

# AISLING MHOR

A Vision of Composition  
Founded Upon Writings Attributed To  
William Butler Yeats  
and Upon Certain Esoteric Principles and Doctrines



A Thesis

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James E. Casey

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AISLING MHOR: A VISION OF COMPOSITION  
FOUNDED UPON WRITINGS ATTRIBUTED TO WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS  
AND UPON CERTAIN ESOTERIC PRINCIPLES AND DOCTRINES

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APPROVED BY:

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Thomas McLaughlin  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Georgia Rhoades  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Elizabeth Carroll  
Member, Thesis Committee

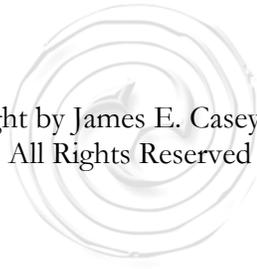
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David Haney  
Chairperson, Department of English

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Judith E. Domer  
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research

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## ABSTRACT

AISLING MHOR: A VISION OF COMPOSITION  
FOUNDED UPON WRITINGS ATTRIBUTED TO WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS  
AND UPON CERTAIN ESOTERIC PRINCIPLES AND DOCTRINES

James E. Casey, B. A., East Carolina University

M. A., Appalachian State University

Thesis Chairpersons: Thomas McLaughlin & Georgia Rhoades



Through the writing of *A Vision*, William Butler Yeats found in esoteric astrological symbolism—received through a series of automatic writings—a mythology which structured and informed his understanding of humanity. Given the work’s reliance on doctrines of magic and the occult, many literary scholars have been reluctant to consider *A Vision* as any more than eccentric context for Yeats’s poetry and drama. *Aisling Mhor* argues, however, that Yeats understood the work as entirely practical—even pedagogical—and that Yeats’s writing was systematically enabled by his occult project. By juxtaposing *A Vision* with the *aisling*, an Irish poetic convention characterized by a prophetic, visionary encounter with the supernatural, this study argues that a pedagogical application of Yeats’s occult work offers important insights for contemporary theories of composition.

*Aisling Mhor* argues, further, that Yeats’s use of the occult in his composing process supports the suggestion by certain composition theorists that the most significant portions

of the writing process are, perhaps, unknowable to our rational minds. The esoteric system espoused in *A Vision*, then, offers method and vocabulary—essentially a mythology—for describing those ineffable elements of composition. By exploring three of the major taxonomical perspectives in composition theory, I suggest that Yeats’s magical paradigm speaks to the intersections of expressivism, social-constructionism, and cognitivism with its dynamic of ultimate synthesis. Such a unifying dynamic also promises to theorize further the affective components of the writing process by acknowledging the essentially spiritual implications of Yeats’s occult mythology for pedagogical practice.

Finally, *Aisling Mhor* argues that such an interdisciplinary approach to Yeats’s *A Vision* and composition theory can only serve to lessen the academic tensions between the study of literature and the pedagogy of writing by appealing to a more holistic, sustaining methodology. And in this study, by incorporating the tools of magic and the occult, composition pedagogy, may gain a broader paradigm for envisioning the act of writing.

For Elizabeth,  
mo anam cara,  
whose love and patience  
has helped me to find  
new vision.

JEC

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## ABBREVIATIONS



AB	<i>Autobiographies</i>
AVA	<i>A Vision, 1925</i>
AVB	<i>A Vision, 1937</i>
CL	<i>Collected Letters</i>
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i>
E&I	<i>Essays and Introductions</i>
LE	<i>Later Essays</i>
MEM	<i>Memoirs</i>
P&I	<i>Prefaces and Introductions</i>
SR	<i>The Secret Rose</i>
UPII	<i>Uncollected Prose, Volume II</i>
YVP	<i>Yeats's Vision Papers</i>

## INTRODUCTION

### “A Good Net for a Herring Fisher”



When, in the conclusions to *A Vision*, first published in 1925, William Butler Yeats writes that “The great books—Berkeley's "Principles of Human Knowledge" let us say—beget new books, whole generations of books, but life goes on unchanged,” he understands the ultimately ineffectual nature of the purely academic pursuit. “It was not so,” he argues, “with ancient philosophy” (*AVA* 252), tacitly implying that *A Vision* might take its place among those ancient, efficacious, and transformative texts.



Earlier, in the fall of 1917, in a hotel on the edge of Ashdown Forest, Yeats began to receive, in automatic scripts channeled through the pen of his wife George, communications from an “unknown writer” (*AVB* 8). In a profusion of incoherent sentences and geometric symbols, all nearly illegible, Yeats’s communicators promised to bring to him “metaphors for poetry.” This experience of automatic writing, which would develop variously over a period of years, was for Yeats “an incredible experience,” an experience to which he attributed the success of two of his volumes, *The Winding Stair* and *The Tower*, and he understood that experience, and the resultant system, as the source of much “self-possession and power” in his writing (8).

Those metaphors found form, as promised, in Yeats's poems, yet the nature of *A Vision*, the published, monolithic form of the "metaphors" gleaned from Yeats's communicators, took a shape which transgressed the bounds of mere poetry. In those automatic writings, Yeats saw the symbolic organization of an integrated system, in the form of interlocking gyres and corresponding circuits of the sun and moon. This esoteric symbolism gave structure and arrangement to the various strains of philosophy and belief which had previously infused his body of work, but which had, until that point, lacked a formal, coherent, and unified expression. With the publication, first in 1925, of *A Vision*, however, Yeats finally understood the convergence of his esoteric philosophy and his occult poetics, his imaginative history and his personal mythology, in a book which would ultimately confound and alienate many of his readers and critics.



It is perhaps especially illuminating, in reckoning with Yeats's genre-defying work, to cast *A Vision* in the metaphorical light of the Irish vision-poem, or *aisling*. The *aisling* conventionally involves the disenchanted poet's auspicious encounter with a woman of the *sidhe*, and in the 18th century Irish tradition, the *aisling* held deep political significance. In the hands of Aogan Ó Rathaille or Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabhain, the *aisling* was a vehicle for nationalist sentiment, in that the poet, dejected by the state of Ireland under the Protestant British monarchy of William III, is visited by a *speirbhean*, or "sky-woman", who is an idealized Ireland personified. The woman offers to the poet a symbolism which prophecies the return of the Catholic Stuart monarchy and, thus, a governing paradigm more conducive to Ireland's Catholic majority (Heaney Notes 132).

In his ambitious study *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd does make the connection between Yeats's *A Vision* and the Irish *aisling* tradition (316-26). His study, however, clearly emerges from a post-colonial perspective, and therefore draws forth little beyond the political implications for the *aisling* metaphor. In this context, however, what is perhaps of greater significance in the juxtaposition of *A Vision* with the *aisling* tradition lies more fully in the *aisling's* essential narrative structure: the disenchanted poet's reception of a prophetic symbolism through contact with the supernatural. Yeats understood that the appropriate prophecy had found him, with his wife George assuming the role of the *speirbhean*, through the automatic writings that would eventually coalesce in *A Vision*, his *aisling*. And while the work certainly embraced the revolutionary political overtones of the conventional *aisling*, Yeats principally found in that supernatural contact an occult system for arranging his wildly diverse beliefs, and he transmuted that system into a potent source of energy for his writing.



For most scholars, however, the occultism which engendered *A Vision* is an intellectual embarrassment. While the work of literary critics such as George Mills Harper and Kathleen Raine has treated, to one extent or another, the magical and occult foundations of Yeats's work, the biographical/literary approach is generally one that maintains a safe critical distance from the beliefs which Yeats held and functions solely as a hermeneutic tool for reading his poetry and drama. Susan Graf argues, therefore, that "the compartmentalization of knowledge that the academy fosters has left a major aspect of his work unexplored and has impeded a real understanding of his art" (x), acknowledging Yeats's occult interests as an undercultivated landscape in Yeatsian criticism.

The critical avoidance of what Harold Bloom calls “the awkward matters” (211) has perhaps kept Yeats’s work from threatening the rational integrity of conventional literary scholarship and has yielded fruitful, if constrained, critical studies. Bloom argues that “*A Vision* would be a richer book if it confined itself to the life of the poetic mind,” and he champions the approach of Helen Vendler who “attempts to save the book by arguing that it is essentially an account of aesthetic experience, a poetics, rather than an esoteric philosophy in its own right” (Bloom 211). But such critics, in attempting to protect Yeats from himself, have essentially prevented *A Vision* from receiving the holistic critical attention which it demands. Hazard Adams does concede, however, in *The Book of Yeats’s Vision* that “critical and interpretive discussions have been reductively concerned with the ‘system’ it is alleged to present” (3), yet he too confines his criticism to the literary sphere by arguing that Yeats’s book is better understood as a thoroughly dramatic, even comic, literary construction.



Graf argues that “Yeats has always been the property of the literary establishment” (ix), but what these many literary studies have refused to reckon with is Yeats’s understanding of his occult system as something much more than a literary oeuvre. Perhaps because much of literary study is thoroughly embedded in a largely rational paradigm, distrustful of any appeal to magic, critics have found little real-world application for the largely occult system which Yeats proposed. For Yeats, however, *A Vision* was a system with real, practical implications, a mythological heuristic which was, in Yeats’s mind, “a good net for a herring fisher” (*AVA* 251).

Virginia Moore, one of very few scholars who identifies herself as “sympathetic” (xv) to Yeats’s occultism, stresses this analogy in *The Unicorn*, her study of Yeats’s occult interests as religious expression. Throughout her chapter on *A Vision*, Moore continually emphasizes Yeats’s system as a practical tool, a “synthesis and application” for an increasingly meaningful life and body of work (260). She claims that the system consistently gave Yeats the confidence he lacked (287), and as she concludes her discussion of the book, she dreams back to Yeats’s net image: “Here and there, over the world, would men swing it, wide and practical, into a luminous sea?” (300).

When Yeats argues that “thought is nothing without action,” he aspires, then, to instruct us in the practical application of his system (*AVA* xii). While the point is not central to his primary argument, Hazard Adams even acknowledges, albeit briefly, that *A Vision* possesses a definite pedagogical character: “Yeats plays instructor to us as his instructors did to him” (57). But the nature of Yeats’s pedagogy in *A Vision* is one that avoids an overly didactic tone. Barbara Croft, in “*Stylistic Arrangements*,” claims that the work “gives no answers and reaches no conclusions,” but “instead, it is generative; it sets the mind dreaming, wandering in a vast, endless speculation” (9). Yeats’s pedagogy, in this creative, expansive context, is arguably a model for all instruction.

Yeats encourages his “old fellow students” in *A Vision*, “If they will master what is most abstract there and make it the foundation of their visions, the curtain may ring up on a new drama” (*AVA* xii). I would argue, then, that a truly holistic assessment of *A Vision*, paying particular attention to the practical and pedagogical nature of the text, demands a similar critical effort toward application, toward pedagogy.



And it is precisely those “awkward matters,” I would argue, that enable and strengthen Yeats’s system, providing a fertile source of confidence and power which Yeats invoked in his composition. Yeats himself often cited the essential nature of magic and mysticism to his thought and writing. In an early letter to John O’Leary, he claims, “If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen* have ever come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write” (CL 303). In *Yeats and Magic*, M. C. Flannery argues that Yeats’s experiences with the supernatural were directly related to his growth as a poet. Similarly, Richard Ellman asserts that it was Yeats’s marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees and the subsequent automatic writings which evoked Yeats’s most powerful verse. According to Ellman, during the writing of *A Vision*, Yeats was enabled by “a newly acquired sense of strength” as the work on *A Vision* “put wisdom at last within his reach” (224).

An investigation of Yeats’s occultism, therefore, and its ties to his writing processes will perhaps enable a more holistic assessment of *A Vision* by taking into account the practical use which Yeats made of his system. And, as Hazard Adams notes that, “among other things,” the book is “about a lost, suppressed, or repressed tradition of poetic conventions” (25), the theoretical current for the present inquiry surely flows toward composition. *Aisling Mhor*, then, seeks to examine this “new drama,” Yeats’s *aisling* for writing, by aligning a practical consideration of *A Vision* within the diverse conversation of composition theory.



To begin, compositionists such as Winifred Bryan Horner have often decried the theoretical rift between composition and literature in the contemporary English department. “Such a separation,” she argues, “represents a fracturing of the language discipline that is detrimental to work in both areas, as unproductive as it is unwarranted” (1). The separation, it seems, stems from a well-founded distrust (primarily among compositionists) of proffering canonical literary texts as consummate exempla to be modeled in pedagogy. A more productive approach—particularly in the case of *A Vision*—is surely to be found, however, in exploring Yeats’s work not as exemplary product but, rather, as suggestive of process.

An examination of Yeats’s *A Vision* in light of composition theory immediately evokes a rich amalgam of questions concerning automatic writing, supernatural visions, occult symbolism, magical consciousness, and other esoteric issues. After all, Yeats envisioned his work as a system for resurrecting “all ancient tricks unlearned” (*CP* 211). The work, however, when read as practical and pedagogical, also invokes more seemingly mundane topics which are frequently explored and contested in composition: inspiration and invention, dualistic cognitivism, and visual literacy, among others. This study, then, will attempt to explore the overlap and interaction between what Ellman refers to as “Esoteric Yeatsism” (223-43), the system expounded in *A Vision*, and the multi-faceted project of contemporary composition theory.



Compositionists find themselves repeatedly at the borders of what various sciences have theorized in biological cognition, social dynamics, or personal psychology and identify that “mysterious” realm as the locus of what is perhaps the most critical phenomenon in the writing process. Lisa Ede argues that “metaphor plays an important role in discussions of writing, for we can never have complete unmediated access to the process of writing” (123), implying that at least some significant portion of the process of writing is occult, or hidden from our rational interrogations, and Kristie Fleckenstein similarly claims that “writing is in many ways an arcane endeavour” (“Creating” 28).

It may be, then, that the tools of magic and the occult, and their inherent correspondences with metaphor and symbol, are perhaps *more* practically suited to the theorizing of composition. In their anthology, *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*, Alice Garden Brand and Richard L. Graves argue that, in composition studies, “people are hungry for transformation” (5), pointing out that recent emphasis on cognitive-based pedagogy ignores many elements of the writing process which cannot be clearly described as cognition. When Brand and Graves further argue that “the greatest need for growth in composition studies lies now in the ways we create meaning beyond what is currently considered acceptable knowledge” (5), they clearly venture into occult territory.

