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EZRA POUND'S OCCULT EDUCATION

IN A WELL-KNOWN PARAGRAPH in "Psychology and Troubadours," Ezra Pound writes:

I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution. Speaking aesthetically, the myths are explications of mood: you may stop there, or you may probe deeper. Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur. I know, I mean, one man who understands Persephone and Demeter, and one who understands the Laurel, and another who has, I should say, met Artemis. These things are for them real.¹

Pound never identified these *mystes* or initiates, but an examination of his early London years reveals that he did "probe deeper." His mentors were found in the *New Age* offices on Cursitor Street and at the meetings of the Quest Society in whose journal, *The Quest*, these remarks first appeared.

During his London years (1908-1921), many of Pound's close associates—W.B. Yeats, Dorothy and Olivia Shakespear, G.R.S. Mead, Allen Upward, and A.R. Orage—had strong connections with occult groups.² Yeats's occult interests are well known, and there is evidence

¹ Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; New Directions, 1968), p. 92. Hereafter cited as *Romance*.

² The term "occult" is widely applied today to the study of supernatural or unusual phenomena, from psychic experiences in séances to Black Magic and

that Pound observed some of Yeats's occult experiments.³ Pound's other occult associates are less well known. G.R.S. Mead was editor of *The Quest*, a journal devoted to gnosticism and the pagan mystery religions. Allen Upward was a barrister, author of occult religious history, novelist, Sinologist, and an original member of the Imagist group. A.R. Orage is well known as the editor of *The New Age*, a journal of politics, arts, and letters in which Pound published more than one hundred articles.⁴ The fact that Orage was a Theosophist and later a follower of Gurdjieff is less well known. Recently published correspondences between Pound and John

such pseudo-sciences as Numerology and Astrology. These are the areas of human interest which many true occultists would reject as involving the degradation of humanity. In this essay, the emphasis is placed on metaphysical occultism—which is different from theurgy or the practice of occult arts. Thus, "occult" is taken here to mean the whole body of speculative, heterodox religious thought which lies outside all religious orthodoxies and includes such movements as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Cabalism, and Theosophy. As well, occultism involves the belief in the possibility of *gnosis* or direct awareness of the Divine (Pound's "Divine and permanent world"), which can be attained through *myesis* or initiation.

³ George Mills Harper, ed. *Yeats and the Occult* (Macmillan, 1975), p. 165; and James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 1988), *passim*. Hereafter cited as *Stone Cottage*.

⁴ Although there is strong evidence that Upward and Orage played a large role in Pound's occult education during his London years, I will not deal with them extensively here. Upward's occult views are most succinctly presented in *The Divine Mystery*, a work which Pound read and praised (see *Selected Prose of Ezra Pound*, p. 403; and *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters, 1909-1914*, eds. Omar Pound and A. Walton Litz [New Directions, 1986], pp. 259, 264; hereafter cited as *Pound/Shakespear*). Several critics have discussed Pound's adoption of such Upwardian concepts as the "fluid universe" and the Divine Man. See, for example, Herbert N. Schneidau, *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real* (Louisiana State University Press, 1969), pp. 118-126; Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 91-102; and Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 68-74. However, these scholars have failed to acknowledge that Upward's ideas are those of London Spiritualist groups, mediums, and ghost hunters.

Orage is discussed only in connection with Pound's economic theories. Even though everyone seems to be aware of Orage's occult connections, no attention is paid to the possibility that Pound shared Orage's occult interests. James Webb alludes briefly to the connection between Pound's economic and occult interests, and Leon Surette goes further in explaining the link between underconsumption economics and theosophy that was part of the intellectual milieu Pound found in the New Age circle. See Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (Open Court, 1976), pp. 116-117; and Surette, "Economics and Eleusis," *San José Studies*, XII (1986), 58-67. Pound's occult friends who helped to formulate his interests in myth and in economics—the Quest and New Age groups, respectively—were, in fact, not two distinct sets but overlapping sets; they were all occultists.

Theobald and between Pound and his future wife, Dorothy Shakespear, clearly document Pound's occult interests during the years preceding the genesis of the *Cantos*.⁵

Scholarly comment on Pound's relation to the occult is virtually nonexistent. Given the renewed interest with which Yeats was pursuing his occult studies and experiments during the early period of his association with Pound (1909-1916), it is surprising to find that most Pound scholars have chosen to ignore this aspect of Pound's life.⁶

Earlier studies either fail to identify Mead and Upward as occultists or seriously underestimate the extent of Pound's involvement with them. "Unusual interest in . . . religious backwaters," "mysticism," and "esotericism" are the phrases or terms used by the earlier scholars to describe the body of ideas which Pound was drawing upon from the very beginning of his career. Only Schneidau uses the term "occult," calling Mead "a well-known figure in occult circles."⁷ But this is the only time he uses this term, choosing instead the term "esoteric" in his discussion of Yeats and Upward.⁸ The later studies aestheticize Pound's occultism. Thus, the extent and importance of Pound's debt to the occult milieu of London circa 1908-1921 has been overlooked or minimized. That debt is extensive, particularly as seen in Pound's contacts with four members of the occult circles of London: Yeats, Olivia and Dorothy Shakespear, and Mead. Since the London occult milieu of the time is characterized by

⁵ See *Pound/Shakespear and Ezra Pound/John Theobald Letters*, eds. Donald Pearce and Herbert Schneidau (Black Swan Books, 1984), hereafter cited as *Pound/Theobald*.

⁶ Notable exceptions to the general scholarly neglect of Pound's involvement with the occult include: *Ideas Into Action: A Study of Pound's Cantos* (University of Miami Press, 1958), Clark Emery's valuable exploratory survey of Pound's eclectic religion as expressed in the *Cantos*; *A Light from Eleusis* (Oxford University Press, 1979), in which Leon Surette brings us closer to a proper understanding of the poems' mythos by chronicling Pound's revisionist rendering of the Odyssean myth in terms of the Eleusinian mysteries and Schneidau's study of Pound's early poetics which includes a brief account of the time when Pound "was entertaining esoteric ideas from people like Mead and Upward" (125). To these must be added Kevin Oderman's *Ezra Pound and the Erotic Medium* (Duke University Press, 1986); Colin McDowell and Timothy Materer's "Gyre & Vortex: W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound," *Twentieth Century Literature*, XXXI (1985), 343-367; Longenbach's "The Order of the Brothers Minor: Pound and Yeats at Stone Cottage 1913-16," *Paideuma*, XIV (1985), 395-403; "The Secret Society of Modernism: Pound, Yeats, Olivia Shakespear, and the Abbé de Montfaucon de Villars," *Yeats Annual*, IV (1986), 103-120; Angela Elliott, *Light as Image in Ezra Pound's Cantos*, Diss. Drew University, 1978; "The Word Comprehensive: Gnostic Light in the Cantos," *Paideuma*, XVIII (1989), 7-57; and *Stone Cottage*, in which the substance of the above two articles is included.

⁷ Schneidau, p. 119.

⁸ Schneidau, p. 118.

diversity and disunity, it is necessary to discriminate between the varieties of occultism which Pound encountered and to identify those with which he became involved.

