ABSTRACT

The theosophical systems formulated by great poets, such as William Butler Yeats, represent a personal idiosyncratic actualization of an ancient repertoire of magical symbols and occult visions. Three fundamental steps of Yeats’ deep investigation into esotericism are given – the Dublin Hermetic society, his meeting with Madame Blavatsky and his joining the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The close reading of ‘To the Rose upon the Rood of Time’ (1893) and ‘The Two Trees’ (1893) clearly shows the deep influence in Yeats’ own system of the symbolic and imaginary repertoire of the above mentioned occult societies.

BIOGRAPHY

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Peake, A. France and C. A. Smith., esotericism and mysticism, as well as on humanities computing.
Her main publications include:

Initiation is the preparation for immortality. Man is only potentially immortal. Immortality is acquired when the purely human part of him becomes allied to that spiritual essence which was never created, was never born, and shall never die.  

Esotericism is a Leit Motiv in Yeats’ life and works, involving his personal and poetic bildung from youth to old age. Even his mother’s family, the Pollexfens, were very interested in astrology and magic, as shown by Uncle George’s clairvoyance and telepathic experiments performed in the domestic entourage. As well, Yeats’ friends were deeply attracted by the philosophical, mythical, and esoteric syncretism drawn from their magical experiences. George William Russell (1867-1935), for instance, already familiar with magic, was the first to introduce Yeats to the intricacies of esotericism during their early years at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. After a short time, on June 16, 1885, their juvenile mystical quest turned into a real, concrete brotherhood, the ‘Dublin Hermetic Society,’ an occult organization directed towards the achievement of the secret knowledge enclosed in many Eastern and Western theosophical movements. During their meetings, members used to read and study oriental works, such as Alfred Percy Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism (London 1883), or listen both to Brahmins and to the most important scholars of Eastern mysticism:

Sometimes a Professor of Oriental Languages at Trinity College, a Persian, came to our Society and talked of the magicians of the East. […] And we persuaded a Brahmin philosopher to come from London and stay for a few days with the only one among us who had rooms of his own. […]

Yeats always considered this experience as the first stage along his own Hodos Chameliontos: a route which would later lead him towards the study of Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Boehme’s and Swedenborg’s theories, alchemy, Buddhism and the Tibetan Mysteries: a necessary background, which certainly helped the young initiate to climb the esoteric ladder.

In 1887 Yeats settled in London with his family. During this year, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), the Russian theosophist and founder of the well known ‘Theosophical Society,’ a medium and author of several occult works, also arrived in London in order to open a new lodge of her Society. After leaving her prosperous

2. Even though only the last part of Yeats’ life is properly considered the most important as far as his occult research and related works are concerned, this paper will mainly focus on the first part of his esoteric bildung.
4. A. P. Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism also dealing with Madame Blavatsky’s extraordinary powers, was one of Yeats’ first occult sources. See G. Hough, The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1984), 33.
6. Born in Ekaterinoslav (Russia), in 1831, Helena P. Blavatsky belonged to a noble family. Her father descended from the Earls von Hahn, while her mother, a writer, was the daughter of Private Councillor Andrey Fadeyeff and Princess Helena Dolgorouky.
7. The name ‘Theosophical Society’ comes from the Neo-Platonic term ‘theosophy,’ meaning ‘divine wisdom.’
http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-0-co.htm#contents
And The Key to Theosophy, Being a Clear Exposition, in the Form of Question and Answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy for the Study of which the Theosophical Society Has Been Founded, (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1995 [1889])
Theosophical University Press Online Edition
http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/key/key-hp.htm
Russian family and life, she travelled throughout Europe and Asia, looking for the source of wisdom. Following the very pathway trod for her by some mysterious teachers who lived beyond the Himalaya, the so-called ‘Masters of the Wisdom,’ 9 she decided to move to America and to establish there a society aiming at the revelation of her knowledge. Before long, her home became one of the most important places where intellectuals and scholars joined together to discuss esotericism, and to keep up their occult and mystical research. Among them was Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), the famous American lawyer, journalist, and expert in supernatural phenomena. Together, Olcott and Blavatsky decided to create a new organization devoted to these matters and, in 1875, he was appointed President of the ‘Theosophical Society,’ while Blavatsky became his secretary.

The main task of this organization was to reach a universal brotherhood by means of a search within the mysteries of sensible reality, involving all human beings with different religious faiths and levels of education. Blavatsky maintained that the main world religions come from one single faith, whose creator may be called God, Brahma or Nature; during the centuries, this faith had split into numerous doctrines which, in turn, had already separated according to principles caused by a social and cultural – rather than religious – background. 10 She believed that, at the end of time, all these faiths would mingle again in one single religion. Her teachings really constitute a fundamental compendium of the doctrines derived from the gnostic tradition, Neo-Platonism, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg and also from cabbala, Hinduism and Buddhism. Her concept of brotherhood appears to be generated by a religious-philosophical syncretism able to include both the greatest Asian philosophies and the ancient Western religious traditions. The initiates of the Theosophical Society aimed to discover and understand the origin and destiny of human beings, knowing that each man represents a minimal part of the great human body. This basic assumption clearly emerges from The Ocean of Theosophy (1893), 11 written by another important member of the Society, the Irish lawyer William Quan Judge (1851–1896). In this work, theosophy is metaphorically pictured as an ocean able to touch and bring near the most far and different shores.

