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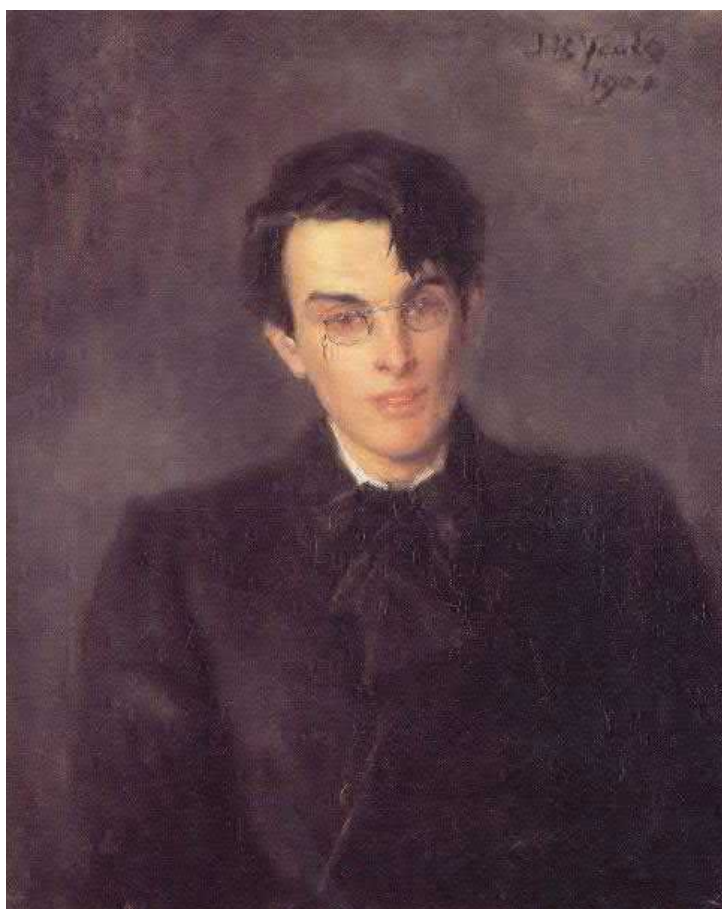
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A Secret Philosophy: W. B. Yeats and the Dublin Hermetic Society

by

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[Image: *William Butler Yeats*, by John Butler Yeats, 1900]

A SECRET PHILOSOPHY: W.B. YEATS AND THE DUBLIN HERMETIC SOCIETY

(i)

On June 16th 1885 a group of young men met in a modest upper room in York Street, near the centre of Dublin. They would call themselves the Dublin Hermetic Society, and they intended to explore ‘a philosophy which has until lately been kept entirely secret, or at most revealed only in symbolism’.¹ The group had been called together by the young poet William Butler Yeats and his friend Charles Johnston. It was Yeats who gave the opening address. This was an important time in his life: three days earlier, he had celebrated his twentieth birthday; and his first published poems had appeared in the *Dublin University Review* just three months before that. We don’t know exactly what he said in those inaugural remarks, but later he recalled:

I had, when we first made our Society, proposed for our consideration that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth.²

So poetry was involved from the start, with Yeats convinced (like Blake before him) that poets are the true prophets. He was also proposing the ‘literal’ (not merely metaphorical) existence of elemental spirits – that there are modes of existence, and living beings, inaccessible to our ordinary senses.

That first meeting must have been a long one: Yeats’s introduction was followed by ‘a paper...by Mr. Smeeth, on the connection of Spiritualism with a possible fourth dimension of space. His remarks were illustrated by several experiments’. Other contributions included ‘Mr Johnston’s paper on Esoteric Buddhism.’ Sadly, no record remains of Mr. Smeeth’s talk and his four-dimensional experiments, though it seems a safe guess that they were based on writings by Professor Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner, which had recently appeared in English

¹ ‘Notes and News’, *Dublin University Review*, July 1885, p. 155.

² *Au*, p.90.

translation.³ Zöllner (who had been duped by a fraudulent English medium) argued that spiritualist phenomena could be explained on the hypothesis of beings acting in a fourth dimension. Such beings could, for example, ‘transport any material object directly into the centre of a room, without its passing through any of the boundaries of the room, whether walls, ceiling, or floor’.⁴

We know what Charles Johnston said, because his paper – an exposition of the newly fashionable doctrine Theosophy – was reprinted in the *Dublin University Review*, a lively magazine at the centre of a group of current and recent students at Trinity College. Yeats and Johnston had been close friends at the High School in Dublin, though Johnston was two years younger. He was now just about to leave school: he would go on to read Oriental Languages at Trinity. Meanwhile Yeats was learning, not very successfully, to paint at the Art Schools (later the Metropolitan School of Art). Even before Yeats left high school the pair, fascinated by the magical and mysterious, had spent hours together exploring strange phenomena. As Yeats recalled, he and Johnston had been

reading Baron Reichenbach on Odic Force and manuals published by the Theosophical Society. We spent a good deal of time in the Kildare Street Museum passing our hands over the glass cases, feeling or believing we felt the Odic Force flowing from the big crystals. We also found pins blindfold⁵

– the latter presumably a test of extra-sensory perception.

Baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach (1788-1869), a Prussian industrial chemist, claimed to have discovered that ‘If we make downward passes with strong magnets...along the persons of from 15 to 20 individuals, but without touching them, we shall always find one or perhaps more among the number, who feel affected thereby in a peculiar manner.’ The

³ *Transcendental Physics. An account of experimental investigations. From the scientific treatises of J. C. F. Z[öllner], Translated from the German, with a preface and appendices*, by Charles Carleton Massey. London: W.H. Harrison, 1882. A third edition appeared in 1885.

