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A Critical and Interpretative Study
of Yeats' "Supernatural Songs"

William Butler Yeats began "Supernatural Songs" in 1933, and finished the twelve-poem set in 1934 (Vendler), just two years before his death in 1936. The poem set explores, among other things, the similarities and differences between pagan and Christian ideologies. The primary definition in the Oxford English Dictionary Online of "paganism" is:

A religion other than one of the main religions of the world; *spec.* a non-Christian or pre-Christian religion, esp. considered as ancient or primitive. Also: the religious beliefs and practices of such a religion; the state or condition of non-Christian people; heathenism.

In "Supernatural Songs," Yeats combines Christianity and paganism until the lines between the two are blurred. The mixing of pagan and Christian ideology in literature is nothing new. Ten years ago, I wrote a paper about the fusion of Roman mythology and Christianity in Dante's *Inferno*. However, Yeats not only mixes paganism with Christianity, in doing so, he openly challenges Christian theology—in particular, the doctrine of the Trinity. Helen Vendler states that "[c]ritics have avoided [the poems] [. . .] in part because of their deliberate rejection of orthodox Christian doctrine [. . .]." Yeats may or may not have had a good understanding of Christian theology. However, Yeats was not a theologian—he was a poet. Yeats exercised artistic license when he wrote "Supernatural Songs." It is *his* fantasy world, the product of *his* imagination, and he can make it anything he wants it to be—without adhering to any of the rules

of the “real” world. Yeats does, however, mix paganism and Christianity and openly disparage Christian theology in “Supernatural Songs.”

The first question I asked when I read “Supernatural Songs” was “who is Ribh”? Yeats often used historical or mythological characters in his creative work—both in his poetry and in his plays. However, Ribh is an original character invented by Yeats. Robert Ure, citing Yeats from “A Full Moon in March,” states that “Yeats tells us that [Ribh] is an imaginary hermit and theologian conflated with an aged Yeats, who is not austere but irritable and 'coarse', like the 'wild old wicked man' in the poem of that title” (Ure 39). Ribh apparently evolved from *Oisín*, who “argues with the apostle of Ireland in the *Agallamh na Sanorach* and in Yeats's earliest narrative *The Wanderings of Oisín*” (Ure 39), which was published in 1889 (Yeats, *Oisín* 351), forty-five years prior to “Supernatural Songs.” If indeed Oisín and Ribh are one and the same, as Ure suggests, the character matured with Yeats. Harold Bloom states that “Ribh is Yeats’s most complex *persona*, because through him the poet tries to grasp more than can be held, at once, by any man: a completeness that would be supernatural” (408).

The first poem of the set, “Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn” is a story about Ribh’s visit to the graves of two lovers. Ribh has a vision in which he sees the spirits engage in some sort of “intercourse” that generates enough light for Ribh to read a book. T. K. Dunseath summarizes the original source myth:

The original Gaelic poem tells of the tragic lovers, Baile and Aillinn, fated by Druids never to wed in this life. Each dies upon hearing a story of the other's death. When they are buried, trees spring from their graves, a yew from Baile's, an apple from Aillinn's. At the end of seven years, poets and prophets cut down the trees and make them into poets' tablets, on which they write all the love stories that they know. A long time afterwards (A. D. 166), these two tablets are brought to Art, king of Erin. When he holds them face to face, each tablet springs upon the other, and it is impossible to separate them. The Druidic prophecy is now fulfilled; the tragic lovers enjoy perpetual union, symbolized by the engrafting of the poetical records. (400)

In the last line of the poem, Ribh's book is called a "holy" book, which I assume to be a Bible since Ribh is a Christian hermit (Ure 39). I noticed that the book is simply called a "book" in line 2, and then changed to "holy book" in the last line. Dunseath interprets this to mean that it is just an ordinary book until the "light of generation" illuminates it—thus making it "holy" (413). I disagree with this interpretation; according to the poem, Ribh is "in the pitch-black night [w]ith open book" when the observer or observers discover him, indicating that Ribh is already perceiving the light.

