



The Yeatsian Henry More

Roberto Bondi

Università della Calabria (<roberto.bondi@unical.it>)

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Abstract:

Henry More, a Cambridge Platonist, was a significant influence on William B. Yeats, the greatest English-language poet of the 20th century. The aim of this essay is to show the presence of some Morean philosophical themes, particularly that of *anima mundi*, in Yeats's work.

Keywords: *Anima Mundi*, Great Memory, Henry More, Unconscious, W.B. Yeats

If Homer were abolished in every library & in every living mind the tale of Troy *might* still emerge as a *Vision*.
(George Yeats, November 1919)

1. Under the Influence of Cambridge Platonism

It has been almost a century since Ernst Cassirer brought to light a previously neglected group of thinkers known as the “Cambridge Platonists”: Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683), Henry More (1614-1687), Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), and John Smith (1618-1652). Cassirer's study, titled *Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge* (1932), was praised by Koyré as an excellent continuation of the great book *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Cassirer 1927). It seemed to Koyré that this study – which was not without criticism but was full of original and new ideas and penetrating analysis – was born out of an interest in the history of ideas (1935).

Since then, the literature on the Cambridge Platonists, in particular Henry More, has grown a great deal. Especially in recent decades, reprints (Cudworth 1995a; More 1997), new editions and translations (More 1987; More 1991, 1995; Cudworth 1995b, 1996; More 1998), and many studies have been published (Pacchi 1973; Cristofolini 1974; Micheletti 1984; Walker 1986; Hall 1990; Hutton 1990; Fouke 1997; Rogers, Vienne, Zarka 1997; Bondi 2001; Crocker 2003; Lotti 2004; Reid 2012; Hedley, Leech 2019). A far from marginal role played by this group of thinkers in the scientific revolution and in some

of the major philosophical and theological discussions of the time has emerged. These authors enriched the philosophical lexicon, coining and using many terms and expressions in a modern sense: materialism, hylozoism, Cartesianism, monotheism, theism and philosophy of religion. Long considered in the shadow of their alleged cultural backwardness, they exerted, as is now acknowledged, a decisive influence in the area of philosophy of religion and philosophy of mind.

Somewhat less well known, especially among historians of philosophy, is the influence that Henry More in particular exerted on the greatest English-language poet of the 20th century: William B. Yeats, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. Of the Cambridge Platonist, Yeats possessed the work in verse and prose (“Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places”, in Yeats 1994, 67, and Yeats 1920b, 328)¹, as scholars of the poet are well aware, who nevertheless in some cases failed to realize and in other cases underestimated Yeats’s reference to More. But who was Henry More to Yeats? What notions of More and Cambridge Platonism, in general, did Yeats, who had also read Ralph Cudworth, appropriate? How did he interpret and what use did he make of those notions?

2. *Premodern and Anti-modern*

“We were the last romantics – chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness” (Yeats 1956, 491)². Yeats was the heir to a great poetic tradition and – as Harold Bloom pointed out in a now-dated monograph – he knew very well that he was. He knew he was the heir of “visionaries who have sought to make a more human man, to resolve all the Sunderings of consciousness through the agency of the imagination” (Bloom 1970, 471). Those lines in “Coole Park and Ballylee”, written in 1931, contain probably the clearest expression of what Yeats thought he was (that “we” included Lady Gregory, who had been for nearly forty years his “strength” and his “conscience” (Yeats 1954, 796)³. In those lines and those that follow there was undoubtedly a rejection of the realism and naturalism of the second half of the nineteenth century, but there was also, and perhaps above all, a reference to tradition. “I have never said clearly that I condemn all that is not tradition”, he wrote two years before his death, and he reiterated: “Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing” (Yeats 1961, VIII, 522; Yeats 1999, 212). Yeats’s tradition is certainly not reducible to Romanticism as a specific historical period. According to Bloom, Yeats actually “occulted” the Romantic tradition and “merely gave birth to the bad line of pseudo-scholars who have been reducing Blake, Shelley, Keats, Spenser, and of course Yeats himself to esoteric doctrine in recent times”. The references to Henry More and the Platonists, for Bloom, would instead have been devoid of any particular significance, mere frills that make one lose sight of the properly romantic matrix of Yeats’s themes. Contrary to what Bloom thought, Yeats’s references to Cambridge Platonism, which are insistent and the result of intense study, are anything but frills.

