

The aims of alchemy have been enumerated through its enigmatic history as follows: to transform base metals into gold; to extract the fine from the coarse; to redeem spirit from matter; to unite the opposites; to discover the secret of matter, and hence, the mystery of creation; and, to perfect the human soul. Gerard Dorn, a sixteenth-century alchemist, said: "Transmute yourselves from dead stones into living philosophical stones." According to Dorn, humans, not metals, are the primary subject of alchemy. Compare the above commandment to Yeats's self-imposed imperative: "Myself must I remake." While the metallurgical aspects of alchemy were obvious anachronisms for the modern poet, the nonmaterial concerns of alchemy—transforming, refining, uniting, perfecting—were central to Yeats's art, thought, and life. "Myself must I remake" is not just a metaphor for Yeats's tendency to revise his written works long after they had been in print. Rather, this dictate points toward the spiritual alchemy that he termed, in league with the hermetic tradition, the "Great Work," the magnum opus.

Alchemy was but one of the many occult traditions that Yeats studied. His early exposure to the supernatural was crucial for his ontological conviction that, though subject to time and space, humanity is rooted and completed in eternity. While most general critiques of Yeats provide some background for his spiritual and occult interests, their methods are eclectic, reflecting Yeats's broad learning. Other studies focus on specific aspects of hermeticism: George Mills Harper's *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, Virginia Moore's *Unicorn*, Mary Flannery's *Yeats and Magic*, and Kathleen Raine's *Yeats, the Tarot, and the Golden Dawn*, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> These studies (except for Harper's,

which is purely informative) argue for the positive nature of these influences on Yeats's writing. Yet other critics have found the occult in Yeats a source of embarrassment (as did Auden and Eliot) or have worked to minimize its importance. Richard Ellmann, referring to "otherworldly systems," writes, "When Yeats seriously contemplates leaving the observable world, he customarily points out what a mistake it would be."<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, while abjuring the occult as an end in itself, gives great weight to the gnostic and daimonic traditions as they place Yeats in the canon of Bloom's Romantic visionaries.

This study draws from both camps and strives to demonstrate alchemy's positive and negative appearance in Yeats's vision. Positively, alchemy had more poetic potential than other hermetic arts—such as magic, tarot, cabalism, and astrology—for portraying the transformation of the human soul, due to its corpus of image and metaphor drawn from the natural world. Negatively, Yeats laid emphasis on the need for spiritual perfection that, in his early thought, entailed transcending physical dimensions into a realm of "essences," creating a dialectical tension between physical and spiritual worlds. Much of this study will focus on the various ways that Yeats sought to mitigate this tension: Yeats's later revisions of the alchemical motif are aimed at bridging the gap between spirit and matter, soul and body, above and below.

In the following brief historical overview of alchemy, we can see what and how Yeats borrowed from the tradition. Throughout this discussion, I refer to Yeats's familiarity with the alchemical texts noted in T. L. Dume and Edward O'Shea's bibliographical studies.<sup>3</sup> Roughly, alchemy can be divided into six periods: Ancient, Egyptian-Greek, Gnostic, Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern. Though Yeats's investigations made

points of contact throughout this three thousand-year development, his learning was less than systematic. Yeats's alchemy is a pastiche, and in many instances his discovery and artistic deployment of alchemy occur in the company of other occult and spiritual traditions.

Ancient alchemy grew out of primitive technology and the myths that explained the genesis of arts and crafts. This rudimentary form of alchemy was allied to Iron Age metallurgy. Mircea Eliade notes that metallurgy began on an industrial scale in Armenia between 1200 and 1000 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Eliade found in Mesopotamian myths the idea that metals were conceived in the earth and grew to maturity in the subterranean womb. Gold was the most "mature" metal, and all other metals were immature, unrefined versions of gold. Gold, therefore, symbolized the highest destiny of the natural world.<sup>5</sup> Alchemy was the knowledge that the gods dispensed to smithies to help metals reach perfection. Through mining raw ores and submitting them to the furnace and the anvil, a metalworker expedited the processes of nature and became master of its rhythm. The Greek god Hephaestus, laboring at his forge, was deemed the divine progenitor of this rudimentary science-art. In this incipient stage, then, alchemy provided both practical skills and a myth about creative capacity: *homo faber*. Alchemy elevated human status nearer to the gods.

