning” that a believer might experience in ritual alternates with his or her common-sense one, but remains “true” and affects a believer’s behavior in and perspective of the common-sense world, which “is now seen as but the partial form of a wider reality.” This “slippage” (122) between frameworks of reality is performed by the poetic and ritual works of both Yeats and Crowley in that they seek to induce ecstatic trance and vision states that allow their audience to experience that “wider reality” and return to “the common round of day” changed by the experience.²¹ That Yeats and Crowley express a self-conscious understanding of religion that sees its symbols and myths for symbols and myths (and yet fully embraces them anyway) merely illustrates an awareness of this “slipping” between perspectives that Geertz describes. Whether Yeats’s communicators and Crowley’s Aiwass were

²¹ Yeats, “Ribh in Ecstasy.”

entities of distinct consciousness or parts of the men's own minds, they provided insights and experiences the men found to express ultimate truths. As Margaret Mills Harper explains, "[...] the nightly sessions were, the Yeatses believed, both a passive reception from an outside force and an active construction, resulting as a matter of course in a system of symbols that are both invented and true" (258). Yeats's and Crowley's creations test the definitional borders between fiction and reality, art and religion.

Yeats never found the "sectary" that he had hoped for Shelley, or, presumably, himself. Instead, he abandoned the Celtic Mysteries project, perhaps due to the schism in the Golden Dawn, perhaps due to Maud Gonne's waning interest and eventual marriage to John McBride. The unfinished rituals have never been published nor do they seem to have found their way into the canon of Western occultism. Literary critics commonly use *A Vision* for interpreting Yeats's symbols, but, like the Celtic Mysteries, it remains a fragment of an unpracticed religion. Shortly before his death, Yeats lamented leaving the Mysteries unfinished, demonstrating that his desire to create a working religion to affect spiritual change in others remained with him to the end. In contrast, Crowley's Thelema has taken root as an organized religion and has spread throughout the world. The International Headquarters of the O.T.O. lists affiliated groups in eighteen countries, and several other organizations claim to be officially or unofficially linked with Crowley's original orders.²² While the number of people involved has not been estimated—but is certainly small in comparison

²² This branch of the O.T.O has been awarded legal ownership of the name in the United States and the United Kingdom

with older, exoteric religions—Crowley’s aesthetic creations of ritual and belief have lifted off the printed page and into living religious tradition. Perhaps it is a testimony to Yeats’s dichotomies of love and hate that one of the people to complete this quest would be the man he had called “unspeakable” and “mad” (*Letters*, To Lady Gregory, 25 April [1900]). Yeats’s system, had it been completed, may have achieved similar success; instead Yeats maintains his renown as a poet, while Crowley has gained his as a prophet.

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Appendix

Western Esotericism, the Hermetic Qabala, and the Tree of Life

Western esotericism, or The Western Mystery Tradition, is a category denoting a loosely connected group of organizations and teachings drawing upon mystical and magical traditions such as those of ancient Egypt, Greece, and the Hebrew Qabala. Western esoteric organizations include, among many others, the Freemasons, various Rosicrucian orders, the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, and the many Thelemic orders based on the teachings of Aleister Crowley.

The Hermetic Qabala

The Hermetic Qabala designates the branch of Qabalism practiced in Western esotericism, as distinguished from the *Kabbalah* as taught in its original Jewish context, or the interpretations of the *Cabala* presented by Christian mystics. The varying transliterations of the Hebrew QBLH reflect these different branches of its use. This dissertation uses the spelling *Qabala* because it is the spelling most commonly used by Western esoteric orders.

The Hebrew Kabbalah became popularized in the West during the Renaissance by Neoplatonists such as Pico della Mirandola and Johann Reuchlin, who inherited the tradition from Jewish scholars exiled from Spain. Their writings influenced Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, which became a primary source for the Masonic and Rosicrucian movements (Godwin xiii).