Following her Masters of Wisdom and, mainly, Mahatma Morya’s teachings, Blavatsky understood that human salvation was not enclosed in any ecclesiastical dogma, but in the soul’s recesses. She considered the Christian religion a real danger, representing a model of dogmatic theology, extremely static in its principles, though she admitted and enhanced Christ’s 12 mission towards salvation. Blavatsky implied that the Christian world, turning away from its prophet’s words, had neglected his principles of brotherhood and religious syncretism. Theosophy, for a long time preserved in India, Persia and Central Asia, was in her opinion the only science able...
to show this high truth, and bring men towards samadhi or spiritual awareness, by means of meditation.

In theosophy, light, usually referred to in the Bible as the main symbol of God’s perfection or of the Holy Spirit, stands for physical reality and is defined as pure illusion (maya), while obscurity is the emblem of spiritual life. In a similar way, theosophy associates the figure of Jehovah with that of the snake tempting Eve in Eden: the snake is not a negative symbol, being related to perfection, wisdom and eternity. Furthermore, according to Blavatsky, Jehovah is one of the seven spirits who formed Elohim or God, cooperating in the creation of the seven planets that, in turn, influence and drive earth, where human beings – created by lunar divinities – live. Each man has a vital principle called the Anima Mundi, an androgynous spirit of the material world, on whose male component is conferred the spiritual quality and on the female one the material quality.

After a few months spent in studying the Western and Eastern esoteric traditions, Yeats realized that all the knowledge he had acquired so far was still too superficial and theoretical. For this reason, in 1888, he entered a subgroup of the original theosophical movement, the so-called ‘Esoteric Section,’ together with other adepts who shared his desire to research occult wisdom. This branch, whose main direction was practical magic, was considered by Yeats the keystone of his occult route. But his expectancies towards the ‘E. S.’ were soon disappointed by Blavatsky’s hostile behaviour: she did not allow her initiates to practice magic without any proper theoretical and practical notions. First, all the members had to learn how to use magic and esoteric symbols, and to understand the religious-philosophical notions whereby they were determined. The latter proved to be a fundamental study for Yeats (many images and symbols would later converge in his poetic system), but limiting at the same time. The new Faust, trying to go beyond the boundaries imposed on the Esoteric Section by its foundress, started devoting himself to the experimentation of his occult wisdom. A totally disastrous experience: the Research Committee created to carry out magic research and led by Yeats himself, was a real


14 ‘Once that the key to Genesis is in our hands, it is the scientific and symbolical Kabala which unveils the secret. The great Serpent of the Garden of Eden and the “Lord God” are identical, and so are Jehovah and Cain ONE -- that Cain who is referred to in theology as the “murderer” and the LIAR to God! Jehovah tempts the King of Israel to number the people, and Satan tempts him to do the same in another place. Jehovah turns into the fiery serpents to bite those he is displeased with; and Jehovah informs the brazen serpent that heals them,’ H. P. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine, I, Theosophical University Press Online Edition, http://www.theosophy.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-2-11.htm Accessed February 2, 2009.


16 ‘For about a year after her arrival in London Madame Blavatsky discouraged her over-eager followers from plunging too deeply into Theosophical depths, warning them of the danger of black magic […]. But in 1888 the Theosophists’ demand for magical instruction was so great that she resolved to form an Esoteric Section for the sincerest of her ‘chelas.’ Yeats was delighted and joined the group soon after it was formed. He was eager to probe more deeply into Theosophical arcana, and he hoped too that the Esoteric Section would […] (prove) that occult phenomena were possible […].’ R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 65-66.

17 ‘It was apparently the intent of the founders not to provide a finished system of philosophy -- such as The Secret Doctrine of Blavatsky, etc. It was intended to be supplemented by further reading, study, meditation, and of course by skrying. In this way, the magical language, and in turn the philosophy, could be developed on an individual basis.’ I. Regardie, The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic Vol. 1: 25.
failure. In 1890 Yeats was asked to resign.¹⁸

Immediately after leaving the Theosophical Society, Yeats turned towards a new organization ‘more in tune with his real needs’¹⁹. “The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,” founded in 1888 and widely known for its peculiar symbol, the Rose Cross. Similarly to the Christian Cross, the Rose Cross is composed of four arms, yet distinguished by their colour. Each colour represents one of the four alchemical elements: the upper arm is yellow, standing for air; the (rosycross) right and left arms are in turn red, standing for fire, and blue for water, while the lower arm is subdivided into two parts: the inferior stands for earth, given by its four elements recognizable by their different colours (citrine, olive, black and russet), while the higher part reproduces the fifth element, the spiritual one. As well, each arm also represents a pentagram (except for the inferior one which, in its spiritual half, shows a cabalistic six-pointed star) and several symbols related to the three alchemical principles: mercury, sulphide and salt. These three principles can be found in each arm according to a constantly different disposition aiming to reproduce their possible combinations. Four pointed rays also exit from the four arms, each of them including one of the letters that constitute the Latin abbreviation I. N. R. I., i.e. Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaorum, the inscription that Pilate ordered his men to affix on Jesus’ cross. Two smaller rays also emerge from each side of the four rays, containing magical symbols and the letters ‘LVX’ (Lt. lux) and ‘IAO’ (referring to the Egyptians deities Isis, Apophis and Osiris), as well as the zodiac signs of Virgo (Isis), Scorpio (Apophis) and the image of the Sun (Osiris). The Rose Cross has within itself another identical but smaller Rose Cross, standing for the microcosm mirroring the macrocosm. The internal cross is composed of 22 petals containing the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.²⁰