⁴ Charles Johnston, ‘Psychism and the Fourth Dimension’, *The Theosophist*, April 1888, pp. 423-8, p. 424. Johnston’s article includes ‘experiments’ to be made with pencil, paper, and lamps – perhaps the experiments which accompanied Smeeth’s paper.

⁵ *Au* p. 90.

sensation, he explained, ‘resembles a cool or tepid *aura* or current of air, which they believe gently blows upon them.’⁶ Reichenbach coined the names ‘Odyle’ and ‘Odic Force’ for the energy involved, and found it was also present in crystals, claiming that

large and splendid specimens [of crystal] from the Imperial Private Cabinet of Natural History in Vienna...instantly excited involuntary contractions, attracted the hand, caused it to become clenched, and, in part, with the strongest tonic spasm. Here, therefore, we perceive, in single crystals, a peculiar power, a fundamental force, which had hitherto remained unobserved.⁷

Yeats and Johnston repeated Reichenbach’s experiments: ‘We used to pass crystals over each others’ hands and eyes and to fancy that we felt a breath flowing from them’, Yeats recalled.⁸

The Dublin Hermetic Society was born when these youthful investigations met the new vogue for Theosophy. The Theosophical Society was the creation of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91), a charismatic Russian spiritualist medium, who claimed that her worldwide travels had included a period in Tibet, where she had been instructed by a group of spiritually advanced gurus or ‘Mahatmas’. The Mahatmas supposedly taught a synthesis of religion, science and philosophy, which was the essence of all existing religions. With the support of Colonel Henry S. Olcott and the Irish-born American barrister William Quan Judge, she founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875; the new synthetic doctrine naturally became known as ‘Theosophy’ (a word which already had a long history). Devoting her energies to propagating this teaching, Blavatsky gave up spiritualist activities – though not her claims to produce paranormal phenomena: the sounding of an ‘astral bell’ was a speciality. She published *Isis Unveiled*, the first substantial statement of her doctrines, in 1877. A period in India, where the teaching quickly acquired a large body of followers (despite accusations of fraud levelled against Blavatsky) was followed by her relocation to

⁶ Karl, Baron von Reichenbach, *Physico-Physiological Researches on the Dynamics of Imponderables, Magnetism, Electricity, Heat, Light, Crystallisation, and Classical Attraction, in their Relations to the Vital Force*, trans. William Gregory, London: Taylor, Walton, and Maberly, 1850, p. 1.

⁷ Reichenbach, *Physico-Physiological Researches*, p. 34.

⁸ W.B. Yeats, ‘The Way of Wisdom’, *The Speaker*, 14 April 1900, p. 40. Reprinted in *UP*, [give ref.], but in a revised text which makes some important changes.

France in 1883. Meanwhile, a London Lodge of the Theosophical Society was set up by the journalist Alfred Percy Sinnett, who expounded his own understanding of Theosophy in *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883).

From the beginning, however, there had been tension between those happy to follow an ‘Eastern’ path – *i.e.*, Blavatsky’s and Sinnett’s idiosyncratic version of Buddhism (including the dictates of the supposed Mahatmas), and those wishing for more attention to Christian teachings and to ‘Western’ esoteric traditions such as alchemy. Disaffected former members of the Theosophical Society had therefore set up the Hermetic Society in London in 1884, supposedly as a ‘supplement and complement’ to the Theosophical Society.⁹ Relations between the two groups were, on the surface, friendly enough – but probably only because both sides felt it wiser to avoid open warfare for the time being. Meanwhile, in Dublin, it is not clear whether Johnston, Yeats and their friends knew anything about the tensions between the two groups. They may simply have heard of the London Hermetic Society as an offshoot of Theosophy, with a wider range of active interests.

The catalyst for the Dublin Hermetic Society’s founding was A.P. Sinnett’s book *Esoteric Buddhism*. Yeats’s account, written almost thirty years later, is excusably vague about the sequence of events. He claims that Charles Johnston had

written to some missionary society to send him to the South Seas, when I offered him Renan’s *Life of Christ* and a copy of *Esoteric Buddhism*. He refused both, but a few days later while reading for an examination in the Kildare Street Library, he asked in an idle moment for *Esoteric Buddhism* and came out an esoteric Buddhist. He wrote to the missionaries withdrawing his letter and offered himself to the Theosophical Society as a *chela*.¹⁰

Yeats’s anecdote – Johnston neatly converted from Christian missionary to Theosophical *chela* (disciple) – makes Yeats himself the agent of conversion, and offers an emblematic picture of Yeats proffering with one hand Renan’s severely rationalistic *Life of Jesus* (which

⁹ R.A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn and the Esoteric Section*, London: Theosophical History Centre, 1987, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *Au* pp. 90-91.

denied miracles and portrayed a wholly human Jesus), and with the other Sinnett's Theosophical extravagances. 'I had stayed somewhere between the two books,' Yeats concludes, 'held there perhaps by my father's scepticism.'¹¹ It makes a good story; but Johnston's own account is simply that he read Sinnett's *The Occult World* in November 1884, and *Esoteric Buddhism* 'the following spring', thereby becoming 'completely convinced' of the truth of Theosophy.¹²

And how had Yeats discovered the book? According to one account, it was sent to him by his aunt, Isabella Pollexfen.¹³ He is also said to have heard it discussed at the house of his father's friend Edward Dowden, Professor of English Literature at Trinity:¹⁴ Dowden had been interested enough to order a copy for the National Library.¹⁵ The point is that everyone was talking about it.

