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DOBBS AND THE TIGER: THE YEATSES' INTIMATE OCCULT

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Abstract

The mediumistic relationship between W. B. Yeats and his wife George (née Hyde Lees) is an important guide to the creative work produced by the Irish poet after their marriage in 1917. Their unusual collaboration illuminates the esoteric philosophy expounded in the two very different versions of Yeats's book *A Vision* (1925 and 1937). It is also theoretically interesting in itself, not only in the early period when the automatic experiments produced the "system" expounded in *A Vision*, but also in the 1920s and 1930s, when the Yeateses' relationship had matured into an astonishingly productive mature partnership. This essay analyses symbols the Yeateses themselves used to conceive of their joint work, particularly the symbolic structures and constructed selves of the collaborators, and particularly in the later period. The authors' own terminology and understanding shed light on their joint authorship; that collaboration produced not only texts but also meaning, as can be seen by the example of the poem "Michael Robartes and the Dancer."

Keywords: W. B. Yeats; Collaboration; George Yeats; Spiritualism.

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Much is still to be learned about the complicated, astonishingly productive, and mutually beneficial collaborative relationship between W. B. Yeats and his wife, George (née Hyde Lees). Their collaboration is fascinating in itself and also important as a guide to the poetry, drama, and other work produced by Yeats after their marriage in 1917, the late period that includes much of his strongest work. A good deal is already known about their joint production of the esoteric philosophy expounded in Yeats's book *A Vision*, and scholars routinely nod to *A Vision* in discussions of some of the major works related to its theoretical system. Nevertheless, George Yeats remains an occluded figure in analyses of, for example, poems like "Leda and the Swan" or "The Second Coming," or plays like *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *Calvary*, or *The Resurrection*. Reading Yeats's late work with the collaboration in mind produces different results from other interpretations.

Some of the reasons for the ongoing misconceptions have to do with the difficulty of coming to terms with the collaboration itself. To some degree, Yeats's fruitful collaborations, notably those with women, still require more scholarly attention, despite several generations of distinguished research. It might even be said that his work with Florence Farr, Lady Gregory, and Ninette de Valois, among others, still outpaces his critics, both in terms of the open acknowledgement of others' roles and also exploration of the possibilities inherent in joint labour. The collaboration with George Yeats was by far the most profound, but she was not a typical co-author, if there is such a thing: she "received" information mediumistically, in an intense experiment with psychomantic writing and other forms of spiritualist communication that continued over a number of years.¹ Nor does she fit well into a second-wave feminist model of a silenced helpmate, despite the imbalance of power implicit in the Yeatses' marriage. Their occult collaboration, which began on their honeymoon in late 1917, is still often misunderstood.² Documentary sources for the several years' worth of intense mediumship, meaning the automatic writing and related notebooks and files, have been available in edited form for some years now, though the letters between the couple have only recently been published.³ Other sources, such as the many diagrams in the automatic writing (which were described but not always reproduced in the edition of the "Vision papers") are available only in archives. Also difficult of access are George Yeats's marginal comments in the works she and her husband consulted in the long and difficult process of revising *A Vision* (published first in 1925 and then, in a drastically revised form, in 1937), as well as many drafts of *A Vision* itself. George Yeats's active role as collaborator certainly did not end with the finish of the busiest period of automatic reception (roughly 1917–1921).

This essay will fix its attention not so much on the textual results of the collaboration as on what the Yeatses believed to be happening between them. Amidst an array of theoretical lenses through which this work can be viewed, this essay will focus on symbols that the Yeatses themselves used to conceive of their joint work. The poet had long been committed to symbol and also to ritual, performance, and the creation of personal and group identities. His wife was a generation younger

than he and brought to their marriage newer ideas about perception, memory, and psychology, as well as a passion for modern art. Both Yeatses were practicing occultists who were keenly aware of the blurred lines between belief and reality; both were deeply engaged with theatre (W. B. as playwright and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, George with keen interest in contemporary European drama). For many reasons, then, it is likely that the symbolic structures and constructed selves of the collaborators are especially relevant to an understanding of their collaboration. The essay will consider two categories of such symbols: first, representations of the Yeatses as individuals, and second, joint or linked images. A final section will look at the title poem of the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, suggesting that such an alternate reading is triggered by awareness of such symbolic single, double, and multiple self-identities.