Yeats uses the motif of smith and metal-craft in his myth about "the holy city of Byzantium." The "worker in gold and silver" (*AV* 279), the "sages standing in God's holy fire" and the "Grecian goldsmiths" (*TP* 193–94; *VP* 408), and "the golden smithies of the Emperor" and their "changeless metal" (*TP* 248–49; *VP* 498) are players in Yeats's poetic representation of the *homo faber*. Yet, Yeats has replaced the ancient order of 1000 B.C. with a more recent historical era. His emphasis lay in "the

artifice of eternity" (TP 193; VP 408), a spiritual development that did not concern the Iron Age maker of weapons and amulets. Eliade makes a further distinction about the worker in gold that helps us understand how Yeats refined the *homo faber*. "Gold is a creation of *homo religiosus*: this metal was valorized for exclusively symbolic and religious reasons."<sup>6</sup> The products of Yeats's metalworkers are never weapons; they are instruments of a constructive philosophy, such as the golden bird perched between eternity and time, materializing sublime intuitions that penetrate the rational edifice of fact and logic.

In Greek-Egyptian alchemy (600 B.C. to A.D. 100), the emphasis shifts from mining practices to a "theory of correspondences" that intertwines man, matter, and cosmos. It could be termed "high alchemy," since its infusion of Greek philosophy and Egyptian spiritual rites promoted the status of its practitioner from creator of metals to creator of souls. Although Yeats first discovered the theory of correspondences in the more modern format of the Theosophical Society, he later renewed his acquaintance with this theory when studying the ancient Greeks. The pre-Socratic philosophers (namely Democritus, Heraclitus, Anaximenes, and Anaximander), theorizing about nature, amplified their field of reflection with such technical terms as time, space, atom, matter, and energy.<sup>7</sup> Their probings of the material world were part scientific, part philosophical: they inquired about the invisible structures that underlay visible bodies. Eric Holmyard, in *Makers of Chemistry*, cites Aristotle as the formulator of one of alchemy's chief concepts, the *prima materia* (16). Aristotle's theory in *De caelo* (bks. 3 and 4) regarding the constitution of matter posited that the *prima materia*—first or primitive matter—had "only a potential existence until impressed with form" (Holmyard, *Makers*

of *Chemistry*, 16). The building blocks of form were the four elements.

Later, during the time of Alexander, Greek thought was infused with Mesopotamian world-models. The Babylonian concept of correspondences took root in the Greek mind, wherein all beings—from star to stone—are connected through a hierarchy of influences. Astrology is the most enduring remnant of this thought, but in its classical heyday the theory of correspondences included animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds. Thus the planets ruled over men and metals: Sun over gold, Moon over silver, Mercury over mercury, Venus over copper, Mars over iron, Jupiter over tin, and Saturn over lead. In *A Vision* Yeats refers to the “Babylonian mathematical star-light,” citing the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* as the source for his learning.<sup>8</sup>

However, Greek speculations on matter always pointed to the one cause, the *primum mobile*, setting the cosmos into harmonic motion. Hence, we find in this amalgam of Greek and Babylonian thought a double binding agent: all life is unified by the ground of being (the *prima materia*, the unmanifest world) and by the hierarchic chain of influence (the manifest world). In Yeats we will see these two ideas repeatedly absorb his attention in the form of “Unity of Being” and “the One and the Many.”

