

THE CHAOS WITHOUT:
BACKGROUND FOR SPIRITUALISM AND OCCULTISM
IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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by
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IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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Thesis Statement

William Butler Yeats, through research in and personal experience with spiritualism and occultism, formulated his own philosophy of religion which permeates his works.

PREVIEW

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William Butler Yeats was an artist of great insight and a man who had a profound understanding of circumstances which were rarely perceived by many of his contemporaries. Yet, this same insight caused Yeats to initiate a search for a philosophy which could fill the void and alleviate the sense of religious insecurity which he experienced early in life. His search led him to an acceptance of a faith based on magic, mysticism, and the occult. Yeats, through research in and personal experience with spiritualism and occultism, formulated his own philosophy of religion which permeates his works.

During his early childhood Yeats had been introduced to supernaturalism through the fascinating stories about fairies and other supernatural beings which were told to him by servants and other local rustics.¹ The tradition in Ireland held that the gods were there before the Gaels came and they fought for possession of the country. The two parties at last came to terms and

¹Joseph Ronsley, Yeats' Autobiography (Cambridge, 1968), p. 45.

the gods withdrew into the hills, leaving the surface of the land to the invaders. Before the gods came there were darker powers, some of whom still survive. The land was felt to be alive with the spirits who had been dispossessed and they were known and respected. Their deeds in different places were remembered. One group of spirits, the Faeries, were good beings. They were dispossessed lords who had ruled before Christ came.²

Throughout Yeats' adult life he was very serious about faeryland. His deep interest in occultism and psychical research, fortified by what he had learned of Eastern philosophy, had confirmed his belief that scientific rationalism was not an inclusive actuality of the universe. In Ireland Yeats could talk to people who accepted the supernatural as part of their concrete experience. This fact made it easy for Yeats to take the faeries seriously. He felt that "the faeries are the lesser spiritual moods of the universal mind, wherein every mood is a soul and every thought a body."³

As a child, Yeats often thought he was experiencing first-hand the faeries' mischief through foreknowledge which he saw in dreams. He also experienced unnatural

²A. G. Stock, W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought (Cambridge, 1961), p. 6.

³Ibid., p. 14.

lights and noises which he attributed to the mischief of the faeries.⁴ This was the beginning of spiritualism and occultism in Yeats' life. Later on he would develop a more serious interest in occultism. Yeats' response to these early experiences, according to Reveries, was an attempt to accept them emotionally. He relied entirely on faith. Yeats had a natural religious inclination in spite of his father's skepticism, and his experiences with the faeries allowed him an object on which he could direct his faith. From the very beginning Yeats was looking not so much for a faith as for the formulation of a faith born within himself.

Yeats hated the scientific realists whose outlook turned all spiritual things into insignificance. During his youth he fancied himself as a Darwinian because he could not believe in Christianity. He saw in Darwinian theory a confirmation of his own vision of a great memory that lives through individuals. This also became part of the foundation for Yeats' belief in magic.⁵

Yeats' first experience in spiritualism, that introduced by the local Irish mythology, is perhaps one of the most important factors influencing his poetry. Yeats wanted to believe in the old myths in order to help establish his own personal faith. The people of faeryland

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁵Stock, op. cit., p. 78.

are often portrayed by Yeats in his early writings. One of the most important groups in faeryland were the Shee or Sidhe who live forever in Tir-na-n-Og, the Country of the Young.⁶ These immortals possessed many distinctly human qualities and often engaged in human activities. the Country of the Young was very much like the human world except that it was a type of heaven. There were no sorrows or worldly grief. It was a free land in which no puritanical moral restrictions existed. As Yeats' Oisín puts it:

But here there is nor law nor rule,
Nor have hands held a weary tool;
And here there is nor Change nor Death,
But only kind and merry breath,⁷
For joy is God and God is joy.⁷

The Shee were not thought of as gods, for they were not worshiped. However, they did have supernatural powers and they often played around in human affairs. For example, they would sometimes transport humans to their world, as was done in The Land of Heart's Desire.⁸

This play tells of the luring away of the soul of a newly married bride on May Eve, and of her death

⁶Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York, 1965), p. 45.

⁷William Butler Yeats, "The Wanderings of Oisín," in The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1956), pp. 358-359.

⁸Zwerdling, op. cit., p. 46.