Most of the scholarship to date concentrates on the first few years of the marriage and reception/invention of the automatic script. This generative period, when ideas and methods were not yet fixed, is indeed exciting, as it was to the couple when “overwhelmed by miracle,” as Yeats described it later. However, letters especially from the period when the patterns had been established—the later 1920s and 1930s, particularly after the first edition of *A Vision* was published and the long period of revision was underway—show a relationship that is strikingly full of ease, intellectual engagement, practical workability, and fun.⁴

An emphasis on the two collaborators is pertinent insofar as their joint work was irremediably personal, even intimate. The theory of human psychology, history, aesthetics, and reincarnation as presented in *A Vision* is careful to distance itself from the lives either of the writer who composed the book or the medium, whose contribution is hidden almost entirely, from the 1925 version especially. The tone of both editions implies objective knowledge of a system that is itself universal, operating on the grand scales of human existence over many incarnations, history over thousands of years, and cycles that include the movements of planets—certainly not the daily lives of a wife and husband. However, the system itself was anything but impersonal, either in reception or implication. An elaborate and obviously false story of origins in the 1925 book is replaced in 1937 with an Introduction that breaks the silence about George Yeats’s role in the genesis of the material:

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. “No”, was the answer, “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.” (AVB 7)

This account is more or less corroborated by the documents. The first preserved script is a page headed in Mrs. Yeats’s ordinary, neat hand, recording

the date (November 5 1917) and the participants (“Present G.Y. & W B. Y.”). Beneath are two horizontal lines followed by an end stop as if they stand for some unrecorded statement, followed by lines of flattened and elongated handwriting, in which phrases and partial sentences are joined together across word breaks. The breaks have been marked, probably as the couple read back over the writing afterwards. Astrological symbols of moon and sun, Saturn and Venus, interrupt the words. On subsequent pages, diagrams of concentric circles and triangles appear, along with loops and more words trailing off into horizontal lines. The last line reads like someone signing off an Internet chat: “Goodbye.” (NLI MS 36,253/1, *YVP* 1: 55). On one of the pages from the early days of the experiment appears a large word NO, perhaps a response to a spoken question, and a further answer: “I give you philosophy to give you new images you ought not to use it as philosophy and it is not only given for you—.”⁵

New images did arrive, as promised in the original message, as did metaphors for poetry. Yeats did not arguably obey the injunction not to use the system “as philosophy,” unless by philosophy is meant an abstract set of propositions that has little to do with immediate, lived experience (his late period is saturated with the ideas from the system, from spinning gyres to an interest in Byzantine culture to conflict between positive and negative forces). The final phrase of the automatic communication is also important. The images, metaphors, and philosophy were “not only given for you,” meaning, in my reading, that they were given, (at least initially) for both people sitting at the table, the man proposing questions and the woman writing down answers that led to further questions. More generally, the system denies insularity to any “you.” Doubling or otherness characterises any entity, whether that entity is the man W. B. Yeats or anyone (or anything) else. The Yeatses’ system also emphatically blends imaginative or intellectual abstractions with practical advice and personal implications, from daily routine to marital relations and starting a family.

An aspect of the system that must be noted, although more questions are raised than answered thereby, is that it arrived collaboratively between not only the two living human beings but also by a variety of communicators: controls, guides, “frustrators” (tricksters or malevolent beings trying to damage the work), personages from other lifetimes, and daimons (personal opposites of every person or spirit). The one is “not only” one but many; the universal and the individual are always aspects of each other.