Yeats recognized himself in a pre-Cartesian tradition, steeped in Platonism and Neo-Platonism (Arkins 1994, 279-289, 1990, 2010). Speaking of his philosophical book, *A Vision*, he wrote: “This book would be different if it had not come from those who claim to have died many times and in all they say assume their own existence. In this, it resembles nothing of philosophy from the time of Descartes but much that is ancient” (Yeats 1978, XI). Yeats’s interests, which permeated his poetry and without which his poetry would be incomprehensible, were, in many cases from

¹ Yeats also knew the works of Ralph Cudworth and Joseph Glanvill.

² “I was a romantic in all”, Yeats wrote at the beginning of the first draft of his *Autobiography* (1972, 19).

³ Letter To Mario M. Rossi, June 6, 1932. For the relationship between Yeats and Italian culture, see Fantaccini 2009.

the outset, oriented towards magic, Kabbalah, occultism, mysticism, spiritualism, theosophy, parapsychology, as well as oriental cultures and Celtic imagination. At twenty he founded the Dublin Hermetic Society which soon became the Dublin Theosophical Society, at twenty-one he attended his first séance, at twenty-two he met Madame Blavatsky and at twenty-five he was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. When founding that Society, Yeats had proposed “for our consideration that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth” (1999, 97)⁴. In 1901, in an essay entitled *Magic*, to which we will return, where the poet, musician, and artist were presented as the successors of the masters of magic, he made his profession of faith:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed. (Yeats 2007, 25)

Yeats was a pre-modernist, but he was also, fiercely, anti-modern. As George Orwell wrote in 1943, in a text in which he underlined the connection between the Irish poet’s style and his political and philosophical views, Yeats was “a great hater of democracy, of the modern world, science, machinery, the concept of progress – above all, of the idea of human equality”. If there is one thing constant in his works – Orwell added – it is “his hatred of modern Western civilization” (69, 71)⁵.

In *On the Boiler*, which he finished composing a few months before his death, Yeats wrote in clear letters: “Instead of hierarchical society, where all men are different, came democracy; instead of a science which had re-discovered *Anima Mundi*, its experiments and observations confirming the speculations of Henry More, came materialism” (1994, 237, italics in original). But Yeats did not give up and was convinced that the illusory nature of mechanical theory and the existence of the link between natural and supernatural would soon be realized.

3. *Yeats Reader of Henry More*

A few months before his death, Yeats had also finished composing “Under Ben Bulben”, which closes with the famous epitaph written for himself (“Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!”) (Yeats 1956, 636-640, 1954, 914). It is certainly one of his most Platonic poems, opening with the theme of the immortality of the soul, on which Yeats never tired of insisting (Yeats 1994, 237, 1956, 636-637). It is certainly no coincidence that one of Yeats’s favourite More texts was *The Immortality of the Soul*, first published in 1659, in a second edition in 1662 – in the collection also owned by Yeats (O’Shea 1985, 181) – and in Latin translation, with scholia, in 1679.

The first decades of the 20th century were for the Irish poet years of in-depth study of the Platonic tradition and of More in particular. In a letter to Lady Gregory dated 31 January 1912, he wrote: “I am deep in my ghost theory [...] I have now found a neoplatonic statement of practically the same theory. The spirit-body is formalist in itself but takes many forms or only keeps the form of the physical body ‘as ice keeps the shape of the bowl after the bowl is broken’ (that is the metaphor though not quite the phrase)” (Foster 1997, I,

⁴ For the relationship, in general, between Yeats and the occult, see Harper 1975.

⁵ On these issues see Nally 2010.

464). Yeats was referring to Henry More⁶, of whom Coleridge had said that he “had both the philosophic and the poetic genius, supported by immense erudition” (1836-1839, vol. 3, 157). Yeats had been dealing with this immense erudition during the summer of 1915, as he wrote in a letter to his father on September 12 (“Henry More, the seventeenth century platonist whom I have been reading all summer” (1954, 588). Yeats agreed with his father that “the poet seeks truth, not abstract truth, but a kind of vision of reality which satisfies the whole being” and added that “it will not be true for one thing unless it satisfies his desires, his most profound desires” (*ibidem*).