What the Egyptians contributed to the alchemy of this period is equally rich and complex. Whereas the Greeks brought a philosophical dimension to the science of transmutation, the Egyptian influence was both practical and mystical. On the practical side, “the Egyptian secret sciences . . . consisted entirely of an age-old craft tradition about the behavior of matter. . . . They knew how to make enamels and invisible ink, and all sorts of complicated alloys.”<sup>9</sup> With this

metallurgical ingenuity, they concocted substances approximating gold and hence devised the practice of gilding. Further, gold or pseudogold was used in Pharaonic funeral rites, since its perpetual luster suggested immortality. Marie Louise von Franz writes that alchemy “originated from the Egyptian death cult, that the chemistry of mummification played an enormous role, that actually the Egyptians mummified their dead in order to obtain immortality and make the dead person divine, and that alchemy tried to do the same, namely produce the immortal man, produce immortality.”<sup>10</sup> For the Egyptian mystery cults, alchemy was a metallurgical ritual symbolizing the process of initiation. Eliade notes, “[T]he essence of initiation into the Mysteries consisted of participation in the passion, death and resurrection of a God.”<sup>11</sup> Metals—or more simply, matter—were submitted to an analogous process of suffering, death, and rebirth. In this occult context, alchemy had no practical end in itself; instead, its purpose was to symbolize the spiritual transmutations occurring within the initiate.

Yeats drew frequently from the Egyptian tradition. As the discussion on modern alchemy will show, the Order of the Golden Dawn (of which Yeats was a member) based many of its practices on Egyptian sources. The opening of Pharaonic tombs and uncovering of ancient papyri in the early 1800s fueled the occult imagination of late Victorian England. While Yeats resisted the enthusiasts of Egyptology in his sect to some degree—preferring instead to exalt an Irish brand of sage, the Druid—he honored the Egyptians as significant torchbearers of tradition. His close friend Florence Farr, whom he remembered in “All Souls’ Night,” wrote a book entitled *Egyptian Magic*.<sup>12</sup> And the “Bible of the Alchemists,” the Emerald Tablet that Yeats referred to in his early and late work, was as-

cribed to the legendary father of Greek-Egyptian alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus. In his personal library, Yeats owned four works on Hermes Trismegistus, some of them heavily annotated; their dates of publication ranged between 1867 and 1924.<sup>13</sup>

Gnostic alchemy shares much with Greek-Egyptian alchemy, but it contains more Near Eastern influences. Gnosticism was a salvation-oriented religion that arose concurrently with Christianity. However, the Gnostics did not postulate the historical occurrence of a *salvator mundi*. They maintained the Babylonian hierarchy of the seven ruling planetary deities, and the destiny of the soul was to pass from earth, through intermediate spheres, to attain the kingdom of light. The myth of gnosis features the fall of a divine power into the darkness of matter; that is, the benighted spirit becomes a prisoner in the human body. The alchemical implication of this myth is that spirit penetrates all matter, and therefore the entire cosmos regains its potential divinity. The function of the alchemist was not to resurrect matter, as in the Osiris-based Egyptian alchemy, but to awaken the sleeping spirit so that it might regain its reign over matter and thereby restore the proper relationship between the two opposites.

Jung linked the Gnostic version of alchemy to Christianity. He traced in Gnostic alchemy a compensation for the stress Christianity placed on transcending the earth and the ways of the flesh.

Alchemy is rather like an undercurrent to the Christianity that rules on the surface. [Alchemy] is to that surface as the dream is to consciousness, and just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavors to fill in the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites.<sup>14</sup>

Yeats's 1896 short story "Rosa Alchemica" fictionally embodied this idea nearly fifty years prior to Jung's work. A Golden Dawn treatise entitled "Physical Alchemy" reveals sources, especially Zosimus, from which Yeats may have learned about Gnostic alchemy. In Yeats's last years, the Gnostic motif of the spirit within matter strikes a dominant chord in his essays and poems. Whereas in the 1890s Yeats planned to start his own Mystery cult to enact rituals in the holy places of Ireland, in the 1930s Yeats's precinct of the sacred grew to embrace the whole created world.