From a literary perspective, Declan Kiberd argues that “Yeats’s is a poetry which would, in all probability, cease to communicate, if it were ever fully known, because its images would retain no power in reserve” (441). Here, he acknowledges the occult aspect of Yeats’s writing as a veritable repository of communicatory power, and it may be that an

exploration of that essentially unknowable realm will offer to composition theory a similar reservoir of generative power.



Initially, a consideration of Yeats's magic and occultism would seem to lend itself to the expressive theories of Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow, given these theorists' emphasis on the writer's inner, subjective, and affective experiences. In its various forms, expressivism, with its genesis in the Romantic project, takes this occult region as its domain, and, among expressivists, the metaphor of magic is a common trope. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow refers to "magic writing" as "wholly internal, hidden, and sometimes instantaneous" (65). Such comparisons rarely venture beyond the relative safety of the academically-sanctioned analogy, however. In *Writing With Power*, when Elbow again tacitly suggests that writing might be equated with magic, he attempts to preclude critical objections by rhetorically questioning his own rationalism: "Could I really believe something this irrational? Surely not. I guess" (357).

The reservations with which many compositionists consider "magic" stem in part from Janet Emig's study "Non-Magical Thinking: Presenting Writing Developmentally in Schools." Rooted in cognitivism, Emig's work did much to further emphasize the process method of writing instruction by denouncing the "magical" approach, which involves the "spontaneous materialization of a finished product" (Covino "Magic" par. 2). But these objections arise from a reductive, if not completely erroneous, conception of magic itself. Magic, by Emig's definition, connotes the superficial trickery of stage illusion and, thus, does little to validate the rich theoretical traditions which the practice of magic has evolved. By

understanding magic instead as a discursive, theoretically rich process, William Covino argues—as would, undoubtedly, Yeats—that magic engenders rather a “fertile, dynamic, and fluctuant imagination” (par. 3).

Such a dynamic imagination has often been argued as a necessary component in the writing process. Ann Berthoff contends that the imagination must be reclaimed from the “suffocating locale called The Affective Domain” (*Reclaiming* vii), which is largely a province of psychology. Rather, she argues, imagination should name “the active mind, the mind in action making meaning” (vii), and this echoes Yeats’s wish for an “imagination free to create as it chose” (*AVA* xi) along with its consequent magical implications. Yet ultimately, as Yeats’s concept of creative imagination is one that transcends the individual and expressivist in its application, Berthoff too understands that imagination must have a social dimension.

Berthoff argues in *Forming, Thinking, Writing* that the “social construction of knowledge is in a necessary dialectic with personal knowledge” (xvii), and she seems to make a point similar to Sherri Gradin’s social-expressivist view: expressivism, with its focus on the subjective, inner processes of the writer, cannot be efficiently separated and placed in opposition to a social constructivist view, which holds that all writing emerges from social situations. This point is acutely born out in the occult symbology of Yeats’s interlocking gyres which “consider subjectivity and objectivity as intersecting states” (*AVB* 71) and is echoed on many levels throughout his work.

Similarly, Karen Burke LeFevre, in her pivotal social-epistemic study *Invention as a Social Act*, also points out that rhetorical “invention often occurs through the socially learned process of an internal dialogue with an imagined other” (2). This conception of the process

of invention is easily aligned with Yeats's symbology as well as his beliefs regarding daimonic interactions and the efficacy of dialogic exchange. Such a perspective might also add a social mythology to predominantly expressivist theories such as Elbow's concept of freewriting via the methods and terminology of Yeats's system.

And, while *A Vision* certainly makes no claims toward the sciences of biology and psychology, Yeats's occult system may, however, be decidedly practical in addressing, metaphorically, some of the cognitive concerns of composition theory. Cognitive-based composing theories such as Gabrielle Rico's have often focused on the biological concept of cerebral duality in which each of the brain's hemispheres functions in particular, oppositional, yet complementary ways. According to Rico, "Natural writing is fully dependent on the cooperation and orchestration of both sides of the brain" (72-3). Again, Yeats's inter-locking gyre dynamic provides symbolic mythology for this cerebral duality, and the exploration of those symbols offers a unifying metaphor for even such science-based theories.

Finally, as compositionists have often recognized that "metalinguistic metaphors have practical and ethical consequences for writers and writing teachers" (Eubanks 92), the metaphors with which Yeats worked in *A Vision* are no exception. Even as mere figurative analogue, the diverse realm of magic and the occult offers to composition a theoretical framework replete with history, vocabulary, and innumerable practical texts which composition theorists have yet to fully explore. However, if we permit a stronger interpretation, taking magic and the occult seriously as alternative ontological description, we might engender an epistemology which is arguably more complete—precluding many of the

disagreements which plague the discipline—and a resultant pedagogy that negotiates some of the taxonomical bounds of composition’s leading theoretical perspectives.



In many ways, composition theory, in its current state, resembles what Yeats might have called a “soul in division from itself” (*CP* 310). As James Berlin notes in his taxonomical study, *Rhetoric and Reality*, modern writing instruction has divided itself into three major epistemological categories: objective, subjective, and transactional. From these categories emerge, respectively, the cognitivist, expressivist, and social-constructionist theories which dominate the contemporary composition project. Berlin claims, however, that none of these categories are “monolithic” and emphasizes the diversity inherent in each (6). But it is arguable that the postmodern project, with its eminently pluralistic approach, has further polarized these broad divisions by encouraging ever-narrowing specializations.

Compositionist John C. Briggs in “Saving Pluralism from Itself: Peter Elbow, Kenneth Burke, and the Idea of Magic” argues that the pluralism which infuses much of current composition theory is “in danger of becoming indifferent to or devaluing the viewpoints that pluralism is supposed to tolerate and respect,” so much so that the “very notion of a common purpose within the pluralistic association is now problematic” (par. 2). He points out that an uncritical tolerance of all theoretical perspectives—he mentions expressivism, cultural criticism, and cognitivism, among others—means that “significant speech about what that purpose is or ought to be is in danger of being vitiated by pluralism’s insistence upon the significance of all speech” (par. 2).

To redress this perceived pluralistic impasse, Briggs recommends a return to the “fundamental assumptions” in composition theory, particularly via the work of Peter Elbow and Kenneth Burke, both of whom “wonder about the mysteries of rhetorical power” (par. 3). Specifically, Briggs argues that, through their discussions of rhetoric and the “richly suggestive phenomenon of magic” (par. 4), Elbow and Burke might encourage composition theorists to reconsider the most basic elements of the rhetorical situation. Acknowledging these “almost occult” elements (par. 4), he claims, “would give us another way of approaching the problem of defining genuine rhetorical literacy. And it would help the profession move beyond conventional conflicts between expressivists and specialists, practitioners and theorists” (par. 44).

Since many compositionists would likely argue that, in classroom application, their pedagogies represent a “complex blend of theories that our current taxonomies discourage or completely deny” (Gradin 16), it seems eminently practical to work toward what Yeats would term a “Unity of Being” among these various theories. And, in casting out Yeats’s “net for a herring fisher,” such a synthesis might be engendered by considering the diverse realm of magic and the occult arts.



In “Creating a Center that Holds: Spirituality through Exploratory Pedagogy,” Kristie Fleckenstein uses a reading of Yeats’s “The Second Coming” to argue that something of a pedagogical apocalypse is imminent if current teaching methods fail to construct a “spiritual center” (25). While Fleckenstein’s apocalyptic tone is perhaps too strong for the present application, her argument for an exploratory pedagogy, an integration of

“nontraditional approaches” (27) along with established conventions does seem directly in keeping with Yeats’s aspirations in *A Vision*. And such a holistic pedagogy, I would argue, cannot be too frequently asserted.

For instance, innovative composition methods which have become largely institutionalized—again, such as Elbow’s freewriting—are consequently fully detached from many of their possible occult conceptions. In my own teaching experience, such pedagogical practices, no matter how well they are philosophically and empirically justified, are too-often easily dismissed in classroom application as clever, but ultimately unaffectionate, teaching tricks. These instructional methods quite often function as Bruno Bettelheim claims of realistic stories: they “inform without enriching,” a problem he claims “is unfortunately also true of much learning in school” (54). It may be that restoring to these practices the mythological level for which Yeats argues in *A Vision* is a practical method for enriching, even spiritualizing, various classroom applications.

In addition, the emergent spiritual center which Fleckenstein describes functions analogously to Yeats’s system in that it offers both an ordering principle and a integrative dynamic, an act of synthesis which “builds on the multifaceted nature of truth making” (Fleckenstein “Creating” 30). The construction—or re-construction, as Yeats might argue—of a spiritual center in composition studies will certainly require, then, an effort to reconcile our theoretical divisions into an integrated yet dynamic unity. But such a renovation must also entail the construction of a mythologically rich paradigm which will ultimately accommodate an active spiritual vitality.

As Yeats understands when he writes that “Myself must I remake” (*CP* 308), a composition born of an animated, magic consciousness can, perhaps even must, involve this holistic process of restructuring reality. Or as Andrea Lunsford has suggested, “It is only by actively composing our worlds that we can know them” (8-9). In this context, William Covino argues that by employing the “magical/rhetorical belief in a cosmology of possibilities for re-ordering discourse and reality” (“Magic” par. 16) we might transform those repressive, mechanistic dynamics which inhibit us. And bell hooks, in her celebration of a more liberating pedagogy, hints toward the occult when she argues that we look “beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable” to discover a landscape in which we might “create new visions” (12).



“That we may believe that all men possess the supernatural faculties,” writes Yeats near the close of *A Vision*, “I would restore to the philosopher his mythology” (*AVA* 252). This study offers, then, as did Yeats himself, a mythology for composition theory by juxtaposing it with the alternative rhetoric of Yeats’s protean magical and occult methodology. By considering a pedagogical application of the system espoused in *A Vision*, taking Yeats’s writings not as literary exempla but rather as an *aisling* of visionary, mythological composing methods, *Aisling Mhor* suggests, ultimately, that perhaps through a dynamic synthesis of various neglected, occult concepts, the contemporary project of composition might find ever more creative ways to integrate various disparate and competing theories and, thus, offer a truly enriching, holistic method for envisioning the act of writing, a method which is, as Ellman says of Yeats, “unified and liberated” (294).

## CHAPTER ONE

### “That Ever-Hidden Thing”



“Making sense of the world,” Ann Berthoff argues, “is composing” (*Forming* 3) and, further, “how you construe is how you construct” (21). When Yeats began the sessions which led to the writing of *A Vision*, he wrote, in a letter to Lady Gregory, that his “mystical philosophy” “makes me feel that for the first time I understand human life” (*CL* 644), and “his vision” had, according to George Mills Harper, “assumed cosmic proportions” (*YVP* 15). That the experiences which Yeats recounts in his introduction to *A Vision* in 1937 offered him a creative sense of order, amid the seeming chaos of modern Ireland and modernity at large, is an idea which may offer to composition theory a viable, expansive paradigm for the act of composing.

While the innumerable literary critics who have treated Yeats’s work have drawn parallels between the contents of *A Vision* and the poetry and drama which that system seems to inform, few have considered the implications of *A Vision* for Yeats’s writing process. In *Yeats at Work*, Curtis Bradford’s textual study of Yeats’s writing process, the experiences which led to *A Vision* are largely glossed over. In discussing the years 1918-20, Bradford does tentatively note that Yeats “was intellectually and emotionally stimulated by those strange experiences described in ‘A Packet for Ezra Pound’” (64). Yet the automatic scripts, which were in full bloom during these years, are never explicitly mentioned, nor, in

the entirety of the study, are the actual contents of *A Vision*. In the introduction to *Yeats's Vision Papers*, however, George Mills Harper observes that, as Yeats received the automatic writings, he was consistently inspired to compose: “His emotional state in the first weeks of marriage while he and George produced an incredible amount of Script stirred him to write” (12). Harper explicitly connects the reception of the automatic scripts to a new facility of composition and a renewed sense of order and purpose.



That Yeats’s instructors came to bring him “metaphors for poetry” may be true on several levels. While most literary critics are quick to interpret these “metaphors” as raw materials for Yeats to shape and develop in his writings—as mere content for his verse—a more expansive interpretation might understand this phrase as “metaphors *for* poetry”—that is, as metaphorical structures for the act of composing verse. When compositionist Phillip Eubanks considers the efficacy of metaphors for the composing process, he rightly claims that the making of metaphor “has to do with one conceptual domain structuring another” (92). It may be, then, that the juxtaposition of Yeats’s process in receiving and articulating *A Vision* along with the process of composition itself offers to composition theory an alternative conception of writing “because, to him who ponders well, / My rhymes more than their rhyming tell / Of things discovered in the deep” (*CP* 46).

Perhaps the central metaphor for Yeats’s “incredible experiences,” and certainly the central metaphor for the present study, is that of the *aisling* or vision-poem, in which prophetic symbolism is gleaned from supernatural contact. And, as Eubanks further argues that it is impossible to gain “important insight into a single metaphor without also

considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds” (94), a consideration of Yeats’s *A Vision* in terms of the *aisling* offers a complex web of associations, rooted in magic and the occult, with numerous parallels to the process of composition.



In Seamus Heaney’s translation of “*Gile na Gile*,” a poem paradigmatic of the *aisling* form, the poet is met with a “brightening brightness, alone on the road” (Ó Rathaille 131) which, we soon discover, is a woman of the *sidhe*. Though the dream-vision is an ancient poetic convention, Ó Rathaille’s *aisling* is one of the best-known among those which flourished in Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries. “*Gile na Gile*” is certainly paradigmatic of the genre, for according to Declan Kiberd, the structure of the *aisling* was “rigidly formulaic:”

It began with a poet, frustrated and weak, falling into a doze by river, lake or mountain-side; and thereafter, he was visited by a *speirbhean* or sky-woman, who was in effect a medium for a supernatural power. . . then, with occult symbolism and complex metaphor, the *speirbhean* would foretell the return of the Gaelic rulers and values, and the extirpation of the Saxon occupier. (318)

Immediately, Kiberd’s narrative recalls the structure of Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” though Yeats, in this *aisling*, bends the formula to his own ends. Given that Ó Rathaille was counted among the Celtic bards with which Yeats was so enamoured, what his use of the *aisling* suggests, however, is that Yeats was not only thoroughly familiar with the form but also intrigued by its implications. Yeats revisits the form again—albeit antithetically—in “Leda and the Swan” when the supernatural visitation is a violent one and

the prophecy tragic. Perhaps, then, what seemed most appealing to Yeats was the abstract structure of the vision-poem rather than any specific, delimiting political message.