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Arriving in London from Venice in 1908, Pound encountered what Mead has called the "rising psychic tide."⁹ Leading figures in this tide were Yeats, Upward, Mead, Laurence Binyon, Ernest Rhys, Rabindranath Tagore, and Orage. Florence Farr, her friend Olivia Shakespear, and Olivia's daughter, Dorothy, were marginal hangers-on.

It was Yeats who attracted Pound to London. As their friendship developed, Pound naturally met Yeats's many occult associates. Yeats's own occult learning is an amalgam of the ideas of various occult groups and individuals. By the time he and Pound met in May of 1909, Yeats's occult education had reached an advanced stage; he was pursuing, with more vigor than ever before, his interest in theurgy or practical magic. Pound is on record as disapproving of Yeats's psychic experiments, and critics usually take this disapproval as evidence of Pound's rejection of the occult. But it is only theurgy and spiritualism that Pound rejects.

A representative example of Pound's ambivalent attitude toward Yeats's occultism is a November 1913 letter to his mother, written just prior to the Stone Cottage winter of 1913-1914. Pound writes:

My stay in Stone Cottage will not be in the least profitable. I detest the country. Yeats will amuse me part of the time and bore me to death with psychical research the rest. I regard the visit as a duty to posterity.¹⁰

Notwithstanding this initial dislike of psychical research and theurgy, Pound later admitted that Yeats "improves on acquaintance."¹¹

In his reminiscences about their activities during the Stone Cottage winter of 1914-1915, Pound even modified his disapproval of Yeats's psychic research. Writing on the "'Noh' Plays," Pound is more sympathetic toward Yeats's experiments and unscientific "correlations."¹² He is still careful, nonetheless, to voice his reservations:

⁹ G.R.S. Mead, "The Rising Psychic Tide," *Quest*, III (1911-1912), 401-421.

¹⁰ *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D.D. Paige (1950; New Directions, 1971), p. 25.

¹¹ Letter of 21 November 1913 in *Pound/Shakespear*, p. 276.

¹² *Ezra Pound: Translations*, Intro. Hugh Kenner (New Directions, 1963), p. 236. Hereafter cited as *Translations*.

I dare say the play, Suma Genji, will seem undramatic to some people the first time they read it. The suspense is the suspense of waiting for a supernatural manifestation—which comes. Some will be annoyed at a form of psychology which is, in the West, relegated to spiritistic séances. There is, however, no doubt that such psychology exists. All through the winter of 1914-15 I watched Mr. Yeats correlating folklore (which Lady Gregory had collected in Irish cottages) and data of the occult writers, with the habits of charlatans of Bond Street. If the Japanese authors had not combined the psychology of such matters with what is to me a very fine sort of poetry, I would not bother about it.¹³

The writers whom Yeats was then reading included Avicenna, Paracelsus, Agrippa, and Swedenborg. F.A.C. Wilson observes that "All these sources of information seemed to corroborate his [Yeats's] own developing philosophy, as did also the detail of the Japanese Noh plays which he was then first reading: as the authorities accumulated, it is interesting to note, his findings won the grudging assent of Ezra Pound."¹⁴ Pound retains his distance, but he is now willing to suspend his hostility since the *telos* of the exercise is the beatific vision, the same "new beauty"¹⁵ that he seeks. The strident tone of his letter to his mother has disappeared in favor of what appears to be "grudging assent."

The impression which emerges from this and similar examples is of a student of the occult trying to find his bearings, a student who is discerning and discriminating but far from eager to advertise his interest in occultism. Pound's usual stance is that of an interested and informed outsider who never became a member of any of the occult groups which proliferated in London during the early years of the century. Thus, while he was present at many of the gatherings of people interested in esoteric matters, especially those held by Yeats and his occult friends, Pound did not see himself, nor was he seen by them, as belonging.

The Yeats-Horton correspondence of 1913 to 1919 is perhaps the strongest evidence of Pound's participation in Yeats's occult friendships. It reveals that occult subjects were discussed during Yeats's "Monday Evenings" at 18 Woburn Buildings and also that the correspondents included Pound in their conversations and cared enough about him to make prophecies about his future. Horton includes a characteristic note to Pound in his letter of 3 March 1913 to Yeats: "You'll do, only climb higher, ever higher and thus forget the burden."¹⁶ Three years later, on

¹³ *Translations*, p. 236.

¹⁴ F.A.C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (Gollancz, 1958), p. 145.

¹⁵ *Translations*, p. 237.

¹⁶ *W.B. Yeats and W.T. Horton: The Record of an Occult Friendship*, ed. George Mills Harper (Macmillan, 1980), p. 119. Hereafter cited as *Yeats/Horton*.

6 September 1916, after having attended Yeats's Monday Evening on the fourth, Horton writes a letter in which he is very critical of Yeats's actions and ambitions:

I was & am very sorry for Ezra because beneath all his many wrappings I see the Real Man who sorrows deeply over the antics & perverse lucubrations of his distracted charge. Watching & listening to Ezra I could see, as it were, a something slimy crawling over everything that is beautiful & noble & of good report & leaving behind him an unquestionably glittering but at the same time foul track of slime. I am sorry for him because of what he must go through, for Love-in-Death is approaching who will open his eyes & those of his Moon & other satellites.

What is astonishing is that you do not see what Ezra is to you

Ezra was your guest last Monday as were others so I did not think it right & proper to say anything but at same time I cannot allow my attitude to be mistaken. I gather from you that one cannot be a Poet & a Hero; in other words to be a Hero you must be a Zero. Well I prefer the Heroic Zero to the Olympian Poet on his sham Olympus

What you or Ezra or anyone else believes or says matters not one tittle to me but I do know we are all in the hands of the Living God & sudden & quick & drastic will be the Event.

I have a word for Mrs Shakespear. Sundry of her accounts are being made up, the balance is being struck—she will soon know on which side it is to be.¹⁷

The references to Pound in this letter establish his participation in Yeats's occult friendships. But this is not the principal lesson to be drawn from the episode: the letters also make clear that Pound had nothing in common with Horton, or with most of the rest of the fools and tricksters who made up much of the London Occult. That he knew many of them personally and understood the nature of their practices and beliefs explains his frequent—and misleading—outbursts against their scandalous and outrageous ways.

Horton's letter includes the strange but typical "prophecy" about Olivia Shakespear. Lionel Johnson's first cousin and herself a novelist, she is the "Diana Vernon" of Yeats's autobiographical writings and had a love affair with the poet which lasted less than a year (1895-1896), after which they remained close friends. Olivia participated in the period's occult movements and even co-authored two plays with Florence Farr, the accomplished actress and occultist who for a time headed the

¹⁷ *Yeats/Horton*, pp. 128-129.

Order of the Golden Dawn. The plays were published together as *The Beloved of Hathor* and *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk* (1902) and deal with occult subjects.¹⁸ Pound and his future mother-in-law were introduced in January 1909, probably by the Australian poet Frederic Manning, Olivia's nephew; Pound was invited to the Shakespear home at number twelve Brunswick Gardens in early February.

