

## Off with the Fairies: Yeats, Ethnography, and Identification

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Above all, [Yeats] was determined to present folk-stories as ‘an ancient system of belief’, echoing the implications of anthropologists like E.B. Tylor and Frazer . . . WBY argued that psychical researchers and anthropologists were confronting the same reality.

—R.F. Foster  
*W.B. Yeats: A Life*

It has gone without saying that W.B. Yeats was not a social scientist, at least not in the strict, disciplinary sense that most contemporary literary critics assume must govern the modern social sciences. During his fifty-plus years in Irish public life, however, Yeats produced a great deal of commentary on Irish culture. Particularly since the beginning of the postcolonial theory boom in Irish Studies, Yeats’s views of Irish culture have frequently been characterized as anything from wishful thinking to deliberate and pernicious distortions of reality, often with the explicit charge that Yeats effectively reinforced the logic of colonial domination by imaginatively substituting an Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy power structure in the place of the English colonial power structure. Applying the insights of contemporary ethnographic theory to Yeats’s work on Irish culture will help balance the record, and will make it clear that Yeats’s approach to Irish cultural study resembles the prevailing ethnographic practices of his era far more than Yeats’s critics have recognized thus far.

In his 1993 essay “The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self” Edward M. Bruner refers to Susan Rodgers’ argument that “many amateur ethnographers in many areas of the world are writing about their culture, and it would be useful for us ‘to begin to collect such texts, interview their authors, and analyze such folk sociologies.’”<sup>1</sup> In Robin Ridington’s essay “A Tree That Stands Burning: Reclaiming a Point of View as from the Center” Ridington summarizes James Clifford’s explanation of the difference between modern disciplinary ethnographic practices and earlier forms of ethnography: “By translating experience into textual form, Clifford wrote, ‘ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority.’ He suggested that ‘a rather different economy of ethnographic knowledge prevailed . . . before [the discipline] had successfully established the norm of the university trained scholar testing and deriving theory from first-hand research.’”<sup>2</sup>

These remarks apply to Yeats’s career-long ethnographic work from both sides. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Yeats began fieldwork among the peasants of the west of Ireland, accompanying Lady Augusta Gregory on excursions to record folklore, songs, and accounts of Irish culture by visiting the cottages of the west’s rural residents. Insofar as Yeats and Gregory lacked any formal training, this was the sort of amateur ethnography Bruner and Rodgers discuss. Their view, however, extends only so much credit to amateur ethnographers. Bruner and Rodgers clearly regard *amateur* as the more important part of *amateur ethnographers*. Their view, bluntly put, is that *real* ethnographers (those with disciplinary know-how and appropriate credentials—identified as *us*) should interview these amateurs, subject them to professional scrutiny, and produce professional ethnographic accounts of the amateurs’ ethnographic efforts.

The perspective expressed by Ridington and Clifford is entirely different, in that it legitimates what Bruner and Rodgers regard as a diminished form of ethnographic inquiry. Bruner and Clifford remind readers that ethnography’s current disciplinary requirements and practices are fairly recent inventions; that historically the boundaries separating ethnography from other forms of knowledge have been quite permeable when they have been there at all; that “a rather different economy of ethnographic knowledge” did not exclude the findings and interpretations of amateur ethnographers or diminish them by treating them as mere native phenomena, fit objects for *real* disciplinary inquiry. Readers who are familiar with Yeats’s life-long interest in the occult may suspect that this interest somehow makes it difficult, if not impossible, to think about Yeats and his work in ethnographic terms. In fact, this interest in the supernatural is at the heart of Yeats’s ethnographic work and thought. Moreover, regardless of how odd it seems to twenty-first century readers, this fascination with the supernatural marks Yeats as a man of his era rather than as some lone crackpot. Seamus Deane says that “Yeats had no idea or attitude which was not part of the late-Romantic stock in trade. He was different in the fervour of his convictions, not in their form.”<sup>3</sup>

That this is so obviously an overstatement gives one a sense of the hostility with which some recent critics—particularly Irish postcolonial critics—have approached Yeats. Deane’s remark is a reminder of the influence of the “poor silly Willie” view of Yeats, in which critics have tended to scoff at Yeats’s promiscuous spiritualism, emphasize his intellectual debts to English Romanticism, and argue that—because Yeats was addled by supernatural beliefs and a pernicious Englishness at both conscious and subconscious levels—Yeats and the authentic Ireland of his time fit together like a fish and a bicycle. Although the assertion that Yeats was very much a representative man of his age would seem to preclude this sort of scoffing at his now-unfashionable beliefs, this has not been the case; the scoffing has continued unabated by any sense that the beliefs of many contemporary thinkers might appear slightly ridiculous in a hundred years or so.

Yeats, it is well known, frequented séances, participated in Madame Blavatsky’s Golden Dawn movement, believed in reincarnation, and accorded a great deal of weight to Irish folk belief in spiritual manifestations and supernatural phenomena. Most literary critics have appeared to be somewhat flummoxed by these aspects of Yeats’s life and many have avoided them altogether. What is often left out of discussions of Yeats’s varied beliefs is that they were not entirely atypical in an era of revolt against determinism or scientism, and that such occult beliefs abounded in the polar opposite environments of Yeats’s life. London and the west of Ireland were, it seems, both beset by fairies, spirits, and other supernatural forces. It is helpful to think of Yeats’s beliefs against the background of what George Stocking describes as “the more general ‘Victorian crisis of faith’ to which Darwinism was a major contributing factor.”<sup>4</sup> Stocking identifies the prevalence of spiritualism in Victorian culture: “For some Victorians, the spiritualist movement was the post-Darwinian analogue to phrenology, providing a bridge back from a soulless secular meliorism toward the spiritual world they had lost.” Stocking explains that the renowned English anthropologist E.B. Tylor investigated spiritualist goings-on by attending séances and meeting with mediums.

