Yeats's *Vision Papers* and the Problem of Automatic Writing:
A Review Essay

K. P. S. Jochum

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Nov. 5, 1917. Passed S.Y. R. L.

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Yeats's Vision Papers and the Problem of Automatic Writing: A Review Essay

K. P. S. Jochum

Universität Bamberg

Yeats's "Vision" Papers
George Mills Harper, General Editor.

Volume 1. The Automatic Script:
5 November 1917–18 June 1918
xiv + 565 pp. $49.00

Volume 2. The Automatic Script:
25 June 1918–29 March 1920
xiii + 596 pp. $49.00

Steve L. Adams, Barbara J. Frieling
Sandra L. Sprayberry, eds.

Volume 3. Sleep and Dream Notebooks,
"Vision" Notebooks 1 and 2, Card File
xiii + 444 pp. $49.00

Robert Anthony Martinich
Margaret Mills Harper, eds.

IT IS A WELL-DOCUMENTED fact of Yeats’s biography that a few days after his marriage on 20 October 1917 he and his wife began a series of sessions of automatic writing. Yeats himself revealed this in the introduction to the second edition of A Vision (1937):

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences.

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He goes on to say that a “system of symbolism, strange to my wife and to myself, certainly awaited expression.” Later, automatic writing changed to automatic speech which Mrs. Yeats delivered while asleep. The records of these sessions and “sleeps” were preserved in copy-books and are now transcribed and published for the first time in their entirety in the three volumes under review (henceforth referred to as *Vision Papers*).

It is not quite clear why and under which conditions Mrs. Yeats started automatic writing; it is useful, however, to look into this matter in more detail to establish a proper perspective for the *Vision Papers*. A. N. Jeffares was perhaps the first to suggest in 1949 that she did it to divert her husband, who was apparently under great emotional strain because of his frustrating love affairs with Maud and Iseult Gonne. This is borne out in a letter which Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory on 29 October 1917:

The last two days Georgie and I have been very happy.... There has been something very like a miraculous intervention. Two days ago I was in great gloom (of which I hope, and believe, George knew nothing). I was saying to myself “I have betrayed three people;” then I thought “I have lived all through this before.” Then George spoke of the sensation of having lived through something before (she knew nothing of my thought). Then she said she felt that something was to be written through her.

The letter continues to say that Mrs. Yeats began to write words “which she did not understand” and which commented obliquely on Yeats’s relationship to Iseult Gonne. It is important to know that Yeats was quite wrong about his wife’s supposed ignorance.

In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, written on 9 July 1928 and published in part in 1954, Mrs. Yeats admitted that she made “an attempt to fake automatic writing” but afterwards found her hand “seized by a superior power.” This letter is cited by Margaret Mills Harper; her source is Virginia Moore’s *The Unicorn*. Moore goes on to summarize the letter: “The loosely held pencil scribbled out fragments of sentences on a subject of which she was ignorant. Thomas of Odessa’ claimed to be writing; then others.” Neither Harper nor Moore are trustworthy; the former gets the date wrong and omits the curious summary, and this summary is nonsense. Mrs. Yeats knew very well what she was doing; the name of the control (or of Mrs. Yeats’s invention) was Thomas of Dorlowicz. It would be important to have Mrs. Yeats’s letter in its entirety, but it has not surfaced again. It is neither referred to in John Harwood’s mono-
graph on *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats* nor in the only extended study of Mrs. Yeats that has appeared so far, a Ph.D. thesis by Susan Ramsay Dailey that is based in part on unpublished correspondence.\(^5\)

We do have, however, a letter of Yeats himself to Mrs. Shakespear, written on the same date of 9 July 1928, in which he expresses his fear that he might be too ill to finish the second edition of *A Vision*. Then he writes:

> Now Dolly Travers Smith was staying here—her mother is Hester Dowden the medium—George had to go downstairs on some household job and said to keep me occupied “Dolly had better do automatic writing.” Dolly did so and wrote “Have no fear. You have time,” repeated this several times and then signed “Thomas of Odessa.” Thomas of Odessa was the first spirit who came to George and myself ten years ago. He stayed so short a time that I had almost forgotten his existence.\(^6\)

Yeats’s memory is certainly faulty; Thomas of Dorlowicz (not of Odessa) is, on the evidence of *Vision Papers*, one of the most important communicators and he stayed more than two years. I find it hard to believe, however, that Mrs. Yeats’s memory is equally deficient; I assume therefore that Virginia Moore’s citation of Mrs. Yeats’s letter is unreliable. Yeats’s letter suggests a collusion between Mrs. Yeats and Dolly Travers Smith (who made stage designs for the Abbey Theatre and later married Lennox Robinson). Smith probably misunderstood the name which did not mean anything to her. Strangely enough, she does not figure anywhere in the writings of Professor Harper and his team.

Mrs. Yeats did, however, tell a similar story to Richard Ellmann, but in noticeably different words:

> Her idea was to fake a sentence or two that would allay his anxieties over Iseult and herself, and after the session to own up to what she had done. Accordingly on October 24, four days after their marriage, she encouraged a pencil to write a sentence... Yeats was at once captured, and relieved. His misgivings disappeared, and it did not at once occur to him that his wife might have divined his cause of anxiety without preternatural assistance. Then a strange thing happened. Her own emotional involvement—her love for this extraordinary husband, and her fears for her marriage—must have made for unusual receptivity, as she told me later, for she suddenly felt her hand grasped and driven irresistibly. The pencil began to write sentences she had never intended or thought, which seemed to come as from another world.\(^7\)

This, then, is the problem confronting a reader of the automatic scripts and of Yeats’s works that are based on it, particularly *A Vision*: How much of it is fake, how much of it is genuine, is there a mixture of both?
While Mrs. Yeats is quite ambiguous about it and was probably motivated by an overwhelming wish to save her marriage and develop a rapport in an area in which she knew her husband to be interested, Yeats seems to have believed that her messages were indeed meaningful transmissions of ideas of various discarnate personages or controls, not her own ideas. At this point a further question arises, namely what to make of Professor Harper’s massive edition of Mr. and Mrs. Yeats’s scribblings and of the philosophy underlying the project.

Before trying to formulate an answer I want to describe what these 1600 pages offer. At the same time I will comment on the editorial procedures of Harper and his team of collaborators, which I think are not always satisfactory. Volumes 1 and 2, edited by Steve L. Adams, Barbara J. Frielings, and Sandra L. Sprayberry, contain the transcriptions of 36 copy-books of automatic script, recorded between 5 November 1917 and 29 March 1920. Some copy-books may have disappeared. Regrettably, no records exist of the first sitting on 24 October 1917 (or more likely 27 October, as Harper points out in his introduction to Volume 1) and of all subsequent sittings prior to 5 November. A reader who would like to see a statistical breakdown of dates, number of sessions and questions, and approximate length of each sitting will search in vain; he will have to look into Harper’s 1978 edition of the first version of A Vision.8

The copy-book entries are printed in chronological order; they are headed by dates and places and frequently times. The editors point out that this information is usually supplied in Mrs. Yeats’s handwriting. This kind of self-conscious signposting does not strengthen belief in automatic writing controlled by remote operators. The entries are basically of two kinds, continuous and numbered questions and answers. A continuous entry may look, in part, like this:

Jealous—I am [break] No I am not [small gap] he is here too [break] Yes—He is trying to control me and influence my communications. (1:56)

It seems to me that the last sentence reflects Mrs. Yeats’s opinion, but it is impossible to disentangle the contributions of Mrs. Yeats and her husband, and the editors have not tried to do so. They could have told the reader, however, that the handwriting in the continuous entries is entirely Mrs. Yeats’s; or so one is led to assume. Nevertheless, these entries have in part the structure of dialog, and one wonders whether it was only Mrs. Yeats who did the writing. The example quoted above
is a simple one; there are longer passages, running over several pages (e.g., 1:436-39), which are so complex that one doubts the automatism of a piece of writing sustained over a considerable period of time.