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE ROSE CROSS
Rays -- White with black letters and symbols.
Air -- yellow ground purple Pentagram and symbols.
Fire -- scarlet ground Emerald Pentagram and symbols.
Water -- blue ground Orange Pentagram and symbols.
White ground -- Black Hexagram and symbols.
Earth Citrine, Russet, Olive, Black, White Pentagram and symbols.²¹

Both the symbol and the name of the Rose Cross are very ancient. Around the year 1614, in the German town of Kassel, an anonymous document entitled Fama Fraternitatis, des Loblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzes, was published and widely circulated among German occult scholars. In 1652, Thomas Vaughan translated it into English with the title Fama Fraternitatis of the Meritorious Order of the Rosy Cross. This work deals with an alleged mysterious current whose sources are to be found both in Hermetic and Christian doctrines. It is the Order of the Rose Cross or Rosicrucian,²² a mystic Christian organization addressing man’s spiritual development. According to the legend, its probable mythical founder, Christian Rosenkreuz, was born in a German monastery and, around the year 1393, travelled to the Holy Land, studying the mysteries of the ancient religions. On his return to Germany in 1402, he created a secret society aimed at analysing these doctrines and philosophies together with his disciples.²³ He died in 1484, at the age of 111, his body was embalmed and

¹⁸ Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 69.
¹⁹ Ibid., 41.
²³ ‘In 1378 was born the Chief and originator of our Fraternity in Europe. He was of a noble German family, but poor, and in the fifth year of his age was placed in a cloister where he learned both Greek and Latin. While yet a youth he accompanied a certain brother P. A. L. on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but the latter, dying at Cyprus, he himself went to Damascus. There was then in Arabia a Temple of the Order which was called in the Hebrew tongue “Damkar,” that is The Blood of the Lamb. There he was duly initiated and took the Mystic title Christian Rosenkreutz, or Christian of the Rosy Cross. [...]’ After three years he went on into Egypt, where there was another Temple of the Order. There he remained for a time still studying the mysteries of Nature. After this, he traveled by sea to the city of Fessa, where he was welcomed at the Temple there established and he there
rediscovered after 120 years inside a grave with the following inscription: ‘Post centum viginti annos pateblo’ (my body will be discovered in 120 years).

The year following the publication of the *Fama*, another anonymous document entitled *Confessio Fraternitatis* was also published in Kassel while, in 1616, a third treatise appeared in print: *Die Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreuz* (The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz), probably written by Johann Valentin Andreae, a German Protestant theologian. These three documents gave rise to great enthusiasm in Germany, focusing scholars’ attention on the ‘Brethren of the Rose Cross.’ In 1700 many Masonic lodges and several occult societies were claiming to be followers of the so-called ‘Rosicrucian Degrees’ while, during the second half of the 18th Century, this alliance was to give birth to new Masonic-Rosicrucian movements, such as the ‘Gold-und Rosenkreuzers,’ created in Germany by Hermann Fictuld in 1757; and the ‘Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia’ founded in 1866 by three important Master Masons: Wentworth Little (1840-1878), Kenneth MacKenzie (1833-1886) and Frederick Hockey (1809-1885). The latter society was deeply influenced by the historian Robert Henderson ‘Kenneth’ Mackenzie, self styled holder of the true Rosicrucian Degrees. MacKenzie, author of the *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* (1877) and initiated in a French Rosicrucian order, was to bring some manuscripts containing the nine hierarchical degrees describing the attainment of perfection. The ‘Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia’ or S. R. I. A. appears to be founded upon these very degrees.

After Little’s death, the S. R. I. A. was led first by Dr. William R. Woodman (1828-1891) and from 1891, by Dr. William Wynn Westcott (1848-1925). The latter remained its *Supremus Magus* until his death in 1925. Woodman and Westcott, together with another member of the S. R. I. A., Samuel Liddel McGregor Mathers (1854-1918), founded in 1888 another organization: the ‘Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,’ whose first London lodge was created on March 1, 1888.

Similarly to the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn also maintained its ‘superior’ origin. Actually, in 1891 Mathers claimed to have been called in Paris by a delegate of his mysterious Secret Lords of the Third Order, known as Frater Lux E Tenebris, who gave him the keys to open the door of ancient wisdom. On his return to London, in 1892, Mathers founded the Second Order of the Golden Dawn: a Rosicrucian society called ‘RR+AC’ (Roseae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis). ‘A perhaps mythical Third Order of Masters’ ruled by those disciples able to pass through the cabalistic Tree of Life was later to follow the Second Order.