Yeats attributed to More the belief in a close link between deepest desires and truth: “Henry More the Cambridge Platonist so wisely explains that all our deep desires are images of the truth. We are immortal & shall as it were be dipped in beauty & good because he cannot be good but fulfill our desires” (2013, 321)⁷. More – Yeats wrote in the aforementioned letter to his father – “argues from the goodness and omnipotence of God that all our deep desires must be satisfied, and that we should reject a philosophy that does not satisfy them”. Yeats declared himself convinced that “the poet reveals truth by revealing those desires” (1954, 588). Of our deepest desires More had spoken in the philosophical poems, specifically in the section devoted to refuting “the all-devouring Unitie of Souls” and showing “how they bear their memorie with them when they remove”. Discussing, in the footsteps of Plotinus (IV, 3, 25-32), the memory of the soul, “the very bond of life”, More asks: “But can she here forget our radiant Sunne? / Of which its maker is the bright *Idee*, / This is His shadow; or what she hath done / Now she’s rewarded with the Deitie?”: “Suppose it: Yet her hid *Centralitie* / So sprightly’s quickned with near Union / With God, that now lifes wished liberty / Is so encreas’d, that infinitely sh’has fun / Herself, her deep’st desire unspeakably hath wonne”. That “deep desire” – More adds – “is the deepest act, / The most profound and centrall energie, / The very selfnesse of the soul, which backt / With piercing might, she breaks out, forth doth flie / From dark contracting death, and doth descry / Herself unto herself; so thus unfold / That actuall life she straightwayes saith, is I. / Thus while she in the body was infold, / Of this low life, as of herself oft tales she told” (1878, 130, 133: *Antimonopsychia, Or The fourth part of the Song of the Soul, Containing A confutation of the Unity of Souls*, italics in original).

Yeats’s immersion in More’s writings, during the summer months of 1915, was only an appendix, however significant, to a study that had been going on for a long time, as a letter of 3 May testifies: “I have been moping because day after day I was reading Henry More & a lot of old witch trials [...]” (Finneran 1977, 30).

4. *Pilgrim Spirit*

The reflections of Yeats’s reading of More during these years can be seen in a series of texts from 1914 to 1932. In “Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-lore” (1914), published in the first of Lady Gregory’s two volumes devoted to *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (Yeats 1920a, 245-262), one of the themes at the heart of Yeats’s interest in the Cambridge Platonists and the Platonic tradition, in general, emerges clearly: the theme of the soul leaving the body and the vehicles of the soul (248-249)⁸. More had dealt with this, especially in *The Immortality of the*

⁶ Not to Thomas More, as Angela Leighton mistakenly writes: see Leighton 2007, 146.

⁷ On “Leo Africanus”, see Hennessey 2004, 1019-1038; Nally 2006, 57-67.

⁸ Yeats’s references to More and the Julian Cox witch affair, see Glanvill 1681, 200. On the general theme of the soul leaving the body and the vehicles of the soul, the bibliography is now endless, but Klein’s work (1965) remains fundamental.

Soul, a text which, as already mentioned, Yeats knew very well, and which, in contrast to that “disease incurable”, to be pitied or laughed at, which is called “perfect *Scepticisme*”, dealt with a topic defined as one of the most relevant: the immortality of the soul and its “*Independence on this terrestriall body*” (More 1659, 1, 5, italics in original). The point of interest here had been addressed by More from the very first pages, in which he had taken care to defend his opinion on the “Vehicles of Daemons” and the “Souls separate” from the possible accusation of offending the “authority of the Schooles”. It is the “Schooles” – More pointed out with a syncretism with which Yeats felt in tune – who violate an authority older than themselves: that of the Pythagoreans, the Platonists, the Jewish Doctours and the Fathers of the Church, “who all hold that even the purest Angels have corporeal Vehicles” (More 1659, Preface, §6).