In medieval alchemy, hermeticism joined forces with Christianity and cast many of its myths in the genre of allegory so popular at the time. Also in this period, alchemy adopted its characteristic obscurity; some students of the occult see here a deliberate effort to obfuscate, claiming that alchemists were attempting to escape medieval religious persecution. Alchemy, having infiltrated Christianity, was practiced by many monks but was considered heresy and witchcraft. Alchemists created textual smoke screens in order to circumvent church authority. Jung demonstrates how alchemists of this time began to equate the philosopher's stone with Christ, and hence the sacraments of the Catholic mass became material for further alchemical amplifications.<sup>15</sup> A prominent example of Christian-hermetic allegory was "The Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz," with which Golden Dawn initiates were familiar. In *A Vision*, Yeats uses an allegorical structure common to medieval alchemical accounts in "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends." In his 1895 essay "The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux," Yeats declared that the medieval age of romance was about to resurface, an age in which "we will learn again that the great Passions are angels of God" (*E&I* 197). In addition to "Rosa Alchemica,"



Yeats wrote two other stories that embody this annunciation and merge hermeticism with Christianity: "The Tables of the Law" and "Adoration of the Magi."

Another medieval motif that Yeats employed was the alchemical idea of the mystical marriage, or *hieros gamos*, symbolized as the conjunction of sun and moon, the embrace of king and queen. According to this motif, a union of the masculine and feminine was required for the attainment of the opus, and hence the tradition of an alchemist aided by his *mystic sorore*, as depicted in the story of Nicholas Flamel and his wife Pernelle. Yeats entertained the idea of mystical marriage both in his actual relations with women and in his poetry about the union of the sexes, as I will discuss at length in chapter 4.

A primary source for medieval alchemy that Yeats would have known as early as 1888 was A. E. Waite's republication of an 1815 volume, *Lives of the Alchemystical Philosophers*.<sup>16</sup> Waite's book provides a hagiographical digest of many alchemists going back to the sixth century. From Waite, Yeats derived his catalog of alchemists in "Rosa Alchemica": Avicenna, Basilus Valentinus, Morienus, and Raymond Lull. However, what Yeats attributes to these alchemists cannot be traced to Waite. In general, Yeats used Waite as an information source rather than as a trusted exegete. Yeats's additional flourishes on these medieval alchemists always heightens them into heroic figures of romance. Waite, however, stressed whatever Christian factor he could find in occult subjects, and he generally diluted the arcana for a lay audience. He too was a member of the Golden Dawn and traced its lineage to the Rosicrucians. Waite maintained that alchemy was at the crux of hermeticism, being its primary myth of spiritual transformation.

Yeats owes much of his knowledge of alchemy to Renaissance writers. In the Renaissance, alchemy came under harsh

scrutiny. On the one hand, there remained alchemists sincerely attempting to create a gold that was “philosophical.” On the other hand, spurious practitioners having no interest in spiritual matters turned alchemy into a confidence racket, such as Ben Jonson portrays in his comedy *The Alchemist*. In addition to Jonson’s satire on gullibility and greed, alchemy became a metaphor for sublimation in more serious literary works, as Charles Nicholl argues regarding the work of Donne and Shakespeare in *The Chemical Theatre*.

Moreover, the former confines of alchemy—the metallurgical and the mystical—were expanded to include natural medicine or “physic.” Paracelsus was the pioneer of this alchemical medicine, arguing that both body and soul had to be cured to achieve the balance of health. The Paracelsian model of health was based on the hermetic idea of “man the microcosm”—that the human body contained all the elements present throughout the cosmos. Just as the alchemist thought that he contained everything he needed for spiritual salvation within his own soul, so Paracelsus thought that physical health was a matter of activating the healing forces within the human organism to restore its inherent harmony.