The Golden Dawn was based on an imaginative and symbolic theology principally derived from the cabala. Its
gained the knowledge and the acquaintance of the habitants of the Elements, who revealed unto him many of their secrets. […] After a stay of two years he came to Spain, where he endeavored to reform the errors of the learned according to the pure knowledge he had received. But it was to them a laughing matter, and they reviled and rejected him, even as the prophets of old were rejected. Thus also was he treated by those of his own and other nations when he showed them the errors that had crept into their religions. So, after five years residence in Germany, he initiated three of his former monastic brethren, Fraters G. W., I. A., and I. O., who had more knowledge than many others at that time. And by these four was made the foundation of the Fraternity in Europe.’ Regardie, *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*, Vol. 7, 44.

24 Every adept had to pass through the nine degrees in order to improve his position within the society and reach wisdom.


26 Dr. Woodman was a cabalistic and alchemic scholar, as well as ‘an eminent Freemason of the last century, who died in 1891 very shortly after the Order was founded and therefore did not play much of an active role in its governance’ (Regardie, *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*, Vol. 1, 4). In 1867 he was appointed Secretary of the ‘Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia’ and in 1878 he became its *Supremus Magus*. Dr. Westcott was also a Master Mason and a cabalistic scholar, besides being ‘a London physician and a coroner by occupation.’ (Ibid.). In 1890 he was named Master of the ‘Quatuor Coronati’ Masonic Lodge and in 1891 *Supremus Magus* of the S. R. I. A.

27 ‘Samuel Liddell Mathers also known as McGregor Mathers, was the most active of the chiefs of the Order. […] He has been described at some length in a biographical study *The Sword of Wisdom* by Ithel Colqhoun, well worth reading in this connection. Mathers was the translator of three mediaeval magical texts. *The Greater Ker of King Solomon, The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, and *The Kaballah Unveiled* (which consisted of certain portions from Knorr von Rosenroth’s Latin rendition of parts of the Zohar – more distinguished however by a relatively long introduction of considerable erudition and which well warrants re-publication by itself as an introduction to the study of the Qabalah.).’ Regardie, *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic*, Vol. 1, 4-5.

hierarchical structure was composed of ten degrees or levels, coming from the ten emanations of the Sephirotic Tree. All the adepts belonging to the First Order pass through four levels (Neophyte 0=0, Zelator 1=10, Theoricus 2=9, Practicus 3=8, Philosophus 4=7) in order to be able to practice ceremonial rituals and thus enter the Second Order, or Level of the Rose Cross. Except from the Neophyte, all the grades relate to one element: Zelator to Earth; Theoricus to Air; Practicus to Water; Philosophus to Fire. It follows the grade of Portal, which is neither of the Outer Order nor of the Inner Order, and it relates to Spirit. At this level, disciples enter the Inner or Second Order and are subdivided into three categories: Adeptus Minor (5=6), Adeptus Major (6=5), Adeptus Exemptus (7=4). Magister Templi (8=3), Magus (9=2), Ipsissimus (10=1). Practical magic is only admitted when the initiate achieves the highest level of the Second Order. Along this route, he is submitted to several difficult tests and a particular magic ritual before entering each stage; a ceremony that usually occurs in temples apt to host these pseudo-theatrical performances. The adept’s advancement across the ten levels metaphorically corresponds to the development of the human soul, which is slowly separating from material reality and approaching divine energy and perfection. Actually, the diagrammatic structure of the Tree of Life can be interpreted both as the manifestation of divine energy descending on earth and as the slow spiritual raising of material reality towards the spiritual one. In this sense, the ten levels passed through by each member to become Adeptus Exemptus represent his own spiritual bildung.

Probably ‘moved by an insatiable, destroying curiosity’ for occult matters but also by a natural predisposition, Yeats entered the Order in 1890 with the name of ‘Festina Lente,’ later to be changed into Frater D.E.D.I., that is ‘Demon est Deus Inversus.’ The hermetic order appeared to satisfy his desire for concrete magic. It is not by chance that, during this period, the word ‘magic’ appeared in his vocabulary ‘as a technical term, meaning the systematic pursuit of occult powers,’ as Yeats himself was later to explain in Magic (1903), an essay he

29 ‘Zelator’ (I°): ‘is recommended to study the powers and properties of Numbers, and the philosophy of the Hebrew Kabalah, in which the relations between Numbers, Letters, Words and Things are defined.’ In this grade we are introduced to the Four Ancients - the elements, the Cross, the Pentagram, and the symbol LVX. / Theoricus (II°): ‘...the mysteries of Nature, of mineral, vegetable, and animal life are proper studies, and its ritual of admission teaches you that beyond the colors, as well as the forms of objects, there are occult relations which need investigation.’ We also hear doctrines on the Elements, the Zodiac, the Hebrew Divine Name IHVH and the four worlds of the Kabbalistic philosophy. / Practicus (III°): ‘The Grade of Practicus has special relation to the ancient art of alchemy and the modern science and art of Chemistry.’ In this grade we hear the alchemical terms of Sulphur, Salt, and Mercury. The terms ‘the Black Dragon’ and ‘Solve et Coagula’ are also introduced. / Philosophus (IV°): ‘...teaches the need of the highest mental culture in order to comprehend the works of the philosophers, and the sacred volumes of the World Religions.’ Fra. Thomas D. Worrel, VII, “A Brief Study of the Rose Cross Symbol.”