When Kiberd connects the *aisling* form to *A Vision*, however, he does so almost entirely in political terms. He argues that Yeats's *A Vision* is an attempt to “define an alternative vision of society” (316), in keeping with the political motivations of the *aisling* writers, and Kiberd never strays far from his post-colonial agenda. He does acknowledge, however, that the work, with “all its arcane lore,” was intended “to provide a spiritual foundation for the new nation-state” (316), yet the significance of this occult element is never fleshed out in the study.

The occult element of the *aisling*—aside from the obvious supernatural apparition—is born out in “*Gile na Gile*” when Ó Rathaille writes of the prophecy imparted by the *speirbhean*:

News that was secret she whispered to soothe her aloneness,  
 News of the one due to return and reclaim his true place,  
 News of the ruin of those who had cast him in darkness,  
 News that was awesome, too awesome to utter in verse. (131)

Given that the actual content of the prophecy—aside from the implied eminent return of the king—is never revealed to the reader, we might conclude that the news “too awesome to utter in verse” is of considerable power and consequence. After receiving this news, the poet claims that “my head got lighter and lighter but still I approached her, / Enthralled by her thralldom, helplessly held and bewildered,” (131). As one thoroughly versed in the glamour of fairy lore as well as the mysteries of esoteric magic, Yeats undoubtedly

understood implications for this “thralldom” and this awesome, hidden truth—implications which include, but ultimately transcend, the political sphere.

In Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabhain’s “A Magic Mist,” another apt example of the 18th Century *aisling*, the poet recognizes a new ease of speech in the presence of the supernatural apparition:

How it fell, I write out in these verses  
     —how I let my lips speak unrestrained,  
 the sweet things that I told the fair maiden  
     as we stretched on the green mountain slope. (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 189)

Here, the poet, in his encounter, finds a new fluency in the face of his despair, and his words flow, “unrestrained,” both in that moment and in the reconstruction in verse. When Yeats, a poet despairing of the condition of the world around him, found himself in receipt of supernatural prophecy through his new wife’s mediumship, he found himself similarly inspired. In the writing of *A Vision*, then, Yeats found not only the hidden auspices of a “returning” kingdom—a kingdom more amenable to his soul—but also a method for engendering creation.



“Whether that other kingdom is the fairy world, the alchemical realm of the moods, or the sphere of reality in *A Vision*,” argues Barbara Croft, “this is the world that imagination discovers; it contains truth that can only be discovered by instinct” (132). Here, Croft identifies the syncretic esotericism which Yeats seemed to draw from in all aspects of his work, an apparent unity which, for Yeats, elided all that was hidden or secret in folklore,

religion, magic, and philosophy. And, as Croft rightly notes, such a dynamic sense of an otherworld required that Yeats initially abjure cold rationality in favour of an intuitive openness.

Yeats certainly understood the problems with a too-strict reliance on objective reason in his own thinking. He writes in his journal from 1909, “Twenty, no, a hundred times if I had acted upon impulse and against reason I should have created a finer world of rights and wrongs, a more personal and passionate life than impersonal reason could give” (*MEM* 254). Here, Yeats again acknowledges that objective reasoning fails on its own to bring passion—inspiration—to life.

Yeats’s many observations about the increasingly fragmented ontological paradigm which dominated his world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries are interestingly paired throughout his writings with statements of an imminent shift in that paradigm and echo a similar anticipation in the *aisling*. In 1897, Yeats writes that “we are in the midst of a great revolution of thought, which is touching literature and speculation alike; an insurrection against everything which assumes that the external and material are the only fixed things, the only standards of reality” (*UPII* 45). Here, Yeats understands his world as reeling in the midst of turmoil while poised on the cusp of a more dynamic and constructive future, much as the *aisling* poets envisioned themselves, too, on the brink of deliverance.

Such revolutionary statements are easily understood in terms of Thomas Kuhn’s work in the philosophy of science. In his oft-cited *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn argues that paradigm shifts occur only in the presence of a malaise created by the failure of a particular paradigm to sustain a conventional pattern of exploration. Kuhn likens a shift in

scientific paradigms to a political revolution, which easily recalls the *aisling* tradition as well as much of Yeats's work, when he writes, "In both political and scientific development the sense of malfunction that can lead to crisis is prerequisite to revolution" (92).

In this context, to speculate about the nationalistic motives behind Yeats's *aisling* is certainly a well-founded line of reasoning, undoubtedly yielding an effective study, yet to imply that Yeats's sole, or even primary, interest in the *aisling* tradition lay in its nationalistic implications would be reductive at best. Rather, in *A Vision*, Yeats certainly understands the full symbolic weight of the *aisling*, given the broad implications of his 1925 edition's subtitle: *An Explanation of Life*. And, as in the earlier essay "Magic," arguably the genesis for the conceptual patterns that would lead him to *A Vision*, Yeats understands himself as part of a larger revolution, one "which has set me all but unwilling among those lean and fierce minds who are at war with their time, who cannot accept the days as they pass, simply and gladly" (*E&I* 51).



In this context, we may begin to consider what Yeats's particular vision might mean for the contemporary project of compositions studies. One significant aspect of the juxtaposition of *A Vision* with the *aisling* tradition is the emphasis on the immediate reception of a complete symbolism through supernatural means, a "sudden enlargement" of vision. "We perceive in a pulsation of the artery, and after slowly decline" (*LE* 29) writes Yeats in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, speaking of the quick revelatory nature of vision as afforded by the Daemon: "It is the sudden lightning, for all his acts of power are instantaneous" (29). Yeats understood the immediacy of the unforeseen revelation as central to his purposes with

*A Vision*. In the 1925 introduction, he writes of a “belief that truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed, and that if a man do not lose faith, and if he go through certain preparations, revelation will find him at the fitting moment” (x). Here, Yeats expresses the belief that revelation—here, almost personified—can be nurtured, encouraged, and attained.

Similarly, compositionist Ann Berthoff argues that “though it’s difficult for young writers to find this formula comforting or trustworthy at the beginning of a composition course, experience has shown that writers *do* find the forms they need—the definition, the cause-effect chain, the story—*when* they need to find them” (*Forming* 22). Yeats further attests to this phenomenon when he writes of an image—an idea—that “rose without confusion, and without labour except the labour of keeping the mind’s eye awake” (*E&I* 35). Yeats, here, seems to suggest that such insights are the result of keen reception much more than of conscious intellectual manipulation.

Elizabeth Holman, in “Behind the Screen of Consciousness: Intuition, Insight, and Inspiration in the Writing Process,” corroborates this idea when she claims that “the operative attributes of intuition are its immediacy and its direct access between person and entity also without conceptual or discursive mediation” (66). Her study traces something of a history of inspiration and intuition from ancient Greece to modern cognitive psychology via the work of Carl Jung, rooting her assertions throughout in those academically-sanctioned disciplines. In this way, Homan attempts to lend credence to a phenomenon which is difficult at best to practice in academic settings, and which, as Berthoff has noted, is often difficult for students to trust.

It seems, however, almost contradictory to attempt a justification of such mysterious processes through the “discursive mediation” of academic archaeologies. If, as Holman claims, intuition and insight necessarily bypass such intellectual processes, might not more productive inquiries into those processes proceed, also, without the constraints of strict rationalism? Yeats considers the sources of his own insights and inspiration in the poem “Fragments”:

Where got I that truth?  
 Out of a medium’s mouth,  
 Out of nothing it came,  
 Out of the forest loam,  
 Out of dark night where lay  
 The crowns of Nineveh. (CP 218)

While elsewhere—most notably in “Adam’s Curse”—Yeats enumerates the labors involved in composition, his lines here, with their intimations of spiritism, natural magic, and *ex nihilo* creation, offer an explanation of inspiration which seems more closely aligned with the etymological roots of inspiration: an *in-spiriting*.

In another example of Yeats’s understanding of inspiration or insight, he refers to “those finely articulated scenes and patterns that come out of the dark, seemingly completed in the winking of an eye” (LE 21). While the import of those “scenes and patterns” will be further explored in a subsequent chapter, the key dynamic here is the emergence “out of the dark” of a completed insight, a fully-formed revelation of understanding. Holman similarly suggests, largely in cognitive terms, that “much of our knowledge involves dynamic, evolving

patterns that are stored at multiple levels in the brain and nervous system and are inaccessible until they are combined with emotions or ‘analogical representations’ at which point the knowledge erupts into consciousness as intuition, insight, or inspiration” (69). This “inaccessible” information, essentially occult knowledge rationalized in cognitive terms, again seems to offer few sympathies with the process Holman seeks to describe and little room for the affective catalyst which she understands as necessary.

The darkness, however, in the Yeats’s example above, functions as a mysterious absence—possibly best understood as a void which somehow desires to be filled—for receiving the “brightening brightness” of insight. Or, as Elbow says of freewriting, “Freewritings are vacuums. Gradually you will begin to carry over into your regular writing some of the voice, force, and connectedness that creep into those vacuums (*Without Teachers* 7). Perhaps, then, the processes which Holman seeks to champion as useful complements to composition pedagogy might benefit from the mythological context in which Yeats writes, “I shall find the dark grown luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing...” (*LE* 9).



Again, however, the use of such an occult methodology is often initially uncomfortable to students of writing who are accustomed to the “trustworthy thesis statement and outline” (Berthoff *Forming* 22). When Yeats asks in “Ego Dominus Tuus,” “What portion in the world can the artist have / Who has awakened from the common dream / But dissipation and despair?” (*CP* 163), he acknowledges the sense of unrest that often precedes and accompanies critical insight, an unrest that is born out in the *aisling* dynamic, as well as,

metaphorically, in the process of composition itself.

Yeats suggests that such “knowledge has often come most quickly to turbulent men, and for a season brought new turbulence” (*LE* 9). The “turbulent men” here suggests the conventional dejected Byronic hero, but such a persona is conventional also of the *aisling*. The poet of Ó Suilleabhain’s “A Magic Mist” is “an outcast in places unknown,” who lies “dejected and tearful / in a nut sheltered wood all alone” (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 187). And in the final stanza of Ó Rathaille’s vision-poem, the poet, after his encounter with the *sidhe*, is overcome with “calamity, shock, collapse, heartbreak and grief” (131) at the importance of his experience.

Holmon echoes this dynamic when she claims that “individuals writing about their intuitive experiences note that their insights occurred when they were perplexed or feeling anxious about a problem they had been unable to solve” (72). This sense of anxiety is surely one felt by all writers at the inception of the composing process, and it would seem ultimately beneficial to mythologize such anxiety as an integral portion of composition. To this end, Yeats claims that “genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind” (*AB* 272), suggesting that “the greater energies of the mind seldom break forth but when the deeps are loosened” by such a crisis (*E&I* 37).

In his discussion of Shelley in “Ego Dominus Tuus,” Yeats highlights this not only this sense of crisis but also an artistic salvation of sorts, his ultimate criterion for genius:

For certainly he sank into his grave  
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,  
And made—being poor, ailing and ignorant,

Shut out from all the luxury of the world,  
 The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper—  
 Luxuriant song. (*CP* 163)

Here, Yeats seems to be suggesting that despite—or, perhaps, only through—this sense of turbulence, this almost tragic sensibility, inspiration is to be found. In other words, as Yeats would have it, “We sing amid our uncertainty” (*LE* 8).



But again, objections to pedagogies of intuition, insight, or inspiration most often implicate this uncertainty—this lack of clear objectives which must accompany such practices—as their inherent failing. Peter Elbow acknowledges the sense of “chaos and disorientation” which ensues from proceeding “without a full plan” (*Without Teachers* 30-32). But this lack of initial direction is mythologized as a form of grace by Richard Graves, and, in this mythology, grace is described much like the *speirbbean* in the *aisling* convention:

Grace is not something that can be called up at will, planned on, or included in a syllabus. Rather it is like some elusive being hiding in the shadows, camouflaged by its surroundings. From time to time, we catch a glimpse of it and in that moment detect something of its awe and magnitude. Yet the more determined we are to find it, the more it eludes us. (Graves 16)

Here, Graves evokes much of the imagery of Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus” with its own elusive being and the determined, if somewhat misguided, quest of Aengus to “find out where she has gone” (*CP* 56), a quest which mirrors the academic impulse. How, then, might we learn to employ this “non-seeking” dynamic in pedagogical practice?

“Since grace is fluid,” Graves continues, “the best way to encourage it is to leave space for it to happen” (20). This space might be mythologically defined, in occult terms, as darkness or nothingness or the mystery of the otherworld—as the above examples have suggested. But, in terms seemingly more palatable to many composition theorists, this space is often mythologized as a form of silence.

“Whenever there is silence,” writes Peter Elbow, “the reader must enter in, participate” (“Silence” 12), echoing the general premise of Reader-Response theory in that meaning—perhaps, grace—can be found in the hidden, empty, or silent spaces. This silence—this “principle of negativity; absence”—is, according to Elbow, “what makes writing good” (12). Or, as compositionist Charles Suhor claims, “Silence pursued for new insight is decidedly friendly, regenerative (when sustained), and conducive to creative response” (32-33).

The title of Yeats’s earlier attempt at a spiritual manifesto, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, is, then, particularly relevant to the discussion at hand. Translated roughly from the Latin, “By the Friendly Silence of the Moon,” the book is often cited as a precursor to *A Vision* in that Yeats first outlines here his doctrine of daemonic inspiration as a portion of his doctrine of the Mask. What is perhaps most significant, however, is the reliance on lunar symbolism for the title of *Per Amica* as well as for the phasal divisions of *A Vision*’s structure. In both instances, the use of a lunar mythology suggests an appeal to the hidden mysteries of the subjective realm, and it is particularly significant that in *Per Amica*, silence is the “friendly” element which engenders this particular construction of reality. Surely, then, when Yeats encourages that the “thoughts of Ireland brood /Upon a measured quietude” (*CP* 46), we

might take up this exhortation as encouragement, in composition studies, to further explore the “friendly silence” of the composing process.