The part of *The Immortality of the Soul* specifically devoted to the subject is contained in a few chapters of Book II (but the theme will also return in Book III). The discussion of the migrating soul and its vehicles comes after certain theoretical cornerstones have been established. One of these is presented at the beginning and concerns the need to conceive of anything as extended:

For, to take away all Extension, is to reduce a thing onely to a Mathematical point, which is nothing else but pure Negation or Non-entity; and there being no *medium* betwixt extended and not-extended, no more then there is betwixt Entity and Non-entity, it is plain that if a thing be at all, it must be extended. (§3)

Even angels were to be thought of as compound beings, consisting of soul and body, “as that of Men and Brutes” (More 1659, 49). This is a decisive point in More’s metaphysics, which openly placed itself in an apologetic perspective (“For assuredly that Saying was nothing so true in Politicks, *No Bishop, no King*; as this is in Metaphysicks, *No Spirit, no God*”, More 1653, 164, italics in original). It was a matter of rejecting the idea that “the very notion of a *Spirit* or *Substance Immaterial* is a perfect Impossibility and pure Non-sense” (More 1659, 55, italics in original) because from that idea derived the impossibility of the existence of God, of the soul, of angels, of good and bad, of immortality, of life to come. More’s apologetic perspective, however, coexisted with a deep conviction of the real omnipresence of God in the world⁹. More thus intended to contrast himself with Descartes, *princeps nullibistarum*, i.e. those who, while admitting the existence of incorporeal realities, assert that they are nowhere to be found. On the contrary: “*Spirits* are as truly in Place as *Bodies*” (72, italics in original). The existence of incorporeal substances was for More an object of “demonstration” (“Let inconsiderable Philosophasters hoot at it, and deride it as much as their Follies please”, 108).

More thus ended up proposing a radical alteration to Cartesian metaphysics with surprising results in terms of the definition of substance. The nature of spirit appeared to him as conceivable and as easy to define as the nature of anything else. If “the very essence or bare substance” (1653, 11) of anything is utterly unknowable, the same cannot be said of its “essential and inseparable properties” (*ibidem*): *self-penetration, self-motion, self-contraction* and *dilatation, indivisibility*; to these properties must be added the power of *penetrating, moving* and *altering* matter (More 1653, 11). Whereas the body is an *impenetrable* and *discerpible* substance, the spirit is therefore a *penetrable* and *indiscerpible* substance that has the specific capacity to contract and dilate thanks to what More calls *essential spissitude*. This is a *mode* or *property* of the substance “that is able to receive one part of itself into another” (More 1659, 13): “Which fourth Mode is as easy and familiar to my Understanding, as that of the Three dimensions to my Sense or Fancy” (*ibidem*).

⁹ See, for example, More 1659, 22-23. In general, on the subject of omnipresence, see above all Funkenstein 1986, 23-116.

By *spissitude* – More emphasizes – is to be understood nothing other than “the redoubling or contracting of Substance into less space than it does sometimes occupy” (*ibidem*).

At the heart of More’s metaphysics, theology, and philosophy of nature, and imposed according to him by evidence of reason, is the *spirit of nature* (or *principium hylarchicum* or *inferiour soul of the world*), which was an enormous source of inspiration for Yeats. It is, for the Cambridge Platonist, not simply a “notion”, but a “real being”, i.e. an incorporeal substance “pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a plastical power therein”. More precisely, according to the “rude description” taken up by Yeats, “*The Spirit of Nature* [...] is, *A substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a plastical power therein according to the sundry predispositions and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such Phaenomena in the World, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into mere Mechanical powers*” (More 1659, 450, italics in original). The *spirit of nature* also has the power “of transporting of particular Souls and Spirits in their state of *Silence* and *Inactivity* to such Matter as they are in a fitness to catch life in again” (More 1659, 450, 469). The *spirit of nature* is always the same everywhere and always acts in the same way in similar circumstances, “as a clear-minded man and of a solid judgment gives alwaies the same verdict in the same circumstances” (466). In More’s view, the introduction of this principle, which takes the form of the *vicarious power of God* upon matter, would not have prejudiced the search for the mechanical causes of natural phenomena but would have prompted greater caution in distinguishing, in nature, what results from the mere mechanical powers of matter and motion from what is produced by a higher-order principle.

