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An Activist's Spiritual Experience: Maud Gonne's "Spirit World" in her Autobiography and Letters to Yeats

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Abstract:

Spirituality and the occult represent important aspects of Maud Gonne's life and writings, and their investigation offers an unusual perspective on this famous icon of revolutionary Ireland. Her memoir and letters to Yeats testify to a lasting relationship with "the spirit world" in as diverse forms as Celtic mysticism, occult practices, psychic phenomena, and the Catholic faith. By investigating her syncretic spirituality and the role this dimension played in her political activism, this contribution intends to expand our understanding of Gonne as an autobiographer; while the written self could "lose all sense of proportion" (Gonne, Yeats 1993, 238) the writer of the self carefully arranged episodes and memories into a plot, the story of a *Bildung* and of a life's mission.

Keywords: Golden Dawn, Maud Gonne, Occult, Political Autobiography, Spirituality

1. Beginning in medias res: Visionary Experience and the Construction of a Life's Mission

In *A Servant of the Queen* Gonne writes that "[t]he spirit world never seemed far from me" (1995, 209, hereafter *SQ*). It is apparent even from a cursory look at the table of contents that the spiritual dimension has indeed a definite place in her memoir. Out of twenty-seven chapters three bear titles that point to otherworldly experiences: "The Woman of the Sidhe" (Chapter 9), "Occult Experiences" (Chapter 15), and "The Inevitability of the Church" (Chapter 26). However, the brief opening section, entitled "I Saw the Queen", is pivotal to start exploring how Gonne chose to deal with this dimension. "I Saw the Queen" precedes a very concise "Foreword" and the actual beginning of her memoir and provides the first instance of how she carefully selected episodes and anecdotes – including visions, dreams, voices from another level of reality – and wove them into the narration of her eventful life.

“I Saw the Queen” deserves our attention for several reasons. In it, Gonne recollects a vision of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the legendary icon of Irish nationalism, that took place on her return journey from County Mayo, after one of her visits to villages hit by poverty and famine. From her letters we know that these journeys occurred between February and March 1898, about ten years after she had started to work for the cause of Irish independence. The young Gonne, “[t]ired but glowing”, saw, from the train window, a beautiful woman heading towards the hills, and heard a voice addressing her: “‘[y]ou are one of the little stones on which the feet of the Queen have rested on her way to Freedom’ ” (SQ, 9). Gonne casts herself as a humble servant and an instrument chosen for this arduous task, a role that was bestowed upon her directly by the legendary woman. “I Saw the Queen” is a spectacular opening *in medias res*, and its prominent position in the book places the account of Gonne’s life and her fight for Irish independence under a supernatural aura. In the last lines, the older Gonne concludes that “[b]eing old now and not triumphant I know the blessedness of having been ‘one of those little stones’ on the path to Freedom” (*ibidem*). These words mark a transition from the narrated self – the younger Gonne who saw the Queen – to the writing and wiser self of the “Foreword” that follows the first page. The juxtaposition with the “Foreword” heightens the dramatic effect of “I Saw the Queen”.

In telling the readers what her memoir sets out to do, the brief second section has a more pragmatic dimension: “[b]y the time that I [...] had arrived at the age of reason and was a free agent I had determined that [the British Empire] was not worth the price. How I arrived at this determination and how it affected my life is the story I have tried to tell” (SQ, 10). In the “Foreword” a change of style occurs: from the narrative and visionary tone of “I Saw the Queen”, to the declaratory and dry sentences of those few lines. The miniature *aisling* of Cathleen in “I Saw the Queen” gives way to the story of a *Bildung*, of a (self-) education that was acquired through determination and direct participation in the battle. Whereas “I Saw the Queen” rests on the assumption of Gonne’s visionary gift and implicitly asks the readers to trust her as the witness of an extraordinary event, the “Foreword” asks them to align on a different argument. Here the narrator anticipates how she came to oppose the immoral “‘conditions *sine qua non*’ ” (Mitchell qtd. in SQ, 10) the British Empire could not have thrived: “famine in Ireland, opium in China, torture in India, pauperism in England, disturbance and disorder in Europe and robbery everywhere” (SQ, 10). Ultimately these two sections reflect their author’s posture towards her mission: as Karen Steele noted in her analysis of Gonne’s journalism, she was “both reporter and lyrical writer, a social activist and allegorist (2022, 114). They reinforce each other in constructing the picture of a life’s mission, one in which inspiration from above and self-determination played equally crucial roles.

These initial sections serve this purpose in other ways. Contemporaries and later critics have often noted her tendency to self-aggrandizement and to “cast a halo about her activities” (Donoghue 1986, 223). Even recently, for instance, *A Servant of the Queen* has been described as the “ebullient, if somewhat egomaniacal” account of the challenge to find a place “in an overwhelmingly male tradition of revolutionary endeavour” in Ireland (Kelly 2018, 111). Gonne’s memoir can be read as a woman activist’s attempt to carve a space within the genre of political autobiography, which had indeed been shaped by illustrious male names. In this respect, it seems that both her detractors and more impartial scholars have sometimes overlooked the closing statements of the “Foreword”:

In telling it I may seem to ignore events and people deserving to be mentioned. In a fight one sees only the corner of the field in which one stands. That is my excuse to those other soldiers in the fight for freedom whom I have not mentioned and who have made as great efforts and perhaps greater sacrifices. (SQ, 10)

