

## Yeats the Magician

*Mogg Morgan*

**J**n 1995 I went on holiday to Ireland. On a day too wet to explore the limestone pavements of the Burren I made my way over to Gort, looking for the lair of the poet WB Yeats and his lifelong friend and patron Lady Gregory. In an act of municipal vandalism, the remains of Coole Park, the Gregory countryseat, were pulled down in the 1960s. I suspect that following the 1921 partition of Ireland, it suffered the fate of many an Anglo Irish household and was burnt out. So the place that inspired so many magical poems is no more, although it is still possible to wander in the park, now open to the public and meditate upon those magical swans:



Unweared still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.

(from *The Wild Swans At Coole* 1919)

When in Ireland, Yeats wanted to live close to his friend Lady Gregory and he bought a ruined Norman tower house called Ballylee Castle or Thoor Ballylee and began renovation. Ireland is dotted with these gloomy monuments, built by the invading Normans to protect their new conquest from the remains of the Celtic aristocracy. The Norman invasion of Ireland really does represent the end of the Celtic world and the substitution of a more patrician Christian church for the plebeian Celtic variety. The Tower house is now one of several museums dedicated to the life and poetry of Yeats - perhaps Ireland's greatest twentieth century poet. Yeats was never able to completely fulfill his plan to make this tower his permanent base. His growing involvement in Irish politics and then ill health necessitated another warmer home. Even so magical events occurred here, and the curators of the museum have captured this in the museum's design.

The Yeats bought the tower in 1915 but it was pretty much uninhabitable until 1918. After a magical journey through Galway and the west of Ireland, the Yeats made a point of finishing off their odyssey with a session at the tower on the equinox, i.e. c 21 September 1918. This was to be the first of many magical rituals performed in the tower, either in its rooms or occasionally, so it is said, on the roof. The roof is a particularly good place for elemental rituals; high above the surrounding trees and open to the bleak Atlantic gales, that thrust their way across the plain. Their first session had to be brief because, as they wrote in their magical diary, the place was still 'very cold'.

It is interesting to see how much Aleister Crowley followed Yeats' activities, making a point of including the Tower house as a setting for an important incident in his novel *Moonchild*, written in 1917, i.e. two years after Yeats' purchase of the place. A character in Crowley's novel called 'Gates' is magically attacked at the tower and falls to his death. The

story's narrator tells us that Gates, "had been to the church in the village near Posilippo, whose tower overlooked the 'butterflynet'; and he had persuaded the priest to allow him continual access to that tower, on the pretext of being an artist. And indeed he had a *pretty amateur talent for painting in water-colours.*" (p. 161 Weiser Edition, my emphasis). The 'butterfly net', is a code name used by the characters in the novel for the magical operation of creating a moonchild. That is a complex operation of sexual magick in which the participants conceive a child and then attempt to persuade a spirit of a higher spiritual entity to reincarnate into the developing foetus. Occult theory specified that the most appropriate time for such an operation be during the third month of foetal development when consciousness was said to begin in the womb. As we shall see, magical work such as this was not unknown in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the source of Crowley's early training in magick. Crowley had never physically visited the tower and made the incorrect assumption that the tower was a disused ecclesiastical building. Thus in *Moonchild*, a magical link is established between the XVI tarot trump, the blasted tower or church and Gates' hideaway bringing about its destruction by lightning.

There was obviously no love lost between Yeats and Crowley. In his publication *The Equinox*, Crowley, in a series of articles entitled 'My Crapulous Contemporaries', lampooned many of the occultists of his day, including W B Yeats. He crudely satirized Yeats' Celtic prose drama *The Shadomy Waters*, as the 'Shadowy Dill Waters', writing that 'It is true that a sort of dreary music runs monotonously through your verses, only jarred by the occasional discords. It is as if an eternal funeral passed along, and the motor-hearse had something wrong with the ignition and the exhaust.' (*Equinox* Vol II)

You might doubt Crowley's assessment of Yeats as an artist (and magician). But bear in mind that *The Shadomy Waters* was written in 1906, years before Yeats' great revelation. Indeed, Richard Ellmann, a modern

scholar with a cooler head than Crowley's, seems to share some of his assessment - Ellmann says that 'had Yeats died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it.'<sup>1</sup>

The novel *Moonchild*, like a great deal of Crowley's writing, is strangely prophetic - especially in this instance of what was *about* to happen to Yeats in the *very* year of its publication. Yeats was indeed struck by a lightning bolt out of the blue. Those with literary ambitions take note, Yeats was born in 1865 and so was fifty-two at the time, and the moral - it is never too late to start. It is also interesting in terms of magical development. Many of us learn magick over a much shorter time span than our predecessors of a few generations ago. Magical training and written material are now much more widely available. Even so, many of the more profound elements of the magical work require time and intellectual maturity if they are to really work. Yeats had been in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn for the best part of twenty-eight years, by the time his real revelation and magical breakthrough came his way. He had done much important work in that organisation and before that in the Theosophical Society and diverse spiritualist groups. He waited a long time for the veil on the adytum to be lifted.

