

OXFORD

DIVINE CARTOGRAPHIES

GOD, HISTORY, AND *POIESIS*
IN W. B. YEATS, DAVID JONES,
AND T. S. ELIOT



W. David Soud

OXFORD ENGLISH MONOGRAPHS

OXFORD ENGLISH MONOGRAPHS

General Editors

PAULINA KEWES LAURA MARCUS PETER MCCULLOUGH
SEAMUS PERRY LLOYD PRATT FIONA STAFFORD
DANIEL WAKELIN

Divine Cartographies

*God, History, and Poiesis in W. B. Yeats,
David Jones, and T. S. Eliot*

W. DAVID SOUD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© W. David Soud 2016

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015956585

ISBN 978-0-19-877777-9

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

for Rohini

Acknowledgements

A project such as a scholarly monograph is never simply the work of one person. There are many people without whom this study, adapted from my doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford, would never have taken shape.

Above all, I would like to thank Rohini Ralby, not only my wife but also a scholar and practitioner of the contemplative way. Her unstinting love, support, and counsel first encouraged me to undertake this project and then made it possible for me to complete it. I cannot thank her enough. This book is dedicated to her.

My stepsons Ian and Aaron Ralby were always ready with their love, advice, and affirmation from first to last.

Rebecca Beasley, my thesis supervisor at Oxford, was as gracious as she was exacting through the whole doctoral process, and then offered equally generous guidance as this book took shape.

Other scholars, at Oxford and elsewhere, also offered assistance in various ways. Gavin Flood was unfailingly generous with his knowledge of both Indic traditions and twentieth-century poetry; he, his colleagues, and the students at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies formed a marvellous scholarly community. Ron Bush, Meg Harper, Rowan Williams, Richard Conrad OP, Paul Fiddes, Jon Stallworthy, David Moody, Jason Harding, Richard Parish, John Kelly, Alexis Sanderson, Doug Mao, Hanneke Wilson, Valentine Cunningham, and Michael Whitworth all took time to share their thoughts on my work, as did Stephen Ross, Ed Sugden, Alex Niven, Zohar Atkins, Olga Breininger, Alys Moody, Charlotta Salmi, and Angus Brown. Charles Robinson at the University of Delaware has remained a tireless and sagacious mentor for many years. I also appreciate the assistance of other colleagues at Delaware, especially George Miller, Chris Penna, Devon Miller-Duggan, and Bruce Allen Heggen.

I have indeed been very lucky.

Contents

General Introduction	1
1. The Divine Self at Play: History and Liberation in the Late Poems of W. B. Yeats	26
2. The Figure and the Map: <i>The Anathemata</i> of David Jones	98
3. The Silence and the Moment: The Dialectical Poetics of <i>Four Quartets</i>	147
Afterword	217
<i>Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	238

General Introduction

In his classic study *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller foregrounds the theological dimension of literature: 'A work of literature is the act whereby a mind takes possession of space, time, nature, or other minds. Each of these is a dimension of literature. Literature may also express a relation of the self to God.' He goes on to observe that in some texts 'theological experience is most important and determines everything else'.¹ While Miller's comment refers primarily to Victorian writers, the theological issues they confronted hardly diminished in importance or immediacy in the first half of the twentieth century. And, though many modernist writers followed the course Pericles Lewis describes as seeking 'a secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural', others—and one might say poets especially—made explicit religious commitments.² Even well after the Great War, for W. B. Yeats, David Jones, and T. S. Eliot, 'theological experience' was often the overriding consideration, and it determined a great deal about some of their most important works.

If we take 'theology' not simply as an academic discipline but in its original sense of discourse about God, its importance to their poetry becomes obvious. A theologically engaged poet's conceptions of the nature of the human self and its situation, of the ends and goals of life, and even of the efficacy of language are likely to follow the trajectory of his religious deliberations. Such an engagement becomes more pressing, and more meaningful, in a time of theological controversy, historical trauma, and widespread religious speculation. The relationship between theology and text warrants sustained and careful attention.

One reason a literary critic might hesitate to venture into this territory is that the linguistic terrain is so treacherous; it is filled with notoriously

¹ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (New York: Schocken, 1965), p. x.

² Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

malleable signifiers. Such fundamental terms as 'religion', 'spirituality', 'mysticism', 'sacred', and 'secular', among others, resist the sort of crystal-line definition that would prove most useful in a study like this. But use them we must.

Adapting a phrase from Saussurean linguistics, Peter van der Veer regards such signifiers as forming 'syntagmatic chains', in which the different terms 'are connected, belong to each other, but cannot replace each other. They do not possess stable meanings independently from one another and thus cannot be simply defined separately.'³ This is, I think, a sound approach, though a more apt metaphor might be 'constellations' or 'clusters' rather than 'chains'. One such cluster would include 'religion', 'spirituality', 'ontology', and 'theology'. While I have broadly defined 'theology' above, it is sometimes used more narrowly elsewhere in this book. 'Ontology', on the other hand, need not be linked with any of the other terms, but occupies a space within the cluster when religious deliberations involve, as they often do, questions about the nature of being. In a given context, each of the terms may subsume one or more of the others: George Santayana defines 'spirituality' as 'the aspiring side of religion', yet it is often used to indicate a broader impulse than 'religion' suggests.⁴ Van der Veer, for instance, affirms that the very vagueness of 'spirituality', which 'sever[s] ties with religious institutions', makes it 'productive as a concept that bridges many discursive traditions across the globe'.⁵ The overall effect is that of an unstable Venn diagram, in which the relative positions of, and overlaps among, these terms vary. At times, near-synonymity gives way to sharp distinctions. The best one can do is clarify the terms' relative meanings as they cross different contexts.

Despite these and other difficulties, recent scholarship has begun to explore more adventurously the intersection of modernism and various forms of spirituality in the broad sense. Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, as well as Matthew Mutter's recent work on the ambivalence towards both religion and secularism lurking in much modernist literature's 'critique of asceticism and return to the world', has raised important questions.⁶ In particular, work on the links between literary modernism and the occult and mystical enthusiasms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been expertly undertaken by

³ Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 9.

⁴ Cited in Van der Veer, *Modern Spirit*, 41.

⁵ Van der Veer, *Modern Spirit*, 7, 36. I will generally use the term 'spirituality' in the broader sense that Van der Veer suggests.

⁶ Matthew Mutter, 'Poetry against Religion, Poetry as Religion: Secularism and its Discontents in Literary Modernism' (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2009), 13.

such critics as Alex Owen in *The Place of Enchantment*, Timothy Materer in *Modernist Alchemy*, Leon Surette in *The Birth of Modernism*, and Sanford Schwartz in *The Matrix of Modernism*. In its discussion of the late poetry of Yeats, this study touches on their work. But Eliot and Jones—two major poets for whom, through much of their careers, religious belief was paramount and theology a compelling discipline—fall largely outside the boundaries of such surveys. Fortunately, there is a fairly rich corpus of criticism on religious aspects of Eliot's and Jones's work. But the interpretative possibilities that arise from juxtaposing these three poets have yet to be explored.

What I hope to contribute with this book is a kind of triangulation of key texts: a selection of poems from Yeats's final decade, during his most intensive and fruitful engagement with Indic traditions; Jones's *The Anathemata*; and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. While many Anglophone poets addressed questions of religion and transcendence in the years surrounding the Second World War, Yeats, Jones, and Eliot stand out as bringing strong theological stances to bear on the same poetic project: how to map within a poem the relation between history and eternity, which for these poets is inseparable from the relation between the individual self and God. It is a question of theodicy, and of the role of the poet in public life, especially in times of crisis—issues closely tied to what critics have called late modernism, of which these three poets can be said to mark off certain theological boundaries. But it is also a question of the nature of the subject, and therefore of poetic agency, and ultimately of poetic strategy. In these poems, theology translates into poetics.

Exploring the theological dimension of these texts requires a specific set of contexts, some of which have only recently begun to adhere to modernist studies. The first is the problem of secularization, an issue that caused a great deal of hand-wringing during the mid-twentieth century and remains with us, albeit in a much more complex and ambiguous form than earlier narratives allowed. Closely related to the question of secularization are three spiritual currents that became points of contention in the first half of the century: liberal Protestantism, the mystical revival, and Theosophy. Liberal Protestantism served as a cultural antagonist for literary modernism, especially during and after the Great War. The mystical revival, which carried over from the nineteenth century, was one response to a widely felt sense of desacralization partly precipitated by liberal Protestantism. Theosophy—more precisely, the Theosophical Society and its offshoots—emerged with the mystical revival as the most prominent and influential early form of what now often goes by the name 'alternative spirituality'. Those contexts open up three further considerations: the question of the nature of the subject, the critical conversation about 'late

modernism', and the taxonomy of difficulty proposed by George Steiner, which serves as a useful hermeneutic device in this study.