1. Individual Names

Even for non-occultists or poets, it is clear that calling something by its name has power. In some ancient cultures, real names were secret, to be revealed only in situations worthy of the knowledge (a bit like issues to do with Internet privacy now). In the book of Genesis, for example, God creates things and names them, that act establishing God’s power over them as much as the creation itself. When the last creation, the human being, is given power over its fellows,

that authority is given by a similar means: the man Adam, whose name means something like the red of the clay from which he is made, is given the task of naming everything else. The power of names is common in other traditions, of course, from ancient Egypt to Scandinavia, shamanism to Hinduism. Names are important in the Kabbalistic tradition that has been tremendously influential in Western esotericism. And naming was also a feature of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the magical society to which both Yeatses belonged. (In fact, W. B. Yeats was the sponsor for Georgie Hyde Lees at her induction in 1914, when she was twenty-one years of age. By that time, he was a senior member of the Order, having progressed up its grades for nearly a quarter century.)

The Yeatses, practicing occultists and devotées of language, knew better than most that a name is both essence and construction. It is nature and artifice, both invented and real. A person's name is something applied, like makeup to a face or, to use a crucially Yeatsian term, a mask over it. Once applied, though, it changes the person wearing it. People do not present themselves to the world naked. We always "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," as T. S. Eliot, speaking as J. Alfred Prufrock, wrote in a poem published in 1915, the year after Hyde Lees' induction into the Golden Dawn under the sponsorship of her future husband (4). Masks, as Yeats uses the concept throughout his work, can be seen as both constructed and also essential. They come into existence seemingly at random, and at the same time are the result of destiny or fate, something that has been decided independently of the human beings wearing them. In other words, masks are both *chance* and *choice*, the terms Yeats uses in two poems. One of those poems is "Solomon and the Witch," his greatest poetic tribute to his wife. Or as he puts it in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, written after he had met Georgie Hyde Lees but before their destinies seemed to be entwined, "accident is destiny" (*Later Essays* 11).

The motto of W. B. Yeats in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is a clear example of a name that functions like a mask. Like all Order mottos, it was the name by which members were addressed by their fellows; it is a symbolic description chosen by the aspirant to represent the higher self that her spiritual progress would increasingly reveal. Yeats as adept was DEDI, an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *Demon est Deus Inversus*, meaning the devil, or demon, or daimon (a little god in Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions) is God inverted. As a young man, Yeats liked the mask-like quality of this two-sided adage, which is relatively common in Kabbalistic discipline. He probably encountered the phrase during his time as a member of the Theosophical Society. *Demon Est Deus Inversus* is the title of a chapter of the book *The Secret Doctrine* by Madame Blavatsky, the founder and centre of the Theosophical Society (411–24). Blavatsky's chapter goes to great length to explain that Good and Evil are both aspects of a greater unity, the dual faces of which are represented by the whole motto. The phrase also brings to mind the Hermetic maxim "as above, so below." Another appeal for the young poet was doubtless the Blakean echo: *The Secret Doctrine* appeared in the same year as Yeats's idiosyncratic but groundbreaking edition of William Blake, co-edited with Edwin Ellis. Yeats doubtless appreciated the sense of living into

Blakean Contraries as well as occult truth.

For her part, Georgie Hyde Lees as initiate in the Golden Dawn chose a motto that was not nearly so well known. Hers was *Nemo Sciat*: Let No One, or No Man, Know. Its source may be the Vulgate, the tremendously influential Latin translation of the Christian Bible, where it appears twice. Unlike W. B., George was well able to read Latin, so she could have read it there. It is more likely that her attention was drawn to the large number of times the phrase appears in the spiritual writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century scientist-turned-mystic and radical theologian. As a young woman, Hyde Lees read voluminously in most of the important writers from the Western religious and esoteric traditions, and Swedenborg would have been inescapable. To her fellow members in the Order, Miss Hyde Lees was known simply as “Nemo.” The name is, at least in part, a bit of fun: of course, a young woman is “No Man”! Her motto probably also nods towards popular culture, to Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo and also the popular comic strip Little Nemo in Slumberland, which featured a young boy’s fantastic adventures in a dream world—ending each week with him waking up, back in the recognisable waking realm.⁶

