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The Position of George Russell (A.E.) in the Celtic Renaissance

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THE POSITION OF GEORGE RUSSELL (A. E.)
IN THE CELTIC RENAISSANCE

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE REAWAKENING OF THE GAEL

Stephen Gwynn, discussing the power and beauty of Yeats' "Kathleen ni Houlihan", writes that wherever the play was presented audiences were quick to appreciate the full significance of the final lines, the sudden and dramatic transformation of the shawled, mumbling old woman into a young girl with the "walk of a queen." For here in essence was the challenge of a people who had to all appearances relinquished a last tenuous hold upon their cultural and political birthright.

Something of the same excitement must have quickened the literary world when it was made aware of the Celtic Renaissance. A golden age in literature traditionally corresponds to an era of peace and plenty. It is the fruit of order and stability and of that national enthusiasm which success and well-being engender. By a striking paradox however, the efflorescence of the Celtic genius in the late nineteenth century found the land poverty-stricken, torn by dissension, bled white by famine and emigration, still struggling to free itself of foreign domination, yet emerging in a role of spiritual beauty and high aspiration to claim its ancient place among the nations.

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Such a transformation obviously could not spring into being over night, but in tracing back the revitalization of Irish nationality, one will observe that at the end of the eighteenth century Ireland was much more a national entity than at the close of the nineteenth, for she had at least her own language and customs. The Penal Laws had made exiles of the Gaels in their own country, excluding them from education and every opportunity for advancement. Despite this it would seem they had nurtured and preserved that typical Celtic culture of which the Irish in the nineteenth century grew so careless, but which they were subsequently so eager to revive as the most essential element of their native life. Though hunted from their own land in that dark, earlier age, and driven for shelter among the hills and wild bare places of the West, they were not a mob, Corkery asserts, but "residuary legatees of a civilization more than a thousand years old."\(^2\) This was the very pivot of all they knew, and it explains the power of the great literary tradition which bound the race together and created a unity which political power could not secure. Alice Stopforth Green emphasizes this same point:

If we turn to Ireland . . . we find a country where for some fifteen hundred years, as far back as historic knowledge can reach, one national force has overshadowed and dominated all others. It has been the power of a great literary tradition. Political power was not centralized, and no single man.

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was in a position to determine what the people should think, believe or do. But in the learned tradition of the race there was a determined order. In their intellectual and spiritual inheritance was the very essence of national life, the substance of its existence, the warrant of its value, the assurance of its continuity.

Imperial conquest aimed at complete assimilation by the destruction of everything Irish. English alone could be spoken in the schools. Thomas Davis, early in the nineteenth century, had urged the necessity of an educational system under national control, but the famine of 1847, the ensuing insurrection, and the reaction which followed obliterated Davis's efforts. As time went on, interest centered more and more in the political fight and the struggle for land, while the slow relinquishment of a distinctive culture passed unnoticed. Ireland was becoming Anglicized, was becoming, in the phrase of the time, "West Britain," and some desperate effort was needed to rescue it from foreign assimilation. When an Anglo-Irish literature made its appearance it was too often the voice of an alien with no sympathetic understanding of the forgotten Innisfail.

With the passing of Gaelic as a literary medium, there emerged the "stage Irishness" of Samuel Lover and Charles Lever, presented in novels pretending to deal with Irish life, and the vehement devotion of Davis and the poets of "The Nation" school--writings which amounted to politics in verse, and which in their absorption in patriotic themes reflected too narrow a phase to permit them to be termed truly representative.

Ibid., p.60. Green, cited above by Corkery.
Creative instincts were stifled by political interests, and it is not until Mangan and Ferguson that the real precursors of the Literary Revival are met. Gwynn assesses their contributions:

In brief the Gaelic Revival derives from Ferguson insofar as it means a return to the primitive or mediaeval monuments of Celtic imagination, and from Mangan insofar as it means an adoption of what is transferable in Gaelic style and technique. . . . These men, however, had little scientific knowledge of the ancient language, so it is not surprising that they failed to catch, save now and then, the spirit of Gaelic; and that they had as a rule only certain tricks of phrase.4

Nevertheless to them may be credited a broader and purer concept of race, quite independent of political sentiment, a diversion of poetry from polemics to its truer function. The new element which they introduced into literature was the substitution of a sense of nationality for aggressive nationalism. However, they lacked those qualifications conspicuous in those who were the true initiators of the Revival, qualifications which were to unite Ireland with her severed past, and to produce the extraordinary awakening known as the Celtic Renaissance.

This impulse was to receive its direction in the last quarter of the century when Standish O'Grady succeeded in arousing the country to a creative sense of its antiquity. The publication in 1878 of the History of Ireland provided the spark which set the nation aglow with a new appreciation of its heritage, and a pride of race which was to find

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outlet in many movements, all conducive to refashioning the national life
after an image conceived in the rediscovered Gaelic mind. Like Mallory,
O'Grady explored the voluminous epics and lays of previous centuries, made
available by earlier writers, and recreated for modern readers Cuchulain,
Queen Maeve, Deirdre, Conchobar, and others, and so furnished material
for later poets and authors and scholars. Every important writer from Yeats
donow has acknowledged his debt to him. George Russell discloses his own
reaction to the History:

I was at the time like many others who were bereaved of
the history of their race. . . . It was the memory of race
which rose up within me when I read and I felt exalted as one
who learns that he is among the children of kings. . . . In
O'Grady's writings the submerged river of national culture
rose up again, a shining torrent, and I realized as I bathed
in that stream that the greatest spiritual evil one nation
could inflict upon another was to cut off from it the story
of the national soul. . . . He was the last champion of the
Irish aristocracy, and still more the voice of conscience
for them, and he spoke to them of their duty to the nation
as one might imagine some fearless prophet speaking to a
council of degenerate princes. . . . It was he who made me
proud and conscious of my country and recalled my mind that
might have wandered otherwise over too vague a field of
thought, to think of the earth under my feet and the children
of our common mother.5

Boyd, while admitting that O'Grady wrote as a poet rather than
an historian, concludes:

[He] infused the new spirit which was to revitalize Irish lit-
erature. . . . He undertakes the reconstruction by imagin-

5
A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, (Dublin: Maunsel & Roberts,
ative processes of the life led by our ancestors in this country . . . sees the gods and demigods, the heroes and kings of Irish history with the eyes of an epic imagination. He is not concerned with deciding the exact point at which legends merge into history, but embraces the whole epoch.6

The enthusiasm of O'Grady focused attention upon racial sources as the foundation for a new literature which would carry on the tradition of the old, and upon the rich inspiration to be gained from Ireland's classical inheritance. Seemingly over-night the Celtic movement assumed form, taking the outside world completely by surprise. The truly remarkable thing about the Revivalists was their complete unanimity of purpose. In realizing their aspiration to reveal to the world the dignity and beauty of the history and achievements of their race, they proved that, despite centuries of sorrow and suffering, the Celtic soul survived—distinctive and original, embodying lofty ideals.

Not long after the publication of O'Grady's work, a club was founded in Southwark, London, to serve as a cultural center for the Irish people of that city, and to teach them the history of their mother country. Gradually the emphasis was shifted to literary phases—lectures on Irish subjects, the collection of works of their native poets, and the encouragement of new talent among the members. The reputation and influence of the club grew. In 1888, one of its meetings was attended by Yeats, who shortly

thereafter was instrumental in reorganizing it on a new basis, chiefly to further the cultivation and spread of the works of Irish authors. A similar society had been forming meanwhile in Dublin, and between the two groups there occurred a steady interchange of men and ideas.

The stimulation of interest in literature was heightened by the sudden collapse of political preoccupations. While Parnell was wresting one victory after another from the English government, scant attention was given to divergent views upon literary excellence. But in the disillusionment which followed his overthrow, the decay of the nation was revealed with appalling clearness, and men and women eagerly grasped at any means which offered hope of national deliverance. They realized that something was vitally wrong, and that the solution lay not in politics but in education. With political pressure withdrawn, the intellectual forces which had been germinating and gathering strength in the early eighties found an outlet. The fall of Parnell would thus appear less the cause of the Renaissance than the symbol of the change.

Salvation came in many guises, for the rebirth of Ireland proceeded not from literature alone, but from several streams of activity converging upon the national consciousness. The Revival is generally attributed to William Butler Yeats, and is assumed to have taken direction from his political and artistic enthusiasms—a purely literary phenomenon, the product of an intellectual aristocracy divorced from life and its problems. It is, on the contrary, the outgrowth of many forces, social,
political, and artistic, motivated by a single aim, the reconstruction of Irish life through the intellectual emancipation of its people.

One of the foremost among these agencies in the far-reaching character of its effect on the general public was the revival of Gaelic initiated by Douglas Hyde. Believing like Davis that the essence of nationality is embodied in the language, and that the soul of the race is expressed in its living speech as well as in its writings and art, he devoted his energies to reviving the ancient and rapidly dying mother tongue, and to giving Ireland a modern literature in her own language. Though his countrymen had stubbornly resisted for almost six hundred years all efforts to foist an alien speech upon them, Hyde had tremendous obstacles to surmount. His labors to restore Gaelic met with ignorance and apathy and even hostility. Most English-speaking Irishmen looked upon the ancient tongue much as George Moore did before his conversion. He states that his conception of it was "dark, muddy stuff, much like the porter drunk by the peasant, who cursed and cudgelled in it," a dialect stained by social stigma, no longer acceptable in polite usage, or found in the expression of the educated. Scholars like Mahaffy and Atkinson, after superficial consideration, had decided that Gaelic did not repay study, as there was no literature in it worth reading. But Hyde's enthusiasm and determination at length prevailed. He set about collecting and translating the folk songs

7 George Moore, Hail and Farewell, (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1911), I, p. 139.
and legends that were passing from the lips of the Irish speaking peasantry
in order to preserve and restore the language in which they were sung and
told. He organized the Gaelic League and toured America to collect funds
for it. Through his instrumentality Gaelic became compulsory both in the
schools and the National University of Ireland. Furthermore, his trans-
lations of the old songs had a definite effect upon the prose style of the
Revival. His Love Songs of Connacht and Religious Songs of Connacht have
been the inspiration of a multitude of later writers who learned from him
to enrich their work with an authentic local flavor. By making use of the
language of the English-speaking peasant he exposed the absurdities of the
stage Irishman, and gave Synge the eloquent speech of the Playboy of the
Western World.

Where the Romanticists had cried "Back to Nature" to escape
the shallowness of the eighteenth century, Hyde's summons "Back to Gaelic
Ireland" was a call to escape national oblivion, to recover what had spon-
taneously developed through the centuries and what was genuinely Celtic.
The appeal was answered with avidity, and before long one hundred and fifty
Gaelic branches were established, and political meetings were replaced by
village gatherings where Irish songs were sung and old stories retold in
the vernacular. Yeats testifies that as many as fifty thousand textbooks
were sold in one year. 8 So eager were the people to learn their native

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8 William Butler Yeats, "The Literary Movement in Ireland," 
Ideals in Ireland, edited by Lady Gregory, (London: At the Unicorn, 1901), p.89.
tongue and history that evening classes had to be held for those employed daytimes. John Synge too, describes the interest in the movement taken by the women of the Aran Islands. Because of its non-political, non-sectarian character, its value was enhanced: "The language," George Moore wrote, "is the one sort of Irish earth on which we can all stand united." Because the League stimulated pride in the past and a new and vital interest in life, it was to prove not only a path to unity, but a social and spiritual revolution.

In the late eighties, Anglo-Irish literature had as yet attracted little attention, existing for the most part only in the dreams and aspirations of young men. For these were the youthful days of the Revival when interest in the national heritage was burgeoning, making ready to blossom forth in the accomplishments of the twentieth century. Throughout the opening years of the nineties, Yeats and his coterie, catching the vital spark of inspiration and the dominant note of Celticism, set themselves to the reproduction in English of the subject matter and charm of style that distinguished the ancient literature of Ireland, and to develop an idiom which should be essentially Irish even though it used another tongue as medium.

While Yeats was planning a poetic style which he might leave to those who were to come after him, much in the manner of the great masters

9 Boyd, p. 46.
of the Renaissance who bequeathed their techniques to their followers, George Sigerson was laboring to make available the unheeded literary heritage of two thousand years, and George Russell began his work of comparing and unifying the mysticism of the Gaelic mind with that of other nations. Younger poets, whose work Yeats sponsored in Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland, announced their intention of writing on themes drawn from the imaginative inheritance of the race, its heroic legends, fairy stories and folk lore. In brief, preoccupation with political hatred of England gave way to a new and engrossing interest in Ireland, and the result has been a literature which stands apart from the English, with a character of its own, wrought of a different genius, offering the spectacle of a national and racial consciousness becoming articulate in a distinctive and beautiful speech.

Morris traces an analogy between the literary activity that ensued and the history of Elizabethan literature:

Both were the fulfillment of a desire for a purely national art; in both instances creative activity was prefaced and accompanied by critical discussion dealing with the general theory of poetry and with the medium of expression to be employed; and finally the creative intelligence of both periods was directed toward poetry, the drama, and in its latest development, the novel.10

Scholars in various parts of the world busied themselves with the study and translation of Gaelic. In the eighties de Jubainville

wrote of the Tuatha De Danaan, tracing in the legends a racial mythology, and emphasizing the antiquity of Irish culture. Windisch in Germany opened to students the ancient world which O'Donovan and O'Curry had explored by publishing a grammar of Old Irish and a vocabulary of Middle Irish. Scholars from other countries—Bavaria, Austria, and America—joined in the research to save the past from oblivion. Manuscripts from the ninth century on were copied, edited, arranged, and translated, and the vast treasure of a highly developed and highly individual civilization, revealed in a vernacular literature going back to prehistoric times, was laid bare to the world.

Yeats, writing of the need for the return to Gaelic if the country were to hope for a culture of her own, indicates its shortcomings, yet points to its necessity:

Before 1891 Unionists and Nationalists were too busy keeping one or two simple beliefs at their fullest intensity for any complexity of thought or emotion; and the national imagination uttered itself with a somewhat broken energy, in a few stories and in many ballads about the need of unity against England, about the martyrs who had died at the hand of England, or about the greatness of Ireland before the coming of England. They built up Ireland's dream of Ireland, of an ideal country weighted down by immemorable sorrows and served by heroes and saints, and they taught generations of young men to love their country with a love that was the deepest emotion they were ever to know; but they built with the virtues and beauties and sorrows and hopes that move to tears the greatest number of those eyes before whom the modern world is but beginning to enroll itself; and except when some rare, personal impulse shaped the song according to its will, they built to the formal and conventional rhythm which would give the most immediate pleasures to
ears that had forgotten Gaelic poetry and had not learned the subtleties of English poetry.

The return to primitive sources therefore, gave color and tradition to the new literature, and rendering it more akin to the Gaelic than the English genius, released Irish culture from intellectual dependence upon England.

The New Ireland, which seemed to Yeats "as full of energy as a boiling pot," found another avenue of expression stemming from this awakened pride in the past, and taking form in poetry and drama. If the newly aroused interest were not to be dissipated in trivial movements, some fusion of activity was essential, Boyd points out, and the little group of writers known as the "Dublin Mystics", by living and working in and for their own country, strengthened the roots of Irish authorship and gave substance to the general literary movement. All were imbued with the same ideals and fired with the same ardor for a national tradition in literature. They concentrated and condensed the hitherto scattered elements of the Revival, and gave a very desirable homogeneity to the rather isolated or unrelated efforts of individuals in England and Ireland.

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11 Yeats, op. cit., p. 88.
12 Loc. cit.
13 Boyd, op. cit., p. 212.
The study of mysticism was the common factor which brought together Yeats, Charles Johnston, John Eglinton, and George Russell. The Hermetic Society which they launched provided an intellectual center whose sphere of influence extended far beyond its own immediate circle; but more important, it furnished a rallying ground for both older and younger writers, a contact between widely diverse opinions and personalities which broadened the appeal of the new literature and emphasized its marked advance over previous movements. It was his encounter with John O'Leary, for example, that inspired Yeats with the idea of developing a literature which would throw Irish thought back upon its own traditions. With this principle George Russell was in complete agreement, for to him nationality was less a political than a spiritual force having its foundation in the soul of the race. How much Russell influenced Yeats, or Yeats, Russell, is debatable, but certain it is that at this point in their lives they were in entire accord, inspired by a mutual desire to serve their country, and out of ancient beauty to evolve forms which would be a creative force in the land. For the first time there was a deliberate concentration of effort upon the foundation of a new literature which would carry on the traditions of the old, upon a poetry, national and racial, but in a more profound, subtle and pervasive manner.

Through their leadership too—Yeats consciously, and Russell to a more accidental extent—was to emerge that aspect of the Renaissance which was to take the world by storm, the dramatic movement, which in its
extent and influence may be considered one of the vital factors in the
rebirth of the nation.

To Lady Gregory and Yeats and Edward Martyn, the drama was
one of the healthiest signs of the revival of the ancient Irish spirit.
They believed it thoroughly national because it was allowed to advance
along its own lines, and because it represented the combined work of
many different personalities. In it they felt Ireland exhibited a
vigorous and glorious quality which might be developed into a touchstone
of inestimable value to that spirit.

With the exception of one play, Russell's connection with
the Abbey Theatre was wholly in an administrative capacity, and that but
for a few years, yet because of the extent and nature of his influence,
his participation in the dramatic movement probably can never be accurately
assessed.

The regeneration of economic life was to claim Russell's
attention and to keep him engrossed for a great part of his life. While
Sir Horace Plunkett must be given credit for organizing the Irish Agri-
cultural Organization Society, Morris insists "the superstructure of
its social philosophy has been raised by A. E." 14 The same urge to serve
his country in a practical manner was closely allied to, or perhaps stemmed
from, his belief that with the amelioration of the life of the

14 Morris, op. cit., p. 221.
peasant a spiritual change could be effected. "Organize your industries," he said to the farmers, "so that you may become what your fathers were, fit company for the Shining Ones, for Lugh and Balor and Manannan, the great and brave and beautiful pagan gods." In all his social propaganda he was inspired by the vision of an Ireland peopled by noble characters. "Wherever there is mutual aid . . . wherever there is constant give and take, wherever the prosperity of the individual depends on the prosperity of the community about him, there the social order tends to produce fine types of character, with devotion to public ideals; and this is the real object of all government."  

He saw in the cooperative movement a promise of more real unity among the Irish people than had ever seemed possible. He conceded that cooperation may be brought about by common religious or political or cultural ideals, but doubted that such a unity could hold unless accompanied by an identity of economic interests among the majority of its citizens. Essential bodily necessities, he claimed, must be satisfied before other needs can successfully secure attention. But pleading for united effort, he urged, "Nothing could be more hopeful for the triumph over the minds of men of agricultural ideals than a movement which aims


at superseding individualism in the economic sphere by cooperation.\textsuperscript{17} And again, "I believe that whatever the temporary strength of other movements in Ireland, the cooperative movement, dealing as it does with the daily lives of men must finally have an influence greater than any other in its effect upon the character of the Irish nation."\textsuperscript{18}

Theosophical speculations which in youth tended by their very nature to drive him into a world of meditation, could no longer claim precedence in his mind, for he had ample occasion now to mingle intimately with his fellow men. He met them on a common field of interests and tastes, and with them exerted unstinting effort toward the mitigation of economic evils, helping to develop and put into practice a philosophy whose application to our own economic life has met with increasing appreciation.

With governmental affairs he had less concern, for he stated repeatedly that he was less interested in the politics of time than of eternity. However, he could not isolate himself completely in this regard, for the internal issues of the country found him an active supporter of labor in its strike against the Dublin Masters, and in 1917 he served with distinction as a member of the Convention for Home Rule. In another


\textsuperscript{18} Loc. cit.
and a broader sense, he is linked to the political movement, for the bond between Irish political thought and the Literary Revival is an intimate one. From this point of view, Russell and Yeats, Standish O'Grady and Hyde, and all those who were associated with them in their high endeavor were as truly founders of the Free State as were Arthur Griffiths and Michael Collins.

Of the major forces, therefore, of which the Celtic Renaissance is a synthesis--literature, drama, the revival of the ancient language, economic and social reform, and political thought--it becomes evident that George Russell, by his writing, whether poetic or journalistic, his influence, his active participation in the remoulding of the national ideal, may rightfully claim consideration as one of the key figures of the Irish Revival. Apart from social and political matters, he made comparatively few converts to his opinions. Many disliked his paintings and rejected his poetry, many more ignored his mystical philosophy, yet all who came in contact with him were convinced of his greatness. The diversity of his talents, it has been said, required many outlets, and while these undoubtedly advanced the interests of his country and served at the same time to make his name better known both at home and abroad, the same diversity worked adversely for his permanent fame, for, as this paper purposes to show, his genius by preoccupation with many activities became spread thin, and by discouraging the focusing of attention upon any one facet of his talents--art, poetry, literature--lacks the depth and profundity which concentration undoubtedly would have developed.
CHAPTER II

THE MANY-COLORED EARTH

Ireland's state of ferment had something of a counterpart in the condition of the western world, when as if in reaction to Darwinian materialism there arose a fever of pseudo-religiosity whose appeal seemed centered in the arcane. As in the instance of its rival movement, it underwent all the ramifications and evinced the varying tendencies of its forerunner.

The air was astir with theosophical speculation and cults of all kinds sprang up everywhere. A revival of interest occurred in Swedenborg, Hinduism, Buddhism, Hermetigism, Rosicrucianism and Egyptian religions. Another phase of the movement was a striking increase in the number of books on Indian ideas. Scientists everywhere began to evince a strong curiosity about the human mind. In Paris, Charcot's studies in pathology were published in 1880; in America at about the same time, William James began his notable experiments in psychology. In England not long after, the British Medical Society reported favorably on hypnotism. Nor were speculation and examination confined to science and pseudo-science. The inquiry invaded the field of poetry under the leadership of Rimbaud, Mallarme, and Laforgue, and took on a subjective, non-realistic character which led it eventually to exhaust itself in the shallow excesses of Symbolism.

This exciting Eleusinian sub-world was opened to the young intellectuals of Dublin by a strange book entitled *Esoteric Buddhism* which had
just appeared from the pen of A. P. Sinnett and which offered a theory of
the soul most of them accepted as the Faith of the Future. Charles Johnston
went to London to interview the author and on his return founded with Yeats
a branch of the Theosophical Society. Here with Russell and some fellow
disciples they lived in a semi-monastic manner. These charter members of
the Dublin Lodge were, as previously mentioned, the principal guiding lights
in that intellectual melting-pot from which the nationalist movement ulti-
mately emerged. Russell at once became an active member, flinging himself
wholeheartedly into theosophy, and was soon absorbed in its seemingly
limitless possibilities. In it he found ample scope for his enthusiasm
and became the life and soul of the little community. He gradually assumed
leadership, and until a few years before his death conducted weekly in-
struction classes in esoteric philosophy, linking the Aryan with the Druid
gods.