The Q & A type entries (by far the majority) begin on 20 November 1917; according to Harper questions were recorded in one copy-book, answers in another (1:13). The numbering, simultaneously made by both partners, ensures matching pairs. Again, this kind of orderliness seems to me incommensurate with automatism. One may assume, although Harper does not say so, that all the questions were written by Yeats, all the answers by Mrs. Yeats. Unfortunately, this is not true. One's faith in the editors is shaken by looking at illustrations 14, 15, and 17 (2:421, 478, 517), where both Q and A are clearly in Mrs. Yeats's handwriting. Some queries are initialled GHY (1:87) or GY (1:65, 68, 70-73, 103, 110, 268), some are glossed by the editors to be in her hand (1:537, 2:545, 566), which again raises the question whether the answers are to be credited to a control of whatever kind or rather to the medium.

Matters are, however, even more complicated than that. In one of his other publications Harper reveals that by 5 November 1919 Mrs. Yeats recorded both questions and answers, placing Yeats's questions in parentheses.9 There is no indication whatever of this in the relevant entry of Vision Papers. The question of authorship becomes still more vexing when one finds the initials GY appended to some answers as well (1:194, 318, 323, 330). The editors add to the confusion by attributing the questions in illustration 3 (1:165) to Mrs. Yeats when they are in fact in Yeats's handwriting. The same mistake occurs in illustration 6 (1:255); the drawing was made by Yeats and not by Mrs. Yeats. To detect this error requires some ingenuity, because it is not immediately apparent where this drawing belongs. It refers to Question 25 on page 253 and Answer 54 on page 256, as explained by note 193 on page 530. I should add that the placing of the footnotes at the end of the book makes for cumbersome reading, the more so since there are no running titles over the notes to indicate to which page or section they belong. Surely, modern scholarly publishing can do better than that.

The Q & A entries pose further problems of attribution. Frequently they dissolve into continuous text (e.g., 1:80–84, 124–25, 152–53, et passim), but the editors have not found it necessary to indicate in whose handwriting these additions are. A simple system of diacritical signs (asterisks, etc.) would have been sufficient to ensure correct allocations.

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What were the Yeatses in fact conversing about? A great many entries are concerned with the system that developed into *A Vision*. Bit by bit, major concepts and arguments of this strange book shape themselves before the reader's eyes. Among others the ideas of self and anti-self, Anima Mundi, Daimon, primary and antithetical, beauty and sexual desire, the 2000-year and 28-day cycles and the phases of the moon, the attributions of various phases to particular individuals are bandied about. As long as the Yeatses are dealing with these subjects, the reader will not miss the attributions too much; it seems clear, however, that Mrs. Yeats's share in providing and formulating major ideas of *A Vision* is considerable and may at places be thought to surpass that of Yeats himself. Of Yeats's other works, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* receives the greatest number of glosses. The action of this play for dancers is clearly based on a complicated love-hate relationship between one man and three women, and one perceives behind these four characters the shadows of Yeats himself, Maud and Isæult Gonne, and Mrs. Yeats.

The other dominant subject of the *Vision* papers is, in fact, a very private one, the relationships between these four people and some other friends. Very little of this has found its way into the published book. Page after page one is confronted with marital and personal problems of the Yeatses, the wishes they have for themselves and their children (still unborn when the sittings start), their way of dealing with each other and striving for marital harmony. Some examples in the original spelling:

Q: "I have colaborated with Lady G[regory] (24) both intellectually & practically. So intellectual work is presumably possible with 12 & 24." A: "Imbalanced—you created she transferred—not real colaboration." (1:199)

Q: "Can you place Florence Farr from my mind?" A: "Medium never saw her but twice & I cant place her from that." (1:204)

And, most poignantly: "Why had I so wild a passion for M[aud] G[onne]?" (1:200). No answer is recorded.

