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Yeats and the Invisible People of Ireland

By DOUGLAS HILL*

Perhaps it is unkind to Yeats, during the centennial of his birth, to bring up some of his rather embarrassing excursions into hermetic philosophy, theosophy, and fairy lore. Many critics see in his prolonged interest in psychic phenomena and folk superstition a forgivable but nevertheless unfortunate lapse in rational and poetic discrimination. At best they see it as a charming pretense, an engaging, tongue-in-cheek preoccupation, for surely no sophisticated man of the twentieth century, it is argued, could believe in such little folk, for example, as William Allingham writes of in his poem, "The Fairies":

We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather!

If belief in fairies and leprechauns is the mark of a feeble or untutored mind, then we must look elsewhere for an explanation of Yeats' apparent credulity, for surely his mind was not feeble or untutored. However, if Yeats' beliefs were not merely an eccentric susceptibility, we should undertake a sincere examination of just what they were.

In this paper I would like to mention briefly the positions from which we usually judge Yeats' propensity for the occult, then limit the discussion to his belief in the invisible people of Ireland, the *Sleagh Math*, or good people (so called to avoid incurring their wrath or enmity)—leprechauns, cluricauns, pookas, banshees, merrows, fir darrigs, etc. Furthermore, I would like to show how Yeats could be induced to accept the reality of these amusing, mischievous, and sometimes dreadful creatures.

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The attitudes from which we usually examine Yeats' occultism range from disapprobation to firm approval. Not a small number of critics have thought, as Auden does, that the occult was nonsense, an understandable consequence of the great turn-of-the-century argument between reason and imagination, but nevertheless something he accepted "not because it is true but because it is interesting."¹

But according to Arland Ussher, Yeats was indeed a charlatan, but a sort of legitimate one.

As Shaw was continually called a montebank, so Yeats was often called a charlatan, or a believer in charlatanry. And there was some plausibility in both descriptions. Only, as Shaw was content to be a fool for truth and a life closer to truth (as he conceived it), so Yeats, desired only to be a charlatan for the purposes of poetry.²

If we can accept Ussher's explanation, Yeats was playing a role, posturing for the sake of his poetry. But the almost unabated energy he poured into his studies of the esoteric, culminating in that peculiar work of imagination, *A Vision*, suggests a firm belief rather than an expedient affectation. This, of course, doesn't rule out the possibility that a practiced belief in the fantastic couldn't become, later on, a genuine commitment. It is one of the functions of poetry to transform skepticism into belief.

Richard Ellmann, in answer to the question of whether or not Yeats actually believed in his esoteric studies, has this to say:

It cannot be answered simply. As a man he sometimes believed in his system and sometimes did not; at first he had more confidence in the 'communication' of the automatic writing as spirits beyond space and time than he afterwards retained. As a poet he largely accepted his father's position that the poet must be free of dogma and formula. But he feared that the real reason for his reluctance to use the *Vision* in his verse might be his timidity, and therefore wrote a few poems explicitly didactic, based on the system, to salve his conscience.³

Had Yeats been a practicing charlatan there is little likelihood that he would have shown reluctance to utilize the *Vision* in

¹See W. H. Auden, *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. by James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York, 1950), p. 346.

²Arland Ussher, *Three Great Irishmen* (New York, 1957), p. 51.

³Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), p. 230.

his poetry. Indeed there is no simple answer. We suspect that Yeats' belief in the occult was intimately concerned with his poetry, and since we know so little about both the occult and creativity, their interanimation is little understood.

Before turning to what Yeats himself says about his belief in fairies, we might find it useful to define them. It should be noted that the word *fairies* is used generically to refer to the various forms of invisible people. A definition of them can be as elusive as the fairies themselves, but they do have characteristics about which there is general agreement. They are ethereal creatures, changeable like mist and clouds, invisible most of the time; a sort of ultra-refined substance or, as it is sometimes put, congealed air. They are usually seen as a race of tall, handsome, frolicsome people or short, wretchedly ugly people with dispositions to match. Although they can be found everywhere—in hawthorne bushes, lakes, castles, bogs, and glens—their own land is Tir-na-N'og, a country where time does not exist and where the inhabitants remain forever young.