Whatever novelty the new religion offered to the others, to Russell
it was another link in his lifelong quest for the infinite. It furnished
him with a new and subtle avenue of approach to the mystery of the universe.
Religious experience began with him at adolescence, and embraced—however
superficially—all known religions. The study of his mystical experience
and philosophy would require extensive treatment, but be beside the purpose
of this paper which undertakes to consider it solely in relation to its
influence on his life and work.

Comparatively little is known about Russell's early years, beyond
the fact that he was born in Lurgan County, Ulster, but moved to Dublin at the age of seven or eight. There he attended the Rathmines school where his education was evidently of the commercial type, with little stress placed upon the field which was later to play so large a part in his interests. Monk Gibbon raises the question of the possible effect of "too much of the God of the Old Testament" in his early upbringing, but adds that though his parents were North-of-Ireland Protestants they were far from being dour and unsympathetic.\(^1\) He notes that they belonged to the evangelical tradition, which, according to Inge, contains a vein of pure and genuine mysticism. The imagery of its hymns, many of which are beautiful and ardent, is replete with symbolism with reference to the invisible world and to the white-robed hierarchy of heaven.

St. John Ervine whose own pen is steeped in bigotry and malice, writes of the bitterness with which religious beliefs were contested in Lurgan, where opinions were apt to be seconded not infrequently by more ardent demonstrations of group loyalty.\(^2\) Whatever accounts for Russell's early bias in religious matters, it seems certain that he early formed an antipathy toward established religion, rejecting orthodoxy in favor of religious experience. He was a doubter of the traditional in a center of traditional conformity. Eglinton tells of Russell's confession that he


left his home one day to "think the whole thing out," and in a brief five minutes had decided to defy a God who threatened him for "doing things he had never promised not to do." This Miltonic concept of defiance was formulated shortly after adolescence, and seems to have remained with him thereafter. He disclosed that he had a vivid sense of a being seeking incarnation within him. In the Candle of Vision he expanded this experience wherein the first stirrings of a strange and mystic impulse were felt:

I was aged about sixteen or seventeen years, when I, the slackest and least ideal of boys . . . became aware of a mysterious life quickening within my life . . . It was, I thought, self-begotten. I began to be astonished with myself, for walking along country roads, intense and passionate imaginations of another world, of an interior nature, began to overpower me. It was no angelic thing, pure and new from a foundry of souls, which sought embodiment, but a being stained with the dust and conflict of a long travel through time; carrying with it unsated desires, base and august, and as I divined it, myriads of memories and a secret wisdom . . . Soon I knew they were the rightful owners and heirs of the house of the body . . . The boy who existed before was an alien. He hid himself when the pilgrim of eternity took up his abode in the dwelling. Yet whenever the true owner was absent, the sly creature reappeared and boasted himself as master once more.

He felt that this being who had taken possession of him was trying desperately to communicate with him, and he was tormented by the limitations of his understanding. He endeavored again and again to piece out the visions only to be baffled by their subtlety:


As I walked in the evening down the lanes scented by honeysuckle, my senses were expectant of some unveiling about to take place. . . . The tinted air glowed before me with intelligible significance like a face, a voice. The visible world became like a tapestry blown and stirred by the winds behind it. If it would but raise for an instant I knew I would be in Paradise. 5

These visitations were the subject of his first verses, and their vague messages are obscured in evanescent imagery:

She is wrapped in dreams divine
As her clouds of beauty pass
On our glowing hearts they shine
Mirrored there as in glass.

Earth whose dreams are we and they
With her deep heart's gladness fills
All our human lips can say
Or the dawn-fired singer trills. 6

And he related another experience whose physical effect was no less startling than his interpretation of it. However, one is no closer to an explanation or logical interpretation of such manifestations:

One warm summer day lying idly on the hillside, not thinking of anything but the sunlight, and how sweet it was to drowse there . . . suddenly I felt a fiery heart throb, and knew it was personal and intimate, and started with every sense dilated and intent and turned inwards, and I heard first a music as of bells going away, away into that wondrous underland, where, as legend relates, the Danaan gods withdrew; and then the heart of the hills opened to me, and I knew there was no hill for those who were there, and they were unconscious of the ponderous mountain piled above the palace of light, and the winds were sparkling and diamond clear, yet full of color as an opal, and they glittered.

5 Ibid., p. 5.

6 Ibid., p. 6.
through the valley, and I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it, but that it had never passed away from the world.\(^7\)

His pseudonym, A.E., resulted from one of these early experiences. He explained in the *Candle of Vision* that in planning a series of pictures which were to illustrate the history of man from his birth in the Divine Mind, first in vague and monstrous shapes, then gradually evolving into his final form, he felt in alliance with a deeper consciousness. Wondering what legend to write under the picture, he found the answer supplied as it were by a whispered voice, "Call it the birth of Aeon". The next day the story of Aeon—which corresponds closely to the revolt of Lucifer, save that he was alone in his rebellion, and descended not to Hell but to earth—took shape in his mind. A fortnight later when in a Dublin library his eyes fell upon an open book and lighted on the word "Aeon," with the explanation that the term was used by the Gnostics to designate the first created beings. He was overwhelmed by the coincidence, and returned later to learn that the myth corresponded to his own imagining. The occurrence confirmed his belief that there is a reservoir of ancestral wisdom available to man, and deepened his growing conviction of pre-existence.

The incident left a powerful impression on his mind, and the word came to have a special significance to him. A printer's difficulty in making out the last letters of the signature attached to an article of his,

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 8.
suggested to him the pen name which was to become as familiar as his own. He occasionally used the diphthong, but adopted "A.E." for general use.

Russell felt again and again an irrepressible urge to transcend ordinary experience. His "visions" — to use the term he employed — are described in the *Candle of Vision*, and in letters to his friends, are stated with the utmost conviction and simplicity. Mme. Simone Tery quotes a letter from him: "I have discovered that consciousness can exist outside of the body, that we can sometimes see people who are far away from us, that we can even speak to them when they are hundreds of miles distant; I have been spoken to myself in this way." 8 To Katherine Tynan he wrote more specifically:

Many years ago I was sitting in my room . . . when suddenly the walls opened before me and I saw a great mountain of very peculiar shape . . . as I gazed about me there appeared the figure of a young man. His countenance was most remarkable . . . of the Napoleonic type . . . Then he vanished and there appeared the figure of a woman with a blue cloak over her head and she was carrying a child in her arms, and rays seemed to come from all parts of Ireland, and they rested on the child's head, so that he was in the midst of a halo of light. This vision in its turn vanished, and there came a picture of what appeared to be a queen upon her throne, and while I looked the throne fell and she with it. That too vanished, and I saw a man of gigantic stature striding up and down Ireland beating a drum, and as he walked smoke and flames sprang up in his path. Then he too vanished and I saw nothing but rays coming from every part of Ireland, so that I could not tell whence they came or where they ended. And while I looked the walls closed and I was sitting in my room alone. 9

8 *Eglinton, op. cit.*, p. 169.

9 *A. E., The Living Torch*, p. 31.
He regarded this dream as definitely symbolic in character, as
foretelling still another tragic episode in Irish history. It is notable
that, unlike the saints whose visions were usually of Christ or of the
Blessed Virgin or of definite, recognizable individuals, Russell saw
"shining ones," "pure and noble characters of unearthly beauty," but without specific personality, connected it seems with mythology rather than any orthodox hierarchy. The essentially pagan nomenclature is characteristic of him. He made no attempt to identify them, and apparently derived from them nothing other than the uplift which great beauty might inspire in an artist. But this aspect was sufficient, it appears, and his satisfaction with their function seemed complete.

Yeats had a good deal to say on the subject, and his observation affords a good, clear-cut outline of the mystical lucubrations and limitations of Russell. While his opinion reflected individual interpretation, it must be conceded that it was rather objectively attained, and apparently not unduly influenced by common interest or over-sympathetic tendencies:

At the time I write of him, he was the religious teacher and that alone—his paintings, his poetry, and his conversation all subservient to that one end. Men watched him with awe and bewilderment; it was known that he saw visions, perhaps more continually than any modern man since Swedenborg; and when he painted and drew in pastel what he had seen, some accepted his record without hesitation, others like myself, noticing the Graeco-Roman forms, when remembering his admiration for the works of Gustave Moreau, divined a subjective element, but no one doubted his word. One might not think him a good observer, but no one could doubt that he reported with the most scrupulous care what he believed himself to have seen; nor did he lack occasional corroboration. Walking with some man in the park... he had seen
a visionary church at a particular spot, and the man had dug and discovered its foundations . . . He and I often quarrelled, because I wanted him to examine and question his vision . . . and still more because I thought symbolic what he thought real, like the men and women that passed him on the road. Were they so much a part of his subconscious life that they would have vanished had he submitted them to question?10

And he wrote again, "If he sat silent for a while on the Two Rock Mountains, or any place where man was absent, the scene would change; unknown beautiful people would move among the rocks and trees; but this vision, unlike that of Swedenborg, remained always what seemed an unexplained external panorama." 11 After a while Yeats seemed to have tired of the unsatisfactory nature of the apparitions, and insisted that these images should be made to explain themselves. Whether or not this represented a change in attitude on his part as to their authenticity, or merely a growing disinterest in them, is not apparent.

Monk Gibbon who knew Russell intimately, reveals that A.E. found the nature of his own visions a mystery, and reviewing the several possibilities which occurred to him, concludes:

Whether they were earth memories retained in some etheric substance so that they became visible at certain times, or whether they were sudden glimpses into an interpenetrating spiritual world, or whether as a friend suggested to me in relation to Blake, they were in the nature of a waking dream, a projection of the mind of some mysterious kind as we experience in sleep, need not be argued here.


They may be an extension of the ordinary artistic faculty by which the painter visualizes almost objectively what he has seen in the imagination previously, or—and I myself lean to this opinion—they may be in the nature of a real experience, such as St. Paul hints at when he quotes the psalmist 'who maketh his angels spirits and his ministers a flame of fire'.

Gibbon relates his attempt to cross-examine Russell on the nature of his visions, to learn whether they were subjective or objective. The undertaking unfortunately throws little light on their nature, other than that of confirming their occurrence. Russell objected to the terms, contending that even normal waking vision is in a sense subjective, and insisted a little angrily that he really did see apparitions. The efforts of his friends to draw him out appear to have been unconsciously resisted, much as the skater on thin ice might refuse to consider his peril, once launched on his enterprise and desperately determined to reach his goal.

His mystical paintings often reconstructed what he said he had seen, although it is well to keep in mind the suggestion of Yeats that Russell was a follower of the school of Moreau, and was perhaps influenced by him. Gibbon cites, as a record of a definite experience, an occasion when Russell, walking through a forest, remarked to a companion that he saw a figure by a tree, and immediately began to sketch the likeness of a dryad embodied in the trunk. Such a picture may have been a kind of projection of thoughts existent in his mind, since fixation of thought can pre-dispose

12 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 28.
the mind to certain desired images. It is this interpretation which underlies Shaw's attitude toward St. Joan and Tatham's toward Blake.

To refute suspicion of the purely subjective nature of Russell's vision, Gibbon offers an incident which he felt proved that he was not merely implementing his imagination. Russell was told by a farmer that he saw the same noble figures upon a hill which the poet had seen. To test the man, A. E. sketched some figures which were false and offered them to the farmer, who rejected them. Thereupon Russell drew the true likenesses, and the man identified them as the apparitions he had seen. Assuming the farmer was unfamiliar with A. E.'s writings, is it not possible that Gibbon ignores here Russell's highly developed mental powers, exercised, unconsciously of course, in this instance? These abilities were clearly demonstrated on the occasion of the production of his play, Deirdre. The impulse came to him to suggest the idea of water at a certain point in the play, and many people testified next day to the queer illusion they had of water pouring out over them from the stage. Such exhibitions of his singular faculties however, were not common with him, and his son avers that he disliked having attention called to them. While these incidents do not prove that he possessed occult powers, they do give evidence of abnormal mental capacities.

Psychic phenomena have been subjected to rigid scientific scrutiny in recent years from competent psychologists and medical men in various fields. Societies devoted to psychical research have brought scientific
objectivity to a field cluttered with fakers and self-deluded "mediums." Their findings, while only at the threshold of the pursuit of tantalizingly elusive knowledge, corroborate the belief which man has independently arrived at, namely, that the mind receives knowledge through means other than the senses. Instances of telepathy, clairvoyance, and like phenomena of extra-sensory perception which reject normal explanation, are frankly being admitted as the legitimate object of scientific research. It is unfortunate for Russell that the studies were not undertaken earlier, for while his religious beliefs were not really based upon his "mystical" experiences, they had the regrettable effect of substantiating in his mind his singular mission—albeit that mission was primarily the regeneration of himself—and of confirming his rejection of orthodox religion. Undoubtedly Russell "saw" the "shining ones." A nature combining as did his the sensitive perception of the artist and the vivid imagination of the poet, a mind singularly sensitive to extra-sensory cognitions, and a drive toward religious experience—in short, a predisposition to emotional instability—would inevitably objectify its intense imaginings.

Perhaps nowhere is Russell's integrity more clearly shown or his character more attractively displayed than in the treatment of his visions. He had no desire to appear mysterious or extraordinary, and absolved himself from any charge of charlatanry by writing as fully as possible of his experiences, saying modestly, "There is no personal virtue in me other than this, that I followed a path all may travel but on which
few do journey."

It must be admitted that Russell never placed great emphasis upon his apparitions, even though his insistence upon their reality was at times vehement and vigorous. When he mentioned them in his book he did so with great simplicity and straightforwardness. "I do not wish to write a book of wonders, but rather to bring thought back to that Being whom the ancient seers worshipped as Deity." On another occasion he revealed the purpose of relating his visions to the visions of seers and writers of the sacred books to "discover what element of truth lay in these imagina-
tions." His quest for their interpretation was intense, soul-searching, and sincere. He felt very conscious of the obligation which his strange powers imposed on him, and of the necessity for great circumspection in their exercise. "I have tried according to my capacity to report about the divine order, and to discriminate between that which was self-begotten fantasy, and that which came from the higher sphere." The Golden Rule of occultism which called for taking three steps in the perfecting of character for every step in pursuit of hidden knowledge, was one he consistently practiced and urged upon his students. He cautioned those who would enter his world lest they meet with disappointment: "It is a world


14 Ibid., p. 31.

15 Ibid., p. viii.

16 Ibid., p. vii.
where we may easily get lost and spend hours in futile vision with no more gain than if one looked for long hours in the dust." 17 And he urged, "Try to become the master of your vision and seek for and evoke the greatest of earth memories, not those things which only satisfy curiosity, but those which uplift and inspire and give us a vision of our own greatness." 18 He warned against alluring visions divorced from humanity, deploring the tendency to procrastination: "I know people whose lamps are lit and they see wonderful things but they themselves will not pass from vision into action. They follow beauty like the dwellers in Tyre whom Ezekiel denounced, 'They have corrupted their wisdom by reason of their brightness.'" 19

The boundless self-confidence which seems one of his most striking characteristics and which led him to reject established religion in favor of his own, compounded of many elements, did a volte-face, with amusing results, when he met Pryse, an American theosophist. A naive side of Russell's nature is surprisingly exhibited in his relations with the latter, who appeared to have an almost hypnotic influence over him. Pryse would, for example, describe a circle around A. E. and defy him to leave it without permission. Together they practiced the art of "psychometrizing" the countryside to uncover the mystery of its past. Another rather humorous

17 Ibid., p. 64.
18 Ibid., p. 65.
note may be found in the picture of the young Russell, who one Sunday afternoon mounted the sea wall at Bray to harangue the crowds but lately returned from Mass in Catholic Dublin, to return to the worship of the old Irish gods.

To his credit, however, it must be said that he never encouraged students to dabble in the occult, but emphasized the need for mental discipline—concentration and meditation—for the progress of the soul. Unwavering meditation and fiery concentration of will were the keys which unlocked to him the growing luminosity of his brain. These were requisite, but could be had for the effort. He believed that faculties of a higher order than those normally exercised lay dormant in all, and could be developed and controlled by mental discipline. In the *Candle of Vision* are related a number of spiritual adventures, with an attempt to interpret their significance, and to show how by concentrated meditation he obtained some control of the means of access to the "divine universe." The arduous steps involved in acquiring the power of concentration, the rigid and exhausting fixation of the faculties upon a chosen object, are laid bare. But if there was labor, there was ample compensation for him, in evidence of spiritual growth, in the "inexpressible yearning of the inner man to go out with the infinite." 20 Through his meditation he found that his thoughts turned more and more to the "spiritual life of earth." At times

he felt exalted to the utmost of mystical experience and was certain that all he saw in vision was part of the life of Earth, "a court where there are many starry palaces. There the Planetary Spirit was King, and that Spirit, manifesting through the substance of Earth, the Mighty Mother, was, I felt, the being I groped after as God." 21 This is the theme that recurs through all his poems, no matter how changed and faceted his philosophy became. He adopted Plato's belief in the Many-Colored Earth, "superior to this we know, yet related to it as soul to body. On that Many-Colored Earth . . . live a divine folk, and there are temples wherein the gods do dwell, and I wish to convey . . . how some apparitions of that ancient beauty came to me, in wood or on hillside." 22

It was about this time that he began to write in verse and that he first came in contact with Yeats, a meeting brought about by association in art school and freighted with consequence to many. He felt it to be a concurrence of personalities controlled by some law of spiritual gravitation.

Russell's beliefs up to this point might be called Pantheistic were it not that for him the supreme manifestation of being is Earth, the "Mighty Mother," a spiritual medium in which, he said, "we live and move and have our being." 23 His nature worship, his advocacy of a return to

21 Ibid., p. 29.
22 Ibid., p. 32.
23 Ibid., p. 56.
nature, is not the ordinary one. In the "Virgin Mother," his belief in the divinity of Earth is most explicitly stated:

Who is that goddess to whom men should pray,
But her from whom their hearts have turned away,
Out of whose virgin being they were born,
Whose mother nature they have named with scorn
Calling its holy substance common clay.


Ah when I think this earth on which I tread,
Hath borne these blossoms of the lovely dead,
And makes the living heart I love to beat,
I look with sudden awe beneath my feet
As you with erring reverence overhead. 24

He rejected any explanation of life and consciousness other than a mystical one. It was as if life and consciousness were part and continuation of a mystical stream. Out thoughts and impulses, he claimed, come to us from a mightier Self of ours, an Ancestral Self, a reservoir which we may tap at will. Though we may maintain constant contact with it, we can never completely exhaust it. He sums up his belief in a single line of verse: "All our thoughts are throngs of living souls," 25 and explains later that just as the body is composed of tiny cells, so the brain swarms with living creatures—gods, demons and goblins. Thus, he contended, there is nothing incredible in the belief that we have access to a treasure house of memories in the Earth, a memory infinitely greater than our own, to which we need

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25 Ibid., p. 87.
merely be attuned in order to attain to perfection.

This pseudo-pantheism was to be augmented, rather than modified by his meeting with Yeats and consequent introduction to Eastern occultism in the Hermetic Society. The period which Russell later referred to as the happiest time of his life, was given over wholeheartedly to the study of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the works of the Neo-Platonists, and modern mystics and spiritualists. He had left his father's house to join the semi-monastic life at Ely Place, and with it had renounced chances for material success. Complete separation and abnegation had had the usual effect of intensifying his every act and of furnishing him with a determined drive. A promising position which his father had secured for him outraged his ethical sense and was rejected in favor of clerkship in a warehouse. For six years on an income varying from thirty to sixty pounds annually, he was "magnificently" happy. The intense enthusiasm of those days is described in the Candle of Vision:

I came to feel akin to those ancestors of the Aryan in remote spiritual dawns when Earth first extended its consciousness into humanity. In that primal ecstasy the golden age was born, that great spiritual tradition which still remains embodied in the Veda and Upanishad, in Persian and Egyptian myth, and which trails glimmering with color and romance over our own Celtic legends. I had but a faint glow of that which to the ancestors was full light. I felt at times as one raised from the dead, made virginal and pure, who renews exquisite intimacies with divine companions; with Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. To breathe was to inhale magical elixirs. To touch Earth was to feel the influx of power as with one who had touched the mantle of the Lord. 26

His belief in the divinity of Earth was not one which came to him through Theosophy, rather, Theosophy gave him the structure for his belief. In this period was laid the groundwork for most of his later interests and accomplishments. The Dublin Lodge became affiliated with the American branch, and a magazine was started to which he contributed prose and verse. To the stimulus of Eastern studies was added the excitement of the Celtic Revival. His ideas were brought into relation with Ireland by his belief in a localized earth-memory of spiritual happenings, and he became convinced that the Mother Earth of Eire was the repository of Druidic wisdom, as active a centre of supernatural knowledge as Egypt or India. Ireland became the embodiment of all that was sacred and beneficent. He began through vision to enter into the Druidic world of antiquity. Convinced that he had a special aptitude for psychic vision, he continued the experiments begun with Pryse, to induce certain favored places, through "psychometrising" to give up their secrets. In Kilmashogue, under the Dublin mountains, he felt he had uncovered an ancient centre of magic, and here he would sometimes bring his disciples as an act of special regard.

Whether he regarded the Celtic gods as actual personages, or as thought-forms existing in the world of imagination, it is difficult to determine, but it would appear that the figures of Irish folklore took shape in his mind as a company of immortals akin to Greek and Hindu divinities. Throughout Gaelic folklore appear hints of a symbolism, perhaps fragments of a remote Druidic system. On the slender strength of these he built up
an ancient priesthood acquainted with all the secrets of nature and a hierarchy of divine beings answering to the more clearly defined figures of Hindu and Greek mythology. He built from old and obscure fragments a not unworkable system, sufficient to satisfy his own convictions at least.

The philosophy of the East held a fascination for him that was to be lifelong. His attachment to it seems never to have been modified by its vagaries. Ranjee Shahani calls him "the nearest approach among the poets of the English speaking world to a sage of Upanishad ... He has brooded in fiery meditation ... over the words of Upanishads, the Bhagvad Gita, the Yoga Sutra of Patangali, the Ramayana, and Mahabharata." 27 Contrasting him with Yeats and Dr. Rabindrath Tagore, Shahani indicates their fundamental differences:

Mr. Yeats uses Hindu thought for poetic embellishment—for decorative effects. With its inwardness he has no concern—indeed is unfitted to grapple. Dr. Tagore, on the other hand, echoes what is, so to speak, in the air. He is a passivist, moulded by not moulding what he has received. Perhaps that is why his profundity is no more than popular wisdom. It lacks the note of personal victory. Dr. Tagore, like Mr. Yeats, is not one of the "combattants d'idees'. To some he appears a mere bewailer.