George Yeats as Nemo slips similarly from one realm to another. The motto also swerves between being an identifying marker and a sign that indicates the inability of language to signify. In the Hebrew Bible, when Moses asks the name of the god, the deity replies, “I am” (Exodus 3:13). On the other hand, if one asks who this person is, her name essentially responds “I am not” (*Nemo*) or “One cannot say” (*Nemo Sciat*). Further, the motto can be thought of as playing with its own language to suggest a further game. *Nemo Sciat* in its shortened form, *Nemo*, if we think of it as a name, blends back into the total phrase suggestively, swerving from the implication that no one may understand something to the sense that she is the (no) one who alone can do it: Nemo may know.

This magical name of George Yeats certainly suggests anonymity, the kind of thing one might expect of the wife of a famous poet. Indeed, she was happy to remain in the background of his public life; in private, too, in her spirit mediumship she acted as a kind of emptied vessel, transmitting words presumably not her own. At the same time, her motto does not suggest utter effacement, as is appropriate for a woman who was an equal partner in discussions, research, and organisation of the complex of ideas underpinning *A Vision*. Midway through the automatic script, a significant change of name occurs. On 26 February 1919, the first session of script after the birth of the Yeatses’ first child (their daughter Anne), the spirit control Thomas of Dorlowitz informed the couple that she was “No longer the medium” but would be called by a “different name / Interpreter” (YVP2 200). A medium aims for erasure; an interpreter is an active creator of meaning. The word suggests etymologically the act of going between (*inter-*) in speaking, explaining, or observing (Greek φραζω). George Yeats is not the final author, but she is clearly part of the process and named as such.

A similar sense is included in the motto name *Nemo Sciat*. To be Nemo is not the same as being nameless. It is to be *named* nameless, an act that alludes to

Homer. In Book IX of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the man-eating giant Cyclops Polyphemos that his name is *Outis*: nobody. Later, when the hero has blinded the Cyclops, Polyphemos calls for help from his neighbours, but when he tells them that no one has hurt him, they suggest it must have been a god and so ignore him. In the story, assumed namelessness is a sign of Odysseus' famous cunning. He is *polytropos*, a man of many turns and devices, a multiplicity, but he is certainly not no one. To assume anonymity is the opposite of being anonymous; on the contrary, it is a sign of the qualities that bring the hero fame.

The Yeatses' Order mottos are only one of a good few names they would have used for each other. He was "Willy" or "WB Yeats," as he usually signed his letters to her—and to others (he signed his letters thus, with initials and surname, even to his closest friends and family members). She is "George" or, quite often, "Dobbs," a nickname from her childhood. Another identifier, from before her marriage, is the figure of a square, which appears often in the correspondence between George and her close friend Dorothy Shakespear, and also in letters with Ezra Pound, who married Dorothy. Other symbols for W. B. include an Eagle, which perhaps has to do with the shape of his nose, as the square may nod towards the shape of her face.

The square is noteworthy as a symbol: its four equal sides might suggest solidity, trustworthiness, and strength. If it were a fence, it would delineate a territory; if a picture frame, it would surround a painting, perhaps (if it were modern work) even define it *as* art. (The word *define* also describes an act of framing: placing boundaries around a concept, as in the Latin word *fnis* from which it derives). Like a square, the Yeatses' system abounds in quaternaries, explicitly mirroring the couple whose marriage and two children make a perfect square.⁷ George Yeats provided for her husband the security and peace for which he yearned. No wonder the automatic script posits that the tower, that square symbolic home that readers of Yeats identify with him, is *her* symbol. W. B. Yeats was attracted to polarities, and his work is full of oppositions: sun and moon, man and woman, peasant and nobility, self and anti-self, artifice and nature, comedy and tragedy, tower and stream, Self and Soul. Four lines seem to have appealed to George Yeats, whose addition to Yeats's binaries often take the form of doubling his twos into fours. Opposites are doubled, forming squares, Xs, sets of two two-part gyres, male and female and their daimonic shadowy opposites, making groups of four. The implication is that any single thing is imagined as including its opposite, but then to see any single such already doubled entity as itself always in relationship with another. Four is the smallest number possible in such a circumstance.