The Dublin group, however, had a range of interests that went far beyond Theosophy. 'The young men', Yeats recalled,

read papers to one another on the Vedas, and the Upanishads, and the Neoplatonists, and on modern mystics and spiritualists. They had no scholarship, and they spoke and wrote badly, but they discussed great problems ardently and simply and unconventionally as men, perhaps, discussed great problems in the medieval Universities.¹⁶

And they were committed enough to pay for the 'dirty back room' where they met.¹⁷

Meetings were at first on alternate Tuesdays, later monthly.¹⁸ As Yeats recalled, there were seven members, though actually numbers must have fluctuated: besides himself, Johnston, Smeeth, and Charles Weekes they are said to have included W.K. Magee, George Russell,

¹¹ *Au* p. 91.

¹² Charles Johnston, 'H.P.B.', *Theosophical Quarterly* (New York), July 1931, pp. 12-13.

¹³ William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats, 1839-1922*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 137, 570 n. 70

¹⁴ Ernest A. Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, Dublin and London: Maunsel, 1916, p. 213.

¹⁵ *Life I*, p. 45 (no source cited).

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'The Poetry of "A.E."', *UP II*, pp. 121-14.

¹⁷ *UPI*, p. 336.

¹⁸ *Dublin University Review* 15 July 1885 p. 155 says the meeting of 16 June was 'adjourned until the 30th ult', which would be 30 June; the December 1885 report, p. 309, says 'its usual monthly meeting' was held in November.

and Claude Falls Wright.¹⁹ Charles Hubert Oldham²⁰ was involved too: he had hosted a preliminary planning meeting at his home in May, and would later host the Society's guest, Mohini Chatterjee.²¹ They were a collection of bright young intellectuals; Johnston and Wright later became leading lights of the Theosophical Society in America; William Frederick Smeeth joined the Indian Civil Service, working for the Geological Department in Mysore;²² Oldham, a founder of the *Dublin University Review*, became both a barrister and a Professor of Economics. Weekes would become a publisher, and Magee, under his pseudonym 'John Eglinton', would become a well-known writer, and Librarian of the National Library of Ireland (featuring in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*).

Academic staff from various institutions were also involved. The November 1885 meeting was chaired by William Fletcher Barrett,²³ Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal College of Science and a member of the Society for Psychical Research: two months later he published a paper claiming to have replicated some of Reichenbach's experiments on human subjects, using electromagnets.²⁴

And there was 'a Professor of Oriental Languages at Trinity College'.²⁵ This was Mir Alaud Ali, from Oudh (present-day Awadh) in India, but of Persian ancestry. Holding the Chair of Arabic, Hindustani and Persian, he was a popular Dublin socialite, famous for attending the annual Dublin Castle ball in Indian dress.²⁶ The teaching of Oriental Languages had been established at Trinity with an eye to the Indian Civil Service; a crop of Theosophists may have been an unintended consequence. Mir Alaud was by no means a docile member of

¹⁹ *Life 1*, p. 47, citing George Mills Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, p. 3, n.11.

²⁰ *Life 1*, p. 552, n.72.

²¹ *Life 1*, p. 47; p. 552, n.72

²² *Dublin University Calendar*, 1892, p. 157.

²³ *Dublin University Review*, December 1885, p. 389.

²⁴ W.F. Barrett, 'Is There a Magnetic Sense?', *Dublin University Review*, January 1886, pp. 23-34.

²⁵ *Au* p. 91.

²⁶ Vivian Ibrahim, 'Seeing a Vision in a Pool of Ink: The "Mir" of Ireland', *History Ireland*, XVIII, 3, May-June 2010.

the Society; part of a meeting on 7 November ‘was taken up by Professor Mir Alaud Ali, who in a very interesting speech criticised the Theosophical movement and its leaders’.²⁷ But as a raconteur he was good value. According to Yeats, Mir Alaud ‘talked of the magicians of the East’, and of how, ‘When he was a little boy, he had seen a vision in a pool of ink, a multitude of spirits singing in Arabic, “Woe unto those that do not believe in us”’.²⁸

Clearly, Mir Alaud was entertaining his young audience with enthralling tales; but the procedure he described was not unusual in parts of the Middle East.²⁹ The diviner would engage a boy (or occasionally a girl) below the age of puberty. Usually a magical diagram would be written in black ink on the palm of the child’s hand; this would be allowed to dry near a brazier with aromatic herbs or incense; then more ink would be added to make a small pool. Alternatively, ink in a dish or floated on oil might be used. The child would be told to gaze into the ink and report what was seen. Much of this was well known in Victorian England: George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, for example, begins:

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader.³⁰

But the authenticity of Yeats’s report is suggested by the ‘multitude of spirits’. Typically, once the psychic vision was under way, not one but many spirits were expected to come. The message Mir Alaud reported – ‘Woe unto those that do not believe in us’ – was guaranteed to appeal to Yeats. After all, the ‘spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth’.

(ii)

Since A.P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* had precipitated so much of this activity, it deserves a closer look – especially as traces of it would remain with Yeats for life. Sinnett had been

²⁷ ‘Notes and News’, *Dublin University Review*, August 1885, p. 309.

²⁸ *Au* p.91.