A. E. is first and foremost a meditative spirit. He has a far more profound acquaintance with Hindu thought than many an Orientalist of repute. When I met him I remarked on this fact with some surprise, for I called to mind the dilettantism of Mr. T. S. Eliot. 'There is nothing to be surprised at,' he said. 'I've had to sweat for it. What you struggle for

you make your own.' Then after a pause: 'Yeats used to laugh at me for my interest in Hindu thought . . . I've been under the spell of your country from the age of twenty. 28

Of Russell's sincerity there is no question. Even his severest critics are slow to impugn this quality. Unlike Yeats, he never incurred the charge of posing, of playing around among the philosophies, of going through phases, or affecting popular tenets. Yeats made many excursions into the spiritual. He belonged at one time or other to the Order of the Alchemical Rose, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Door, and toyed with Rosicrucianism, with alchemy and magic, and even with table rapping. For years he trifled with the idea of creating a new mystical order and providing it with a ritual. Russell, however, was much more direct and obvious. His position, therefore, while vulnerable, was never as untenable as that of Yeats. Having accepted Indian philosophy early in life, he remained close to it to the end, because he was more intellectually persistent, much more simple of heart. At no time did he manifest Yeat's superficiality in this respect. Although frequently rebuffed by him and held in lesser esteem by many, he achieved a greater stability than did his more scintillating companion. The philosophy he embraced involved self-subjection to the point of self-suppression. Truth to him was attained, not by the statement of concepts, but by the uplifting of the being. For him, man is composed of two minds, the ancestral intuitive mind which reflects all the

28 Ibid., p. 382.
experiences of the race, and an outer mind slowly developed by education. His conviction is in direct contrast to Wordsworth's belief, for to A. E. the soul is a late arrival, entering consciousness at the age of puberty, when the "animal" element bows out with the coming of the spiritual, enriched by the invisible agencies of the spirit world and the garnered wisdom of countless lives. With Plato and the Brahmins he believed in transmigration—that the life of the soul is cyclic and that its physical birth and rebirth are but the working out of the soul's pilgrimage from the eternal to the eternal. To Plato's explanation of spiritual memory as the recollection of visions of those ideas seen by the soul in its excursions, he joined the doctrine of ancestral memory, a recapitulation of the evolution of race consciousness, present subconsciously in everyone. A. E. put a stern emphasis on the inner self, the Psyche, but his emphasis differed from the Eastern mystics in that he sought in maturity his greatest, his innermost self, and found in the elements manifestations of deity.

Russell has given abundant evidence that his visions were not an end in themselves, as was the case with Blake; but that to him, all knowledge, all beauty, is intended to lead man on to a higher destiny. Therefore, cutting through the apparitions and his peregrinations among the philosophies, his goal is found to be fixed and true and undeviating throughout his life. He was a most convincing speaker—Julian Huxley testified that he sat up all night trying unsuccessfully to find a flaw in Russell's argument about intuitions versus ancestral memories—yet there was no solid
ground in his philosophy. He could in one poem warn of retribution for sin, yet in another speak of "the dark rapture born where the Holy Breath is mixed with the unholy wine." 29 His rejection of Christianity, for example, is an instance of illogicality strangely at odds with the clearness of thought exhibited in other matters. "The fault I find with Christianity," he remarked on several occasions, "is that it is no more than a code of morals, whereas three things are required of a religion—a cosmogony, a psychology, and a moral code." 30 Of the three he considered the first the most important, the psychic as well as the ethical individuality being determined by the stage reached in its ascent. To Simone Tery he said:

I read all the sacred books which I could find, those of China, Egypt, of India, of Persia, of Judea, as well as the mystic philosophers like Plato, Plotinus and Sankara; and I found truth in all, and a singular identity of belief; I have found however that the sacred books of Judea are the least interesting of all and contain less spiritual truth than the Bhagavad Gita or Upanishads for example. The Old Testament is a collection of poems and legends far more than a collection of sacred texts which are profound. 31

And yet, though he affirmed on one occasion that "most of what was said of God was in reality said of that Spirit whose body is the earth," 32 and on another occasion that Prometheus was just as historical as Christ, he

30 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 166.
32 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 6.
contradicted himself again and again, as for example, in writing on the
classical character of heroic literature:

No literature ever had a more beautiful heart of childhood in it . . . I do not like to speculate on the absence of this spirit in our later literature, which was written under other influences. It cannot be because there was a less spiritual life in the apostles than in the bards. We cannot compare Cuculain, the most complete figure of Gaelic chivalry with that supreme figure whose coming to the world was the effacement of whole pantheons of divinities. 33

DeBlacam calls him most aptly a "hungry imagination groping in the world of philosophic ideas." 34 His lack of solid education, joined to a turbulent imagination and complete, unquestioning self-confidence, combined to render him impervious to any suspicion that there might be another and better path than the one he was following. St. John Ervine—referring to his poetry—deprecates the air of adulation which surrounded A. E., which would in this matter also tend to confirm his belief in the integrity and soundness of his own thinking.

There is, too, the suspicion in the mind of the reader, a suspicion which Eglinton also reluctantly voices, that the role of heretic was not distasteful to him. "A. E. has left so gentle a memory that it may seem invidious to suggest that his desire to distinguish himself as a heretic indicates a certain perversity in his mind." 35 He quotes a letter

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35 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 129.
to Weeks in which Russell wrote that he prayed not for enemies, but to have enemies to keep him alive. Recalling A. E.'s essay on John Butler Yeats, in which he referred to the Irishman's traditional love of mischief, one wonders if this characteristic, this compulsion to differ from the majority, is not at the root of his attitude toward the Church.

It is paradoxical indeed that a philosopher living in a country which had cherished Catholicity at such great cost for over eight hundred years should seek so far afield for an answer to the craving of his spirit. This puzzle may be partially resolved when we recall the not too great antipathy between Druidism and certain phases of Orientalism, yet there is much that is incompatible with Western thought. Russell was severed by his Protestant upbringing from a share in the beliefs of the majority of his countrymen, and even at odds with the less representative sect to which he belonged, and this breach he deliberately set about to widen. He held slight regard for paternalistic allegiance in the field of conscience. The essential Ireland, as Eglinton, a Presbyterian, observes, is Catholic Ireland, and A. E. felt that his real mission was to disseminate heresies and so to rid the country of what he called "priestcraft." This early became a firm resolve. Yet obviously he was not really bigoted, for many of his friends were Catholics, and for years he worked in close harmony with Father Findlay in the I. A. O. S. In his trips throughout the country, he frequently spent the night in Catholic rectories, and so made a rather wide acquaintance among the clergy. Though the association was ever
broadening, it never approached the point where he considered altering his position or modulating overmuch his zeal. His antagonism was rather directed toward the Church as an institution. On the whole, his rebuke to Kipling best sums up his attitude:

I am a native of Ulster... I have lived all my life in Ireland holding a different faith from that held by the majority. I know Ireland as few Irishmen know it, county by county, for I travelled over Ireland for years, and Ulsterman as I am and proud of the Ulster people, I resent the crowning of Ulster with all the virtue and the dismissal of other Irishmen as thieves and robbers. I resent the cruelty with which you, a stranger, speak of the lovable and kindly people I know... Let the truth be known, the mass of Irish Unionists are much more in love with Ireland than with England. They think Irish Nationalists are mistaken and they fight with them and use hard words, and all the time they believe Irishmen of any party are better in the sight of God than Englishmen... I am a person whose whole being goes into a blaze at the thought of oppression of faith, and yet I think my Catholic countrymen infinitely more tolerant than those who hold the faith I was born in. I am a heretic, judged by their standards, a heretic who has written and made public his heresies, and I have never suffered in friendship or found my heresies an obstacle in life. 36

One wonders if the explanation of his whole attitude might not be found in that brief moment early in life when he decided on five-minutes thought to reject a God who would punish him "for doing things he had not promised not to do." 37 Such a naive conclusion offered him an easy egress from orthodoxy, and provides a touchstone to an understanding of his

36 A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, p. 94.
37 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 7.
rationalizing. His complete self-assurance, confirmed it seemed by his later visions, seems never to have been shaken, and though his humility never failed to impress those who knew him, it ran counter at times to a tremendous and dismaying egotism. We meet again and again the principle that man is divine and so far equal with God. In the Poem "Earth" occur these lines:

How could a beggar wear the kingly crown
Or those who weakly laid the sceptre down
Walk 'mid the awful beauty God had made
For those whose hearts were proud and unafraid
Careless if on His face were smile or frown. 38

A similar, even more revealing, passage is found in the Poem "Unity," wherein man's divinity is unmistakably asserted:

Each fire that in God's temple lit
Burns fierce before the inner shrine
Dimmed as my fire grew near to it
And darkened at the light of mine. 39

If this immense spiritual claim can be ignored, the tone that pervades the great majority of his writings is genuinely religious and, where he does not go off into mystical speculation, admirable. His fundamental soundness is evidenced in a letter to a friend: "I do not want you to become a Theosophist so much as I want you to be always seeking for still higher ideals of life, to hold always an ear anxious for truth." 40 And the validity of his viewpoint is borne out by the following:

38 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 65.
39 Ibid., p. 294.
40 Eglingon, op. cit., p. 19.
With man and his work we must take either a spiritual or material point of view. All half-way beliefs are temporary and illogical. I prefer the spiritual with its admission of incalculable mystery and romance in nature, where we find the infinite folded in the atom, and feel how in the unconscious result and labor of man's hand the Eternal is working. 

Freedom of the spirit was, above all else, his desire for mankind, for to him man is enslaved not so much by political domination or social conditions, as by preoccupation with temporal things to the exclusion of higher realities. He regarded him as endowed with high dignity and exalted destiny, and saw even in the sodden features of the tramp the temporary disguise of a god who had forgotten for the moment his identity.

If one were to skim off the froth of his more speculative expositions, he would find underneath, unchanging through the numerous additions he made to his philosophy, the essential hunger of the soul for its Maker, which St. Augustine voiced and which Russell himself rather poignantly expressed:

Some for beauty follow long
Flying trace, some there be
Seek thee only for a song
I to lose myself in thee.  

This basic search is certainly orthodox and may be encountered again and again down through the records of revealed religion. St. Theresa, St. Paul, St. Catherine of Siena, St. John of the Cross, and St. Bernard of

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1 A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, p. 66.
2 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 42.
Clairvaux, are but a few of the long list who have expressed in varying ways similar sentiments. In this pursuit of union with God lies his claim to the title of mystic—that much-abused term whose application ranges all the way from the genuine seeking of surrender to the Absolute, to magic and dreamy poetry, and to all vague emotional reactions compounded of awe and a sense of strangeness. In striving after an acceptable application of the term so loosely applied as truly to range from the ridiculous to the sublime, innumerable variants are found. There are likewise many methods of approaching an understanding, although probably none on which all will agree.

Helen White, in her study of the mysticism of Blake, with whom Russell seems to have so much in common, resolves the divergence of views as regards mystics by compiling a list of those whose names appear most frequently in their ranks, and deducing certain common elements which may be taken as suggestive for the class, if not for the individual. But a study of the typical mystic presents the field of mysticism at its highest, most fully developed level, and that, White cautions, would be like defining poetry on the basis of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare. "There would still be Pope and Morris and Swinburne and William Butler Yeats." In a more determined attempt to catalogue, the field she offers three qualities which may be noted in all typical mystics as the yardstick by which an individual may be measured: "an intense and immediate consciousness of spiritual reality,

the extraordinary faculty of spiritual concentration, and great ethical strenuousness." 44 In an elaboration of these characteristics she offers her explanation of his problem and how, whether Oriental or Occidental, he seeks the same goal:

Not all mystics are ascetics in the rather extreme sense in which that word is usually understood, but all mystics recognize the essential dualism of man's nature, and the law of the body warring against the law of the soul, and the necessity of man's spirit, enlightened and purified, wielding absolute mastery over the law of the body... In that warfare, however, the mystic believes that the spirit of man has a powerful ally, for he believes that there already exists a relation between the soul of man and spiritual reality. To the Brahmic pantheist, man's soul is an emanation, a portion of the Universal Soul or Atman, for the moment of a lifetime imprisoned in the body as a portion of the air in a room may be shut within a vase; to the Christian the soul is... the image of God, in itself the very stuff of reality. It is this relation between the soul of the individual and the World Soul, the Absolute, or God, that makes possible the soul's attainment to direct and immediate contact with Supreme Reality even in this life. And that contact is the goal of the mystic. 45

Evelyn Underhill, instancing such varied types as St. Theresa, Boehme, the Sufis, Philo, and the Kabalists, concludes that "almost any religious system which fosters unearthly love is potentially a nursery for mystics." 46 Therefore, in a broad sense, she considers mysticism "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit toward complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever the theological formula under which

44 Ibid., p. 57.
that formula is understood," but avers that the greatest mystics have been Catholic saints. 47 She defines the "soul's solitary adventure" in the superb words of Plotinus as 'the flight of the Alone to the Alone.' 48 Again she calls it a "highly specialised form of that search for reality, for heightened and completed life which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness." 49

On the basis of Russell's goal, his intense and lifelong consciousness of spiritual reality, and his pursuit of self-perfection, then, he may be admitted to the ranks of the mystics, though obviously not of the great mystics. And inasmuch as he rejected Christianity, though practicing all its virtues, he cannot be considered one of the Christian mystics. His visions, while they may have served as a means to an end, seem in themselves to have done no more than point his spirit to a world beyond this, however widely that world fell short of the mark which Christianity defines and beside which all other religions and philosophies seem wholly inadequate. And despite his claim, one wonders after reading his poetry how much genuine happiness was his. For the most part a plaintive note runs through all of it, a suggestion of spiritual misgiving, a suspicion of having somehow lost his way. Is not this the undercurrent of the proem to his Collected Poems?

47 Ibid., p. x.
48 Ibid., p. 98.
49 Ibid., p. 111.
When I first discovered the King in His Beauty, I thought I would be the singer of the happiest songs. Forgive me Spirit of my spirit, for this... though I would not, I have made the way dark and thorny and have wandered in too many by-ways, imagining myself into moods that held Thee not.

Sean O'Faolain raises the same question:

One dares to guess at a few things. One guesses that men write against what gnaws them; that our subjects are our own complexes; which is not to be trite and say barely that a Free Trader will see Free Trade in a primrose by the river's brim, but to say that he is a Free Trader because his soul is stiff with emotional tariffs. One wonders, that is to say, whether A. E. did not protest too much about the value of "personal experiences of the spirit" and whether he was sure about his own "deeps of life."

This much is certain, nevertheless; whatever the deficiencies of his philosophy and the digression of his religious quest, his eyes were never withdrawn from contemplation of eternity, and his energies never halted from the pursuit of that perfection which should insure his goal. His master passion—whatever he engaged in, painting, poetry, or social work—was the search for spiritual reality. As he himself confessed, "thought, from whatever it set out, ever led to the heavenly city." Thus while he lacked the conviction which flows from a philosophy grounded on divine revelation, the essential goodness of the man and the sincerity of his lifelong search could not fail to bring him within the soul of the religion he repudiated.

CHAPTER III

A. E., POET, ARTIST, DRAMATIST

If the Theosophic Lodge had sent A. E. exploring down many dark avenues and devious paths and always away from the heights to which Christianity led on the greatest poets, by a seeming compensation it gave him the nucleus of a public and introduced him to England and the United States. Through the instrumentality of Charles Weekes, a fellow Lodge member, poems which had appeared in the Irish Theosophist were published in Dublin under the title Homeward: Songs by the Way in 1894, and the welcome accorded them led to the publication of a companion volume, Earth Breath and Other Poems, in 1897. The reaction in Dublin was most favorable, and the repeated success which greeted the second book established A. E. as the supreme poet of contemporary mysticism, second only to Yeats in the poetic literature of the Revival.

Time has not borne out the judgment rendered then, though it has not taken away his title of poet. Others have come along, among them his own proteges, to claim the place he occupied for a brief interval. In authority and influence, however, Russell never lost his preeminent position in the Celtic Revival.

Among the many paradoxes in A. E.'s nature, none is more curious than this—that a critic whose fine sensitivity and judgment were valued by poets of greater genius could be so undiscriminating in the writing of
his own verse. This seeming incongruity is at once a blemish and a mark of his poetry. And his verse was of no little moment to him. Every line he had ever written he remembered and cherished. It mattered less what people said of him in other respects; if his poems were remembered and appreciated, his soul was content, and though this vanity may be pardoned, it can scarcely be overlooked. The answer doubtless lies in what was to him the sacred origin of his verse—not in the joy of creation alone, but in the record of an experience which transcended reality, of those moments when he felt one with the Infinite. For A. E. was above all things a religious poet, and the mysticism of his nature breathes through the whole of his verse. It is a rare poem indeed which is not written in the mystical strain—the occultism of the Vedas and Upanishads ever in the background. In the preface of his first book of poems, his creed is stated plainly, and he remained faithful to it to the very end of his poetic career: "I know I am a spirit and that I went forth in old time from the Self-Ancestral to labors yet unaccomplished, and filled with homesickness, I have written these songs by the way." 1

In this declaration is the summary of the whole message and tendency of his poetry. If like Blake he divined a mission, unlike him, he pursued it with genuine humility. Conviction of man's identity with the Divine, the Ancestral Self of Eastern philosophy, from whom we are temporarily divided, came to him in those moments of vision which he commemorated in his

poems, and therefore his poetry was doubly precious to him. "Sometimes his verses are the expression, almost crude, of the beliefs that have rooted themselves in him, the best are the embodiment and often the perfect expression of moral institutions," explains Eglinton.² Seldom do they fail to reveal deep-rooted ethical convictions.

He sought to show beauty as the symbol of greater majesty, to reveal Divine Beauty, and to demonstrate the place that each holds in the universality of spiritual perfection. Yeats referred to A. E. as "the one poet of modern Ireland who has moulded a spiritual ecstasy in verse," ³ and just as supernatural beings intrude in his early paintings and capture the attention, so his mysticism penetrates almost every line of poetry, its force ever impinging on the reader. If it were not for this compelling quest for the ideal he might have been content to explore the beauty of nature per se, and so to revel with an artist’s abandon in the external loveliness which so moved his soul, yet it seemed that beauty served to lead him on, rather than lure him away. He was seldom tempted to forsake his mission in order to indulge his fancy.

If one were to trace back the thought of A. E., one would find at least three main threads: Platonism, which is of course common in poetry; Indian mysticism, the peculiar extension of the cult of the East; and, most

evident of all, pseudo-pantheism.

Things of the sense, those copies of the ideal in the heavenly place, led his thoughts inevitably to the lost home. But his delight in beauty made his distrustful of it:

Oh be not led away
Lured by the color of the sun-rich day
The gay romance of song
Unto the spirit life doth not belong

... ... ... ... ...

Be it thine to win
Rare vistas of white light
Half-parted lips, through which the Infinite
Murmurs its ancient story

The same thought is repeated in Janus:

Image of beauty, when I gaze on thee
Trembling I waken to a mystery
How through one door we go to life or death
By spirit kindled or the sensual breath

The element of infinity which he sought was supplied by the mysticism of the East. This he explored to the limit of his powers. Behind all his images and emotions lay the complicated conception of a life anterior to the present, and of the present lived primarily in relation to that half-forgotten pre-existence. All his life he sang of those moments of rapture which he glimpsed in vision reminding him of his destiny, absorption into Universal Being. His poems therefore are but expressions, but conveyances.

5 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 129.
Substance was to him only a thick layer of transparencies under which the spiritual universe revealed itself to his vision. But thanks to Standish O'Grady, the inspiration of Celtic mythology diluted the influence of the East and became fused into his poetry. Yet Russell has never been primarily an Irish poet in the sense of Stephens, Lewidge and Yeats, though he gloried in the thought of being one. Where they were nationalists, he was a universalist. Davidson observes: "Where Yeats and Stephens have seen the world in terms of Ireland, A. E. has seen Ireland in terms of the world. Always a mystic ... he has been concerned with the types of things and not with particular examples." 6

The pseudo-pantheism, a sense of the all-pervading power who speaks symbolically to man from the "dumb brown lips of earth," forms a third and most unmistakable strand in the web of his poetry. 7 It is this characteristic which contributes to his unique position in Irish letters. The earth, the star, and man are one, and the intensity of his revelation glows through the lines of much of his verse. For A. E. the very earth under his feet had its mystic message:

I heard them in their sadness say,
"The earth rebukes the thought of God;
We are but embers wrapped in clay
A little nobler than the sod."


7 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 37.
But I have touched the lips of clay,
Mother, thy rudest sod to me
Is thrilled with fire of hidden day,
And haunted by all mystery. 8

His poems of nature are therefore a kind of orison, in their wor-
ship of the diverse manifestations of divinity. They take on almost the same
measure of ardor as those fervid expressions of the metaphysical school. He
emphasized that his verse was all conceived and written in the open air, yet
too little of the vision of the eyes went into its making. Sharp sensuous
detail was sacrificed to such phrases as "the lake's pale leaden amethyst,"
"the honey-suckle scented glade"—abstractions, rather than accurate per-
ceptions, capable of substitution by similar phrases without loss of meaning.
He supplanted personal experience by mystical interpretation. His belief
in the divinity of nature did not give him any special insight into the life
of nature, or offer a convincing explanation or interpretation. And this is
because the painter and the poet in him had to share with the mystic. The
artist's sensuous delight in form and color is indicated in the "Great
Breath":

Its edges foamed with amethyst and rose
Withers once more the old blue flower of
day:
There where the ether like a diamond glows
Its petals fade away.

A shadowy tumult stirs the dusky air;
Sparkle the delicate dews, the distant shows;
The great deep thrills, for through it everywhere
The breath of beauty blows. 9

8 Ibid., p. 34.
9 Ibid., p. 9.
In the lines addressed to a flower is a picture resplendent with tints and shades:

To build its palace walls of jade
What myriads toiled in dark and cold:
And what gay traders from the sun
Brought down its sapphire and its gold! 10

The poet's delight in grace is apparent:

Those delicate wanderers,
The wind, the star, the cloud
Ever before mine eyes
As to an altar bowed
Light with dew-laden airs
Offer in sacrifice 11

Dawn, dusk, twilight, were moments of lingering delight. Night held a special rapture for him, as this, one of many references, indicates:

Twilight, a blossom gray in shadowy valleys dwells
Under the radiant dark the deep blue-tinted bells
In quietness reimage heaven within their blooms,
Sapphire and gold and mystery. What strange perfumes,
Out of what deeps arising, all the flower-bells fling
Unknowing the enchanted odorous song they sing!
Oh, never was an eve so living yet: the wood
Stirs not but breathes enraptured quietude. 12

In his simpler moods he is often convincingly devout:

And one thing after another
Was whispered out of the air
How God was a big, kind brother
Whose home is in everywhere. 13

Eglinton discusses the difference between A. E.'s nature-worship and that of modern poetry, accepting Wordsworth as representative of the group:

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10 Ibid., p. 337.
11 Ibid., p. 54.
12 Ibid., p. 55.
13 Ibid., p. 112.
In Wordsworth who was of a philosophical turn, the contemplation of nature produced a state which was a wonder to himself, and which he made many attempts to describe, though he never quite succeeded in telling what happened within himself. But he certainly insisted, as do all the hierarchs of nature, that 'impulses' proceeded from nature to his own being. In Wordsworth's case these impulses produced a power of imaginative language in which he far transcended the ordinary level and a certain courage in proclaiming as truths, ideas which on sober reflection he was a little disposed to explain away. 14

Russell's point of view regarding the divinity of nature may be found in his own words:

I believe of nature that it is a manifestation of Deity, and that because we are partakers in the Divine Nature, all we see has affinity with us, and though now we are as children who look upon letters before they learn to read, to the illuminated spirit its own being is clearly manifested in the universe even as I recognize my thought in the words I write. Everything in nature has intellectual significance and relation as utterance to the Thought out of which the universe was born, and we, whose minds were made in its image, who are the microcosm of the macrocosm have in ourselves the key to unlock the meaning of that utterance. 15

It is inevitable that A. E.'s poetry should be compared with Yeats' for they were by general recognition the two leading poets of Ireland. Although time has tended somewhat to emphasize their disparity, they once were closely linked. Their association began in youth, and while frequently interrupted, continued until Russell's death. The early intimacy broke down with the passing of time, and the element of antagonism crept in, yet there

14 Eglinton, p. 244.
was never a formal break between them, and they collaborated in later years. In spite of the growing breach, in important projects they were able to overlook personal and sometimes major differences. It was inevitable, too, that a certain rivalry should have entered into their personal relations, for the Dublin literary world of that time split into two factions. Padraic Colum states that those who tired of A. E. went over to Yeats, and those who got no support from Yeats went over to A. E. 16 Unfortunately for Russell, though he was more aware of Yeats all his life than of anyone else in the world, that rivalry did not carry over into his verse. Had he but emulated some of his friend's qualities or yielded to his leadership, his own poetry would have gained immeasurably.