Whenever the conversation turns to private or domestic matters and to direct confrontations of the two partners, the missing attributions are regretted most. The following example will illustrate this. The third session of 12 November 1917 begins as follows:

Before I begin to write you will be better now [if] you drink more & you should take more exercise—you were better before you came here because you took more walking [small gap] this is to the man not the medium [break] not more
than usual I think [break] If you are not better in a week you had better see a doctor [break] no (1:80)

Is this Mrs. Yeats nagging a recalcitrant husband or Yeats being solicitous for his wife's health? There is no telling.

Because of the wide variety of topics discussed in the automatic script the reader needs some guidance on his way through the maze. In this respect the editing is helpful throughout. Professor Harper has provided a 50-page introduction in Volume 1, which is in fact a succinct chronological summary of the subject matter covered in the first two volumes. Harper indicates correspondences or differences between the scripts and relevant passages in the published Vision of 1925. The reader is also helped by more than 90 pages of notes and detailed subject and name indexes in both volumes 1 and 2. Serious research on the Vision papers is not possible, however, without the help of Harper's previously published The Making of Yeats's "A Vision", two volumes with 750 pages of close analysis.10 It is only in this publication that one learns to one's surprise that large parts, questions as well as answers, of the sitting of 12 November 1917, quoted above, were written by Mrs. Yeats alone.11

Volume 3 of Vision Papers contains three distinct items. The first item comprises nine "Sleep and Dream Notebooks," edited by George Mills Harper and Robert Anthony Martinich. They cover the period 28 March 1920–21 March 1924 and are best described as research notes for A Vision. At the same time they are records of an intensely personal collaboration of husband and wife, at work on the great project, but also preoccupied with other things, such as the identity and mythical lineage of their first child. The editing of the "Sleep and Dream Notebooks" is a more satisfactory affair than that of the automatic script, since the writers are clearly identified. One has to bear in mind, though, that many passages in Mrs. Yeats's hand were in fact dictated by her husband. The production of the notebooks was a manifestly more deliberate affair than the sessions of automatic writing. Harper notes how Mrs. Yeats spoke in her "sleep":

While seemingly to Yeats to be asleep, she conversed with the Controls, sometimes in answer to a question from Yeats and sometimes in monologue while he recorded... Of course, there were no direct transcriptions of Sleeps as Yeats wrote after the experience or George recorded their discussion of the event. (3:2)

In one important case there is a considerable lapse of time between the event and its recording. A notebook entry of 8 October 1921 describes
and comments upon a session of automatic writing that took place on 23 February 1918, introducing the mysterious Anne Hyde, Duchess of Ormonde and Countess of Ossory, who died, according to Yeats, in 1685, but whose son would be born to the Yeatses. The son’s conception was evidently planned on the advice of Mrs. Yeats’s controls to take place three months after the February 1918 session. The son, however, turned out to be a daughter, Anne, born 26 February 1919, and the first session of automatic writing after the event, on 20 March, reads like a desperate attempt to account for the unlooked-for mystery (2:200-202). This episode shows like nothing else the great biographical value of Vision Papers. A substantial novel or drama could be written utilizing the material spread out in these three volumes.

As the notebooks progress they become more and more abstract, changing to typewritten summaries and overviews, by way of preparation for final codification in A Vision. The immediacy of experience fades; the sessions of automatic writing and recorded dreams have served their purpose and are discontinued. The same development can be seen in the second item in Volume 3 of Vision Papers, the transcriptions of two further notebooks, “recording passages directly from or suggested by” the automatic script (3:143). They cover the period November 1917–January 1925 and constitute further steps towards the composition of A Vision. Unlike Volumes 1–2 and the “Sleep and Dream Notebooks,” they contain very little personal material and are entirely devoid of the conversational quality and the human drama of the recorded sessions.