The autobiographer does not hide the subjective perspective of her memoir. Gonne is not just apologizing with those who have been “forgotten”; this statement can be read as the assertion of her right to tell the events from her own unique perspective. Recently Gonne’s memoir has been discussed in terms of “political autobiographics” situated between life-writing and historical record, where “‘the contingency and freedom that characterize the realm of the *vita active*’” take centre-stage (Guaraldo 2001, qtd. in Tamboukou 2018, 249). *A Servant of the Queen* is alive with accounts of travels, adventures, plans, meetings, anecdotes, which are made more vivid by her gift for dramatic dialogue. The combination of narration, dialogues and straightforward tone, coupled with the adventurous atmosphere surrounding the life of the young Gonne, is anticipated in “I Saw the Queen”. One among several autobiographical fragments that make up the memoir, this episode stands out as a defining moment of her career, to the point that she had originally wanted Cathleen ni Houlihan’s words “one of those little stones” to be the title of her book¹. These words reappear in the closing lines of *A Servant of the Queen*, where once again the older Gonne humbly considers her role in the Queen’s journey as a blessing (cf. *SQ*, 350). Their importance makes them the textual equivalent of an epiphany; just as the episode of the vision represents Gonne’s formal “investiture”, so Cathleen’s words, being repeated at the end, seal the convergence between personal and national destiny. As an activist writer Gonne seems to be fully aware of a biographeme that is well-rooted in the writings of male activists since the early nineteenth century, “the master trope of the Irish autobiographical tradition”, namely “[t]he rhetorical fusion of individual identity and collective destiny” (Harte 2007, 3). Following her predecessors, but at the same time subverting the gendered narrative that matched political activism with masculinity, the convergence of personal and national mission is manifest in several *loci* of *A Servant of the Queen*, specifically in the image of a woman who renounces her private life and devotes all her energies to the Irish cause. One of the most explicit passages in this respect is the following:

I had long ago chosen to devote my life to the one objective of freeing Ireland, and since then I had invariably found that anything I undertook for myself personally never succeeded, and so I had given up trying. So long as I was working for Ireland I felt safe and protected. (*SQ*, 328-329)

Statements such as this, along with the omission of several private facts, make her personal life appear unimportant in comparison to her political activities. Whereas for male autobiographers the neglect of the domestic life was part of a national narrative rooted in notions of masculinity and rebellious heroism, for Gonne leaving out biographical facts reflected in part her and her son Sean’s wish to protect their privacy². Self-censorship, however, built on a much

¹ The correspondence between Maud Gonne and the publisher Victor Gollancz shows that the title “One of those Little Stones” was kept until the end of July 1938, although she had been asked to change it since March of the same year. Both the publisher and L.A.G. Strong deemed it inadequate, the latter describing it as “inept” (see “Correspondence and documents relating to the publication of Maud Gonne’s memoir ‘A servant of the Queen’ by Victor Gollancz, 1936-1992”, MS 50,700/10/5 (9) quoted with the kind permission of the National Library of Ireland). Alternative titles suggested by Gonne were “Let Erin Remember”, “Laughing and Fighting” and “One Thought and Many Deeds”; a title suggested by the publisher was “The Battles I Fought”, an adaptation of her line “the battles we fight here have perhaps been already fought out on another plane” (*SQ*, 336). This title was rejected by Gonne because perceived as “presumptuous” and “pretentious” (cf. MS 50,700/2/2; MS 50,700/3/6 (2)). They finally settled on “A Servant of the Queen”, which was proposed by Gonne on 10 July 1938 (cf. MS 50,700/3/6).

² Gonne’s elder child, Iseult, was officially her adopted child. Seán, her son by John MacBride, was a leading member of the IRA; in 1937 (one year before *A Servant of the Queen* came out in print) he became a barrister specialized in defending IRA members and later a prominent politician on the Irish and European stage (cf. Jeffares,

earlier image of Gonne as a spokesperson for the rural dispossessed and political prisoners, completely devoted to Ireland, an image that she and her collaborators had cultivated in the Irish radical press; both then and in the memoir, the image of an Irish Joan of Arc contributed to shape a self-propagandistic discourse that revolved around her public achievements (cf. Steele 2001, 142).

Among the contradictions of Gonne's life, that could not find a place in her memoir, were not only an extra-marital relationship and two children, but also an intimate connection with the "spirit world", especially at those junctures when it could veer towards eccentric dealings with the occult and magic. For instance, the solo and collaborative visions with Yeats, in which she was engaged for reviving Celtic rituals, were utterly left out; other aspects that involved her own psychic powers and her affiliation to occult societies show the narrator's ambivalence towards this dimension. In the chapter "Occult Experiences" her experiments with second sight and bilocation are hastily described as dangerous and potentially out of her control. Since those experiments demanded intense concentration, already by the time of the events, the young Gonne considered them a distraction from her political work. As I will discuss more in depth later, the account of her involvement with Theosophy and the society of the Golden Dawn betrays similar contradictions. "Both consciously and unconsciously the author reveals herself, presenting a personality which would be phenomenal in any nation and at any time": these were the words of L.A.G. Strong, the first professional reader of Gonne's memoir who recommended it for publication (MS 50,700/10/5 (7)). His remarks give a fairly accurate idea of Gonne's narratorial posture: *A Servant of the Queen* successfully manages to keep the reader's attention on her "one-idea'd" personality and her public achievements (*SQ*, 124), and the tension and "fissures" in the narrative add to the complexity of the narrated self.

"I Saw the Queen" is not just rhetorically effective but also anticipates several elements that make up Gonne's spirituality as they emerge in the autobiography. One is Celtic mysticism, which for Gonne meant first and foremost the trust in the spirit of the land and its people, seen as sources of energy and protection for herself and the nation-to-be: "I had stopped a famine and saved many lives by making the people share my own belief that courage and will are unconquerable and, where allied to *the mysterious forces of the land*, can accomplish anything" (*SQ*, 9, my emphasis). Mythology, popular lore and legends are intimately connected with this dimension. From her first meeting with John O'Leary, her early attempts at organizing Irish-themed concerts in Dublin with her childhood friend Ida Jameson, to her occult work with Yeats and the Order of the Golden Dawn, and the foundation of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann, Gonne had gained considerable knowledge about Irish history and mythology, folk music and tales. This knowledge in turn made her attachment to the Irish land and its people stronger, and significantly contributed to her *Bildung* and self-styling as a promoter of Irish nationalism when she toured as a lecturer in public talks and fund-raising events, and especially in her prolific journalistic production³. On a more personal level, Gonne was fascinated by the peasants' belief in ancient legends and considered it an integral part of that protective aura that came from the land. One passing example of the attention she devoted to popular lore is found in "I Saw the Queen". On the same day in which she saw Cathleen ni Houlihan, Gonne spotted a magical fish that brought good luck:

MacBride White (1995), x-xii).

