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Communicators

by [Denis Donoghue](#)

On *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume XIII, A Vision; The Original 1925 Version.*, edited by Catherine E. Paul & Margaret Mills.

Catherine E. Paul & Margaret Mills, editors
The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume XIII,
A Vision; The Original 1925 Version.
Scribner, 384 pages, \$60

Sometime in 1911—the exact date is not known—W. B. Yeats, visiting his friend Olivia Shakespear in London, was introduced to a young Englishwoman named Bertha Georgiana Hyde-Lees. She was a few months over eighteen, he was nearly forty-six. A friendship soon developed, enthusiastic on her part, warier on his. They shared many occult interests, including astrology, the Tarot, magic, spiritualism, and esoteric philosophy. She was also of a good family. Over the months, they attended séances together. The relation proceeded, but not in haste. Yeats and Mrs. Shakespear had recently renewed their old intimacy, and he was also entangled in an affair with Mabel Dickinson. On July 24, 1914 Georgie—as Yeats liked to call her, though most of her friends called her George—was inducted, with Yeats as sponsor, into the Stella Matutina Section of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society devoted to occult “science” and magic. In November 1915 and for a few months thereafter, there was talk of marriage, but it seems to have been notional on Yeats’s part, even though George started thinking of herself as engaged to him.

Yeats was still enchanted with the ardent Nationalist Maud Gonne—English daughter of a British Army officer of Irish background—although she had desecrated the poet’s love in 1903 by marrying the warrior-patriot John MacBride, despite Yeats’s several attempts to dissuade her:

My dear is angry that of late
I cry all base blood down
As if she had not taught me hate
By kisses to a clown.

Maud’s marriage ended in 1905, and a legal separation was effected the following year, but her Catholicism made it impossible for her to think of marrying again. Yeats had first met her on January 30, 1889 and had fallen in love at first sighting. But she was then politically and soon to be sexually involved with Lucien Millevoeye, a Boulangist campaigner. Millevoeye and Maud had a child, Georges, who died in infancy; their second child, Iseult, was born on August 6, 1894, and survived. Maud broke with Millevoeye in the summer of 1900. MacBride then entered her life, first as a companion in her fight for the independence of Ireland, then as a suitor. When their marriage came to an end, Maud sought Yeats’s help in getting advice on legal questions. In December 1908

Yeats and Maud became lovers, but she soon gave up the sexual part of their relation and reverted to its spiritual form. To complicate matters with George, Yeats was still involved in the affair with Dickinson: it started in the spring of 1908, and ended with a row on June 6, 1913. Yeats felt free thereafter to refer to her as a harlot. By the end of 1915 it was clear to Yeats and his friends that he was in an emotional mess. Better to marry than to burn, although he generally took care not to burn: more to the point, better to marry than to risk making a lover pregnant. There had been a scare of that kind with Dickinson, followed by telegrams and anger. On April 24, 1916, while Yeats was worrying about his emotional life, the Easter Rising broke out in Dublin, followed by six days of bloodshed and the arrest of the leaders. On May 5, the British Government executed John MacBride for treason, transforming him from clown to martyr.

Maud was now free to marry. On July 1 Yeats proposed to her again, but she refused him for her customary reasons: she preferred his friendship, and posterity would thank her for letting a great poet concentrate on his poems. Meanwhile Yeats had started to swoon over Maud's daughter, a beautiful, vivid woman who charmed him by reciting French poems:

A strange thing surely that my Heart, when love had come unsought
Upon the Norman upland or in that poplar shade,
Should find no burden but itself and yet should be worn out.
It could not bear that burden and therefore it went mad.

Mad enough to ask Maud, a week after she had turned him down, whether or not she would object if he were to propose to Iseult. Maud told him she thought Iseult would not take his proposal seriously. In the event, she took it seriously enough to keep him dangling for several months. But in mid-September 1917 she said no, and he at once thought of George. He proposed to her on September 26, was accepted, and they married on October 20.

The honeymoon, at the Ashdown Forest Hotel, did not start well. Yeats was distraught that by marrying he had betrayed three women—Maud, Iseult, and George. After a few days, in the hope of diverting him, George attempted automatic writing. She soon found that she could do it. Not surprisingly, the first messages she received as a medium assured Yeats that in marrying her he had done the right thing. On October 29 Yeats wrote to his friend Lady Gregory in Ireland:

Then George spoke of the sensation of having lived through something before (she knew nothing of my thought). Then she said she felt that something was to be written through her. She got a piece of paper, and talking to me all the while so that her thoughts would not affect what she wrote, wrote these words (which she did not understand), “with the bird” (Iseult) “all is well at heart. Your action was right for both but in London you mistook its meaning.”