At the same time, a frame or fence or square is in some sense nothing, a space marking the end of something rather than anything itself. A square is a mystery. If the lines are moved 45 degrees, it becomes an X, the two-dimensional representation used in the script and *A Vision* to represent a three-dimensional turning gyre, which never ceases movement and cannot be fixed or completed. W. B. Yeats's imagination inclined towards the representational image; George

Yeats's vision slants into diagrams, lines and shapes that stand for movement.

2. Joint Symbols

Just as symbolic mottos and names reflect some of the ways in which the Yeatses conceived of themselves as individuals, other symbols refer to their marriage. Marriage itself is of course a symbolic state, a linguistic abstraction that exists only insofar as it is commonly agreed upon, and is thus inherently difficult to affix with meaning. Like other stages of human life or relationships between people, from friendship to enmity, marriage differs widely across cultures as well as individuals. To some degree, especially in some periods of social change (like the early years of the twentieth century in Europe), every marriage is unique.

By 1917, W. B. Yeats had been in love for many years (not with George Hyde Lees), and he had created, in part from literary tradition, an elaborate imaginative structure of frustrated love as a poetic condition. Marriage required a very different conceptual and practical environment. To some degree, he (and she) undertook their marriage symbolically. One of the coordinates certainly was that of a working collaboration. In addition to the system of *A Vision*, they created something else while working together for hours each day, week after month after year, receiving then organising ideas, finding ways to express those ideas in words and diagrams—whether in the form of dialogues, expository prose, or in Yeats's plays and poetry that refer back to it. There is evidence that their collaborative work strengthened the bond between them, helping to create a partnership that was strong enough to withstand the pressures that came with very complicated lives and commitments. From the first days of their marriage, the Yeatses explored philosophy and consciousness together, focused on creativity and his creative career. They made and cared for a family. They were lovers, friends, and companions on a deep level. The ring George gave W. B. in 1918 is a symbol of the two Yeatses together: a hawk joined to a butterfly, symbolising the marriage of two kinds of wisdom: piercing thought and aimless joy.⁸

One of the models available to the Yeatses was that of the alchemical *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage. In the alchemical tradition, which became a staple source of symbolism in the Western esoteric tradition, marriage is often used as a symbol of the union of opposing elements in the service of the ultimate goal of refining a base metal (physically or allegorically speaking) into *prima materia* (first matter).⁹ The Yeatses knew much about the long and complex tradition of alchemy from Rosicrucianism, which term refers to the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (1616). Much attention was devoted in hermetic circles to this text, which ends with the symbolic marriage of king and queen, an allegory of the soul and Christ. By the nineteenth century especially, spiritual or theoretical interpretations had almost completely outstripped the physical practice of alchemy, so that symbolic terms—male and female, king and queen, sun and moon—for union leading to purification and wisdom would have been ubiquitous. Interestingly, although the oppositions of the alchemical marriage

suggest heterosexuality, the marriage, like the Ourobos or snake that is also frequently depicted in these terms, is a symbol in which male and female are a unity that transcends the seeming division between two genders. The unity is typically symbolised as a hermaphrodite or doubled gender.

Other symbolic correspondences for marriage included the casting of astrological horoscopes, a routine practice for both of the Yeatses, though the majority in the archives from the period after their marriage cast by themselves (as opposed to commissioned by a professional astrologer) are hers. Many horoscopes are natal charts of individuals, some personally connected to the couple (including their children) and some historical or public figures. Some charts are mundane, cast to help interpret the forces of daily life. Some are predictive, sometimes aiming to find answers to specific questions (such as one from 31 July 1922, during the Irish Civil War, which asks, “Will our bridge [at Ballylee, the tower the Yeatses owned in County Galway] be blown up?” [NLI 36,274/28]).