²⁹ See, e.g., William H. Worrell, ‘Ink and Mirror Gazing Ceremonies in Modern Egypt’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XXXVI (1916), pp. 37-53.

³⁰ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Chapter One.

editing the *Pioneer* newspaper in Allahabad, India, in 1879 when he met Madame Blavatsky and fell under the spell of Theosophy. *Esoteric Buddhism*, first published in 1883, was the second, and more coherent, of two bestselling books in which Sinnett announced the Theosophical doctrine, conveying teachings supposedly given to Blavatsky by her mysterious ‘Mahatmas’ – chief among them one ‘Kuthumi’ or ‘Koot Hoomi Lal Sing’.

Popular it may have been, but *Esoteric Buddhism* was by no means easy reading. Nor had it much to do with Buddhism as usually understood. Starting from an explanation of seven ‘principles’ of which the human being was composed, it went on to explain that our planet is one of seven ‘globes’, of which only two others, Mars and Mercury, are visible to human sight, the rest being too subtle for our senses to register. Each person—or ‘spiritual monad’—must be reincarnated many times in succession on each of the seven worlds, gradually becoming more refined and spiritually mature in life after life. The ‘round’ of the seven worlds must be made not once but very many times; for each individual must also be born seven times, on each world, in each one of seven races, each race having within it seven ‘sub-races’, and each of those in turn seven ‘branch-races’. Moreover, one life in any of these states may not be enough; many may be required. Spiritual evolution thus requires vast timescales.

Sinnett suggested that to grasp the scheme more easily, the reader might visualise the system of worlds as

a system of towers standing on a plain – towers each of many stories [*sic*] and symbolizing the scale of perfection – the spiritual monad performs a spiral progress round and round the series, passing through each tower, every time it comes round to it, at a higher level than before.³¹

None of this, Sinnett claimed, was incompatible with science. Darwin’s theory of evolution was simply ‘a small part’ of ‘the vast natural truth’. Parts of the scheme were expressed in terms which today read shockingly: – ‘the degenerate Chinaman’ and other ‘fallen, degraded

³¹ Sinnet, *Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 34.

semblances of humanity ... Malaysians, Mongolians, Tibetans, Javanese, &c.&c.’ – were, though it was not very clear how this fitted the logic of Sinnett’s scheme, remnants of ancient civilisations which had perished in the past. Reassuringly for Indian and European readers, according to Sinnett, ‘the highest people now on earth (spiritually) ... are the Aryan Asiatics, the highest race (physical intellectuality[sic]) is the last sub-race of the fifth – yourselves, the white conquerors.’³²

Spiritualistic phenomena were also discussed. In the interval between incarnations, Sinnett explained, spirits experienced a period of dreamy recuperation called ‘Devachan’, during which they could be contacted by a medium or sensitive person, who might then speak, or perform ‘psychography’ (automatic writing), on their behalf; though the spirit in Devachan would be quite unaware of this. Moreover, some of the psychic energy of a dead person might remain in the world for a time as a ‘shell’. Such a shell, though quite without independent consciousness,

will perceive... whatever he can perceive through the borrowed principles of the medium, ... but this will not carry him beyond the range of the perceptive faculties of the medium, or of some one else present in the circle. Hence the often rational and sometimes highly intelligent answers he may give, and hence, also, his invariably complete oblivion of all things unknown to that medium or circle[.]³³

Thus, the shell ‘knows’ only what is in the memories and perceptions of the medium or the immediate circle; the shell’s apparent personality ‘is just as likely to reflect some quite different personality, caught from the medium’s mind.’

Sinnett’s worldview even found room for elemental spirits, ‘those semi-intelligent creatures of the astral light, who belong to a wholly different kingdom of Nature from ourselves’. But he was reticent:

knowledge concerning the elementals ... is scrupulously withheld by the students of occultism. To possess such knowledge is to wield power ... it is by command over the elementals that some of the greatest physical feats of adeptship are accomplished[.]³⁴

³² Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 29, 58.

³³ Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 98.

³⁴ Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 96-7.

Here for a moment the heavy pseudo-Oriental façade slipped, to reveal a link with the world of Western occultism. A second such moment occurred when Sinnett quoted:

‘to be immortal in good one must identify oneself with God; to be immortal in evil with Satan. These are the two poles of the world of souls; between these two poles vegetate and die without remembrance the useless portion of mankind’

– attributing the words, in a footnote, to ‘Éliphas Lévi’, pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant (1810-75), an influential French writer on ceremonial magic.

The summary of Sinnett’s book which Charles Johnston presented at the Society’s first meeting, and afterwards published in the *Dublin University Review*, was considerably more coherent than the book itself. Though Yeats (unlike Johnston) never became a committed Theosophist, aspects of *Esoteric Buddhism* would stay with him. Meanwhile, in 1885 the stir made by Theosophy and its new converts at Trinity was enough to inspire a university wit with some satirical verses:

I’m an Esoterical swell,
A boss of the Buddhists as well,
A Theosophistico-
Occulto-Mystico-
Koot Hoomi Lal Singhi swell.

I can talk of Blavatsky’s sweet bell,
Of the ‘Brothers’ a lot I can tell,
For I’m an Electrico-
Psycho-Eclectico-
Koot Hoomi Lal Singhi swell.

I chum with the Yankee Colonel,*
In Sanskrit I read, write and spell,
For I’m a Buddhistico-
Yoge-o-Mystico-
Koot Hoomi Lal Singhi swell.³⁵

* Colonel Olcott.