With the advent of printing in the fifteenth century, Renaissance alchemy produced a number of texts. The medieval veil of secrecy had been torn aside by the zeal to circulate knowledge. In 1652 Elias Ashmole compiled several medieval alchemical texts in *Theatrum Chemicum Britannica*. Waite reprinted much of Ashmole’s material in *The Hermetic Museum*, which Yeats read in the 1890s. He also knew Basil Valentinus’s *Triumphant Chariot of Antinomy* and Cornelius Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The most important Renaissance source for Yeats, however, was Franz Hartmann’s *Life of Paracelsus*.<sup>17</sup> O’Shea’s catalog lists three pages of marginal annotations for

this text, both in the hand of Yeats and Edwin Ellis. Yeats and Ellis relied heavily on Paracelsus to help them decode Blake for their collected edition of Blake's poetry.

B. J. T. Dobbs, in *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy*, reconstructs the pivotal religious, political and scientific interactions of the late seventeenth century leading to radical shifts in the discourse of alchemy. As the Reformation produced a ferment of religious uncertainties, alchemy enjoyed a renewal of interest. Europeans sought in alchemy the mystical and ritualistic spirit that was being neglected in revised forms of worship. However, as Dobb notes, this renewed zeal for the mystical side of alchemy tended to ignore the physical side of alchemy. In turn, the imbalance that favored the mystical side evoked a reinvigorated practice of physical alchemy. Dobbs argues that alchemy was also transformed by the Reformation's larger social influence: "[Alchemy] became associated with efforts of general reform—reform of man, reform of human knowledge, of society itself" (91). Regarding the hermetic art as science in the seventeenth century, alchemy was transformed through its engagement with mechanical philosophy and chemistry. Alchemy's previously vague, metaphorical, and unstable discourse was revised into a systematic body employing mechanical terminology. Dobbs draws the historical inference that "[t]he function of the movement toward the rationalization of alchemy was to join alchemy to the mainstream of scientific revolution, destroy its quasi-religious aspect, and set it on a path of gradual evolution into objective chemistry" (91). However, with the rise of modern scientific method in the eighteenth century, alchemical claims for the transmutation of metals were submitted to rigorous testing. And since such claims were discovered to be unverifiable, alchemy was institutionally disavowed. Nevertheless, the basic

assumption of alchemy—that “matter should have a unity behind all its apparent diversity”—remains appealing to science to this day (92).

In the early nineteenth century, an American hermeticist, Mary Atwood, published *Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy*.<sup>18</sup> She placed primary emphasis on the spiritual nature of alchemy, citing its metallurgical antecedent as an ancient metaphor that was no longer necessary for the modern initiate. The philosopher’s stone, in this context, implied an identification between the aspirant and his or her higher self. It is this view, which conjoins psyche and spirit, that sets the stage for Jung’s twentieth-century version of alchemy.

Yeats’s affiliation with the Order of the Golden Dawn has been well researched and documented by George Mills Harper. The Order of the Golden Dawn, established in 1887, incorporated an alchemical ritual into its extensive body of hermetic disciplines. Yeats joined the Order in 1890, and his reaction to Golden Dawn rituals was ambivalent; he found them “obvious and melodramatic” as well as “beautiful and profound” (*Au* 389). As stated previously, A. E. Waite wrote extensively on alchemy as the formative logos of the Rosicrucians and hence appointed alchemy’s centrality for the Order of the Golden Dawn. However, it is noteworthy and perhaps ironic that Golden Dawn alchemy reverted back to the practices of physical alchemy, the transformation of substances. The description of the order’s alchemical ritual, as found in Israel Regardie’s *Golden Dawn* (as well as the Yeats Occult Papers at SUNY Stony Brook), reads like a primitive chemical experiment to be performed not in a laboratory but in an animistic universe wherein everything is alive, related, and consecrated. The planets can affect matter on earth, and the alchemist’s

state of being can aid the contact between higher and lower worlds.