“One longs,” Janet Emig confesses, speaking of composition textbooks, “for them to make at least a small obeisance in the direction of the untidy, of the convoluted, of the not-wholly-known, of a more intricate self and process” (“Uses” 48). Here again, the recognition of the “not-wholly-known” in the writing process suggests that that which is hidden from our rational minds may, in fact, be the key to a more efficacious composing mythology.

In this context, while Yeats’s reliance on symbolism in his poetry as well as in his larger aesthetic has been well explored, it is worth noting that the occult character inherent in the symbolist project is often identified as the locus of its power. In *The Heritage of Symbolism*, C. M. Bowra discusses the methodology of symbolism as it particularly manifests itself in Yeats’s writings:

The claim of this method is that it allows the poet to deal with subjects which ordinary speech must leave vague. Such subjects play a large part in all aesthetic experience and are the stuff of which mysteries are made. To define them more closely would rob them of some essential characteristics; to express them in ordinary abstractions would be entirely inadequate for anyone who feels their real character. (191-192)

It may be argued, then, that anyone who has felt the “real character” of writing—those writers who experience the quickening of the writing process—might, quite expectedly, feel

the “ordinary abstractions” of conventional, institutionalized composition pedagogies similarly inadequate. And, if an attempt to define more precisely certain characteristics of the writing process serves only to limit potential in the act of composing, then perhaps something of an “occult poetics,” assimilating the characteristics of symbolism, would engender a better approach to those deeply hidden processes which compositionists often locate at the heart of writing.

One study of H. P. Blavatsky’s use of occult language—a rhetoric which was surely influential for Yeats—offers insight into the constructive possibilities of this esoteric rhetoric:

A quick glance at Blavatsky’s explicit discussions of language discloses both an awareness of the limits of language as well as a desire to develop an ambiguous and novel vocabulary for moving readers toward the ineffable truth—an awareness and a desire that is best characterized as an occult poetics. (Gunn 207)

Here, it becomes apparent that, whether through the imagistic, symbolic content of writing or through the actual linguistic implementation of that writing, the occult realm offers more room for expression than our conventional, rational interrogations might afford.

And, when Susan Schiller claims that an increased level of spirituality may be available through composition, we begin to see also that an occult approach to those ineffable portions of the writing process might evoke the “spiritual foundation” which Yeats desired:

First we need to accept and value the fact that spirituality can be defined in myriad ways because it is mysterious. The infinite potential offered to us by such mystery is an advantage, for it allows affirmation of far more than we will ever fully know. It offers the opportunity for lifelong learning and discovery, which in turn opens us up to accepting knowledge as a spiraling evolution of information and insight. (36)



It may be, however, that the aversion to such occult issues, at least in the academic landscape, stems in part from the implicit suggestion that allowing any ideas to remain hidden or mysterious represents a failing of the rationalism on which so much of our modern educational system is founded. When Seamus Heaney writes in his “Personal Helicon” of the mysterious inspiration he gleaned as a child from “the dark drop” of old, abandoned wells, he suggests that the child-like sense of wonder that allowed him to “pry into roots, to finger slime, / To stare, big-eyed Narcissus into some spring” is but a childish indulgence, “beneath all adult dignity,” something magical—something spiritual—lost in the transition to rational maturity (*Opened Ground* 15).

In composition theory, Peter Elbow makes a similar observation regarding the somehow childish fascination with mystery and magic when he writes that, lamentably, “scholars and rationalists like to tell the history of language as story of things we gained that our forebears lacked—in terms of the stupid mistakes the ancients made” (*With Power* 360). He goes on to compare these early human “mistakes” to the mistakes made by children, who “use language magically” (360). Elbow suggests finally that children—as well as our

somehow more primitive predecessors—“had power in language that’s hard to capture now” (360).

When Heaney concludes his poem, “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (*Opened Ground* 15), he is suggesting that the darkness—the depth and mystery of emptiness—is a fruitful locale for personal fulfillment, to be accessed, now, through the echoes of his writing. Might not composition theory, then, with its eminently rational concerns for widespread literacy, dare to confront this largely irrational domain on its own terms, on occult terms, in an attempt to regain the magical paradigm which imparts the power and voice of “the ancients?”



Given the pervasive nature of the scientific paradigm in our contemporary world, such forays into occult territory may seem either powerfully threatening or else pathetically delusional. In *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, something of an antithesis to *A Vision*, Carl Sagan argues that, in the absence of the rationality of science, “The candle flame gutters. Its little pool of light trembles. Darkness gathers. The demons begin to stir” (27). Here, however, even in the occult language of metaphor, the darkness is something to be feared.

By contrast, in the dedication to A. E. of the esoteric volume *The Secret Rose*, Yeats assesses, in strikingly similar terms, the occult character of his nation:

So far, however, as this book is visionary it is Irish for Ireland, which is still predominantly Celtic, has preserved with some less excellent things a gift of vision, which has died out among more hurried and more successful nations:

no shining candelabra have prevented us from looking into the darkness, and  
when one looks into the darkness there is always something there. (*JR* 126)

Beyond the political overtones of the statement, the significance for his occult project seems clear: by envisioning the darkness as potent—ripe with potential—Ireland has remained receptive enough to see, still, the “brightening brightness” of the prophetic *sidhe*. It is in this vein that Yeats entreats us to “Fix every thought upon / That quarter where all thought is done,” for “Who,” he asks, “can distinguish darkness from the soul?” (*CP* 238). And through this dynamic, in *A Vision*, Yeats sees that “this ever-hidden thing which makes us fold our hands has begun to press down upon multitudes” (*AVB* 300), and, in response, he offers his *aisling* as a sustaining mythology.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Sympathetic Vibrations”



In the preceding chapter, the focus of Yeats’s occultism in regards to *A Vision* centered primarily around a seemingly instantaneous reception from, and exploration of, occult regions. Such a dynamic is one that often finds much use in the so-called “creative” writing discipline—a discipline which encompasses Yeats’s primary genres— where expressive writing most often finds its niche. However, that dynamic—which is often perceived as essentially passive—bears the brunt of much criticism from composition theorists concerned primarily with the pedagogy of “practical” expository prose. Sherrie Gradin notes that “irrational, mysterious, or fanciful things are frowned upon and contemptuously referred to as ‘Romantic’” (7).

Janet Emig severely criticizes this Romantic impulse by declaiming it as “magical thinking” and setting it at odds with the developmental, or process approach. In her study, “Non-Magical Thinking,” she argues that “magical thinking” about writing—a phrase attributed to cognitive psychologist Howard Gruber—can be characterized by the beliefs that “there is essentially one process of writing that serves all writers,” that “that process is linear,” and that “the process of writing is almost exclusively conscious” (140). It would seem, however, something of a logical fallacy to denounce the “magical” approach based on

these criteria as magic of the sort with which Yeats was familiar would hardly hold with such rigid assertions.

The disparity seems to lie with Emig's implicit definition of magic—in William Covino's terms, "the familiar rabbit-out-of-a-hat definition" ("Magic" par. 2)—which would leave students unquestioning and powerless in the spell of the instructor, suggesting that Emig's concerns, then, are located, at least partially, in the social sphere. A more balanced definition would certainly include Covino's assertion—gleaned from an anthropological definition of magic—that "magic is a conceptual construct for appraising the powers of language" as well as a "liberatory alternative to established rationalism" (*Magic, Rhetoric* 5).

Interestingly, however, in much of her other work, Emig's use of occult terminology—particularly in "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing"—seems to imply a tacit awareness of the "magic" inherent in writing, even if she is unable, in her academic expression, to freely articulate it. In that study, Emig uses terms such as "ritual," "evocation," and "incantation" in conjunction with the "daemons" and other "entities" which she identifies in the unconscious portion of the writing process (46-53). In this study, her ultimate conclusion—that writers should be given flexible deadlines to accommodate these unconscious processes—is one that fails to realize the power of the magic she has invoked.

Emig's objections—paradigmatic as they are—are but a portion of a larger, societal aversion to all things magical. As Covino notes, "the prospect of a magical epistemology is a fearful one even for those who endorse literacy as a disruptive force" (*Magic, Rhetoric* 5).

Particularly in composition studies, Gradin observes that "the classical approach to

rhetorical theory and pedagogy, for instance, as represented by such current theorists as John Gage, considers the romantic view unsuitable for composition pedagogy because it is premised on the romantic assumption that successful writing is a mysterious process or act of genius” (5).

Resistance to such magic arises also—perhaps due to their ostensible reliance on the sciences of biology and psychology—from the cognitivists. As Gradin notes, Linda Flower’s cognitivist assessment of Coleridge’s composing methods—methods which are not altogether dissimilar to Yeats’s—points out several composing “myths:” Coleridge “suggests that the creative vision comes without effort, that it comes fully articulated, that it comes in a matter of moments, and that it can not be repeated because it is a gift from the muse” (Gradin 8). While the use of the term “myth” to refer to something essentially counterfactual is directly at odds with its use elsewhere in this study, the statement is indicative of this paradigmatic opposition to the elusive magic of inspiration as explored in the previous chapter, and these objections resemble, perhaps, Emig’s distrust of “magical thinking.”

In response, Gradin argues further that “to accept this simplified view of ‘romantic inspiration’ not only ignores the complexity of what this meant to the romantics, but it also denies that inspiration is accessible to most if not all students through the cultivation of a certain kind of intellect—an encompassing intellect” (9). The impetus behind Gradin’s study is, then, that by textually excavating and historicizing “romantic inspiration,” composition studies might glean a theory which encompasses both the expressivist and the social-constructivist rhetorics, thereby justifying the use of these romantic impulses. But, while

Gradin sees her study as an effort to legitimize the rhetoric of inspiration and magic, Peter Elbow offers confidently, without a legitimizing historical narrative, “If you invest yourself deeply in something as mysterious as writing, it’s hard to avoid magical thinking” (*With Power* 359).



Another related objection to the idea of “magic consciousness” stems from the pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire. As William Covino notes, “For Freire, illiteracy coincides with ‘magic consciousness,’ which is a resignation to the facts of life and the powers that enforce them” (*Magic, Rhetoric* 113). This aversion, much like Emig’s, is one that is thoroughly concerned with the unequal distribution of power in a social interaction, a distribution which is rightly feared in its expression as an unquestionable pedagogical magic power wielded upon—or, in Freire’s terms, deposited in—the powerless student. It is this dynamic which Covino differentiates as “arresting” magic (21) and denounces as “prevailing sorceries inimical to social vitality” (24).

Freire’s objections seem eminently related to many of the dangers which have been pointed out in relation to the use of automatic writing, the spiritist phenomenon which engendered much of *A Vision*. In this context, automatic writing is a thoroughly passive act wherein the automatic writer is but a powerless medium for the transmission of a dominating spirit. But a further consideration of the phenomenon of automatic writing as practiced by Yeats and George—especially in conjunction with the pedagogical practice of freewriting—might offer a method for understanding a more interactive form of automatism and, thereby, identifying a possible constructive social dynamic in the process.

When popular occult writer Edain McCoy describes the uses of automatic writing, she claims, “You can receive commentaries, ideas, guidance, advice, and information from your own Higher Self, or from any other entity you wish to try and contact.” (17). McCoy, here, identifies essentially two possible sources for automatic script: one internal and one external. Though perhaps most palatable to the modern, rational mind, understanding automatic writing as a tool for tapping hidden insights in the unconscious reduces the phenomenon—much like freewriting—to an essentially individual, expressivist act.

But, as McCoy further explains, “Through merging ourselves with a universal mental energy, usually referred to as the Collective Unconscious, our Higher Self (sometimes called the super-conscious) can access information in this great mass of omniscient energy and relay it to us” (19). Although through the appeal, here, to Jungian terminology where Yeats would undoubtedly have preferred “the Great Memory,” McCoy seems to be describing a process which does extend beyond the individual writer. In contrast, Elbow asserts that, in writing, “the final higher organization in words should only be called a borrowed reflection of a higher organization that is really in me or my mind” (*Without Teachers* 23). Where McCoy’s definition—her mythology—finally elides the self and a larger, collective consciousness, Elbow’s statement keeps insight firmly located in “me or my mind.” And it is ultimately this divergence of origin, then, which differentiates freewriting from automatic writing.

It may be argued, however, that the automatic writings which Yeats used as the basis for *A Vision* functioned analogously to freewriting in composition pedagogy—as an invention strategy which lessens inhibition and generates insight. What, then, might

composition theory glean from the essentially occult perspective of automatic writing? Perhaps, by surrounding the essentially conventional concept of freewriting with the mythology of Yeats's automatic scripts, composition studies might glean a more dynamic, affective pedagogy.



Compositionists Robert Boice and Patricia Meyers also have argued that automatic writing and freewriting share a similar genesis in that both are “semihypnotic activities in which the writer writes effortlessly, either with little conscious awareness or else without feeling responsibility for what is being written” (471). The automatism of freewriting, they claim, even in their 1986 study, is a pervasive technique among composition teachers although little attention is given to the method's origins in spiritist phenomena as such occult ideas are generally shunned in pedagogical practice. As to the efficacy of automatic writing, however, Boice and Meyers conclude, based on a survey of William James's work on automatism, that the process evokes a kind of split consciousness in the writer (476), and they further assert, much like Peter Elbow, that such “dissociation enhances access to creative processes and inhibits internal censors” (479).

It is the idea of split consciousness, however, that promises greater insight into the phenomenon. As Ann Berthoff asserts, “In all its phases, composing is a conversation you're having with yourself—or *selves*, since, when you're writing, you consciously play the roles of speaker, audience, and critic all at once” (*Forming* 23). In *Forming, Thinking, Writing*, Berthoff articulates her pedagogical practice of the “dialectical notebook,” and it would seem that this practice, wherein the writer can “carry on a dialogue between you-as-listener and

you-as-reviewer, the One Who Listens and Looks Again,” (22) she shares a similar dynamic with Yeats’s experience of automatic writing. Of his “instructors,” Yeats writes:

They showed when I began that they assisted or approved, for they sent sign after sign. Sometimes if I stopped writing and drew one hand over another my hands smelt of violets or roses, sometimes the truth I sought would come to me in a dream, or I would feel myself stopped---but this has occurred to me since boyhood---when forming some sentence, whether in my mind or upon paper. (*AVB* 18)

Here, Yeats seems to understand both the creative impulse afforded by the dissociation of automatism as well as something of the internal censors which Boice and Meyers recognize, yet Yeats, given his magical world view, understands the process as one animated by disincarnate beings who offer “sign after sign.” Though she does intimate that the possibility of multiple “selves” exists, Berthoff would have the dialectical process remain in the metaphorical realm as a mere description of individual thought while Yeats would have his thought process engaged in a more dynamic conversation with entities beyond the bounds of his immediate experience—allowing, perhaps, for a greater level of insight.