http://www.sricf-ca.org/paper3.htm


30 W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies, 122.

31 Hough, The Mystery Religion, 43.

32 ‘I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy, (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself. (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols,’ - W. B. Yeats, “Magic,” Ideas of Good and Evil, in Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1961), 21. In 1893 Yeats published together with Edwin John Ellis a most important and over-criticized three volume edition entitled The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical. Edited with Lithographs of the Illustrated “Prophetic Books” and a Memoir and Interpretation by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats. It is worth noticing that in the first chapter of the first volume of this edition, The Symbolic System, Yeats admitted interpreting Blake that ‘He who has thus passed into the impersonal portion of his own mind perceives that it is not a mind but all minds. (Ibid., 244), thus anticipating the above quoted concept. For any in-depth investigation of The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, see H. Adams, Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968); I. Fletcher, “The Ellis-Yeats-Blake Manuscript Cluster,” The Book Collector 21 (1972): 72-94; K. Raine, From Blake to A Vision (Dublin: Dolmen, 1979); D. Masterson and E. O’Shea, “Code Breaking and Myth Making: the Ellis-Yeats Edition of Blake’s Works,” Yeats’s Annual No. 3, (1985): 53-80; A. Antonielli, “William Butler Yeats’s ‘The Symbolic System’ of William Blake,” Estudios Irlandeses No. 3, (2008): 10-28; A. Antonielli, William Blake e William Butler Yeat.
wrote at a very crucial moment in the history of the hermetic society, when the order was suffering a second irreparable dismemberment. The first one occurred when Mathers, who had settled in Paris in 1892, started his collaboration with Aleister Crowley (1875-1947)\(^3\) – who had entered the Golden Dawn in 1898, – in order to create the Third Order. During this period, Mathers’ autocracy was weakened by his ambitious adepts, who probably wanted to take over his power. In March 1900, Mathers was sent away together with Crowley. As a consequence, he decided to change the name of the Golden Dawn to ‘Alpha Et Omega,’ while the new group of rebels led by Robert William Felkin (1858-1922) and John William Brodie-Innes (1848-1923), took the name of ‘Stella Matutina,’ Yeats decided to adhere to the ‘Stella Matutina.’\(^3\) First, he was appointed ‘Instructor in Mystical Philosophy’ and, in 1901, Emperor of the London Temple of Isis-Urania. But after two years, even this new order broke down and around 1903 Yeats had to face a new diatribe to protect his own leadership. Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) and a number of his followers opposed Yeats, ‘objecting to [his] occultism and saying that they must work on purely mystical lines;’\(^3\) Yeats decided to respond to this new conflict by writing two essays, a private one directed to the adepts of ‘Stella Matutina,’ entitled Is the Order of R. R. et A. C. to Remain a Magical Order? (March 1901); and a public one: Magic.

The thematic nucleus of this essay is connected with his faith in ‘magic,’ that is in man’s capability to evoke spirits and receive visions. Yeats supported the use of particular ‘instruments’ that allow these visions in human beings: i.e. symbols. The Sephirotic Tree, Gematria, the four alchemic elements, the Indian Tattva, the pentagram, the six-point star, the Tarots and the astrological signs are only a few of the several symbolic elements exploited and shared by adepts to communicate to each other the vision received. By adopting symbols, the human mind has the capability to overcome any boundary: it can flow into another mind, share its same vision, and create together one single mind and memory. Thanks to these collective experiences of reverie, all single minds join into one mind, recovering their original unity and perfection that enable them to enter the universal mind and memory ‘that animates the whole universe.’\(^3\)

Over only four years, Yeats published two important poetic works: Crossways (1889) and The Rose (1893), explaining that while the title of the first one derived from his trying ‘many pathways,’ with the second collection he had finally found the only pathway towards ‘the Eternal Rose of Beauty and Peace.’\(^3\) A hiatus of four years during which his esoteric bildung was predominant, since he had already entered the Golden Dawn (1890), promoted to a higher level of its hierarchical ladder (1893), moved to Paris with MacGregor Mathers and was thus enabled to listen to his teachings (1894), and started the experiments of telepathy with his Uncle George Pollexfen (1894).\(^3\)

\(^3\) After only one year after his initiation, Crowley reached the high level of Philosophus (the most important of the first Order). In 1903, Crowley embezzled Mathers’ documents, on which they were working together in Paris, to create the Third Order of the Golden Dawn. Thanks to the latter in 1907 he founded a new magical brotherhood: the ‘Argentum Astrum’ (Order of the Silver Star). Afterwards, in 1912, he entered the ‘Ordo Templis Orientis’ (OTO), devoted to black and sexual magic. In 1921 he succeeded Theodor Reuss, becoming its leader (see Raine, Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn, 10).


\(^3\) Raine, Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn, 10. It is worth noting, as argued by Regardie, that ‘Mathers and the Order he founded were only nominally Christian,’ since ‘The Order was a Hermetic Brotherhood and Christianity played only a minimal role in its operation.’ Actually, he continues, ‘[...]After the revolt of 1900 in the Order he [Waite] was one of the several committee members who ran the Order. Later he pulled out from this committee to form his own Fellowship of The Rosy Cross. When this happened he totally revised not merely the rituals of the Order but the entire philosophic context of the Order. [...] There is almost no relationship between the teachings originally laid down and the later biblical emphasis introduced by Waite.’ Regardie, The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic, Vol. 1, 19.