In *The Making of Yeats's "A Vision": A Study of the Automatic Script* (1987), George Mills Harper explained how Yeats and George, seer and medium, collaborated in the scripts. There were no séances, no darkened rooms, spirit cabinets, ouija boards, or crystals; no observers. George did not go into a trance. Over a period of nearly two and a half years, they had 450 sittings in Ireland, England, and—when she accompanied him on a lecture tour—the United States. Sometimes the sittings were thwarted by Frustrators, as Yeats called them. There was even a deceiver, but he didn't last long. The procedure was that Yeats would raise a question—“Is then the knowledge of god easier to the artist than the saint?”—and George would transmit the answer—“Much.” Question: “Is butterfly symbolic of cleared subconscious?” Answer: “No Butterfly symbol of innocence of emotion Eagle complexity & unbalanced emotion anger overcoming wisdom—Butterfly wisdom overcoming anger—the clearing of subconscious destroys anger.” George was not a mere scribe, she was joint author, collaborator with Yeats and their Communicators, as he called them. As Yeats said later: “Much that has happened, much that has been said, suggests that the communicators are the

personalities of a dream shared by my wife, by myself, occasionally by others.” George also steered the messages away from such awkward topics as Maud, Iseult, and Mabel. It was her great personal achievement, as John Montague has noted, to “convince Yeats that she was giving him back his own unconscious which he could then accept through her authority.” In “The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid,” written in 1923, Yeats paid tribute to George as source and medium:

All, all those gyres and cubes and midnight things
Are but a new expression of her body
Drunk with the bitter sweetness of her youth.

The Communicators answered his questions to the extent eventually of 3,600 pencilled pages. They called themselves by several names—Thomas of Dorlowicz, Ontelos, Ameritus, Dionertes, and Epilamia. Some of the questions and answers were so personal that they could not have any general bearing or appear in any book that might be compiled from the material. But most of the sessions read like high-brow seminars on passion, emotion, love, sex, genius, memory, the transfer of images from one mind to another, reincarnation, and the desirability of having children (two for the Yeatses). George found the writing hard on her wrist, and often boring. By March 29, 1920 Dionertes had prescribed an easier method: George would talk in her sleep and Yeats would transcribe what she said. This method continued until September 18, 1922, when so many pages had been compiled that Yeats decided he must set about bringing the mass of script into order as a philosophic system. (The pages and cards have been published in four volumes as *Yeats's Vision Papers*, general editor George Mills Harper, 1992). His ambitions for a system entailed disobeying the Communicators. As Yeats recalled, many years later:

What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. “No,” was the answer, “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.”

Yeats was not satisfied with anything less than a philosophy of life. “I wished for a system of thought,” he wrote, “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.” Whatever that meant.

The Communicators were well versed in Yeats's writings. Their main service was to impel him to extend and put in systematic form the divinations he had expressed (with Edwin John Ellis) in his edition of *The Works of William Blake* (1893), his essays “Magic” (1901) and “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” (1914), and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917). These were predicated on Yeats's belief in reincarnation. In “Magic” he held to three doctrines, (1) “that the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy,” (2) “that the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself,” and (3) “that this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.” In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* he placed this mind and this memory in what the neo-Platonist Henry More called the Anima Mundi, a storehouse of ancestral images, apparitions, and memories that recur again and again, “for passion,” as Yeats said, “desires its own recurrence more than any event.” “The dead,” he continued, “as the passionate necessity wears out, come into a measure of freedom and may turn the impulse of events, started while living, in some new direction, but they cannot originate except through the living.” Hence the merit of séances, evocation of spirits, and automatic writing.

Yeats's work with the automatic writings and his own esoteric essays was completed in the publication of *A Vision*, dated 1925 but issued by the publisher T. Werner Laurie in an edition of six hundred signed copies on January 15, 1926. This edition was reprinted in 1978 as *A Critical Edition*

of Yeats's "*A Vision*," 1925, edited with introduction and notes by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood. But that edition presented the text in facsimile, and therefore uncorrected. The new edition by Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper resets the original text and takes account of the new information on the first *Vision* that has accrued since 1978.

A Vision has three main emphases: a theory of historical sequence (comparable to Spengler's *The Decline of the West*), a conspectus of psychological types (worth comparing with Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*)—both of these correlated with the twenty-eight phases of the moon—and a series of speculations on life after death. The theory of history is not deterministic, Yeats claimed, because the mathematical figure on which it is based—the circle or wheel with its subdivisions into arcs, cones, and gyres—“is an expression of the mind's desire, and the more rapid the development of the figure the greater the freedom of the soul.” But the book is an apocalypse, a revelation like the Apocalypse of St. John, not a dissertation. It is not to be argued over, but to be received or rejected.

Yeats himself rejected it. The ink on the first edition was hardly dry before he said he was ashamed of it. “I had misinterpreted the geometry, and in my ignorance of philosophy failed to understand distinctions upon which the coherence of the whole depended.” He decided that he must read much more philosophy and try again. George helped him by translating various Latin and French sources, notably including Pierre Duhem's *Le système du monde: Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, the first five volumes of which were available during the Yeatses' years of revision. Yeats's main reading was in Berkeley: he saw that he must establish his vision in relation to the tradition of philosophic Idealism, which I take to issue from the impulse to make one's consciousness account for the whole of one's experience. Yeats took these revisions very seriously, as he wrote to Ezra Pound:

I will never think any thoughts but these, or some modification or extension of these; when I write prose or verse they must be somewhere present though not it may be in the words; they must affect my judgment of friends and of events; but then there are many symbolisms and none exactly resembles mine.