To summarize briefly, the Golden Dawn alchemical ritual was an operation requiring at least seventy-nine days to complete. The initiate chooses a particular matter for transformation, seeking to create "an elixir for use according to the substance from which it came. If from a thing medicinal, then as a medicine; if from a metal, then for purifying metals."<sup>19</sup> The substance goes through a seven-stage process, during which the seven planets exercise their influence over the substance. For this atavistic ritual, the initiate wears robes, invokes higher forces, traces symbols in the air with his wand, and makes ceremonial gestures and incantations before the altar. At the outset, the initiate prays before the "Egg Philosophical" (an oval glass containing the matter): "So help me thou Lord of the Universe and mine own Higher Soul." The alchemist must make a new invocation each time he exposes the substance to a different planetary ray. The operation's success depends both on the matter and on the spiritual state of the alchemist, who must "Keepeth himself allied closely with his Higher Self during the work of the invocation."

While it is not known whether Yeats performed this ritual, other indications reveal that Yeats adamantly opposed the practice of physical alchemy. For instance, in "The Trembling of the Veil" Yeats looks back on his early occult involvements, recounting how MacGregor Mathers introduced him to "an old white-haired Oxfordshire clergyman, the most panic-stricken person I have ever known" (*Au* 124). This old clergyman, William Ayton, was a member of the Golden Dawn and in fact practiced physical alchemy.<sup>20</sup> While Mathers revered Ayton—"he unites us to the great adepts of antiquity" (*Au*

124)—Yeats's cameo presentation of Ayton is biting ironic. After Ayton confides that he had an alchemical laboratory in his cellar "where the bishop [could] not see it," he makes this further disclosure:

I once made the elixir of life. A French alchemist said it had the right smell and the right color, but the first effect of the elixir is that your nails fall out and your hair falls off. I was afraid that I might have made a mistake and that nothing else might happen, so I put it on a shelf. I meant to drink it when I was an old man, but when I got it down the other day it had all dried up. (*AU* 124–25)

Yeats switches from the comic to wistful remembrance in casting a nostalgic glance at his youthful high regard for MacGregor Mathers. Though Mathers played the role of mentor to the youthful initiate, the mature Yeats portrays Mathers as being tainted by his archaic quest for the alchemical elixir:

In the credulity of our youth we secretly wondered if [Mathers] had not met with, perhaps even been taught by some old man who had found the elixir. Nor did he deceive us. . . . "If you find the elixir," he was accustomed to say, "you always look a few years younger than the age at which you found it. If you find it at sixty you will look fifty for a hundred years." None of us would have admitted that we believed in stone or elixir, the old Oxfordshire clergyman [Ayton] excited no belief, yet one among us certainly laboured with crucible or athanor. Ten years ago I called upon an elderly solicitor on some business, but at his private house, and I remembered whose pupil he had been when I found among the ashes of the hearth a little earthen pot. He pretended that he studied alchemy that he might

some day write its history, and I found when I questioned others, that for twenty years there had been such a little pot among the ashes. (*Au* 127)

Aside from the satiric pokes he takes at Ayton's home brew, Mather's tall tales, or the solicitor's serious attempts, Yeats emphatically dissociates himself from such practices. By depicting physical alchemy as a clumsy, defective anachronism, he at once lays bare the more embarrassing aspects of the occult and clears his own ethos of any misguided spiritual materialism.

Though clearly eschewing the physical practice and retaining the metaphysical plot-line, Yeats's alchemy also encompassed certain aesthetic claims. Yeats conceived the creative process (for all kinds of art) as a form of alchemy and, moreover, thought that the artist himself became transformed through the act of creation. In *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats's unfinished novel written around the turn of the century, he debunks the practices of physical alchemy in order to construct his aesthetic analogue. The protagonist, Michael, a thinly veiled spokesman for Yeats, is intellectually pitted against McClagan, who is modeled after MacGregor Mathers. McClagan talks a great deal about the alchemist's elixir and his hope to discover it. Apparently, as we have seen in the Golden Dawn's alchemical ritual, the initiates held a literal belief in the elixir and its promise of physical immortality. Whereas McClagan was still searching for the elixir, there were other adepts—the Secret Chiefs of Third-Order Adepts—who reputedly possessed it. Mathers wrote of these Secret Chiefs in 1896, the same year that Yeats composed "Rosa Alchemica":