SECULARIZATION AND THE SACRED

In his Massey Lectures of 1974, Steiner argued that 'the political and philosophic history of the West during the past 150 years can be understood as a series of attempts—more or less conscious, more or less systematic, more or less violent—to fill the central emptiness left by the erosion of theology'. He identified movements ranging from Stalinism to Freudianism to structural anthropology as forms of 'substitute theology' engendered by a 'nostalgia for the absolute'.⁷ While he declined to advance a specific narrative on the causes of secularization, his lectures conformed to what Charles Taylor has called 'the formerly dominant, unilinear secularization theory, which sees the retreat of faith as a steady function of certain modernizing trends'.⁸

Like many of their contemporaries, Yeats, Jones, and Eliot subscribed to variants of that narrative. We need only recall Yeats's oft-quoted lines from 'The Second Coming'—'The best lack all conviction, | While the worst are full of passionate intensity'—to see the lineaments of Steiner's argument. Jones's notions of 'the Break' and 'the turn of a civilisation' follow a similar trajectory, as does a great deal of Eliot's poetry and prose, especially after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism.⁹ And all three poets indulged in what Stephen Spender called 'the nostalgic fallacy of vicarious living', which mythologized a lost organic community bound together at least partly by a shared religion.¹⁰ Still, a more nuanced treatment of the secularization thesis will prove helpful here.

The 'unilinear' narrative, grounded in Max Weber's famous principle of disenchantment, was already being challenged at the time of Steiner's lectures, and the controversy has continued through to the present day. Much of the debate has hinged on defining secularization: is it about public institutions, private belief and practice, epistemic frames, or all of the above? Depending on the definition, it can be (and has been) cogently

⁷ George Steiner, *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 2–5.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard, 2007), 461; emphasis in original.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (1957; repr. New York: Macmillan, 1987), 402 (hereafter referred to as Allt and Alspach); David Jones, Preface to *The Anathemata: Fragments of an Attempted Writing* (1952; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 15; David Jones, *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*, paperback edn (1974; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 9.

¹⁰ Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Methuen, 1965), 240.

argued that the secularization thesis is a fallacy. Even the concept of disenchantment has been interrogated. In his 2007 study *A Secular Age*, Taylor makes clear that we should not equate religion with enchantment: 'Enchantment is essential to some forms of religion, but other forms... have been built on its partial or total denial.'¹¹ And Jean-Pierre Dupuy has pointed out that, understood rightly, Weber presents disenchantment as 'paradoxically itself both a belief and an act of faith'.¹²

Nevertheless, scholars such as Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce have found little reason to doubt that 'there has been a major change in the importance and popularity of religion and that the term "secularization" is as good a way of describing it as any'.¹³ The precise nature and origins of this shift will doubtless continue to be debated. To cite a few relevant examples, such otherwise divergent thinkers as Weber, Louis Dupré, and René Girard have assigned responsibility to latent desacralizing impulses within Christianity; Sanford Schwartz links the crisis of value with the rise of scientific world views that 'replaced [a] higher world with a mechanistic cosmos utterly indifferent to traditional moral and spiritual sentiments' and 'left man stranded in a universe devoid of transcendent value'; Fredric Jameson points to 'the desacralization of the market system'; and Michael Levenson links its British manifestation to 'the self-celebrating independence of the middle-class' in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Perhaps no one has undertaken such a comprehensive survey of this terrain as Taylor. Tracing the origins of secularization as far back as the flowering of Franciscan spirituality, Taylor theorizes a 'nova effect' in which the rise of humanism as a viable alternative to belief in the transcendent 'spawn[ed] an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options'.¹⁵ For Taylor, the most decisive manifestation of secularization is neither the withdrawal of religion from public spaces nor the falling-off of religious practice, but rather what he terms 'secularity 3': a shift in the 'conditions of belief' that 'takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 553.