The themes of the soul leaving the body and the vehicles of the soul, addressed by More in Book II (and later in Book III) of *The Immortality of the Soul*, presuppose all this and leave the field open to the topic of apparitions. Those that are referred to by this term – More emphasizes – “are so far from being merely the Dreams and Fancies of the Superstitious, that they are acknowledged by such as cannot but be deemed by most men over Atheisticall” (More thinks here of Pomponazzi, Cardano, and Vanini). Undeniably demonstrating the existence of spirits and incorporeal substances in the world are those extraordinary effects, certainly not natural, that are omnipresent in everyday life and that we can generically call apparitions: “Such are speakings, knockings, opening of doores when they were fast shut, sudden lights in the midst of a room floating in the aire, and then passing and vanishing; nay, shapes of Men and severall sorts of Brutes, that after speech and converse have suddainly disappeared” (66, 98-99). On this theme, in which Yeats showed a profound and pervasive interest, More had dwelt a few years earlier in *An Antidote against Atheism* (Book III), as he now recalls in *The Immortality of the Soul*, presenting it as “the last proof of Incorporeall Substances”, and had cited “so many and so unexceptionable storyes concerning *Apparitions*, that I hold it superfluous to adde any thing here of that kind” (90). More now preferred “exercising” his reason rather than “recording” history. But the subject of apparitions was, in general, too important to take for granted: later in Book II, he takes it up again.

Books II and III are, as already mentioned, the places where More addresses the theme of the migrating soul and its vehicles. We can now, finally, dwell on this. The notion of vehicles of the soul is considered by More to be fundamental to understanding how the soul enters into the terrestrial body; the union of soul and matter is representable in terms not of a *mechanical way*, but of a *vital congruity*, which, identified with a faculty in the plastic part of the soul, does not indicate the presence of life in matter, but only that matter is rendered “a congruous Subject for the Soul to reside in, and exercise the functions of life” (More 1659, 253). That notion of vehicles of the soul is considered by More to be in essence a Platonic notion: it was the Platonists who posited the existence of three vehicles, *aethereal*, *aerial* and *terrestrial*, distinguished only

by *purity, consistency, and duration*. But More is well aware that the notion was also traced back to Aristotle, in particular the endlessly discussed passage from *De generatione animalium* (II, 3, 736b33-737a1). According to More's interpretation "the full and express meaning therefore of *Aristotles* text must be this, that in the spumeous and watry or terrene moisture of the seed is contained a Body of a more spirituuous or aëreal consistency, and in this aëreal or spirituuous consistency is comprehended [...] *a nature that is analogous or like to the Element of the stars*, namely that it of it self *aethereal* and *lucid*": "And it is this *Vehicle* that *Aristotle* seems to assert that the Soule does act in, separate from the Body; as if she were ever either in this *terrestrial* Body, or in her *aethereal* one" (More 1659, 259-260, 263, 270, italics in original). Given that the Platonists' is a "more orderly conceit", the fact remains that the soul can live and act in both an *aerial* and *aethereal* vehicle. And just as there are three vehicles, there are also three *vital congruities*, namely *terrestrial, aerial* and *aethereal* or *celestial*.

More takes up the Platonic theme, which was so successful in the Renaissance, of the absence of envy in the divine, and emphasizes that "it is not to be thought but that He has framed our Faculties so, that when we have rightly prepared our selves for the use of them, they will have a right correspondency with those things that are offered to them to contemplate in the world". Having ascertained that it is evident that those three *congruities* are to be found in "severall Subjects", what prevents us from thinking of the co-presence of all three in a single subject, that is, in the human soul, and more precisely in the plastic part of the human soul? It is precisely because of those three *congruities* that the soul is able to unite livingly with the body whether *celestial, aerial, or terrestrial*. The denial to the soul of the ability to live in these different vehicles amounts to "a reproach to Providence" (272-273). Here More can close the circle in the sign of what appears to him to be perfect intelligibility, to such an extent that it will be possible to express himself through axioms, such as the one according to which "the *Soule* separate from this *Terrestrial* Body is not released from all *Vital Union* with Matter" (328). It, therefore, becomes perfectly understandable how the soul leaves the body. The cessation of one vital congruence is simply the awakening of another congruence. The testimony of history and the reason show to the unprejudiced that human souls subsist and act after they have left earthly bodies. Not only that. The soul has the power to change "the *temper* of her *Aiery Vehicle*, but also of the external *shape* thereof" (338, italics in original).

These theses are borne in mind by Yeats in various writings, including a 1914 text, "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places", published in the second of Lady Gregory's two volumes devoted to *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) (see Yeats 1920b, 295-339)¹⁰. Quoting passages from More's philosophical poems dealing with the pre-existence of the soul, Yeats insists on the existence of the airy body or spirit body, which was, before birth, and will be, after death, our only body¹¹. And quoting passages from *The Immortality of the Soul*, he compares More with Philoponus and insists on the plastic power of the soul and the *figure* or *shape* of the vehicles of the *genii* (More 1659, 384).