The Ezra Pound-Dorothy Shakespear correspondence provides several examples of Olivia Shakespear's occult interests: she acts as Yeats's ambassador to Pound to get the information for Pound's horoscope; she is an expert in drawing occult symbols; and she translates a seventeenth-century occult text, *Le Comte de Gabalis* (Paris, 1670), by the Abbé de Montfaucon de Villars, which Yeats and Pound earlier had been reading at Stone Cottage.¹⁹

In her letters and notebook Dorothy Shakespear discusses palmistry and astrology and mentions several books which she is reading, ranging from Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (newly published when she read it) to Conybeare's translation of Philostratus's *Apollonius of Tyana* (a text from which Pound later drew heavily for cantos 91 and 94) and Sinistrari's *Demonology; or, Incubi and Succubi*.²⁰ The degree of Dorothy Shakespear's, and Pound's, involvement can be measured by what is in this respect the most important passage in their correspondence—a letter in which he attempts to clarify, for Dorothy's edification, the difference between "real symbolism" and aesthetic or literary symbolism:

. . . What do you mean by symbolism? Do you mean real symbolism, Cabala, genesis of symbols, rise of picture language, etc. or the aesthetic <symbology> symbolism of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and that Arthur Symons wrote a book [Symbolist Movement in Literature] about--the literary movement? At any rate begin on the "Comte de Gabalis," anonymous and should be in catalogue under "Comte de Gabalis." Then you might try the Grimoire of Pope Honorius (IIIrd I think).

There's a dictionary of symbols, but I think it immoral. I mean that I think a superficial acquaintance with the sort of shallow, conventional, or attributed meaning of a lot of symbols weakens--damnably, the power of receiving an

¹⁸ For more information see Josephine Johnson's *Florence Farr: Bernard Shaw's "New Woman"* (London: Colin Smythe, 1975).

¹⁹ See *Pound/Shakespear*, pp. 108, 181, 293, 294, 302, 303, and 334. It was Pound who persuaded Shakespear to translate parts of *Le Comte de Gabalis*, which he then published in the "Egoist" from 16 March to 1 June 1914. For the importance of this text to Pound, as well as for his reading of other occult texts during the period under discussion, see *Stone Cottage*, pp. 87-92.

²⁰ *Pound/Shakespear*, pp. 31-32, 188-189, 305.

energized symbol. I mean a symbol appearing in a vision has a certain richness and power of energizing joy--whereas if the supposed meaning of a symbol is familiar it has no more force, or interest of power of suggestion than any other word, or than a synonym in some other language.

Then there are those Egyptian language books, but O.S. [Olivia Shakespear] has 'em so they're no use. De Gabalis (first part only) is amusing. Ennemoser's History Of Magic may have something in it--Then there are "Les Symbolistes"--french from Mallarmé, de l'Isle Adam, etc. to [Remy] De Gourmont, which is another story.²¹

Pound's preference for "occult" as opposed to "aesthetic" symbolism is quite clear in this letter. It severely tests the arguments of those who deny Pound's interest in esoterica. Michael H. Levenson, for example, in his persuasive revisionist account of Modernism, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, argues that both Pound and Ford criticized Yeats's symbolism and opposed both its technique of "suggestion" and "invocation" and its straining after the ineffable. Levenson, having carefully traversed the terrain between the time of the acceptance for publication of the Imagist anthology (Summer of 1913) and the outbreak of the war the following summer, observes that

Ford criticized the poetry of Yeats because it forsook immediate perception in favour of imaginative wanderings through mystical arcana. Pound, too, liked to compare art to science (the "arts, literature, poesy, are a science just as chemistry is a science") and in one of his early manifestos he insisted that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol." The pursuit of transcendence is thus summarily abandoned.²²

Levenson insists that "to symbolist 'evocation,' Imagism opposed precision, hardness, clarity of outline. To symbolist transcendence, Imagism opposed the natural world."²³ Levenson's distortion of Pound's Imagist position is due to his failure to see, first, that Pound rejects neither the "real symbolism of vision" nor the possibility of transcendence and, second, that Pound's use of scientific terminology and scientific analogies in his prose belongs to the tradition of "occult science."

It is evident from the letter to Dorothy Shakespear that Pound was clear about the difference between literary symbolism, as represented in Arthur Symon's *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, and "real" symbolism.

²¹ Letter of 14 January 1914, *Pound/Shakespear*, p. 302.

²² Levenson, p. 110.

²³ Levenson, p. 120.

Pound understood literary or aesthetic symbolism as a mixture of occultism, spiritualist mysticism, and magic couched in a language of emotional reverberation and suggestiveness. And even though he had no trouble with the first component, his own Modernist needs dictated that a precise language be used in his poetry. Therefore, in his work he rejected the Symbolist technique of suggestion in favor of a "sort of hyper-scientific precision"²⁴ but without rejecting the Symbolist metaphysical mysticism. Clearly, this is what Pound means in his "Vorticism" article, in which he rejects the "mushy technique" of Symbolism but not its transcendentalism. In the same essay he approves wholeheartedly of a "belief in a sort of permanent metaphor, [which] is, as I understand it, 'symbolism' in its profounder sense. It is not necessarily a belief in a permanent world, but it is a belief in that direction."²⁵ In short, while attacking and rejecting aesthetic symbolism, he approves of "real" symbolism.²⁶

Pound's Modernism develops out of the dialectic, during his early London years, between Yeatsian symbolism and his own need for a language which would be precise and free of Symbolism's "mushy technique." But when he says that "I went to London because I thought Yeats knew more about poetry than anybody else . . . I went to study with Yeats and found that Ford disagreed with him," he is thinking in terms of technique.²⁷ His *catechesis* under Yeats became an education in the occult as a result of Yeats's occult friends. Pound met many occultists: during the meetings of the Quest Society in Kensington Town Hall and later in a large studio in Clareville Grove, South Kensington, in Paris during the spring of 1911 when Yeats and Pound were often together, or during Yeats's "Mondays," or perhaps during visits to John M. Watkins' bookstore at Cecil Court, to which people came for "tea, talk, and theosophy."²⁸

²⁴ *Romance*, p. 87.

²⁵ *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; New Directions, 1970), p. 84.

²⁶ In "The Secret Society of Modernism" (as well as in *Stone Cottage*), Longenbach examines many of the same issues presented here. Although I am in general agreement with him as to what Pound means by "symbolism," Longenbach concludes that "It is finally not the subject matter but the elitist attitude of occult literature that was most important for Pound" (117). I argue, on the other hand, that the subject matter (that is, the thematic correspondences) was also important to Pound.

²⁷ Donald Hall, ed., *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 2nd Series (Viking, 1963), p. 47.

²⁸ Geoffrey N. Watkins, "Yeats and Mr. Watkins' Bookshop," *Yeats and the Occult* (MacLean-Hunter Press and Macmillan of Canada, 1975), p. 309.

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Of all those who contributed to Pound's occult education, the most important was G.R.S. Mead. There is strong evidence pointing to Pound's early attraction to theosophical ideas in both the Ezra Pound-Dorothy Shakespear correspondence and in some of the unpublished letters to his parents. Together with Pound's published letters to John Theobald and his unpublished letters to Patricia Hutchins, written more than forty years after Pound's initial acquaintance with Mead, they establish beyond doubt Pound's admiration for Mead's knowledge and scholarship, his interest in the subjects that were Mead's trademark, and Pound's and Dorothy's attendance at Mead's lectures.