It is often assumed that Yeats' muse was Maud Gonne, the Irish nationalist and fellow member of Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It is sometimes said that with her Yeats enjoyed what amounted to a spiritual marriage. This relationship became less important to him after his mundane marriage in 1917.

Relationships like Yeats and Maud Gonne can be likened to a variety of 'tantrism' called *sahajiyana* or the 'natural way'. Sahajiyans are often poets and artists who enter into secret and elicit trysts that fall outside of normal family or clan loyalties. These are what amount to largely unconsummated, unearthed love affairs. This has a very magical

effect on the body, which remains, in a highly aroused state, often for many weeks, even years. By aroused, I do not necessarily mean the sexual centres, these may well be involved, but often the arousal is more noticeable in other parts of the 'psychological' anatomy. I still find the Tantrik chakra system the most convenient way to describe this - the arousal may be more noticeable in the stomach (manipura chakra), or 'heart' (anahata chakra), where it may be transferred to the throat or head chakras. This energy can be very tangible and it may be possible for it to physically flow between the corresponding chakras of the sahajiyān partners when they are in receptive mood. (See my book *Sexual Magick*, for some more information on this system.)

As there is often no satisfactory physical resolution of the passion, large amounts of psychic energy erupt into other areas, often as highly creative outbursts of poetry or art. Eventually the relationship burns itself out or the partners step over the line and the relationship falls apart. On the negative side, it seems that the pent up energy engendered by this magical practice can sometimes manifest as physical illness. Ancient medico-tantrik sources known as Ayurveda (the science of longevity), of which I am a student, say that Tuberculosis is the disease most often linked with the above psychic state and interestingly this disease is known across several cultures as a disease of lovers.

Yeats obviously felt a need to earth his highly creative magical partnership with Maud Gonne in the form of a full physical relationship, but this was not to be. Throughout their relationship Maud Gonne refused his every proposal of marriage dealing a final blow to Yeats's hopes when in 1903 she wrote to him from Paris that she had just married Major John McBride of the Irish Transvaal Brigade in the Boar War.

McBride was, according to Ellmann, not a poet, not an occultist, not a learned man and not even a good lover. It seemed a perverse choice of a husband. Predictably the effect on Yeats was devastating - it

almost killed him. A London pathologist, and fellow member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Westcott,?) thought that he must have had tuberculosis. This was apparently confirmed by later X-ray, although luckily for Yeats the disease disappeared again. Serious as the disease was, and indeed still is, Yeats' experience of it shows that it is possible to escape its clutches. His recovery is not unusual given the help of friends and indeed the power of magick in its broadest sense.

Maud Gonne's husband John McBride was killed in the abortive Easter 1916 rising against the British colonial rule of Ireland. This event was in itself something of a magical act. The participants knew beforehand that the action was doomed to failure, but went ahead because of the effect they thought it might (and in fact did) have on the popular imagination. So McBride turned out to be a magician after all and Yeats, although he hated McBride, saw that he had 'found [his] heroic opposite'<sup>2</sup> and Yeats, magnanimous to the last, immortalized him in the poem *Easter 1916*:

“This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout,  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

## The Hermetic roller coaster

Yeats' life began to pick up pace, and he entered a period that may be familiar to some modern occultists as the 'hermetic roller coaster'. Yeats rushed to Paris to again propose marriage to Maud Gonne on condition that she gave up politics. She refused. Despite this knock back, he stayed in Paris and struck up a friendship with Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult.

Iseult was Maud Gonne's daughter by a much earlier marriage. Iseult was born in 1894 in rather strange circumstances. When Yeats first met her mother Maud Gonne, she was, unbeknownst to him, already in love with a French newspaper editor by whom she had conceived a child. Sadly this child died. Yeats and his friend George Russell, who under the pseudonym AE authored a mystical book entitled *The Candle of Vision*, was comforting Maud following this untimely death. She asked them what would happen to such a tiny soul. I think it was George Russell who pronounced that 'such souls were often reborn in the same family'.