In addition, Yeats’s conception of automatic writing is also able to animate—and ultimately transcend—what Boice and Meyers refer to as those “internal censors”—just as freewriting promises a methodology for similarly freeing inhibitions. Elbow identifies those inhibitions as an impulse to self-edit: “The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn’t just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page” (*Without*

*Teachers* 6). In Yeats's version, the instructors—the beneficent communicators—are able to identify those sources of interruption. “Others,” he points out, “whom they named Frustrators attempted to confuse us or waste time. Who these Frustrators were or why they acted so was never adequately explained” (*AVB* 12-13), but by understanding these sources of confusion as somehow “other,” Yeats is able to dissociate from them, avoiding the often inhibiting feelings of self-doubt. While such a dissociation may suggest—to the more rational-minded—a certain level of self-delusion, it becomes clear that Yeats's occult conception of automatic writing offers him a social dynamic which may be both complementary as well as antithetical.



In this context, Yeats's understanding of antithesis may offer further insight. Speaking again of his instructors, Yeats claims that “it was part of their purpose to affirm that all the gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his true being. Was communication itself such a conflict?” (*AVB* 13). Here, Yeats seems to suggest that antithesis itself might be an engendering factor for communication in general. Similarly, Sherrie Gradin notes the Romantic impulse of Elbow's argument that “an organism cannot grow, the mind cannot grow toward knowledge, unless we allow ourselves to be ‘swallowed by what is different from the self—to merge or expand into what is different’” (102). Yeats, then, seems to understand—and employ—a concept of dialectical opposition which some compositionists understand as key to the composing imagination.

That Yeats's system in *A Vision* relies heavily on a multifaceted concept of antithesis—a concept more fully explored in the following chapter—suggests that this

dynamic functioned as a center of gravity for multiple lines of his thought. As early as *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats writes that “I sometimes fence for half an hour at the day’s end, and when I close my eyes upon the pillow I see a foil playing before me, the button to my face. We meet always in the deep of the mind, whatever our work, wherever our reverie carries us, that other Will” (*LE* 12). Here, again, Yeats is able, through his dream-vision, to animate—and, thus, realize—his antithesis as an independent entity. And, that other “Will” to which Yeats refers here, recast in “Ego Dominus Tuus,” suggests the prophetic visionary figure of the *aisling*:

I call to the mysterious one who yet  
 Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
 And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
 And prove of all imaginable things  
 The most unlike, being my anti-self,  
 And standing by these characters disclose  
 All that I seek. (*CP* 163)

Janet Emig, despite her objections to “magical thinking,” offers particular insight into the faculty which Yeats understands in these instances as his Daemon. Emig suggests that writers “convey implicitly or explicitly not only awareness that there is an unconscious actively performing in all their writing, but a belief—more, awe—in its importance, efficacy, and power. Often, in fact, they persona-fy the unconscious part of the writing self into daemons” (“Uses” 49). Here, while the dynamic expressed is a significant one, perhaps the point most significant to this study Emig notes as a mere aside: through the personification

of this unconscious element, writers are able to access a sense of awe—a sensation conducive to creation and composition and, ultimately spirituality.

Yeats similarly speaks of his use of dialogic interaction in the automatic communications when he asks, “Was that drama itself part of the communication, had my question to be asked before his mind cleared? (*AVB* 130). Here, the drama of which he speaks evokes a similar observation from compositionist Hildy Miller. She suggests, “Writers often dramatize ideas when they are either especially interested or trying to muster some interest in a topic. Ideas can be quite literally embodied as characters in a dramatic rhetorical situation” (119).

That Yeats was fully cognizant of the ritual power of drama seems clear, given his considerable theatrical efforts. And it may be that when Miller suggests that drama encourages engagement with ideas, we are offered an insight into the ultimate, seemingly universal, efficacy of drama and theatre. Yeats understands this efficacy in *A Vision* when he writes that “the stage-manager, or *Daimon*, offers his actor an inherited scenario, the *Body of fate*, and a *Mask* or role as unlike as possible to his natural ego or *Will*, and leaves him to improvise through his *Creative Mind* the dialogue and details of the plot” (*AVB* 84).

However, what may be more fully applicable here is Yeats’s use of the dialogic form in his poetry—notably, “Ego Dominus Tuus” and “Dialog of Self and Soul.” As Berthoff argues, “Learning to write is in part learning to invent the dialog, as we do daily in unplanned conversations” (*Forming* 24), and Yeats’s endeavours towards dialog—both in his dialogic poetry and especially in his practice of automatic writing—suggest a method for mythologizing this dramatic exchange.

Again, however, given the conclusions Emig reaches in “The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing,” her efforts seem to fall short of this mythic possibility. She claims that a writer’s use of daemons is a subject “intriguing enough to warrant treatment through a full piece of research, which, to my knowledge, it has not yet received” (51). Here, Emig fails to realize that the “research” which she prefers—a form of the case-study format emerging from psychology and the social sciences—is perhaps not especially conducive to the construction of an ultimately spiritual expression, a method which both communicates and engenders awe. Nonetheless, further exploration of automatic writing—exploration which takes into account its occult implications—would undoubtedly lead composition theory from the individual logic of the expressive realm into a larger, more dynamic social sphere.



When LeFevre argues that “invention is a dialectical process in that the inventing individual(s) and the socioculture are co-existing and mutually defining” (35), this dialectical process echoes the dramatic dynamic outlined above. Where Berthoff speaks of the internal conversation which encourages composition, LeFevre understands that this conversation might be—possibly should be—envisioned as a larger, social interaction. As Yeats writes that “a poet is justified not by the expression of himself, but by the public he finds or creates; a public made by others ready to his hand if he is a mere popular poet, but a new public, a new form of life, if he is a man of genius” (*E&I* x), we begin to see that Yeats—much as the *aisling* writers and the ancient Celtic bards before them understood the

function of poetry as socially enactive—believes that the words of the poet are capable of altering the social landscape.

This idea is one that is as thoroughly Romantic as Celtic or nationalistic. Shelley argues for this element of social responsibility in *A Defence of Poetry*:

Poets are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. (755)

In this context, we may recall Kiberd's reading of *A Vision* as a kind of spiritual program for the nation of Ireland. When Yeats dreams of creating at Castle Rock an "Irish Eleusis or Samothrace" (*MEM* 123) in collaboration with Maude Gonne, we begin to get a sense of the magical "Great Work" which Yeats understood as his avocation:

For years to come it was in my thought, as in much of my writing, to seek also to bring again in[to] imaginative life the old sacred places—Slievenamon, Knocknarea—all that old reverence that hung—above all—about conspicuous hills. But I wished by my writings and those of the school I hoped to found to have a secret symbolical relation to these mysteries, for in that way, I thought, there will be a greater richness, a greater claim upon the love of the soul, doctrine without exhortation and rhetoric. (*MEM* 124)

And, as Covino argues, "In a nonmagical society, our classification systems are presumed to

be scientific and logical, so that their origins in social rituals within a magical epistemology are forgotten” (*Magic, Rhetoric* 12), implying that resurrecting such an epistemology constitutes a socially transformative process. Yeats, then, in aspiring toward a national spiritual renewal through the magic of his writing—a re-enchantment not unrelated to the vision of the *aísling* writers—seeks to resurrect these social rituals.



Further, Yeats understands himself as participating, through his writings, in a greater lineage of literary production. “Even in literature,” LeFevre claims, “which may be regarded as an asocial enterprise, collectively held knowledge and styles of thinking influence invention. Having a common heritage of creative thinkers and writers, and knowing about that heritage, can be a source of creativity for individual writers” (91). LeFevre, here, seems to be suggesting a relationship which stands in marked contrast to Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence.” While Bloom’s assessment of collective invention seems coloured by Freudian angst, wherein a writer’s literary predecessors are to be reckoned with only through “misreadings.” LeFevre’s argument, however, seems eminently more constructive: a writer may find creative sustenance by synthesizing and incorporating the innovations of his or her forebears. This incorporation is evidenced when Joyce Carol Oates speaks of Yeats’s “eclectic, fanciful, Sargasso Sea of the imagination, in which nearly everything he has read turns up in some form” (par. 6).

But Yeats’s reliance on the works of other authors is never a mere borrowing. In assessing the relationship between Yeats and Blake, M. C. Flannery, in her study *Yeats and Magic*, suggests that “what we will see is that Blake did not so much influence Yeats as serve

to give him confidence that a major poet could work from an occult system” (39). What Yeats found in Blake, then, rather than specific content, was an occult methodology gleaned from Blake’s own mythopoesis.

This interaction is one that is often expressed metaphorically as a kind of resonance: “Resonance comes about when an individual act—a ‘vibration’—is intensified and prolonged by sympathetic vibrations” (LeFevre 65). Here, in speaking of the resonance (a term attributed to Harold Lasswell) of enabling social interactions, LeFevre uses a phrase that Yeats employs in Phase 12 of *A Vision*: “Every emotion begins to be related, as musical notes are related, to every other. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings into sympathetic vibration” (*AVA* 61). While Yeats, here, speaks in largely affective terms, the dynamic itself is significant: by aligning himself and his writing project with other “sympathetic” writers, his projects might reverberate into an astounding, harmonic force.

This seems especially true in “To Ireland in the Coming Times,” when Yeats writes:

Know, that I would accounted be  
 True brother of a company  
 That sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong  
 Ballad and story, rann and song. (*CP* 46)

Here, while the political implications may be preeminent, Yeats understands himself as an integral portion of the social project “to sweeten” the political strife which has plagued his nation. And, in a particularly clear statement of his sense of social involvement and responsibility, he writes that “those themes we share and inherit, so long as they engage our emotions, come first. When that is no longer possible we are broken off and separate, some

sort of dry faggot, and the time has come to read criticism and talk of our point of view”  
(*E&I* ix).



As Yeats describes his magical collaborations with Maude Gonne, he claims, “I could therefore use her clairvoyance to produce forms that would arise from both minds, though mainly seen by one, and escape therefore from what is merely personal” (*MEM* 124). Again, we see in Yeats’s thought an aversion to the “merely personal,” but we see, also, that the limited subjectivity of this personal realm can only be transcended by a kind of social interaction. As Yeats further explains, this dynamic is centered around the interaction of opposing, antithetical natures, an idea which lies at the heart of *A Vision*:

My own seership was, I thought, inadequate; it was to be Maud Gonne’s work and mine. Perhaps that was why we had been thrown together. Were there not strange harmonies amid discord? My outer nature was passive—but for her I should never perhaps have left my desk—but I knew my spiritual nature was passionate, even violent. In her all this was reversed, for it was her spirit only that was gentle and passive and full of charming fantasy. (*MEM* 124)

When Peter Elbow, then, refers to “cooking” in the writing process as “the interaction of contrasting or conflicting material” (*Without Teachers* 49), Yeats’s collaborative dynamic is again illuminated. Further, as Elbow elaborates this idea, he offers, essentially, an apology for this dynamic—nearly alchemical—process:

Cooking consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other. (*Without Teachers* 49)

In Yeats's magical world-view, then, the writer is never merely a single entity, concerned only with self-expression, but rather a participant imagination within a dynamic of social multiplicity. When Kiberd speaks of Yeats's political ancestry as both "Anglo" and "Irish," he makes a claim for Yeats which, when considered beyond the political sphere, speaks directly to the dialectical process in which Yeats was consistently engaged: "Ultimately, his guile led him to expose the limitations of either term by fusing both, and to do this in the conviction that while it takes talent to discern differences, only genius can establish the underlying unity" (317). Perhaps, in taking Yeats as example here, this transcendent unity might be realized among the various strands of composition theory, for, as LeFevre suggests, "Finally, an understanding of invention as a social act helps direct us toward a possible synthesis of the fragmentation of knowledge existing in the academic disciplines" (137).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “The Completed Symbol”



“By the help of an image,” Yeats writes, “I call to my own opposite, summon all / That I have handled least, least looked upon” (*CP* 161). In these lines, from “Ego Dominus Tuus,” Yeats outlines the centrality of vision—rather than the scholasticism of language—to his poetic project: “I seek an image, not a book” (163). As one so thoroughly concerned with “this ship of written speech” (*E&I* 51), it may seem counterintuitive that Yeats would grant such preeminence to the visual. It is clear, however, that imagery served as a powerful catalyst to Yeats’s writing, and, given the significance of images—visual symbols—to the magical world-view, the interaction of image and text is an area in which composition theory might glean important insights from the occult.



When James Berlin notes that “language does not simply record the private vision, but becomes involved in shaping it” (146), his use, here, of the trope of vision to refer to a particular construction of reality evokes an inquiry not only into the verbal, linguistic forms on which he focuses but also into the dynamic faculty of vision itself. When, in common expression, “insight” implies a deep level of comprehension, and “I see” means “I understand,” it seems warranted to interrogate Yeats’s *A Vision* and its consequent

applications for composition in terms of visual imagery. After all, as Gabrielle Rico acknowledges, “Before there are words, there are images” (157).

And, “For any writer,” Ann Berthoff argues, “exploring the relationships between images and concepts can be useful in getting the dialectic started and in forming a concept” (*Forming* 143). That she later uses Yeats’s “The Stare’s Nest by My Window” and his accompanying explanation as a primary example of a concept-forming image is, perhaps, significant, given Yeats’s perennial reliance not only on the poetic image but also on the intricacies of vision in all of its permutations. Arguing further that “using imagery is one way to realize a concept—to make it real—by giving it a shape” (*Forming* 142), Berthoff—always a proponent of the imagination—speaks in nearly magical terms.

Therefore, when Yeats writes that “almost at once my imagination began to move itself and to bring before me vivid images that, though never too vivid to be imagination, as I had always understood it, had yet a motion of their own, a life I could not change or shape” (*Ec&I* 29), Berthoff’s dynamic of realizing and shaping is evoked. However, while Berthoff locates this activity within the writer, Yeats, again, looks into a larger world. He describes the envisioned images as independent as well as animate, and it becomes apparent, then, that these “vivid images” are, for Yeats, as “realized” as his communicators in *A Vision* or in the vision of the *aisling* poets. In this context, when Berthoff suggests to student writers that “if what you’re composing seems to have a will of its own, follow its lead” (*Forming* 6), might we not allow that Yeats’s receptivity to such willful visions allowed him a particular facility with their use?