Their divergence might be said to begin with their poetic aims. Closely akin in many respects, these were the avenues along which each traversed solitary paths. Both desired a spiritual renascence for Ireland, and both sought it through the instrumentality of Beauty. With Russell, it was to be a subjective pursuit. "If I raise myself," he said, "I raise the rest of the world." 17 His goal was to pass on that vision of Eternal Beauty which haunted him. If he could achieve this objective, his mission was attained. Yeats believed that the spiritual is impotent until clothed in words. In his critical writings he stressed the religious aspect of poetry,


17 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 18.
but tended to think of the poet as a priest rather than as a saint. With him, the poet speaks for the masses; with Russell he is identified with the masses. As T. S. Eliot notes, Yeats felt the want of a religion, and having no sympathy with any established creed, looked for one in art, in the manner of Matthew Arnold. 18 "I ... made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories ... passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians," Yeats confessed. 19 Thereupon he set about reorganizing Irish poetry to make it "distinguished and lonely." 20 A. E.'s remark that Yeats "may be regarded as the pivot around which Irish literature turned from instinctive to conscious art," is also a key to the distinction between the two men. 21

Poetry came to A. E. from a kind of intuition; the burden of his verse lifts his utterance to the song of a prophet. No seer of old held his calling in greater reverence than Russell. On the other hand, interested as Yeats was in the supernatural, he chose the austere and implacable pursuit of an artistic ideal as the highest form of religious service. His pragmatic viewpoint is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the following:


19 Loc. cit.

20 Ibid., p. 52.

21 A. E., Living Torch, p. 257.
I thought one day if somebody could make a style that would not be an English style, and yet would be musical and full of color, many others would catch fire from him and we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland. Then with a deliberateness that still surprises me, for I have never been quite certain that one should be more than an artist. I set to work to find a style and theme to write about that the ballad writers might be the better.

The sincerity of his purpose and the uncertainty of its attainment is made evident in the statement of his early goal:

My work in Ireland has continually set this before me: How can I make my work mean something to vigorous and simple men whose attention is not given to art but to a shop, or teaching in a National School, or dispensing medicine? I had not wanted to "elevate them" or "educate them" as these words are understood, but to make them understand my vision.

Yeats at one time of his life wrote of himself as a mystic, yet though he believed in mysticism, he did not seem to have evidenced in any unusual degree direct mystical experience. Certainly he did not have the same claim to that title as A. E., and he would have been the first to admit that more correctly he is a symbolist. Both poets, of course, made use of symbols, but Yeats did not succeed in subordinating them to the expression of truth as A. E. did. The latter had a spiritual message to convey, and his deep sincerity in his mission is in contrast to Yeats' digressions. Ernest Boyd contends that whereas Yeats became enamoured of the instrument

22 Morris, op. cit., p. 39.

and lost sight of its purpose, A. E. was so enraptured by the reality of his vision, that the end dominated the means. His "Symbol Seduces" is a repudiation of Yeats' conception of beauty.

And while I sit and listen there
The robe of beauty falls away
From universal things to where
Its image dazzles for a day

MacNeice makes an interesting analogy between the two poets. He denies Yeats' claim to being a mystic, but adds that the lack of mystical experience is not necessarily a liability, and offers the work of the two men to prove that it might even be considered an asset:

If I may borrow a simile which Yeats himself used in another application, he was like Lancelot who nearly saw the Graal. He believed in the Graal, divining its presence (to use Plato's metaphor), he made great efforts to achieve direct vision. But it was perhaps just because he lacked this direct vision that he was able to write poetry. Would not Lancelot have been able to give a better account of the Guest than Galahad? Galahad, I feel, would have forgotten the road in the goal achieved and have lost his human feelings in that superhuman experience.

Nor is Yeats a philosophical poet in the sense that A. E. is. He lacked the deep conviction of the latter. The philosophical element of his poetry is to be found in its form rather than in its content. Like Donne and Pater he had a basic concept of style, but his view of life will be found in his essays rather than in his verse. A. E., on the other hand, was

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in continual apprehension of abstract ideas, of the meaning or significance underlying the appearance of things. Apprehensions alone, left Yeats dissatisfied—he must also comprehend. In this sense there was little of the mystic in Yeats—he had to have his feet on the ground. To achieve an understanding of universal qualities, Yeats made use of the particular Irish appearance of things. He made many excursions into European literature, but all his poems, even those later, purer verses are stamped with his nationality, whether by a curious turn of phrase or an idiom of the Irish voice. This is despite the fact that he gradually whittled away from his poetic style every element that was not the absolute essence of his artistic individuality.

While A. E. held his native land in equal regard, its idiom does not so dominate his verse. The habit of mind whereby he saw every natural phenomenon as a symbol of higher beauty is rather Wordsworthian. He did not discover the immanence of God in the untransformed beauty of nature as the English poet did, but his vision enabled him to see nature transmuted and transformed. A correspondence has been noted between his mood and that of Traherne's in childhood:

The corn was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood up from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold; the gates were at first the end of the world. The trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me. 27

There is in A. E.'s poems a singular fusion of earth and heaven, pagan and Christian. Celtic mythology is not a mere decoration; he used it because it was intimate and present as a living world, representative of that found everywhere. The ancient myths of Ireland represented a symbol of the ultimate spirit of reality which he was concerned to find, yet apart from the symbol he was not interested in Irish legend. One cannot dismiss his Irish background as of no influence whatever, but his verse compels belief that it would have been practically the same without that influence. He could and did appreciate the true character of Gaelic genius, its cold yet passionate realism at the one pole, its unquenchable idealism at the other, but his verse was not sufficiently Gaelic to make his work part of the mainstream of Irish letters. As for Yeats, so completely did he identify himself with Ireland that he may be said to conjure up the very landscape of Eire in one's mind, particularly in his early verse, in a way that Russell succeeds in doing in none. A. E.'s background therefore lacks the vividness of Yeats'. His poetry refers to the Irish scene but always in a rather indefinite way.

Edward Davidson comments:

The wild swans of Yeats are seen at Coole; his lake isle belongs to Innisfree. A. E. would have reduced them respectively to swans anywhere and a lake isle nowhere. In fact he does not appeal to the human consciousness of the universal scene by means of the typical appearances of a particular local scene. An Irishman reading his poetry will easily recognize some adumbration of the Irish countryside, but one who has never been in Ireland will find little that is unfamiliar to stand between the verse and his understanding of it. 28

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28 Davidson, op. cit., p. 328.
A rather captivating comparison of the two poets appeared shortly after the turn of the century:

Mr. Yeats sees the concrete visions of the Without he follows the track of the red-sashed people in green, catches glimpses of red-gold hair, and faces pale as "water before dawn"; he haunts that square white door in the hillside—known in the fairyland topography of all nations—which swings open at nightfall to loose the fairy riders on the world... A. E.'s eyes gaze on the Within; his visions are immaterial—the visions of the soul who seeks in its own depths to grasp the imaged memories of stars which shone on it in a bygone not yet obliterated eternity:

As in ancient hours ere we
Forgot ourselves to men. 29

In "Connla's Well," "The Children of Lir," and in the "Call of the Sidhe," there is the fusion of the local and the universal, a union lending an indefiniteness which carries out the mystic impression. The legendary lore of Ireland is yoked with Eastern mysticism, and the result is a poetry which is specifically Irish but predominantly universal in its appeal. In its wider application, however, it seems to have lost some of the power of Yeats' more local conjuring. An interesting contrast in treatment of the same subject may be secured from Yeats' "Hosting of the Sidhe" and A. E.'s "Call of the Sidhe." The magic of Yeats—his ability to delight the ear and the eye of the imagination—is soon manifest:

The host is riding from Knocknarea
And over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare;
Caoilte tossing his burning hair
And Niamh calling: "Away, come away
Empty your heart of its mortal dream

The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.
The host is rushing twixt night and day
And where is there hope or deed as fair
Caolite tossing his burning hair
And Niamh calling "Away, come away." 30

Against this rush and sweep, the dreamy, meditative, mystical
qualities of Russell seem even more marked:

Tarry thou yet, late lingerer in the twilight's glory:
Gay are the hills with song; Earth's faery children leave
More dim abodes to roam the primrose-hearted eve,
Opening their glimmering lips to breathe some wondrous story.
Hush, not a whisper! Let your heart alone go dreaming.
Dream unto dream may pass; deep in the heart alone
Murmurs the Mighty One his solemn undertone.
Canst thou not see adown the silver cloudland streaming
Rivers of faery light, dewdrop on dewdrop falling,
Star-fire of silver flames, lighting the dark beneath?
And what enraptured hosts burn on the dusky heath?
Come thou away with them for Heaven to Earth is calling
These are Earth's voice—her answer—spirits thronging.
Come to the Land of Youth; the trees grown heavy there
Drop on the purple wave the starry fruit they bear.
Drink: the immortal waters quench the spirit's longing.
Art thou not now, bright one, all sorrow past, in elation,
Made young with joy, grown brother-hearted with the vast,
Whither thy spirit wending flits the dim stars past
Unto the Light of Lights in burning adoration. 31

There is no real comradship with the animal world to be found in
his poetry, such as one meets in old Gaelic literature, or for example; in

1933), p. 61.
31 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 218.
Yeats' charming poem "To a Squirrel at Kyle-Na-Gna":

Come play with me
Why should you run
Through the shaking tree
As though I'd a gun
To strike you dead
When all I would do
Is to scratch your head
And let you go. 32

His closest approach to this perhaps is to be found in the first verse of "The Nuts of Knowledge":

A cabin on the mountainside hid in grassy nook
Where door and window open wide that
Friendly stars may look
The rabbit shy can enter in, the winds may
Enter free
Why throng around the mountain throne in
Living ecstasy. 33

Yeats, comparing himself with Lionel Johnson wrote truly, "I was more preoccupied with Ireland . . . and while seeing all in the light of European literature, found my symbols of expression in Ireland." 34 MacNeice agrees with him, adding, "In reviving Irish literature he revived himself, was saved from spending his time in the adulteration of foreign wines. He may have at times distorted the meaning of Ireland, but it was Ireland that gave body to his poetry." 35 Russell, on the contrary, became more and more a citizen of the world. As his perspective broadened, it seemed to have lost some of its poignancy. His reaction to Easter Week illustrates the trend of

32 Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 81.
33 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 158.
34 Yeats, Cutting of an Agate, p. 39.
35 MacNeice, op. cit., p. 52.
his thought. His initial aloofness gave way to profound emotion, and in that mood he wrote commemorating the dead. Then he remembered others who loved Ireland but died on European battlefields, and hoped by his words to reunite the two bitterly antagonistic elements of his country. The development of this universality led him to write in the poem "Michael":

We choose this cause or that, but still
The Everlasting works Its will
The slayer and the slain may be
Knit in a secret harmony. 36

It appears again in his angry reproof

We are less children of this clime
Than of some nation yet unborn
Or empire in the womb of time.
We hold the Ireland in the heart
More than the land our eyes have seen,
And love the goal for which we start
More than the tale of what has been.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
We would no Irish sign efface
But yet our lips would gladlier hail
The firstborn of the Coming Race
Than the last splendor of the Gael. 37

But this universality of concept is in Russell's case carried too far—the poet is unable to cope with the mystic. His spiritual apprehensions are conveyed in terms too nebulous to awake an answering response in the reader. Yeats expresses this idea in describing his verse as "endeavors to capture some high impalpable mood in a net of obscure images." 38 And because his

36 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 368.
37 Ibid., p. 230.
38 Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 308.
verse takes shape from a gentle, scarcely perceptible moulding, as compared with Yeats' crisp, incisive chiseling, it does not strike off those bright sparks that dazzle and delight.

Commenting on his imagery one critic makes an interesting distinction between his problem and that of the metaphysical school. A. E., he says, starts with something familiar, about which emotion can be felt, and makes it strange, while the metaphysical starts with the strange and makes it familiar. This is done by using terms to describe the ordinary and material, which are commonly used to describe the costly or the spiritual. Thus a boat is crystal, a city is opal, a bruised wild orchid is a crushed jewel.

It is, of course, important, both in order to express A. E.'s ideas fully and in order that his poetry may remain flesh and blood, that the boat should not be lost in the crystal, or the bruised orchid in the crushed jewel. And that is the danger of these general epithets which are not descriptive or in any way precise. They are like the images in the Song of Solomon, in which one excellence is described by comparing it with another. But in the Song of Solomon the excellence to which the original excellence is compared is in itself very much flesh and blood, whereas gold or opal or seraph winds are exceedingly vague as used by A. E. It is usual to call such images poetical, but we should rather say that they are no longer poetical, that they are no longer flesh and blood. But they do at any rate, carry with them a weight of poetical association which is so vast that we entirely forget the boat or the city, because of the overpowering influence of the epithets that describe them. 39

39 Living Age., op. cit., p. 698.
It has been advanced that Russell had too vast a kingdom of the spirit to reduce it to expression, and this seems to be the apprehension in his line "Too rich a freight may founder," but this has not been true of such poets of Thompson, Crashaw, Herbert, and many others who might be cited. Where they succeeded, perhaps his diversity of interests held him to less intensive efforts. Or it might be truer to say that he did not make sufficient effort to convey his experience. What heights he might have reached as a poet, it is useless to conjecture, but that his verse would have profited is beyond argument. And here again may be seen another and fundamental cleavage of viewpoint with Yeats. The latter lived in constant reverence of his art and of the office of poet; consequently his life was dedicated to the cultivation of his genius. With this as an end, then, he was always able to direct his energy into more definite channels. He dreamed of gathering together fragmentary Irish writings into a great literature, and thus to give Ireland an artistic criterion by means of a poetic hierarchy. He hoped to do for Ireland what the Arthurian legend had established across the sea. His early work drew heavily upon Irish myth and folklore and upon the verse and theory of the French Symbolists. It abounded in supernatural beings out of Celtic legend, and fantastic creatures like the boar with red bristles signifying winter and death. But he very quickly grew weary of the ceremonial style which seemed to stress cadence at the

40 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 341.
expense of reality. Realizing the shortcomings of his methods, he quickly put himself aright, and by rigid discipline succeeded in pruning away the elaboration and extravagance of his early verse by ballad writing and by a preliminary prose statement of the substance of his poetic concept. Nothing short of perfection contented him. His labor after an exacting standard of beauty was lifelong, and that standard varied endlessly, since with growth, appreciation of beauty alters. He was not without phases and digressions, but the tenacious adherence to purpose was rewarding to an extraordinary degree. This is probably noteworthy in its contrast to Russell who never attained that same satisfaction. When Yeats became involved in Ireland's political struggle, he abandoned the color and elaboration of his early lyrics for a less rhetorical rhythm and a more direct phraseology. But he never failed to find in the dream of a free Ireland, in the imagery suggested by her landscape, an unfailing fount for his art. Babbette Deutsche writes: "He . . . continued to draw sustenance from a native landscape which . . . offered to his more active imagination the equivalent of what the Lake landscape offered Wordsworth. In marrying the Irish landscape to Celtic myth he made the two equal, and in all his poetry the physical is nowise shamed before the supernatural." 41

In abandoning the rich, romantic coloring which he had first used, he determined to remodel his style, to make it "as cold and passionate as the

an achievement which admits him to the metaphysical ranks. In his analysis also he followed the meticulous scrutiny of this school. Deutsche comparing him with Donne observes:

He has not Donne's curiosity about current ideas, . . . But he has Donne's energy and wit, his intensity and his self-awareness. He is like him too, in having yoked together two parts of a personality which almost seem two selves: the mystical and practical, the attentive Platonist and the active patriot. 43

With Russell it might be proper to say that there was no cleavage between the selves. The mystic and the practical man existed side by side, but the mystic was in control, there was never a struggle for domination. The discipline which Yeats imposed on his art, Russell imposed on his character. His poems, whatever their value as word pictures to the poet, were essentially declarations of faith. Unlike Yeats, he was not a conscious artist, his work was seldom if ever revised. Yeats reveals:

... A line will take hours, maybe
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught. 44

This is confirmed by MacNeice's study:

He was never one of those who writes as the bird sings. Both his themes and his images are selected rather than spontaneous. . . . As a poet he was as deliberate as Vergil . . . In spite of his Romantic genealogy he had a Roman liking for the poet in a formal niche; poets were to be members of a priesthood, handing down their mysteries to their successors and conferring with one another when they wished to develop or modify their ritual. 45

42 Ibid., p. 200.
44 MacNeice, op. cit., p. 30.
This confession may be set against that of A. E. in the preface to his *Collected Poems*, wherein his less classical philosophy of composition is set forth:

I have omitted what in colder hours seemed to me to have failed to preserve some heat of the imagination; but in that colder mood I have made but slight revision of those retained. However imperfect that seemed, I did not feel that I could in after hours melt and remould and make perfect the form if I was unable to do so in the intensity of conception when I was in those heavens we breathe for a moment and then find they are not for our clay.  

His principle then is in direct contradiction to T. S. Eliot's conviction that "it is not the 'greatness', the intensity of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts."  

Certainly Russell's method has its perils. It dismisses the responsibility of the artistic while sublimating it to a higher authority. Where Yeats asserted his credo that "words alone are certain good," Russell used them merely as the accompaniment of the idea, a device for the expression of the poem's *raison d'être*. "Carrowmore," "By the Margin of the Great Deep," and other poems which call up pictures of the beautiful Irish countryside are primarily acts of faith; consequently in these and in all his poetry the same images recur. He wrote over and over of dawn and of twilight—periods most favorable for meditation, but indicative too of the nebulous twilight quality of

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46 A. E., *Collected Poems*.
his verse. The world of the spirit seems a world of the disembodied moving in a roseate ether; the world about him seems to have been glimpsed through a veil, or, as it were, in subdued mood. Where Yeats used words with the utmost precision, as MacNeice emphasizes, in A. E. they were subservient to a scarcely expressible spiritual meaning, a meaning which would be impaired if the words were too explicit. The vague, the ephemereral, the fleeting, were his tools, and he handled them with too little discrimination. "The Great Breath," which has often been quoted, might be selected as a typical poem:

Its edges foamed with amethyst and rose
Withers once more the old blue flower of day:
There where the ether like a diamond glows
Its petals fade away.

A shadowy tumult stirs the dusky air;
Sparkle the delicate dews, the distant snows;
The great deep thrills, for through it everywhere
The breath of Beauty blows

I saw how all the trembling ages past,
Moulded to her by deep and deeper breath,
Neared to the hour when Beauty breathes her last
And knows herself in death 48

To say that it fairly represents him at his best and yet is an early poem, illustrates the great distinction between Yeats and himself—lack of growth. That failure to refine and refine frequently leads to poetic stagnation, is clearly illustrated here. There is, with slight exception, a sameness of imagery, of theme, of meter and rhythm in his verse. To the last he never avoided either cliches or the most conventional diction. Over

and over recur the words "starry," "mist," "diamond," "crystal." The artist in him rejoiced in the use of color—rose, purple, blue—and in the sparkle of precious stones—opal, ruby, diamond, amethyst—but these are typically the soft misty colors of the Irish landscape, and the imagery therefore tends to be heightened rather than descriptive. The workmanship is frequently defective, the obvious word seldom avoided, and facile epithets like "mystic," "dreamy," and "starry," often produce the effect of hurried rhetoric rather than intimate realization. He rejected the incisive, the particular, for the general, the vague. The cloud was preferred to the rock, the rainbow to the rose. The abstract drawn upon too constantly dulls the impression. Every stone or blade of grass is a symbol contained in the symbol of the whole. He idealized everything, while Yeats generally idealized only his personal emotions. A. E. is declamatory rather than subtle, eloquent rather than quick. He described rapture but never communicated it. His poems leave one dissatisfied because they lack what he gave every evidence of possessing, character. Their universality seems the legacy of a tradition rather than the achievement of an individual. The impersonality one feels in his verse is largely due to the fact that he dealt in general ideas, which, as Yeats pointed out, were not self-won, as Thoreau's and Emerson's were, from nature and humanity.

Most of his lyrics are variations on the one theme, expressions of but one facet of his mind. Their subsequent monotony stems from the fact that the greater part of his verse was written as the result of a religious experience whose expression he was unable to convey in words. His command
of technique was unequal to the task of communicating in verse, as he admitted to Yeats: "I hate letting any prose pass which is not as well united as I can make it. I can revise my prose though I cannot easily revise my verse."\textsuperscript{49}

Yeats' analysis of his friend's poems is interesting, though its indictment must be somewhat modified through its tendency to over-strictures. "There are fine passages in all, but these will often be embedded in thoughts which have evidently a special value to the writer's mind, but are to other men merely the counters of an unknown coinage ... so much brass or copper, or tarnished silver at best."\textsuperscript{50} Then he cited the exclamation of an old peasant, a half-crazed visionary: "God possesses the heavens ... but He covets the world." That insatiable desire reversed was, he thought, reflected in A. E.'s aspirations:

This old man rises before me when I think of X. Both seek, one in wandering sentences, the other in subtle allegoric poetry, to express something 'that lies beyond the range of expression.' Both have ... the vast and vague extravagance that lies at the bottom of the Celtic heart.

When Russell toured America in 1932 he was drawn into a discussion of American poets and poetry which is most revealing. He confessed that his preference ran to Whitman and Emerson—whom indeed he has often been compared—but that he found Poe mechanical, artificial, and repetitious! The moderns were dismissed as perfect in technique but lacking in feeling.