³⁵ ‘The Young Buds: T.C.D.’, *Dublin University Review*, July 1885, p. 163.

(iii)

And then there was George Russell. Two years younger than Yeats, who had met him at the Art Schools, he was remarkable because ‘he did not paint the model as we tried to do, for some other image rose always before his eyes (a Saint John in the Desert I remember), and ... he spoke to us of his visions.’³⁶ At first Yeats found him ‘almost unintelligible. He seemed incapable of coherent thought, and perhaps was so at certain moments.’³⁷ He would spend long periods almost without speaking: the Yeats family’s maid had already spotted him passing in the street and nicknamed him ‘the Strayed Angel’. As an artist – he was a part-time student – he had an astonishing fluency of technique:

We copied the model laboriously, [whilst] he would draw without research into the natural form ... but I can remember the almost scared look and the half-whisper of a student, now a successful sculptor, who said, pointing to the modelling of a shoulder, ‘That is too easy, a great deal too easy!’ For with brush and pencil he was too coherent.³⁸

Despite his oddness, the other students were awed by him:

we never derided him, ... and we would ‘gush’ when we spoke of him, as men do when they praise something incomprehensible. But when he painted there was no difficulty in comprehending. How could that ease and rapidity of composition, so far beyond anything that we could attain to, belong to a man whose words seemed often without meaning?³⁹

Russell, an Ulsterman by birth, worked, not very happily, as a clerk in a Dublin store.

Brought up in a Protestant household where a strong emphasis was placed upon moral propriety, Russell had lost faith in – or more precisely, rejected – Christianity at the age of fourteen, when it struck him that ‘God had no right to punish him for not doing what he had never promised to undertake.’⁴⁰ Not that he had any very heinous sins in mind; but the principle simply seemed to him wrong. Vividly imaginative from childhood, in his late teens

³⁶ *Au* p. 80.

³⁷ *Au* p. 240.

³⁸ *Au* p. 240-1.

³⁹ *Au* p. 241.

⁴⁰ Henry Somerfield, *That Myriad-Minded Man: A Biography of George William Russell, “A.E.”, 1867-1935*, Gerrad’s Cross: Colin Smythe, 1975, p. 5.

– though the dates he indicates are somewhat contradictory⁴¹ – he had found himself overwhelmed by spontaneous visions in which

The visible world became like a tapestry blown and stirred by winds behind it. If it would but raise for an instant I knew I could be in Paradise.... Every flower was a word, a thought. The grass was speech; the trees were speech; the waters were speech; the winds were speech....I listened with my whole being, and then these apparitions would fade away and I would be the mean and miserable boy once more.⁴²

Among his visions were figures he believed to be the gods of ancient Ireland:

one warm summer day lying idly on the hillside,... I felt a fiery heart throb...and I heard first a music as of bells going away, away into that wondrous underland whither, as legend relates, the Danaan gods withdrew; and then the heart of the hills was opened to me, and I knew that there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palaces of light[.]⁴³

Such experiences would recur exuberantly throughout his life: Russell's visual imagination was evidently as strong as most people's external visual perception, and spontaneous visions of gods, heroes and spirits frequently presented themselves to him (though their garb and demeanour, to judge by his paintings, owed a good deal to Blake and Pre-Raphaelite art). They also inspired him to write his first poems. It was probably in 1884, when he was seventeen and Yeats nineteen, that Yeats noticed him at the Art Schools. They became lifelong friends.⁴⁴

Russell discovered *Esoteric Buddhism* around the same time as Yeats, who may indeed have introduced him to it. Entranced by Sinnett's intricate vision of cosmic evolution, he quickly became a convinced Theosophist – though he didn't yet join the Theosophical Society – and even started to proselytise: Yeats recalled him lending a book called *Light on the Path* (an introduction to Theosophy for 'those who are ignorant of the eastern wisdom') to 'a strange mad pious' fellow-student at the Art School who 'used to come sometimes with a daisy chain round his neck'. It was typical of Russell to choose the least mentally-stable

⁴¹ George Russell ('A.E.'), *The Candle of Vision*, New York: University Books, 1965, pp. 4, 16, 39.

⁴² Russell, *Candle of Vision*, p. 5.

⁴³ Russell, *Candle of Vision*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Russell, *Candle of Vision*, p. 16.

person present to convert, but he got what he deserved: the student ‘stayed away for several days and then came one day looking very troubled. He gave the book back saying, “You will drift into a penumbra”.’⁴⁵ Whatever this was supposed to mean, it was somehow prophetic: Russell’s poetry and art would not develop, remaining always attractively unfocused.

Perhaps fearing parental disapproval, Russell did not join the Dublin Hermetic Society,⁴⁶ but he threw himself into the occult investigations started by Yeats and Johnston. In the winter of 1886-7 the friends were studying not only Theosophy and Reichenbach but also Éliphas Lévi’s *Mysteries of Magic*, and experimenting with ‘thought transference, materialization, and astral travel.’⁴⁷ *Mysteries of Magic*, a compilation from ‘six large volumes’ of Lévi’s, edited and translated by the English occultist A.E. Waite, appeared only at the very end of the year,⁴⁸ so it looks as if the friends, avid for magical guidance, must have pounced on it as soon as it was published. They may have been a little disappointed: the book is long on theory but distinctly short on practical instruction. However, Yeats must have been cheered by Waite’s Introduction, which explained that Lévi’s system ‘reduces God to a sensible and rational hypothesis, and it gives no proof of the soul’s immortality’.⁴⁹ In fact, wrote Waite, ‘this teaching aims a death-blow at all exoteric theologies’;⁵⁰ it taught ‘the secret of the subjection of the sphinx of human liberty, the serpent of passionate desire, the Baphomet of superstitions, not by destruction but by making all and each perform unconsciously the will of the adept.’ These are the means, Waite explained, ‘by which cataclysms are caused and by which the world is renewed.’⁵¹ Magic promised power.