¹⁰ In a note in the first of Lady Gregory's two volumes devoted to *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, Yeats referred to More and his *spiritus mundi*. After quoting Cornelius Agrippa, Yeats wrote: "Henry More is more precise and philosophical and believes that this air which he calls *Spiritus Mundi* contains all forms, so that the parents when a child is begotten, or a witch when the double is projected as a hare, but as it were, call upon the *Spiritus Mundi* for the form they need" (Gregory 1920, I, 278; Yeats 1994, 271). See More 1659, 387-397; Glanvill 1681, 199-200.

¹¹ See More 1878, 127 (*The Praeexistency of the Soul, Added as an Appendix to this third part of the Song of the Soul*): "Wherefore who thinks from souls new souls to bring / The same let presse the Sunne beams in his fist / And squeez out drops of light, or strongly wring / The Rainbow, till it die his hands, well-prest".

But Yeats's great poetry is also steeped in these themes. Yeats scholars often fail to realize either the presence of these themes or, above all, their philosophical source. In the autumn of 1926, he wrote "Sailing to Byzantium" with that incipit ("That is no country for old men") that was so successful outside the poetic sphere. Commenting on this poem for a radio programme in 1931, Yeats states: "Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called "Sailing to Byzantium". Byzantium appeared to him as the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy. The journey to that city was the symbol of the quest for "spiritual life"¹². This extraordinary poem closes like this: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; / Or set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (Yeats 1956, 408). The first two verses are incomprehensible if one disregards what is said in this paragraph. In the important exegesis of Yeats's poems by Alexander Norman Jeffares, who is also familiar with Yeats's prose passages on the subject of the vehicles of the soul (Jeffares 1968, 355), we surprisingly find no comments whatsoever on the two verses in question (256-257).

5. *Yeats and Henry More's Anima Mundi*

The theme of the vehicles of the soul is also present in the "little philosophical book" (Yeats 1954, 624) that Yeats wrote in 1917 and which came out the following year under the title *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918)¹³. It consists of a "Prologue", a poem entitled "Ego Dominus Tuus", two parts entitled "Anima hominis" and "Anima mundi" (but another title considered was "Spiritus Mundi"), and an "Epilogue" from which the major legacy that the Cambridge Platonist left Yeats emerges: the *anima mundi*. The text is not by chance dominated by the figure of Henry More, "who was called during his life the holiest man now walking upon the earth" (Yeats 1994, 20)¹⁴. Yeats writes that when with More and with the Platonists in general we attribute to all souls a vehicle or body, we avoid the abstract schools and find ourselves with great poetry, and with superstition which is nothing but popular poetry, and we find ourselves "in a pleasant dangerous world". Drawing on the reflections and quotations (e.g. Hippocratic¹⁵) contained in *The Immortality of the Soul*, Yeats dwells here on the relationship between the vehicle of the human soul and the animal spirits (the vehicle of the human soul is what used to be called the animal spirits), which "fill up all parts of the body and make up the body of

¹² Yeats's note is quoted in Jeffares 1968, 253-254.

¹³ The title is taken from Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 255 and was translated by Yeats as "Through the friendly silences of the moon" (Yeats 1994, 293).

¹⁴ For the definition, see Ward 2000, 54.

¹⁵ See More 1659, 200-201: "That this *thin* and *Spirituos Matter* is the immediate engine of the Soule in all her operations, is in a manner the generall opinion of all Philosophers. And even those that have placed the Common *Sensorium* in the *Heart*, have been secure of the truth of this their conceit, because they took it for granted, that the left Ventricle thereof was the fountain of these pure and subtile Spirits, and please themselves very much, in that they fancied that Oracle of Physitians, the grave and wise *Hippocrates*, to speak their own sense so fully and significantly, [...] *That the mind of man is in the left Ventricle of his Heart, and that it is not nourished from meats and drinks from the belly, but by a clear and luminous Substance that redounds by separation from the blood:* which is that which happens exactly in the Brain. For the Spirits there are nothing else but more pure and subtile parts of the blood, whose tenuity and agitation makes them separate from the rest of the mass thereof, and so replenish the Ventricles of the Brain". For the Hippocratic quotation, see Hippocrates 1825, 490.

air” (*ibidem*)¹⁶. He insists on the plastic power of the soul and its ability, after death or even in life, when the vehicle should leave the body for some time, to shape it at will by an act of imagination. Above all, he introduces the theme that is the greatest legacy of More’s thought, the theme of the *anima mundi*.