\textsuperscript{49} J. Patrick Byrne, "A. E., Poet and Man," 

\textsuperscript{50} "A School of Irish Poetry," 
writing verse "woven out of the brain and not at all of the soul." 51 The
subject matter too—workmen, machine mills, drunkards—he believed unsuit-
able for poetry. Amy Lowell and her followers he rejected because vers libre
was distasteful to him, alien to his spirit and understanding. "Perhaps
the difference lies in the fact that America is young and Ireland beautifully
old. You have mechanical endeavor; we have suffering and tradition. Who is
to say which has touched the fountain of poetry?" 52

How apparent here is his tenacious grasp on tradition, his dis-
like of experimentation, and how strong the contrast between his passive
acceptance of his art and Yeats' aggressive pursuit of its perfection!
Yeats defied conventional rhyming and evoked music in every line. A. E. fell
into the most conventional metrical cliches. Yeats tells of a visit with a
mutual friend, a "learned musician," who was asked to listen to their verses.
He relates that Russell was surprised to learn that he did not make each
poem to a different tune, but that he made them all to two quite definite
 tunes which are, it seems, like very simple Arabic music: "I varied more
than Mr. Russell, who never forgot his two tunes, one for long and one for
short lines." 53

Stanley Kunitz seems to strike at the core of A. E.'s poetic
deficiency when he writes that the virtue of A. E. did not permeate his.

51 R. C. Feld, "The Opinions of A. E.," The Century Magazine,
CIII (November 1921), p. 9.
52 Loc. cit.
53 Byrne, op. cit., p. 243.
verse because Russell evidently never regarded poetry as in itself an act of
the spirit, exhaustive of the whole man. His time, he explains, was absorbed
by Ireland, his intellect consumed by the spirituality of the East. With
these all-engrossing demands on his vitality, there was little else of much
moment or concern.

On that day ... when walking down a country road near
Armagh, he 'saw' all at once in a moment of overpowering
joy, the godhead divided among all created things—on that
day before he became a poet, A. E. renounced poetry. In
surrendering his allegiance to formal poetics he abandoned
as well all pretense to the mechanics of the art. The con-
tentions between good and evil, body and soul, death and
life—these rocks upon which our poetry is built—were
henceforth to be but shadows to him. 54

The intensity of personal passion is rarely felt in his poetry;
indeed it could be more truly said that seldom is a wholly human emotion
glimpsed through his verse consequently love lyrics, the fount from which
most poets draw their deepest inspiration, were in A. E. the outcome of
pure transcendentalism:

Do you not feel the white glow in your breast, my bird?
That is the flame of love I send you from afar:
Not a wafted kiss, hardly a whispered word,
But love itself that flies as a white-winged star

Do not ask for the hands of love or love's soft eyes:
They give less than love who give all, giving what wanes.
I give you the star-fire, the heart-way to Paradise
With no death after, no arrow with stinging pains. 55

54 Stanley J. Kunitz, "The Middle Way" Poetry, XXXVIII (August
1931), p. 278.

55 A. E. Collected Poems, p. 100.
In "Whom We Worship," he repudiates

the love of lips and eyes
The ancient ways of love

for

... while the innermost with music beat
The voice I loved so long
Seemed only the dream echo faint and sweet
Of a far sweeter song.

But ah, my dreams within their fountain fell;
Not to be lost in thee,
But with the high ancestral love to dwell
In its lone ecstasy. 56

Even more explicitly he states his cool mysticism in "At One,"

I would not have you near, for eyes and lips might mar
The silence where we meet and star is lost in star. 57

and in "Illusion,"

Oh beauty, as thy heart o'erflows
In tender yielding unto me,
A vast desires awakes and grows
Unto forgetfulness of thee. 58

All his lyrics were written in the same spirit, in calm and
quietude of soul, divorced from passion, renouncing to attain a higher ful-
fillment, and tinged with tenderness and often an unspeakable sadness. They
suggest nothing so much as a preoccupation with matters immaterial and

56 Ibid., p. 171.
57 Ibid., p. 42.
58 Ibid., p. 175.
formless, and definitely detached from daily experience.

The same note of sadness is echoed by Yeats in *The Shadowy Waters*:

Yet never have two lovers kissed but they
Believed there was some other near at hand
And almost wept because they could not find it. 59

But Yeats passed from this mood and in the amazing vigor of his later years was to draw upon springs of energy which his youth did not find, to develop a capacity for response to the purely sensual which flushes his abstractions with life.

If Russell's deficiencies have been made more glaring by comparison with the foremost poet of his time, it must not be construed that he had no claim to the title of poet. He is repetitious, he is monotonous at times, as critics charge, but if the poetic fire burned rather waveringly and somewhat dimly upon occasion, it nevertheless burned, and shows in many a felicitous phrase and many a beautiful picture, and certainly in sincerity and nobility of thought, a potentiality which lack of real craftsmanship kept unrealized. If his work is pale in color and limited in range, he achieved in his best verse a delicate and individual beauty. "A Summer Night" with its response to the invisible things of nature, its intimacy and sensitiveness to her most delicate moods, is a charming poem; a critic's blue pencil could have made it a distinctive one. Where the demands for mere refinement of anything like the arts of poetry were called for, Russell

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failed to respond with adequate vigor. A shorter poem may illustrate the fact:

Dusk wraps the village in its dim caress  
Each chimney's vapour, like a thin gray rod  
Mounting aloft through miles of quietness,  
Pillars the skies of God.

Far up they break or seem to break their line  
Mingling their nebulous crests that bow and nod  
Under the light of those fierce stars that shine  
Out of the calm of God

Only in clouds and dreams I felt those souls  
In the abyss, each fire hid in its clod  
From which in clouds and dreams the spirit rolls  
Into the vast of God 60

The third stanza is an anticlimax to a charming beginning. Its omission would increase rather than impair the value of the poem, yet A. E. allowed it to encumber and vitiate an otherwise artistic concept. The second stanza is less objectionable, but its "fierce stars" shining "out of the calm of God" is apt to give the reader pause.

"Dawn" is another, though less marked, example of his failure to refine. The initial stanzas achieve a delicate beauty and interest which the poet fails to maintain.

Still as the holy of holies breathe the vast,  
Within its crystal depths the stars grow dim;  
Fire on the altar of the hills at last  
Burns on the shadowy rim

Moment that holds all moments; white upon  
The verge it trembles; then like mists of flowers  
Break from the fairy fountain of the dawn  
The hues of many hours.

60 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 10.
Thrown downward from that high companionship
Of dreaming inmost heart with inmost heart
Into the common daily ways I slip
My fire from theirs apart

An explanation for this strange deficiency may be found in the origin of his verse and his poetic practice. His poems which arose from a process of subconscious meditation, came to him frequently in fragments—he might have to wait days before the succeeding stanzas would spring into his mind. In one instance there was a lapse of thirty years. It would seem then that the initial inspiration was the core of the apprehension, and the succeeding verses mere extensions of the concept. This would account for the weakness, the anti-climax, of much of his poetry.

In trying to discover the secret sources of poetry, Russell wrote an account of the inception of several of his poems. Because he found that they would often spring full-fledged into consciousness, "fashioned by an art with which the waking brain had but little to do," 62 he inferred "an interior creator of poetry and myth, a being with prenatal wisdom which exists in all of us trying to become self-conscious in the body." 63 Hence his reluctance to revise or rework what he felt were "miracles out of the psyche." 64 His passivity doubtless derives from a belief—confessed to Yeats—that in his next reincarnation he would realize his desires in art and poetry.

61 Ibid., p. 12.
63 A. E., Ibid., p. 52.
64 Ibid., p. 58.
A merry note, one seldom sounded in his verse is heard in "Frolic,"

The children were shouting together
And racing along the sands
A glimmer of dancing shadows
A dove like flutter of hands.

The stars were shouting in heaven
The sun was chasing the moon;
The game was the same as the children's,
They danced to the self-same tune.

The whole of the world was merry,
One joy from the vale to the height,
Where the blue woods of twilight encircled
The lovely lawns of the light. 65

"Old Wines" is written in the same vein:

The boys with their golden limbs
Shine out through the tawny glare.
They race, and after their heels
The shadows in purple flare.

They dance from the sand to the sea
And shatter its blue as they pass,
Till the tide is frothy with light
And glimmers with bubbles like glass.

And Michael, Rory and Teige
Are aglow with the Sun and the Wind;
For unto their rapturous youth
The ancient nurses are kind.

They drink the oldest of wine.
It sparkles like fire in their clay,
A spirit breathed in the waters
Ere Time had buried a day. 66

"Reconciliation" has much to commend it. There is greater strength, better
rhythm, a suggestion in it of Whitman whom he admired:

65 A. E., Collected Poems, p. 21.
66 Ibid., p. 327.
I begin through the grass once again to be bound to the Lord;
I can see, through a face that has faded the face full of rest
Of the earth, of the mother, my heart with her heart in accord,
As I lie 'mid the cool green twines that mantle her breast
I begin with the grass once again to be bound to the Lord.

By the hand of a child I am led to the throne of the King
For a touch that now fevers me not is forgotten and far,
And His infinite sceptred hands that sway us can bring
Me in dreams from the laugh of a child to the song of a star.
On the laugh of a child I am borne to the joy of the King. 67

"Dark Rapture," too, written in alexandrines is one of his best. In movement and diction it is reminiscent of Yeats.

Ah, did he climb, that man, higher to heaven than I,
Babbling inarticulately along the road
His drunken chaotic rapture, lifting to the sky,
His wild darkness, his hands, his voice, his heart that glowed;
Gazing with intoxicated imagination on
The dance the tireless fiery-footed watches make
Through unending ages on the blue, luminous lawn?
Oh, could that maddened will, those riotous senses break
Into the astral ecstasy, for a moment feel
The profundities? Did he offer his sin to the Most High?
Or was he like those spoilers who break through and steal,
Not by the straight gate, into the city of the sky?
I heard him cry GOD in amazement as if his eyes
Saw through those reeling lights the one eternal Light.
Was that madness of his accepted as sacrifice?

67 Ibid., p. 298.
Did fire fall on him from some archangelic height?  
I, who was stricken to dumbness of awe, could not endure  
The intolerable vastness still to the uttermost star.  
Was it not enough the heart humble, contrite and pure?  
Must hell with heaven be knit ere the ancient gates unbar,  
The Pleroma open? I hurried, unaccepted, forlorn,  
From the deep slumbering earth, the heavens that were not mine,  
Hearing murmurs still from the dark rapture born  
Where the Holy Breath was mixed with the unholy wine. 68

Close as was his bond with nature, he did not retreat to poetry  
to escape the sordid. His intimate experience with reality probably was the  
touchstone to objectivity here. Even in the crowded city street he found  
beauty. The degradation of the city slum did not appall his poetic sense,  
and where others would perceive only squalor, to him

The stars appear
O'er the prodigious, smouldering, dusky, city flare.
The hanging gardens of Babylon were not more fair  
Than these blue flickering glades, where childhood in its glee  
Re-echoes with fresh voice the heaven-lit ecstasy.
Yon girl whirls like an eastern dervish. Her dance is  
No less a god-intoxicated dance than his,  
Though all unknowing the arcane fire that lights her feet,  
What motions of what starry tribes her limbs repeat.
I, too, firesmitten, cannot linger: I know there lies  
Open somewhere this hour a gate to Paradise,

68 A. E., Vale, p. 12.
The trams were transfigured for him as

the high-built glittering galleons
of the streets
That float through twilight rivers from galaxies
of light.
Nay in the Fount of Days they rise; they
take their flight,
And wend to the great deep, the Holy Sepulchre,
Those dark misshapen folk to be made lovely there. 69

The humanitarianism which was to find an outlet through so much
of his life shines through his verse. It is again and again apparent that
man, the principle object of his lyre has both his share in the scheme of
things as well as his obligation of fraternal guardianship. His compassion
saw even in the drunken outcast and beggar the royal line. So he sang:

Ere I lose myself in the vastness and drowse
myself with the peace,
While I gaze on the light and the beauty
afar from the dim homes of men,
May I still feel the heart-pang and pity, love-
ties that I would not release;
May the voices of sorrow appealing call me
back to their succour again.

Not alone, not alone would I go to my rest
in the heart of the love;
Were I tranced in the innermost beauty, the
flame of its tenderest breath,
I would still hear the cry of the fallen
recalling me back from above,
To go down to the side of the people who
weep in the shadow of death. 70

70 Ibid., p. 153.
New volumes of verse appeared rather frequently from his pen, yet each contained a large percentage of poems already published. And it would appear that Homeward, The Earth Breath, and The Divine Vision—the last published in 1903—contain the best of A. These and some later poems were collected and published in 1913. Gods of War was an outcry of bewilderment at the European disaster, a denunciation of the guilt of the nations concerned, and a stern warning of wrath to come. Voices of the Stones, his next important volume, appeared ten years later, in 1925. The dedicatory verse inscribed to Padraic Colum seems to announce a change:

I have made these verses in a rocky land
And I have named them Voices of the Stones
Although they do not keep that innocence
Was shed on me when quiet made me kin
To the cold immobile herd. All things have changed
From primal nature save these stones: all things
Since Eden, bird and beast and fin, have strayed
Far from that shining garden of His thought:
We also. Only the humble stones have kept
Their morning starriness of purity
Immutable. Being unfallen they breathe
Only unfallen life; and with my cheek
Pressed to their roughness I had part regained
My morning starriness, and made these songs
Half from the hidden world and half from this. 71

Yet this book and those which followed from his pen, Dark Weeping, Enchantment, The House of Titans, and Vale, reveal preoccupation with the same themes, handled often beautifully, but in the familiar manner. His longer

71 Ibid., p. 301.
poems were in general less successful. "The Dark Lady" was an attempt to solve the mystery of Shakespeare's Sonnets through intense meditation upon the riddle. Selected Poems represents the last act Russell performed before his final illness, the assembling of the humbled odd poems he wished most to be remembered by.

Frank O'Connor throws a very interesting light upon the paradox of Russell, claiming that at the basis of all his thinking was a habit-forming complex—habits of phrasing which veiled and obscured the really sensitive and acute perceptions of his mind, habits which inhibited the less responsive channels of expression. "His own poems, as often as he repeated them . . . never changed a comma . . . a thing I could never understand, for he was the first one to point out to me that language is finite and the beauty of verse wears away by repetition." 72 As an illustration, O'Connor cites Russell's protest at Yeats' revision of his early poems. On this score, however, MacNeice takes issue, urging that here A. E.'s critical judgment was superior to that of Yeats, that the latter's poems by their very nature demanded the dignity and simplicity, even the languid quality of the early lyrical treatment. 73 In general, O'Connor's argument appears very sound; certainly he has the weight of intimate acquaintance to support it. He continues with his theory:

72 Frank O'Connor, "Two Friends," Yale Review, XXIX (September 1939), p. 64.

73 MacNeice, op. cit., p. 71.
That habit-forming complex was all over his conversation, his poetry, his prose, his painting. Critics accused him of vagueness and platitude ... and it was hard to defend him. But for myself I feel certain that those vicious tricks of style which made him obscure a really individual perception in language where repetition killed all sense of wonder, were habits of phrasing picked up heaven knows how or where in boyhood. ... It is the same with his poems and pictures. Heaven knows from what early study of Nonconformist hymns a man so alive to the magic of poetry—and poetry simply bubbled from him—picked up those barbarous, jangling rhythms; the metrical equivalent of cliches—though there are cliches enough. 74

To this conclusion, A. E.'s poems compel assent. Relying solely on inspiration and produced effortlessly and in abundance, they were written without the anguish of the artist, and the sadness which runs through the greater part of them reflects an unsatisfied creative urge. "He can never have known the utter emptiness of the artist who exhausts himself in one supreme effort and feels there can be nothing more to say," 75 concludes O'Connor. Probing for the answer to Russell's lack of growth, he adds:

I tell myself that he was a dilettante, but a dilettante is a nature without passion and energy, and he had both. I tell myself that he was too impatient to do anything that required labor, and that was partially true, but why did he allow himself to be guided into those few patterns? ... A life that was all externalization, an art that was all disguise, a philosophy that was a prison for an abounding nature—what was the reality? Was there some sort of failure to shake off his boyhood and accept the dialectic of life? 76

74 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 67.
75 Ibid., p. 73.
76 Ibid., p. 80.
He comes to the conclusion that "there was too much daylight in A. E. to nourish poetry," and recalls the "bright glare upon the crude colors of his canvasses and the masses of shadow among the flickering candles in Yeats. . . . These two things might almost be taken as symbolical of the contrasted objectivity and subjectivity of the two men." 77

O'Connor's slighting reference to Russell's paintings reflected an opinion not generally shared, for it was thought by many that he had artistic talent in marked degree. A. E. himself said that he felt nature had intended him to be a painter, but here again his mysticism seems to have exerted its unfortunate influence.

He was about sixteen or seventeen when he entered the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, where Yeats was also a student. Russell remained only six or seven months, securing admission to the Royal Hibernian Academy of Art on the test of a small drawing. The instruction here, in his opinion, was sadly inadequate, but it was all he was ever to have and was terminated when Russell felt that art was a besetting temptation which must be mastered if his spiritual life were not to be stunted.

George Moore relates the story told him by John Hughes, a student at the Art School at the same time and later a distinguished sculptor. Within a few weeks of A. E.'s enrollment, teacher and students alike were amazed at his talent for drawing and composition, and at the ease with which he was

77 Ibid., p. 74.
able to sketch the naked model from sight. "Turning from the model he designed a great assembly of gods about the shores of the lake renowned in Celtic tradition. 'Compared with him we seemed at that time no more than miserable scratchers and soilers of paper.' "78 While no proof of genius in the field of art, nevertheless such an indication of ability does suggest a student of great promise.

In spite of every evidence of talent and of the support and encouragement of faculty and students alike, he laid aside his brushes because, as Yeats recalled, his "will was weak and must grow weaker if he followed any emotional pursuit." 79 Eglinton asserts that A. E. told him positively that his reason was a financial one, and since the one thing certain in A. E.'s character was his sincerity, it is probable that both elements entered into his decision, with the religious motive predominating, as it did in every instance in his life. Art was hereafter to become not an end but a means by which he might live more purely and intensely.

In the years spent in Pim's warehouse he produced numerous small water colors, generally mystic or symbolic in nature. When he joined the I. A. O. S., he began to sketch small landscapes. Those which have survived of the period show plumed deities sitting in council among the clouds, or ascending and descending in many-colored spirals of flame.

78 George Moore, op. cit., p. 350.
79 Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 304.
According to Eglinton, his painting in oil began early in the twentieth century, when Count Casimir Markievicz settled in Dublin and persuaded him to join the Countess and himself in an exhibition of paintings. It proved to be an artistic and financial success, and he continued to exhibit regularly for the next ten or twelve years. Several of his canvases were purchased for the Dublin Municipal Collection. Ernest Boyd describes these pictures of his early and middle years with their introduction of superhuman phenomena, in somewhat the same vein as A. E.'s explanation of them:

Sometimes an angelic Being will hover above a plougher as he works, sometimes the body of a woman appears rising out of the ground. The abrupt juxtaposition of such figures in an otherwise ordinary landscape is characteristic. These supposedly supernatural phenomena are as much a part of the natural scene as the material objects the artist is painting. He simply describes what he sees. The poet and artist being closely related in A. E.—the themes and coloring of their work is identical—we find in his verse the same peculiarity as in his painting.80

As he grew older he lost his taste for symbolic and mythological paintings and confined himself mainly to pure landscape. The sand dunes of Donegal with their great sweeps of coast were a favorite site for the artist, and his son Diarmuid recalls that summer after summer he would set off for the spot and return with twenty or thirty sketches to be finished at leisure during the winter. A. E. said of Donegal that it was one of those places in the world where fairies and gods could be seen and heard. These visits to the coast were always a source of inspiration and a lifting of the spirit,

80 Boyd, op. cit., p. 225.
furnishing him with a renewed belief in the occult, if any were necessary. He stated:

The earth is a person, a goddess. ... Just as in our bodies there are certain parts which are more in contact with impressions than others, like the eyes ... so it is with the earth. There are certain places in her body which are sensitive, and beings, strangers to us, can be manifest more easily in those places. Donegal is one of them. 81

Professor Thomas Bodkin was among those who saw in his work a streak of genius:

He had a fine sense of color, a great gift for composition. His draughtsmanship, particularly in figures left occasionally much to be desired. But had he painted day in and day out, there can be no doubt that he would have taken rank as one of the most noteworthy painters of his age. 82

He mentioned a landscape frieze which was apparently destroyed by fire in the Irish Civil War as a "composition well realized, of extraordinary loveliness. It certainly was A. E.'s masterpiece." 83

His resemblance to Turner in his intoxication with light and many hues is supported by Monk Gibbon's statement that in his paintings he captured the translucency of the Irish scene, "that mysterious quality in which the earth itself seems alive, radiating its own vitality." 84 If, as it seems, he was meant to be a sensuous painter of landscapes, it is the greater pity he lacked the discipline to perfect his art.

81 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 78.
82 Ibid., p. 67.
83 Loc. cit.
84 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 35.
Contact with European art was what many of his friends desired for him. He made one or two visits to Paris, but though he did not fail to visit the Louvre, his stays in the city were too brief and came at too late a period in his life, to bring about any noticeable change in his work. His knowledge of the technique of painting was very slight and as a result some of his pictures deteriorated. Eglinton tells how he would start to work on a sunlit scene, and his vision changing as the work proceeded, the result might prove to be a nocturn. Consequently the layers of paint superimposed upon each other without opportunity to dry out, tended to go opaque and to crack. He adds that the only medium he used was turpentine which, when used to excess, induces fissures in the pigment.

Art, according to Russell's own testimony, gave him his happiest moments. He looked forward from the midst of busy days to Sundays devoted to painting, and his home and office were filled to overflowing with picture after picture of plumed spirit forms with flames issuing from their spines, looking something like red Indians; or of Irish sea weed gatherers approaching the brow of a hill at sunset, with red light streaming behind them; or of children playing on the beach, wading or running races. Aside from the release of spirit, the joy of expression, his son states that through his paintings Russell was able to supplement his modest income by as much as one hundred and fifty pounds a year, though his prices for his canvases were extremely low and must have annoyed other artists. He concluded that his father must have come to realize this, and for that reason stopped showing his pictures.
Discussing a trip with A. E. through the Louvre, Eglinton mentions his preference for Fra Angelico's "Coronation of the Blessed Virgin," and to a lesser extent, for the Watteaus, and for the moderns, Monet and Rousseau. "In painting he looked first for the dream, the record of some visionary beauty, then he was concerned with the technical rendering of light."  

The concern for the "dream" was consistently the touchstone of his whole life. Mysticism again spurred him away from the normal outlet of his gift, and tinged that gift, as it did his poetry, with a strange exotic quality, weakening it in a way all art is weakened when it loses contact with reality.