¹² Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 56.

¹³ R. Wallis and Steve Bruce, 'Secularization: The Orthodox Model', in Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 8–30, at 25.

¹⁴ Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 39; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 236–7; Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15.

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299. Louis Dupré advances a similar argument in *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). More so than Taylor, Dupré emphasizes the influence of late medieval nominalist theology.

not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others'.¹⁶ This proliferation of competing moral and spiritual sources, especially those that discount transcendence of any kind, gives rise to the 'malaise of immanence', in which 'the sense that all these answers are fragile, or uncertain' leads to a general 'fragility of meaning, analogous to the existential fragility we always live with'.¹⁷ It also gives rise to alternative spiritualities. Taylor's narrative accounts not only for the spiritual *bricolage* of Yeats but also the paths to conversion of Jones and Eliot.

Discussing secularization requires a working definition of the sacred. In this respect, Taylor's reading often relies on the work of Mircea Eliade, the historian of religion whose theory of the sacred and profane, though not unchallenged, has remained foundational in his field. Unlike René Girard, for whom 'violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred', which 'consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them',¹⁸ Eliade frames the dialectic of sacred and profane within that of Being and Becoming. The sacred is associated, or even equated, with the former:

Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious—that is, participates in reality.¹⁹

For religious persons, then, 'the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*.' It follows that any hierophany is the 'revelation of an absolute reality', such that 'the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world'. The elimination of the sacred therefore ontologically uproots the world, and with it the self.

Eliade therefore takes a bleak view of secularization. Suggesting that 'the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit', he insists that, in the aftermath of that development, 'modern nonreligious man assumes a tragic existence'.²⁰ A desacralized cosmos is, in effect, stripped of its

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 308.

¹⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1957; repr. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987), 202.

²⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11, 21, 203.

connection to Being. Eliade's notion of the 'tragic' effects of secularization meshes neatly with Taylor's 'malaise of immanence'.

Yeats, Jones, and Eliot adopted similar stances, subscribing quite openly at times to the narrative that secularization is a pernicious, even dehumanizing development. And all three regarded liberal Protestantism as one of its prime agents.

LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM

Taylor's admonition not to confuse disenchantment with secularization is exemplified by liberal Protestantism. A broad religious orientation rather than a systematic theology, it pervaded the educated classes of Britain and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though often traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher's Romantic immanentism, liberal Protestantism came into its own with a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collection of theologians who based their approaches on Kantian critique. The foremost among these were Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack. Following Kant, these theologians affirmed the inner moral imperative as the surest sign of a Supreme Being, and of a divine order of which humanity is part and to which it is accountable. 'Ritschlianism', according to the theologian Paul Tillich, 'was a withdrawal from the ontological to the ethical', and regarded the purpose of Christianity as 'to make morality possible'. Such a theology effectively denuded religion of mystery. As a result, it 'aroused the wrath of all those for whom the mystical element in religion is decisive'.²¹

Around the turn of the century, the lightning rod for that reaction was liberal Protestantism's most famous exponent, Harnack. He was primarily a church historian rather than a systematic theologian; his hugely popular book *What Is Christianity?*, translated into English within a year of its German publication in 1900, set about answering its titular question using 'the methods of historical science, and the experience of life gained by studying the actual course of history'.²² Harnack's historically determined vision of the faith, in which Jesus is presented as a 'spiritual personality' for whom, 'rightly understood, the name of Son means nothing but the knowledge of God', grounded Ritschlian ethical Christianity in a

²¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 512–14.

²² Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (2nd rev. edn, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), 7.

foundation of textual and historical scholarship.²³ For Harnack, the true gospel preached by Jesus bore little resemblance to the superstructure of Hellenized dogma that developed around it over succeeding centuries. True Christianity 'is a practical affair, and is concerned with the power to live a blessed and holy life'; it is essentially an ethical doctrine, taught by someone whom Harnack seems to regard as a great religious teacher but not as the Word made flesh. As Harnack frames it, Christianity 'teaches us to live our lives aright' and is therefore primarily a path of moral self-realization:

But if with a steady will we affirm the forces and the standards which on the summits of our inner life shine out as our highest good, nay, as our real self; if we are earnest and courageous enough to accept them as the great Reality and direct our lives by them, and if then we look at the course of mankind's history, follow its upward development, and search, in strenuous and patient service, for the communion of minds in it... we shall become certain of God, of the God whom Jesus Christ called his Father, and who is also our Father.²⁴

The key elements here—the surety of an innate and reliable moral sense, the vision of history as an 'upward development', the subtle resistance to traditional doctrines of the Incarnation—unmistakably position liberal Protestantism as a mode of religion steeped in Enlightenment rationalism.