⁴⁵ *Au* p. 468.

⁴⁶ Brown, *That Myriad-Minded Man*, *AE*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ Peter Kuch, *Yeats and A.E.: ‘the antagonism that unites dear friends’*: Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983, p. 53, citing Denson MS 9967, 3, to C.C.Coates, n.d.; and MS 9967, 5, to same, Feb 1887.

⁴⁸ *Mysteries of Magic* was announced in Redway’s September 1886 catalogue, and published in December; see R.A. Gilbert, *A.E. Waite: A Bibliography*, Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1983, B1(a).

⁴⁹ Alfred Edward Waite, ed., *The Mysteries of Magic: A Digest of the Writings of Éliphas Lévi*, London: George Redway, 1886, p. xli.

⁵⁰ *Mysteries of Magic*, p. xix.

⁵¹ *Mysteries of Magic*, p. xl-xli.

At this stage the group's appetite for magic seems to have been omnivorous and a little confused: Russell boasted to a friend that he was trying a 'delightful' experiment which has often been done before by Adepts and black magicians. It is to try and separate my astral body consciously from my physical body. When I can do this I can wander away with the speed of thought from land to land over the world.⁵²

The notion (actually mistaken) that he was doing things typically done by 'black' magicians seems not to have bothered him at all.

(iv)

How closely these experiments were connected with the Dublin Hermetic Society is uncertain. But, returning to the realm of events that can be dated, the Society was about to perform an important service by inviting Madame Blavatsky's Indian envoy, Mohini Mohun (or Mohan) Chatterji (or Chatterjee)⁵³ to Dublin. Chatterji's role was to spread the word about Theosophy in the United Kingdom, before Blavatsky's own arrival – and if necessary to mount some defence of her, since she had recently been accused of faking psychic phenomena. The *Dublin University Review* of August 1885 had announced a possible visit by 'the celebrated Mr. Mohini...towards the end of the year';⁵⁴ it was arranged by Charles Johnston, who had visited the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society that summer.

Mohini Chatterji came for 'a few days'⁵⁵ or 'a week'⁵⁶ and gave talks as well as engaging in private discussion. He visited the Contemporary Club, a recently-founded debating club frequented by Yeats and his father, as well as by many Trinity College luminaries;⁵⁷ and the young poet was a reverential listener at Oldham's house, where Chatterji stayed, besieged by visitors. He remembered how Chatterji

⁵² Kuch, *Yeats and A.E.*, p. 53, citing Denson MS 99672,2, to C.C.Coates, n.d.

⁵³ All the variant spellings occur on the title pages of his books; Chatterji is, by a small majority, the spelling most often found, so it is used here.

⁵⁴ *Dublin University Review*, August 1885, p. 66.

⁵⁵ *Au* p. 91.

⁵⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', *The Speaker*, 14 April 1900, pp. 40-41.

⁵⁷ Three sketches of Chatterji by J.B. Yeats were among drawings lent by the Contemporary Club for the 1901 exhibition of work by Nathaniel Hone and JBY; Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, p. 232.

chaffed me good-humouredly because he said I came at breakfast and began some question that was interrupted by the first caller, waited in silence till ten or eleven at night when the last caller had gone, and finished my question.⁵⁸

He found Chatterji ‘a handsome young man with the typical face of Christ’ and ‘beautiful, as only an Eastern is beautiful’;⁵⁹ when he talked, he gave the impression that for him ‘all thought [was] a flight into the heart of truth’. Fifteen years later, Yeats would write that ‘I, at any rate, owe more [to him] than to any book,’⁶⁰ and he remembered Chatterji’s teaching for a lifetime.⁶¹ It was, Yeats recalled,

my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless. Consciousness, he taught, does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion and can change in height and depth.⁶²

In other words, it introduced the idea that there are *levels* of consciousness. Moreover, Chatterji’s teaching would be the source of at least two poems, one of them among Yeats’s finest.

Chatterji (1858-1936), a Bengali Brahmin lawyer who would later practise as a barrister in Bombay (now Mumbai), had joined the Theosophical Society in the early 1880s. He became a prolific author.⁶³ His translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* would be published by Trübner of London in 1887, about eighteen months after Yeats met him. Within four years he would publish a translation of *The Offering of Srimat Devendranath Tagore*, a collection of

⁵⁸ *Au* p. 92.

⁵⁹ *Au* p. 92.

⁶⁰ Yeats, ‘The Way of Wisdom’, p. 40.