He had tried his hand at another art form at the turn of the century, but had evidently found drama uncongenial to his taste or too demanding of the craftsman, and after one play had submitted no more, though there was a partially written comedy found among his effects.

In Ireland poetic drama had been developing since 1892, when Yeats' The Countess Cathleen had been produced, but it was not destined to advance independently of England for a few years. The success of poetic drama on the Continent may have been the impetus needed. Maeterlinck in Belgium, Rostand in France, Hauptman in Germany, D'Annunzio in Italy, and Stephen Phillips in England were writing in the pattern earlier seen in

85 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 187.
Brand and Peer Gynt, the dramatic poems which preceded Ibsen's social and ethical plays. In Ireland poetic drama was to attain a new significance not only by reason of its intimate connection with the Celtic Revival, but because the Abbey theatre was to become to the world the symbol of the spiritual rebirth of a dying nation.

In Europe the first sign of a revolt against the conventional theatre came from Paris and spread rapidly to London. Ibsen's and Shaw's works were supplemented in 1893 by George Moore's Strike at Arlingford and a year later by Yeats' Land of Heart's Desire.

In 1899 The Countess Cathleen and Martyn's Heather Field were acted by an English cast on the Dublin stage under the auspices of the Irish Literary Theatre founded by the two playwrights and Lady Gregory. Their three-year plan for an experimental spring season in Dublin came to an end in 1901. William and Frank Fay, stirred by the new forces at work abroad, wanted actors temperamentally and technically adapted to the interpretation of Irish drama, and material which had not yet been presented on any stage. Learning that A. E. had an unfinished play about ancient Ireland, they persuaded him to complete it. Russell brought Yeats to one of the rehearsals, and the latter became so enthusiastic that he gave his Cathleen ni Houlihan for production by their company. Thus it happened that in April 1902, the Irish National Dramatic Company presented these two plays, a performance which marks the real beginning of the Irish National Theatre. Here for the first time plays written by Irish playwrights had been acted by an Irish company and directed by an Irish producer. It was really and genuinely Irish,
supported by all the factions and cliques in the Ireland of that time. Thus while the Irish Literary Theatre had its origin in the cosmopolitan dramatic movement, the Fay's Irish Dramatic Company was closely allied to the Irish Literary Movement, which found its inspiration in the Gaelic Revival.

Deirdre, one of the most famous of Celtic folk tales, was the tragedy which Russell essayed—a legend only less known than that of Iseult and the subject of poets and playwrights from Sir Samuel Ferguson down. It is not as easy story to retell dramatically. Even Yeats' version, though undeniably good, does not rise to the heights we might expect of him. Dorothy Hoare mentions that there are two versions of the tale, and in both versions, two parts. The first deals with Deirdre's girlhood and elopement with Naisi, and the second with their return and death. She observes that any dramatization of these is generally either too verbose or else omits much effective material. A. E.'s play is guilty of the first error, yet its failure is due not so much to that mistake as to the fact that it is on the whole mechanical and unmoving. Its first act—like the first stanza of his poetry so often—is the best. Here as in verse, the lack of sustained beauty is apparent. As the subject becomes less ideal and more realistic, the play falls off steadily. The characterization is both poor and inconsistent. Conchobar who is presented in the first scene as a king who above all else seeks for justice, becomes at the end completely devoid of principle.

Where A. E. divided the action into three scenes, Yeats heightened the dramatic tension by telescoping them into one, the homecoming of Deirdre and Naisi to their death. It is interesting to note that Synge's treatment of the same theme developed into a character study of the woman Deirdre.

The play did not terminate A. E.'s connection with the Abbey Theatre. Darrell Figgis claims that the presidency of the Irish Literary Theatre was first offered to Russell, who declined it and suggested Yeats for the position. Later, the search for permanent headquarters for the company and the fact of that presidency gave the leadership to Yeats. This account is not mentioned elsewhere, but Lady Gregory and others confirm the fact that A. E. was made vice president of the Irish National Dramatic Society, a position he held for a few years, relinquishing it possibly because of disagreement with the policy of Yeats.

Russell's contribution to the dramatic movement is again evidenced only by the intangible. His single play, simple and not too successful, added little if anything to the theatre, but in his stimulation and encouragement of the other playwrights and in his unfailing interest and sympathy with the aims of the Dramatic Society, he must be considered a definite, if unseen, force.

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87 Figgis, op. cit., p. 136.
CHAPTER IV

THE WORLD OF PRACTICAL AFFAIRS

By taste and sympathy, by natural endowment and temperament Russell would appear to have been intended for the sheltered life of an artist or poet. While obviously not as highly gifted as Yeats, he nevertheless had talents of a high order, which attention and cultivation could have rendered distinctive. His success in the world of practical affairs then is the more surprising and reveals anew the many-sided nature of his genius.

If his early meeting with Yeats was to become a turning point in his life, his introduction to Sir Horace Plunkett was to prove even more momentous, for with no abandonment of interest in the arts his energies were now directed into channels which mysticism could no longer mislead or blight, but in which the spirituality of his nature was to be an asset, equipping him as it did with an over-all understanding of the nature of man's relation to his environment. Confessing that his preferences ran along other lines, he revealed that duty alone brought him out of his pleasant seclusion: "My conscience would not let me have peace unless I worked with other Irishmen at the reconstruction of Irish life." ¹ So successful was he in helping to solve the problems of rural Ireland that in 1930 Secretary of Agriculture Wallace summoned him to the United States to lecture to groups on agricultural cooperatives. It was not that these were peculiar to A. E.'s native

¹ A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, p. vii.
land; it was rather the success—and the promise of success—which they brought to a land which centuries of injustice had relegated to a state of backwardness strangely inconsistent with the Celtic natural genius.

It would not be feasible in one short chapter to attempt the history of the troubled and tragic past of Ireland. Yet without some consideration of that past it is impossible to understand the economic and social situation and the true significance of the cooperative movement. The general story is familiar. The country's isolated position saved Ireland from Roman conquest and permitted it to achieve independently and with but minor interruptions a comparatively high state of civilization until the twelfth century, when the land fell victim to English conquest, a virtual deathblow. This disaster like a cancer took hold slowly, but in time effectively consumed the productivity of the country.

In the opinion of many experts Ireland might easily have become a prosperous agricultural country. A mild climate, abundant rainfall, and over fifteen million acres of arable land, emphasize her agricultural potentialities, a fact which absence of coal and iron deposits only serve to point up. There should have been abundant crops for all, even though diversification was not always possible. In place of promised prosperity, however, there is a history of famine and the greatest poverty and distress. Historical events give the explanation.

Before considering the land problem, it must be recalled that if the people were forced to look to farming for a livelihood it was because
Ireland's manufacturing industry and commerce—a well balanced and promising industrial development—were crushed by the English Navigation Act of 1698. Similar prohibitions and restrictions were imposed upon the country solely for the profit of the conqueror and with no consideration for the people affected. The paralyzing Act of Union in 1800, followed by the Industrial Revolution proved an equally effective, if not so openly malicious, hindrance to development. Not until 1824 when complete free trade with England was established did manufacture attempt its slow revival. By that time it seemed useless to essay a recovery of lost ground for it was hopelessly outdistanced and outmoded.

Since no manufacture existed there was no alternative but farming as a means of subsistence. The original Celtic land system of communal ownership with individual occupation had long been forcibly replaced by confiscation into the hands of a comparatively few large landowners. These rarely visited their property but entrusted its management to middlemen who in turn were primarily interested in the amount of rent that could be extorted. It was an Englishman, Lord Chesterfield, who commented on the callousness and greed and misery this system nurtured: "The poor people in Ireland are used worse than negroes by their lords and masters and their deputies of deputies of deputies." The practice of extracting the last shilling from the helpless tenant led only to individual apathy and national

2 Corkery, op. cit., p. 4.
poverty. Furthermore, the exploitation of the tenant was emulated by the local shopkeepers, the "gomeen" men of the villages who bound the people into virtual slavery. Seed, for example, was later proved to be commonly adulterated up to and even over sixty percent. Gordon and Staples cite, as proof of the thoroughness of the cheating generally practiced, the statement of landlords whose holdings were threatened by the land legislation of the late nineteenth century, that it would be very easy for them to set themselves up as shopkeepers in the villages and within a generation regain possession of their estates. The land was let and sublet in such a fashion as to create at the bottom of the scale a rack-rented peasantry raising grain to pay the rent and subsisting on a meager diet of potatoes. Where the original owners were not exterminated or driven away, they remained as renters with no hope of their injustice ever being righted. Under such a system the tenant did not enjoy any security of tenure and the landlord was able to evict him whenever the rent was not paid. This modified form of piracy nurtured in England an ever-enlarging group of avaricious estate men whose indifference to the sorry lot of the native was thoroughly in accord with the general callousness of the century. According to Froude's estimate, nine-tenths of the land, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was held by Protestants of English or Scotch extraction, an appalling distribution on the basis of numbers. A large proportion of tenants held their farms on

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3 Corkery, op. cit., p. 30.
a yearly lease, and though longer leases existed, under the penal codes they could not be extended to Catholics. Furthermore, save in Ulster where far better conditions prevailed, landlords never accepted the obligation of financing permanent improvements as owners did in England.

The penal laws of 1735 exempted pasture land from ecclesiastical tithes. This, and the increased demand for cattle after 1815, made property owners anxious to convert their arable land into grazing ground. As a result vast stretches of prairie comprising much of the best soil of Ireland supported cattle, while the increasing population was forced into smaller and smaller subdivisions of holdings. By 1841 there were almost 700,000 holdings under fifteen acres as against 130,000 over fifteen acres in extent. \(^4\)

Except in a very few areas, small farms of this kind could not support the families settled upon them. An Oxford economist who visited Ireland remarked: "In a country where the only three alternatives are the occupation of land, beggary, or famine—where there is nothing to repress competition and everything to inflame it—the struggle for land is like the struggle to buy bread in a besieged town, or to buy water in an African caravan." \(^5\)

In 1800 the population was estimated at five million, or 166 to the square mile. England and Wales at that time had a population of nine million, or 153 to the square mile. Lack of industry obviously placed a


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 33.
tremendous burden upon the soil of Ireland. With the continuous pressure toward smaller holdings it was inevitable that soil exhaustion would be followed, as it was in 1846, by famine. There were two consequences to the tragedy—clearances and emigration. The scale on which the first was practiced only added to the misery. Barker states that from 1849 to 1856 over fifty thousand families were evicted. In 1863 and again in 1864, the number was about two thousand; in 1865 and 1866, about one thousand. Those who were able to do so emigrated. Between 1846 and 1851 over a quarter of a million people left Ireland each year; between 1851 and 1861 over one hundred thousand annually sought other refuge. While the exodus produced a temporary cessation of rural congestion, it inevitably erected a permanent barrier to racial understanding and cooperation. Never again could the English anticipate a peaceful solution to the problem. "Famine, eviction, emigration, this ... triple van of woes ... left a legacy of hatred of England to the third and fourth generation," concludes Barker. 6

Gordon and Staples bring to the fore a point which cannot be over-emphasized in relation to Ireland's "backwardness," — that the emigration was not of a number of families, but of individuals, and this meant the loss of a group containing an abnormally large proportion in the productive years of life—the loss of natural leaders.

There was another and equally serious effect. The vicious circle of economic depression and emigration seriously reacted upon the social life and character of the people. A deadening melancholy settled upon all forms of community life, created by poverty and perpetuated by lack of leadership and aggravated by attempted Anglicization.

... Various customs which had brought them together for social enjoyment passed into disuse. The color and spirit which the dances and festivals and story tellings had brought into the lives of the young people faded away. The public house became by lack of competition the center of social life. 7

And the social blight was deepened by lack of education. The laws barring Catholic children from an education were finally repealed, but attendance at primary schools was not compulsory at all until the passage of the Act of 1892. Secondary schools were independent of a central authority, and Trinity College took but little part in the life of the country. Technical education in agriculture was practically unknown. This chaotic condition in the educational field had far-flung repercussions in all walks of life and left the people peculiarly susceptible to economic stagnation.

Disraeli had sought in 1844 to define the Irish question: "A dense population in extreme distress inhabit an island where there is an Established Church which is not their Church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in a distant capital. Thus they have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, an alien Church, and in addition the weakest Executive in the world." 8 He thereby raised three subjects for

7 Gordon and Staples, op. cit., p. 27.
8 Barker, op. cit., p. 34.
inquiry—agrarian, ecclesiastical, and political.

The Roman Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 admitted Catholics to Parliament, but not until 1869 was the English Church disestablished and disendowed. Other reforms came equally slowly. The various Land Acts, at the prodding of the I. R. B. and the Fenians, gradually returned land to its rightful owners. However the long struggle for political rights, the harshness and injustice of the English government, had focused attention through the centuries upon the unhappy lot of the conquered, and serving as it did to keep the political question constantly before their vision, turned the minds of the people away from practical matters. The Nationalist Party insisted that self-government would provide the panacea for the ills of Ireland. Economic evils were in their opinion the result of political causes, and to be corrected only by Home Rule. This not only over-emphasized political strategy, but, more seriously, absorbed the national energy.

In the crisis into which Ireland had fallen in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, land legislation was only a partial remedy. Fortunately there appeared a man with a constructive plan to meet the urgent needs and with the initiative to put it into effect. The cooperative movement had been attempted earlier in Ireland by John Scott Vandaleur, a landlord influenced by the teachings of Robert Owen, but when he later fled the country to avoid the payment of debts, the Ralahine Agricultural and Manufacturing Cooperative Association he had founded languished. A definite gap in the progress of rural security was thus made. Plunkett who had been
a rancher in the western part of the United States, had observed the tendency toward industrial combinations there. When he returned to Ireland he found widespread poverty and indebtedness, a nation of small farmers employing primitive methods of agriculture and living under unsatisfactory conditions of land tenure, and a rate of emigration which threatened to drain the land completely. He saw the chief evil, the "gombeen man," the local usurer, slowly strangling rural life. Darrell Figgis graphically describes the hopeless plight of the farmer:

Small holders cannot buy the expensive implements with which sowing, and harvesting are made speedy and cheap; and therefore they cannot win the best from the soil, though they would have to accept the prices decreed by these speedier and cheaper methods in other parts of the world. Lacking organization, moreover, they could not even know what these prices were; or knowing them they could not demand them. Yet if they purchased they had to purchase at the range of prices decided by the play and interplay in the exchange of various commodities in the social economy of which they knew nothing. . . . The longer they struggled the poorer they became; the poorer they became the more they fell into the debt of the middleman, and when they fell into his debt he could demand that they should purchase only from him and sell only to him at what prices he in his judgment should decree. 9

The simple and obvious solution to this, as Plunkett saw it, was for the farmers to band together into companies and buy collectively for their joint use whatever was needed, to buy them as corporate bodies, directly from the main sources and sell directly in the world's markets—in

9 Figgis, op. cit., p. 66.
short to eliminate the middleman altogether. He succeeded in interesting in
his project Father Thomas Finlay, a young Jesuit, and R. A. Anderson, the
supervisor of rents of Lord Castledown, and the three set about spreading
the gospel of cooperation. By 1894, the movement had become too large to be
carried along by individuals, and the Irish Agricultural Organization Society
was formed. In 1897, seeking an additional organizer, Plunkett appealed to
Yeats, who in turn recommended George Russell. The latter undertook the work
rather reluctantly, dubious of his ability to be of substantial assistance,
but at the insistence of Yeats that his particular talents were needed. For
eight years he spent his time first as organizer, and later as assistant
secretary, touring the Irish countryside, lecturing to the farmer on the ad-
vantages of working with his neighbor instead of competing with him, inaugur-
ating credit societies, agricultural societies, and miscellaneous groups.
The work of alleviating living conditions among the peasantry assumed two
general tendencies—economic and agrarian reform and the rehabilitation of
cottage crafts. It was largely due to Russell’s influence that the much
needed and very effective women’s branch of the cooperative movement was
formed in 1911. The United Irishwomen, an organization with about forty or
fifty local units scattered throughout the country, drew its members from
farmers’ wives and daughters, and women of the smaller country towns. In-
struction was given them in poultry-keeping, egg production, gardening,
village industries, and home decoration. Milk depots were established to
provide for the very poor, and village nurses were installed in cooperation
with existing agencies.

The I. A. O. S. in its earlier stages bore the burden of practically all the technical education in agricultural matters which was done in Ireland. Instructors were sent out to deal with the various problems of farming: seeds scientifically adjusted to differing soils, butter making, poultry raising, etc. Questions relating to livestock and such matters were discussed at general meetings, though these functions were handled after 1900 by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in order to leave the parent organization free to devote itself to organizing cooperatives, its most important function. In the work in which Russell was first engaged—organizing the Faiffeisen banks—his success was remarkable. Eglinton quotes H. F. Norman's comment that "Russell and those working under or beside him ... started about two hundred and fifty of these banks whose loans proved the salvation of thousands of small farmers." 10

It was all in all a strenuous life, as his son testifies: "It can't have been an easy job, for even in his later years when time had mellowed details, he would speak to me of the wretchedly long journeys involved and the miserable rawness of the weather." 11 But there was joy in it too for him, the satisfaction of work for which he was eminently suited, one which offered his patriotism and idealism expression:

10 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 47.

It is not the work which is done which excites enthusiasm, but the work which is yet to be done—the long vistas and the yet unfolded close. It is not what the state has done or can do which inspires, but the infinitely nobler possibilities which arise through the voluntary cooperation of men to wring from nature and life the utmost they can give. There are unexpected possibilities in agricultural organization—beginning things which I believe will finally evolve into splendid consummations. 12

He saw it as a means of channelling the newly awakened Irish spirit into outlets which would produce the greatest good for the whole people; an opportunity to create a new social order by releasing the rural population from acute distress and despair that they might assimilate the intellectual and spiritual fruits of the Gaelic revival. It was a work for which he was signally qualified, one which gradually changed him from a shy, retiring man into an able speaker and a strong opponent in debate. His humor, kindliness, and resourcefulness in argument, supplemented by an infectious enthusiasm, were powerful weapons in winning adherents to his cause. Opposition came not only from the gombeen men, who quickly allied themselves with the politicians to block the I. A. O. S., but from the farmers themselves, who after centuries of oppression and isolation were suspicious and distrustful of new ideas and methods. The latter group could in the vast majority of cases be won over; the former with their combination of money and power were able seriously to handicap the progress of the I. A. O. S. In 1906 the Nationalist party captured the vice presidency of the

12 A. E., Cooperation and Nationality, (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., Ltd., 1912), p. 32.
Department of Technical Instruction held by Plunkett, and replaced him with T. W. Russell, who cut down and later withdrew the grants which Plunkett had secured for the organization. Figgis explains the turn of events: "One of the leaders of the political party ... was one of the greatest gombeen [gombeen] in the country; and it was easy to advance the plausible argument that a doctrine of self-help weakens the case for national self-government."

Despite this setback, great strides were made in the relief of the Irish farmer.

Statistics furnished by the United States Department of Commerce offer proof of the remarkable development of agricultural cooperation in Ireland. In 1889 the original society had a turnover—mainly in butter—of £4,363; by 1900, 477 societies were in existence, with a total turnover of £1,038,877. By 1920 the number of societies had increased to 1,114, with a turnover of £14,604,852. In 1925 there was a marked decline, due partly to unsettled conditions at home and abroad, and partly to the fact that trading interests were strongly entrenched in the dominant political party. But if all the farmers did not achieve the goal envisioned by Plunkett and Russell, their lot had been improved immeasurably, and the government has seen the wisdom of promoting their cause. The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Banking Currency and Credit commented on the benefits derived from the policy of making Ireland more self-supporting, an advantage which

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13 Figgis, op. cit., p. 68.

must have become even more obvious since the second World War. "Quantities of cereals and feeds coming into Ireland in the days of British rule ... have been reduced by half. Certain other foods for which the Irish once depended almost entirely on supplies from abroad, they now produce." 15 Morton, writing on this same new self-sufficiency cites the increase in land under tillage as the highest figure in three-quarters of a century: "The production of wheat in the ordinary rotation of crops and the revival of the milling industry have succeeded in changing the point of view of large numbers who had come to accept as inevitable the dependence of Ireland on her English export trade." 16

Of great importance, too, were the cottage crafts and the arts formerly cultivated by the peasantry. These tended to decentralize industry and to foster the development of a well-rounded economic life, and a satisfied and prospering rural population.

The admitted improvement in the standard of living is of less consequence than the encouragement of individual energy and self-reliance, characteristics vitally necessary for social progress. This thought was foremost in the minds of the originators of the movement, for at the Cooperative Congress of 1889, the statement was made that "the waste product of our present industrial order was the unrevealed capacity of men in the ranks who had never enjoyed an opportunity to unfold their powers." 17 In Ireland

17 Gordon and Staples, op. cit., p. 255.
where emigration drained off such a large percent of the youth of the country, this loss has been particularly acute.

Of far-reaching consequence, too, the cooperative brought together in friendly discussion of mutual interests, Catholics and Protestants, Sinn Feiners and Constitutionalists, Unionists and Home Rulers, giving promise that in time the bitterness and dissension prevalent through the years and fostered by the English, will become lost in the common goals of community life.

Darrell Figgis expresses appreciation of the change in viewpoint resulting from mutual endeavor:

Instead of dividing all their profits [the farmers] began to allocate some portion of these to public purposes within the community, beginning therewith intelligently to discuss those public purposes. In other words, the cooperative societies became rural communities. . . . The men who had struggled pitifully against conditions too hard for them . . . now became citizens. They were compelled to think for themselves; and that gave them new interests. Prosperity quickened those interests. . . . Nationality meaning now a tissue of live interests, instead of a medley of ancient catchwords, clearer political thinking resulted. 

Signal economic progress was made, it is true, noteworthy enough to attract visitors and imitators from England, Scotland, Finland, Serbia, India, and the United States. Yet, as has been stated, Ireland did not originate the cooperative, nor did she achieve the success of other countries

18 Figgis, op. cit., p. 86.
in carrying out the project. Why under such circumstances should she have become a place of pilgrimage for other agricultural cooperators? Gordon and Staples see the answer in her leadership:

The men at the head of this movement are able to inspire others because they have a clear vision of what a cooperative should be. The Cooperative Commonwealth of which A. E. writes is for these people a real objective. The fact that the outward and visible signs of the movement are not proportional to this spirit causes but little disappointment to those who have any conception—and no man can be long in Ireland without forming such a conception—of the peculiar difficulties which have to be faced and overcome. They realize that these men have been sensible enough to see that business success must be established before higher results can be hoped for, and that their patient work in this direction is gradually meeting with its reward. 19

It has been said that Ireland is a country where leadership and personal affection count for almost everything. One of the greatest assets then of the I. A. O. S. was the happy combination in its organizers of those qualities which inspire confidence and admiration, traits which Plunkett, Father Finlay, and Russell possessed in a marked degree.