³ The invaluable work of Karen Steele on Gonne's journalistic writings provides examples of her use and subversion of female icons from Irish mythology and legends (see Steele 1999; 2022).

That afternoon, at the Wishing Well in Ballina [...] I had seen the fish which they said none of our generation had seen; it had darted across the clear water which bubbles up unceasingly at the foot of a green mound where legend says a queen lies buried. I had wished the wish of all our hearts – a Free Republic. (*Ibidem*)

In this and the previous excerpt cited above, Gonne, who portrays herself as the saviour of many lives and the witness to an extraordinary event, also implicitly represents her work for Ireland as inspired by and placed under the protection of the ancient spiritual forces of Ireland.

This episode anticipates two longer ones that are found in the chapters “The Woman of the Sidhe” and “Famine”, which show Gonne’s sense of having achieved a quasi-mystical connection with the Irish people. During a journey to County Donegal she became the object of rumours among villagers: they saw her as a benevolent fairy creature who had come to help a local priest give assistance to the evicted tenants in defiance of the police (cf. *SQ*, 134-135). Later, in County Mayo, she was regarded as the mysterious woman dressed in green from a prophecy of a legendary local seer. This woman would come in a time of famine and “preach the revolt” (*SQ*, 252), as she indeed started doing in 1898 once she had arrived in those lands, heavily damaged by a potato blight and endemic poverty. Just as in “I Saw the Queen”, where Gonne caught sight of something exceptional – the fish at the Wishing Well – thus becoming herself a token of good luck, in those two episodes she performed something exceptional: she materially assisted families, reinstated them to their houses, and persuaded the British authorities to consent her requests to raise the local people’s pay in the Relief Works, so as to prevent more deaths from starvation. In her account she explains that her bravery owed to the simple faith of the local people in her person as a larger-than-life figure. As in “I Saw the Queen”, Gonne’s special status – in this case her “transformation” into a supernatural creature – is communicated once again through direct speech, namely the words of two local priests. The strategy of acknowledging her supernatural investiture through the words of others puts her figure and her actions in the spotlight and reflects the typical combination of humility and pride of Gonne’s narrator. Pratt noted that in relating these events the narrator “obviously takes pleasure in the supernatural flavor of the legend” (1983, 193). Gonne’s awareness of the effect her physical presence could have on others – her stature, her charm, her fashionable clothes – emerges in several passages of her autobiography; here the magical aura, bestowed upon her, lends an element of theatricality to her appearance to the police and the villagers. What is more, Gonne explicitly parallels the two episodes and, by mentioning her impulse to write an article at the time of the second event, she portrays herself in the multiple roles of the fairy, the fighter and the journalist who was conscious of the writerly potential of those stories on her readership. The power that came from the land – the superstition of the villagers – encouraged her to fight, both on the “battlefield” and with the pen:

In Donegal, being the woman of the Sidhe had helped me to put evicted families back in their homes and release prisoners. I hoped that being the woman of the prophecies in Mayo would help me to stop the famine. I went to my hotel and wrote an article on the Relief Works for the *Freeman’s Journal*. (*SQ*, 253)

Overall, these scenes give us an insight into the extent to which she came to regard herself as the human and rhetorical instrument of those local battles – her speeches are often reported in detail – and, through them, of the larger battle that would lead Ireland to freedom. “I Saw the Queen” introduces one further element, which often resurfaces in the autobiography

and the letters, and that is crucial for understanding Gonne's attitude towards her political work: the combination of "courage and will" (*SQ*, 9). In the first chapter courage and will are intimately connected with the memory of Gonne's beloved father and with his teachings, and they are among the "Words Remembered" – this is the title of the chapter – that would guide her in her life. As I will discuss later, the cultivation of will power was also one of the guiding principles of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, of which she was an adept for a few years.

Finally, the element on which the entire episode of "I Saw the Queen" is premised is Gonne's natural receptivity to otherworldly visions. The narrator does not give the reader any clue as to how the momentous epiphany of Cathleen was formed, nor her younger self wondered about it. This gift was channeled into elaborate self-guided visions in the years in which she experimented with the occult and was not lost when she converted to Catholicism, but it was well alive also outside her formal engagement with the occult, and could take on both a playful and a deeply disturbing dimension. "I Saw the Queen" is the formal beginning of Gonne's autobiography and synthesizes all the salient elements that mark her complex, at times troubled, relationship with spiritual things. Three other "beginnings" are disseminated in *A Servant of the Queen* and will be discussed in the next section.

2. *Multiple Beginnings: Encounters with the Spirit World and the Syncretic Imagination*

Gonne's proximity to the spirit world can be traced to her childhood. The narrator portrays herself as a restless girl who used to see "strange shapes moving in the dim gleam of night-light, creeping under the bed, and a veiled woman with dark sad eyes" (*SQ*, 14). These phenomena are told in the first chapter, where she recollects her mother's death. In this account the attentive reader will not miss a striking coincidence between the sad eyes of this mysterious woman and Edith Cook's sad look when she appeared to her daughter in "a cruel little memory" (*SQ*, 13). Psychoanalysis would probably interpret the woman as the projection of the child's distress over her mother's death. This figure would haunt the adult Gonne, and her presence seems to be connected with moments of strain and loss in her life. The letters and the autobiography record several instances of Gonne's spontaneous receptivity: visions, voices and premonitory dreams, which at times prompted her to alert her friends against imminent dangers. Her attitude towards her gift was ambiguous: whereas she cultivated it during her affiliation to the Society of the Golden Dawn and when she worked with Yeats at his project of creating a Celtic Mystical Order between the late 1890s and early 1900s, it also brought about disturbing experiences.