The final item in Volume 3 is an edition of the Card File by Margaret Mills Harper. The file, consisting of 782 cards, “represents a late stage in the ‘codifying’ of Vision materials, an elaborate organizational tool” (3:222). The cards are Yeats’s work; Mrs. Yeats did not write any of them. Some were even written after the publication of A Vision. The editor assumes that readers may want to use the file as an index to the ideas in the automatic script and the notebooks and has added cross-references to this material and a thorough index to the whole volume. She notes that several cards go beyond summarizing and indexing and add comments and value judgments. The cards also elaborate hints in the automatic script concerning the strange role that Yeats’s son Michael (born 22 August 1921) was to play. In Margaret Mills Harper’s words, his parents considered Michael “to be the Avatar or Messiah for the historical cycle just beginning” or the Irish Avatar and coming Master (3:226). Without in the least wishing to be disrespectful to the
considerable achievements of Yeats's daughter and son, one cannot help noticing that the communicators may have provided "metaphors for poetry" but no avatars and incarnations.

Which brings me back to the question of plausibility. W. B. Yeats himself is perhaps less of a problem to the reader and critic than Mrs. Yeats. He did not think of himself as a medium; he was by and large one of the believers, although, as Harper has pointed out elsewhere, a rather ambivalent one. When Yeats married he had behind him more than thirty years experience in various esoteric, parapsychologic, and spiritistic circles, including those that practiced automatic writing. It looks as if he really believed in automatic writing, but it is more important to realize that once he had received and understood the "messages," regardless of their provenance, he involved himself in the rather mundane activities of summarizing, theorizing, classifying, abstracting, indexing, revising, and, most importantly, of writing a remarkable body of conscientiously crafted imaginative literature. In other words, he knew when he had to discard or push into the background the spiritistic promptings in order to be true to his poetic profession. One should not forget, as Harper and his team seem to do occasionally, that Yeats also engaged in such unspiritual activities as writing literary criticism, directing a theater, and serving as a Free State Senator.

But Mrs. Yeats was, at the time of her marriage, no novice either. Judging by the accounts of those who knew her (she died in August 1968), she was an intelligent, resourceful, intuitive, and shrewd woman, well read in the same arcane literature as her husband and thoroughly conversant with spiritistic practices. She was certainly capable of "faking" automatic writing or, to use a more adequate description, of recognizing and to a large extent producing what her husband needed. What, after all, does she mean by being seized by a superior power? In the same way in which the composition of poetry can develop its own momentum and carry the writing poet along to unpremeditated ideas and words, an inspiration like Mrs. Yeats's may acquire a force of its own. In what seems to me a sensible, helpful and lucidly argued account of Yeats's occult thinking, Graham Hough's *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, Mrs. Yeats's automatic script is seen as part of occult teaching, "handed on secretly by oral tradition—a claim which it is equally difficult either to substantiate or to refute." The spirit guides may be as sacrosanct as the Lord who gave Abraham the doctrines of the Cabala, and as disreputable as Madame Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley who peddled arbitrary
symbolic concoctions. Where do we place Mrs. Yeats if we want to retain the claim of wisdom handed down orally?