Given that Yeats—from his earliest folkloric writings through “Those masterful images” of “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” (*CP* 356)—returned, throughout his career, to these visionary images, we might conclude that Yeats found in vision a lasting sustenance. When compositionist Hildy Miller claims, then, that “images—hidden or not—inspire writers emotionally: interest them, motivate them, sustain and disrupt their work, lead to private purposes and private approaches to rhetorical situations” (116), she offers insight not only into Yeats’s composing process but also into processes of composition itself.

Similarly, compositionists such as Joddy Murray have suggested that by relying on the visual as merely another rhetorical device, composition theory has left unexplored a vast array of affective communicative power. Murray writes that “image studies in composition must begin to also account in part for the ineffable, the unsayable, and the affective if we are able to take advantage of the non-discursive in our invention practices (84). And this non-discursive element—the essence of vision—seems, in Murray’s terms, to invoke the occult realm.

Therefore, we must consider, further, Miller’s argument that, in writing, “what is most compelling is both created and nourished in embodied ideas”—that is, in the complex inter-relations of visual image and those deep-seated emotions realized in the physical body—and that we must “reconsider and perhaps retheorize the magic of embodied processes at work” (124). These theorists, however, in speaking primarily of mere affect, stop short of suggesting that visual images may also engender, beyond mere personal emotion, a level of spiritual experience in writers. This idea—perhaps exemplified by the reliance on the visual symbols of intricate spirals and knotwork in the Celtic imagination—is

one, however, that is well-developed in disciplines ranging from anthropology to religious studies. We may conclude, then, that studies such as Miller's might best be cast in light of the well-theorized symbolism of magic that Yeats champions, and we might include among that more balanced theory some clearer gesture toward an ultimate ineffability.



Unfortunately, however, visual imagery often seems to find little coherent expression in composition pedagogies. As compositionist Demetrice Worley points out, “Though composition specialists acknowledge the importance of visual imagery in the writing class, they have not fully specified how to put it into practice. This is undoubtedly because, from about the third or fourth grade on, verbalization is privileged over visualization” (139). Perhaps, then, in viewing the implications of visual imagery in Yeats's *A Vision*—as well as in his larger occult aesthetic—composition theory may find new ways to theorize the importance of the visual in ever more creative ways.

To begin, many compositionists often question the ways in which visual images might simply reinforce verbal rhetoric. A particularly instructive example, then, arises when Harper notes that Yeats's communicators preferred not to further expound the geometrical symbols of the system until Yeats began to write (*YVP* 23), suggesting perhaps that a understanding of the symbols in completion could only be achieved through writing about them. When Thomas, one of Yeats's instructors, tells him that “I do not want you to write on system,” he claims that instead “I would like you to write something *through which* I can give you ideas” (*YVP* 31). Here, something of a dialectical pattern begins to emerge in that

the understanding of the geometric symbolism both fuels and is fueled by written composition.

“And then,” Yeats further comments, “though I had mastered nothing but the twenty-eight Phases and the historical scheme, I was told that I must write, that I must seize the moment between ripe and rotten—there was a metaphor of apples about to fall and just fallen” (*AVB* 18). This idea parallels Worley’s assertion that “visual images can guide the texts they create, which, in turn, can guide the images they create—in instructive reciprocity” (138), and may further aid discussions among compositionists who argue—from an essentially cognitive standpoint—not only for the ultimately epistemic nature of writing but also for the use of visual symbolism as a heuristic or invention strategy.



And certainly, the cognitive project in composition studies—shaping its inquiries from the sciences of neurobiology as well as developmental psychology—has been at the forefront of research into imagery. Using imagery in the composing process, according to many compositionists, utilizes a particular kind of non-literal, non-linear cognition.

As Gabrielle Rico argues, “We have evolved two independent thinking apparatuses that not only dramatically increase our mental options but make creative acts possible” (70). These two “thinking apparatuses,” which she differentiates as “sign and design,” are engendered by a kind of cerebral duality brought about by the hemispheric division of the brain. Associated with the left hemisphere, the sign mind, she claims, is “largely occupied with the rational, logical representation of reality and with parts and logical sequences” (17) while the design mind, a function of the right hemisphere, “consistently thinks in complex

images; it patterns to make designs of whatever it encounters, including language, which, instead of clear-cut signs, becomes *designs* of non-literal meaning” (18).

That Yeats felt the consequences of this cerebral duality has often been suggested—based largely on his ubiquitous spelling difficulties and self-expressed difficulties in school—in the theory that he may have suffered from dyslexia. Marylou Miner and Linda Siegel have argued that this posthumous diagnosis of dyslexia offers “hope that children, parents, and teachers working with this problem will be inspired by the brilliant accomplishments of someone who may have had dyslexia” (375). However, they emphasize Yeats’s writing as an accomplishment in this context merely because dyslexia is generally viewed as a deficiency in logical, verbal processing—an ability which, as mentioned earlier, is socially privileged. In Rico’s cognitive terms, then, dyslexia might be defined as malfunctioning of the sign mind, the processes governed by the brain’s left hemisphere.

Thomas West further argues that Yeats may, indeed, have experienced what some call “dyslexia” or what others term a “learning disability.” Our choice of terms, here, West claims, “depends entirely on the context” (19), and of the prominent figures he identifies as possessing this condition—Yeats among them—West argues that “many of these individuals may have achieved success or even greatness not in spite of but because of their apparent disabilities” (19). West relies heavily on the theories of Howard Gardner in making the case that by employing a “visual/spatial intelligence”—a type of intelligence generally devalued by a logocentric society—many individuals demonstrate a striking level of creative power.

When Howard Gardner elucidates his theory of spatial intelligence, one of the six distinct forms of intelligence which he identifies, he claims that it

entails a number of loosely related capacities: the ability to recognize instances of the same element; the ability to transform or to recognize a transformation of one element into another; the capacity to conjure up mental imagery and then to transform that imagery; the capacity to produce a graphic likeness of spatial information; and the like. (176)

In the context of this study, the attributes of spatial intelligence which Gardner notes read like a catalog of magical competencies—from the conjuring of visions to the alchemical transformation of elements. It is unsurprising, then, that West links this form of intelligence with Yeats’s work. And, further, if we were to allow such a discussion to fully embrace this visual/spatial intelligence in the vocabulary and methodologies of magic, might not a more dynamic understanding of this “intelligence” unfurl for composition theory?

I would argue, then, that what Gardner terms “multiple intelligences,” an idea which has been enthusiastically adopted by much of contemporary educational theory, is essentially but another mythology—which, again, hardly ventures beyond the scientific—for explaining this extraordinary propensity, in some individuals, for visual thought. Might it be possible, then, that by elucidating the correspondences between this largely scientific mythology and the magical, occult mythology from which Yeats worked, we might gain further insights into the creative process and, thus, enrich our composition pedagogies?



Given the concern among compositionists about the practical application of visual images, however, it may be beneficial, as a first example, to consider one of the primary magical symbols which Yeats employed in his work with Theosophy and the Order of the

Golden Dawn. Drawn from a well-established tradition of esoteric Judaism, the central symbol of the Kabbalah is a geometric diagram, the *sephiroth* or Tree of Life (see Figure I). As Smolley and Kinney explain, “The Kabbalistic Tree exists partly to deal with the question of how the many arose from the One. If we can at times glimpse an underlying unity that gives birth to all we perceive, we also see that the world displays a lavish and bewildering multiplicity” (78). Consisting of a system of ten circles, each corresponding to a particular element of reality and numerical value, the Tree of Life is organized into three major columns: the left and right columns represent the extremes of division and harmony, respectively, while the central column embodies the balance of the two forces. According to the Kabbalists, it is this balance, this reckoning of the antithesis, which engenders all creation.

As Kabbalah, in the Hebrew, suggests a collection of received wisdom which has emanated from the divine, the *aisling* dynamic with which Yeats was enthralled is immediately evoked. Further, Kabbalism “looks to lead it [the mind] along many trains of associations” (Smolley & Kinney 88), and the *sephiroth*, as a visual key, mirrors the interconnected path of divine creation—a path which Yeats would call *Hodos*

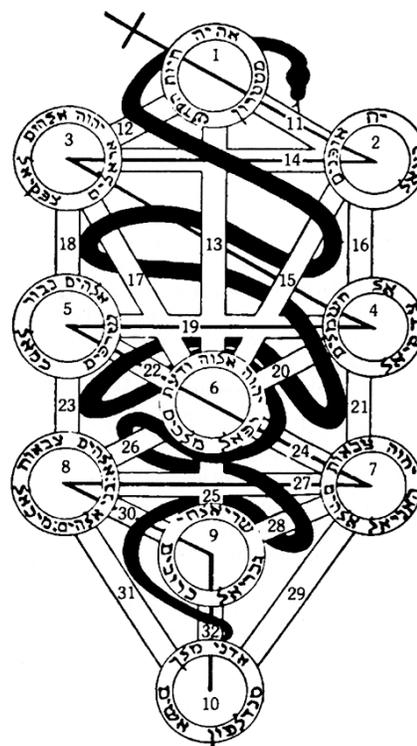


Figure I  
Yeats's Tree of Life (Graf 24)

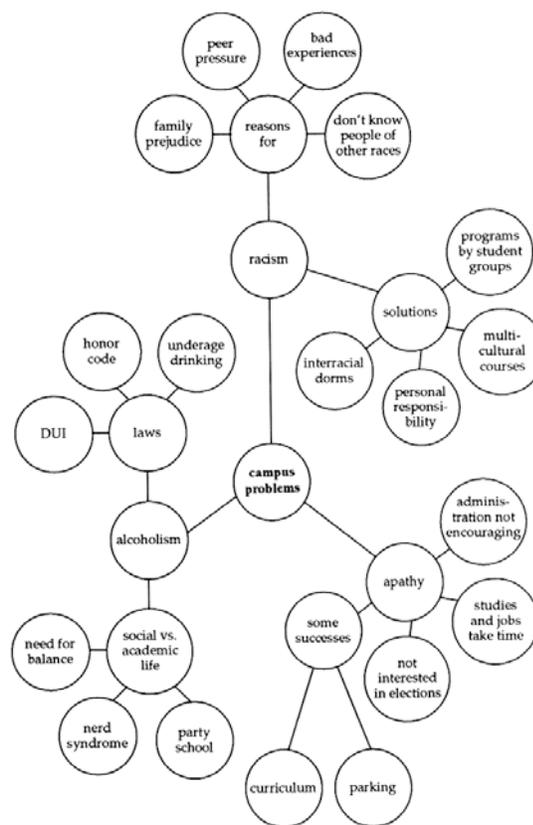
*Chameliontos*, or the path of the serpent. The Tree of Life, then, fits into the Kabbalistic

world-view by functioning as a visual and mathematical map of the act of creation, and by meditatively tracing the associations which engender reality, the Kabbalists argue, we become privy to the divine fundamentals of creation itself.

An intriguing parallel is to be found in the essentially cognitive work of Gabrielle Rico. Rico's research finds its most

practical application in her use of clustering as an invention strategy—a graphic demonstration, perhaps, of Yeats's contention that “the centre cannot hold” (*CP* 189). Since the publication of *Writing the Natural Way* in 1983, however, the use of clustering diagrams (see Figure II) has become conventional in composition textbooks. When Demetrice Worley claims that “when some of us think of visual imagery in the writing classroom, we think only of the mapping strategies associated with inventing,” (133) not

only do we get a sense of the pervasive nature of Rico's work, but we also sense that, through its assimilation into pedagogical convention, the work has lost much of its potential for theoretical evolution.



**Figure II**  
Clustering Diagram (Lindeman 109)

What Rico's work also seems to have lost, through its assimilation, is its affective power. Later theorists have consistently embraced the cognitive/biological basis for Rico's argument, championing its science at the expense of its metaphorical or mythological value. Despite her reliance on the hard science of brain physiology, Rico claims—in occult terminology—that “clustering is that magic key” which, through a nonlinear process, evokes “lightning associations that allow patterns to emerge” (28). These are claims that Yeats and other Kabbalists could easily draw from the graphically similar Tree of Life. That Rico's clustering diagram can be understood, essentially, as a map of the act of creation is, perhaps, readily apparent: clustering is championed for its ability to aid writers in envisioning the emergence of their writing from a central—primordial—idea.

But clustering, she argues, assists us not only in visually representing the connections to which writers have previous access but also in the generative act of creating those connections. To those writers who “experience resistance to the novelty of clustering,” Rico recommends beginning simply with the geometric design, “letting the circles and lines shape a pleasing pattern” (41). Much as the Tree of Life symbolizes the process of divine creation *ex nihilo* through its interconnected geometry, Rico argues that “that very nonlinear act will break down your resistance and you will find yourself filling in those inviting empty circles with the associations that are inevitably triggered by the nucleus word” (41). It is the visual invitation of the circles—the inherent absences of the geometry—that, according to Rico, breaks through the writer's inhibitions—certainly, an occult concept. And when, in the “Phases of the Moon,” Yeats writes that “Images can break the solitude / Of lovely,

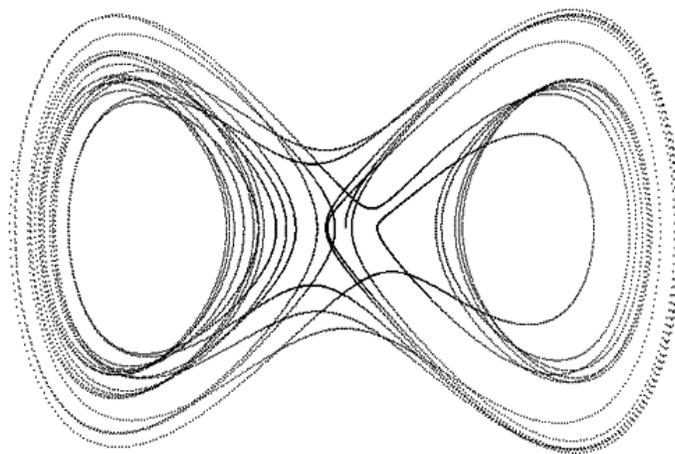
satisfied, indifferent eyes” (*CP* 167), we see Rico’s claim, and the claim of the Kabbalists echoed in his lines.