When such a rendezvous has been in a much frequented place, there has been nothing in their personal appearance

or dress to mark them out as differing in any way from ordinary people except the appearance and sensation of transcendent health and physical vigor (whether they seemed persons in youth or age) which was their invariable accompaniment: in other words, the physical appearance which the possessor of the Elixir of Life has traditionally been supposed to confer.<sup>21</sup>

The critic Kathleen Raine notes that Yeats was enchanted by such reports, and yet he invariably casts a shadow of speculation over such spiritual glamour. *The Speckled Bird's* protagonist Michael, while retaining an oblique reverence for the ancient masters and their elixir, does not accept such a practice for himself as a modern aspirant. Instead, he looks upon "those old ideas as symbols of the greatness of man and man's intellect" (SB 63). Further, Michael does not wish for physical immortality but for the immortal world beyond death, which is clearly the desire of the Symbolist. He seeks that other world through contact with those great symbols. Immortality, in Michael's terms, is not consonant with duration in time but transcends time through states of consciousness not limited by the body.

With the introduction of Michael's aesthetic element into the discourse of alchemy, McClagen charges Michael with bastardizing the hermetic tradition:

I have come to recognize that you are not a magician, but some kind of artist, and that the *summum bonum* itself, the potable gold of our masters, [is] less to you than some charm of color, or some charm of words. (SB 92)

Perhaps McClagen overstates his case. True enough, Michael (i.e., Yeats) does not believe in the elixir, but he does believe



in the possibility that the elixir symbolizes—that of spiritual immortality. Yeats, then, through his speaker, portrays himself as an artist of this quest.

The Golden Dawn's "Flying Roll No. VI" delineates four categories of alchemy. These categories are aligned to the Cabala's four planes of existence. These are (1) physical alchemy, or the production of an elixir; (2) psychic alchemy, which is the "power of creation of living forms"; (3) mental alchemy; and lastly (4) spiritual alchemy. The following excerpt from "Flying Roll No. VI" describes mental and spiritual alchemies, which, I believe, held the strongest interest for Yeats:

Mental Alchemy: the creations of Art and Genius, the ensouled music, picture and statue; this was practiced and not preached until modern times.

Spiritual Alchemy: the practice was almost unknown except to a few entirely hidden Magi; but it was written about by some good and true philosophers, who couched their views on man's origin and destiny, his descent from God, and his possible re-ascent to God, in the language of the Material Plane to avoid persecution and destruction, at the hands of the priests of established churches.<sup>22</sup>

Yeats shuttles back and forth between these two alchemies, between that of the artist and the adept. As an artist, Yeats used the metaphors of alchemy to represent his aesthetic pursuits: he endeavored "to condense as out of the flying vapor of the world an image of human perfection" (*VP* 489). And as an adept, his spiritual quest for the "perfection of the life," or the *Great Work*, took precedence.

A Renaissance axiom shows the relationship between

alchemy and art: *Quod natura relinquit imperfectum, Ars perfecit* (What nature left imperfect, the art perfects). The “art” here is alchemy, and the alchemists believed that their function was to complete the work that God had begun. Likewise, the work of perfection, both in nature and in the soul, revealed to the human being his proper function in the cosmos as the bridge between spirit and matter. In order to serve the process of perfection, though, the alchemist had to combine the sacred and profane in himself. In “Under Ben Bulben,” Yeats employs the phrase “profane perfection of mankind” to suggest the artist’s ideal. In a declamatory tone, he exhorts his artistic successors to “do the work,” which he specifies is to “Bring the soul of man to God” (TP 326; VP 638).