Pound must have met Mead at one of Yeats's "Mondays," which Mead attended about twice a month.²⁹ Pound's earliest reference to Mead occurs in a letter to Isabel Pound, dated 17 September 1911: "I have spent the P.M. with G.R.S. Mead, edtr. of *The Quest*, who wants me to throw a lecture for his society which he can afterwards print. 'Troubadour Psychology,' whatever the dooce that is."³⁰ The uncertainty in the last sentence indicates that it was Mead who suggested the title, and possibly the subject, of Pound's essay "Psychology and Troubadours." The same uncertainty or uneasiness is discernible in a letter from Dorothy to Pound dated two days after Pound's letter to his mother: "Don't you be 'nebulous to the Nth' about yr. Troubadour psychology--or Mead won't be pleased. Say you're a reincarnation so you know. Are you? do you?"³¹ Dorothy's reference to reincarnation indicates a playful skepticism that Pound himself maintained throughout his occult studies (as well as implying a certain gullibility on Mead's part).

Many other letters from the same period make clear Pound's admiration for Mead. References to Mead appear frequently in letters to his parents. On 21 October 1911, Pound writes: "I've met and enjoyed Mead, who's done so much research on primitive mysticism--that I've written you at least four times . . ."³² "I find Mead very interesting," he

²⁹ For the relation between Yeats and Mead, see Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* (Macmillan, 1954), esp. pp. 105-112.

³⁰ Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book Library, Yale University, Letter # 223; hereafter identified as Beinecke. Elliott was the first to note Pound's numerous references to Mead in his letters to his parents (*Light as Image*, pp. 133-134); she stresses the significance of Mead's studies in Gnosticism and theosophical subjects as probable sources for Pound's own idiosyncratic understanding of these arcane areas of research and experience (134 and *passim*). See also her reworking of this topic in "The Word Comprehensive," cited earlier in Note 6.

³¹ Letter of 19 September 1911, *Pound/Shakespear*, p. 61.

³² Beinecke, #226.

writes in December, 1911; and on 21 February 1912, he is even more flattering: "G.R.S. Mead is about as interesting--along his own line--as anyone I meet."³³ A letter from Dorothy to Pound, also dated 21 February 1912, shows that she herself and at least one of her friends shared Pound's interest in Mead: "I was deeply interested in Mead--so, I think, was G. [Georgie Hyde-Lees]."³⁴

Pound's unpublished letters to his parents strongly suggest that his attendance at Mead's Quest Society lectures was regular. In March 1912, he writes to his mother saying that "Mead's lecture on 'Heirotheos' was very good"; in a letter dated 5 November 1912, Pound announces to his parents that "Mead's lectures begin this P.M.," and in another dated four weeks later (3 December 1912), he says: "I'm going out to Mead's lecture. And so on as usual. This being Tuesday."³⁵ Even when Pound was away from London, he could rely on Dorothy for information about Mead's lectures since there was apparently an understanding between them that Dorothy's Tuesday evenings would be spent listening to Mead.³⁶

Three other letters indicate that Dorothy was at the time reading Mead's books, including *The World Mystery* and *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*.³⁷ In her letters to Pound, Dorothy discusses Mead's works in a way which assumes Pound's familiarity with them. In a 22 May 1912 letter, for example, Dorothy writes about Mead's *The World Mystery*:

I have been intensely excited over another of Mead's--"The World-Mystery." It is full of interesting things, and I have "correlated" several to vaguenesses of my own! Also a footnote fit for Walter [Morse Rummel], about a "dodecagonal pyramid" with a door of many colours--the pyramid "in a sphere of the colour of night". . . .

I find Renan an excellent antidote to G.R.S. Mead and his numbers and Mysteries.³⁸

The key phrase here is "intensely excited over another of Mead's," indicating Dorothy's familiarity with several of Mead's works and suggesting Pound's parallel interest.

³³ Beinecke, #232 and #238.

³⁴ *Pound/Shakespeare*, p. 87.

³⁵ Beinecke, #268 and #271.

³⁶ *Pound/Shakespeare*, p. 276.

³⁷ *Pound/Shakespeare*, pp. 102, 114-115, 160.

³⁸ *Pound/Shakespeare*, p. 102. As Stephen J. Adams has informed me, Pound met Rummel in the United States before he reached London in 1908. Rummel, as Dorothy's recollection of him in this context shows, also had strong occult interests.

In a letter written about four weeks later, Dorothy is still studying *The World Mystery*. In a postscript, she tells Pound of a visit by the Meads and mentions an exciting new finding:

The Meads here at tea yesterday: they both have so much, and such pleasant, personality P.S. . . .
I feel quite interested--having found an incantation in Mead beginning "Iaô, aôî, ôia"³⁹

The incantation, "AOI," found by Dorothy in Mead and brought to Pound's attention in this letter, was later used in the *Cantos*.⁴⁰

More than forty years after his initial acquaintance with Mead, the London milieu of the first two decades of the century in general, and Mead in particular, remained an enduring interest for Pound. His letters to John Theobald and Patricia Hutchins confirm this interest. The letters to Theobald contain many references to things occult and to the activities of such occultists as Jiddu Krishnamurti,⁴¹ Madame Blavatsky, and Mead. One such reference appears in Pound's reply to Theobald's inquiry about whether "Mead [was] one of the Psychical Research investigators that made trouble for Blavatsky?"⁴²

GRS Mead / BlavatskiTe {no suspicion of a k} [handwritten insertion] "Echoes from the Gnosis," possibly 40 vols/Quest Society and Quarterly, Q.S. lectures at least monthly for part of the year/ <London 19? to '14>. . . . I don't think Mead mucked with the psychical research gang/ that was another subject of satire/⁴³

In Pound's letters to Patricia Hutchins, most of which date from about the same period as those to Theobald, he stresses the special ambience of Kensington and returns repeatedly to Mead and the Quest Society

³⁹ Letter of 16 June 1912, *Pound/Shakespeare*, pp. 114-115.

⁴⁰ Canto 79, 490. All references are to the 1975 edition of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New Directions). Hereafter cited as *Cantos*. The editors of *Pound/Shakespeare* point to Mead's *The World Mystery* as the source of the incantation.

⁴¹ Jiddu Krishnamurti is the Indian theosophist who founded the World Order of Star in England with Annie Besant and who was pronounced, in 1925, the new messiah, a claim he repudiated in 1928.

⁴² *Pound/Theobald*, p. 29.