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life forms the central symbol around which the Qabala is organized, providing a diagram of the spiritual and physical universe. Dion Fortune, an initiate of an offshoot branch of the Golden Dawn who would later found the magical order now known as the Society of Inner Light, gives a concise description of the Tree of Life:

It is a glyph, that is to say a composite symbol, which is intended to represent the cosmos in its entirety and the soul of man as it relates thereto; [...] we use it [...] to scan and calculate the intricacies of existence, visible and invisible, in external nature or the hidden depth of the soul. (*Mystical Qabala*, 37)

Practitioners in Western esotericism use the Tree of Life as a symbol for meditation and as the primary tool for organizing correspondences of magical symbols and objects. Magical correspondence, described by Sir James Frazer as the “Law of Similarity,” relies on the belief that acting on one thing can affect another thing that is like it. Crowley explicates this important concept:

There is a certain natural connexion [sic] between certain letters, words, numbers, gestures, shapes, perfumes and so on, so that any idea or (as we might call it) “spirit,” may be composed or called forth by the use of those things which are harmonious with it...

(*MTP* 8)

The Tree of Life, as an arch-symbol with the capacity to contain all other possible symbols, is used to categorize symbols to show their similarities and relationships.

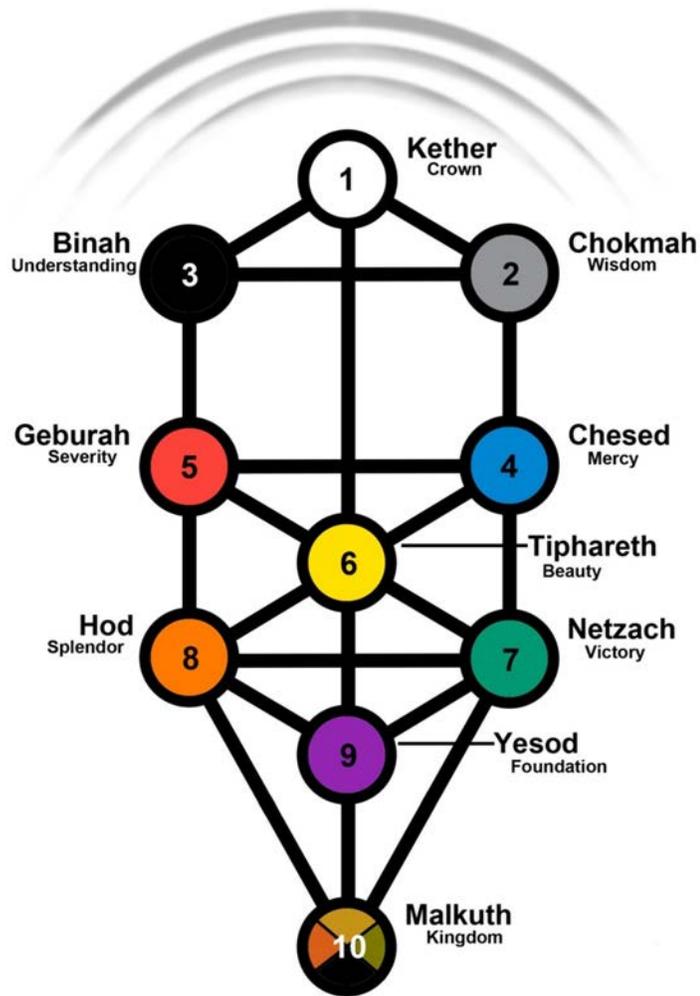


Fig. A.1 The Tree of Life

The Tree is comprised of ten *Sephiroth*, or spheres, and twenty-two paths that connect them. The Sephirah at the top of the Tree, Kether, represents the Godhead or the first positive spiritual source. The Sephirah at the bottom of the Tree, Malkuth, represents the material world. As such, these two spheres roughly correspond with the World of Forms and World of Particulars of Plato, although, with the addition of the other eight spheres, the paths, and their division into four worlds by the Qabalists, the Tree of Life is significantly more complex than Plato's arrangement.