\(^3\) Hough, The Mystery Religion, 45.


\(^3\) ‘He saw me using images learned from Mathers to star reverie, and, though I held out for a long time, thinking him too old and habit-bound, he persuaded me to tell him their use, and from that on we experimented continually, and after a time I began to keep careful record. [...] I, without speaking, would imagine the symbol, and he would notice what passed before his mind’s eye, and in a short time he would practically never fail of the appropriate vision.’ W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies, 258.
The 1893 poetic collection, *The Rose*, certainly represents a very fertile ground for any analysis of the Golden Dawn influence in Yeats. Starting from its very title, it is worth remembering the principal axiom of the Rose Cross movement, clearly grounded in the symbol of the rose: the spiritual truth is hidden everywhere, even in phenomenal reality that potentially owns the power to hide transcendent beauty. Yeats was deeply fascinated by this concept, understanding its power of occultation and thus its implicit danger. *Point de liaison* between the sensible and the spiritual reality is the rose, epitome of both these worlds as well as the catalyst to which all the elements trapped in the material reality are moving, since every element is converging towards its core. For this reason, the rose stands for the unity of all the opposites, being in the centre of the cross, that is to say at the point where the four different forces, represented by its four arms, converge.

Focusing on the first poem of this collection, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” this double, contradictory meaning – attributed by the poet to the symbol of the rose, – clearly emerges from the first lines (‘Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!’) The incipit, similar to the classic one, contains the poet’s invocation to the eternal rose, being his Muse and giving him the power to sing ‘the ancient ways’ (l. 2) of ‘Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide’ (l. 3), of the ‘grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed’ (l. 4) Druid, and of Fergus (l. 5). He asks the Muse to help him to reach the ‘Eternal Beauty,’ preventing him from listening to all those common things hidden in phenomenal reality, though the rose can also be discovered in the sensible world, enclosing the passion (‘red,’ l. 1), pride (‘proud,’ l. 1) and sadness (‘sad,’ l. 1) experienced by the poet during his life (‘of all my days,’ l. 1). Besides, the opposition caused by the double nature of the rose, spiritual and material, creates a further dialectic movement in which all the elements evoked in the first two stanzas take part: the heroes of the past (l. 2) and the future of men (l. 9), the branches of love and those of hate (l. 10), the stupid and evanescent mortal things and the Eternal Beauty (ll. 11-12); and again, the great heroes of the Irish mythology (first stanza) that contrast with the worm or country mouse (ll. 16-17), or the ‘all poor foolish things that live a day’ (l. 11) with the ‘strange things said / By God […]’ (vv. 19-20). It is worth noticing, as Ellmann points out, the continuous reference to the four elements and, above all, to water (l. 7, ‘In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea’), the latter being the symbol, according to Neo-Platonic philosophy, of the imaginative faculty, since it is from water that images are created.

The opposite movement discovered at a thematic and symbolic level emerges even formally by subdividing the poem into two stanzas, the one opposed to the other. This division strengthens and confirms the semantic opposition between the two stanzas: while in the first, Yeats fears the temptations of the sensible world, asking the rose to leave him. As a matter of fact, fearing his own potential inability to own spiritual and material knowledge at the same time, he chooses Dickens’ realism instead of Shelley’s spiritual wisdom. Paradigmatic is the line 21, where Yeats voices his fear deriving from the so-called *Hodos Chamelontos*, ‘the

Come near, come near, come near - Ah, leave me still
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
Lest I no more hear common things that crave;
[...]
But seek alone to hear the strange things said
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,
And learn to chant a tongue men do not know.

Still following the same dialectical movement, in the second stanza the poet wants to return to phenomenal reality, asking the rose to leave him. As a matter of fact, fearing his own potential inability to own spiritual and material knowledge at the same time, he chooses Dickens’ realism instead of Shelley’s spiritual wisdom. Paradigmatic is the line 21, where Yeats voices his fear deriving from the so-called *Hodos Chamelontos*.
fear that this imagination would be so bewildered by a multitude of images that it would become confused and powerless. 47 Yeats himself admits: ‘When I was writing […] “The Rose,” I found that I was becoming unintelligible to the young […]’ 48 hence the decision to leave the rose of wisdom and re-approach the world, the latter being at this point metonymically represented by news in a daily newspaper.