The vehicle once separate from the living man or woman may be moulded by the souls of others as readily as by its own soul, and even it seems by the souls of the living. It becomes a part for a while of that stream of images which I have compared to reflections upon water. But how does it follow that souls who never have handled the modelling tool or the brush, make perfect images? Those materialisations who imprint their powerful faces upon paraffin wax, leave there sculpture that would have taken a good artist, making and imagining, many hours. How did it follow that an ignorant woman could, as Henry More believed, project her vehicle in so good a likeness of a hare, that horse and hound and huntsman followed with the bugle blowing? Is not the problem the same as of those finely articulated scenes and patterns that come out of the dark, seemingly completed in the winking of an eye, as we are lying half asleep, and of all those elaborate images that drift in moments of inspiration or evocation before the mind’s eye? (Yeats 1994, 21-22)

Yeats, thus, based on precise Morean suggestions, foregrounds the theme of the *anima mundi*. For what are our animal spirits or vehicles if not the condensation of the vehicle of the *anima mundi*? What else do they do but give substance to its images “in the faint materialisation of our common thought, or more grossly when a ghost is our visitor”? (Yeats 1994, 22)¹⁷. Yeats thus welded the idea of *spirit of nature*, of *anima mundi*, of *spiritus mundi* with the idea of a *great memory*, understood as a universal memory, a kind of Jungian collective unconscious¹⁸. Yeats sometimes spoke of the *subconscious* (as a synonym for *unconscious*), distinguishing it from the *mind of the race* (Yeats 1999, 280). At other times he used the term *unconscious*: “Henry More saw but the like problem in the formation of a child in the womb, believing [that] the imagination [of] the unborn but gave an impulse towards form completed by ‘Spiritus Mundi’

¹⁶ In 1924, Yeats adds this note: “This passage, I think, correctly represents the thought of Henry More, but it would, I now believe, have corresponded better with facts if I had described this “clear luminous substance” [see previous note] as a sense-material envelope, moulded upon “the body of air”, or true “vehicle”; and if I had confined to it the words “animal spirits”. It must, however, be looked upon as surviving, for a time, the death of the physical body. The spirits do not get from it the material from which their forms are made, but their forms take light from it as one candle takes light from another”. Rather, to make More’s position clear, Yeats should have emphasized that for the Cambridge Platonist animal spirits are not the “common percipient” in our bodies, are not capable of “sensation”, “imagination and rational invention” or “memory” (and should have recalled More’s insistence on animal spirits in the fourth ventricle of the brain).

¹⁷ “Henry More will have it that a hen scared by a hawk when the cock is treading, hatches out a hawk-headed chicken (I am no stickler for the fact), because before the soul of the unborn bird could give the shape ‘the deeply impassioned fancy of the mother’ called from the general cistern of form a competing image. ‘The soul of the world’, he runs on, ‘interposes and insinuates into all generations of things while the matter is fluid and yielding, which would induce a man to believe that she may not stand idle in the transformation of the vehicle of the daemons, but assist the fancies and desires, and so help to clothe them and to utter them according to their own pleasures; or it may be sometimes against their wills as the unwieldiness of the mother’s fancy forces upon her a monstrous birth’”. (Yeats 1994, 21-22). See More 1659, 391 (*chickens with hawks heads*), 395 (*the deeply-impassioned fancy of the Mother snatches away the Spirit of Nature into consent*); 397 (*the Soul of the Word... Monstrous birth*, my italics). Yeats adds another quotation here: “Though images appear to flow and drift, it may be that we but change in our relation to them, now losing, now finding with the shifting of our minds; and certainly Henry More speaks by the book, in claiming that those images may be hard to the right touch as “pillars of crystal” and as solidly coloured as our own to the right eyes”. See More 1659, 348. See also Yeats 2013, 327-328.