When the dead lovers engage in "intercourse" that does not require physical bodies in line 15, it is not "sexual" intercourse, which would require the appropriate male and female sexual organs. This intercourse was something far more profound—a spiritual joining. However, he refers to the lovers as "angels." The OED traces the etymology of the English word "angel" back to the Hebrew word for "messenger of Jehovah," which is translated into Greek in the Septuagint as *αγγελος* (angelos). The word passed into Latin, then into the modern languages, and eventually English. Yeats knew exactly what the word "angel" meant when he blended it into a pagan myth. Yeats apparently borrowed the idea of "angelic intercourse" from Swedenborg, but was probably influenced by Blake or Milton as well (Bloom 408). I am certain that it did *not* come from the Bible.

"Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn" is a mixture of pagan and Christian elements, but does not yet denigrate Christian theology. This first poem in the set, however, foreshadows some of the poems that follow that do denigrate Christian theology. The pure spiritual union of two souls described in the first poem evolves into something more traditionally sexual in the second poem.

The second poem of the set is “Ribh denounces Patrick.” The original title, “Ribh Prefers an Older Theology” (Ure 38), infers a theology older than the ministry of St. Patrick (ca. 389-461), a Christian missionary who planted the church in Ireland (Cairnes 123-24, 171). The “older theology” in Ireland was Celtic Druidism (Cairnes 123-24).

The first two lines of the poem begin with an overt attack of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, calling it an “abstract Greek absurdity.” The doctrine of the Trinity, or Godhead, is *not* an invention of St. Patrick, or the Greeks—it comes from the Bible. There are numerous biblical evidences of the doctrine; I will cite only one:

[. . .] it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased (sic). (Luke 3:21-22)

The poem states, in lines 2 and 3, that “all natural or supernatural stories” reflect a trinity that instead of being “wholly masculine” is instead divided into entities of “[m]an, woman, [and] child.” This idea is apparently common to many pagan ideologies; for example, Shamsul Islam interprets Yeats’ poem as Hindu ideology:

It is obvious, though not specifically stated, that [Yeats] rejects the Christian Trinity in favour of the Hindu Trinity, which does include the female principle. The post-Vedic Hindu Triad is composed of two male gods, Vishnu (the preserver), Shiva (the destroyer) and the female earthly goddess, Shakti (the Mother Goddess). (287)

Ribh then declares that just as mankind, animals and even insects reproduce by sexual union, so does the Godhead. Since Ribh has already rejected the orthodox Christian Trinity, anything that follows in the poem represents “something else,” either genuine paganism or the product of Yeats’ imagination. The pure spiritual union of the lovers in the first poem is now reduced to simple sexual reproduction in the second poem. The poem states, in line 5, that “Godhead begets Godhead,” then in line 11, that “God [. . .] is but three.” How could both be

true? How could the Godhead reproduce and still remain three? Bloom states that the poem “ends in a *non-sequitur*, since Yeats does not even hint what it is about the complete love of the Godhead that saves it from endlessly repeating the copying of itself” (410).

The third poem, “Ribh in Ecstasy,” carries the humanization of the Godhead a step further. In this poem, Ribh declares that the Godhead not only engages in sexual intercourse, but that it enjoys “sexual spasm”—orgasm. Ribh has degraded the pure spiritual union of two souls to sexual reproduction and now to carnality. Note that it is in this poem that the word “sexual” is used for the first time. The intercourse described in the first poem is not the same as the third—joy and pleasure are not the same thing. Ure states that “the experiences recorded are very different from each other” (39).

The fourth poem “There” is a bit more abstract than the three previous poems. In lines 1 and 2, the image of “[t]here all the barrel-hoops are knit” is contrasted in perfect parallel prosody to “[t]here all the serpent tails are bit”—a reference to the “Ouroboros Serpent [which] appears on ancient Egyptian papyri dating back as far as the sixteenth century B.C. (Schuler 4). I did not perceive a connection to Christianity, until I read Vendler’s argument:

This poem, like others in the sequence, becomes a parody of the usual eschatological discourse, e.g., that of Revelations: “[. . .] and there shall be no night *there*; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light” (emphasis added) (Rev. [. . .] 22:[. . .]-5). Yeats's eschatology is at the same time naturalized (barrel-hoops are knit), mythologized (the Ouroboros biting his tail), hermetic (the gyres converge in one), and astronomical (all planets drop in the sun). By being drawn from so many traditions of language, this eschatology renders itself linguistically impure, unlike religious eschatologies inscribed within one code.

The word “there,” as used in the section of the Revelation, which Vendler cites, refers to a prophecy of a *place*—“a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1) where “[. . .] there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former

things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Vendler asserts, and I agree, that Yeats is parodying the Christian scripture in the poem “There.”