⁴³ Letter of 3 June 1957, *Pound/Theobald*, p. 32.

lectures at the Kensington Town Hall.⁴⁴ As can be gathered from her book,⁴⁵ parts of which Pound would have seen in manuscript, Hutchins did not pay much attention to Pound's emphasis on the occult ambience of Kensington. In his letters, Pound appears to become increasingly upset with Hutchins' failure to include Upward and Mead in her account or to document the activities of the Quest Society at the Kensington Town Hall, where not only Pound and Jessie L. Weston, but also T.E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis came and even lectured.⁴⁶ Pound's irritation is clear in a letter from Italy, dated 15 June 1959, which effectively ends his direct correspondence with Hutchins—Pound complains that Hutchins has paid no attention whatsoever to the pains he has taken to delineate the special character of Kensington and the personalities of its inhabitants.⁴⁷

Mead had a decent reputation in Edwardian England, and modern studies on gnosticism and the origins of Christianity still mention him.⁴⁸ But even though his most important books were reissued in the 1960s, little is known, and little has been written about him. The chief source for what we know of him is a memoir which he wrote and published in *The Quest* some eight years before his death. This essay, which recounts the early history of the Quest Society and outlines a major shift in the periodical's future course, is aptly entitled "The Quest"—Old and New: Retrospect and Prospect.⁴⁹

Born in 1863, Mead was educated at King's School, Rochester, England, and at Cambridge (M.A., 1885). He entered Oxford to study philosophy and later attended the French University of Clermont-Ferrand,

⁴⁴ The Ezra Pound-Patricia Hutchins correspondence began in 1953 and continued virtually until Pound's death. However, in 1960 Pound stopped replying to Hutchins, and from 30 September 1960 Dorothy Pound took over the correspondence. I have not myself been to the British Museum, and I am working from Leon Surette's notes, for which I thank him.

⁴⁵ *Ezra Pound's Kensington: An Exploration, 1885-1913* (Faber and Faber, 1965).

⁴⁶ It is of interest to note that Levenson mentions Hulme's and Lewis's participation in the Quest Society Lectures at the Kensington Town Hall without mentioning that this was one of the centers of theosophical activities at the time.

⁴⁷ See letter #159, British Museum, Patricia Hutchins Collection.

⁴⁸ See the following: Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis, The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans & ed. Robert McLachlin Wilson (Harper, 1977); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Beacon, 1967); and the article on "Gnosticism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (Macmillan, 1987).

⁴⁹ Mead, "The Quest"—Old and New: Retrospect and Prospect," *The Quest*, XII (1925-1926), 289-307, hereafter cited as "The Quest." Most of my information about Mead's biography and his view of the problems of the Theosophical Society at the point when he left to form his own group comes from this essay.

at which he seems to have studied spiritualism.⁵⁰ He joined Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in 1884 and in 1889 gave up the teaching profession to become her private secretary—in which capacity he remained until her death three years later (1891). He sub-edited Blavatsky's monthly magazine, *Lucifer*, which he renamed *The Theosophical Review* upon becoming its editor. The impossible task of correcting and revising *The Secret Doctrine* fell to him. In 1890, Mead was appointed General Secretary of the European Section of the Theosophical Society, a position from which he resigned in 1897 in order to devote himself more fully to his writing. When Colonel H.S. Olcott, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, died in 1907, the Presidency was offered to Mead; but he declined because he "much preferred continuing [his] studies, editing, writing books and lecturing" to "continual travelling and organization."⁵¹ When problems divided the Society in 1909 because of what Mead calls the "miserable, unpalatable episode" of C.W. Leadbeater's sexual scandals,⁵² Mead led a schism, and some seven hundred members resigned with him.

At one time, Mead's followers expected him to set up a rival "Neo-theosophic tin tabernacle" to carry on the pretence and charlatanism of the original group; but he wanted no part in any of this because, as he categorically states,

I had never, even while a member [of the Theosophical Society], preached the Mahatma-gospel of H.P.B. [Blavatsky], or propagandised Neo-theosophy [Mead's term for Besant's movement] and its revelations. I had believed that "theosophy" proper meant the wisdom-element in the great religions and philosophies of the world.⁵³

Mead's effort to distance himself from Blavatsky's theories and practices, and his skepticism regarding the validity of Neo-Theosophical psychic phenomena, are similar to Pound's own distancing himself from anything smacking of the practices and beliefs of the "Bond Street charlatans."

Mead founded "The Quest Society" (with one hundred and fifty ex-Theosophists and another one hundred new recruits) and its journal, *The Quest*, in order "to promote investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy and science, on the basis of experience" and "to

⁵⁰ Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), pp. 345-346.

⁵¹ "The Quest," 295.

⁵² Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847-1923) was a British clergyman and occultist who played a major role in the history of the Theosophical Society. From time to time he was accused of engaging in homosexual activities involving young students.

⁵³ "The Quest," 296-297.

encourage the expression of the ideal in beautiful forms."⁵⁴ Mead and his society abjured "all 'magical' and 'occult' pretensions which seek the 'will to power' and are essentially 'anti-social.'" *The Quest* would accept articles examining "the history and criticism of such 'occult' subjects, but never with their advocacy."⁵⁵ The distinction that Mead makes here is between theurgic practices and psychical phenomena on the one hand and speculative occult philosophy on the other. This is a distinction which Pound would also make while favoring, like Mead (and unlike Yeats), the latter.

Although the later volumes of *The Quest* include essays on Freudian psychoanalysis and other contemporary topics, it was mythology, religious mysticism, and the study of Christian origins that remained central to Mead. Among the contributors were: A.E. Waite, Fiona Macleod, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, Ernest Rhys, Denis Saurat, Rabindranath Tagore, W.B. Yeats, A.E. (George Russell), Laurence Binyon, Alfred Noyes, Edward Carpenter, F.C. Conybeare, Arthur Symons, Evelyn Underhill, Jessie L. Weston, Raymond A. Nicholson, Gershon Scholem, Martin Buber, and Ezra Pound.

Undoubtedly, Pound would have read many issues of *The Quest* during his years in London.⁵⁶ Volume IV is of particular interest because it contains Pound's essay "Psychology and Troubadours." This volume includes articles by Mead himself ("The Meaning of Gnosis in Higher Hellenistic Religion"), by Weston, Tagore, and Underhill ("The Mystic as Creative Artist"), and a poem by Yeats ("The Mountain Tomb"). An article of possible interest to Pound is Arthur E. Bailly's "Dante and Swedenborg: Two Other-World Explorers." Even more significant are some of the reviews, two of which are of Pound's new volumes of poetry, *The Sonnets of Guido Cavalcanti* and *Ripostes*. There are reviews of F.C. Conybeare's Loeb Classical Library edition of *Apollonius of Tyana*, Edouard Schure's *The Great Initiates*, Edmund G. Gardner's *Dante and the Mystics*, and three reviews of Evelyn Underhill's books, among them one of *The Mystic Way*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Quoted from G.R.S. Mead, "On the Nature of the Quest," *The Quest*, I (1909-1920), 29-30. In a footnote we find that this first article of *The Quest* is "the substance of an address delivered by the President [Mead] at the Inaugural Meeting of the Quest Society, at Kensington Town Hall, London, W., on Thursday, March 11, 1909" (29).

⁵⁵ "The Quest," 307.

⁵⁶ Firm evidence of Pound's knowledge of *The Quest* articles is his later use in *Cantos* of Mead's essays on Dance and Christendom. For a discussion of this see Colin McDowell, "'The Toys . . . at Auxerre': Canto 77," *Paideuma*, XII (1983), 21-30.

⁵⁷ Pound used Conybeare's edition of Philostratus in writing Canto 96, and he probably knew of this edition even before the appearance of the review in *The Quest* (July, 1913), since Shakespear mentions it in a February 1913 letter (*Pound/Shakespear*, p. 188). Conybeare often appeared in *The Quest*.