¹⁸ On the affinities between Yeats and Jung see Oliva 1989. See also Ellmann 1954, 151.

which is perhaps that world, your century has named the unconscious”; “We are the unconscious as you say or as I prefer to say the animal spirits freed from the will, & moulded by the images of Spiritus Mundi” (Yeats 2013, 328, 334). Retracing the path that had led him to these convictions, he emphasized that, faced with the emergence of images, although he had no clear answer as to their nature, he knew that he was faced with the *anima mundi* of which the Platonists spoke, and in particular Henry More, who attested to its existence using the bird’s instinct as an example; that *anima mundi* “which has a memory independent of embodied individual memories, though they constantly enrich it with their images and their thoughts” (Yeats 1999, 210). In *My Friend’s Book* More becomes a truly decisive source:

But what if Henry More was right when he contended that men and animals drew not only universals but particulars from a supersensual source? May we not be compelled to change all our conceptions should it be proved that, in some crisis of life perhaps, we have access to the detailed circumstantial knowledge of other minds, or to the wisdom that has such knowledge for a foundation; or, as Henry More believed – unless I have forgotten his long essay on *The Immortality of the Soul*, toiled through some fifteen years ago – that the bees and birds learn to make nest and comb from that *Anima Mundi* which contains the knowledge of all dead bees and birds? (Yeats 1994, 114-115)

Yeats had by no means forgotten the content of More’s *The Immortality of the Soul*, who had set out his views on the subject in a passage in Book III. After clarifying what was to be understood by spirit of nature and proving its existence, More referred to nesting (1659, 467-469). Now instead Yeats “knew” that “revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest; and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind” (Yeats 1999, 216-217). In the 1901 essay on magic, however, Yeats had clarified the meaning of his belief in the existence of a *great mind* and a *great memory* within the sort of profession of faith that has already been mentioned (“I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed”). Yeats claimed to believe “in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices”. The first doctrine is that “the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy”; the second is that “the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself”; the third is that “this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols”. Here, Yeats spoke of visions and evocations of spirits, quoted Joseph Glanvill and William Blake, insisted on the power of symbols and emphasized the existence of a *memory of nature* that brings to light events and symbols from remote centuries. At the same time, he was aware that he engendered “a most natural incredulity” and ended up among “those lean and fierce minds who are at war with their time”. And he affirmed the duty to cry out that “imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory”. His belief was indeed that “our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often [...] not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven” (Yeats 2007, 25, 33, 38, 41).

The Cambridge Platonist was not quoted here. In the “little philosophical book” of 1917, however, he was called upon, especially through the aforementioned “rude description” of the *spirit of nature* contained in *The Immortality of the Soul* (More 1659, 450), and placed among

the sources of these doctrines: “Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea; Henry More’s *Anima Mundi*, Wordsworth’s ‘immortal sea which brought us hither [...] and near whose edge the children sport’ ”. (Yeats 1994, 18; Wordsworth 1807, II, 156). In sleep or wakefulness, images surface that one ends up finding in books one has never read before: it was impossible, in Yeats’s opinion, not to arrive at the belief in a *great memory* that is transmitted from one generation to the next. There is no reason to distinguish between mental images and apparitions: in all cases, it is a matter of “forms existing in the general vehicle of *Anima Mundi*, and mirrored in our particular vehicle”, of that *anima mundi* which is to be thought of as “a great pool or garden”. With it, we communicate through “the association of thoughts or images or objects”. Yeats refers to the Morean notion of *vital congruity* and defends the idea that, through changes in this *congruity*, the soul attracts “a certain thought, and this thought draws by its association the sequence of many thoughts”. He insists that “we carry to *Anima Mundi* our memory, and that memory is for a time our external world”, and closes with melancholic tones:

I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them: everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs; I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end. It seems as if the vehicle had suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that the images from *Anima Mundi*, embodied there and drunk with that sweetness, would, like a country drunkard who has thrown a wisp into his own thatch, burn up time. (Yeats 1994, 22-23, 27, 31)

In the same years, Yeats gave these themes poetic expression. “The Second Coming” is from 1919: “The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out / When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* / Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds” (Yeats 1956, 402). From the same year is “An Image from a Past Life”, accompanied, in the 1921 edition, by a long note in which Yeats dwells on the relationship between dreams and memory and, above all, on the *spiritus mundi*, defined as “a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit” (389-390, 822). The references could be multiplied. An in-depth study, on these themes, of Yeats’s entire poetry would be interesting.

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