Therefore, when Berthoff argues that “articulating relationships as we form and develop concepts depends on a capacity to see the form of one thing in another and to use the form of one to explain and define the other (*Forming* 167), we begin to see the transformative power of truly magical thinking, a conceptual system for elaborating sympathies between seemingly different objects or ideas.



Furthermore, while the goals of the present study certainly fall short of expounding theoretical physics, perhaps an inquiry into contemporary theories of chaos in juxtaposition with Yeats’s own system might again demonstrate the efficacy of visual symbols not only in the non-discursive realm of the occult but also in logic of science.

The strange attractor (see Figure III) is formed by a set of three equations developed, initially, by mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz in an effort to understand the infinite variables involved in weather prediction. These



**Figure III**  
Plot of Strange Attractor (Bourke duffing5.gif)

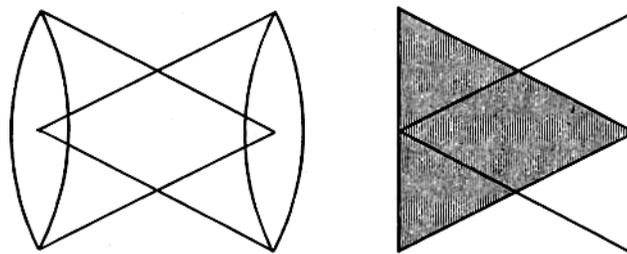
equations, when reiterated and continuously graphed, demonstrate a pattern in the chaotic progression, regardless of the variables used. James Gleick writes of Lorenz’s graph:

It traced a strange, distinctive shape, a kind of double spiral in three dimensions, like a butterfly with its two wings. The shape signaled pure disorder, since no point or pattern of points ever recurred. Yet it also signaled a new kind of order. (qtd. in Burkett 196-197)

Consequently, the geometry of the interlocking gyres (See Figure IV) which form the symbolic heart of Yeats's *A Vision* becomes strikingly similar to the plot of the strange attractor, both visually and conceptually. What might be the implications of this visual dynamic for composition studies, then, when we consider that it has been reached from both the mathematical and occult

sciences?

As Thomas West suggests, elucidating the central tenet of chaos theory, "Chaos is the study of mathematical patterns (hidden under



**Figure IV**  
Yeats's Gyres (*AVB* 68)

apparent randomness) that can be found, especially at high levels of energy, in large and complex and rapidly changing systems, such as global weather" (West 36). In her study "The Butterfly Effect: Writing from Chaos to Composure," compositionist Sandra Price Burkett, however, makes practical use of the strange attractor—a primary example of this chaos theory—as a metaphor for the writing process. "Whatever its name," she argues, "writing encourages the process of finding order in disorder, integration in fragmentation, meaning in chaos, pattern in spatter, focus in blur" (190). Burkett— finding instructive

symbolism in mathematical reality—ultimately claims that only in recognizing and confronting the chaos in which writers struggle to communicate can writing begin to grasp larger, transcendent patterns of reality. Here, then, it is important to recall the overwhelming sense of order which Yeats gleaned from working with the visual symbols of *A Vision*.

Given the inherent symmetry of Yeats's gyres, Yeats would seem to agree when Coleridge understands that the power of the imagination “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” (qtd. in Berthoff *Forming* 264). But with the ultimate interdependence of Yeats's antithetical gyres, it may be closer to the truth to argue that the essential value of the symbol—the image, the concept—lies not in the reconciliation of forces into a more comfortable entropy, but rather in the conceptual embrace that the extremities of each force must necessarily retain their particular powers. Unity emerges, then, only when the gyres are allowed their antithesis.

Finally, Douglas Hofstadter, in speaking of the strange attractor in his *Metamagical Themas*, discusses the ultimately affective reassurance of “knowing that there was some kind of *law* to this chaos, so that in *reality*—that is, in God's eye—there was simply a deeper kind of order underneath it all” (387). Here, again, we might hear Yeats ask, “Were there not strange harmonies amid discord?” (*MEM* 124), and, as compositionists, we might inquire further into that affective sustenance which may be found in the synthesis of the mathematical sciences and the occult.



Of his gyres, his completed symbol, Yeats writes, “Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over in my mind, exploring all its details, defining and again defining

its elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra” (*AVB* 301). Here, the contemplation of the symbol gleaned from his communicators begins to lead Yeats toward an understanding of the antithetical dynamic in nearly mathematical terms.

When Yeats considers the ultimately mathematical structure of Pound’s *Cantos*, he writes, “I may, now that I have recovered leisure, find that the mathematical structure, when taken up into imagination, is more than mathematical, that seemingly irrelevant details fit together in a single theme” (*AVB* 5). It is significant to note here that Yeats is able to discuss the ostensibly cold logic of mathematical structure in terms of an amorphous “theme,” a term which, perhaps, enjoys greater currency in the verbal realm. But again, unity among diverse multiplicity is the primary dynamic, implying specifically that the tools and logic of mathematics—whether in pure abstraction or in concrete visual manifestation—might offer yet another path toward magical synthesis. Yeats further wonders:

“What if every two thousand and odd years something happens in the world to make one sacred, the other secular; one wise, the other foolish; one fair, the other foul; one divine, the other devilish? What if there is an arithmetic or geometry that can exactly measure the slope of a balance, the dip of a scale, and so date the coming of that something?” (*AVB* 29)

Here, Yeats seems to long, even amidst his thoroughly occult project, for something of a mathematical structure, a wish that was ultimately attained, according to West, who argues that “curiously, the poet drew on mathematical concepts to shape his poetry” (174-5). And

given that mathematics treats the logic of abstract, nonlinguistic entities, it may seem, then, that mathematics and magic may share more than we ordinarily assume.

Peter Elbow argues that all communication must proceed from the dialectical interaction of divergent logics—both poetic and mathematic. He claims that, in language, meaning “is pushed and pulled simultaneously by forces that try to make it fluid and dreamlike but also fixed like mathematics” (*Without Teachers* 153), and he subsequently suggests that it is only this antithetical relationship which allows for the communication of meaning, echoing—in a glorious multiplicity—Rico’s cognitive dualism, Berthoff’s dialectical thinking, and Yeats’s antithetical, spiraling gyres.



What begins to emerge from these comparisons seems to be an essential human tendency to convert—in James Moffett’s terms—“chaos to cosmos” (qtd. in Burkett 190), to transcend disorder with balance and equilibrium. In his description of “growing” in the writing process, Elbow observes that “the words come together in one pile and interact with each other in that mess; then they come apart into small piles according to some emerging pattern . . . and so forth and so on till it’s “over”—till a pattern or configuration is attained that pleases you or that “it was trying to get to” (*Without Teachers* 24). And that pattern, much like the pattern of the strange attractor, with its chaotic will-to-order, has, in Yeats’s terms, “come to them in beautiful startling shapes” (*E&I* 155).

Further, Elbow claims that “the turning point in the whole cycle of growing is the emergence of a focus or theme. It is also the most mysterious and difficult kind of cognitive event to analyze. It is the moment when what was chaos is now seen as having a center of

gravity. There is a shape where a moment ago there was none” (*Without Teachers* 35). Here, Elbow speaks of the quickening of comprehension in largely visual terms, where “focus” and “shape” can be “seen.” And although the gyrations of “The Second Coming” are ultimately terrifying, the emergent “center of gravity” of which Elbow speaks certainly evokes Yeats’s “vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*” (*CP* 189).



It is, perhaps, arguable, then, that Yeats’s reliance on visual imagery—and the dynamic faculty of vision in its various forms—engendered in him a particular sensitivity to the symbolic form. As previously noted, Yeats’s use of symbols—both in visible, tangible forms as well as in abstractions of “the mind’s eye”—offered him a method of approaching a reality which could accommodate occult truths. When he writes in *A Vision* that “I draw myself up into the symbol and it seems as if I should know all if I could but banish such memories and find everything in the symbol” (*AVB* 301), he seems to long for a transcendence into a kind of final, ultimate composition, a transcendence “into the artifice of eternity” (*CP* 197).

Yeats’s methodology for achieving this transcendent goal is one which makes full use of the ubiquitous correspondences of magic. In describing, again, his earlier visionary collaborations with Gonne, Yeats writes:

At every moment of leisure we obtained in vision long lists of symbols. Various trees corresponded to cardinal points, and the old gods and heroes took their places gradually in a symbolic fabric that had for its centre the four talismans of the Tuatha de Danaan, the sword, the stone, the spear and the

cauldron, which related themselves in my mind with the suits of the Tarot.

(*MEM* 125)

Here, the ultimately synthetic nature of Yeats's thought seems evidenced in the dynamically interwoven symbols which he "obtained in vision," obtained as images.

"I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist" (*E&I* 49). In making little or no distinction between verbal, musical, or visual symbols, Yeats, here, offers another conceptual ellipsis which suggests that in symbolism might lie an appropriately unifying dynamic.

Towards this unity, in restating Cassirer's argument, LeFevre makes a similarly transformative claim for symbols:

For Cassirer, it is not categories that change over time, but rather symbolic forms that allow culture to change over time. The categories provide a cognitive foundation from which people have fashioned symbolic forms that they use to constitute their world. By means of symbolic forms, people can change the ways in which the world is constituted. (114-115)

Elbow, in turn, argues for a similarly symbolic view of verbal expression: "The magical view of language, in a nutshell, is that a word is a part of the thing it stands for—the word *contains* some of the juice or essence or soul of the *thing* it points to" (Elbow *With Power* 358). If we think, then, of words as but a type of visual symbol, an image even, viewed in light of a magical paradigm, then might we not find in those symbols the appropriate tools for transmutation?



In noting the ritual symbolism of Yeats's Golden Dawn practices, Barbara Croft suggests that Yeats's "ritualized performances of a symbol's meaning must have made the patterns of myth not just an objective intellectual system, but a total way of life" (138). What, then, might such performances of symbolic ritual mean for the process of composition? Such an integration of a symbolically-rich conceptual dynamic into the conventionally mundane business of composition surely promises—if we but allow an expansive magical world-view—the possibility for spiritual growth.

Ernst Cassirer argues that "the combination or separation of perceptual data depends upon the free choice of a frame of reference. There is no rigid and pre-established scheme according to which our divisions and subdivisions might once and for all be made" (qtd. in Berthoff *Reclaiming* 111). Here, Cassirer identifies a concept akin to Kuhn's shifting paradigms and Emig's "governing gaze" ("Inquiry Paradigms 160-4) in the suggestion that what we see—and what we envision—is heavily influenced by the contextual mythology we choose to employ.

Further, Kristie Fleckenstein sees this as a choice between "scopic regimes" or "dominant ways of seeing that contribute to the constitution of a cultural order" and understands that such a choice "invites us into the politics of vision, a stance necessary in an age increasingly dominated by the image" (*Fields of Vision* 1). And if such a referential system is, in fact, a personal—albeit, political—choice, might we not choose the synthetic, expansive vision over the divisive and limiting?

In Seamus Heaney’s poem “Field of Vision,” the consequences of a focused, limited “scopic regime” are something to be lamented. Heaney describes the vision of an invalid, confined to stare out the same window day after day, a vision which becomes “an education/ of the sort you got across a well-braced gate—” (*Opened Ground* 343). This a vision that is perpetually focused and deepened only while becoming increasingly less aware of the contextual world, and something of an inverse relationship—echoing Yeats’s gyres—is established as focus and depth become strange and unintelligible:

. . .you could see  
 Deeper into the country than you expected  
 And discovered that the field behind the hedge  
 Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing  
 Focused and drawn in by what barred the way. (343)

A more practical approach, in contrast to the “scopic regime” in which we are “focused and drawn in” by our current conceptual paradigm, might be termed a gestalt approach to academic production. Such an approach—which may be likened to the visual recognition of unity, pattern, and coherence—would undoubtedly offer to the academic landscape a method informed by magical synthesis.

Similarly, Edward O. Wilson, a noted biologist, has proposed a similar integration of knowledge, and has noted that “the greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities” (239). Wilson’s term *Consilience* implies a convergence of knowledge across disciplines “to create a common groundwork of explanation” (8). He writes, “In both the arts and sciences the programmed

brain seeks eloquence, which is the parsimonious and evocative description of pattern to make sense out of a confusion of detail” (239), implying not only that Yeats’s predilection for unity might simply be a feature innate to human consciousness but also, perhaps, that the sciences and the humanities—not unlike the natural and supernatural in Yeats’s “Supernatural Songs”—“with the self-same ring are wed” (*CP* 290).

## CONCLUSIONS

### “UNITY OF BEING”



Near the close of the first version of *A Vision*, Yeats seems, almost, to apologize for the work which he has completed:

Much of this book is abstract, because it has not yet been lived, for no man can dip into life more than a moiety of any system. When a child, I went out with herring fishers one dark night, and the dropping of their nets into the luminous sea and the drawing of them up has remained with me as a dominant image. Have I found a good net for a herring fisher? (*AVA* 251)

Here, while acknowledging—or disclaiming—the inherent abstractions which have suffused the work, Yeats provides the necessary key to the work in the “dominant image” of the herring fishers: *A Vision* is a tool for gleaning insights in the “dark night.” *Aisling Mbor*, similarly offers but a “moeity” of possible applications, but with its largely methodological considerations, this study similarly aspires to an ultimately practical purpose.



The avowed goals of Yeats’s system, as proposed in *A Vision*, are decidedly interdisciplinary. In the essay “If I were Four-and-Twenty,” Yeats identifies his impulse toward unification:

“One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity.' For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence.” (*LE* 34)

Here, Yeats suggests that even before the events which brought about the writing of *A Vision*, he understood his writing as a tool for interrelating all of his thought, and, in that integration, for finding a richer source of writing. In the introduction to the 1925 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats claims that, unlike his contemporaries in occultism who sought “spiritual happiness” or “some form of unknown power,” he sought an integration: “I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul’s” (*AVA* xi).