Pound's clearest statement of his debt to Mead is his footnote on Mead's lecture on Simon Magus and Helen of Troy. It is dated 1916 and acknowledges Pound's debt to "a recent lecture by Mr. Mead on Simon Magus [which] has opened my mind to a number of new possibilities."⁵⁸ Accordingly, Pound sees the legend of Simon and Helen of Tyre as a "clearer prototype of 'chivalric love'" than anything he himself has discovered for use in his own essay. Even though the text of the "recent lecture" remains unknown, its arguments must have been those Mead makes at length in *Simon Magus: an Essay* (1892) and in more condensed form in *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900). We may safely assume that it was Mead who introduced Pound to the history of this gnostic allegory of the soul; but Pound would certainly not have agreed with Mead's interpretation of the legend's sexual symbolism. Mead is explicit, for example, in his warning to the readers of *Simon Magus* not to interpret the legend literally, "for nothing but sorrow will follow such materialization of divine mysteries."⁵⁹ Pound's note makes clear that he absorbed both the sexual and the theological dimensions which the *Simon* legend shares with Gnosticism in general; it is clear, as well, that Pound did not share Mead's prudishness regarding the sexual symbolism inherent in the legend and that he parted ways with Mead at this point.

Other opinions, ideas, images, and historical personages important to Pound have been traced to Mead.⁶⁰ But more important than discovering

Conybeare's Loeb edition is accepted as legitimate scholarship, but Mead's book on Apollonius is not. While Pound scholars have kept these works distinct, *The Quest* review suggests that Conybeare's and Mead's books on Apollonius were largely collaborative. Gardner's book, which would also have been of considerable interest to Pound, is praised by the reviewer for placing Dante's epic in the context of a mystical tradition and for coming to the conclusion that the end of Dante's mysticism is "to make spiritual experience a force for the reformation of mankind." This book, then, reflects Pound's own faith in a spiritual reformation of mankind. Finally, Underhill's books might well have attracted Pound's attention, since we know that both Dorothy Shakespear and T.S. Eliot admired her study, *Mysticism* (1911), reviewed in Volume II of *The Quest*.

⁵⁸ *Romance*, p. 91.

⁵⁹ *Simon Magus: An Essay* (Theosophical Society Press, 1892), p. 75.

⁶⁰ For example, see Hugh Kenner's *Gnomon: Essays in Contemporary Literature* (McDowell, Obolensky, 1951) for discussion of the importance of Mead's *Apollonius of Tyana* (1901), a critical commentary upon Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, to Pound's treatment of the first-century A.D. sage in cantos 91 and 94 (pp. 295-296); Surette's discussion of Pound's absorption of Gnostic theology through Mead (*A Light from Eleusis*, pp. 60-63); and Oderman's discussion of Pound's use of the concept of *augoideas*, which he borrows from Mead's *The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition* (Watkins, 1919)—hereafter cited as *Subtle Body*—in the later *Cantos* (pp. 72-75).

the exact sources of some of Pound's ideas in Mead's writings is the fact that the general substance of Mead's occult thought is reflected in Pound. In particular, Pound's conception of the "celestial tradition," his formulation of his fantasy history, and his theory of "palingenesis" or soul-making (outlined most clearly in the section entitled "Religio" of *Selected Prose* and in *A Guide to Kulchur*) correspond quite closely to Mead's occultist formulations.⁶¹

The most consistent argument in Mead's writing is for the existence of a living esoteric tradition whose origins are to be found in Orphism and the ancient mystery cults of Greece and Egypt. In *Orpheus*, for example, Mead argues that Orphism lies behind all the mystery religions of antiquity—Pythagoreanism, Eleusis, and Mithraism among them. Mead writes, as he says, "as a man convinced of the persistence of the Mysteries" through the ages, a belief that Pound shared:

. . . In the construction of my skiff I have mainly combined the researches of Lobeck, who was a scholar and no mystic, with the writings of Taylor, who was half scholar, half mystic, and cemented all together with some information derived from H.P. Blavatsky, who was a mystic and no scholar. I write as a man convinced that the Mysteries have not gone from the earth, but still exist and have their genuine adherents and initiators⁶²

Pound, too, writes "as a man convinced that the Mysteries have not gone from the earth," that the "light from Eleusis" is the "inextinguishable source of beauty [which] persisted throughout the Middle Ages maintaining song in Provence, maintaining the grace of Kalenda Maya."⁶³

Although Pound incorporates or superimposes his own variations in the *Cantos* and elsewhere, he appeals to an esoteric tradition in very much the same way as Mead does. This tradition includes secret societies such as the Albigenes and the Templars—both of which preserved, according to both Pound and Mead, the true light of *gnosis* or wisdom. Pound appeals to the tradition in Canto 90:


"From the colour the nature
 & by the nature the sign!"
 Beatific spirits welding together
 as in one ash-tree in Ygdrasail.

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of Pound's conceptions of the "celestial tradition" and "palingenesis" as they appear in *The Guide to Kulchur* (1938; *New Directions*, 1970) and the *Cantos*, see my article "*The Cantos as Palingenesis*," *Paideuma*, XVIII (1989), 7-33.

⁶² *Orpheus* (1896; Watkins, 1965), p. 195.

⁶³ *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (*New Directions*, 1973), pp. 53, 58.

to both Pound and Mead, the true light of *gnosis* or wisdom. Pound appeals to the tradition in Canto 90:

"From the colour the nature
 & by the nature the sign!"
 Beatific spirits welding together
 as in one ash-tree in Ygdrasail.
 Baucis, Philemon.
 Castalia is the name of that fount in the hill's fold,
 the sea below,
 narrow beach.
 Templum aedificans, not yet marble,
 "Amphion!"
 And from the San Ku 
 to the room in Poitiers where one can stand
 casting no shadow,
 That is Sagetrieb,
 that is tradition.
 Builders had kept the proportion,
 did Jacques de Molay
 know these proportions?
 and was Erigena ours? (90/605)

This is Pound's rediscovered, fictional "tradition," rising from the ancient rites of Delphi, Dodona, and Mithras through the Medieval manifestations of the tradition in the Albigenses, the Knights Templar, and Erigena to its later appearances in John Heydon and Swedenborg. Even with the help of Mead's more comprehensive accounts of the tradition, Pound's passage remains obscure; but the obscurity is part of the intention, since this is a secret tradition meant to be understood only by those who have undergone the proper initiation.

Mead's clearest formulation of the supposed esoteric tradition is to be found in *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*⁶⁴ which is "intended to serve . . . as a small contribution . . . leading towards a solution of the vast problems involved in the scientific study of the Origins of the Christian Faith."⁶⁵ Mead discusses the Trismegistic (Hermetic) tradition, notably a text discovered by Michael Psellus during a revival of Platonic studies in the eleventh century in Byzantium. Gemisthus Plethon visited Florence in

⁶⁴ *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, 3 vols. (1906; Watkins, 1964). In *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality*, Virginia Moore argues that it was Yeats's "study" of Mead's *Thrice-Greatest Hermes* that consolidated his knowledge of the Western occult tradition.