Consumed by grief, Maud Gonne found the father and took him down to the burial vault in Sacré Coeur and made love to him over the dead child's coffin! Maud Gonne conceived and the child was called Iseult. The whole story is very reminiscent of Crowley's later novel *Moonchild*. It also has important parallels with the Hindu tantrik practice of savasadhana, or meditation on a corpse. Such rites are said to be still practiced in India, although they are very secret. An experienced tantrik magician and his assistant go to the cremation ground where fresh corpses are stored awaiting cremation the next day. Whilst the assistant keeps watch, the tantrik adept prepares a terrifying ritual in which a primordial goddess is invoked into the revived corpse. The adept take a strong psychoactive potion and the rite can result in the most terrifying visions.

Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult, was in her early twenties at the time she was befriended by the much older Yeats. Inevitably he proposed

to her, and after several months of presumable hard soul searching, she too turned him down.

Shortly after this final knock back, Yeats returned to England and took up with a woman friend called Georgie Hyde Lees, a woman he had known from his days in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In October 1917, after a whirlwind romance, he married her. Now all the fun begins. As the proverb goes, 'marry in haste, repent at leisure,' and indeed Yeats did repent. For within a few days of their marriage he was having serious doubts about the wisdom of it all and sank into one of his deepest depressions. What a mistake he thought he had made.

### **Passive and active mediumship**

The newlyweds were honeymooning in the Ashdown Forest in Sussex. Mrs Yeats, or 'George' as she was habitually called, seeing what a mood her husband was in thought she would do something to distract him. She was interested in psychic research and back in 1911 had helped Yeats to check the authenticity of information given him by mediums, so she knew a thing or two about parlour-room séances. As Ellmann puts it, 'she encouraged a pencil to write a sentence' 3 Here is what she wrote 'What you have done is right for both the cat and the hare.' She was the cat and the hare was Maud Gonne. The more cynically minded read into this, that George was desperate to keep her unhappy husband and used a spiritualist trick to capture his attention and eventually his love. Whatever the truth, from these small, contrived beginnings, sprang what has been described as 'the most remarkable body of materials of its kind in the history of psychical research'.

Over the course of the next three years, the couple recorded 3600 pages of automatic writing made during 450 sittings - by any standards a sizeable body of work. I wonder how many modern magicians can remember the last thirty rituals they were in, let along 400!

And those 3600 pages of research are only that part of the communication that they choose to preserve. Much of it was lost, including the record of those first few crucial days. Even so it makes Crowley/Aiwaz's *Book of the Law* look like a *billet doux*. Some of the communication was worked over by Yeats and published as a book entitled *A Vision*, which is as near as he ever got to constructing his own magical system.

The Yeats' training in the Golden Dawn would have instilled in them hostility toward common spiritualism. The Golden Dawn taught that passive mediumship was to be avoided at all costs. Passive mediumship is the kind of mediumship one can still see practiced in spiritualist churches. The medium enters a light trance and invites any spirits present to make use of him or her. The Golden Dawn taught that the medium should take a more active role, selecting and invoking appropriate spirits, which are then able to give a higher level of communication. This is not to deny remarkable results sometimes achieved by passive mediumship.<sup>5</sup> However, many of the examples I and other investigators have witnessed, have been far from impressive and often faked.

In the Yeats' experiments, they trod a middle path between passive and active mediumship. They often discarded large chunks of the script after later examination and checking. In fact it seems that William Yeats, was on the lookout for dodgy communications and later asked his wife for a list of the books in her library. He read every one of these books to see, if any of the more complex ideas might be derived from them - a suspicion that turned out to be quite unfounded.

### **What was the purpose of the communication?**

Yeats was, to use a modern idiom, 'knocked out' by the content of the 'almost illegible script'. He found it so exciting and profound that he

‘offered to spend the rest of his life explaining and piecing together those scattered fragments.’

*‘No’ said the communicators firmly, ‘we have come to give you metaphors for poetry’*

And indeed, this is what happened.

William Yeats thereafter came ‘to be ranked as the dominant poet of our time...largely responsible for founding a literary movement and for bringing a national theatre into being; he drew into creative energy Synge and Lady Gregory, strongly influenced a number of other writers and evolved a new way of writing verse.’<sup>6</sup> So very different to what Crowley called a *pretty amateur talent*. The communicators were true to their words and much more besides. It is also worth bearing in mind that poetry was in times past and certainly up until the time of Yeats, seen as a magical art form. In the Celtic world, it is well known that the Bards were expected to be proficient in poetry as a sign of their adeptship. So perhaps it was for William Yeats after he received the initiation of the bridal chamber and what he called the *Gift of Harun Al Rashid*.