Coming back to the title of the poem (“The Rose upon the Rood of Time”), it is evident that the poet wants to focus on three elements, probably drawn from the esoteric cauldron: the rose, the cross and time. The rose, as we have already verified, presents several symbolic meanings, both sacred and secular. The rose is the main symbol of the Virgin Mary, venerated in the Litaniæ Lauretaeæ as a Mystic Rose. Besides, the image of Mary with a rose in her hand stands for her knowledge of the mysteries related to the creation of the world. According to Christian iconography, the red colour of the rose is also related to Christ’s blood on the cross, and thus to his sufferings. On the contrary, from an esoteric point of view, its five, eight, twelve, or fifteen petals are related to Pythagoras’ sacred correspondences and its flower to the last knowledge of things. The cross, on the other hand, is both the epitome of the original Adam appended to the tree of knowledge and the symbol of man’s fate: each human being has to pass through death and resurrection before joining the deity. The two overlapped arms represent the four elements (air, water, fire, earth), while their point of conjunction is the rose cross, where all the opposites are reconciled. 49

In this poem, the opposition between the rose and the cross is reinforced by the presence of the temporal clause, that confers a temporal boundary on the cross, immediately contrasting with the eternity of the rose. The imperishable rose lies on the cross of time, crucified on it and turned into the emblem of the connection between eternity and caducity, spirit and matter. The rose coming out from the core of the cross is also the emblem of Rosenkreuz’ teachings, aiming to discover the real point of intersection between man (the cross) and woman (the rose), between the four natural elements (the four arms of the cross) and the fifth element, the spiritual quintessence (the rose) and, principally, the temporal place where caducity turns into eternity. Furthermore, it also represents the way through which the spirituality of the rose touches the concreteness of the cross. In Rosicrucian philosophy, which in turn comes from the cabalistic doctrine, sensible reality is conceived as the last emanation of spiritual reality, where the former and the latter are unified by the Chioth ha Qodesh, or Ladder of Lights: the hierarchical ladder passed through by all the emanations coming from the spirit and directed to the material world. According to this vision, even earth contains a divine spark of the spiritual one, as Trismegistus had already maintained: ‘The things below are as the things above.’ 50 The partial divinity or perfection of the human world is thus determined by this point of connection between the eternal rose and the mortal cross. The poet’s desire to embrace the eternal rose in the first stanza and, by contrast, to leave it and devote himself to the mortal cross in the second one, is expressive of the pilgrim’s difficulty to choose one route instead of the other; his fear to ‘never see again a Shelley and a Dickens in the one body.’ 51 The last lines of the second stanza recall the incipit of the poem, evoking once more the ‘Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days’ (l. 24), and implicitly meaning that the route chosen by the quester is that of the rose, of occult knowledge, of a supernatural vision. Therefore, since the eternal rose is nailed on the rood of time, the pilgrim does not have to leave the material world, just because the rose annihilates in itself the dialectics between eternal and caducity, spirit and matter.

Another meaningful occurrence of the symbol of the rose may be found in the poem entitled “The Secret Rose,” belonging to the collection The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). In this poem, the symbolic and semantic meaning of the rose as a point of convergence between spiritual and material reality is further confirmed by the poet’s vision, which totally coincides with the Rosicrucian philosophy of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn adepts also interpreted this symbol as the ‘mystic marriage’ contemplated by the initiate when he finally finds his cross, after his worldly pilgrimage: the cross stands for the memory of his worldly pains and fights, the rose

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47 W. B. Yeats, The Poems, 430.
49 W. B. Yeats, The Poems, 430.
51 Ibid., 206.
for love and beauty (ll. 1-6).

Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose,
Enfold me in my hour of hours; where those
Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,
[...]
Men have named beauty [...].

In this poem, the reference is probably to the initiatory rituals through which the neophytes could enter the first degree of the Golden Dawn. According to this ceremony, the adept is led inside a sepulchre built with seven walls rich in many symbols, such as the seven old planets and the seven prismatic colours. This vault represents, according to the hermetic tradition, Christian Rosenkreuz’ tomb, as thoroughly described in the *Fama Fraternitatis*. Each of the seven walls portrays ten mysterious symbolic figures. In Israel Regardie’s *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic* (1984), it is possible to observe the forty symbols of the Golden Dawn, probably deriving from the multiplication of the dimensions of each wall, being as stated in the *Fama of 5’x 8’*. The number forty might refer to the four elements and ten spheres of the Tree of Life, so that this grave would exist on each of the four levels of reality: “Each Wall of the Tomb is said mysterically to be 5 feet in breadth, 8 feet in height, thus yielding 40 squares, of which 10 are marked and salient representing the Ten Sephiroth in the form of the Tree of Life, acting through the planets.” For this reason, when the initiate entered the vault, he was said to enter the four dimensions and move a further step towards real knowledge.

The image of the holy sepulchre as represented by Yeats in this poem recalls the place where Jesus was buried, bringing the reader to associate the disciples and women looking for Christ’s body inside the holy vault with the adepts of the hermetic order, who are equally looking for their truth, the rose. The poet implores the rose to reveal itself, but not during his worldly quest, while in his ‘hour of hours,’ the last day of his life, when the cryptic symbol of the rose can finally disclose its real beauty (ll. 27-32):

[..]. I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?

By focusing attention on another poem from *The Rose* collection, entitled “The Two Trees” (1893), it will be possible to distinguish and clearly recognize the cabalistic symbolism mainly learnt by Yeats during MacGregor Mathers’ famous seminars. This poem uses extensive symbolism connectable with the Tree of Life. The title

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52 ‘Each of the 7 walls is attributed to one of the astrological planets. The wall attributed to Venus is actually the door through which we must enter. That is because Venus symbolises desire. We usually misinterpret that as sexual desire. In fact it is desire for life which ultimately, is desire for God. Note also that each wall has 8 horizontal rows. They can be attributed to the Ptolemaic spheres of the fixed stars (top row) and the astrological planets from Saturn for the second row, through to the Moon for the bottom row. The five vertical columns can be attributed to the alchemical elements of Earth, Water, Fire, Air and the Quintessence. Thus the astrological and alchemical attributions form a grid which can give extended meanings to the symbols,’

J. Courtis, *The Tomb of CRC. The Symbolism of the Seven Sides*,
http://www.crcsite.org/tomb.htm

As far as the different meanings of number seven, see Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Donald Tyson (Ed.), (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1998), 268.