⁶⁵ *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, I, p. xiii.

1438, bringing a Neoplatonic doctrine with him and prompting the acquisition by Cosimo Medici of a Greek manuscript from Macedonia. Cosimo had Marsilio Ficino translate the text into Latin so that he could read it before he died. Ficino then articulated for the West Plethon's idea of a tradition of Wisdom to which Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato all belonged. The story of the passage of the importation of Greek thought into Italy and the revival of Hellenism appears in both *The Guide to Kulchur* and the *Cantos*.⁶⁶ Pound attaches great importance to this story, whose probable source was Mead.⁶⁷ Mead insists that there is "an unbroken line of tradition in which Gnosis and Mystery-teaching have been handed down through pre-Christian, Pagan and Jewish, and through Christian hands."⁶⁸ Of course, Pound also believed in an unbroken tradition which he traced back to Eleusis.⁶⁹

Mead's major books, including *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* and *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, were published prior to Pound's arrival in London in late 1908. But his arrival did coincide with the serial publication (1907-1909) of *Echoes from the Gnosis*, an eleven-volume series written by Mead for the general reader.⁷⁰ These slight volumes were part of a proselytizing campaign designed to draw people to theosophy, and their topics represent a helpful outline of Mead's interests during the fifty-odd years of his career as an author.

Two major interests are apparent in *Echoes from the Gnosis*. First, Mead is interested in palingenesis. He claims that the Gnosis of God is

⁶⁶ See *The Guide to Kulchur*, pp. 45, 160, 224, 263, 313; and *Cantos* 7, 23, 26, 83, and 98.

⁶⁷ The centrality of the tradition and Pound's reverence for Plethon are most clearly expressed in the following passage from *The Guide to Kulchur*:

Gemistus Plethon brought over a species of Platonism to Italy in the 1430s And they say Gemisto found no one to talk to, or more generally he did the talking

At any rate he had a nailed boot for Aristotle, and his conversation must have been lively. Hence (at a guess) Ficino's sinecure, at old Cosimo's expense, trained to translate the greek neoplatonists. Porphyry, Psellos, Iamblichus, Hermes Trismegistus

Whence I suppose what's-his-name and the English mystics with reference to greek originals sometimes (John Heydon etc.). (pp. 224-225)

The same tradition is wonderfully captured in the opening lines of Canto 23, in which Pound either mentions the names or uses quotations to allude to some of the Neoplatonists who appear in the above passage.

⁶⁸ *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, III, p. 213.

⁶⁹ See "Terra Italica," in *Selected Prose*, esp. pp. 58-59.

⁷⁰ *Echoes from the Gnosis*, 11 vols. (Theosophical Society Publications, 1907-1908).

the "Perfect Perfection" which, unlike "the birth or *genesis* into matter . . . [is] the essential birth or palingenesis, the means of re-becoming a pure spiritual being."⁷¹ Second, Mead is profoundly interested in the origins of Christianity. These concerns are constant in Mead's writing, regardless of whether he is focusing on Gnosticism (as in *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*) or on the spiritual significance of sacred dances in pagan and Christian rituals (*The Sacred Dance of Christendom*).

Echoes from the Gnosis itself deals with a variety of subjects, ranging from *The Gnosis of the Mind* to *The Mysteries of Mithra* and *The Chaldaean Oracles*.⁷² Pound was at least aware of this series, for he wrote to John Theobald nearly forty years after the series appeared: "I think Mead must hv done `nigh onter' 40 vols, of Echoes, and the Quest 1/4 ly must have run at least ten years??"⁷³

Speaking about symbols in Volume VI, Mead says that "The true interpretation of symbols depends upon the capacity of the learner [initiate, neophyte] to make them alive and to see them from as many points of view as possible. All true symbols should first of all be made solid, then made interpenetrable, then made alive, in-breathing and out-breathing."⁷⁴ This idea is not far from Pound's contrast of Symbolism to Imagism: "Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in `association,' that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory . . . the imagiste's images have a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra."⁷⁵

The idea of the vortex—which Pound could have absorbed from various sources, including Upward—is found in Mead's Volume VIII, in which he speaks of "Vortices, Voragines, Whirl-swirls, Æons, [and] Atoms" in discussing the ultimate mystery or "Paternal Depth."⁷⁶ In Volume IX, Mead discusses the form that gods take in a way which is echoed by Pound in "Religio, or the Child's Guide to Knowledge," as well

⁷¹ *The Hymns of Hermes*, p. 51.

⁷² A total of eleven individual volumes were published under the general title of *Echoes from the Gnosis*, and there were other volumes which were projected but never appeared. These are the titles of the published volumes: I. *The Gnosis of the Mind*; II. *The Hymns of Hermes*; III. *The Vision of Aridaeus*; IV. *The Hymn of Jesus*; V. *The Mysteries of Mithra*; VI. *A Mithriac Ritual*; VII. *The Gnostic Crucifixion*; VIII. *The Chaldean Oracles*, I; IX. *The Chaldean Oracles*, II; X. *The Hymn of the Robe of Glory*; and XI. *The Wedding-Song of Wisdom*. Among those volumes which were projected but never appeared are: "The Hymn of the Soul," "Some Orphic Fragments," and "The Words of Heraclitus."

⁷³ Letter of 11 June 1957, *Pound/Theobald*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ *A Mithraic Ritual*, pp. 51-52.

⁷⁵ *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; New Directions, 1970), pp. 84-85.

⁷⁶ *The Chaldaean Oracles*, I, pp. 54-58.

as in various places in the *Cantos*: "In themselves the Gods have no forms, they are incorporeal; they, however, assume forms for the sake of mortals, and, as Mead writes, citing Proclus: 'For though we [the Gods] are incorporeal:

. . . *Bodies* are allowed to self-revealed manifestations for your sakes'.⁷⁷

The idea of *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage, which pervades Pound's prose and poetry is also found in these volumes, notably in Volume XI.⁷⁸ Many of these concepts can be found in several other sources and are, in any case, the common stock of many occult texts; but Mead's works conveniently illustrate Pound's conformity to such occult views, which he certainly knew.

There is a consistent and unswerving program which guides Mead's work as a whole and which parallels the structure of occult history articulated in *The Spirit of Romance*, in some of the early essays in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, and in *The Guide to Kulchur*. The same structure is latent in the *Cantos*.⁷⁹ There is a strong parallel or affinity between the fundamental metaphysical ideas of Pound, the theosophical synthesis of Mead, and the occult history which represents "what has really survived in European minds after several centuries of trituration of the ideas of the cabalists and hermetists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance."⁸⁰

In all of Mead's works, there are tantalizing bits which Pound might be echoing in the *Cantos* and which illuminate aspects of the wisdom-tradition. His most important work after *Thrice-Greatest Hermes* is probably *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, a study of the origins and development of Gnosticism and the Origins of Christianity in the light of theosophical belief in the One ur-religion, the common source of all wisdom-traditions, and the Light of the initiation.⁸¹

⁷⁷ *The Chaldaean Oracles*, II, pp. 68-69; see *Selected Prose*, pp. 48-49.