In America, liberal Protestantism found its fullest expression in Unitarianism, the denomination in which T. S. Eliot was raised. Charles William Eliot, distant relation of the poet and president of Harvard University, epitomized Unitarian liberalism when he proposed 'a new ideal of God' encompassing 'the Jewish Jehovah, the Christian Universal father, the modern physicist's omnipresent and exhaustless Energy, and the biological conception of a Vital Force'.²⁵ Such a theology not only seemed to incorporate scientific and philosophical trends; it also 'had the considerable advantage of being able, tacitly, to appeal to the common feeling that real progress was being made on all sides by human society'.²⁶

Such liberal Protestantism was partly a reaction against the more strident aspects of Calvinist theology, especially the seemingly fatalistic and inhuman doctrines of total depravity and double predestination. But it did not lack for critics, most of whom regarded its confidence in human

²³ Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 14, 138.

²⁴ Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 157, 322.

²⁵ Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010), 5.

²⁶ S. W. Sykes, 'Theology', in C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (eds), *The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain*, vol. ii: 1918–1945 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 146.

progress and perfectibility as delusory, and its immanentist sense of God as an attempted domestication of the divine. Both Baudelaire's and T. E. Hulme's assertions of Original Sin militated against not only Romanticism but also the liberal mindset. The most effective critics of liberal Protestantism, however, were Søren Kierkegaard, who anticipated it but whose works were translated into German only in the 1910s and English only in the 1930s, and Karl Barth, who shook the foundations of the liberal edifice with the 1922 edition of his *The Epistle to the Romans*, a prophetic rebuke disguised as biblical exegesis. As we shall see, Barth exerted considerable influence over Eliot's thought just before and during the Second World War.

Perhaps no literary figure better personifies the predicament of liberal Protestantism than Matthew Arnold. As Charles Altieri has observed, Arnold was arguably 'the age's greatest humanist',²⁷ but his most quoted poems, among them 'Dover Beach' and 'Stanzas from the Grand Charteuse', are saturated with nostalgia for a sense of the sacred. Nonetheless, in *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold bleaches Christianity of its mystery to reconcile it with empiricism. His famous (or infamous) formulation of religion as '*morality touched with emotion*', a sensibility and a practice grounded in 'the sweet reasonableness of Jesus', made him a prime target for a range of opponents, eventually including Eliot. While those attacks were often reductive, some of Arnold's more glaring accommodations to purely secular thought, such as his utilitarian defence of Christianity as contributing mightily to 'the sum of universal happiness', exemplify the fragilization of belief explained by Charles Taylor.²⁸ It is not surprising that Arnold would argue that poetry must become the refuge of the sacred—nor that many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century believers would seek to recover a sense of the sacred in those regions of spirituality most resistant to secularist influence.

THE MYSTICAL REVIVAL

In his 1911 essay 'Whither the New Art?', Wassily Kandinsky declared that 'a general interest in abstraction is being reborn both in the superficial form of the movement towards the spiritual and in the forms of occultism,

²⁷ Charles Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry', *PMLA*, 91/1 (January 1976), 102.

²⁸ Matthew Arnold, *Dissent and Dogma*, vol. vi of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 176, 396, 398; emphasis in original.

spiritualism, monism, the “new” Christianity, Theosophy and religion in its broadest sense’.²⁹ That essay came at the end of a decade in which mysticism, variously conceived, had featured in a series of influential publications. In 1901, the Jesuit Augustin Poulain had published *Des Graces d’oraison Traité de théologie mystique*, a treatise on contemplative prayer and mysticism that would go through nine editions in five languages by the start of the Great War. The following year came William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In 1908, after years of painstaking work, Friedrich von Hügel published *The Mystical Element in Religion*. Evelyn Underhill, for whom von Hügel served as a spiritual director, produced her seminal *Mysticism* in the same year as Kandinsky’s essay. The internationalism of these texts, and their enormous popularity, speak to the breadth and depth of interest in mysticism at the time.

The ‘revival of mysticism’, as Holbrook Jackson termed it in 1913, more commonly known as the mystical revival, described ‘a range of spiritual alternatives to religious orthodoxy that sprang up in the 1880s and 1890s and gained momentum and prominence as the old century gave way to the new’. The trend had emerged over the entire course of the previous century. Wayne Proudfoot contends that it began in the wake of Schleiermacher’s 1799 *On Religion: Speeches to its Culture Despisers* as a ‘protective strategy’ designed to ‘seal off a guarded domain for religious experience amid modernity’.³⁰ While that position disregards, for instance, the strain of mysticism running through English culture from such early figures as Julian of Norwich through many Elizabethan and Jacobean poets and divines, the Cambridge Platonists, William Law, and various Protestant sects, it does go some way towards explaining mysticism’s move from the margin towards the centre in the nineteenth century. In seeking to preserve an inviolable space for experience of the sacred, many adherents of mysticism, however they conceived it, sought to fend off the perceived hegemony of a secularist world view. Embedded in Bernard McGinn’s definition of mysticism as ‘the inner and hidden realization of spirituality through a transforming consciousness of God’s immediate presence’ is the sense of mysticism as both interior and reserved.³¹

²⁹ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 86–7.

³⁰ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 20; Eric Leigh Schmidt, ‘The Making of Modern Mysticism’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71/2 (June 2003), 274.

³¹ Bernard McGinn, ‘Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal’, *Spiritus* 8/1 (Spring 2008), 44.

Transcendentalism, that American amalgam of German Idealism, Indic spirituality, and European mysticism, certainly played a pivotal role in the revival. Eric Leigh Schmidt marks the date of 20 May 1838, when Bronson Alcott first convened a meeting of the Transcendental Club to discuss mysticism, as a watershed. By 1902, William James would refer to an 'everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition'.³²

A crucial ingredient in both Transcendentalism and the mystical revival as a whole was the pervasive influence on Western thought and literature of translations from India that began to appear in the late eighteenth century, perhaps most influentially Max Müller's 1870s series, *Sacred Books of the East*. In the early twentieth century, Sir John Woodroffe's *Tantrik Texts* series would exercise a similar, if lesser, fascination. One need only consider Schopenhauer's fondness for the Upanishads, or the quotations and allusions to Indic texts in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, or even Nietzsche's sharp dismissals of Buddhism, to see the extent to which Indic traditions had become part of the discourse of Western religion and philosophy. To be sure, many such understandings were orientalist distortions of traditions that pose serious problems of commensurability for Western thinkers. But the salient fact is that many nineteenth- and twentieth-century enthusiasts or adherents of both Western and non-Western mysticism sought to make it an arena in which direct encounter with the sacred would restore a sense of ontological and teleological security.

Yet the inwardness of mysticism could not shield it from the criticisms of sceptical psychologists. The mystical revival unfolded in what has also been called 'the golden age of hysteria', and many researchers were inclined to dismiss claims of mystical consciousness out of hand. In France, where the Catholic Church in particular frowned upon popular expressions of mysticism, such researchers as Jean-Martin Charcot, Albert Houtin, and Pierre Janet categorized mystical experience as the pathological expression of a dissociative consciousness.³³ In his introductory lectures on psychoanalysis, Freud refused to dignify mysticism with a definition, folding it in with such occult phenomena as séances, which he regarded as having the 'secret motive' of supporting religion against 'the advance of scientific thought'.³⁴ His break with Jung was driven partly by the latter's interest in mysticism and Hermeticism.

³² Schmidt, 'The Making of Modern Mysticism', 282–7.

³³ C. J. T. Talar (ed.), *Modernists and Mystics* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2009), 10–11.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (1933; repr. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 42.

Yeats, Jones, and Eliot all took seriously the possibility of mystical experience and practice, but to different degrees and in very different ways. Though Eliot pursued a deep interest in mysticism throughout his life, he regarded mystical consciousness as 'a gift of grace', asserting that 'you will never become a mystic unless you have the gift'. He therefore remained dismissive of what he called 'the warm fog which passes for mysticism nowadays', in which people of 'vague thinking and mild feeling' seek out 'a swooning ecstasy of pantheistic confusion'.³⁵ For much of his life, Yeats folded his mystical inclinations in with his occult pursuits, but in his final decade he mostly abandoned his earlier fascination with magic and spiritualism in favour of the study and translation of largely mystical Indic texts and traditions. Jones, the most exoterically inclined of the three, saw mystical consciousness as reserved for very few extraordinary souls—though some critics regard him as having suffered from the strain of attempting and failing to achieve his own mystical vision.

THEOSOPHY

The mystical revival, universalist aspirations, fascination with Indic traditions, and occult enthusiasms converged in Theosophy, a term probably coined early in the nineteenth century by the erstwhile occultist–universalist Fabre d'Olivet, but famously appropriated by Helena Pavlova Blavatsky, co-founder and head of the Theosophical Society from 1875 until her death in 1891.³⁶ Despite some excellent studies, the remarkable influence of the Theosophical Society on early-twentieth-century art has only recently begun to be widely appreciated. Associated with it, as members of either the Society or one of its offshoots, or as occasional lecturers or visitors, are Yeats, Pound, Hulme, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Scriabin, among others.

Blavatsky, the product of a Russian family that claimed aristocratic ancestry, so embroidered her life story that it is difficult to ascertain much before her arrival in the West in the 1870s. After immersing herself in the spiritualism that had taken hold in the United States after the Civil War, she founded the Theosophical Society with Henry Steel Olcott in New York in 1875. Though Blavatsky was clearly a charlatan, she had a

³⁵ T. S. Eliot, 'Thinking in Verse: A Survey of Early Seventeenth-Century Poetry', *Listener*, 3/61 (12 March 1930), 443; T. S. Eliot, 'The Mystic and Politician as Poet: Vaughan, Traherne, Marvell, Milton', *Listener*, 3/64 (2 April 1930), 590; T. S. Eliot, 'The Silurist', *Dial*, 83/3 (September 1927), 263.

³⁶ Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 21.

remarkable power of synthesis, and her major contribution was the construction of a mystical–universalist system that did much to infuse a reverence for Indic traditions into Western popular culture. Her major books, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), became source material for countless aspiring occultists and mystics. *Isis Unveiled*, ‘an unruly amalgam of Western occultism, Buddhist and Hindu teachings, and more than a dash of anti-Christian polemic’, served as a reference point for a range of artists and writers. As John Golding describes them, ‘her books offer a short cut to a vast panorama of occult thought and religion. Indeed, to artists who saw themselves as being in a period of acute transition the tenets of Theosophy must have seemed marvelously suggestive and adaptable.’³⁷

The Theosophical Society is a study in textual fecundity. It not only drew a large membership but also generated a considerable number of publications, under both Blavatsky and such successors and associates as Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater, Rudolf Steiner, A. R. Orage, and G. R. S. Mead. Many internal discussions and debates played out in the pages of its main journals, the *Theosophist*, *Lucifer*, and the *Path*, and in such offshoot periodicals as Orage’s *New Age* and Mead’s the *Quest*. The latter two were surprisingly ecumenical, often publishing avant-garde literary work. In particular, the *Quest*, the journal of the Quest Society, which was formed after Mead’s break with Besant and Leadbeater’s Theosophical Society, promoted the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson.³⁸ Mead knew Yeats, who introduced him to Pound in London around 1911. Pound’s essay ‘Psychology and the Troubadours’ originated as a Quest Society lecture, and was first published in the same issue of the *Quest* as Yeats’s poem ‘The Mountain Tomb’.³⁹ Pound also published regularly in Orage’s *New Age* from 1912 through to 1920. In a particularly striking convocation, Orage, Underhill, Pound, Yeats, Hulme, and Jessie Weston regularly attended Quest Society gatherings at Kensington Town Hall.⁴⁰

Theosophy thus rested at the nexus of occultism, mysticism, and the avant-garde. The central principles of its syncretic philosophy would exercise a lasting influence over Yeats as well as Mondrian, Malevich, and Kandinsky. Mondrian told a friend that he got ‘everything’ from Theosophy.⁴¹ Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, one of the most

³⁷ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 29; Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, 15.

³⁸ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 49.

³⁹ James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats & Modernism* (1988; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21–2.

⁴⁰ Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, 34.

⁴¹ Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, 15.

influential artist statements of the century, is so thoroughly marinated in Theosophical ideas that, as Hilton Kramer has noted, many of its passages 'are barely intelligible without recourse to the ideas of Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner'.⁴² Such was the potency of the Theosophical Society's programme that, decades after his 1890 departure from the group, Yeats would project its principles erroneously onto the Indic texts he studied in his final years.

Part of Theosophy's appeal lay in its enshrinement of an inviolable subjectivity: a transpersonal, transcendent Self of the kind set forth in the Upanishads and other Indic scriptures. One of the fundamental tenets of Theosophical doctrine is that the goal of human evolution is the full realization of this divine subjectivity. Despite some uncertainty in Theosophical circles over the precise ontological status of the Self—a confusion I will discuss in the chapter on Yeats—it is by nature insusceptible to empirical investigation and therefore reserves its sacredness, in the Eliadean sense of fullness of Being. The appeal of this doctrine speaks to a nineteenth-century anxiety about the integrity of the individual self that dates as far back as Schopenhauer and was deepened by the proliferation of different, often mutually antagonistic visions of the human subject.

THE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

It speaks to the aptness of Taylor's 'secularity 3', with its mutually destabilizing variety of moral and spiritual sources, that any meaningful discussion of a stable human subject feels almost anachronistic; it suggests what many would consider a discredited essentialism. As Robert Langbaum remarked in his 1987 essay 'Can We Still Talk about the Romantic Self?', 'the latest theoretical criticism has all but wiped out the self as a legitimate subject for literary discourse'.⁴³ Yet it is impossible to trace the contours and assess the implications of a poet's religious belief without discussing how that belief situates the human subject. Yeats, Jones, and Eliot operated from religiously determined visions of the ontological status of the human self, all of which militated against a purely Cartesian perspective.

Taylor, who has painstakingly traced a number of currents that converged to form what we somewhat reductively call the Cartesian subject,

⁴² Hilton Kramer, *The Triumph of Modernism: The Art World, 1987–2005* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 8.

⁴³ Robert Langbaum, *The Word from Below* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 20.

nonetheless names Descartes as the prime exemplar of a pivotal shift in Western culture, one in which 'both science and virtue require that we disenchant the world, that we make the rigorous distinction between mind and body, and relegate all thought and meaning to the realm of the intra-mental'.⁴⁴ This is the shift from a 'porous self', susceptible to the influence of purposive supernatural agencies and correspondences, to a 'buffered self',⁴⁵ the disenchanted self of the Enlightenment:

This is the ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears, and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act 'rationally' . . . Reason is no longer defined in terms of a vision of order in the cosmos, but rather is defined procedurally, in terms of instrumental efficacy, or maximization of value sought, or self-consistency.⁴⁶

The buffered self enjoys a 'sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world', and is tied to 'images of power, of untrammelled agency, of spiritual self-possession'.⁴⁷ But what Jean-Pierre Dupuy starkly describes as 'the Cartesian ambition to make man like God, the master and possessor of nature' leads to losses as well as gains.⁴⁸ As Taylor observes, that very self-possession 'can also be lived as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects. The sense can easily arise that we are missing something'.⁴⁹ For Louis Dupré, the Cartesian turn led to a 'disconcerting emptiness of the foundational self', whose 'poverty contrasts with Augustine's conception of the soul, which to him was the richest of all concepts'.⁵⁰

Hence the elaboration of the Romantic expressivist self. As Jonathan Culler has suggested, the very self-sufficiency of the buffered self made possible its Romantic counter-self:

Lyric was finally made one of the three fundamental genres during the romantic period, when a more vigorous conception of the individual subject made it possible to conceive of lyric as mimetic: mimetic of the experience of the subject . . . The lyric poet absorbs into himself the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness, and the unity of the poem is provided by this subjectivity.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 131.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

⁴⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300, 563.

⁴⁸ Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, 55.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

⁵⁰ Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 118.

⁵¹ Jonathan Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', in Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (eds), *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 66.