Yeats’s earliest exposure to an integral system, however, likely came through his work on an 1893 edition of Blake, co-edited with Edwin J. Ellis. When Blake writes, “I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another Man’s” (387), Yeats finds an expression of the necessity of an over-reaching mythological structure, and he introduces the three-volume edition as “an account of Blake’s myth” (*PE&I* 74). Yeats claims that “the solidity of the myth and its wonderful coherence” is, perhaps, the obstacle which has “hitherto kept the critics from attaining a knowledge of what Blake meant,” (174) yet Yeats understands himself as having particular insights into Blake’s mythology. And it is illuminating that Yeats identifies the “Symbolic System” as “the signature of Blake’s genius, and the guarantee of his sanity” (175).

Also, during the late nineteenth century, Yeats had begun his associations with the Theosophical Society via Macgregor Mathers and H. P. Blavatsky. In Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, in particular, Yeats began to consider theories regarding the unification of apparent opposites, and in her second work, *The Secret Doctrine*, Yeats found, in a full, coherent form, the positing of a basic esoteric unity at the root of all human religious expression. Again, albeit from a largely different perspective, Yeats is confronted with an intricate system with a process of integration as its functioning dynamic, and each of these diverse systems of thought share a common, direct relationship with magic and the occult.

Today, however, such esotericism is given little widespread credibility, and the possibility of a complex, yet unified, theoretical system seems ostensibly contradictory to the postmodern project—arguably the most visible of the current competing paradigms—which broadly disavows the existence of any single, over-reaching theoretical narrative. Yet given that any truly integral system should accommodate those well-honed and viable tools of postmodernism while transcending its ultimate instability and indeterminacy, that integral system may, in moving toward a constructive goal, offer a more productive paradigm. Many contemporary thinkers have termed this transcendent project “constructive postmodernism,” and it is this pattern of thought, largely a product of disciplines outside the literary sphere, which are perhaps best suited to making sense of the implications of Yeats's system.

One notable attempt at constructing a truly integral system has emerged from the theoretical work of Ken Wilber. Wilber, with his background in philosophy, psychology, and Eastern mysticism, has proposed a veritable *Theory of Everything* which seeks to

incorporate the best of all systems of thought into a vast theoretical mythology which he terms “transpersonal” in nature. Wilber’s system is one founded on the original Greek word, *kosmos*: “Ultimate reality was not merely the cosmos, or the physical dimension, but the Kosmos, or the physical and emotional and spiritual dimensions altogether” (xi). Here, Wilber, much like Yeats, grounds his theory in an idealized, ancient form of reality. From this pattern of thinking, Wilber constructs his “integral vision”:

A genuine Theory of Everything attempts to include matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit as they appear in self, culture, and nature. A vision that attempts to be comprehensive, balanced, inclusive. A vision that therefore embraces science, art, and morals; that equally includes disciplines from physics to spirituality, biology to aesthetics, sociology to contemplative prayer. (xii)

Ultimately, while Wilber’s system lacks the poetic sensibility—the mythology—of Yeats’s *A Vision*, the two works share much in common, from their reliance on gyres or spiral dynamics to the use of aesthetically similar geometrical patterns to explain the interaction of various forms of knowledge. Therefore, to perceive the patterns of esoteric magic in such a transcendent paradigm requires but the slightest intellectual reckoning.



Historically, many paradigms have suffered as a result of a purely antithetical dynamic and have proved finally unsustainable. While Romanticism necessarily filled a gap created by the enthusiastic adoption of the Enlightenment’s ideals, for all its efficacy in restoring the imagination in the cultural paradigm, its total schema was ultimately

imbalanced. Today, the so-called New Age movement (which, incidentally, shares much with Romanticism) similarly fails in its outright rejection of the dominant, science-based paradigm, and, in that failure, is situated outside the bounds of academic inquiry, except as an object of cultural study. Although Yeats was thoroughly influenced by Romantic ideals, he eventually understood the failure of Romanticism, with its broadly subjective perspective, and the failure of the Enlightenment's humanism, with its strict program of objectivity, as the product of each paradigm's failure to *incorporate*, rather than *annihilate*, its antithesis.

And, while the paradigm shift that Yeats identifies and subsequently encourages with *A Vision*—a shift from the coldly scientific to a more balanced pattern acknowledging both the reason and the intuition of the soul—is not wholly at the heart of the perceived crisis in composition studies, the political undertones which Thomas Kuhn identifies certainly play a part in the discontent. When Kuhn writes of paradigm laws and theories, the set of assumptions and methods through which a given paradigm operates, a parallel with the “laws and theories” of composition is illuminated. Kuhn argues that “inevitably they restrict the phenomenological field accessible for scientific investigation at any given time” (60). It is this same restriction of vision that Yeats laments when he writes:

. . .our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our souls less sensitive. Ours souls that were once naked to the winds of heaven are now thickly clad, and have learned to build a house and light a fire upon its hearth, and shut-to the doors and windows. (*E&I* 41)

Yeats, here, understands that the trappings of modernity—particularly the modern education—are unfortunately, though not irrevocably, detrimental to a receptive and perceptive spirituality.



A further consideration of the uneasy relationship between literature and composition offers an instructive example of what a fully synthetic—even transcendental—approach to the two disciplines may imply. While the criteria for literature, though intensely debated, most often includes some nod toward a transcendence, a deeply human resonance—poetry is poetry because it is affective; it moves the reader—much of literary criticism, perhaps too thoroughly embedded in the rational, scientific paradigm, seems to have lost its ability—its magic—to channel that transcendent quality into the practical world.

Susan Graf, in her study of Yeats’s occult interests, makes note of such a personal connection in an early chapter. She describes informal meetings with friends, *outside* the university at which they were enrolled, where she discovered Yeats only through their study of occultism. “It was then that I found Yeats, sensing a bond with him, a similarity in the way that we thought about reality. When I read Yeats, I understood him in an almost uncanny way” (3). Such a personal connection, such a quickening of comprehension, is undoubtedly a fertile source of academic motivation, yet to acknowledge publicly that connection, once understood as the “affective fallacy” in literary scholarship, is a bias which, in the eyes of conservative academia, will undoubtedly cloud the analytic powers and diminish any resultant conclusions.

However, in “What I Learned in Grad School, or Literary Training and the Theorizing of Composition,” Patrick Bizzaro considers, through interviews with several noted composition theorists, the effects of a literary background on work in composition pedagogy. What several of the interviews suggest, whether explicitly or indirectly, is that this kind of subjective, devotional reading of literature—a reading which seeks relevance and application in the reader’s life—is perhaps one of the most common methods for relating to literary texts. For instance, Peter Elbow’s graduate work on oppositions in Chaucer thoroughly informs his theoretical perspective on composition pedagogy. Such a methodology, however, as the practical application of scholarship, is generally discouraged in the academic landscape by virtue of its inherent subjectivity. It is too often considered unnecessary, uncritical, and even irresponsible in literary studies. Yet such an approach is surely a portion of the dynamic imagination which a truly magical world-view must engender.

Although such a subjective reading is often encouraged, understood as beneficial and empowering in many current composition pedagogies as a source of more “authentic” writing, much of that same pedagogy still lacks the mythological complexity which this study has attempted to demonstrate through the literary sphere. This research, then, seeks to understand that paradox in a larger theoretical framework which can accommodate both the subjective and objective and can assume, as its object of study, the correspondences between the pedagogical implications of literature and the pedagogical practices of composition.

Despite such certain impediments, it seems not only possible, as a mere intellectual curiosity, but rather imperative, as a point of responsibility, that literary and composition

studies move forward in unison, not with a single dominant political or theoretical stance hammered out, unvaryingly, in all applications, but rather with a dynamic, holistic paradigm—modeled on certain esoteric examples—which is broad enough, in Yeats’s terms, to “hold in a single thought reality and justice” (*AVB* 25) and flexible enough to avoid “constraining one by the other” (*LE* 34).

As Yeats discusses his concept of “Unity of Being” in *A Vision*, he further illuminates the possible synthesis between literature and composition:

At the approach of Unity of Being the greatest beauty of literary style becomes possible, for thought becomes sensuous and musical. All that moves us is related to our possible Unity; we lose interest in the abstract and concrete alike, only when we have said, "My fire," and so distinguished it from "the fire" and "a fire," does the fire seem bright (*AVA* 61).

Perhaps, then, only when we have explicitly theorized “My theory,” and so distinguished it from “the theory of . . .” and “a well-known theory,” will our theories begin to approach a “Unity of Being,” a dynamic synthesis of that which moves us in literature and that which moves our students to write. Joyce Carol Oates makes the dynamically similar claim that in dealing with Yeats, we can “attempt to analyze him, distantly, antiseptically, holding on to our critical and dispassionate powers,” and, consequently, “scholarly book follows scholarly book.” Otherwise, she adds, we integrate and achieve synthesis when “we are assimilated into Yeats” (par. 6).



Barbara Croft notes that when “the various threads of Yeats’s life seemed to be coming together” in the 1930s, “occultism could provide not only disguised content, but a new style” (140). Here, Croft again emphasizes that Yeats’s occult beliefs offered him something more akin to a methodology than mere “metaphors for poetry” and that that “new style” brought him somehow closer to the grand synthesis he had long sought. As Yeats concluded his final version of *A Vision*, he writes:

I too think of famous works where synthesis has been carried to the utmost limit possible, where there are elements of inconsequence or discovery of hitherto ignored ugliness, and I notice that when the limit is approached or past, when the moment of surrender is reached, when the new gyre begins to stir, I am filled with excitement.” (300)

*Aisling Mbor*, then, assumes such a transcendent paradigm as its ultimate dynamic and endeavours to model such a syncretic approach. While this study does not hope to offer an exhaustive treatment of neither Yeatsian criticism nor composition pedagogy, it does, however, anticipate a mode of thought which, through, its cognizance of—its encounter with—the esoteric otherworld, will prophesy an academic approach in which, as Yeats would have it, “the moon and sunlight seem / One inextricable beam” (CP 200).



When Yeats admits that “some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon,” (*AVB* 24) he offers a simplified, and, for many, an ultimately acceptable, concession. “To such a question,” he writes, “I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken

such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience” (25). In these lines, Yeats presents his readers, both popular and critical, with a convenient means for reading *A Vision*, substituting aesthetics for esoterica.

If, finally, we reach a conclusion similar to Yeats’s, that a consideration of magic and the occult in the light of composition theory can offer us only “stylistic arrangements” of pedagogy, have we but concerned ourselves with the ultimate insubstance of glamour? “I don’t know how one might settle the question once and for all,” responds Elbow, “but the magical view is useful” (*With Power* 371), for, as he also claims, “Some writers on some occasions really do restore magic to language. They somehow put juice into words and thereby cast a long distance spell over readers” (359).



In the end, the various competing or complementary strains of composition theory are largely tied to corresponding ontologies—that is, to the ways in which reality is to be determined, perceived, or constructed—and their respective political implications. The mythological composing method proposed here attempts to transcend these often contested ontologies and seems most closely allied to what James Berlin terms “epistemic rhetoric,” a method which serves not just as a vehicle for the communication of truth but rather as tool of truth discovery. This position, he argues, “implies that knowledge is not discovered by reason alone, that cognitive and affective processes are not separate, that intersubjectivity is a condition of all knowledge, and that the contact of minds affects knowledge” (165). Here,

Berlin's criteria emerges in the discourse of academia, but, as he enumerates these epistemic premises, the echoes of Yeats's doctrines of "Magic" faintly linger:

- (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 the one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

(*E&I* 29)

And, if "language in metaphor," as LeFevre argues, "is capable of affecting our conceptual system and creating something new" (113), then might not this coupling of Yeats's *A Vision* with the pedagogy of composition, if only through the sympathetic magic of metaphor, offer us that as yet unrealized reality? Yeats, in the 1925 introduction to *A Vision*, dreams back to such a vision:

I look back to it as a time when we were full of a phantasy that has been handed down for generations, and is now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages. That phantasy did not explain the world to our intellects which were after all very modern, but it recalled certain forgotten methods of meditation and chiefly how so to suspend the will that the mind became automatic, a possible vehicle for spiritual beings. It carried us to what we had learned to call *Hodos Chameliontos*. (*AVA* xi)

Ultimately, then, *Aisling Mbor* understands itself as but a point of vortex, the inception of what Schiller calls a “spiraling evolution” (36), a point along the path of the serpent in which, “as educators, we must dream; for if we do not, realities do not shift” (35).



In “All Soul’s Night,” the epilogue to *A Vision*, Yeats writes that he needs

. . . some mind that, if the cannon sound  
 From every quarter of the world, can stay  
 Wound in mind’s pondering,  
 As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound;  
 Because I have a marvelous thing to say,  
 A certain marvellous thing. (*AVA* 253)

In this poem, Yeats understands the importance of developing a mode of thought, woven into unity from a multiplicity of magical, ancient cloths, capable of enduring—even transcending—the modern tumult and capable of engendering a medium for that “certain marvellous thing.” When Edward Engleberg notes, then, that Yeats “insisted on forging for himself an elaborate aesthetic, in itself an act of metaphysical engagement” (xxi), he understands that Yeats wrote to forge his great vision—his *Aisling Mbor*. Similarly, in taking up Yeats’s esoteric vision as a pedagogical model, composition theorists might find orientation, method, and vocabulary for envisioning that “certain marvellous thing” at the center of the writing process.

And, Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones*, identifies this metaphysical impulse in each of us when she claims that “only the writing stays with the great vision. That’s why

we have to go back again and again to books—great books, that is. And read again and again the visions of who we are, how we can be” (82).

*Sambain 2003, and later*

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## VITA



Concentrating in creative writing and minoring in religious studies, James E. Casey completed a Bachelor's Degree at East Carolina University in 1995 and left the lowlands of Greenville for the mountains of Boone. In the fall of 1996, he enrolled in the M.A. English program at Appalachian State University where he worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and a University Writing Center consultant. During his graduate studies, Casey encountered William Butler Yeats on a study-abroad trip to Ireland and subsequently returned to spend two summers, 1998 and 1999, at the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo.

Casey returned home to Washington, NC, in 1999 to be closer to his family and began teaching developmental and curriculum-level composition at Beaufort County Community College. In the summer and fall of 2003, he completed his graduate work for a Master's degree in English with a minor in philosophy and religion from Appalachian State. James E. Casey currently works as Coordinator of the Academic Support Center—a multi-disciplinary learning facility—at Beaufort County Community College, and he resides in Washington with Caroline Elizabeth Shook, his soul-friend.