In the fifth poem, “Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient,” Ribh returns to his open criticism of Christian ideology. The poem is divided into four stanzas, with six lines in each stanza, each of which has the same rhyming scheme. Vendler deems this poem “the most Yeatsian poem of the sequence.”

Ribh may still be the narrator, but Yeats himself is revealed more prominently than in the previous poems of the set. Yeats, through Ribh, expresses the futility of seeking or studying love, since it is beyond human understanding, and that he prefers hatred, which he is able to understand and control. Note that the term “God” is used for the first time, instead of “Godhead,” which is abandoned for the balance of the poem set. The word “God” as it appears in this poem, as a name that is capitalized, is clearly referring to the Christian God.

In the third stanza, however, the pagan bi-gendered identity concept creeps in again, this time in Ribh himself, who refers to his own soul using the reflexive feminine pronoun “herself.” Just as the Godhead was attributed with a feminine component in the second and third poems, now an earthly man is given the same attribute.

The third stanza ends with line 18: “Hatred of God may bring the soul to God.” This statement is arguably the most absurd non sequitur I have ever encountered. It certainly does not reflect Christian ideology in any way. I doubt that the idea that the way to get closer to *any* deity or deities by *hating* him, her, it, or them conforms to any system of religion found anywhere on the earth. Not even Ribh, from what we know of him, would believe such a thing. This idea must come from Yeats’ own imagination; it is as if the Ribh mask is ripped off, revealing the

Yeats underneath. After this poem, Ribh is never mentioned by name again for the remainder of the poem set.

In the last stanza of the poem, feminine pronouns are again used to represent Ribh's (or Yeats') soul. Note also that the words "master" and "he" are capitalized—a Christian convention that indicates that the words represent God.

In the sixth poem, "He and She," Yeats continues the story of his female soul as it travels with the moon, which engages the pagan convention of attributing the moon with a female identity. Instead of the usual pagan interaction of the female moon and the male sun, which is shadowed only in the background, we find interaction between Yeats' female soul with the Christian God, who is aggressively pursuing "her." Vendler states that Yeats "represents [. . .] the soul's approach toward sexual merging, and yet her recoil from it to personal identity [which is] that 'perpetual virginity of the soul' that is 'the tragedy of sexual intercourse' [. . .]."

Yeats removes any doubt that he is referring to the Judeo-Christian concept of God in line 8: "I am I, am I," is an inverted rendering of God's own name as revealed in the Old Testament:

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you (sic). (Exod. 3:13-14)

The New Testament also identifies Jesus with the name:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, *I am*. (emphasis added) (John 8:56-58)

Vendler considers the seventh poem "What Magic Drum?" to be "the strangest poem that [Yeats] ever wrote." Apparently, the different manifestations of sexuality between deity and

mankind from the previous poems have produced a child, the final member of Yeats' pagan Godhead. A Christian image is insinuated in line 3: "Drinking joy as it were milk upon his breast"—an allusion to the image portrayed in paintings, of the baby Jesus nursing at Mary's breast. However, Yeats' "child" is not the Son of God, but a "beast" from some kind of primordial forest. Vendler offers another interpretation:

Yeats imagines himself as God—a God part beast, part human, part divine—who embraces Primordial Motherhood in himself and engenders a suckling child, a cub with a glimmering belly to be licked by the God's "sinewy tongue" even as that same tongue moves sexually over the limbs and breast of Primordial Motherhood.

The eighth poem, "Whence had they Come," returns to the more traditional prosody of twelve lines, arranged in six pairs of rhyming couplets. With more traditional prosody comes more traditional content—or so it seems. The extremes of beast and God fall into the background leaving only mankind. It appears that Yeats has stepped outside of the madness and into more linear thought. However, the underlying theme of the cruelty of sexuality is still present. Yeats speaks of himself in lines 5 and 6:

A passion-driven exultant man sings out
Sentences that he has never thought;

In lines 11 and 12, the poem refers to the conception of Charlemagne, which Bloom considers "one divine annunciation too many, even for Yeats [. . .]" (416).