Obversely, the artist-chemist restores God to Creation. Yeats discovered this allegiance between artist and alchemist in Hartmann’s *Paracelsus* in the late 1880s. In the following passage, Paracelsus revises the myth of Genesis as alchemical narrative: “The first body, the YLIASTER, was nothing but a clod, which contained all the chaos, all the waters, all minerals, all herbs, stones and gems. . . . Only the supreme master could release them and form them with tender solicitude, so that others could be created from the rest.”<sup>23</sup> Here we see the hermetic principle that everything is contained in the raw matter of chaos, and the work of perfection is to bring out of that chaos all the forms existing within it—extracting the gold from lead. Although God, the supreme master, was the only creative force at the world’s beginning, Paracelsus theorized that God appointed Adam to assume the function of creative master on earth.

The artist-chemist’s business, then, is to release the spiritual essence from the physical forms that God has drawn out

of the darkness. Paracelsus emphasizes that this work is an art, a creative act that, surpassing technology, requires the practitioner to be divinely inspired. Alchemy “changes the character of simple bodies, and raises them up into higher states of existence. To exercise this power, not merely mechanical labor, but artistic skill, is required.”<sup>24</sup> Paracelsus finds more resemblances between artist and alchemist in drawing distinctions between alchemy and chemistry: “The painter who daubs a wall with paint is a chemist; his work requires skill, but no genius. The artist who composes a picture is an alchemist because he embodies an idea and puts his own character into his work.”<sup>25</sup>

Yeats’s spiritual aims for his art, to “bring the soul of man to God” and to render “the profane perfection of mankind,” suggests yet a further analogue to the alchemist’s art. Namely, the production of art must reflect the creation of a new being within the artist; it must create out of the complex aggregate of the artist (a polymorphous and polyphonic subjectivity) the philosopher’s stone: a unity comprised of all dichotomies. In writing of artists whom Yeats believed to have achieved such unity—Shakespeare, Dante, and Villon—he offers, “We gaze at such men in awe, because we gaze not at a work of art, but at the re-creation of the man through the art, the birth of a new species of man . . .” (*Au* 273). Similar to Paracelsus’s alchemized version of Genesis, Yeats conceived the human psyche, like primordial chaos, as containing the possibility of its own perfection. He found evidence for this goal in “that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s ‘Imagination,’ what the Upanishads have named ‘Self’” (*E&I* 158). Actually, there was nothing new to be born, only the ancient to be reborn. It was human contact

with the transcendent dimension that produced this new species: "I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death" (*TP* 248; *VP* 497).

Yeats found literary precedence for alchemy in historical periods whose creative expression favored symbols, romance, and imagination. As a *fin de siècle* literary critic, Yeats forecasted the end of an age that had stifled the human imagination for two centuries and he heralded the approach of a new era in phrases echoing his Romantic predecessors: "the imagination has been laid in a great tomb of criticism," "the age of criticism is about to pass," "for art is a revelation, not a criticism" (*E&I* 196, 197). As stated previously, hermeticism made inroads into Christianity in the Middle Ages, when a great literary flowering occurred with allegorical romances. According to Yeats, the parabolic arc of this influence met its demise when Rosicrucianism was forced underground in the 1700s. In his 1895 essay "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrucx," Yeats depicts the burial of imaginative art as but the temporary entombment of an eternal impulse: "The followers of the Father Christian Rosencrucx, says the old tradition, wrapped his imperishable body in noble raiment and laid it under the house of their Order, in a tomb containing symbols of all things in heaven and earth, and in the waters under the earth, and set about him inextinguishable lamps, which burnt on generation after generation . . ." (*E&I* 196). And although Yeats thought the previous two centuries were primarily a barren intellectual age cut off from the passionate depths of the unconscious, he found in Blake an anomalous flowering of the symbolic imagination. "He [Blake] had learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, 'the body of God,' 'the Divine Members,' and he drew the deduction, which they did not