## **The method**

We can learn a lot from this. The communicators insisted that there were no observers. They dispensed with the normal paraphernalia of spiritualist trance. There was no need for table rapping, amnesia, automatisms etc.. Often the pair would simply sit at a table, wherever they were. Yeats would then frame questions and George would discourse upon the subject. She would not pretend to be in a trance or speak in a funny voice like ‘Is there anybody there?’ This form of trance is one that we could all emulate - given enough practice. It is a more integrated approach, in which magick and one’s ordinary life are less

divided one from the other. Even the convention of using ‘joined up’ automatic script can be dispensed with given time. These things are *means to an end* not the end in itself. Once you understand the kind of awareness a trance is, you can often dispense with the trappings. This style of trancework or channeling is actually quite ancient and falls into a broad category of magick that is sometimes called the Apollonian style as opposed to the Dionysian system which is more energetic and exhausting.

Yeats asks in one of the trances, if any of his magical techniques, especially invocation, may be of use in analysis or for provoking the communicators. The answer is that he might use some variety of talismanic magick. The communicators’ reply is thus:

‘A symbol to be dipped in water after each night of sleep. Make a mantra over a small object give it to her to wear in sleep without saying what it is use(d) for. Charge with a simple clear image such as a flower.’

The purpose of this talisman is not necessarily to incubate a dream. It may indeed do that, but it may also serve to facilitate the next day’s trance dialogue. When asked what image to put on the talisman the communicators reply:

‘Use a nature symbol not a planetary one.’

At this stage in his life Yeats was, as the communicators reminded him, using his own words ‘nothing but the embittered sun’ His over intellectual, solar nature needed a counterbalance. Along with this the communicators say that he should *not* use a ‘planetary’ sigil, of the kind that would have been familiar to him from his work in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He should instead use a more natural image, such as a flower. This could be a stylized drawing of a flower, like a sigil or rapid intuitive representation of a flower. I think it could be an actual flower or even the essence of a flower such as perfume oil.

The communicators say:

‘Put the moving image on the object and don’t do it again or you

will gradually lose the first simplicity of the thought.’

This is so like the sigilisation technique of Austin Spare, it is uncanny.

I suggest it is a technique we could all try. I have done so now with success.

## Exercise 2

Step One: Take a piece of clean cartridge paper.

Step two: Make the mind calm, and in an intuitive flash mark it with a natural symbol, perhaps a flower or even dropping some perfume oil on the talisman.

Step three: say a mantramantra over it. Interesting that the communicators use the term ‘mantra’, a Sanskrit term and not the most obvious one. But it accords well with the decidedly eastern flavour of the ‘Yeatsian’ magical system.

Step four: Sleep with it under your pillow.

Step five: neutralize the talisman by emersion in water the next day

This is what happened to me on one of the occasion I did this: I smelt some rose oil, which is one of the most magical of oils; note the occurrence of this in the name Rosicrucian etc etc. I had the following dream:

### 13th November 1995

In the dream I went to a country estate, called either Grift or perhaps Drift farm. It had a grand house with a memorial column up high on one of the hills. On one of the tenant farms nearby, was a gorge with perhaps the disused entrance to a well shaft. The farmer had permission to excavate this shaft. There was some connection between this and a mutilated carving in a nearby church. The Jacobean carvings had been beheaded, and although the heads had been retrieved from various dealers, it had never been restored. There was something sinister about the family whose tomb it was. As we took away the rough course of blocks that hid the entrance to the well shaft, we found a much more elaborate tomb inside. There were artifacts scattered everywhere, including a fine blue ancient Egyptian perfume vial, the lid still intact. There was danger that our efforts would be too crude and that we would lose as much as we could salvage. Before I could stop them, someone rinsed the perfume bowl in water, leaving only a tiny trace of the original contents for analysis. I saw the name Francis Barrett, perhaps his hidden tomb. [The place of FB's burial is currently unknown although there have been reports of a tomb in Kensal Green cemetery.] I knew we would need more equipment now for properly documenting what we were finding. A dog appeared and was much attracted by the aroma coming from inside the still sealed tomb. And a local labourer was also drawn to the place.

There is a longer version of this piece in:

Tankhem: Seth & Egyptian Magick

Mandrake of Oxford, ISBN 1869928-865, 234pp, 12.99 (USD25)