The revised *Vision* was published on October 7, 1937, fifteen months before Yeats died. After his death, George Yeats and Thomas Mark, Yeats's editor at Macmillan, corrected several errors in the 1937 edition. The first revised edition was published by Macmillan in New York on April 17, 1956 and in London on December 7, 1961 and with further corrections on September 27, 1962. The 1962 text is the one most readers of Yeats consult. The 1937 edition, still further edited, will constitute Volume XIV of the ongoing *Collected Works*.

Responses to the book have often been dismissive. Frank Pearce Sturm, a learned occultist, told Yeats that “all these gyres & cones & wheels are parts of a machine that was thrown on the scrap heap when Ptolemy died.” In *Science and Poetry* (1926), I. A. Richards maintained that Yeats's esoteric lore was as regressive as D. H. Lawrence's dealing in solar myths. T. E. Hulme held that Yeats was trying to restore to his poems an intuition of infinity without having to believe in any of the accredited religious doctrines. In *After Strange Gods* (1934), T. S. Eliot wrote:

It is, I think, only carrying Mr. Richards's complaint a little further to add that Mr. Yeats's “supernatural world” was the wrong supernatural world. It was not a world of spiritual significance, not a world of real Good and Evil, of holiness or sin, but a highly sophisticated lower mythology summoned, like a physician, to supply the fading pulse of poetry with some transient stimulant so that the dying patient may utter his last words.

Eliot thought that Yeats made himself a great poet, in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, by discarding the occult nonsense. It is not true. Yeats retained it to the end, as his later poems and plays show. Hostility to *A Vision* culminated in W. H. Auden's remark: “mediums, spells, the Mysterious

Orient—how embarrassing.”

This phase of the reception of *A Vision* seems to be over. No one I know of finds it a scandal. Some readers resort to the later *Vision* for its glosses on the poems. If, while reading “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” you wonder how “the gazing heart doubles her might,” you do well to consult Yeats’s invidious distinction, in the second *Vision*, between the glance and the gaze. Some readers hold that if Yeats needed occult communications from the dead to help him write *The Tower* and the later poems and plays, well and good. They assume that his attempt to devise a philosophic system was useful at least as homework, scales and arpeggios, stretchings of the mind. They remark, too, that only a few poems, and those not the best, notably “Ego Dominus Tuus” and “The Phases of the Moon,” rely on *A Vision*. In Yeats’s greatest poems, such as “Among School Children,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” “The Second Coming,” and “Leda and the Swan,” *A Vision* is either unnecessary or the parts of it that count may easily be guessed. To read “The Second Coming,” all you need to intuit is that the displacement of one age by the next may take a violent form, as the Christian age may be displaced by some rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born.

If we take Yeats’s esoteric writings together, including the two often incompatible versions of *A Vision*, we have a book of prophecy, an “irregular metaphysics,” a phrase I take from R. P. Blackmur. In *Anni Mirabiles* he writes that “where the great novelists of our time have dealt with the troubles caused by the new knowledges (and the erosion of some of the old ones) in a kind of broad and irregular psychology, so the poets have been led to deal with them (or to repel them, or rival them) in a kind of irregular and spasmodic but vitalized metaphysics.” This desperate recourse is caused by “the relative disappearance of generally accepted (if only for argument) systematic metaphysics that bears on daily life.” One result is the proliferation of minor syntaxes in modern poetry, each of them good only for the occasion and issuing from arbitrary force beneath or apart from reason. Blackmur speaks of poets who “quivered with horror at all statements not drawn from dreams.” So, too, Yeats. *A Vision*, in either of its versions, is not doctrine or dogma but, in default of these, a testament. It does not demand to be believed. “For the present,” he wrote in a draft, “I but ask my reader to accept my dream as he would accept the play of Hamlet when the curtain is up.”

It may be evasive to settle for this concession. But there are many books we read notionally or provisionally. I am glad that Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* exists, so long as I am not compelled to believe it or act upon it. I read both versions of *A Vision* opportunistically, valuing the discussion of psychological types for many exhilarating perceptions, brief lives of writers and artists, while wondering why there are only twenty-eight or even twenty-six types (since there is no life at the full or the dark of the moon).

The theory of historical periods is often suggestive but never convincing: imagining that it might be so, I find pleasure in the imagining but not in the sequences adduced. In the end I regret that the book, in either version, is only in part what I think it should have been in full, a poetics—not a philosophy of life but a testament to the imagination, on the evidence of art and literature and the desire that they would survive, if not prevail. I would like it to be a book to set beside Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Pater’s *The Renaissance*, Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Valéry’s *Art of Poetry*, Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Langer’s *Feeling and Form*, Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*. But I concede that it would need no ghosts come from the Anima Mundi to write such a book.

Denis Donoghue's latest book is *On Eloquence* (Yale University Press).

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