A second beginning in her relationship with the supernatural was her formal introduction into occult things through Yeats, who first introduced her to Mme Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, and in November 1891 initiated her into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. These were the two major branches of the mystical revival of the *fin de siècle* and they would have a lasting influence on twentieth-century occultism. The Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn radically departed from mid-century spiritualism and mediumship: they were established as circles with a strong intellectual basis and internal hierarchy; they were organized into stages of study and initiation ceremonies; they claimed ancient lineages, reaching back to both Eastern and Western sources; finally, they rejected the figure of the medium, its centrality in the communication with the otherworld, and instead awarded primacy to the empowerment

of the Will as opposed to trance possession⁴. Since the first extant Gonne-Yeats letters date back to 1893, neither her encounter with Blavatsky nor her first initiation into the Golden Dawn are recorded⁵. Both events are mentioned in the chapter “Occult Experiences”, where Gonne only touches on the eccentricity of Blavatsky and on the exterior aspects of the Order that most annoyed her, such as the ceremonial clothes the adepts used, “the English love of play-acting” and the “mysterious” and “grand-sounding titles” (*SQ*, 211). Her suspicions about possible connections between the Order and Freemasonry eventually persuaded her to leave it in 1894. During the three years in which she was an adept she completed all four stages of the Outer Order. Her account, however, gives the impression that her connection with the Golden Dawn was rather brief and superficial, Yeats’s idea rather than her own’s, and she dismisses it in only one sentence: “I passed four initiations and learned a number of Hebrew words” (*SQ*, 210)⁶.

In fact, Gonne had started experimenting with the occult and magic just before joining Theosophy and the Order, hoping “[to gain] power to use for the great objective of my life” (*SQ*, 209). This interest and her involvement with the two societies came during a period of personal loss, which is not recorded in *A Servant of the Queen*. In August 1891 the death of her son – Georges Silvère, who was born from her relationship with a married man, the French journalist and right-wing politician Lucien Millevoye – pushed her to find spiritual consolation in Yeats and the mystic poet and painter George Russell. Gonne’s wish to establish a contact with her dead child pushed her farther: she sought consolation in a form of spirituality that offered a ritualized journey towards personal development and promised the adepts that they would be able to cultivate their inner force and achieve rebirth. What the autobiography records, instead, is the reappearance of the veiled woman, an event which the narrator describes as one among other “strange unaccountable things” (*SQ*, 207) that had happened at that time. An uncanny double, this time the woman did not look like her mother: “[s]he was rather like me, but smaller and darker. A portrait of me, painted by Kreder [...] I thought resembled her more than it resembled me” (*ibidem*). These remarks, including the sudden deflection of the resemblance on her portrait, are perhaps the closest Gonne came to recognize the woman as her darkest side. It is revealing of her ambiguous attitude that, when she mentions this hypothesis, she ascribes it to Yeats and MacGregor Mathers, the founder of the Golden Dawn, who “evolved the theory that she was what, in old Egyptian magic, was called the Ka. As far as I could understand them, a part of my personality had survived death in a former incarnation” (*ibidem*). The narrator seems to distance herself from the sinister prospect that this evil presence was part of her personality, and yet she encrypts that disturbing idea in the language of occultism. Despite the bad omens hovering around this woman, Gonne initially took advantage of the latent potential of her presence by “using” her to “influence people’s minds and get them

⁴ About the departure of Theosophy and the Golden Dawn from previous spiritualism, see Owen 2004, Chapters 1; 2.

⁵ The only letter mentioning the Golden Dawn while Gonne was still a member of the order is dated 13 October 1893: “[i]f you are not in London perhaps Mrs Emery would kindly examine me for my 3°=8°” (Gonne, Yeats 1993, 51, hereafter *GYL*). The reference is to the third grade of the First Order, called “Practicus”; Mrs Emery is the actress and occultist Florence Farr, who, as an expert adept, would examine new members.

⁶ This remark, neutral as it may appear, masks in fact Gonne’s antisemitic aversion, which is also present in her journalistic contributions. The elaborate Kabbalistic symbolism in the teachings of the Golden Dawn must have made her impatient with its doctrine. A clue about her attitude is in a letter dated September 1900 in which she writes of her cousin’s May similar aversion to this aspect of the Order: “[s]he is not altogether satisfied by the G.D. She, like myself, was rather repelled by the Semitic tendency of the teaching” (*GYL*, 134). On Gonne’s anti-Dreyfusard and antisemitic comments, see Frazier 2016, 170-171; 186.

to do things” (*ibidem*), but she soon came to realize that she was growing stronger and more independent from her will through repeated invocations. At a closer look at the text a detail regarding the woman reveals that her presence was linked to the death of Gonne’s baby son: in a séance where she was summoned “she had confessed to having killed a child” (SQ, 208). At that point Gonne tried with great difficulty to chase her away. As at the time of her mother’s death, it is possible that she was once again deflecting her distress and her repressed guilt over her child’s death towards this eerie figure (cf. Pratt 1983; Greer 1995, 103-106; 120-121)⁷.