The scope of A. E.'s influence was to be even more widely extended, for in 1905, at the time of Plunkett's removal from office, Russell resigned as assistant secretary in order to take over the editorship of the Irish Homestead, the agricultural cooperatively-owned paper. It became in his hands an educational propagandist medium, widely known beyond the borders of his own country. To increase its power it was thought best to

19 Gordon and Staples, op. cit., p. 275.
divorce the paper from the I. A. O. S. Thus, while working in the closest harmony with the organization and even acting as the organ of the movement, it could nevertheless speak as an independent observer. Russell's voice, moreover, could be heard on many matters, for although his work had been mainly on behalf of the farmers, he had come to appreciate the desperate needs and general distress prevailing among the working classes everywhere.

The I. A. O. S. had achieved wonders for the farmer, but farm laborers and city dwellers still struggled for a bare existence. At the moment the former were on strike against the farmers, a great strike broke out in Dublin under the direction of the Irish Transport Union.

Down to the twentieth century there was no party willing to sponsor the cause of labor. In 1907 James Larkin took over the leadership of Irish labor and was generally successful in handling strikes until removed from office by treachery. In 1910 Connolly, who had founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896, returned from America to take a prominent position in the labor organization. But in 1911 the Dublin Employers Federation, Limited, was formed to promote mutual protection. The years 1911 and 1912 were the "period of the Great Strikes," when need for radical social improvements was made articulate. Farm laborers were without benefit of organization to help them in bargaining, and their lot had little if any amelioration in the rural reform. Town laborers fared even worse, for outside of the North there were few manufacturers in Ireland and little employment in the towns except in the transport services where wages were low and unemployment chronic.
William Murphy, a former railroad builder in Africa and England, and in 1913 owner of the largest Irish newspaper, countered Larkin's "sympathetic strike" with a "sympathetic lockout." He succeeded in organizing over four hundred employers behind a plan to compel their employees to sign an agreement resigning membership in the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and to agree not to join or support this organization. Twenty thousand workers were thrown out of employment by their refusal, and the wretchedness of the Dublin poor was made known as never before. The desperate struggle continued for six months. English trade unions sent money and food, but Murphy ignored the gesture and refused to compromise. At this point Russell could remain passive no longer. In his "Open Letter to the Masters of Dublin," printed in the Irish Times and circulated as a leaflet, he wrote:

You may succeed in your policy (Murphy did succeed) and ensure your own damnation by your victory. The men whose manhood you have broken will loathe you, and will always be brooding and scheming to strike a fresh blow. The children will be taught to curse you, the infant being moulded in the womb will have breathed into its starved body the vitality of hate. It is not they—it is you who are blind Samsons pulling down the social order. 20

Shortly thereafter A. E. was invited to London to speak at a great meeting at Albert Hall to protest against the injustice of the employers and the arrest of Larkin for sedition. He shared the platform with

20 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 57.
George Bernard Shaw. But, despite the weight of censure at home and abroad, Murphy held his ground and the workers were forced to capitulate. To all appearances "Larkinism" had been defeated. Yet, as Clarkson points out, in the deepest sense Larkinism had triumphed, for the struggle had united the working classes throughout Ireland.

The fighting spirit had been aroused, not of the working classes alone, but of the idealistic men and women of all ranks, creeds, and professions. The Republican wing of the Sinn Fein turned its attention to the needs of labour. Most significant of all, the most helpless of all classes in Ireland had learned the lesson of its power, and in the learning had proved itself worthy of Ireland's bravest traditions. 21

Another beneficial outcome was the focusing of attention upon the unspeakable misery of the slums of Dublin, a condition against which Russell had protested so vehemently. Long blocks of once splendid houses gone to rack and ruin, with three or four families sharing a single room, were common not only to Dublin but to every provincial town in Ireland. Russell's outspokenness aroused a great deal of resentment, but his charges were substantiated by the Committee of Inquiry into Housing.

And finally the strike had international repercussions, for during the autumn Larkin had begun drilling and organizing the "Citizen Army," a body distinct from the Irish Volunteers, which was later to play a leading part in the Easter Week Rebellion.

Russell had tried to remain aloof from national politics and had largely done so, though he felt as keenly as any the injustice of England. He endeavored to maintain objectivity and calmness in writing of Ireland's treatment, but his sense of outrage could not be entirely suppressed: "Ireland Limited is being run by English syndicates. It is the descent of a nation into Hell, not nobly, not as a sacrifice made for a great end, but ignobly and without hope of resurrection." 22 He believed in Home Rule but took little part in politics in general, partly because he had a horror of violence. The Easter Rising of 1916 at first touched him not at all, as he confessed in a poem:

Their dream had left me numb and cold 23

And yet this is not surprising for the Dublin insurrection was not generally popular in Ireland at the time. There was suspicion of a leftist movement on the part of the minority, and something akin to apathy holding the nation in thrall. If the leaders had been imprisoned, the Sinn Fein society as a revolutionary party, rather than a constructive one, might have died out. But the secret trials of the sixteen men, their execution in small groups at intervals, and the folly of arresting several thousand obviously innocent men in various parts of the country and sending them to England, increased


the tension day by day, and flooded the country with hatred of the English. The Rebellion failed, as Padraic Pearse and the others had foreseen, but it succeeded in integrating even more strongly the newly awakened race consciousness.

The American declaration of war against Germany in 1917 gave a new turn to the Irish question. In order to procure complete unanimity in the United States in support of England, President Wilson, responding to public pressure, endeavored to resolve once and for all the opposing claims of the two countries. As a result of his insistence, a Convention was called for the purpose of devising a scheme for Irish self-government within the Empire.

In June 1917, invitations were sent to one hundred and one Irishmen, representing all parties: to chairmen of county and borough councils, to representatives of small towns and urban districts, to bishops, both Catholic and Protestant, to presidents of the larger Chambers of Commerce, and to representatives of labor and of the political parties. The Government proposed to nominate the chairman and fifteen prominent Irishmen of all sections of opinion. Sir Horace Plunkett was chosen chairman of the Convention, and Russell was one of the leading members—two men whose choice was regarded as auspicious. At the end of July the Convention met to consider a form of government on the Dominion model but modified to suit the conditions peculiar to Ireland.

A. E., an Ulster man and a Protestant, was the principal spokes-
man in opposition to Ulster. Eglinton writes: "At certain moments he was
the central figure in the assembly," 24 and regarding the proposed fiscal arrangements between Great Britain and Ireland, adds, "A. E. exhibited a mastery of details which earned him the respect of his opponents." 25 He quotes Stephen Gwynn's statement that Lord Londonderry was much impressed with A. E., saying that his scheme was the only workable one put forward. When it became clear that Ulster would not cooperate, Russell decided on the gesture of withdrawal. This action was explained in a letter. "I retired from the Convention because I could do nothing more there. . . . It is not the Irish people who are hindering a settlement, but the pledges to the people of Belfast, nothing else." 26 Quinn agrees with him on this latter point:

The resistance by Ulster to the Home Rule Act would never have gone to the extent that it did but for the encouragement of a small group of powerful English Tories and the support of certain powerful financial interests, who wishing to prevent the carrying out of English radical reforms looked about for a way of defeating the Liberal Party and hit upon . . . the Ulster question . . . Ulster supplied the familiar "moral issue." Old and dying feelings of religious bigotry were revived. The Tories and financiers backed and financed Ulster . . . not because they loved Ulster or were really afraid of religious persecution, but because they wanted the Liberals out and the Tories in. 27

A final report was presented on the twenty-first of November by the Grand Committee, which stated that it had arrived at certain provisional

24 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 123.
25 Ibid., p. 124.
26 Ibid., p. 125.
conclusions, but that these were contingent on full agreement being reached on the general scheme. It was soon clear that no such general agreement was likely to be reached and that the Convention had been a failure.

This was a bitter disappointment to Russell, for he had worked hard to secure unity, both by force of personal influence and by public appeal. His letter printed in the Irish Times was later published under the title "Thoughts for a Convention." In it he stated sympathetically but justly the history and aims and achievements of the various political parties. He gave full credit for the many good measures won by them in their long contest, but pointed out the weakness of a constitutional party that found itself between two extreme parties, each demanding a settlement on its own lines. He felt that Ireland's economy precluded a complete independence of Great Britain, though on the other hand he resented the partition of Ulster and warmly defended the South against the charge of bigotry.

The editor of the Unionist Irish Times remarked to A. E. that he had "shaken the faith of the Unionists in their innermost tabernacles." 28 This praise is no more remarkable than the publication of the article in a Unionist paper without a single word of protest.

To Quinn the letter appeared "the best, the sanest, the most unbiased, and at the same time the most eloquent discussion of the general principles underlying the Irish Home Rule Question, that I have ever seen . . .

28 Quinn, op. cit., p. 83.
[an] eloquent and persuasive discussion of the great political question." 29

He cites A. V. Dicey's article in the Nineteenth Century in which the veteran opponent of Home Rule in any form referred sympathetically to Russell's pamphlet:

An Englishman interested in the home rule question should read with care "Thoughts for a Convention" by A. E. . . . I have no doubt that A. E. disagrees with all my conclusions, but his Memorandum, though written from an entirely Irish point of view, is characterized by a noble spirit and brings before Englishmen feelings, thoughts, and sometimes facts with regard to Ireland which they are apt to overlook. 30

Twenty thousand copies of the pamphlet were sold within a few days of its publication; this, with the large circulation of the Irish Times, gave his ideas a wide hearing.

On May 30, 1917, a letter was addressed to the editor of the Times: "We the undersigned, having read 'Thoughts for a Convention' by A. E., without endorsing all his statements, express our general agreement with his conclusions and with the arguments by which these are reached." 31 The signatories included thirty names, among whom was that of Dr. Walsh, the Archbishop of Dublin.

On the day the report of the Convention was handed in, England announced its intention of conscripting Irish soldiers. Russell protested

29 Ibid., p. 80.
30 Ibid., p. 84.
31 Ibid., p. 155.
vigorously in a letter to the Manchester Guardian, reprinted as a pamphlet, "Conscription in Ireland; a Warning to England." He was withheld from casting his lot with the Sinn Feiners only by his horror of physical violence and by his belief in the economic interdependence of the two countries.

Apprehensive and disturbed in the turmoil about him, he plunged into the writing of "heresies" since politics had lost its savor. The Candle of Vision which was to give him a "bad name" and provide the outlet for his heretical energy was published the same year and, to his disappointment, created not a ripple of protest. It is an exposition of his beliefs in the divinity of Earth and an attempt to explain his visions. In it his logic does not appear to best advantage—his generalizations are too often unsound—but eloquent and often poetic descriptions of nature and something of Russell's own charm redeem its more obvious faults. Eglinton comments: "The little book was read with admiration for its style by people interested in psychology and particularly in the nature and significance of dreams." 32 Russell himself soon to some extent lost interest in it and in a letter expressed surprise that the work had gone into three editions. Eglinton concludes: "We live in a tolerant age, and A. E.'s mystical philosophy was accepted without inquisition, simply as part of himself, and very few of his innumerable friends bothered themselves about it." 33

32 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 130.
33 Ibid., p. 133.
At the end of World War I he was in great demand both in England as an exponent of the Irish situation, and at home, as a speaker on various issues. The outbreak of the "Anglo-Irish War" put an end to this peaceful occupation and turned him into a distracted figure. The wrecking of the I. A. O. S. creameries by the Black and Tans on the pretext that they were being used as a basis of attack on the military and police, infuriated Russell, and demanding an inquiry, he drew up a detailed report of the damage done, estimated at a quarter of a million dollars. Many thousands of copies of A. Plea for Justice were circulated in Great Britain, and some of his statements were quoted in the House of Commons.

He was invited to breakfast with Prime Minister Lloyd George, in pursuit of the latter's avowed policy of exploring every avenue to the solution of the Irish problem, but felt he attained greater success in his contact with Lord Northcliffe. He claimed indirectly a share in bringing about the Irish settlement, for Russell drew attention to Northcliffe's opportunity to bring American opinion to bear through his vast organization. In less than a week he had column after column of American opinions in the papers he controlled, the voice of America's prominent statesmen, lawyers and industrialists, and it was so unanimously in favor of Irish self-government that I think it was mainly responsible for the feeling which arose in Great Britain that the Irish question was not only a domestic problem, but was a world question. 34

34 Ibid., p. 139.
The Inner and Outer Ireland and Ireland and the Empire At the Court of Conscience were two pamphlets written at this time, but they reveal the remoteness of his idealism from the actualities of politics.

In the new regime, A. E. had the satisfaction of seeing Plunkett's and his ideas of Dominion self-government adopted. But the era of peace which appeared dawning was forestalled by turmoil and bloodshed. During these trying times he wrote The Interpreters.

Its theme is an imaginary world state which has come into being, maintaining itself by force. In one ancient nation a conspiracy has been detected and its leaders captured and thrown into prison to await execution. In the group are a poet, an anarchist, a communist, an artist, an imperialist, arrested by mistake, and an old philosopher who acts as arbitrator, in the manner of Socrates, in the discussion which arises. Each swears to tell why he joined the revolt. The work has greater skill than Russell's other prose works; there is good exposition of conflicting beliefs and the scheme of the fantasy is well maintained.

The Candle of Vision, Imaginations and Reveries, and the compilation of brief essays gathered by Monk Gibbon in the Living Torch from the files of the Irish Statesman, are generally conceded to display Russell's prose at its best. The first—previously discussed—has somewhat less literary appeal than the other two volumes which are collections of critical and philosophical essays. His interests ranged from national and sociological matters to art and literature, but it is in the last-mentioned field
that he seemed most at home. In sensitive studies of the work of fellow poets, Yeats, Seumas O'Sullivan, James Stephens, and others, he revealed himself a keen and competent critic of poetry. His "Poet of the Shadows" has a touch of sadness and no small amount of charm:

I never look into the world of my friend without feeling that my region lies in the temperate zone and is near the Arctic circle; the flowers grow more rarely and are paler, and the struggle for existence is keener. Southward and in the warm west are the Happy Isles among the Shadowy Waters. The pearly phantoms are dancing there with blown hair amid cloud-frail daffodils. They have known nothing but beauty, or at the most a beautiful unhappiness. Everything there moves in procession or according to ritual, and the agony of grief, it is felt must be concealed. . . . I have looked with longing eyes into this world. It is Ildathach, the Many-Colored Land, but it is not the Land of the Living Heart. . . . I sigh sometimes thinking on the light dominion dreams have over the heart. We cannot hold a dream for long, and that early joy of the poet in his new found world has passed. It has seemed to him too luxuriant. He seeks for something more, and has tried to make its tropical tangle orthodox; and the glimmering waters and winds are no longer beautiful natural presences, but have become symbolic voices and preach obscurely some doctrine of their power to quench the light in the soul or to fan it to a brighter flame. I like their old voiceless motion and their natural wandering best, and would rather roam in the bee-loud glade than under the boughs of beryl and chrysoberyl, where I am put to school to learn the significance of every jewel. 35

The essay on James Stephens is equally rewarding in its penetration and clarity:

35 A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, p. 34.
For a generation the Irish bards have endeavored to live in a palace of art, in chambers hung with the embroidered cloths and made dim with pale lights and Druid twilights, and the melodies they most sought for were half soundless. . . . Even as the prophet of old was warned to take off his shoes because the place he stood on was holy ground, so it seemed for a while in Ireland as if no poet could be accepted unless he left outside the demesnes of poetry that very useful animal, the body. . . . He could not enter unless he moved with the light and dreamy footfall of spirit. Mr. Yeats was the chief of this eclectic school, and his poetry at its best is the most beautiful in Irish literature. But there crowded after him a whole horde of verse-writers, who seized the most obvious symbols he used and standardized them, and in their writings one wandered about gasping for fresh air and sunlight, for the Celtic soul seemed bound for ever by the pale lights of fairyland on the north and by the darkness of forbidden passion on the south, and on the east by the shadowiness of all things human, and on the west by everything that was infinite, without form, and void. 36

The Living Torch is less even in literary texture, as might be expected where deadlines had to be met. However, it gives evidence of the high degree of skill which Russell had developed in the quarter century he served as editor of the Irish Homestead and its successor, the Irish Statesman. The Homestead at first contented itself with matters essential to the farmer, but gradually these gave way in good part to A. E.'s native interests. If the change in purpose lost for him some of the more "practical" of his adherents, it certainly gained a following from those more influential men who guided the opinions of their countrymen.

36 Ibid., p. 43.
In politics the paper had tried to remain neutral, and this in Eglinton's opinion limited its effectiveness. It is difficult to arouse enthusiasm with a middle-of-the-road policy, particularly in a people who for generations had known the bitterness of being a pawn. The intellectual class alone was not sufficiently numerous or influential to support the weekly, and Plunkett's American friends who had subsidized the enterprise were disappointed at its neutrality. Consequently Russell found it necessary to make a trip to America in 1921 to collect funds for the continuance of the paper. He lectured widely and very successfully, and was able to return to Dublin with enough money to carry him through his immediate difficulties.

During the years he spent as editor, he had gone a good way, in Eglinton's opinion, toward "creating in Ireland that public opinion" which Lecky had declared to be Ireland's great desideratum." The Irish Statesman remedied the lack of those organs of literary and cultural opinion which the great London weeklies provided. The Censorship Bill, for example, was debated vigorously in its pages. Its leading issues were given ample coverage and the conflicting points fully developed. A. E.'s comments were both lucid and eloquent, Eglinton recalls. "In articles (much admired by Shaw and George Moore) he defended what he conceived to be the cause not only of the rights of literature, but of civil liberty, with Miltonic

37 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 203.
spirit." 38 He adds later that A. E.'s fears of a threat to intellectual freedom proved groundless.

The burden of his editorial work at length became oppressive, and he began to long for freedom. After twenty-five years as weekly commentator in the Irish Homestead and in the Irish Statesman on politics, literature, and art, he announced his withdrawal from the field. Offering as his excuse the need for new blood in the rejuvenation of journalism, he called for volunteers from the newer literary arrivals. His outstanding work in the field of journalism was recognized by Dublin University in 1929, when it conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Letters as "litterarum existimatores justus."

Early in May, 1930, Harvard University offered him a degree to be conferred at the Summer Commencement, but as he had planned to come to America in the autumn of that year on a lecture tour, he decided not to make a special trip.

In 1912 he had explained the scope and ideals of the I. A. O. S. in Cooperation and Nationality, a work which attracted international attention to him as a writer on economics. In it he expounded his idea of a rural society, and his common sense and idealism are seen happily mated:

If you scrape and save to leave money to your children after you die instead of giving them illuminated minds and healthy bodies, you are damnably bad parents, enemies

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38 Ibid., p. 198.
of your race, and of the human race. Look now at some normal, healthy men and women. See how they bear God's image on them. . . . If you lose the divine image and deface it or forget it in money-making and money-grubbing, you are in rebellion against God, and are enemies of humanity. 39

And explaining how wide the scope of activities must be and that provision must be made for the needs of the whole man, he added:

I hate to hear of stagnant societies who think because they have made butter well they have crowned their parochial generation with a halo of glory, and can rest content with the fame of it all. . . . And I dislike little groups who meet a couple of times a year and call themselves cooperators, because they have got their fertilizer cheaply, and have done nothing else. 40

He insisted that a social order to be sound and enduring must provide for economic development, political stability and a desirable social life. This theme was developed further four years later in the National Being, in which he also discussed the farmer's relation to the townsman and urged urban cooperatives.

The rural crisis in America after the depression of 1929 recalled the Irish Cooperative Movement and its chief exponent, and at Secretary Wallace's urging, Russell agreed to lecture at agricultural colleges and universities on the philosophy of his book. His success was instantaneous, and his ability to hold large audiences amazed no one more than himself,

39 A. E., Cooperation and Nationality, p. 72.

40 Ibid., p. 86.
remembering his extreme shyness in youth. He was surprised to find a little community cooperative in the West founded by a Daniel Wallace patterned after his own cooperative plan. In a letter written a few months later, he mentioned a conference in Chicago with people who wanted to start a foundation to save American agriculture along his lines. He was gratified too to learn that his poems were "very well known, [the Candle of Vision]... a kind of Bible for many mystics." The American committee which brought me over are distributing thousands of the National Being free, in order to work up an interest in rural civilization. I am supposed to be awaking U. S. A. to the danger of a rural exodus." 41

His lectures took him before groups of every kind—state universities, business men, chambers of commerce, state agriculture officials. If he previously had lacked a first-hand knowledge of America, this Odyssey supplied him with a wealth of experience. He wrote in December, 1931, when his tour was half completed, that 10,000 copies of his book had been distributed and that he found people versed in it. "I was told that the Harvard professor of Rural Sociology said I was the only writer on the subject with any creative imagination." 42 His tour was a great personal triumph and brought him in contact with many of the greatest minds, scientific, literary, and political, in the country, and won for him in his short stay a host of warm friends.

41 Ibid., p. 218.

42 Ibid., p. 227.
On his return to Ireland he began in earnest his long projected Avatars. Belief in the coming of the new Avatar, a divine hero, was general among the Theosophists in the early days, and that idea had been fixed in A. E.'s mind by a dream, and seems not to have been erased by time. His story tells of the birth of a new religion of Cosmic Consciousness, and is permeated, as is all his work, by belief in the divine life of nature. There is much wisdom in the book, but also complete unreality both in characterization and development, and it added nothing to his literary stature.

"The literary man who is, or ought to be concerned mainly with intellectual interests, should only intervene in politics when principles affecting the spiritual life of the country are involved." 43 So Russell wrote at the turn of the century, when he doubtless envisioned himself spending his years in the ivory tower of theosophy and poetry. But a deep compassion for his fellow men and a keen resentment of injustice drew him again and again into internal and national politics, deflecting the nature of his contribution from Irish letters to Irish life. But in view of the avenues of opportunity his labors opened, and the weight of his moral and practical influence in the cause of humanity in Ireland, it is difficult to regret the abandonment of his youthful dream.

43 A. E., "Nationality and Imperialism" Ideals in Ireland, p. 16.
CHAPTER V
A. E.—CATALYST

To glance back briefly, the beginning of the nineteenth century found Ireland a country rendered by centuries of misrule politically helpless, economically destitute, culturally decaying, socially stagnant and disordered. Yet this was the land which during the early years when civilization in Europe had fallen victim to barbarian hordes, had cherished the seed of learning and the light of faith until its own life was threatened with extinction by the blindness of the English. Count Cavour who built up Italy, on visiting Ireland early in the nineteenth century, reported that it presented "the saddest spectacle to be found in any civilized society—complete and absolute oppression of the poor by the rich, of him who labors by him who possesses, organized by the laws and administered by the Minister of Justice."¹ A Frenchman, visiting the country not long after, commented on the magnificent castles and the wretched cabins, the extremes of wealth and poverty, with no middle class to exert the steadying progressive political influence needed.²

In the eyes of the world, Ireland was a dying nation—misunder-

¹ Mansergh, op. cit., p. 21.
² Ibid., p. 31.
stood, underrated even by many of her own people. Yet the germ of nationalism working in the soil was to flower in the latter part of the nineteenth century in the beauty of the Celtic Renaissance and to restore Kathleen ni Houlihan to her place among the nations.

