

Myriad-Minded Man. George Russell (AE)
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[The broadcast may be heard at <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/22264965/>]

Poet, painter, playwright, politician, economist, editor, mystic. Labelled 'that myriad-minded man', George William Russell was born in Lurgan in 1867 and died in Bournemouth in 1935. He spent almost his entire life in Dublin, where he was a central figure in the cultural and public life of the city and country for more than four decades; he contributed more than any other individual to diverse aspects of Irish life during that period. The breadth of his expertise was all the more remarkable since he shunned formal education, declaring: 'I learned nothing at school being quite clever enough to evade knowledge by seeming to possess it.'

Russell met W.B. Yeats when both attended the Metropolitan School of Art. They became life-long friends, occasionally rivals. With a shared interest in the esoteric Yeats and Russell joined the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, whose aim was to unite the various religions of the world into a single spiritual movement. They were deeply influenced by the Hindu mystic Mohini Chatterjee who visited Ireland to establish its Dublin Lodge. Another visitor was its first President Colonel Olcott, one of whose lectures was entitled 'The Irish Fairies Scientifically Considered'.

As a youth Russell experienced frequent trances, waking dreams of heightened consciousness with visions of cosmic happenings. He believed that a strange self, indeed a multiplicity of beings, was trying to enter his body. He was employed as an accountant at Pims drapery store in South Great George's Street, a tiresome occupation from which his daily reveries provided alleviation. In 1897, recommended by Yeats, he took up employment with Horace Plunkett's Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, where his job was to establish farming cooperatives and credit banks around the country. He also edited the Society's journal, the *Irish Homestead*. He travelled through every county in Ireland talking to farmers about the advantages of co-operatives, discoursing on his favourite topics of pigs, poetry, poultry and metaphysics. One farmer requested a loan to buy a suit. When Russell pointed out this was not the best attire for farm work, nor the most agriculturally productive, he explained that it would enable him to marry a girl who owned two acres, a pig, and twenty-five pounds.

Russell acquired various monikers, including 'the hairy fairy', because of his bushy beard and voluminous head of hair. As *nom de plume* he himself chose 'Aeon', the Greek word for 'epoch', or 'age', a term used by the ancient Gnostics to refer to the eternal order of spirit.

Russell's printer had difficulty reading his writing and curtailed it to AE. Russell gladly adopted it as his appellation and from then on signed everything "AE".

Russell was universally loved. Patrick Kavanagh called him 'a great and holy man'. Frank O'Connor related: 'Russell would cheerfully get you a new doctor, a new wife, a new flat or a new job, and if you were ill, he'd come along and cook for you and nurse you. One evening when he came to my flat, and found I'd been ill for the preceding week, the tears came into his eyes and he said, "You should have sent for me. I could have cooked for you, I'm quite a good cook – I can cook chops, you know."'

In August 1902, AE arrived home to find a young James Joyce sitting on his doorstep in Rathgar. Having listened to his poems, AE pronounced 'Young man, there is not enough chaos in you to be a poet.' Joyce riposted that while it was intellectually interesting Theosophy was a refuge for renegade Protestants. Twenty years later AE was immortalised in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which takes place in the National Library. The discussion centres on the origin and meaning of art: 'All these questions are purely academic, Russell oracled out of his shadow... The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring. ... The deepest poetry of Shelley, the words of Hamlet bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas. All the rest is the speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys.'

In the episode Stephen Dedalus is asked about the pound borrowed from Russell when he was hungry. He theorises on the physical alteration of his body in the intervening period in the hope that he can be absolved from the debt: 'Wait, Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound.' But as a convinced Aristotelian Stephen recalls that what defines him are not the material molecules of his body but the spiritual form of his soul. He must pay up. Joyce gives us perhaps the most brilliant joke in literature – a complete sentence made up of the five vowels. Stephen submits: 'A.E.I.O.U.'