Robert Kirk, who described the Gaelic fairies in *The Secret Commonwealth*, 1691, called them "the subterranean people" or "the abstruse people."⁴

Lady Gregory describes the *Sidhe*, or fairies, this way:

The Sidhe cannot make themselves visible to all. They are shape-changers; they can grow small or grow large, they can take what shape they choose; they appear as men or women wearing clothes of many colours, of today or of some old forgotten fashion, or they are seen as bird or beast, or as a barrel or a flock of wool. They go by us in a cloud of dust; they are as many as the blades of grass.⁵

Unlike many grim, brooding manifestations of the occult, fairies are vital, lively, and colorful. There is even "something of timid affection between men and spirits. They only ill-treat each other in reason; each admits the other to have feelings."⁶

Of these people, Yeats says in "The Celtic Twilight": "No matter what one doubts, one never doubts the faeries."⁷ Whether this is the residual superstition from Yeats' childhood

⁴Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland Collected and Arranged by Lady Gregory: With Two Essays and Notes by W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1920), p. 265.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London, 1959), p. 7.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 106.

speaking or Yeats himself is difficult to determine. The question for many critics remains: was Yeats capable of distinguishing between volitional belief and a possible hoax that irrepresible and fugitive memory sometimes plays on the mature mind? Virginia Morre in *The Unicorn* recounts one of Yeats' early experiences with fairies in Sligo.

Visiting his Middleton cousins at Rosses Point near Sligo, he often entered the cottages roundabout, and it was there he first heard the quaint doings of the 'wee folk.' Like many Irish, a cousin Lucy Middleton had 'second sight.' She described amazing experiences. Willy too had heard mysterious sounds and seen mysterious sights. It did not occur to him to doubt the invisible.⁸

It is not entirely clear whether a belief in 'the occult' preceded or followed a belief in fairies in Yeats' adult life, whether both were consequences of a predisposition for numinous experiences. In other words, there is no assurance that an explanation of Yeats' search for illumination in the occult is consistent with his affirmation of the existence of fairies. The two are related but not necessarily concomitant.

An acquaintance with the peculiar Irish logic at work in these matters would be helpful in understanding the basis for Yeats' belief. For example, in "The Celtic Twilight" Yeats tells of several Connaught Fenians who apparently convince a group of townspeople of the reality of a fairy pig by showing them that it isn't there.⁹ The reasoning seems to be thus: "Of course it's a fairy pig; you can't see it now, can you?" Irrefutable logic indeed. Again, a woman in County Dublin replies to Yeats' question concerning the fishermen's knowledge of mermaids: "Indeed, they don't like to see them at all."¹⁰ I obtained the following information in Rosmuc, County Galway—a tiny Gaelic speaking parish. A local schoolmaster told me that many of the local inhabitants were apprehensive over his safety because his house was built on a fairy path. The fact that the schoolmaster had lived there for several years without observing any wondrous phenomena failed to controvert their belief.

This logic might appear all the more wondrous when it is noted that a belief in fairies and fairy tales often existed side

⁸Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn* (New York, 1954), p. 9.

⁹Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁰W. B. Yeats (ed.), *Irish Folk Stories and Fairy Tales* (New York, n.d.), p. xi.

by side with an equally devoted belief in Christianity, without either absorbing or transforming the other.

The rationalist immediately spots the absurdity of the quaint logic in these stories. Unqualified belief cannot precede the evidence for it. But in these matters it does, because belief, for these people, is to fairy lore what evidence is to rationality. The framework of assumptions or laws in each system governs the limits of its application. Rules of evidence in the fullest sense are inadmissible or simply irrelevant in dealing with the little people. Belief cannot be disproved without repudiating it as an experience, but experience with the elusive world of the fairies is part of the very texture of Irish life. Belief, then, is emotional and cannot be acquired through the usual channels of study; rather the reverse is the case: knowledge is acquired through belief. It might be anachronistic to believe in fairies, but it isn't necessarily the mark of intellectual inferiority to seek in irrationality a substitute for an emotionally faltering society. Completeness of form is not judged by its submission to reason, but by its power to please or to elicit wonder. Therefore, a thing is complete only when it evokes belief, or it is miraculous only when it is confirmed by the imagination. A belief in fairies is taken for granted. It is an assent without apology or explanation. One believes in science because it works; it gets results. One believes in fairies because they animate life and release latent images of reality that lie somewhere in the deep inaccessible regions of the mind.