The death of Parnell had provided a breathing space in the political struggle, and as an exhausted man might put down his heavy burden to rest in sudden awareness of the beauty about him, so Ireland ceased looking outward and turned her eyes inward, ceased to weep over her heritage of sorrow and began to rejoice in her heritage of beauty.

The new spirit quickened every phase of life and generated an heroic concept of nationalism and a political vitality which had its culmination in the dream of centuries, independence. Though it manifested itself first to the world in the field of literature, it was not a literary phenomenon. Rather it was the expression of a social synthesis, rooted in political and social history and concerned equally with intellectual emancipation and economic progress. The intimacy of the bond between the various phases of the movement stems from the common aim, the reorganization of Ireland; and in the new thought, the new literature, and the new social philosophy is the living proof of the new nation.

The preceding chapters have attempted to trace the development of the various agencies concerned in the rebirth of an ancient nation, and it has been observed that save in the active work of spreading
the Gaelic League, George Russell assumed a prominent and even a leading role in the various phases of reconstruction. He did not believe in the usefulness of the Irish language as a medium of expression, but he heartily approved the Gaelic League as a means of directing attention to the past. In *Ideals in Ireland* he noted the constructive energy which the movement released, the turning away from wholesale denunciation of England to direct attention to home problems and opportunities.

His poetic work is not of the highest quality, for though replete with beauty and nobility of thought, his poems are not, as Yeats observed, self-won, and so do not strike an answering spark in the reader. Their deficiencies appear to stem in large part from his religious preoccupations. While his mystical experiences were the source of the keenest happiness to him, supply the answer, in some measure at least, to the craving of his spirit, their effect upon his poetry was an adverse one in that they left him with the urge to perfection of self, not the perfection of his art. Because they were, almost in their entirety, written to convey some mystical experience, he considered it both unfitting and unnecessary to exert any conscious restraint of craftsmanship. His verse, as a result, is intuitional rather than deliberate, passively accepted rather than carefully developed. The unwillingness to change, to experiment, led him into the most conventional of diction, to monotony, to vague abstractions. And it cannot be denied that his predilection for the early pagan aspects of Gaelic literature and his
inability and unwillingness to interpret the dual religious and national character of Gaelic thought rendered him incapable of a true expression of the traditional aspirations of his race. All these charges may be raised against him, yet if his range was narrowed by mystical preoccupations, the essential spirituality of his nature raised his poetry above the commonplace and gave it the appeal which higher beauty always commands. His twofold endowment of artist and poet made him particularly sensitive to loveliness, and could not fail to enhance the quality of his verse. If, as has been charged, his poetry is somewhat restricted in range, it is generally conceded that within his sphere he succeeded in achieving a rather pale, but delicate and individual beauty. Within his limitations he is a true poet.

His Deirdre proved that the writing of plays was uncongenial, but it was through this play that he interested Yeats in the work of the Fay brothers, and thereby opened that glorious epoch of the drama which gave an outlet to Irish genius and commanded the admiration of the world.

Ireland's debt to Sir Horace Plunkett can never be minimized, but her debt to A. E. is only slightly less. If he did not have the honor of initiating the cooperative movement, he it was who raised the superstructure of its social philosophy, and through the hard and often discouraging work of organizing, through lectures and writing, advanced the prestige of his nation at home and abroad. His social concept
arouses respect; the dignity of man and his spiritual potentialities were ever his concern. He cannot be read without a glow of admiration for his common sense and his broad understanding of the economic goal:

I think we do right to expect great things from the State, but we ought to expect still greater things from ourselves. We ought to know full well that if the State did twice as much as it does, we shall never rise out of mediocrity among the nations unless we have unlimited faith in the power of our personal efforts to raise and transform Ireland, and unless we translate that faith into works. 3

He described his constant struggle to keep the movement free from external control "lest the meddling of politicians or official persons without an inspiration should deflect for some petty purpose or official gratification the strength of that current which was flowing and gathering strength unto the realization of great souls." 4

It is unfortunate that his mystical convictions estranged him from the general mass of his countrymen, that his pursuit of the esoteric should have sent him searching down devious mazes, deploying his faculties away from proven truth. Because his quest for the spiritual was basically sincere and wholehearted and lifelong, it could not fail to give him a realization--however limited--of the Eternal Plan. His faculties, however, were not sharpened on the right tools. He missed what the humblest peasant around him had access to.

3. A. E., Imaginations and Reveries, p. 100.
4. Ibid., p. 117.
It has been observed that absorption in the arcane overshadowed and diminished his talents. Evidence of an unrealized gift of high order in painting seems substantiated by the word of competent critics. Journalism of a high order is revealed in the essays of the Irish Statesman. Here, though the major burden was sustained by himself, he sought to give the periodical wider scope by gathering around him a group of well-known writers. And delighting to encourage new talent, he generously opened its pages to names hitherto in the background, like the poet Gogarty and the historian, Edmund Curtis.

But if he was not truly "great" in the sense of Yeats and Synge and Joyce, how then can he have attained such a position of eminence in the Ireland of his time and in the circle of her intellectuals? Irishmen themselves have asked and tried to answer the question. Eglinton compares him to Richard Rolle of Hampole, Thomas Traherne, Henry Vaughn, and William Blake, and such who owed little to their fellow men, but whose importance is altogether out of proportion to their technical accomplishment. He has frequently been likened to Dr. Johnson in that his leadership was probably of greater importance than his literary contribution. He seems to have been looked upon as a key personality, and a visit to Ireland was not complete without an interview with him. Nor was this because of any suggestion of quaintness of character or setting. His visits to the United States brought him in contact with men of eminence in every field--literature, science, education, government--and here, as
at home, his opinions were accorded respect. Ernest Boyd tells of a dinner given for him in Washington which was

... a triumph for ATheism because after dinner, puffing his old pipe, A. E. sat in the drawing room and talked while twenty men sat spellbound. The group included the outstanding lights of the Bar, a general, all the leading editors of any intellectual pretensions in the country, Wilson's right-hand man, Colonel House, and a sprinkling of millionaire Irish-American industrialists. It was a far cry from the simplicities of 17 Rathgar Avenue, but A. E. talked as if Violet [his wife] might bring in tea and cake at any moment.

His conversational powers, while attested to by many, will in the nature of things have to go unrecorded. Padraic Colum said that A. E. seemed to have a charm to prevent the world wearying him. His talk was inexhaustible, not only in itself, but in its ability to stimulate the minds and tongues of others. Jessica Nelson North made much the same comment: "Those of us who had the privilege of listening to him remember not so much his tendency to 'run on' as the spell of his eloquence ... his ideas were altogether timeless and often unique. Above all one felt his intrinsic and unconscious goodness." Monk Gibbon who knew him intimately elaborates on this point:

There is no doubt that his conversation had an astonishing range and that he had the gift of evoking whatever was most interesting in others simply by the prodigality with which he gave himself. Whatever the

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5 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 194.
topic, he brought to it a certain quality of spiritual insight which lifted comment on to a higher plane. The talkers against whom he matched himself were of every kind and description... they included Yeats, James Stephens whose fancy can range more playfully in conversation than that of almost any man in the world, MacKenna, the translator of Plotinus. By all opinion the most brilliant talker of his time in Dublin, Gogarty, Padraic Colum, Austin Clark and many others.7

Because Russell's claim to greatness arises in large part from the impact of his personality upon others, it does not seem amiss to consider those qualities which gave him leadership and which so profoundly affected others. And it is inevitable that such reflection would bring in its train a comparison with Yeats, since the two were by common consent the Dichterpaar of the Ireland of their time.

George Moore, Simone Tery, John Eglinton, and many others have attempted to explain A. E., who was a legend in his own lifetime. Frank O'Connor's brief study seems particularly revealing, and throws a light upon facets of his personality which are not likely to show through in his writings:

I think I liked him best when he was teasing or sly... or even innocently malicious, or as occasionally happened when people were stupid, downright rude, because at such times he had to improvise, and then something of the willful, wicked, unfed, sleeping artistic temperament came to light... I loved A. E. in that mood, gay, quick spontaneous, with just a little touch of Southern malice... Sometimes... on the defensive, when he was not

7 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 38.
timid and was dealing with the unexpected, relying not on memory, but the moment's inspiration, he was really superb. Vagueness, benevolence, platitude, dropped away and left a very cold, clear, wintery intelligence, and a curt speech which had something noble and personal about it. But that did not happen often.

And seeking the element which beclouded and smothered his genius, he discovered it in A. E.'s addiction to habit. "He was more the slave of habit than anyone I ever knew. He liked fixed days, fixed hours for doing things; fixed ways of doing them ... his conversation, like his life, ran in patterns: well formed phrases, ideas, quotations and anecdotes, which he repeated over a lifetime without altering an inflection."9

From intimate knowledge of both Yeats and Russell, O'Connor is able to present an interesting study in contrasts—Yeats, the small town boy who had travelled, and A. E., the one who remained at home. "Yeats, subtle, casuistical, elegant, mannered; a diplomatist ... a man of the world who had been the friend of artists and bohemians; the other guileless, untravelled, full of universal benevolence, but with a non-conformist conscience."10 Yeats' appearance fitted the traditional conception of the poet—tall, elegantly dressed in pale, beautifully cut suits and silk shirts, the latter blue, during the days of O'Duffy's fascist party.

8 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 70.
9 Ibid., p. 64.
10 Ibid., p. 74.
"His speech was like his clothes, suave, mannered. He walked slowly and deliberately, with full ornamental gestures in the dim candlelight." Of A. E., George Moore writes, "The reason I have not included any personal description of A. E. is because he exists rather in one's imagination, dreams, sentiments, feelings, than in one's ordinary sight and hearing, and try as I will to catch the fleeting outlines, they escape me."  

Eglinton is more specific:

He was well proportioned, with a russet bearded countenance in which kindliness was the prevailing expression. . . . All the power of the head . . . was in the large full face, with high cheekbones giving him the look of a countryman of Dostoevsky. . . . Quizzical blue eyes twinkled behind his glasses, and the whole appearance was extraordinarily winning; some even called him handsome. A huge tie proclaimed the artist, his clothes being always slack and shabby.

Diarmuid Russell confirms this last remark, "New suits wrinkled in a day, and his overcoat looked—as James Stephens remarked in a novel—as if it had been put on with a shovel."

And in contrast to the simplicity of 17 Rathgar Avenue, O'Connor recalled that it is only when one got more used to Yeats that one noticed the expensiveness and beauty of everything about him, "the pictures, the masks from his dance plays, the tall bookcases and long

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11 Ibid., p. 70.
12 Moore, op. cit., p. 160.
13 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 171.
14 Diarmuid Russell, op. cit., p. 171.
orderly table, the silver candlesticks, and that dimness which made rich
hollows of the shadows. . . . He was really a lovely man to watch. Every
pose was right. "Where Russell seemed to him restless and dimly
benevolent, he found Yeats "always alert, dramatic, and amazingly brilliant.
He was diabolically observant. . . . While it seemed to me that the images
on A. E.'s retina were vague, I thought those of Yeats must be small, clear,
intense, like those of a bird watching from a great height the movement
of creatures on earth." He saw, too, in the fame of each an inequality
which must have been a source of unhappiness to the lesser poet, for
Yeats was a European figure, while A. E. was little more than a provincial
celebrity, a disparity which he felt no nature could bear and which must
have wounded and bewildered him. "There was some sense of disappointment
over A. E. He showed me the proofs of Song and Its Fountains. I noticed
particularly the dedication to Yeats, 'rival and friend.' Those last
revealing words disappeared from the published text." DIARMUID RUSSELL CONTRADICTS THIS CONCLUSION. HE HAD ASKED
his father if the comparison of their works was embarrassing. A. E. had
laughed and answered, "Willy is a much better poet than I am. He is a
great poet. He devotes all his time to his art and can spend days

15 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 73.
16 Loc. cit.
17 Ibid., p. 76.
reworking a line or a verse until it has reached the ultimate in perfection. I, on the other hand, have to do many, many things, some by desire, and some by compulsion. "18 He explained that whatever virtue appeared in his poems lay in the truth of the subject rather than in their imagery.

In an essay "Genius and Environment," Russell provides a clue to his reaction toward Yeats. One wonders if the antagonism he speaks of does not spring from a subconscious chafing at the knowledge of his lesser endowment:

Genius is often dangerous to genius. When two men with creative imagination meet, they draw each other from their secret base. They cannot draw so easily from their own fountain, they soon feel this, and hence it is rare to find creative poets desirous of close intimacy with one another. The work of the scientific man is built largely on the investigation and research of others. But the poet must fall back on what is within himself, and the incursion of another powerful nature, while it may fascinate for a while, will the moment the poet feels the breaking up of his natural mould of mind arouse something like hostility. 19

Yeats' feeling for Russell is found in his remark that he "loved and hated" him, which can only mean that he was puzzled by his complexities.

John Eglinton, too, finds it interesting to compare the two men, discovering them in character and disposition poles apart:

18 Diarmuid Russell, op. cit., p. 56.
19 A. E., The Living Torch, p. 115.
Even as a public man Russell hardly ranked with Yeats, who had a real talent for public appearances. Yet Russell, as an embodiment of the beliefs and principles of the Irish literary movement, was to it a tower of strength, and without him it would not have maintained its air of transcendental nationalism. Yeats, like a Parnell of literature, held aloof for the most part from the younger recruits to his movement, an attitude favorable to the authority of Irish literature's unquestioned chief; though indeed when he liked to do so, no one could give more helpful or discriminating advice to the young poets than Yeats.20

He appears in a less favorable light in his attitude toward Russell's "school." Yeats had discovered Synge and Lady Gregory. A. E. had discovered Colum and Stephens and many others—Jessica Nelson North credits him with "at least twenty poets of merit"—and Yeats had sneered, "But was there ever a dog praised his fleas?"21 The epigram perpetuated the legend that Yeats was pompous and arrogant and ungenerous.

Sean O'Faolain finds their essential difference in their attitude toward life. Russell, he claims, looked at life with the eyes of innocence, Yeats with the eyes of desire. This same innocence of life is what gives an air of unreality to some of his prose. He continues:

As for A. E., I loved him, and we all loved him as a man. As for his poems they are sweet and they are noble, but they are not A. E. and they are not life.... If I were to be wrecked with either on a desert island, or have the choice of either as a companion in death, I should not hesitate which to choose. For the desert island I should choose A. E.—and read Yeats. For the end—Yeats. Because we live as we can but we die as we must. I should get no

20 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 104.
21 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 73.
companionship from Yeats; he is wrapped up in his own world, like Joyce . . . and he is full of ideas but he has no intellect, having no continuity but his lyric mood. But as against A. E.'s kindness, tolerance, journalism, sociability, and wisdom, he has what is more to the point of a crisis—pride and passion. If God could only have mingled the two of them! Or if youth had not lured them with the bauble of the esoteric! 22

Simone Téry who travelled to Dublin to write about its literary celebrities, sums up its two leaders: "Ce qu'on aime le mieux dans Yeats, ce sont ses vers. Mais le chef-d'œuvre d' A. E., qui est un grand artiste, c'est encore lui-même." 23

Mary Colum, from the vantage point of close association with the Dublin literary world, is able to round out the picture. Russell's Sunday "at homes" were famous in Dublin, she recalls. To attend them was to meet everyone of importance who ever visited the city. Commenting on the range of conversation, from poetry and painting—"the best talk on art and literature in the world"—to agricultural organizing, she goes on to compare Yeats and A. E.:

A. E. liked to have every sort of person in, and was aware of no difference between the mind of a woman and the mind of a man. W. B.'s guests were selected: one could not bring any chance-acquaintance into his house, as into A. E.'s; one could not go oneself without invitation. In

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23 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 16.
A. E.'s, one talked on draughts of tea or coffee, but in W. B.'s, one's tongue was loosed on sherry. 24

Russell's stature in Dublin may be measured by the regard shown him by members of his own craft, for he was honored in the works of many writers. Frequently it took the form of the dedication of a book, as in Padraic Colum's **Wild Earth** ("To A. E., who fostered me"), or James Stephens' inscription in **Insurrections**. In **Ulysses**, A. E. is recognizable in the beginning, though he soon passes out of the story. He was often asked to write prefaces, and oftener still his name appears in acknowledgments in the introductions to books. It is significant, too, that it is rare to find a work dealing with that period which does not mention A. E., and always in the most appreciative way. St. John Ervine states that in all the books on Ireland, considered nationally, socially, and economically, that have been written in the past twenty years, two men inevitably are mentioned, Sir Horace Plunkett and A. E.

Men of affairs in most parts of the world have heard of them and I imagine few of the people who go to Ireland with any serious purpose fail to visit them. It would be difficult for any intelligent person to come into the presence of A. E. and remain unaware that he is a man of merit. He fills the room immediately and unmistakably with the power of his personality. 25

Of all the honors offered him, that which undoubtedly gratified

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25 St. John Ervine, op. cit., p. 27.
him most was the one which came in connection with his work in helping to found the Irish Academy of Letters, a movement sponsored by Shaw and Yeats. The latter had asked Russell to formulate the rules and constitution, and the Academy was launched in 1932 at a meeting presided over by Lennox Robinson. While activated by the threat of an official censorship ban, it was also the expression of Yeats' lifelong desire for a high standard of literary excellence to inspire Irish writers.

The letter which Robinson read to a select group at their initial meeting stated that, though their number was small, their sole strength lay in the authority of their utterances:

This, at least, is by no means negligible, for in Ireland there is still a deep respect for intellectual and poetic quality. Insofar as we represent that quality, we can count on a consideration beyond all proportion to our numbers, but we cannot exercise our influence unless we have an organ through which we can address the public, or appeal collectively and unanimously to the Government. . . . In making this claim upon you, we have no authority or mandate beyond the fact that the initiative has to be taken by somebody, and our age and the publicity which attaches to our names makes it easier for us than the younger writers.26

Russell's name is signed to the document as Provisional Honorable Secretary. In drawing up the project, Shaw and Yeats put forward on their own authority a list of twenty-five original members, adding to it ten Associates—those whose work was considered less Irish.

or less creative, that is, not producing either poetry, plays, or novels.

The Gregory Medal, the Premier Award of the Academy in recognition of an Irish author's distinguished service to literature in general, is offered every three years. The first voted by the Academy to receive the medal were Yeats, Shaw, and A. E. That Russell was not merely carried along by weight of association, but had merited distinction in his own right, is borne out by the opinion of many writers.

Stephen Gwynn, viewing him in his literary milieu, asserts, "These two men, [Yeats and A. E.] were to dominate the entire literary revival, and to affect the whole intellectual life of Ireland in their time."27 Hugh Alexander Law claims, "Lionel Johnson, William Butler Yeats, K. T. Hinkson and George Russell (A. E.) were the acknowledged chiefs of the new school of poetry—if the word 'school' may be used indicating a unity of purpose compatible with much diversity of method."28 Yeats is quoted as having said that "Russell and the theosophists on the one hand, and Standish O'Grady on the other, had done more for Irish literature than Trinity College, in the course of three centuries."29 Boyd writes:

It is no exaggeration to say that almost every Irish writer of value today owes something to the poet, painter, and

27 Ibid., p. 119.
economist, who has become a centre of ideas which are freely at the command of all who seek them. Nor has there been any reluctance to profit by this prodigality of sympathy and imagination. From the doyen repatriate, George Moore, to the youngest poet trembling on the brink of publication, all have acknowledged their debt to A. E. 30

George Moore states in Hail and Farewell that he had made Russell's acquaintance in the pages of the Express. "And looking at him I remembered the delight and the wonder which his verse and prose had awakened in me. It was as if somebody had... led me away into the young world which I recognized at once as the fabled Arcady."31 He adds that it was to meet him that he had gone to Ireland, quite as much as to see the plays. He was to say to Gibbon upon another occasion, "You know, A. E. is the most important person in Ireland."32 It is noteworthy that Russell enjoys the distinction of being the only one not mockingly portrayed in his book.

Katherine Tynan Hinkson appraises the Dublin literary world with which she was so familiar:

I have known in my time some few undoubted geniuses—three certainly in literature—W. B. Yeats, Francis Thompson, and George Russell (A. E.), to whom I believe I have a fourth in James Stephens. In none of these have I found the beauty of genius as I have found it in George Russell. ... Of him,

30 Boyd, op. cit., p. 238.
31 Moore, op. cit., p. 141.
32 Ibid., p. 410.
more than anyone else I have ever known, I would say, "We shall never look on his like again." 33

If this appreciation is more glowing than some are willing to subscribe to, it is nevertheless an indication of the esteem he won from those with whom he came in contact.

His helpfulness and sympathetic interest flowed especially to young writers, as Frank O'Connor testifies: "Almost until his death ... he read our manuscripts, found us publishers, printed our first work, supervised our reading, even tried to arrange our marriages." 34 He concludes: "There were certain things A. E. gave young writers that no one else could give or would give ... his protégés were poor men all. He was as warm and homey as a turf fire," 35 a comparison in which many concurred.

Gibbon pictures him in the same light, as "the oracle toward which, sooner or later, every literary aspirant in Dublin gravitated." 36 One might well conclude from this that perhaps Russell's greatest contribution to Irish letters was, to use Moore's word, "maieutic." 37

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33 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 7.
34 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 60.
36 Ibid., p. 19.
37 Moore, op. cit., p. xii.
his graceful farewell in the Irish Statesman he wrote of himself:

For twenty-five years the Editor has been a weekly commentator in the Irish Homestead and in the Irish Statesman, on politics, literature, and the arts, and he could not have continued much longer, nor would it have been right for him to have continued: . . . A new Ireland is growing up with its own ideals of a culture, a social order and a civilization. It is only right that those who belong to the new era should be its propagandists, and not elderly men whose minds have lost flexibility and who have come to a kind of spiritual deafness when they listen to the talk of young genius. Before that last infirmity weighs more heavily upon the Editor, he feels it is best to cease criticism and comment. He can still, like George Herbert, 'relish versing,' and on looking back, he finds his greatest pleasure was the discovery of Irish talent . . . he would like to be remembered for this, that he was the friend of the Irish poets, those who make the soul of the nation.38

In studying Russell, one returns again and again to the thought with which O'Faolain concludes his analysis: "If youth had not lured [him] with the bauble of the esoteric!"39—the same regret which Yeats voiced for his friend. But if he did not succeed in the complete realization of powers which his friends discerned and respected, the value of his influence was never underrated. There is unanimity too in the opinion that his greatest work was himself, and that his genius was tributary to a personality rich in humanitarianism, sensitive to beauty, focused on Eternity. And in the overflow of this personality, in the

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38 Eglinton, op. cit., p. 204.
39 O'Faolain, op. cit., p. 57.
impact of a mind, vigorous and resourceful and keen, the explanation of his influence may be found. Like a catalyst he crystallized the richer elements with whom he came in contact, helping to give them a form and beauty which they might not have achieved so well or so fully independently.
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Periodical Literature


The thesis submitted by Helen M. Dalton has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English. The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.