53 ‘Upon each side of the Vault are forty squares, five vertical series and eight horizontal, the whole being symbolically 5’ x 8’. Now the published and printed *Fama Fraternitatis* says these forty feet were divided into ten squares. If you are mathematicians you would know that ten similar squares could not alone be placed in such an area and yet fill it. Ten squares alone to fill a rectangle could only be placed in an area of the shape 5’ x 6’. Hence in the Fama, ten squares is a blind which we know to represent Ten Squares are marked and salient, that is they are the SEPHIROTH,’

http://www.crcsite.org/tomb.htm


itself is immediately related to the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, originally united in one single tree but later, after man’s fall on earth, split into two different ones. In a similar way, the formal structure of this poem appears to mirror its symbolic and semantic trend: the poem is divided into two stanzas, each of them of twenty lines (iambic tetrameters). Each stanza is built around one main subject – one of the two trees – totally different from the other one, so that they are implicitly bound to a perennial endemic conflict strengthened not only by their intrinsic meaning but also by their formal occurrence. In the cabala, those emanations coming from spiritual reality and gradually forming the material world are represented by a diagram, the Sephirotic Tree or Tree of Life. While the Tree of Life contains spirituality (represented by its foliage or first emanation) and materiality (its roots or last emanation), the Tree of Knowledge stands for the main symbol of human pride. The Tree of Life, around which the first stanza is centred, is created by the heart, the core of human spirituality (ll. 1-9):

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colours of its fruit
Have dowered the stars with merry light;
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night;
The shaking of its leafy head
Has given the waves their melody.

From this tree, the four classical elements are also derived: fire is symbolized by the stars (l. 6), earth by the roots of the tree (l. 7), air by its ‘leafy head’ (l. 9) and water by the ‘waves’ (l. 10). It is worth noticing line 15, that was inserted by the poet in 1929 (after the publication of A Vision), containing the image of the ‘gyres,’ the two interdependent and opposed cones ruling human beings’ history (ll. 12-15):

There the Loves a circle go,
The flaming circle of our days,
In those great ignorant leafy ways;
Gyring, spiring to and fro

The term ‘gyring’ is clearly fundamental in Yeats’ philosophical system, exemplifying the rotational systems of the two gyres, one placed inside the other so that the tip of the first one always touches the core of the widest part of the second gyre, and vice versa:

At the extreme of one cone, human life was ‘subjective’ - that is, dominated by the pursuit of images of loveliness. At the extreme of the other cone, human life was ‘objective’ - that is, dominated by the mind’s abstract analyses of reality.

The extreme part of one of the two cones is looking for images of beauty; a search that appears to characterize even the Tree of Life, whose ‘leafy ways’ are ‘ignorant’ (v. 16), that is they are not determined by the analytical and rational ‘unresting thought’ (v. 34) that, on the other hand, represents the objective cone and the Tree of Knowledge. In contrast with the image of the ‘heart’ of the first stanza is the image of the ‘bitter glass’ of the second one; the bitter glass is the material mirror, the symbol of vanity par excellence, and thus of the Tree of Knowledge: ‘His second tree is introspection, thought, the ruin, of the body by the abstract mind which Yeats especially deplored in women […]’.  

The Tree of Life and the Tree of Death might also represent the two opposite poles that wrap the anonymous

56 As Yeats himself explained in “The Stirring of the Bones” “The “Tree of Life” is a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called Sephiroth joined by straight lines. Once men must have thought of it as like some great tree covered with its fruit and its foliage, but at some period, in the thirteenth century perhaps, touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia in all likelihood, it had lost its natural form’ (W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies, 375).
57 The first version of lines 14-16 was: ‘Winged Loves borne in gentle strife, / Tossing and tossing to and fro / The flaming circle of our life,’ W. B. Yeats, The Poems, 135.
58 Ibid., 447.
'beloved,' the one piercing his heart ('in thine own heart,' l. 1) and the other his body ('bitter glass'). The paradigmatic opposition between the two trees could be biologically given thanks to a sort of dichotomy of the beloved in heart and body. By observing his own heart, he will be able to contemplate 'the holy tree,' the 'holy branches' and the 'trembling flowers.' On the contrary, from line 21, the object of his vision is no longer a source of love and beauty but one of desolation (ll. 21-34) 'made when God slept in times of old':

Gaze no more in the bitter glass  
The demons, with their subtle guile,  
Lift up before us when they pass.  
Or only gaze a little while;  
For there a fatal image grows  
That the stormy night receives.  
Roots half hidden under snows,  
Broken boughs and blackened leaves.  
For all things turn to barreness  
In the dim glass the demons hold,  
The glass of outer weariness,  
Made when God slept in times of old.  
There, through the broken branches, go  
The ravens of unresting thought;