Whereas her involvement with the Golden Dawn was short-lived, her interest in magic and occult practices did not wane after she left it in 1894 and was especially connected with Yeats’s Celtic mystical order. In her collaboration with him she used her visionary gift and some of the visualization techniques she had learnt in the Golden Dawn to project herself on the astral planes where she and the poet would see the ancient Celtic gods and druids. On these journeys they identified symbols that they would use for the iconography of the ceremonies of the envisioned Celtic Order. As a member of the Outer or First Order of the Golden Dawn Gonne had not been formally initiated into the techniques known as skrying in the spirit vision and astral projection, which were taught to the adepts of the Second Order. The members of the First Order, however, were taught the techniques to achieve tattwa vision – self-guided visions prompted by the use of the five tattwa symbols representing Spirit, Air, Fire, Water and Earth⁸. As explained by Israel Regardie, tattwa vision trained the use of the imagination, which in turn was a prerequisite for learning and mastering advanced techniques later on in the adepts’ magical curriculum⁹. Several letters to Yeats, as well as his notebook entitled *Visions of Old Irish Mythology* dated December 1898¹⁰, testify the exuberance of her visions. They clearly show that not only was she familiar with tattwic visualization techniques, but also that, with the poet or alone, she successfully attempted astral projections. Without fully mastering them, she nonetheless became capable of achieving highly sophisticated visions in terms of sensuousness and detail¹¹. An example of this occultist effort can be found in a letter dated late December 1898, which contains the ritual for the

⁷ The most recent biographer of Gonne also mentions the complex relationship between her interest in occult magic and her tragic loss, and notes how she used “her growing familiarity with the occult [...] [for] constructing a unique antidote for grief” (Bendheim 2021, 54).

⁸ For a detailed explanation of the techniques taught in the Golden Dawn to reach that level of focus and imagination, see King 1987, 65-66.

⁹ According to Regardie, tattwa vision was a method “to which most members of the Order devoted the greatest attention [...] [It taught] the necessity of an imaginative formation of an intellectual or astral form [...] for the purpose of exploring [...] the several strata of one’s own psychic make-up” ([1937-1940] 1989, 41). Regardie also explained that “[t]he simpler aspects of this investigation are taught just after the grade of Philosophus [the last grade of the First Order], though naturally the full possibilities of this method and the complete details of the technical side do not reveal themselves until the teaching of the Second Order has been received” (*ibidem*). On the use of tattwa symbols, see also Greer 1995, 58, 62, 64; Owen 2004, 148-153.

¹⁰ This manuscript, as yet unpublished, can be consulted at the National Library of Ireland and is filed in the collection “W.B. Yeats Occult Papers, ca. 1890-1937” (MS 36,261/1). It was transcribed and commented by Lucy Shepard Kalogera in her 1977 dissertation thesis (139-155).

¹¹ On the importance of the sensory component of the visions, Moina Mathers, wife of the Order’s founder, wrote: “[y]ou must be prepared to receive impressions of scenes, forms and sounds as vivid thought forms. ‘Thought forms’ I use for want of a better word. There are distinctly in these experiences, things heard, things felt as well as things seen, which would prove that the qualities that we are here using are really the sublimated senses. [...] [R]emember, that though the material in magical working is the least important of the planes in one sense, yet in another it is of the utmost importance for it crystallises the astral plane and completes it.” (“Of Skrying & Travelling in the Spirit Vision”, in Regardie, 467-468).

Initiation of the Spear that Gonne had already received in a previous self-guided vision. In the elaborate “choreography” of the vision she encountered druids, Brighid and finally the sun god Lugh who performed the ceremony¹².

A further reason that may have pushed Gonne to experiment with the occult within an organized society arguably lies in the prominent role attributed to volition. The training of the will was a central stage of the adepts' curriculum, resulting in the sharpening of their psychic faculties. Gonne was “initiated” into the notion that the will could attain anything as a child. As already noted, not only did Thomas Gonne encourage her daughter to be brave, but he also insisted on the importance of exerting her will, a teaching that in *A Servant of the Queen* sounds as the spiritual testament he left to her (“[s]ome other words of Tommy's I record here because they also influenced my life”, *SQ*, 15). In addition to the sinister appearances of the veiled woman, in the autobiography the preoccupation with the subjugation of the will resurfaces in connection with the use of sleeping drugs and other psychic phenomena, such as episodes of unintentional bilocation. After Gonne managed to banish the woman, and after she had fought against her addiction, she became resolute in preventing any external power from subduing her: “I refused to let any will, human or disincarnate, overpower my own” (*SQ*, 209). These words recall a teaching of the Golden Dawn. In a lecture delivered by Florence Farr entitled “Three Suggestions on Will Power” she cautioned the adepts against “the danger [that] arises from attempting to exercise this will power, before we have purged ourselves of ignorance and darkness” (MacGreogor Mathers, Gilbert 1987, 59); the risk was serious for the initiates because they only had superficial knowledge of magic and could endanger themselves. Farr also explained that “once done the force you have set in motion becomes almost uncontrollable” (*ibidem*). Gonne had realized indeed “the danger of playing with forces without sufficient knowledge” (*SQ*, 336) when she had experimented with the powers of the veiled woman. Long after her first son's death (1891) and the end of her involvement with the Golden Dawn (1894), she continued considering the risk that some external evil force might temporarily numb her will as a real one, with consequences on her work for Ireland. In November 1898 she wrote to Yeats that she had been unable to do any occult work for a month because each time she tried “something seemed to stop me” and “my mind was blank and stupid” (*GYZ*, 96). To explain this impediment, she concluded that “it must be some of the forces that work for England that were paralysing my will” (*ibidem*).

Gonne eventually embraced Catholicism in February 1903 at 38, before marrying Major John MacBride. This decision marked a new phase in her relationship with spirituality and the supernatural. The chapter entitled “The Inevitability of the Church” charts her old resistance to the Catholic faith and her final decision to be received into the Roman Church. Just as in the chapter devoted to her occult experiences, her account revolves around single episodes and anecdotes that show once again how personal relationships, intuition and instinct, at this crucial turn in her life, mattered much more than any inner theological debate with her Anglican faith. Interestingly, in “The Inevitability of the Church” numerous references to Celticism stand out, showing how Gonne's religious faith never excluded, on the contrary, could always embrace her Celtic beliefs. If she was predestined to become a Catholic, as the

¹² The letter is in *GYZ*, 99-100. On this ritual, see Shepard Kalogera 1997, 144; Owen 2004, 168-169. Yeats and Gonne scholars and biographers have often dwelt on this letter since, in addition to the information on the Celtic Mysteries it contains, it was written shortly after a turning point in their relationship: Gonne had told the poet about her liaison with Millevoeye and the two children she had had from him, Iseult and Georges Silvère. For example, see Toomey 1992, 98; Greer 1995, 218-219; Frazier 2016, 181-182.

title suggests, it was because her belief in the spiritual force of the land persuaded her of the necessity to be closer to Ireland and the Irish. This conviction was explicitly espoused in a letter to Yeats dated 7 May 1903: “I followed as usual inspiration, [the great reason] was that I felt for my work it was necessary for me to become more completely united to the soul of my people so that I could more completely understand their thoughts & help them better” (*GYL*, 170).