3. St George and the Tiger

As time went on, and the daily automatic experiments grew into a system based on oppositions and quaternaries, the Yeatses’ relationship matured as well. To read their voluminous correspondence is to watch this process take place. Given that they were quite often apart during the twenty-two years they were married, and given that they were both vivid writers of letters, reading the correspondence is a useful and often entertaining way to fill out an understanding of the text-saturated pair.

One game to play with the letters is to watch salutations or closings. In W. B.’s letters to George, she usually merits a “My dear” at the start and a “Yours affecly” [affectionately] at the end. He is “Dear Willy” most of the time, occasionally “William” and is quite often sent away with “Love.” With a few exceptions, which seem a bit awkward, the tone of the letters is not romantic (a revealing clutch of “My beloved” letters from W. B. move immediately to inquire about details of the renovation of Ballylee, overseen and largely paid for by George).¹⁰ The dominant notes struck are easy, chatty, even gossipy. The clear sense is that the writers are genial friends, depending on each other for news and insistent that news keep coming. Any number of W. B.’s letters include statements like “No letter & I am famished for news” (30 July [1930], *WBV/GY Letters* 220) or “My dear Dobbs: Are you a letter-writer? No youre not” ([13 Nov 1930], *WBV/GY Letters* 230). Now and then, he tells her seriously what her letters bring him: “My dear Dobbs: I thank you for your delightful letter—you are much the best letter writer I know, or have known—your letters have so much unstrained animation, so much natural joyousness” (28 Jan [1932], *WBV/GY Letters* 290).

Whereas Order mottos and alchemical symbols are a bit weighty (despite the play implicit in *Nemo Sciat*), underscoring Yeats’s reputation as poet filled with gravity, the names and symbols that recur in the letters are anything but

somber. They are signs of intimacy and playfulness. This unconstrained quality is itself significant. W. B. Yeats had close friendships with many people, and many of those friendships were with women, but there was only one whom he calls by pet names. George Yeats has more monikers than her famous husband in the correspondence, and not merely because, like most married women in her culture, she lost her maiden name Hyde Lees at her marriage.

Interestingly, she seems to have chosen her own first name. She abandoned Bertha Georgie, her birth name, for George. That earthy single syllable derives from the Greek Γεωργιος, from γεωργος, meaning *farmer*, and, further, from γη, *earth*, and εργον, *work*. A George is grounded, literally, working the earth. St George, the patron saint of England, Malta, Catalonia, and a good number of other places, is of course most famous as a dragonslayer. In iconography, he is usually pictured with the Dragon coiled at his feet. One other beast, a tiger, is another of the symbols for W. B. used by George. The tiger is of course redolent of the Blakean beast burning bright in the forests of the night, about which the poet wonders “What immortal hand or eye, / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Blake 25).

That dragon and tiger, symbols of the Yeatses as individuals and together, enable one final observation, an against-the-grain reading of one of Yeats's poems. The reading is one of many I suggest may become possible by looking at the text through the lens of the Yeatses' symbolic relationship.

Yeats was fond of the adjective *wild*, and he was also fond of claiming the essential wildness of those he loved. Mrs. Yeats was among these, although her animal familiar in his poetry is more likely to be a domestic cat than a wild animal. Even a domestic cat is fundamentally untamed, however, as the poem “The Cat and the Moon” makes plain.¹¹ George Yeats may have been represented by a square, but her symmetry was fearful, exciting, to her husband, as his was to her. He was one of the big cats, as it were. If she was symbolically a square, she was neither the keeper of a cage nor found in one, as the poem “Owen Aherne and His Dancers” puts it (VP 450). Although as the years passed and George had the delicate task of caring for Willy in the face of some shocking bouts of illness, she never wanted to be his keeper. In 1936, she wrote Lily Yeats, W.B.'s sister, “that ‘she feels like a child of five left in charge of a Tiger in a wire cage, and she is tired of being sent for when the Tiger escapes’” (BG 502, Letter from Lily to Ruth Lane-Poole, née Pollexfen, 24 March 1936).