The ninth poem, "The Four Ages of Man" is another group of rhyming couplets. Vendler interprets the poem literally to mean what the text indicates—that "he" is at first a baby who struggles for mobility until he learns to walk, then an adolescent who falls in love, then a man who abandons love for intellectual reason, then "resists destiny in the spectre of inevitable death, but at the stroke of midnight [. . .] will die, and God will win, in the fourth and last battle." This interpretation makes perfect sense, and that is what worries me. The previous eight poems were

ambiguous in one way or another; would Yeats suddenly be so coherent and logical? Yeats has thrown us the ultimate curve, by making us look for something twisted that simply is not there.

This poem has less connection to the set than any of the others; however, the suggestion that death is a defeat imposed by an adversarial God is a subtle reminder of Yeats' dislike of the Christian God, which is found in the other poems. Christianity considers death to be not a defeat, but a victory:

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Cor. 15:54-55)

The relative coherency of the ninth poem was apparently temporary, since the tenth in the series, "Conjunctions," returns to abstraction. Bloom states that the "first couplet [is] founded on the horoscopes of Yeats's children" (416). Such a reference to Greco-Roman astrology, in line 1, is contrasted to a reference to "mummy wheat" in line 2, which refers to "Egyptian wheat recovered from mummies' graves [. . .]" (Vendler). The second couplet begins with a reference to Jesus' death on the cross, and ends with "[o]n breast of Mars the goddess sighed," which invokes an image of Mars and Venus in repose after sex. Vendler comments that "Jesus is represented as simply one cultural counter or anthropological index among many. This placement is emphatically anti-supernatural, in the usual Christian sense of the word."

The eleventh poem, "A Needle's Eye," appears simply to refer to the passage of the "stream" of time. Bloom states that "[t]he stream here is all phenomena, the needle's eye the microcosmic and spatial analogue to the moment of moments, the pulsation of an artery" (417). However, there is a probable connection to Jesus' statement that "[i]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25), in which case the "needle's eye" would stand as a barrier to progression toward God.

The twelfth and final poem of the set, “Meru,” is the poem “which closes the sequence [but] was written first [. . .]” (Vendler). The poem, which is presented as a Shakespearean sonnet, rejects not only Christianity, but also western ideology and civilization in general. Shamsul Islam interprets the poem as Yeats’ embrace of eastern religion:

In this song Yeats [. . .] finally declares that the vision of ultimate reality can only be attained through the bleary eyes of a yogi meditating on Mt. Everest or Meru. Yeats affirms his faith in Indian philosophy and bids goodbye to the West. (289)

Although not named in the poem, we are reacquainted with Ribh, or at least a symbol of Ribh, one of the “[h]ermits upon Mount Meru or Everest” described in line 9. If this is the case, it turns out that Ribh is not a Christian hermit after all. Vendler offers an explanation:

In looking away from Christianity for a religious model that did not depend on an afterlife, Yeats had found, not for the first time, Indian Buddhism. He had the literary wisdom to know that he could not impersonate a Buddhist monk, and so *he persuaded himself* that early Irish Christianity must have had something in common with Buddhism (emphasis added).

The last two lines of “Meru,” therefore the last two lines of “Supernatural Songs,” the rhyming couplet of the sonnet, announce the defeat of the Christian God:

That day brings round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone.

In conclusion, Yeats was apparently dissatisfied with orthodox Christianity, and found it “insufficient” for his spiritual needs. He poetically sought an alternative to Christianity, but not wishing to discard it entirely, chose instead to re-invent Christianity to conform more closely to his personal ideology. Yeats therefore invents Ribh, who represents an alternate Christian theology that exists only in Yeats’ imagination. In the fifth poem, “Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient,” Yeats finds that Ribh can no longer represent Yeats’ true sentiment of hating everyone and everything, including God—so Yeats is forced to abandon his alter-ego for the balance of the poem set, only hinting of him in the final poem “Meru.”

The poem set is unified by several factors, although each factor is not present in every poem. The theme of some type of male-female union is present in all but the fourth, eleventh, and twelfth poems. Pagan imagery is present in all but the fifth, eighth, ninth and eleventh poems. Christian imagery is present, often subtly, in all but the fourth and eighth poems, and Christianity is never presented positively in any of the poems.

The overall unifying theme, however, is that orthodox Christianity is somehow lacking, and that it would be acceptable only if modified with elements of paganism and Yeats' own imagination. In "Supernatural Songs," Yeats mixes paganism and Christianity and, in doing so, openly disparages Christian theology.

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