One more element that played a role in her conversion is briefly mentioned in the autobiography: it lay in her need to find a stable and protective guidance in the Catholic Church in reaction to occult and dangerous practices:

I knew it was possible to break the dividing barrier which separates us from this world and once had been eager to do so in the hope of gaining power to further the cause to which I had devoted my life. Then I had realised the danger of playing with forces without sufficient knowledge, – danger to one’s own sanity and still more danger to those one loves and may be unable to protect. I looked on the Catholic Church as the repository of spiritual knowledge and sometimes I longed for its protection and guidance (*SQ*, 336).

Gonne saw the Church as a source of “spiritual knowledge” and explicitly contrasted it with the occult. One of the principles underlying Golden Dawn doctrine was the ancient “Know Thyself”, coupled with a questioning attitude towards the invisible forces in the universe and within oneself: its teachings stressed intense introspection and guided the adepts through a journey of self-discovery. As Gonne confessed, she was rather reluctant to self-scrutiny: “I never indulged in self-analysis” (*SQ*, 287). The emphasis on the self as a site of incessant exploration and the ultimate bridge to divinity had brought about dangerous experiences, while the Church could provide safer guidance. Unlike the two editions of the autobiography published during Gonne’s lifetime (Victor Gollancz 1938 and Eagle Books 1950), the 1995 and now standard edition fails to catch a pattern of conversion from unorthodox spirituality to institutional religion that can be inferred from the position of the chapter “The Inevitability of the Church”, which Gonne placed immediately after “Occult Experiences”. On the other hand, after her conversion she developed a strongly syncretic vision of spiritual things. In the aforementioned letter of 7 May 1903, where she reproaches Yeats for his irritation over her conversion, in order to reassure him that her faith would not prevent her from taking part in Celtic ritualism, she explains that Catholic and Celtic symbolism can fully coexist:

[T]o me it seems the spear of the soldier piercing the side of Christ & letting the essence of God flow into the Graal cup is the same symbolism as the spear of Lug piercing the night & letting the essence of God the spark of fire of the soul flow down into the Cauldron of regeneration & rebirth, & the font of baptism & the holy water seem to me the same as the purifying Cauldron of Dana which begins initiation, or the deep well by the tree of knowledge! [...] What do I care if the Great Mother is called Mary or Dana or Bridget or the Captain of Armies of Heaven is called Lug or Michael. (*GYL*, 169-170)

The belief in the sacredness of the land and its people was another element of her syncretic spirituality; central to the mysticism of the Celtic Revival, for Gonne it was also of special personal significance, as it came from the bond with Ireland that she had developed in her childhood. Vivid and fond descriptions of landscapes, especially of the nature in the peninsula of Howth where she had lived as a child, are found in the autobiography and the letters. Gonne made Ireland the place of her affective belonging, almost an imaginary womb in which, as Anne Magny has suggested, she might have sublimated the maternal figure she had lost when

she was only five (2014, 56). Unlike her practices of Celtic occultism, this attachment was not mediated by any intellectual source; it was turned into a devotion of the land, reflecting Gonne's personal territorialisation of Ireland¹³.

The sketch of Gonne's eclectic spirituality in the preceding paragraphs is fundamental to grasp the importance she attributed to the existence of a dialectic between the spiritual and the material planes and the role this connection played in her incessant work for Ireland.

3. "As Above so Below": *Occult-political Visions*

In "I Saw the Queen" Gonne transfers onto the level of inspired vision her belief in being predestined for the nationalist mission; seen walking on the earth and then fading away in the distance Cathleen ni Houlihan represents a link between the material and the spiritual world. The idea of a close connection between the two worlds resurfaces several times in the memoir and the letters. In "The Inevitability of the Church" she explicitly affirms this conviction:

I believe every political movement on earth has its counterpart in the spirit world and the battles we fight here have perhaps been already fought out on another plane and great leaders draw their often unexplained power from this. I cannot conceive a material movement which has not a spiritual basis. It was this that drew me so powerfully towards the Catholic Church. (SQ, 336)

The last line shows that Gonne considered the dialectic between the political and the spiritual the main reason of her religious conversion. In fact, the profound belief in this connection can be traced to an earlier stage of her political activity. In a letter to Yeats dated 6 September 1897 – the period in which the poet was starting to lay down his project of creating a Celtic mystical cult – she noted:

[L]ately I seem to have made a step in advance on the spiritual plane. I seem now to be able to put my soul in communication with the souls of those great & strong heroes who lived only for their ideal & to whom the material things of life count for naught. I get strength therefrom to go on with my work. (GYL, 77)

Her progress on the spiritual plane – her astral journeys that put her in communication with Celtic gods and heroes – sustained her work for the Irish cause. The support given by the occult work to her political activities is confirmed in the autobiography: even though grief and trauma played a significant role in sparking Gonne's interest in the occult, the official reason given in the memoir is her wish to gain power for her battles.