George Yeats did not marry for peace or tranquillity, and certainly not for fame or conquest, but to encounter a brightly burning, mysterious genius in a profound and lifelong partnership. In a late letter, she jokes about all the things she has learned about him by helping a would-be biographer (Oliver H. Edwards) sort through private papers: “. . . lordy I do know so much more than I ever knew about your life! In the last 48 hours I have done more research for ‘data’ than I ever did since I took on with you. I think I did it with great discretion. . . .” Then she drops her light tone: “This is all long-winded and dull to you, but it hasn't been dull to me because all these investigations have quickened my memory of the

strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality that you are. Yours, George” (1 Jan 1935, *WBY/GY Letters* 387).

The poem “Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” a dialogue between the two characters named in the title, was published in the volume of the same name published in 1921. The poem is often read as misogynistic, and as if the two speakers are analogues for Yeats as the male speaker who dominates the conversation and a young woman, based on Iseult Gonne, as the nearly voiceless Dancer.¹² Certainly, *He*, as the male character is named, does not seem to have any great respect for his counterpart *She*. *She*, for her part, says very little, only single lines, though her short ripostes are clever come-backs to his implicit criticism of thinking women. The setting is a museum, and the two are looking at a representation of St George and the Dragon.

He. Opinion is not worth a rush;
 In this altar-piece the knight,
 Who grips his long spear so as to push
 That dragon through the fading light,
 Loved the lady; and it's plain
 The half-dead dragon was her thought,
 That every morning rose again
 And dug its claws and shrieked and fought.
 Could the impossible come to pass
 She would have time to turn her eyes,
 Her lover thought, upon the glass
 And on the instant would grow wise.

She. You mean they argued. (*VP* 385)

He seems to say the dragon is the overwrought thinking of the chained maiden, and that the hero in freeing her liberates her from the burden of mental activity, so she can just be beautiful. *She* responds to him with either naïvety or the kind of fake innocence that is the response of many women to sexist men: her final line, and the final line of the poem, is “They say such different things at school” (*VP* 387). As Edna Longley has remarked, the poem “need not only be read as a dialogue between sexist male and ironical feminist – though, as in ‘Towards Break of Day’, Yeats’s irony seems to half-apologise to real women for the compulsions of his Muse” (Longley 278).

Presenting misogyny as weakness certainly does fruitfully complicate both “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” and “Towards Break of Day” (*VP* 398–9). Here, though, an understanding of the dynamic between the poet and the hidden George Yeats enables a further, queer suggestion. Given the symbolic association between W. B. Yeats and wild beasts or birds of prey, George Yeats with her namesake saint, and wisdom as just such a butterfly-like aimless escape from the hawk-like tortured thought, what if one put a different set of associations into the square frame of the painting represented in the poem, one that imagines demon and deus inverted, and Nemo knowing? In other words, what if the Dancer were identified with the male poet, and the hero with the

woman who fought for much of her life to liberate him, so that he could get away from his tortured thought into the great beauty of his art? The Dancer says that her “wretched dragon is perplexed” (VP 386), but the poet who gave her those words might just have been onto something.