When Hough addresses this question, he is careful to point out that "the things said by the unknown communicators were very much the same sort of things Yeats had been hearing and saying all his life." And so, in fact, had Mrs. Yeats for some part of her life, sometimes in the company of Yeats himself, several years before she married him. Still, Hough discounts any "conscious co-production" of the Yeatses; he refers to automatic writing as a "classic field for telepathic fusion" and notes: "Quasi-unconscious communal productions of this kind are numerous in the annals of physical research." These productions are credited to "psychic roots," common to the persons involved in these productions. Hough concludes, correctly, "that A Vision is not a transcription of the automatic writings" and "not a dictated text, it is an artefact... a work of imagination." One should not forget this distinction when trying to assess the nature of the automatic script; with the benefit of hindsight, i.e. through the perspective of the published artefact, a large part of the automatic script assumes an intentional character. Strangely enough, Mrs. Yeats, whose reluctance to talk about personal and spiritistic matters is well known, did comment on the nature of spiritistic communication. In her thesis, Susan Ramsay Dailey quotes an unpublished letter written by Mrs. Yeats to Yeats with reference to The Words upon the Window–Pane: "[S]pirits were present at a séance only as impersonations created by a medium out of material in a world record just as wireless photography or television are created: that communicating spirits are mere dramatisations of that record; that all spirits in fact are not, as far as psychic communications are concerned, spirits at all, are only memory." Mrs. Yeats's move from spiritism to psychology is remarkable and casts further doubt on the automatism of her writing.

At this point it might be instructive to cite some standard definitions of automatic writing, something that Professor Harper and his team have inexplicably neglected to do. According to Werner F. Bonin's Lexikon der Parapsychologie, automatic writing takes place under hypnosis, in trance, and in other states of impaired normality. The writer produces involuntarily and, as a rule, under coercion; the actual contents of his or her writing are generally alien to the personality of the writer. The handwriting is abnormal, in character entirely different from the ordinary writing of the medium, very small, in mirror writing, upside-down, or anagrammatic; the words may be in "pseudo-lan-
guages.” It follows that the writer’s normal personality is completely set aside; automatic writing expresses either the medium’s subconscious or an “extra-individual agent,” a control who may be dead or living elsewhere or is simply pseudonymous and discarnate. It seems to me that under these conditions Mrs. Yeats’s efforts do not qualify as automatic writing, except in some minor and negligible aspects such as mirror writing.

In the Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology, automatic writing is defined more liberally as

Scripts produced without the control of the conscious self. . . . Automatic writing and speaking necessarily imply some deviation from the normal in the subject, though such abnormality need not be pronounced, but may vary from a slight disturbance of the nerve centers occasioned by excitement or fatigue to hystero-epilepsy or actual insanity. When the phenomena are produced during a state of trance and somnambulism the agent may be entirely unconscious of his or her actions. On the other hand, the automatic writing may be executed while the agent is in a condition scarcely varying from the normal and quite capable of observing the phenomena in a critical spirit.

The last remark leaves room enough to accommodate Mrs. Yeats’s productions. But the article continues:

As a rule automatic speech and writings display nothing more than a revivifying of faded mental imagery, thoughts and conjectures and impressions which never came to birth in the upper consciousness. . . . Though the matter and style may on occasion transcend the capabilities of the agent in his normal state, the great body of automatic productions does not show an erudition or literary excellence beyond the scope of the natural resources of the automist.

The point of Mrs. Yeats’s “esoteric” communications, as far as the matter of A Vision is concerned, is surely that they become more and more explicit, work towards an integration of the system and show a considerable amount of erudition that is all her own. In a somewhat haphazard but noticeable manner they (and Yeats’s questions) tend to build on each other. The private and domestic communications are often refreshingly mundane, even when allusively expressed, and do not follow any of the definitions of automatic writing given above. One should not forget that there have never been any eyewitnesses of Mrs. Yeats’s automatic writing and her “sleeps.” She was adamantly opposed to her husband’s occasional suggestions to admit observers, and she had her will. I find it impossible to clearly understand a great many passages in the
automatic script without knowing anything of their circumstances of production, the behavior of the two collaborators, their states of mind, and the time involved in producing the questions and answers. The mediums cited in the *Encyclopedia of Occultism* performed either in the company of others or left detailed descriptions of the cataleptic fits in which they produced their scripts. It is about time to label Mrs. Yeats’s efforts, not automatic writing with its overtones of forced utterance, but something else altogether. “Inspired and imaginative cooperation” would be more appropriate, if indeed a concise description can be found for what seems to me a sophisticated and purposeful marital game on many planes of knowledge, emotion, feeling, sexuality, and shared preoccupations.