Once again occult doctrine can throw light on Gonne's conviction that different planes of existence could influence each other. This idea originates in the ancient postulate of alchemic correspondences between microcosmic and macrocosmic forces. The first formulation of a mutual relation between earth and sky, human and celestial, is found in the so-called *tabula smaragdina* or "Emerald Tablet", which dates to the eighth century and which, together with the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, represents one of the most influential sources on the Western esoteric tradition. The second of the thirteen maxims engraved on the tablet reads: "[w]hat is below is

¹³ I borrow the notion of "territorialisation" from sociology, specifically from Anthony Smith, who uses it in relation to communities and the formation of a collective national identity: this process involves the creation of "an ethno-scape in which a people and its homeland become increasingly symbiotic" through shared historical memories of places and personages (2009, 50).

like that which is above, and what is above is similar to that which is below to accomplish the wonders of one thing' ” (Blavatsky 1877, 507). Hermeticism as an anti-materialistic body of knowledge came to influence the spiritual revival of the late nineteenth century and to shape the core doctrine of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn through the mediation of seveneenth-century German Rosicrucianism and occult Freemasonry. Escorted with the principle of the correspondences formulated in the Emerald Tablet, the Greek precept “know thyself”, the Paracelsian doctrine of alchemical transmutation and Kabbalistic magic – now all more or less symbolically and psychologically oriented –, the occult adepts of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras believed they could apprehend the complex layers of the universal unity by intellectual and imaginative investigation¹⁴. For Yeats ritual magic promoted action: the poet wrote that in the gradual achievement of wisdom that the adept experienced by performing the rituals “there [is] [...] no abstraction to deaden the nerves of the soul”, and recalled how the rituals aroused in him “plans for deeds of all kinds” that made him wish “to return to Ireland to find there some public work” (Yeats 1972, 27). Likewise, Gonne’s work for Ireland gained strength from her occult work and later her Catholic faith. As we have seen, unlike the former, the Church represented a more solid spiritual source, with less emphasis on sheer introspection. Whereas Yeats had found in occult doctrine and magic the seeds of that splitting of the subject that would lead him and his wife to regard the deepest truths as incessantly dialogical and relational, Gonne had experienced the doubling of the will as a dangerous fragmentation of the self¹⁵. Gonne, however, seemed to retain the fundamental teaching of occult doctrine: she did not abandon the idea that different existential layers were closely linked and that the forces that presided over one also guided the other. The political could thus only be rooted in a non-material plane and “the great leaders” could only be successful if they drew their strength from there.

This organicist view of all things was also attuned to a historical period – the last decades of the 19th century, when Gonne became politically active – in which social utopianism and unorthodox spirituality often shared goals of collective regeneration. In the same letter in which Gonne mentions the heroes of the past “who lived only for their ideal & to whom the material things of life count for naught”, she expresses “a horror of all the little things & the materialities of life” and continues: “[o]ne would be much stronger if one had no ties, no belongings, no possessions even. Every now & then I have a feeling that I should get rid of every thing & live as though I were quite poor” (*GYL*, 77). Anti-materialist ideals were not uncommon both among political radicals and exponents of spiritualism and occult societies of the *fin de siècle*. For some of them the mutual relationships between the spiritual and the material plane explicitly took on progressivist and socialist contours, originating what Beaumont calls “positivistic mysticism” (2012, 166). Theosophy counted among its ideals chastity and selflessness and the Golden Dawn condemned greediness and squandering. In her doctrinal writing on her conversion, the theosophist Annie Besant, who already was a prominent Fabian, a socialist; and a campaigner for birth control, stressed the importance to strive for a universal brotherhood, an egalitarian society that would contribute to social betterment. If we look at members of Gonne’s upper-class *milieu*, Constance and Eva Goore-Booth were also interested in Theosophy and occultism and later turned to radical socialism, Bolshevism; and to campaigning for women’s suffrage. Like Gonne, Constance eventually turned to Catholicism; in her biography, Lauren

¹⁴ For a comprehensive history of Hermeticism, see Ebeling 2007. On the nineteenth-century tendency to psychologizing the hermetic and alchemic traditions, see Owen 2004, 13; 148-185.

¹⁵ For the significance of the double will, assumed personalities and the multiple self for Yeats and George Hyde-Lees the reference text is Harper 2006, in particular 164; 223; 225.

Arrington notes that what drew her to it was “the antimaterialist focus of Catholic doctrine” as well as a “newfound spiritualism [that] revived the mysticism that she had exercised at the turn of the century” (2016, 207).

Three letters provide case studies for the dialogue in Gonne's writings between the political and the visionary dimensions. After months of tireless work for the 1798 Centenary celebrations commemorating Wolfe Tone's failed revolution, which also coincided with a period of intense collaborative and individual occult work for the Celtic Mysteries, Gonne had a “strange dream” in which “[i]t seemed as if I was awakened by a loud deafening cry, ‘The Lion of the West is rising’, ‘The Lion is awake’ ” (GYL, 96). This dream speaks the mysteric language she and Yeats were in the process of creating. Its account is preceded by the description of a curious phenomenon she had seen a few nights before: bright rays of light across the sky had turned from white to blood red. Gonne came to believe that these mysterious rays were a forewarning of “some terrible upheaval in Europe” and rejected the explanation she had heard, namely that “in Paris people were making experiments with electric light projections, but of course this was nonsense” (GYL, 95). At this point she reports that “the papers say it was an Aurora Borealis” (*ibidem*), a natural phenomenon which, unlike the other possible explanation, is not dismissed and is read instead as a cataclysmic presage. In the light of the political unrest of those years Gonne interpreted her dream and the rays of light as omens of an imminent revolution in Ireland.