Above the Tree itself are the three Negative Veils, Ain ("nothing"), Ain Soph ("without limit"), and Ain Soph Aur ("limitless light"). The Veils are designated as negative because they "exist" prior to and outside all things in actual existence. Regardie characterizes the Negative Veils as

the ultimate root from which this universe, with all things therein, has evolved is [...] Infinite or Limitless Light. [...] this is to be understood as an infinite ocean of brilliance wherein all things are held as within a matrix, from which all things were evolved, and it is that divine goal to which all life and all beings eventually must return. (Regardie18)

Thus, all things in existence, both spiritual and physical, are represented by the Tree of Life, which itself finds its origin in the Negative Veils.

Four Worlds

The Tree is divided into four sections, or “worlds,” which represent progressive stages of manifestation: Atziluth (Emanation), Briah (Creation), Yetzirah (Formation), Assiah (Action). Only the last of these worlds, Assiah, contains things with physical form. The worlds are often described through the analogy of creating an object, such as a chair: Atziluth would represent the desire for something to sit on, Briah represents the idea to create a chair, Yetzirah represents the blueprint for the chair’s design, and Assiah represents the actual chair.

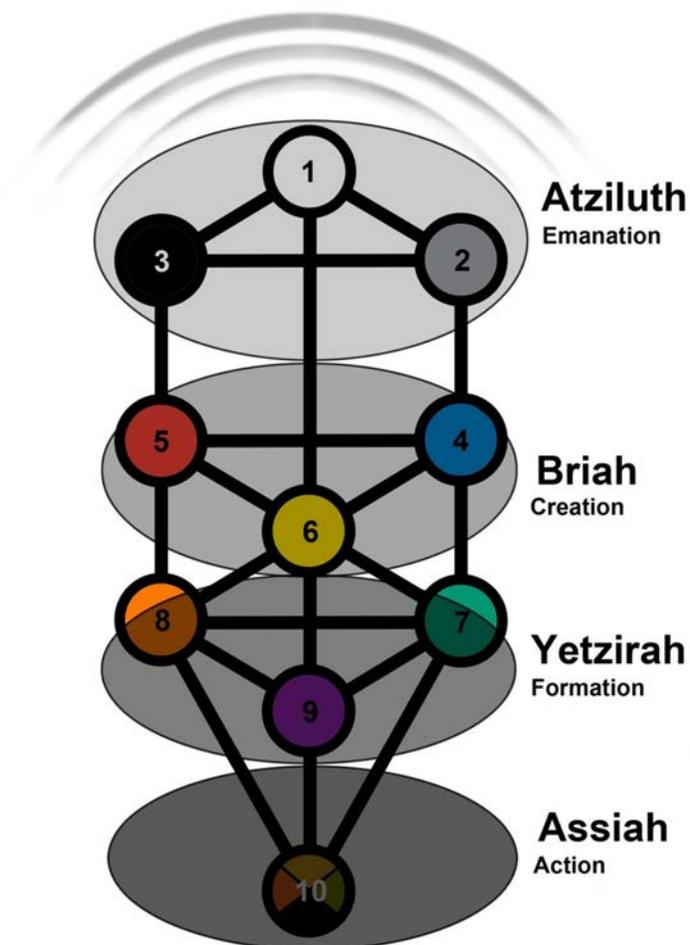


Fig. A.2 The Four Worlds

Atziluth is generally considered to contain the three topmost Sephirah: Kether, Chokmah, and Binah. These spheres represent the first positive forces of creation, Kether being a non-gendered source of energy which is then channeled through the masculine and feminine Sephiroth, Chokmah and Binah. This alteration between masculine, feminine, and neutral continues throughout the Tree.