Notes

1. Beginning in autumn 1917, on the honeymoon of their marriage, George Yeats began an exercise of automatic writing and other forms of mediumistic communication. The practice was mutual, requiring the presence of both partners. It lasted for some three years of nearly daily labour and then occasionally for a number of years following. Automatic writing is a mild form of mediumship or mental experiment in which a writer empties her mind, sets writing implement to paper, and experiences the pen or pencil moving across the page seemingly of its own volition. Automatic writing is familiar to most occultists, and the Yeatses knew a fair amount about it before they began their experimentation. Their practice varied over time, but for the most part it consisted of some kind of initiatory ritual, a prefatory stream of words and phrases presumably from disembodied spirits, which they called “instructors” or “communicators,” and then more orderly reception of information. The instruction was recorded in numbered lists representing questions posed by W. B., who remained in a fully conscious state, and answers by George, or at any rate written through her hand (what exactly was happening, in terms of source and authenticity, was a frequent topic of the script and conversation). The Yeatses soon began to organise the bits of data, which they believed were fragments of a vast “system” that explains human psychology and history as well as cosmic truth. As time went on, the Yeatses also explored other methods to receive what they believed were communications from beyond the grave and deep within their own subconscious minds and spiritual selves, most notably the mutual recording of dreams. From this material, W. B. composed two versions of a philosophical book entitled *A Vision* (1925 and 1937), and he engaged creatively, intellectually, and emotionally with the ideas for the rest of his life. Many of his later works refer, explicitly or obliquely, to those ideas.
2. A number of accounts of the first days of the writing fasten onto the word *fake*, which Mrs. Yeats used herself in talking with the scholar Virginia Moore. The writing began during a very trying honeymoon, Moore relates, when Mrs. Yeats “decided—she admits this very honestly—to ‘make an attempt to fake automatic writing.’” Then, “to her utter amazement, she says, her hand acted as if ‘seized by a superior power’” (253). For the most thorough explanation of the events, see Saddlemyer, *Becoming George* 103. Richard Ellmann, who knew Mrs. Yeats, gives an important early account. See also the authoritative biography of W. B. Yeats by R. F. Foster and the biographical and literary analysis by Terence Brown. My own *Wisdom of Two* examines the collaboration as such.
3. The genetic documents for *A Vision*, including the automatic script, various notebooks, and early drafts of the book, have been edited as the four-volume *Yeats's Vision Papers* (hereafter abbreviated *YVP* with volume and page number). The letters between W. B. and George Yeats were edited by Ann Saddlemyer and published in 2011; they are cited herein as *WBY/GY Letters*. The manuscripts and typescripts themselves are held in the National Library of Ireland, cited here as NLI followed by MS number.
4. *A Vision* (1937), 19. *A Vision* was published in two very different books, a shorter and rougher version in a small print run by the small London publisher Werner Laurie (1925), and the longer, more expansive, and clearer revision by Macmillan (1937). The latter is the variant from which almost all later editions were reprinted.

Hereafter, the 1925 edition will be abbreviated AVA and the 1937 AVB; I will cite both books from the Scribner editions co-edited by Catherine Paul and myself.

5. NLI 36,260/4. See also Harper, *Wisdom of Two* 6.
6. Jules Verne's character Captain Nemo first appeared in his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Little Nemo in Slumberland was created by the American artist Winsor McCay; it ran in the *New York Herald* and the *New York American* between 1905 and 1926.
7. For a discussion of the four daimons and the Yeatses' family structure, see *Wisdom of Two*, 299–315.
8. See Plate 1, following p. 290, Saddlemyer, ed., *W. B. Yeats and George Yeats: The Letters*.
9. The Yeatses also knew of actual couples who also lived their lives as working magical partners. Notably, the fourteenth-century alchemists Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel were an example the Yeatses may have entertained as they searched for models for the kind of relationship they wanted for themselves. For a general study of alchemical symbolism in Yeats, see Gorski.
10. I am indebted to Joseph Hassett, whose lecture "Building Thoor Ballylee, Constructing The Tower," examines these letters in detail.
11. Yeats, *Variorum Poems* 378; hereafter abbreviated VP.
12. Daniel Albright, for example, begins his explanatory notes to the poem with the observation that "The Dancer in this poem was based on Iseult Gonne" (604); Yeats's biographer R. F. Foster remarks that the poem "referred, inevitably, to himself and Iseult" (*Arch-Poet* 190).

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