Two visions Gonne had in Paris during the First World War represent a similar but more layered occult interpretation of the fearful period she was living through. In November 1915 she describes a vision she had had at mass of thousand spirits of men killed in the war, among whom stood Irish soldiers. The description has strong religious undertones but the experience was occasioned by an Irish reel Gonne had been hearing for days. At mass she suddenly remembered where she had heard it: it was in Slieve Gullion, Northern Ireland, where the music seemed “to come out of the heart of the mountain” (GYL, 362). In her vision, soundscape and choreography blend into an image of spiritual completeness. The spirits of the Irish soldiers who were killed

are being marshalled & drawn together by waves of rhythmic music [...] into dances of strange patterns. [They] are being drawn together in this wild reel tune [...]. They are dancing to it, some with almost frenzied intensity & enthusiasm while others seem to be drawn in unwillingly not knowing why, but the rhythm is so strong & compelling they have to dance. It is leading them back to the spiritual Ireland from which they have wandered & where they would find their self realisation & perfectionment & to whom they would bring their strength. (GYL, 363)

The vision ended with a triumphant image: the Irish soldiers danced on “stronger & deeper Rhythms” and were led “to a deeper peace, the peace of the Crucified which is above the currents of nationalities & storms” (*ibidem*); yet, Gonne added, “for all that they will not be separated from Ireland for as an entity she has followed the path of Sacrifice & has tasted of the Grail & the strength they will bring her is greater” (*ibidem*). Ireland is seen as a spiritual womb from which the soldiers were separated and to which the tune was now leading them back. While the language is permeated by the vocabulary of Catholic redemption and resurrection, the vision is rooted in the land, literally in the soil – the music coming out of the mountain –, and in the soldiers: now all cleansed and blessed, they would not just resurrect, they would empower their motherland. Gonne's syncretic imagination merges the animism of the Irish land – the magic of its nature and the reel – with an ecstatic vision of Christ, his sacrifice with the sacrifice of the soldiers. The aural element in this vision is

especially evocative. An interesting coda to this letter found on a scrap of paper shows how lasting the memory of that music had been for Gonne and how strong its symbolism was. The nativist myth of a pure and noble Irish nation shines through the tune: “some day out of their [the Irish rhythms’] freshness, their primitiveness and their inconsequence a great deep power may be revealed or evolved” (*ibidem*).

At the beginning of the war Gonne had another vision, which she described in a letter to Yeats only in May 1916, a few days after she had got news of the Easter Rising in Dublin. In the first lines Gonne pays tribute to the men and women who took part in the armed occupation of the General Post Office. Despite their defeat “[t]hey have raised the Irish cause again to a position of tragic dignity” (*GYL*, 372). Towards the end of her letter she recalls a vision that had made her prescient of a tragedy that would happen in Dublin:

At the beginning of the war I had a horrible vision which affected me for days. I saw Dublin, in darkness & figures lying on the quays by O’Connell Bridge, they were either wounded or dying of hunger – It was so terribly clear it has haunted me ever since. There must have been scenes like that in the streets of Dublin the last days. (*GYL*, 373)

Her vision anticipated scenes that Gonne in fact would see in person later, in France, when she volunteered as a nurse in military hospitals. Whereas in the first part of the letter the political is sublimated through the mythology of sacrifice and the rhetoric of spiritual ennoblement, the vision is an example of “how the occult generates a commentary on the political trauma of Ireland” (Nally 2010, 3): it bears no traces of triumph, it reveals instead the anxiety over the Anglo-Irish war and the all too real consequences for her beloved Dublin.

One last, rather sinister, instance of the connection between the spiritual and the material dimension appears in the last chapter of the autobiography, and comes from a comparison drawn from sacred history, which is used to legitimate direct intervention in the Anglo-Irish situation. Gonne and MacBride shared similar ideas regarding the use of radical tactics to destabilise the English. While relating rumours of attempts on the part of the American Fenian Clan-na-Gael to sink English ships, she reports a dialogue with a reference to the story of Moses and the ten plagues; the story was meant to back her opinion that a more active campaign of bombings should have been pursued to make the Irish cause more visible to the world:

‘Such acts as those of Captain Mackey should be successive and continuous,’ I said. ‘It was the plagues of Egypt, successive and continuous and well advertised by Moses, that brought the Pharaoh [*sic*] to his senses, to let the Israelites escape, and broke the morale of the Egyptian people so much that they all lent money to the Israelites to clear out [...]. There is a lot to be learnt from that old story, but in our war we have no Moses’. (*SQ*, 346-347)

The Biblical precedent was invoked to legitimate past and prospective plans of dynamite attacks that would shake the English establishment, their “happy sense of security” (*SQ*, 346) and the moderate Irish parliamentarians. Unlike the visions that have been previously discussed, in which the dialectic between the two spheres results from Gonne’s direct experience as occultist, believer, dreamer and (self-)interpreter, here the spiritual plane is frozen into a paradigmatic story, removed from time and history, to serve the purpose of justifying violence. Joining forces with MacBride, the sacred mission to deliver Ireland from her oppressor was turned into a “divinely” inspired murderous project.

4. Conclusion

The textualization of the otherworldly dimension in Gonne's memoir and letters shows the layered nature of her "spirit world" and the complex relationship she had with it. In this respect this lens contributes to a composite image of Maud Gonne and enriches the more familiar one of a woman blinded by her battles, an image that both the poetic tradition and *A Servant of the Queen* helped to forge. Through this prism we see the humble servant of the Irish cause and the writer fascinated "with the symbolic power of a woman leading men to freedom" (Steele 2007, 89), who prides herself on being turned by popular imagination into one of those legendary women. As an activist, Gonne drew inspiration and support from her Celtic and Catholic spirituality. The supernatural could represent a channel of communication with her chosen country, its past and its people; conversely, in her private life it could manifest itself as a dark force alienating the self. Although Gonne's professed disinclination to examine herself is evident in the letters, which plunge the reader into her busy everyday routine, they leave space for brief reflective moments. Among them Gonne's thoughts regarding her conversion to Catholicism and her syncretic faith stand out, and *A Servant of the Queen* elaborates and expands them. In the latter text the first section shows careful writerly premeditation: in it all the threads that make up Gonne's composite faith are anticipated and the autobiography's central theme – her life's mission – thus proves to be inextricably linked with the supernatural from the beginning.

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