⁶¹ Chatterji made such an impression that fragments of his teaching continued to swim up in Yeats’s mind for the rest of his life. In 1887 he quoted ‘the wise Indians’ (presumably Chatterji) on the passions; ‘Kanva on Himself’, embodying his teachings on reincarnation, appeared in 1889. Yeats first published his recollections of Chatterji in an essay, ‘The Way of Wisdom’, in 1900, revised in 1908 as ‘The Pathway’, for his *Collected Works in Verse and Prose*. In 1909 he wrote ‘I have remembered today that the Brahmin Mohini said to me, “When I was young I was happy. I thought truth was something that could be conveyed from one man’s mind to another. I know now that it is a state of mind.”’ (*Dramatis Personae*, p. 464.) In 1926 he discussed with Sturge Moore the view that ‘Everything we perceive “including so-called illusions, exists in the real world”’, explaining that the idea ‘always fascinated me for I learnt it from a Brahman when I was eighteen, and believed it till Blake drove it out of my head.’ (Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, London: Faber, 1954, p. 217). His poem ‘Mohini Chatterjee’ was published in 1929; and in 1935, working with Purohit Swami on translating the *Upanishads*, he wrote to Chatterji to thank him for ‘the wealth of talk’ which ‘gave me indeed my first philosophical exposition of life’. (Foster II p. 536). Chatterji’s influence was lifelong.

⁶² *Au* p. 92.

⁶³ Shri, ‘Yeats and Mohini Chatterjee’, *YA* XI, 1995, p. 61.

moral and spiritual maxims; in 1899 *Words of Blessedness. Being Outlines of the Teachings of Paramhansa Sivanarayan Swami*, and in 1904 versions of two far more important works, the *Viveka-chūdāmaṇi or Crest-Jewel of Wisdom* and the *Ātmānātma-Viveka or Discrimination of Spirit and Not-Spirit*, both attributed to Śaṅkara, the 8th century BCE Indian philosopher of Advaita Vedanta. In 1907 would come *Indian Spirituality, or The Travels and Teachings of Sivanarayan*, an account of the teachings and adventures of his own spiritual guide (it is surely himself whom Chatterji modestly portrays as ‘a busy lawyer, whose English education had taken away his reverence for the religious forms of his country’.)⁶⁴ Quite possibly, involvement with Theosophy was a stage in Chatterji’s finding his way back to the Indian tradition.

That ‘English education’ certainly showed: Yeats (prone to use book titles symbolically) portrays him arriving ‘with a little bag in his hand and *Marius the Epicurean* in his pocket’.⁶⁵ If so, Chatterji was certainly up to date: *Marius* had appeared just a few months previously. So the young guru was aware of Pater’s novel, with its aesthetic creed advocating a ‘visionary reception of everyday life... [as] a revelation in colour and form’ and as ‘an end in itself: a kind of music, all-sufficing to the duly trained ear, even as it died out on the ear.’⁶⁶ But what did Chatterji teach? The best (indeed, only) evidence is in Yeats’s recollections⁶⁷ (written almost fifteen years later) and Chatterji’s own article ‘The Common Sense of Theosophy’ in the May 1886 *Dublin University Review*,⁶⁸ which is probably an edited version of a talk given during his visit. Yeats admitted that he could not recall ‘his philosophy as a whole’ but quoted scraps of Chatterji’s teaching with confidence: ‘I remember these phrases and these little fragments of argument quite clearly, for their charm and their unexpectedness

⁶⁴ Mohini Mohan Chatterji, *Indian Spirituality; or, The Travels and Teachings of Sivanarayan*, London: Luzac, 1907. [page number needed]

⁶⁵ Yeats, ‘The Way of Wisdom’, p. 40.

⁶⁶ *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, vol. I p. 58, vol. II p. 240. [page numbers of 1st edition needed]

⁶⁷ Yeats, ‘The Way of Wisdom’, p. 40.

⁶⁸ *Dublin University Review*, May 1886, pp. 386-96.

has made them cling to the memory'. Some of his *dicta* were indeed memorable. Yeats remembered Chatterji telling his young hearers, for example, that his father, 'the first of his family to leave his native village for a thousand years, had repeated over and over as he lay dying, "The West is dying because of its restlessness."' And when 'somebody' (Yeats himself?) asked if he should pray,

he said, one should say before sleeping: –

'I have lived many lives. It may be that I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again.'⁶⁹

When a school teacher asked about the education of children, he was told to 'teach them fairy tales, and that they did not possess even their own bodies' – a traditional view in Indian thought, since we cannot prevent our bodies from ageing, becoming sick and dying, and must eventually leave them; they are thus not really 'ours'. And he reinforced Yeats's belief in the spiritual importance of poetry, announcing, 'I have thought much about it, and have never been able to discover any reason why prose should exist.' He was not above performing healing rituals: he claimed to have cured a woman in London (at her husband's request) of neuralgia, having first checked that she had genuine faith in him, by making a circle round her and reciting a poem in Sanskrit; reciting the poem to Yeats and his friends, he 'was disappointed because we did not know by the sound that it was a description of the spring.'

He refused to give his own religion a name – again, a characteristically Indian position, since all spiritual insight is simply *dharma* (a word Yeats does not use), a perception of truth; though 'if one urged him too impetuously he would look embarrassed and say "this body is a Brahmin. "' – meaning that in his current incarnation he happened to be a Brahmin, having been born as such, but that this had no ultimate significance.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', p. 40.

⁷⁰ Pace P.S. Sri, 'Yeats and Mohini Chatterjee', *YA* XI, 1995, p. 65, who misunderstands at this point, perhaps because he misquotes ('the body is a Brahmin').

To venture beyond Yeats's recollections, we may assume that Chatterji's teaching was based on Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy of the translations he would later publish. According to these, the only reality is Brahma – the ultimate, God. In our ignorance, however, we fail to realise that 'the Material Universe [is] false, and illusive ... and Brahma ... the only reality'.⁷¹ As a result we cling to things, including the body, and we suffer. But once we realise our own identity with Brahma – the fact that Brahma is our true 'self' – then our suffering (including the pain arising from countless reincarnations) will cease. 'Whoever knows ... his self as one with Brahma, which is eternal, non-dual and unconditioned, attains *moksha* [liberation].'⁷²

From this point of view, to argue that 'even our desire for immortality was no better than our other desires', and that 'prayer ... was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom' was almost, if not completely, orthodox. But there are indications that Chatterji's views at this time were affected by Western thought. Yeats remembered him

proving by many subtle and elaborate arguments that 'art for art's sake' was the only sinless doctrine of art, for any other would hide the shadow of the world as it exists in the mind of God by shadows of the accidents and illusions of life, and was a blasphemy; ... and [that] every soul wavered between ... the desire to possess things, to make them a portion of its egotism, and a delight in just and beautiful things for their own sake[.]⁷³

If Chatterji said any of this, then he was equating the Hindu's contemplative quest for Brahma with a Western aesthete's contemplation of beauty, and expressing it in terms ('the shadow of the world as it exists in the mind of God') borrowed from Neoplatonism. Possibly Yeats's memory was at fault here and he mixed in his own later ideas. Returning to Chatterji's advice on bedtime reflections, one recalls his supposed statement, 'Everything that has been shall be again.' Did he really say that? In the Vedantist view, endless reincarnation

⁷¹ *Ātmānātma-Viveka or Discrimination of Spirit and Not-Spirit* by Shankarācharya, tr. Mohini M. Chatterji, Bombay: Rajaram Tukaram, 1904, p. 6.

⁷² Chatterji, *Ātmānātma-Viveka*, p. 23.

⁷³ Yeats, 'The Way of Wisdom', p. 40.

does not mean endless repetition. Rather, the words suggest Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. Again, Yeats may simply have misremembered.

Chatterji returned to London after a few evidently intense days. But the following May his article 'The Common Sense of Theosophy' appeared in the *Dublin University Review*.⁷⁴ Writing now as public spokesman for the Theosophical Society, Chatterji no doubt had to toe the official line. Much of his article is taken up with refuting the charge that Theosophy is a patchwork of ideas from other religions. 'Theosophy is not eclecticism, which is a mosaic,' he writes, 'while Wisdom-Religion is an organic whole. Theosophy is like an abstract mathematical formula of which each religion is a particular application.' And 'being the inner truth itself, Theosophy regards religions as various descriptions of that truth.'⁷⁵ A neat argument; but it is his discussion of reincarnation that is really startling, for he explains that 'the ego successively incarnates itself on this earth until it has collected all experiences that life on this planet can offer.'⁷⁶ This notion – reincarnation as a process of acquiring all possible experience – is neither typically Hindu nor Theosophical, but aesthetic. In his famous 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*, Pater had reflected, 'A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses?'⁷⁷ Here was Chatterjee's answer; and how appealing it must have seemed to a young man hungry for life!

It was probably Chatterji who inspired Yeats to 'steep himself in...Sanskrit plays'⁷⁸, though in reality he seems to have read only the most famous one, Kalidasa's *Śakuntalā: A Sanskrit Drama, in Seven Acts*, translated by Monier-Williams. At any rate, he derived the name Kanva from it (after the play's wise hermit Kanva, who educates the heroine), and

⁷⁴ Chatterji, 'The Common Sense of Theosophy', *DUR* May 1886, pp. 386-396.

⁷⁵ Chatterji, 'The Common Sense of Theosophy', p.389.

⁷⁶ Chatterji, 'The Common Sense of Theosophy', p. 393.

⁷⁷ [page number from pre-1885 edition needed]

⁷⁸ C.L. Wrenn, *W.B. Yeats: A Literary Study*, reprinted from the *Durham University Journal*, London and Durham, 1920, p. 12.

soon after Chatterji's visit tried to express his view of reincarnation in a poem called 'Kanva on Himself':

Now wherefore hast thou tears innumeros?
Hast thou not known all sorrow and delight
Wandering of yore in forests rumorous,
Beneath the flaming eyeballs of the night,

And as a slave been wakeful in the halls
Of Rajas and Mahrajas without number?...

Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees
Of myriads of beloveds, and on thine
Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees
In other lives?⁷⁹

He would publish the poem in 1889, but would grow dissatisfied and discard it. It would be more than forty years before the teaching would inspire the triumphant climax of his great poem 'Mohini Chatterjee':

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
'Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
"I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything,
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain."'

That he might set at rest
A boy's turbulent days
Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these.
I add in commentary,
'Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied—
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied—
Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade,
Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade

⁷⁹ VP 723-4.

May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.’

Chatterji himself proved rather too eager for experience: excessively close involvement with Theosophical ladies in London would lead to his being sent back to India, where he resumed his law practice, became a Freemason,⁸⁰ and published his Vedanta translations.

And so by May 1887, when the twenty-two-year-old William Butler Yeats moved to London to join his mother, his siblings, and his talented, impecunious artist father at their new home in South Kensington, two essential elements of his spiritual life – Western occultism and Indian philosophy – were already in place. But there was a third element, which would prove even more fundamental. It was the tradition of Irish legend and rural folklore, amidst which much of his childhood had been spent, at Sligo, in the west of Ireland. To this we must now turn.

[This chapter will form part of a work in progress, *Mysterious Wisdom: The Spiritual Life and Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, to be published in due course by Oxford University Press.]

⁸⁰ He is presumably the Mohini Mohun Chatterjee, solicitor, who, according to Lane’s *Masonic Records*, was initiated into the Marine Lodge, Calcutta, in 1889.