A landscape animated by invisible presences heightens the observer's aesthetic response. The difference between the history of a locality and the fairy lore is that the history is dead, the events have happened; but the fairies are still alive and can only be kept alive by belief, even if the belief contradicts rational judgment. Furthermore, contradiction itself does not require explanation. Some things are revealed through or because of it—just as mystery does not always plead for clarification, because clarification would destroy its holy persuasion. It can be seen that, for the Irish, belief is based on the depth of what is *not* known. When the possible becomes probable, man's spirit is somehow diminished.

Yeats did not have to define these nuances of belief because he was already a typical Irish visionary. The fairies were

part of the Irish racial imagination that he inherited. The fact that he was a poet and found these irrational predispositions useful does not argue that he decisively chose to augment his fertile imagination with myths and folklore—though certainly there was conscious effort in this direction, particularly in his attempt to reintegrate ancient tradition in contemporary life and literature.

Yet it would hardly do to think that Yeats lied about his belief in the invisible people even to insure the continuity of Irish tradition, or even for the sake of establishing a harmony of forms. In the first case, belief based on deception leads to discovery, repudiation, and disorientation. In the second case, belief based on convenience lacks conviction; hence, it is no belief at all but arbitrary and mechanical pretense-like ritual without content or like Pascal's severely rational argument for an acceptance of God. To Yeats, unity was of utmost importance. "He never gave up hope of bringing together myth and fact into a new religion, or, as he called it, a new 'sacred drama' of Unity of Being."¹¹ Myths cannot elicit unifying belief if they have lost their sacramental value; that is, if their attempt to harmonize a diversity of forms is based solely on intellectual discrimination.

Yeats felt that fairies, everywhere and in everything, prevented a dissociation of the conscious and the unconscious and further led to a harmony of reality. The crucial question was not whether the fairies actually existed but whether a belief in them would unify man with his environment, harmonize the past with the present, the rational with the irrational. Of course, a belief in fairies *per se* would not confer all these benefits on an individual, but the attitude toward reality that makes a belief of this kind possible would. Fairies, in addition, symbolized Yeats' acceptance of a wider world of epiphenomenal creatures and his refusal to make any more concessions to a science bent on trivializing every belief not based on rigidly prescribed rules of evidence. L. A. G. Strong says:

Believing that all material objects were 'representations' or 'dramatisations' of a reality which did not end with their destruction, and that their form was decided, more or less arbitrarily, by human perceptions, he naturally drew less distinction than do most men between what everyone sees,

¹¹Ellmann, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

which we call reality, and what only a few see, which we call illusion.¹²

Convinced that the purely physical and the purely psychical are artificial, Yeats was free to believe in fairies because he had disburdened himself from the rational foundation upon which any objections could be raised. Whether his belief in fairies was neurotic or merely childish, there seems to be substantial evidence that it was genuine. Had it not been, there is doubt that his mythic poetry and occult investigations could have been sustained for the greater portion of his life. At any rate, it is more important to try to understand Yeats' belief than to explain it away or to apologize for it.

According to Ernst Curtius:

Man creates tools with which to work matter. Hence his intellect is adapted to the world of solid bodies and is most successful in the sphere of mechanics. But just as life is safe under the guidance of instinct, so it is endangered in the sphere of the intellect. If intellect encounters no resistance, it can threaten the existence both of the individual and of society. It bows only to facts, i.e., to perceptions. If 'Nature' wished to take precautions against the perils of the intellect, she would have to produce fictitious perceptions and facts. They have the effect of hallucinations, i.e., they appear to the mind to be real beings and can influence conduct. This explains the simultaneous existence of intelligence and superstition. "Only intelligent beings are superstitious." The fiction-making function ("fonction fabulatrice") has become necessary to life. It is nourished by the residuum of instinct which surrounds the intellect like an aura. Instinct cannot directly intervene to protect life. Since the intellect reacts only to perceived images, instinct creates "imaginary" perceptions.¹³

Yeats the poet and Yeats the visionary were one and the same. His poetry and his belief both led to a suspension of time as in dreams and in myths, where reality endures and facts as we know them slide away into the irrecoverable past.

¹²See L. A. G. Strong, "William Butler Yeats," *Scattering Branches*, ed. by Stephen Gwynn (New York, 1940), pp. 209-210.

¹³Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953), p. 8.