The next two worlds, Briah and Yetzirah, contain the next two triads of Sephiroth. Chesed, Geburah and Tiphareth in the world of Briah represent the mental realm, while Netzach, Hod, and Yesod in the world of Yetzirah represent the emotional realm. The final sphere of Malkuth is the only Sephirah in the physical world of Assiah.

Other Symbols Within the Tree

Many other symbols commonly used in Western esotericism are applied to the Tree. Each of the worlds described above corresponds with one of the Greek elements: Atziluth, fire; Briah, water; Yetzirah, air; and Assiah, earth. These four elements and the four worlds also correspond with the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, the letters Yod Heh Vav Heh, which stand for the unpronounceable Hebrew name of God.

The creative forces traveling down the Tree from Kether, through all the Sephiroth to Malkuth, are symbolized by a Flaming Sword. Because of the angled path the Flaming Sword follows through the Sephiroth, these forces, characterized as masculine, are also called the Lightning Flash. This energy is

received by the physical world in Malkuth, but it also travels back up the Tree: the forces of life returning to their source. This energy, characterized as feminine, takes a winding path up the Tree, following each of the Paths in turn. Because of its winding path, these energies are called the Serpent on the Tree of Life. This symbol holds many commonalities with the Yogic Kundalini Serpent, an important symbol for Crowley.

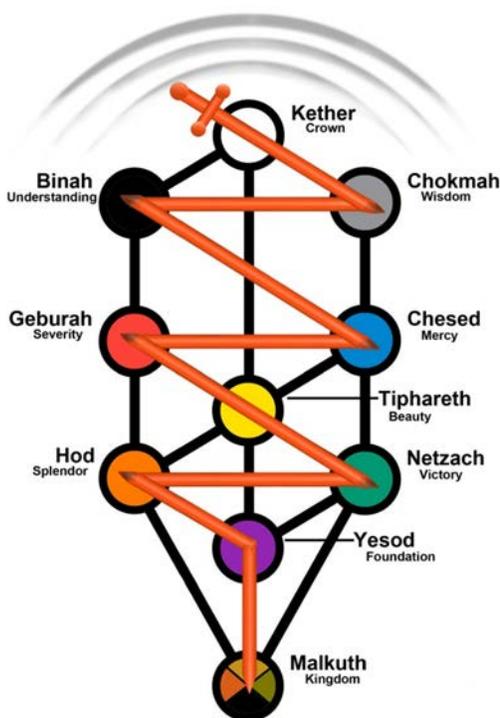


Fig A.3 The Flaming Sword

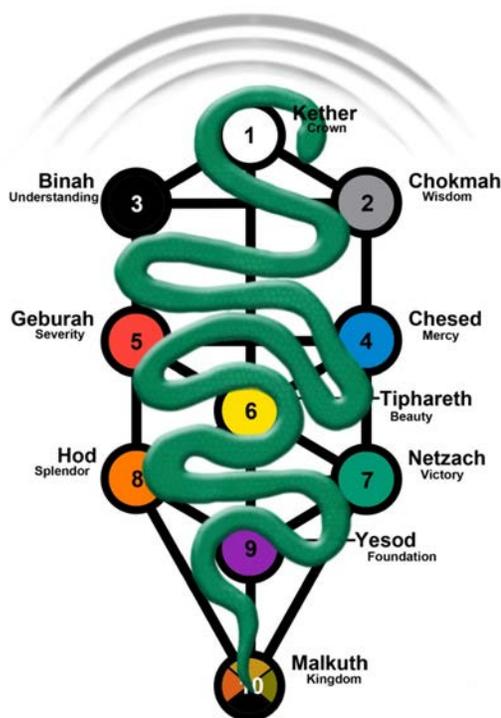


Fig. A.4 The Serpent

These examples are only a small selection of the correspondences applied to the Tree of Life. The symbol and its full history and significance are too vast a topic to fully explicate here; however, a basic conception of this important

aspect of Western esotericism is crucial for understanding the magical systems and much of the poetry of W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley.