

W. B. YEATS AND THE VEGETABLE PHOENIX

Neil Mann

M. du Chesne... affirme, that himselfe saw an Excellent Polish Physician of *Cracovia*, who kept, in Glasses, the Ashes of almost all the Hearbs that are knowne... he tooke That where the Ashes of a Rose were preserved; and holding it over a lighted Candle, so soone as ever it began to feele the Heat, you should presently see the Ashes begin to Move; which afterwards rising up, and dispersing themselves about the Glasse, you should immediately observe a kind of little Dark Cloud; which dividing it selfe into many parts, it came at length to represent a Rose; but so Faire, so Fresh, and so Perfect a one, that you would have thought it to have been as Substantial, & as Odoriferous a Rose, as any growes on the Rose-tree.

Jacques Gaffarel, *Unheard-of Curiosities* ¹

SHORTLY BEFORE he was asked to leave the Theosophical Society in October 1890, Yeats was involved in a series of experiments with fellow members of the Society's Esoteric Section in which they put some of its teachings to the test. Yeats's 'scheme for organization of occult research' was accepted and a 'Research Committee appointed' in January 1890 with Yeats as its Secretary and soon formally named the 'Recording Committee' (*Mem* 282). In his autobiographical writing Yeats selected a few of the Committee's experiments for attention, one of which in particular strikes most readers as outlandish and quixotic:

[4]

I was always longing for evidence, but ashamed to admit my longing, and having read in Sibly's *Astrology* that if you burned a flower to ashes, and then put the ashes under a bellglass in the moonlight, the phantom of the flower would rise before you I persuaded members of the Section who lived more alone than I and so could experiment undisturbed to burn many flowers without cease. (*Mem* 23–24; 1916)

In this draft version of the events, there is a slightly flippant element in the image of Theosophists incinerating numberless blooms in their lonely lodgings, but the essentials of the process appear relatively straightforward and totally ludicrous.

Perhaps surprisingly, the phenomenon of resuscitating 'the phantom of the flower' was once far from ludicrous or marginal and it merited its own entry in Diderot and d'Alembert's great *Encyclopédie*.² Accounts of the experiment were retailed many times through the seventeenth

¹ Gaffarel, *Curiositez inouyes sur la sculpture talismanique des persans* (Paris: du Mesnil, 1629), translated as *Unheard-of Curiosities* by Edmund Chilmead (London: Moseley, 1650), 136–37

² 'Palingénésie', *L'Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* vol. 11 (1765), 784–85. The text includes a full method and derives from Vallemont, *Curiositez de la nature et de l'art sur la vegetation* (1703), see note 30.

century and on into the eighteenth century, sometimes to investigate the properties of the natural world or to evoke wonder at the marvels of nature and sometimes as an anecdotal analogy to illustrate the resurrection, ghostly apparitions or the doctrine of signatures. Only a few accounts actually give instructions for performing the experiment and one of these is indeed Ebenezer Sibly's, but Denis Donoghue's laconic note that the method is 'more elaborate than Yeats's account suggests' (*Mem* 23n) is an understatement, since like all of the methods Sibly's is a complex series of processes taking months.

The situation is complicated further by changes in Yeats's account of the experiment, although the process he describes stays largely the same. Omitted from *Four Years* (1921),³ along with other Theosophical material, the experiments were reintroduced in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), but in the restored version Yeats does not read Sibly's work himself:

[5]

Some book or magazine published by the society had quoted from that essay of magic, which Sibley [*sic*], the eighteenth century astrologer, had bound up with his big book upon astrology. If you burnt a flower to ashes and put the ashes under, I think, the receiver of an air pump, and stood the receiver in the moonlight for so many nights, the ghost of the flower would appear hovering over its ashes. I got together a committee which performed this experiment without results.⁴

Yeats is no longer cajoling his more solitary colleagues into incessant flower-burning but almost forming the Committee for this very purpose, while the apparatus involved has become slightly more complex. When *The Trembling of the Veil* was collected together with *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* for Macmillan's 1926 publication of *Autobiographies* (*Wade* 151), Yeats further revised the account to erase Sibly entirely, writing that the 'book or magazine published by the society had quoted from an essay upon magic by some *seventeenth-century* writer' (224; italics added; cf. *Au* 181; *CW3* 158). It seems strange that Yeats should have moved from a named eighteenth-century practitioner and book to a shadowy seventeenth-century writer,⁵ but he was moving the source back to the century when the experiment was a staple of chymical writing and rehearsed as often by physicians as by Cabbalists and by priests as by Paracelsians.⁶

The first section of this essay will examine the possible sources that Yeats indicates, to try to establish a clearer idea of the experiment that he undertook with the Recording Committee.

³ 'Four Years', *The London Mercury* (Vol. 4 No. 20–22) and *The Dial* (Vol. 70 No.6–Vol. 71 No.2), both June to August 1921; *Four Years*, Dundrum: Cuala Press, December 1921 (*Wade* 131).

⁴ *The Trembling of the Veil*, (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1922 [*Wade* 133]) 67–68.

⁵ William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (*CW3* 452n) suggest Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* (London: Collins, 1681; cf. *YL* 750), but this does not have a reference, although his *Scepsis Scientifica* (London: Eversden, 1665) does.

⁶ The use of the archaic 'chymical' is borrowed from Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and his Alchemical Quest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), to refer to investigation that was neither chemistry nor alchemy in their modern senses (*viz.* p. 9).

Although the sources are various, the central aim of the demonstration is consistent and raises the question of what the experiment sought to prove and how it relates to Yeats's ideas, which forms the subject of the second section. The third section examines the metaphors and symbolism of alchemy arising from the experiment.

[6]

I

The process for resurrecting a plant from its ashes, usually referred to as palingenesis,⁷ is found amongst a miscellany of largely magical material in the fourth part of Ebenezer Sibly's *A New and Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology*.⁸ Sibly (1751–1799) seems out of place in the generally accepted image of the rational eighteenth century, but as a medical doctor was very much part of the scientific world of his day, as well as a collector occult works, copying alchemical manuscripts and popularising astrology. Sibly was a latter-day Paracelsian, at the tail end of that tradition where science and magic were all but indistinguishable, and he was also a forerunner to the occult revival of the nineteenth century.⁹

Sibly may present the experiment in reviving the apparition of a plant among accounts of planetary medicine and talismans, but such 'wonderful things... ought to be considered the surprising phenomenæ of nature' rather than magical. He also regards it as a form of 'chemical analysis, whereby a simple spirit is produced, which will represent the herb or flower from which it is extracted, in full bloom'.¹⁰ Rather than burning a flower the method involves pulverising the whole of a cleaned plant in a mortar and sealing it into [7] a glass vessel, which is then placed 'for putrefaction in a gentle heat in balneo, not more than blood warm, for six months, by which it will be all resolved into water'. Quicker methods involve using alcohol to speed the extraction of the plant essences either by placing yeast in the mixture or by distilling 'a proportionable quantity of

⁷ See Jacques Marx's, 'Alchimie et Palingénésie', *Isis* 62, 1971, 275–89, supplemented by Allen G. Debus, 'A Further Note on Palingenesis: The Account of Ebenezer Sibly in the *Illustration of Astrology* (1792)', *Isis* 64, 1973, 226–30. See also Debus, *The French Paracelsians: The Chemical Challenge to Medical and Scientific Tradition in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 159 ff, and Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vols. 7 and 8 (NY: Columbia University Press, 1958).

⁸ London: printed for Proprietor, 1790; it was also published as *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences*, but the volumes are identical and the running title of both editions is *An Illustration of Astrology* (viz. YL 1912, which lacks the title page).

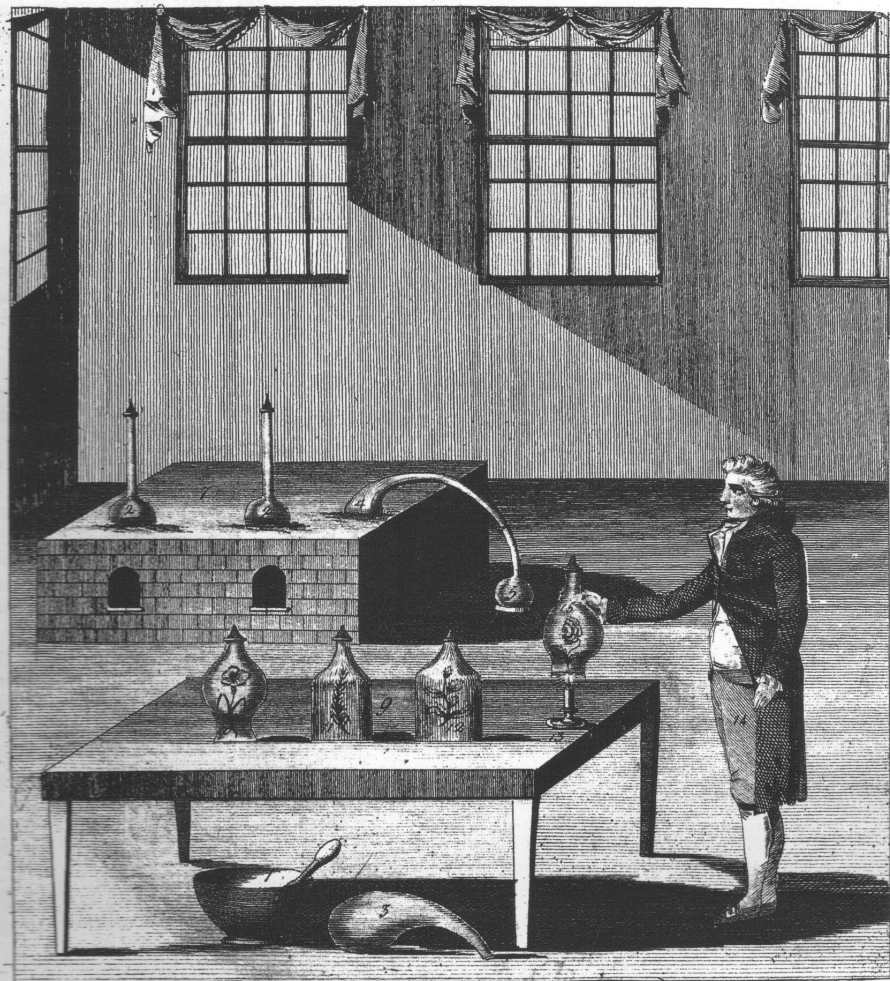
⁹ See Allen G. Debus, 'Scientific Truth and Occult Tradition: The Medical World of Ebenezer Sibly (1751–1799)', *Medical History* 26, 1982, 259–278 and Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 107–111.

¹⁰ *An Illustration of Astrology*, 1114. See Debus, 'Further Note', 228–30. A version (with some errors) is available online at *Twilit Grotto: Archives of Western Esoterica* <<http://www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/sibly4.htm#p1114>> [accessed October 2006].

sack [8] or low wine' over the chopped or pounded plant. But this is only the first stage. Next the operator is told:

Take this water, and pour it into a glass retort, and place a receiver thereunto, the joints of which must be well closed; distil it in a sand heat until there comes forth a water and an oil; and in the upper part of the vessel will hang a volatile salt. Separate the oil from the water, and keep it by itself, but with the water purify the volatile salt by dissolving, filtering, and coagulating. When the salt is thus purified, imbibe with it the said oil, until it is well combined. Then digest them well together for a month in a vessel hermetically sealed; and by this means will be obtained a most subtil essence, which being held over a gentle heat of a candle, the spirit will fly up into the glass where it is confined, and represent the perfect idea or similitude of that vegetable whereof it is the essence: and in this manner will that thin substance, which is like impalpable ashes or salt, send forth from the bottom of the glass the manifest form of whatever herb it is the *menstruum*, in perfect

vegetation, growing by little and little, and putting on so fully the form of stalks, leaves, and flowers in full and perfect appearance, that anyone would believe the same to be natural and corporeal; though at the same time it is nothing more than the spiritual idea endued with a spiritual essence. This shadowed figure as soon as the vessel is taken from the heat or candle, returns to its *caput mortuum*, or ashes again, and vanishes away like an apparition, becoming a chaos or confused matter.¹¹



A LABORATORY.

Showing how a Simple Spirit may be extracted, to represent
Flowers & Herbs, in Full Bloom.

To clarify the description, Sibly includes a 'plate of the elaboratory, where a person is in the act of producing these flowery apparitions' with the equipment and items all numbered, and this picture seems to have stayed in Yeats's memory.

¹¹ *An Illustration of Astrology*, 1114–15.

Each of the preliminary methods outlined involves some form of rotting, fermentation or the use of alcohol to extract the plant's essence, and none mentions burning of the plant or moonlight. The engraving, however, could well have created a false memory, with the flower that appears above the candle-flame conjuring the burning of flowers, the shaft of soft light that rakes across the picture interpreted as moonlight and the 'glass vessel' held by Sibly's 'chemist' remembered first as a 'bellglass' and then as 'the receiver of an air pump'. Yeats was undoubtedly aware of this account and when, in 1916, he first cast back in his mind to recall events some twenty-five years earlier he lighted on this plausible source.

[9] It appears that further reflection made Yeats realise that some 'book or magazine published by the society' was his immediate source, but the version given in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) appears to be an amalgam of the plausible memory of Sibly with the version that he later decided was the more accurate one of a seventeenth-century writer (*Autobiographies*, 1926).¹² It is not, however, straightforward to work out who this writer was. Of more than thirty seventeenth-century accounts of palingenesis, few contain a clear method and none of these corresponds to Yeats's memory. At least two Theosophical books that were current contain more than passing references to the phenomenon: Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and Franz Hartmann's *The Life of...Paracelsus* (1887).¹³ Blavatsky with the serendipity of effective plagiarism manages to name six of the major figures very succinctly at the same time as muddling different accounts; Hartmann explains the experiment in a Theosophical interpretation of Paracelsus, but the accompanying footnote gives eleven names most of whom are irrelevant.¹⁴ Neither, however, offers any method and the references are just names. Far more helpful to someone wondering in January 1890 what the newly-formed Committee would 'find to do with itself' (*Mem* 282) was a series of articles published in 1889 in a Theosophical magazine, albeit in German.

The Leipzig journal *Sphinx*, a 'monthly magazine for the historical and experimental establishment of a transcendental world-view' was closely associated with the Theosophical Society in Germany. A regular contributor was the renowned theorist and researcher of psychic matters and spirituality Carl du Prel, and his article '*Der Pflanzenphönix*' ('The Plant Phoenix') appeared in

¹² Another factor may have been buying Sibly's book, since it came into the Yeatses' library after the catalogue of the early 1920s (*YL* 1912).

¹³ *Isis Unveiled*, 2 vols. (NY: Bouton; London: Quaritch, 1877) 1: 476; *The Life of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, better known by the name of Paracelsus, and the substance of his teachings* (1887; 2nd ed. rev., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896 [*YL* 854]) 294–95.

¹⁴ Blavatsky's account is taken from Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature: or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* 2 vols. (London: Newby, 1848) 189–90; Hartmann's list of names is clumsily culled from Carl von Eckartshausen's *Aufschlüsse zur Magie* 4 vols. (Munich: Lentner, 1790), 2, 388ff.

April 1889.¹⁵ [10] This in turn inspired an article the following October by Carl Kiesewetter, ‘*Die Palingenesie in ihrer Geschichte und Praxis geschildert*’ (‘Palingenesis Outlined in its History and Practice’), and Hermann Grote wrote an evaluation of the two in ‘*Die alchymistische Palingenesie. Eine moderne Nachschrift*’ (‘Alchemical Palingenesis: a Modern Postscript’), to which Kiesewetter appended a rejoinder.¹⁶ Ties between Britain and Germany were close in occult circles, so that access to the articles and help with the language is unlikely to have caused any problem within the Committee as a group, and certainly not the Theosophical Society more generally, but it does mean that any knowledge Yeats would have had was at second hand and that the level of detail available to him is uncertain.

Du Prel (1839–99) remains best known for his work on the philosophical implications of dream and sleep-states, *Die Philosophie der Mystik* (1884; translated into English in 1889).¹⁷ Kiesewetter (1854–95) wrote about the history of occultism and alchemy; he had not published any books in 1889 but had been prolific in his contributions to *Sphinx* and in the magazine’s first issue had written about the Rosicrucians, claiming to have inherited papers from his great-grandfather, the last Emperor of the Brethren (a claim that he repeats in this essay on palingenesis), such that A. E. Waite termed him Rosicrucianism’s *fabulator magnus*.¹⁸ Dr Grote is a more obscure figure, referred to as ‘a modern chemist’, and his only other contribution to *Sphinx* is a critical assessment of an article on homunculi, also by Kiesewetter.

The essays take the different approaches to the phenomenon that [11] might be expected of their authors. Du Prel’s article, the third and last in a series on *Pflanzenmystik* (plant mysticism), follows accounts of magnetising plants and forced growth, where fakirs force a plant to go through the cycle from germination to flowering and fruiting within hours or days; he relates palingenesis to contemporary magnetic research, ghost-seeing and odic force, and views the plants’ magnetic or vital ‘organising principle’ as surviving the destruction of the physical form. Kiesewetter takes a more historical and descriptive approach, looking at various different contexts and processes, and well over half of the article is direct quotation. Grote’s article is an appraisal in terms of

¹⁵ *Sphinx*, (Leipzig), 7. 40 (April 1889), 193–202 (hereafter cited as *Sph40*). Du Prel’s article was collected in *Studien aus dem Gebiete der Geheimwissenschaften* Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Friedrich, 1890) 76–91; reissued as *Studien zu den Geheimwissenschaften* (Leipzig: Bohmeier, 2006) 60–70.

¹⁶ *Sphinx*, 8. 46 (October 1889), 207–216 and 217–224 (hereafter cited as *Sph46*). Kiesewetter’s article was published posthumously in a French version in *L’Initiation* (Paris) 31. 7 April 1896, 41–64 (as ‘Kusewetter’).

¹⁷ *The Philosophy of Mysticism*, translated C. C. Massey, 2 vols. (London: Redway, 1889). A copy assigned to ‘G[eorge] Y[eats]’ is listed in ‘The 1920s Catalogue of W. B. Yeats’s Library’ (O’Shea, *YA4* 287) and a copy with W. B. Yeats’s bookplates, possibly the same one, is listed as *YL* 593.

¹⁸ ‘*Die Rosenkreuzer, ein Blick in dunkle Vergangenheit*’, *Sphinx* 1.1 (January 1886) 42–54. Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (London; Rider, 1924), 347 and 415.

contemporary scientific thinking, looking at explanations through contamination, micro-organisms and various levels of (self)deception.

Grote's attitude is relatively straightforward, probably right, and of less interest here, but the difference between du Prel and Kiesewetter is instructive, because their approaches highlight some of Yeats's own dichotomy. Du Prel is the occult scientist, seeking to turn the methodology of science onto the matters of the soul and spirit, and to discover the hidden forces of nature that go beyond the purely physical, whereas Kiesewetter is a would-be Rosicrucian and romantic in love with esoteric tradition and symbolism. Du Prel tries to analyse his subject and seems more concerned with the possible mediumistic and visionary powers of the operators than simply with the phenomena of the plants; Kiesewetter shows a love of wonder, a will to believe and possibly the faith that by sheer accumulation of accounts and details he will carry the argument. Du Prel is the nineteenth-century psychic investigator and Kiesewetter the creator of romance, the Baroque mage *manqué*. Part of Yeats would have responded very readily to the semi-scientific approach of du Prel, seeking out the odic force of the plant, and another part would have felt kinship with the more magical and wondering attitude of Kiesewetter.

Kiesewetter shows some impatience with du Prel's theorising, but both unite against Grote's materialist science. In his rejoinder to Grote, Kiesewetter writes: 'Du Prel has clearly mixed pure alchemical palingenesis with mediumistic forced plant growth; how much greater would his triumph be if the physical alchemical process con-[12] firmed his theory. Therefore: *Fiat Experimentum!*' (*Sph*46 222). To someone looking for an appropriate experiment early in 1890, such a challenge might seem opportune and the order of the articles' publication would be immaterial. Kiesewetter's would be the most immediately useful since it contains references to more than a dozen different accounts, and quotes some seven methods in full, of varying specificity and practicality, but du Prel's article would have given a rationale and theoretical consideration of the forces involved, justifying what might otherwise seem a wild-goose chase.

Kiesewetter seeks to distinguish between the various types of palingenesis in order to focus on what he calls 'shadow-palingenesis' (*Schattenpalingenesie*), which concerns itself with producing what Sibly calls the 'shadowed figure', making visible the plant's 'astral body', rather than revivifying its physical body. Having traced this form of palingenesis back to Paracelsus (1493–1541), Kiesewetter then gives a list of some eleven writers who examine the phenomenon, all more or less Paracelsian in their approach and all but one seventeenth-century writers. The references would have been easy to follow up, but since Kiesewetter proceeds to cite seven accounts in full, there would have been little incentive to look further. Of the seven, five are from

the seventeenth century, but two of these are actually the same one, so there are four appropriate methods of which three show elements that seem consonant with Yeats's account. None is a clear match and in the end deciding which is the most likely depends on which criteria are judged to be crucial and how much Yeats's memory might have been affected by Sibly's or other accounts.

The first process Kieseewetter outlines is that of William Maxwell (fl. 1670s), one of the earliest proponents of a magnetic vital spirit working by rays. Kieseewetter criticises him for writing 'unfortunately like his teacher [Robert] Fludd very unclearly and enigmatically' (*Sph46* 209) and the method is not full enough to be readily usable. It involves taking 'a fair quantity' of rose petals or leaves, drying these and then reducing them to a white ash. So far this would correspond adequately with Yeats's memory, but the next stage involves extracting the salts from the ashes with water and then fermenting the liquid for three months at a gentle heat.¹⁹ After this [13] 'Putrefaction', the vessel is placed over a fire 'until the form [of the plant] begins to appear in the glass' (*Sph46* 210). Although the details are vague, Maxwell clearly uses the opposite combination of the alchemists' 'wet' and 'dry' ways to Sibly. He uses the 'dry way', involving high temperatures, powders and crucibles, at the beginning and then the 'wet' way of gentle temperatures, liquids and flasks in the second part, whereas Sibly extracts material by a preliminary fermentation 'in balneo', and then uses greater heat to distil and separate the distillates and dry residues.

The next two accounts that Kieseewetter gives are in fact one method and derive from the same original source, which is the only one to mention the influence of moonlight, though not in Yeats's way. In this method the plant matter itself is kept 'wet' throughout, starting like Sibly but then continuing like Maxwell, even if there are 'dry' subsidiary operations that involve distilling dew and calcining the residue. The ultimate source is Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), who in turn credits the Emperor Ferdinand III for passing it on to him, and du Prel's article mentions the story briefly (*Sph40* 196).²⁰ Kieseewetter deliberately avoids repeating the same sources as du Prel, and the first version that he quotes is a slightly abbreviated and slightly paraphrased form of Kircher's instructions by David von der Becke (1648–1684).²¹ The second account is simply a German translation of Kircher's process and appears to come from the compendium by Georg Franck von

¹⁹ *De Medicina Magnetica libri III*, ed. Georg Franck (Frankfurt: Zubrodt, 1679) Bk. II Ch 5. Here, as with other Latin texts, my translation is of Kieseewetter's German version, rather than the original.

²⁰ *Mundus Subterraneus, in XII. libros digestus*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Jansson van Waesberg, 1665) 2: 413–418.

²¹ *Experimenta et Meditationes. Circa Naturalium Rerum Principia* (1674; Hamburg: Grooten, 1683).

Franckenau (1643–1704).²² Franck, a friend of Maxwell and Fludd and the editor of Maxwell's *De Medicina Magnetica*, compiled the most comprehensive survey of the literature about palingenesis to date in 1680,²³ and after Franck's death [14] Johann Christian Nehring published the survey separately in German as *Palingenesia Francica* (1716) and in the original Latin, vastly expanded with commentary and prefatory material, as *De Palingenesia* (1717).²⁴ Kiesewetter does not draw any attention to the similarity of the two accounts he gives and they are just different enough in their phrasing for the repetition not to be too obvious. Strangely, du Prel also included two different versions of a single story in his article: Joseph du Chesne (1544–1609) wrote the first description of palingenesis after Paracelsus, performed by an unnamed doctor in Cracow who kept the ashes of plants in phials, and du Prel recounts this story once referring to du Chesne and once referring to Quercetanus, the Latinised form of the same name.²⁵

The process described by Kircher and von der Becke only uses the plant's seed, which is crushed, moistened with dew (both fresh and processed), and then fermented in a closed flask. After some days it begins to look slimy, with stripes on the surface like a multicoloured film, and at this stage von der Becke states that:

the sealed glass is exposed to the rays of the sun and the moon, and kept in a warm chamber in rainy weather, until all the signs have been completed. Then, when the vessel is moved to heat, the image appears representing the plant, according to the seed used, which vanishes again when it cools. Any expert should be able to apply this method of representing the *Idea seminalis* with few changes. (*Sph*46 210)²⁶

The reference to moonlight is certainly interesting, and the second account makes it clear that sunshine and moonshine are vital influences, since the speed of the process depends on how often the flask has been put away during bad weather, coming 'to completion sometimes in two months, and sometimes in two years'. Kircher's version [15] is also fuller in the details concerning the signs that the experiment is progressing well and the critical change when the slimy and spirituous material at the bottom becomes 'a white ash, from which in time rise stalk, leaf and flower in colour

²² Kiesewetter gives the source as: 'Abhandlung über die künstliche Wiederauflebung der Tiere, Pflanzen und Menschen aus ihrer Asche. Frankfurt und Leipzig 1785, 12^o'. The closest to this title is the rare *Künstliche Auferweckung der Pflanzen, Menschen, Thiere aus ihrer Asche* (Frankfurt und Leipzig, 1785) 8^o, apparently a reprint of *Palingenesia Francica: oder... Tractätlein von der künstlichen Auferweckung derer Pflantzen, Menschen und Thiere aus ihrer Asche* (Leipzig: Martini, 1716).

²³ It appears as an appendix to the second edition of his botanical lexicon, *Flora Francica, h.e. Lexicon Plantarum Hactenus Usualivm* (Strasbourg: Staedelius, 1685) and subsequent editions.

²⁴ *De Palingenesia, sive resuscitatione artificiali plantarum, hominum et animalium e suis cineribus, liber singularis* (Halle: du Serre, 1717).

²⁵ The French version derives from Jacques Gaffarel's *Curiositez Inouyes* (see note 1), while the Latin one comes, probably indirectly, from du Chesne's own account, *Ad Veritatem Hermeticæ Medicinæ* (Paris: Saugrin, 1604).

²⁶ See *Experimenta et Meditationes*, 320.

and form; with the withdrawal of the heat they disappear and sink back into their earth' (*Sph46* 211–12).²⁷ Although there are similarities to Sibly's method in the putrefaction of the plant, the fact that the matter remains contained within the flask marks the experiment as significantly different and fully 'wet', and the chymist's 'art' consists largely of applying gentle heat or light at different stages.

The final possible candidate for Yeats and the Recording Committee's procedure is a method given in Johann Joachim Becher's *Chymischer Glückshafen*, a compendium of what we would now label as chemistry, mineralogy, metallurgy, alchemy and folk-medicine, mainly in Latin.²⁸ Towards the end of the book are two methods for 'Regeneratio Plantarum' and Kiesewetter translates both, noting that Becher (1635–1682) was 'a very renowned chemist in his time' (*Sph46* 212).

Take any plant and take each part at the appropriate time, the root in November, after the seed has fallen; the flower in full bloom; the leaf or herb before it blossoms. Take a good quantity of each and dry it in a shady place, where neither sun nor other heat reaches it. Then calcine it in an earthenware vessel, with any joints well sealed, and extract the salt with hot water. Then take some juice of the root, herb and flower of the plant in question, put it into an earthenware vessel and dissolve the salt in it. Now take some virgin soil, i.e. earth that has never been ploughed or sown, as found on mountains. This must be of a red colour, clean and without adulteration; pulverise and sieve it. Put this into a vitreous or earthenware vessel and moisten it with the juice, until it has fully absorbed it and begins to look green. Then place on this vessel another tall enough that the plant at its natural size would have sufficient room. The joins must be well sealed, so that no draught reaches the image of the plant. The vessel that forms the lower part should, however, have an opening in the bottom, so that the air can penetrate. Then place it in the sun or in a gentle warmth and after less than an hour the natural image of the plant will appear in pearly colours. (*Sph46* 212)

[16] Kiesewetter notes that Becher's method is the more complete original for the only process given by du Prel, which came from the writings of the Boehmist priest Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782). Du Prel paraphrases Oetinger's version and omits the crucial step of mixing the plant-juice with the salt, but he is perhaps slightly clearer on certain details, one of which is particularly relevant to Yeats's experiment: Oetinger spells out that the upper vessel of the experiment must be of glass ('*bedecke es mit einem Glas*'),²⁹ and du Prel's paraphrase goes even further to call it a 'bell-glass' ('*Bedecke den Topf mit einer Glasglocke*') (*Sph40* 198).

This method of Becher and Oetinger's is dry in the first part and relatively dry in the second, since it uses no flasks or fermentation. Becher's second method is the predecessor of Sibly's, wet and then dry, but ironically it has no particular elements that match Yeats's description, macerating

²⁷ See *Mundus Subterraneus*, Vol. 2, 415.

²⁸ *Chymischer Glückshafen oder Grosse Chymische Concondanz und Collection von funffzehen hundert Chymischen Processen* (Frankfurt: Schiele, 1682) 784–85.

²⁹ *Des württembergischen Prälaten, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. C. E. Ehmann (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1858–63) Part 2, Vol. 5, 'Gedanken über die Zeugung und Geburten der Dinge...' 462.

the vegetable matter and putrefying it, then distilling it into spirit, phlegma, sulphur and salt before recombining them. The final two methods that Kiesewetter includes are different again because they are older and involve preparing a special ‘Spiritus Universalis’ to effect the palingenesis, and Kiesewetter claims that they come from ‘my great-grandfather’s Rosicrucian manuscripts’, one traced back to Albertus Magnus (1206–1280) and the other taken from a manuscript *Testamentum Fratrum Rosae et Aureae Crucis* (*Sph*46 215–16). When mixed with a person’s blood this ‘Spiritus’ also creates a ‘lamp of life’: the blood is placed with the ‘spirit’ in a phial, and it then glows with a light, which will dim if the person falls ill, become hot if he is angry, become agitated if he is agitated, and so on.

This article, and especially these two final accounts, could quite fairly be called ‘an essay upon magic’ (*Au* 181; *CW*3 158), less because of its contents, and these are magical enough in many aspects, than because of its approach. Kiesewetter wants the phenomenon to be true and writes as if it is true. He draws no conclusions about the forces involved or the rationale for the experiment, and does not even try to compare common strands or elements within the [17] different procedures. The accounts are simply given as they are and it is left to the readers to draw whatever conclusions they wish. Without apparently being analytical, however, Kiesewetter does select representatives of the range of methods to be found in the literature: Kircher-von der Becke’s largely wet way, Becher-Sibly’s wet start and drier finish, Maxwell’s dry start and wet finish, and Becher-Oetinger’s dry start and dryish finish. Even a deeper reading of the fuller surveys contained in *De Palingenesia* or the Abbé de Vallemont’s chapter on ‘The Vegetable Phoenix’ would not have yielded any significantly different or more practical method.³⁰

Yeats’s account contains three basic elements: burning flowers to ashes, a bellglass or air-pump receiver, and moonlight. With none of these, the Becher-Sibly method can be excluded and, to continue by elimination, since the burnt flowers imply a dry start, the Kircher-von der Becke method can also be discounted – the feature of moonlight could be introduced into the other processes easily enough. In writing about putting ‘the ashes under a bellglass’ or ‘under, I think, the receiver of an air pump’, Yeats does not say what the ashes are contained in, but the use of the word ‘under’ makes it unlikely that he envisaged the ashes sealed in a flask, as in Maxwell’s method. In contrast Oetinger’s account specifically mentions a glass or bellglass and mixing the ashes with ‘virgin soil’ is not excluded. Yeats makes no mention of exciting the ashes with anything more than moonlight and, though all the methods involve some heating, only the Becher-Oetinger procedure

³⁰ Pierre le Lorrain, Abbé de Vallemont, *Curiositez de la nature et de l’art sur la vegetation: ou l’agriculture et le jardinage dans leur perfection*, (1703; Paris: Cellier, 1705) 654–708.

does not involve a direct heat source, relying simply on sunlight or warmth. Though this process of deduction is far from conclusive, the Becher-Oetinger method seems to have most to recommend it and, as it is the only method given by du Prel, it might have had greater credibility for the prospective experimenter. Since Yeats implies no very long process, however, time remains a problem, since the Becher-Oetinger method requires collection of plant material in spring, summer and autumn. Yeats mentions no source for his flowers, so possibly the florist's shop provided some material out of season, [18] even if this seems to go against the spirit of the experiment somewhat. Once the plant matter is gathered, this process is certainly the quickest. The drying of the plants could well have been delegated to 'members of the Section who lived more alone than I and so could experiment undisturbed', while the need 'to burn many flowers without cease' is supported to some degree by the need for relatively large quantities of original matter in order to extract sufficient 'salt' from the ashes, though both Becher and Oetinger mention a single combustion.

It is entirely possible that the Committee took a more creative approach to the experiment than Kiesewetter and actually combined useful or appropriate techniques from other methods, such as the action of sunlight and moonlight. The passage of time, the fading of memory and the strengthening of certain sympathies, such as the symbolic importance of the moon, might affect the idea; the whole plant could easily be reduced to flowers, and the use of a bell glass could well become blurred in application. Other writers' accounts would also impose themselves, not only Sibly's picture sticking in Yeats's memory but also the picturesque descriptions of the plant's resurrection that are cavalier with details and preliminaries. We know, for instance, that Yeats read *Religio Medici*, and Sir Thomas Browne writes of a 'plant or vegetable consumed to ashes', continuing that: 'to a sensible Artist the formes are not perished, but withdrawne into their incombustible part, where they lie secure from the action of that devouring element. This is made good by experience, which can from the ashes of a plant revivifie the plant, and from its cinders recall it into its stalk and leaves againe'.³¹ All details and supposed techniques are stripped away and the essence of the story is left to create another layer on Yeats's memory. Even the cautious Meric Casaubon is clearly enchanted by '*the spiritual rose*: that is, a rose... by art, reduced into ashes, wherein the substance of the rose shall be so preserved, that with a convenient heat applied, a *spiritual rose* shall arise, and appear in the glass, like in all [19] things to what it was before'.³² The

³¹ Browne, *Religio Medici*, Part 1, Section 46 [bis i.e. 47; modern editions section 48] (London: Crooke, 1645), 103–04. Yeats's library has three editions containing *Religio Medici* (YL 289–291) one of which he received in 1905 and wrote about looking forward to reading properly (CL4 110).

³² *A Treatise Proving Spirits, Witches, and Supernatural Operations* (London: Aylmer, 1672), 18.

details of a failure may not be rehearsed too often afterwards and Yeats may have substituted the elisions of the writers in place of the reality.

II

Although the details of the Recording Committee's experiment may remain in doubt, the reason for undertaking it in the first place is less problematic. Seventeenth-century writers may have used the phenomenon to illustrate the resurrection or to assert the doctrine of signatures, but the experimenters themselves were examining the constitution of living matter and the supposed relationship of the plant to its image or shadow. Carl du Prel follows very much in this tradition and is quite clear that the importance of the 'vegetable phoenix' lies in showing the 'organisational germ' (*Sph40* 193) or 'organising principle' (*Sph40* 199), which he also refers to as the 'plant soul' (*Sph40* 195) and 'astral body' (*Sph40* 201), and he is at pains to show that 'for the modern scientist there is no objection in principle to the possibility of the plant-phoenix, which is far less wonderful than the fact that vitality survives in frozen infusoria [protozoa] and fakirs buried alive' (*Sph40* 196). More generally, du Prel's concern is with the powers of the human mind, its 'magnetising' capacity and the hidden abilities of sensitive people, and he relates palingenesis to fakirs' powers, to hypnotism, and to the seeing of spectral lights in graveyards. The conclusion of his essay brings the strands of old and modern, plant and animal together in a vitalist mysticism centred on the odic light phenomena of Baron von Reichenbach: 'We do not know whether or how long an organism's inherent formative power still remains connected to the body after death, and it may, if odic effluvia are linked with putrefaction, actually be attached to these, so that such light phenomena over graves may even be formed just as the ghost of the plant is represented by the vegetable phoenix' (*Sph40* 202). Odic phenomena had fascinated the younger Yeats and Charles Johnston in 1884 when they [20] had first started 'reading Reichenbach on Odic Force and manuals published by the Theosophical Society. We spent a good deal of time in the Kildare Street Museum passing our hands over the glass cases, feeling or believing we felt the Odic Force flowing from the big crystals' (*Au* 90; *CW3* 97). Quite possibly such manuals were the first Theosophical writing that Yeats read, before even *Esoteric Buddhism*, which he read later that year (*Life* 1 45). Certainly one of the things that drew Yeats to Theosophy was the science of its mysticism, and it was something that continued to interest him. The Recording Committee's experiments that he mentions to Kathleen Tynan involved clairvoyance, mesmerism and telekinesis along with 'some experiments too of still stranger nature' (*CLI* 212), and although palingenesis may be a more

elaborate and, at least in conception, more spectacular experiment than moving a suspended needle with the power of the mind, the theme of vital magnetism connects both.

Palingenesis is also a way of investigating the supposed properties of the astral body and the astral plane. The astral was originally conceived as a level of being intermediate between the physical and the spiritual. The term of the ‘astral’ or ‘sidereal’ body can be traced back Paracelsus (1493–1541), a reformer and revolutionary in the fields of chymistry, medicine and the theory of matter as well as theosophy.³³ Paracelsus coined many terms, most of which remained of limited currency, but a few became widespread among them the ‘astral’ or ‘sidereal’ world in which the planetary influences operated.³⁴ This was part of a more general three-fold order, applied to humanity and the world and related to the renewed Hermetic and Neo-Platonic traditions of the fifteenth century, so that the physical body, the astral body and spiritual body mirrored the worlds of the elements, the planets and the empyrean. Paracelsus also made the constituents of matter threefold, adding the principle of Salt to the binary system of Arabian-influenced alchemy, where Sulphur and Mercury are the origins of all metals (this alchemical strand will be examined more fully in the following section). The ‘astral’, the middle term between [21] the physical and the spiritual, was often assigned to the ‘soul’ in the human and more broadly to ‘the Soul of the World’, for instance with Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists. The term gained a new lease of life in the nineteenth-century with Éliphas Lévi and then the Theosophists.

For Paracelsus, as digested for the Theosophists by Franz Hartmann, ‘Matter is, so to say, coagulated smoke, and is connected with spirit by an intermediate principle which it receives from the Spirit. This intermediate link between matter and spirit belongs to all three kingdoms of Nature’, mineral, vegetable and animal. Paracelsus gives separate names to each kingdom’s astral principle, but ‘in human beings it is called the Sidereal Man’. Hartmann’s Paracelsus, like du Prel, sees the intermediate principle as the organising pattern of the physical, and ‘This invisible ethereal body may be resurrected and made visible from the ashes of plants and animals by alchemical manipulations. The form of the original body may thus be made to appear and disappear’.³⁵ By analogy therefore an experiment on the ethereal body of a plant is an investigation into the whole of the natural world and its relationship to the supranatural astral. Hartmann refers the reader to an appended extract from Paracelsus’ ‘De Resuscitationibus’ (*De Rerum Natura*), which, in the

³³ See Warwick Gould, “Paracelsus in Excelsis” (*YAI* 176–84) for Yeats’s use of Paracelsus’s theological and theosophical writings.

³⁴ On Paracelsus’s coinages, see Philip Ball, *The Devil’s Doctor: Paracelsus and the World of Renaissance Magic and Science* (London: Heinemann, 2006), 264–65.

³⁵ All quotations Hartmann, *Paracelsus*, 45–46.

original context, describes an operation to revivify wood; however Hartmann selects a single passage and provides a slanted translation:

Palingenesis. — ‘If a thing loses its material substance, the invisible form still remains in the light of Nature (the *astral light*); and if we can re-clothe that form with visible matter, we may make that form visible again. All matter is composed of three elements—*sulphur, mercury, and salt*. By alchemical means we may create a magnetic attraction in the astral form, so that it may attract from the elements (the A’kasa) those principles which it possessed before its mortification, and incorporate them and become visible again.’³⁶

[22] Vegetable palingenesis shows the organising matrix of the plant’s astral form, which informs the physical being, structures the organism as it grows, and then survives its destruction for a while, as a footnote clarifies: ‘The astral body of an individual form remains with the remnants of the latter until these remnants have been fully decomposed’.³⁷ The term ‘magnetic attraction’ also shows how readily the terms of mesmerism and vital magnetism were drawn into Paracelsian and Theosophical discourse, and *Isis Unveiled* speaks of how ‘Reichenbach will perhaps one day be found to have paved the way with his OD for the just appreciation of Paracelsus’.³⁸

One of the central themes of the first volume of *Isis Unveiled*, ‘Science’, is indeed vital magnetism, and Blavatsky states that ‘We believe WILL-POWER the most powerful of magnets’ and tells how ‘the Hermetic philosopher... knows how the vital force can be made active or passive at will’, adducing the palingenesis of plants as her proof and referring to du Chesne, Kircher and Oetinger among others: ‘And, if the astral form of even a plant when its body is dead still lingers in the ashes, will skeptics persist in saying that the soul of *man*, the *inner ego*, is after the death of the grosser form at once dissolved, and is no more?’³⁹

For the Theosophists, however, the astral was no longer the middle term of three, since the human being comprised seven principles to which the Esoteric Section devoted its study along with the rest of the septenary cosmos. Yeats writes of how they studied ‘tables of oriental symbolism. Every organ of the body had its correspondence in the heavens, and the seven principles which made the human soul and body corresponded to the seven colours and the planets and the notes of

³⁶ Hartmann, *Paracelsus*, 205. ‘Truly in the light of Nature this is a great mystery, that a thing which had altogether lost its form, and had been reduced to nothingness, recovers that form and becomes something from nothing—something which afterwards is much nobler in its virtue and its efficacy than it had been at first’, A. E. Waite, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great*, (London: Elliott, 1894 [YL 1533]), 150.

³⁷ Hartmann, *Paracelsus*, 205.

³⁸ *Isis Unveiled*, I.163.

³⁹ *Isis Unveiled*, I.472; 475; 476.

the musical scale. We lived in perpetual discussion' (*Mem* 23).⁴⁰ Even highly placed members of the Theosophical Society [23] questioned the reality of seven separate principles, most notably T. Subba Row who preferred the traditional Indian fourfold division of Raja Yoga.⁴¹ Yeats might have found the elaborate tables of correspondences even more tiresome if he suspected that they were founded on a misconception and the experiments that he outlines focus on investigating the principles. In an experiment with indigo 'extracted from the plant in some particular way' (*Mem* 23), which the teachings said was associated with the plane of Manas (higher Mind or Human Soul), Yeats aimed to discover whether the association was more than arbitrary and what visions would be associated with this plane. It also had a practical aim: if it did evoke a visionary landscape, then Yeats could use visualisation techniques in order to 'escape from the astral when I thought of them' (*Mem* 23). Rather than escaping the astral, the experiment with the phantom plant sought to explore aspects of its nature.

Disdainful of the astral in the human, Theosophy was distrustful of the astral plane, and in particular of the force called the 'astral light'. Although the term was traced back to Paracelsus, the nineteenth-century concept was largely the creation of the French magician Eliphas Lévi who brought together the astral soul, *anima mundi*, ether and vital magnetism, to create the concept of the Astral Light as the 'Great Magnetic Agent' and 'in a certain sense, the Imagination of Nature'.⁴² Blavatsky quotes passages of Lévi in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), taking his symbol of the serpent or dragon for the astral light as a warning of negative fascination, but A. E. Waite's digest of 1886 made the ideas available in English. The 'Astral Light' is the force through which all magic is accomplished as well as the source of poetic creativity: 'What we call the imagination in [24] man is the inherent faculty of the soul to assimilate to itself the images and reflections contained in the living light, or Great Magic Agent'.⁴³ For Yeats as an artist the astral was the vital realm of emotion, the 'moods' (*E&I* 195) and the 'many-coloured serpent, theme of all our poetry' (*E&I* 288). As he moved from the speculative occultism of the Theosophists, it is not perhaps surprising

⁴⁰ For the teachings and tables, see *The Secret Doctrine* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1897), III.433–594 and *H. P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings*, ed. de Zirkoff, 15 vols (Wheaton IL, Madras, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1950–95) XII, 479–713. To oversimplify these sources, the seven principles taught to the Esoteric Section were: etheric or astral double (Linga Sharîra), life force (Prâna), astral or desire body (Kâma Rûpa), mind (Lower Manas), mind-soul (Manas), spiritual soul (Buddhi) and the Auric Egg or Magnetic Sphere.

⁴¹ See 'Notes on the Bhagavad Gita', *The Theosophist* 8 (February 1887), 299–311 and see Blavatsky's comment to the Esoteric Section, *Collected Writings* XII, 605.

⁴² A. E. Waite, *The Mysteries of Magic: A Digest of the Writings of Éliphas Lévi* (1886; 2nd ed. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1897) 71, 72. Evidently Yeats asked Waite about the subject in 1914, since Waite wrote that 'the theory of the Astral Light as a receptacle of forms, and having therefore "pictures" therein, was first originated by Éliphas Lévi, after the year 1860' (*LTWBY* 1 280).

⁴³ *The Mysteries of Magic*, 67

that he was investigating the astral plane around the time that he entered the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in March 1890 or that he took one of the phrases associated with astral light, *Demon est Deus Inversus*, as his motto there.⁴⁴

Certainly Yeats treated the astral light as a real, potential source of occult knowledge; writing as D.E.D.I. in *The Irish Theosophist* in 1890, he tells that he is accustomed to meeting with a fellow ‘Occultist and student of Alchemy’, in order to ‘summon invisible powers and gaze into the astral light; for we had learned to see with the internal eyes’ (*UPI* 245). The astral remained an important source of knowledge when Yeats sought to establish the Celtic Mysteries in the 1890s, though he always had to rely upon more sensitive people such as Dorothea Hunter, so that the vision remained part of another’s subjective experience.⁴⁵ Yeats, however, ‘was always longing for evidence’ (*Mem* 23), so that he continued to visit séances, despite the dismissal of mediums by both Theosophy and the Golden Dawn. Séances might provide a more scientifically verifiable form of confirmation, but were always fraught with possibilities of fraud, so that the hope of creating the spectre of a rose offered an even greater level of objectivity.

III

If Yeats’s experiment with the flower is apparently his only flirtation with any practical alchemy, alchemy’s symbolism and concepts were [25] familiar to him from a variety of sources and influence his writing, although he seldom requires any familiarity with alchemy’s particular emblematic storehouse from the reader. William T. Gorski’s *Yeats and Alchemy* shows the range of allusion to the subject and the ambiguities of attitude which Yeats expresses in his writing, in particular with reference to his remaking of himself, but does not give enough credit to the breadth of Yeats’s reading and incidental knowledge of the subject.⁴⁶ His youthful reading of Balzac no doubt introduced him to the subject in a relatively serious light and Theosophy uses some of the symbolism as well, but these insights were to develop far further in the Golden Dawn. W. A. Ayton was a practised alchemist and MacGregor Mathers and Westcott were both fascinated by the subject, indeed half of the volumes in Westcott’s series of *Collectanea Hermetica* are alchemical. The Rosicrucian symbolism that underlay much of the Inner Order drew very heavily on alchemy and, though Yeats may have viewed physical alchemy with scepticism, he was alert the beauties of

⁴⁴ ‘This Light is symbolized by... the double Face on the double Pyramid.... This is the “Astral Light,” or DEMON EST DEUS INVERSUS’ (*The Secret Doctrine* [London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1888] I, 423–24).

⁴⁵ See Hunter’s lecture ‘Clairvoyance’ and Gould’s introduction, *YAI4*, 265–83.

⁴⁶ William T. Gorski, *Yeats and Alchemy* (Albany: SUNY, 1996).

its archetypal imagery and readily recognised such symbols as ‘salt and antimony... the liquefaction of gold, as they were understood by the alchemists’ (*Myth* 345; *CW5* 18) when they arose in dream or vision.⁴⁷

Though the alchemists or ‘puffers’ of the seventeenth century might often be objects of mockery, their goal and its underlying concepts retained more respect, so that even a relatively orthodox man such as Sir Thomas Browne writes that ‘The smattering I have of the Philosophers stone... hath taught me a great deale of Divinity’.⁴⁸ As modern chemistry rose, the alchemical tradition passed from currency into the realm of discarded knowledge, but the symbolism and allegory remain one of the most visually rich traditions of Hermetic thought. The theosophy of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) uses an idiosyncratic language of symbolic alchemy that is removed from practical chymical foundations but continued to influence people well into the eighteenth century, including [26] William Blake and so, through his research for *The Works of William Blake*, Yeats.⁴⁹ It is likely that without the enigmatic allegory of *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (1616) the Rosicrucian ferment created by the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614) and the *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) would soon have faded, but *The Chemical Wedding* transformed Rosicrucianism from being a public call for religious and social reform into a coded secret and a movement of personal transmutation in terms of alchemy.

In ‘Rosa Alchemica’ (1896), Yeats’s most obviously alchemical work, the protagonist has shown such understanding of the alchemists’ mystery, in his ‘little work on the Alchemists, somewhat in the manner of Sir Thomas Browne’, that ‘believers in the arcane sciences... could not believe so evident sympathy but the sympathy of the artist, which is half pity, for everything which has moved men’s hearts in any age’ (*M2005* 177; *VSR* 126; *Myth* 267). Browne’s ‘smattering’ may be the result of modesty but the narrator of ‘Rosa Alchemica’ shows a knowledge of alchemical material and writes that, while appearing wide, is shallow or less than accurate, and it is unclear to what extent Yeats intended his readers to recognise the shaky foundations of his protagonist’s understanding. Certainly Yeats through the story shows a far deeper appreciation of alchemy than his narrator, in particular of the role of dissolution and putrefaction in the process.

While it is impossible to generalise about a subject with as long and varied a history as that of alchemy, one of the fundamentals is the attainment of a purity or perfection, usually either the

⁴⁷ See Gould and Toomey’s notes on ‘Rosa Alchemica’ in *Mythologies*, especially *M2005* note 4, 369–70.

⁴⁸ *Religio Medici*, Part I Section 38, 85; modern editions Section 39.

⁴⁹ The copy of Franz Hartmann’s *The Life and Doctrines of Jacob Boehme, the God-Taught Philosopher* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891) in Yeats’s library (*YL* 853) is very heavily marked, mainly with reference to Yeats and Ellis’s work on *WWB*.

Philosophers' Stone or gold, through the refinement of a first matter, its disintegration and recombination, in a gradual and cyclical process. A common theme in the process is the use of fire in order to break matter down, digest and perfect it, although the nature of the fire may be chemical rather than physical, and the degree of heat is more usually the incubatory warmth of a dunghill than the refining fire of the smithies. The key technique is a repeated cycle [27] of distillation and recombination, encapsulated in the dictum *solve et coagula*, dissolve and coagulate. Though the processes themselves are shrouded in code-names and deficient or jumbled sequences, the signs of correct progress are marked by a progression of colour changes, black, white, red, at its simplest.

In a slightly expanded sequence, *nigredo*, blackness, is succeeded by the iridescence, changing or varied colours of *cauda pavonis*, 'the peacock's tail', which then gives way to white *albedo*, the first perfection of a lunar tincture that can tinge other metals to silver, which is sometimes symbolised by a dove or swan. Few alchemists stop at this stage, since, by a form of modified repetition and after passing through the yellow stage of *citrinitas*, the work arrives at *rubedo*, the red solar tincture which transmutes other metals to the perfection of gold. Further processes, again modified repetitions, are usually then applied in order to strengthen or multiply the tincture, which is the Philosophers' Stone. The number of stages into which the work is divided can be as few as three, following the sequence of significant colours, but is usually given as seven, for the planets and their metals, or twelve, for the Zodiac. Paracelsus, for instance, states, 'there are, of a truth, only seven principal steps' in the transmutation of natural objects: 'Calcination, Sublimation, Solution, Putrefaction, Distillation, Coagulation, Tincture', but du Chesne gives Calcination, Solution, Separation, Conjunction, Putrefaction, Coagulation, Cibation, Sublimation, Fermentation, Exaltation, Augmentation and Projection.⁵⁰ Although the number owes more to symbolism than to clear boundaries and terminology varies, certain terms recur: Calcination, Solution, Putrefaction, Coagulation, which in terms of vegetable palingenesis are represented by burning the plant, dissolving the salts, putrefying the solution and bringing it to solid form. These stages, especially Putrefaction, and *nigredo*, the first sure sign of progress, are central to the two works that Yeats names in 'Rosa Alchemica', *Splendor Solis* (M2005 186; VSR 141; Myth 283), which follows a sevenfold order, and *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* (M2005 178; VSR 129; Myth 270), which counts twelve stages.

Yeats knew the painted manuscript version of *Splendor Solis* [28] in the British Museum's Harley Collection and made it the model for the Order of the Alchemical Rose's 'book on the

⁵⁰ Waite, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of... Paracelsus*, 151; *Ad Jacobi Auberti Vindonis ortu et causis metallorum* (Lyons: Lertotium, 1575), 65–69.

doctrine and method of the Order' (*M2005* 185; *VSR* 140; *Myth* 281) describing it as 'written upon vellum, and in beautiful clear letters, interspersed with symbolical pictures and illuminations, after the manner of *Splendor Solis*' (*M2005* 186; *VSR* 141; *Myth* 283).⁵¹ MacGregor Mathers appears to have worked upon a translation of *Splendor Solis*,⁵² but otherwise the only 'public' translations into English that existed in the 1890s were in manuscript: one, a translation from a French reworking, is by William Backhouse, the alchemical patron of Elias Ashmole, and there are copies in both Oxford and London (though the London one is incomplete), and the other is a translation from the original German, in London.⁵³ Yeats could have known one of these but there is no conclusive evidence.⁵⁴

Splendor Solis contains seven distinct treatises and the First Treatise, in a single part, focuses on the relationship of Art and Nature in the Great Work, and the central role of 'Putrefaction' and 'greening'. Putrefaction or corruption was long considered to underlie the process of the seed's 'rotting' and germination, the development of the chick within the egg, as well as the production of insects by spontaneous generation, and so all transformation. *Splendor Solis* [29] explains that the Philosophers' 'putrefaction is a moistning & exsiccation whereby dry thing[s] come to there [*sic*] fiery state; that they may be green & grow. In this putrefaction the moisture is incorporated into the dryness, & not destroy'd, so that the moist part keepeth the dry together' (BL MS Sloane 2639 f.8r). Putrefaction therefore restores the substance to an earlier stage in development when it was still growing, with the purpose that it will now develop all the way to perfection, balancing moist and dry, hot and cold.

Yeats recognised this and, in 'Rosa Alchemica', as the narrator succumbs to a narcotic trance, he hears 'a distant voice saying: "Our master Avicenna has written that all life proceeds out of corruption"' (*M2005* 182; *VSR* 135; *Myth* 276), a dictum that Yeats repeated in his own voice almost thirty years later (*AVA* 139). Treatises linking generation and corruption are at least as old as Aristotle, and among the works of Avicenna (Husain 'ibn abd Allah 'ibn Sina, 980–1037) that were

⁵¹ British Library Harley MS 3469. Other illuminated versions are in Berlin (two), Nürnberg, Paris, Kassel and Solothurn (Switzerland) and date from the 1530s to 1580s. It was printed as part of *Aureum Vellus oder Guldin Schatz und Kunstammer* (Rorschach am Bodensee: Gottskampf et al, 1598).

⁵² See *M2005* 391. One of Ayton's pupils, Julius Kohn, did translate the work from the Harley Manuscript: *Splendor Solis: Alchemical Treatises of Solomon Trismosin, Adept and Teacher of Paracelsus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, [1920]).

⁵³ *Splendor Solis* was translated and paraphrased by L.I. as *Le toyson d'or* (Paris: Sevestre, 1612); Backhouse translated this as *The Golden Fleece*: British Library MS Sloane 3613 (part missing) and Ashmole's copy, MS Ashmole 1395 (Bodleian MS 7597). MS Sloane 2639 uses Backhouse's translation of L.I.'s French text for the introductory material, but translates *Splendor Solis* itself directly from the German; the translator is unknown.

⁵⁴ Quotations here are taken from MS Sloane 2639 as the more succinct of those that Yeats could have known. See Robin Alston's comments on *The Secret Rose* in his lecture 'The Book as Revelation' (Warburg Institute, 1996), <<http://www.r-alston.co.uk/essay3.htm>> [accessed October 2006]. Alston and others refer to Sloane MS 2503 because MS 2639 was formerly bound with MS 2503.

known in mediaeval Europe is the book entitled *On generation and corruption*.⁵⁵ Avicenna explicitly criticised alchemy as nothing more than changing appearance, but this did not stop many suppositious works on alchemical subjects being attributed to him.⁵⁶ He is indeed cited in *Splendor Solis*: the Third Treatise consists of a series of seven parables dealing with a process of death, corruption and rebirth, and the third parable opens with a comment ascribed to Avicenna, ‘A heat if it works on a moist body, then the same begetteth at first a blackness’, which echoes the opening comments on putrefaction. The parable then describes how a rising mist or sea engulfs the ‘King of



the Earth’, drowning him in darkness and stench. As dawn arrives, ‘the clear sun shone through the clouds & various sorts of colours’ revealing a renovated earth and ‘brightness shined, & therein was such a perfection as much rejoiced the King of honour, & renewed & very well adorned him, whose beauty the sun & moon admired at’, wearing a triple crown, bearing a starry sceptre and a golden apple, with a white dove on it. The parable [30] closes with Aristotle’s dictum that ‘the Destruction of any thing is the generation of another’ (BL MS Sloane 2639 f.11v–12r),⁵⁷ and is evidently associated with the black putrefaction of *nigredo*, which after time gives way to the multi-coloured dawn and then the white and golden new life, in potential at least.

The following parable describes a man rising from a quagmire, ‘stuck fast in clay, or black unclean slime, w[hi]ch was of an evill smell’, to be met by an angelic figure waiting to clothe him in purple or red. It recapitulates the theme and opens with a quotation: ‘I commend all my posterity

⁵⁵ *De generatione et corruptione*, the third of Avicenna’s eight *Libri naturales*, was translated into Latin in the late thirteenth century.

⁵⁶ See A. E. Waite, *Lives of the Alchemystical Philosophers based on materials collected in 1815 and supplemented by recent researches* (London: Redway, 1888; YL 2210); see M2005 382.

⁵⁷ See Aquinas, *Summa* I.cxviii.2, ‘*generatio unius est corruptio alterius*’.

that they make the bodys spirituall, by solution, and again to make all spiritual things corporal, by a gentle boiling’, and it continues that, ‘the spirit dissolveth the body, & the solution extracts the soul of the body, & turneth the body into a soul, & the soul is changed into a spirit, & the spirit shall be joined again to the body; then it is firm & constant to the body; & the body is again spirituall in the power of the spirit’ (BL MS Sloane 2639 f.12r).⁵⁸ Whether this complex interchange of body, soul and spirit is metaphysical or just metaphorical, the command to dissolve and coagulate is clearly more than a simple distillation. A circulatory process, entailing numerous repetitions, it involves spiritualising matter and then materialising the spirit, so that the dissolution of the physical is



the fixing of the spiritual and *vice versa*, the two principles, in effect, living each other’s death and dying each other’s life, a theme that runs through Yeats’s writing. This two-way process, follows the Smaragdine Tablet’s injunction: ‘Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then descend again to earth, and unite together the power of things inferior and superior; thus you will possess the light of the world, and all obscurity will fly away from you’;⁵⁹ it never denies the importance of the physical realm, although it asserts the need for the spiritual, and needs putrefaction or corruption to break down the material, so that it can be reassembled in a harmonious and perfected form.

Yeats’s narrator has created ‘a fanciful reverie over the transmuta-[31] tion of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences’ (M2005 177; VSR 126; Myth 267), without performing the second part of the operation. He has attempted to spiritualise the material by dissolution, but has then halted the process. It seems to be a false *nigredo* or rather *cauda pavonis*: the peacocks and peacock feathers which recur throughout ‘Rosa Alchemica’ are not simply Aesthetic decoration, but indicate a failure to pass from one stage to another, as the ‘tapestry,

⁵⁸ The quotations are derived from the *Turba Philosophorum*.

⁵⁹ Translation version from Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, I, 507.

full of the blue and bronze of peacocks, fell over the doors, and shut out all history and activity untouched with beauty and peace' (*M2005* 178; *VSR* 127; *Myth* 268). When Yeats writes in the 'PIAL' notebook in 1909 that a vision about Maud Gonne suggests 'alchemical symbolism of the order human, spiritual, material <...> the black, white & red of the operation' (NLI MS 36,276 f. 10v), he shows that, unlike his narrator, he recognises that the material is the red tincture that follows the spiritual white.⁶⁰

Yeats's narrator repeats to himself:

the ninth key of Basilius Valentinus, in which he compares the fire of the Last Day to the fire of the alchemist, and the world to the alchemist's furnace, and would have us know that all must be dissolved before the divine substance, material gold or immaterial ecstasy, awake. I had dissolved indeed the mortal world and lived amid immortal essences, but had obtained no miraculous ecstasy. (*M2005* 178; *VSR* 129; *Myth* 270)

The narrator has sought to dissolve 'the mortal world' and thinks that he has passed to a stage of 'immortal essences', but he has 'obtained no miraculous ecstasy' because the dissolution of the body has not been accompanied by coagulation of the spiritual and the concomitant re-engagement with the physical world in which he still lives. He is therefore at the intermediate stage of the peacock's tail and returns to the true *nigredo* and breakdown which is brought about at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose.

The comparison he draws is actually from the Fourth Key of Basil Valentine,⁶¹ in which all will be 'reduced to ashes, from which ashes [32] the Phoenix is to produce her young. For in the ashes slumbers a true and genuine tartaric substance, which, being dissolved, will enable us to open the strongest bolt of the royal chamber'.⁶² The tartaric substance in the Phoenix's ashes is a chemical



⁶⁰ This also contains an analysis of a dream about fermentation inspired by Basil Valentine.

⁶¹ The text of *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* was first published in 1599; engravings, probably by Matthäus Merian, were included when it was collected with two other works into the *Tripus Aureus* ed. Michael Maier (Frankfurt: Jennis, 1618). It was included in the *Musæum Hermeticum* (1625), the expanded edition of which (1678) was the basis for A. E. Waite's translation, *The Hermetic Museum*, 2 vols. (London: Elliott & Co., 1893), I, 324ff. See *M2005* notes 375–76.

⁶² *The Hermetic Museum*, I, 331.

form of the alchemists' fire, which will break down even the strongest barrier to achieving the work. The Fourth Key is about *nigredo* and in the engraving a skeleton stands upright on a bier; in the background a peacock perches on the church tower, hinting that the death of *nigredo* will give way to the peacock's tail. The text centres on the role of the ashes, and their importance as the 'Salt' of matter: 'By burning anything to ashes you may gain its salt. If in this dissolution the sulphur and mercury be kept apart, and restored to its salt, you may once more obtain that form which was destroyed by the process of combustion'.⁶³ In Paracelsian theory, Salt was the principle of fixity, solidity and incombustibility, hence the ashes, the neutral body for the two active principles of Sulphur (Sol, hot, combustible, coagulating, male) and Mercury (Luna, cold, fluid, volatile, female). It is specifically related to form or body, while the solar spirit and lunar soul provide movement or life, but ideally all are spiritualised and also made corporeal.

It would be extravagant to claim that Yeats's dabbling with palingenesis might represent any great engagement with plant alchemy but such practice rehearses the techniques, rhythm and stages of alchemy in general while the transformations supposed to be demonstrated in palingenesis intimate many of the themes in 'Rosa Alchemica'. The process is a limited *Opus Minor*, achieving *nigredo* and then going from *nigredo* through the *cauda pavonis* only as far as the *albedo*, but it does centre on the production of the ashes or Salt from which the vegetable phoenix can arise. The procedure of Sibly [33] and Becher (II) is the clearest in separating the constituents of Salt, the residue or ash, Sulphur, an oil or grease, and Mercury, pituita, phlegm or water. The putrefaction separates the constituents for their full extraction and then reconstitution in a subtler way. Sibly introduces the Mercuric water back into the residue in order to 'purify the volatile salt by dissolving, filtering, and coagulating' and then adds the Sulphurous oil, before they are digested further to recombine to a 'subtil essence' that is revived by heat.⁶⁴ In the process given by von der Becke and Kircher, the stages are clearer; the distillation and recombination is applied to the dew collected, which is then added to the vegetable matter, and at the end of the initial blackened putrefaction 'the seed will be seen to have changed, and on top of it will be found a skin with diverse colours and underneath a slimy substance' (*Sph46* 211), representing the *cauda pavonis*. It then needs the rays of the sun and moon for a longer period, until at length the spirituous matter turns into a white ash. Without the separation of the constituents, this operation is not as obviously related to the three principles as Sibly's, but the colour changes are closer to those of classical alchemy. The Becher-Oetinger method produces the first Salt through drying and burning, like

⁶³ *The Hermetic Museum*, I, 332. See *M2005* notes 392. Salt (with a capital in my text) is not sodium chloride or any other salt, and similarly Sulphur and Mercury are not the modern elements.

⁶⁴ *An Illustration of Astrology*, 1114.

Maxwell's sketchy method, and it then adds the juices pressed from the fresh plant to supply the Sulphur and Mercury, so that the putrefaction and greening, in a very literal sense, take place afterwards in the virgin soil. The use of fire associates it more graphically with the Phoenix, and it is also the closest to a 'natural' process since the moistened ash is almost 'sown' into the earth to produce a greening. This method, which seems the most likely for Yeats to have used, is clearest in the nature of 'calcining' or burning away admixture and re-invigorating the incombustible residue to create an image that is unreal but potentially eternal.

[34]

IV

Whatever form the attempt at palingenesis took, it was an experience of a supposed alchemical process, in which matter is destroyed in its existent form and the adept seeks to recreate another refined form using his art. As with much of alchemy, the importance of the process may reside more in its psychological implications than its literal truth and the symbolic import takes on a life of its own, even if the phenomenon does not exist. Cotton Mather found that it was an apt metaphor for a memoir, 'when we do in a *Book*, as in a *Glass*, reserve the History of our Departed *Friends*;



and by bringing our *Warm Affections* unto such an History, we revive, as it were, out of their *Ashes*, the true *Shape* of those *Friends*, and bring to a fresh View, what was *Memorable* and *Imitable* in them'.⁶⁵

Palingenesis epitomises how through art a living form can be re-presented to the artist's audience. The experimenters themselves write of the apparition in Platonic terms of ideas: du Chesne writes of it as existing 'rather in spiritual idea' ('*spirituali tantum idea*') and von der Becke refers to a 'seminal vegetative Idea' ('*Idea seminalis vegetabilis*') and explains that 'an image, indeed an Idea will arise related exactly to the plant' ('*effigies ac Idea quaedam*'). Kircher writes of exciting 'the form of the plant and, if the flask is well sealed, it will last in this way forever' ('*plantæ formam*') and for Sibly the form is a 'perfect idea or similitude' but 'nothing more than

⁶⁵ *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Parkhurst, 1702), Bk 2, 37.

the spiritual idea endued with a spiritual essence'.⁶⁶ Vallemont indeed warns that, 'We must not expect a solid Body in this Apparition: 'tis only a Shadow; and if any one should rashly go about to touch this resuscitated Rose, it would fare with him as with the sacrilegious Ixion, who thinking to embrace Juno, found only a flitting Cloud, without any Consistency'.⁶⁷

[35] The change from an Ideal realm that exists really in the Hermetic cosmos to a realm of ideas that is confined to the human mind may change a presence into a symbol or metaphor but does not alter the fundamental concept. The phantom rose may be a product of pure mind or imagination rather than one of quantifiable science, but it still retains reality at least from the viewpoint of art. In the end the vegetable phoenix is an emblem of the 'spiritual idea': the body has been spiritualised and the plant has been transmuted into an essence that represents its living form, and through losing its physical presence it has gained a potential immortality.

As Yeats wrote of his own struggles with writing for the theatre in 1906:

All art is in the last analysis an endeavour to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art's sake, and that is why the labour of the alchemists, who were called artists in their day, is a befitting comparison for all deliberate change of style. (*VP* 849)

The achievability of the alchemists' quest is less important than its symbolic weight for the artist; the futility of the quest may indeed make it all the more apt, since artists lay no claim to knowledge of the ultimate essences or to perfection of life, indeed actively renounce them, in order to live with images. Moreover, they need to engage with the mess and variety of the phenomenal world, to pitch into 'the frogspawn of a blind man's ditch' (*VP* 479) where generation and corruption meet.

(Note: in the printed version only the first illustration, from Ebenezer Sibly's *Illustration of Astrology*, was included.)

⁶⁶ *Ad Veritatem Hermeticæ Medicinæ*, 293; *Experimenta et meditationes*, 320; *An Illustration of Astrology*, 1114 & 1115; *Mundus Subterraneus*, II, 415.

⁶⁷ *Curiositez de la Nature et de l'Art sur la Vegetation* (see note 30), translation by Arthur Young, *Curiosities of Nature and Art in Husbandry and Gardening* (London: Brown et al., 1707), 334.