⁷⁸ *The Wedding-Song of Wisdom*, pp. 80-84.

⁷⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this structure (which I call *katabasis/palingenesis/epopteia*) as it appears in the *Cantos*, see my forthcoming *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* (Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1992), pp. 101-108.

⁸⁰ Denis Saurat, *Literature and Occult Tradition*, trans. Dorothy Bolton (Bell, 1930), p. 69.

⁸¹ Among Mead's other works are: *Simon Magus: An Essay* (1892); *Orpheus* (1896); *Pistis Sophia: A Gnostic Gospel* (1896); *Apollonius of Tyana* (1901), a critical commentary upon Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*; *World Mystery* (1907); *Quests Old and New* (1913), a collection of thirteen papers, most of which had already been published in *The Quest*, dealing with the philosophy of the Far East, Gnosticism, and typical movements of contemporary thought; *The Gospels and the Gospel* (1902); *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.* (1903); *The Theosophy of the Vedas* (1905); *The Gnostic John the Baptizer* (1924); and *The Sacred Dance of Christendom* (1926). The titles of these volumes give us

Mead's works on gnosticism provided Pound with a composite model of initiatory ritual structures. His *Doctrine of the Subtle Body* probably provided the poet with an account of the form and nature of palingenesis, the soul's ascension from the body's dense matter in a second birth to another realm, a region of light. Published in 1919, *Subtle Body* contains an Introduction and three essays which had already appeared in the *Quest* in 1909 and 1910.⁸² In these Mead undertakes to summarize the ancient conceptions of *sensorium*, "the notion that the physical body of man is as it were the exteriorization of an invisible subtle embodiment of the life of the mind."⁸³ Although Pound's palingenetic imagery does not derive from Mead, his conception of palingenesis as expressed in the *Cantos* (especially in *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*) conforms to Mead's discussion of the "radiant body." Mead describes palingenesis as an ascension of the soul from the hylic cosmos to an aetheric, crystalline brightness of the "radiant body"—and this is beautifully captured in *The Guide to Kulchur*: "sea crystalline and enduring, of the bright as it were molten glass that envelops us, full of light."⁸⁴

In 1895 Mead published a new edition of Thomas Taylor's *Selected Works of Plotinus*, adding his own Foreword to Taylor's Introduction.⁸⁵ In these writings Mead refers to the "rising psychic tide" of the period and to the need for a universal spiritual fellowship. He suggests that the previously irreconcilable conflict between religion and science has produced a generation which longs and searches for reconciliation, and he concludes that the study of man's psychic nature is necessary for this reconciliation; thus, Plotinus, the most discerning philosopher of mysticism, deserves a new hearing. Mead's closing remarks are of particular interest for the student of Pound:

And that Plotinus was not a mere theorist, but did actually attain unto such a state of consciousness, is testified to by Porphyry (C.xxiii). Plotinus also treats of this in the last book of the "Enneads" (see also En.V.v.3), but, as he says, it can hardly be described (dio kai dysphraston to theama). Thus we reach the borderland of philosophy as we understand it.

a picture of the depth and breath of Mead's theosophical concerns and scholarship.

⁸² The three sections of *Subtle Body* had appeared in *The Quest*, I (1909-1910): "The Resurrection of the Body," 271-287; "The Spirit-Body: An Excursion into Alexandrian Psycho-Physiology," 472-488; and "The Augoeides or Radiant Body," 705-724.

⁸³ *Subtle Body*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ *The Guide to Kulchur*, p. 44.

⁸⁵ *Selected Works of Plotinus*, trans. Thomas Taylor, ed. and introd. G.R.S. Mead (Bell, 1914). See also Sharon Mayer Libera, *Ezra Pound's Paradise: A Study of Neoplatonism in the Cantos*, Diss., Harvard University, 1971.

Beyond this region lie the realms of pure mysticism and the great unknown. And if any one can lead us by a safe path to those supernal realms, avoiding the many dangers of the way, and in a manner suited to western needs, Plotinus is a guide that can be highly recommended.⁸⁶

The role of Plotinus as psychopomp in Canto 15, as Libera explains it, is Pound's adaptation of Mead's suggestion in the passage:

Pound bestows on Plotinus precisely the role of guide in Canto 15; there Plotinus leads Pound out from the Hell of London just as Virgil led Dante through the *Inferno*. Plotinus shows Pound a solid path through the hellish muck and brings him to a mystical vision of the sun at the threshold of the region of the saved. Thus, in a true sense, Pound followed Mead's recommendation of Plotinus as a guide.⁸⁷

Many of the echoes of Mead's work in the *Cantos* and in Pound's prose are just that: echoes for which it is difficult to find the exact source. More important than direct borrowings is the discovery that Theosophical ideas are constantly in the background of Pound's thinking, formulating his worldview. Pound borrows much from Mead's Theosophy. There Pound found: the "celestial tradition"; the belief in the persistence of the light from Eleusis through the Middle Ages, and its re-surfacing in the songs of Provence and Italy; the desire for a "pagan revival," leading to the gathering of the forgotten fragments of ancient mystery rites so as to recapture a polytheistic consciousness which is now all but lost to Modern man; the expectation for the dawn of a "New Age"; and palingenesis.

The problem, then, is to reconcile Pound's ambivalent attitude towards occultism, the mild ridicule directed towards "Old Krone" [Mead] in *The Guide to Kulchur* and the *Cantos*, with his serious interest in "things occult."⁸⁸ I think that Pound's ambivalence finds its motivation in his

⁸⁶ *Selected Works of Plotinus*, p. xxxiv.

⁸⁷ Libera, p. 30.

⁸⁸ Pound's mild ridicule of Mead always appears within the context of ridicule of Madame Blavatsky. See *The Guide to Kulchur* (pp. 225-226) and *Cantos* (74/446). In a letter to John Theobald, Pound relates an anecdote involving Blavatsky and again directs some mild ridicule toward Mead:

. . . Blavatsky, OBjective, as per sitting at table digging into juice beefsteak / disciples on carrot diet: "Ah, childRen, my CHILdren, how many of you have succeeded . . . in . . . BEgetting vegeTARian children?"

Also her pulling Mead's leg to see whether M/ thinking or swallowing. (11 June 1957, p. 36)

deliberate attempt to put some distance between himself and the stupidity, foolishness, and charlatanism of his associates (including Yeats) who were participants in the psychic experiments and tricks common in occult circles of the period. In his own mind, he could—or he believed that he could—always distinguish between the merits and the absurdities of mysticism and occultism. When Pound speaks, therefore, about myth in terms of "delightful psychic experience" and says that he knows people to whom such experiences occur so that he is personally acquainted with "one man who understands Persephone and Demeter, and one who understands the Laurel, and another who has, I should say, met Artemis," he is telling us that he is familiar with the occult community of London and that "These things are for [him, too,] real."

The editors of the Pound-Theobald correspondence observe that "Pound's anecdotes (e.g. Madame Blavatsky as a Gertrude Stein figure), rich in themselves, mask one of the enduring interests of his life, so evident in the visionary traditions invoked in the *Cantos*" (p. 30).

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- Page 1 of 1 -



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[Footnotes]

⁶ **Gyre and Vortex: W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound**

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