I do not understand why Professor Harper and his collaborators are so coy about this. His introduction reads strangely at places, especially when he writes of George Yeats and her “control” Thomas:

George was tired of writing and of Yeats’s intense round of activities. Speaking for her on 29 Mar, Thomas issued a stern warning. . . . Unwilling to write on 1 Apr, Thomas agreed reluctantly on the 3rd but complained of ‘too much lunar influence in the house.’ More likely, he was expressing George’s distaste for more discussion of Yeats’s *Moments*. (1:33)

Two days later George and Thomas steered the discussion to an idea that she wanted to establish clearly. (1:35)

Is Harper trying to pull the reader’s leg or is he unable to make up his mind? At no point in *Vision Papers* does he ask the obvious question of whether to trust the “automatism” of Mrs. Yeats’s writing, nor does he discuss the implications of the possible alternatives, i.e. pretended automatism or deliberate involvement and cooperation. At one point he seems willing to address the problem when he writes: “When George Yeats attempted automatic writing in Oct 1917, she had the example of Elizabeth Radcliffe in mind, but there were significant differences in format and purpose, as I shall point out” (1:5). To the reader’s annoyance he doesn’t; at least I have not been able to find any comparison between the automatic scripts of Elizabeth Radcliffe (a medium known to the Yeatses) and Mrs. Yeats in Harper’s introduction and notes. It would have been helpful to cite passages of automatic writing by Radcliffe or other mediums known to Yeats in order to obtain a clearer view of Mrs. Yeats’s products.

When I said that Mrs. Yeats’s beliefs are more of a problem than her husband’s, I should have added that the beliefs of Professor Harper and
his team are in even greater need of interpretation. An interesting, but hardly satisfying, solution is proposed by Margaret Mills Harper. She writes, also in another of her publications and much indebted to Roland Barthes and the philosophy of the demise of the author:

I will sidestep the question of whether spirits exist, invoking the convenient critical assumption that real personages are unrecoverable from texts anyhow; as “author,” like “poet,” is a fictional construct, so the supernatural beings of the AS [automatic script] have no status in extra-textual reality.22

Yeats, I am sure, would have classified his structuralist apologist among the frustrators who obstruct metaphor-providing spiritual communicators. George Mills Harper, however, has faced the problem of the plausibility of automatic writing, unfortunately again outside Vision Papers. In the preface to The Making of Yeats’s “A Vision”, he asks:

But what actually took place at the sittings? Were they patterned on the format of conventional séances? Did George go into the trance of the traditional medium? Did she use any of the usual paraphernalia of the séance room? Did she indeed write automatically? If so, was her entire production automatic? And, finally, how automatic, if at all, was Yeats’s part in the production? Some answers are clear, others mystifying.23

Harper’s answers are guarded. In view of the many atypical features of the sessions, he cannot but conclude that there was little or no automatism in the whole enterprise. He voices his doubts, but at the same time he insists on mystifying elements without telling us what they are.

To sum up: Yeats scholars will be immensely grateful for the Herculean labors of making so much interesting material available for inspection and analysis. They will also greatly appreciate much of the editorial framework, such as cross-references and indexes. They will nevertheless notice with regret that the editing could have easily been better than it is, and that it is frequently necessary to read other publications by the editors to form a more complete picture. Finally, they will be puzzled by the editorial philosophy that appears to be unable to come to terms with the strangeness of the texts and their modes of creation.
Notes


11. Ibid., 1:35–36.


16. Ibid., 62.

17. Ibid., 52.

18. Ibid., 63.

19. Dailey, 82–83. The undated letter is on file in the Yeats Archives at SUNY, Stony Brook; it is not quoted by Harper as far as I can see.

20. Werner F. Bonin, Lexikon der Parapsychologie und ihrer Grenzgebiete (Bern/München: Schers, 1976), 53–54; my paraphrase of the German original.