Also, Stocking adds, “For some Victorians spiritualism offered a surrogate for the emotional security provided by unquestioned religious belief.”<sup>5</sup> In a discussion of the resistance to the idea of evolution, Stocking says, “Although it reflected changes in the colonial situation and domestic ideological contexts of anthropology, the antievolutionary reaction was part of the more general ‘revolt against positivism’ in European social thought. It involved a reassertion of the role of ‘irrational’ factors in human social life, and a critique of the methodological and epistemological grounding of prevailing scientific determinisms.”<sup>6</sup> Arnold Krupat’s commentary on the relationships between ethnography and literature will help connect the broad social commentary provided by Stocking with a more specific examination of Yeats’s ethnographic literary work. Krupat mentions a category of writing that falls somewhere between disciplinary professional ethnography and general creative writing:

what I will call ethnographic fiction, a literary genre with ostensibly wider public appeal than the (developing) genres of professional ethnography. Here the example of Adolph Bandelier’s novel *The Delight Makers*, published in 1890, serves as an important precursor. In his preface, Bandelier wrote that he ‘was prompted to perform the work by a conviction that however scientific works may tell the truth about the Indian, they exercise always a limited influence upon the general public; and to that public, in our country as well as abroad, the Indian has remained as good as unknown. By clothing sober facts in the garb of romance I have hoped to make the “Truth about the Pueblo Indians” more accessible to the public in general.’<sup>7</sup>

It is easy enough to see the similarities between works such as Bandelier’s and Yeats’s ethnographic literary projects. It is important to note, however, that Yeats’s accounts of Irish culture typically did not appear in the guise of a unitary fictional narrative invented by an outsider (as Bandelier’s novel clearly did), and therefore involved more determined truth claims. Krupat’s analysis also invites a return to the subject of Yeats’s oscillating habits of thought. In a discussion of “Franz Boas, whose name . . . is synonymous with the scientization of anthropology”<sup>8</sup> Krupat explains an aspect of Boas’s thought and work that has perplexed anthropology scholars for years, an aspect that is very similar to Yeats’s oscillations:

the famous Boasian hostility to theory and to laws . . . Boas also seems to have given many of his students and readers a strong impression that he was implacably opposed not only to theory but to all statements of phenomenal lawfulness, that for him anthropology was the sort of inquiry that best limits its view to the singularity or particularity of cultural phenomena. Nonetheless . . . one can also cite essays in which Boas asserts that the statement of general laws is, indeed, the ultimate aim of anthropology, as of any science. These latter assertions permit one to wonder whether there is not, at a deep level of Boas’s thought, a commitment to sustaining contradiction, a refusal of closure as somehow a violation of the way things ‘really’ are: a refusal, of course, that denies the

possibility of science. This seems all the more likely when one considers that even in Boas's explicit remarks approving the possibility of scientific generalization, he insists again and again on impossible conditions for such generalization, for his contention is that laws will legitimately be 'discovered' only when 'all the "facts" are in.'<sup>9</sup>

Krupat asks, "can such a conception be compatible with an anthropological *science*? Boas characteristically responds yes—and no?"<sup>10</sup> Krupat later declares, "It is a simple matter to quote Boas on both sides of what seem to me antithetical and—in the form in which they are stated—irreconcilable positions . . . Boas's 'attitude' is such as to offer firm support for both sides of a great many questions."<sup>11</sup> In short, poets are not the only contradictory thinkers. The contradictory aspects of Yeats's work and thought do not in and of themselves mark his work and thought as less serious or coherent than Boas's. With this in mind, it becomes evident that reading Yeats's writings on Irish peasant culture in terms of ethnography makes a good deal of sense. Doing so, in fact, makes one aware of how many Yeats scholars have recognized the ethnographic or anthropological elements of his work and thought and passed over these elements with relatively little commentary. R.F. Foster, Yeats's official biographer, says of Yeats, "He was a more stringent editor [of his ethnographic accounts] than is often realized. 'I have . . . written down accurately and candidly much that I have heard and seen, and, except by way of commentary, nothing that I have merely imagined.'" Foster is quick to point out that Yeats was not simply a man of science: "In connecting fairy belief with anthropological researches, he hinted at a scientific rationale; but more important, in his view, was its therapeutic function and literary inspiration."<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand the belief system underlying much of what Yeats thought about Irish culture, one must understand the Anglo-Irish antithesis, a key concept explained by Declan Kiberd in one of the italicized "interchapters" of his monumental *Inventing Ireland* (1995). According to Kiberd's explanation of the Anglo-Irish antithesis (it is important to note that this hyphenated binary opposition should not be confused with the hyphenated hybridization implicit in discussions of Yeats's Anglo-Irish identity), Ireland functions as England's other, a country and a culture that supposedly embodies all that John Bull's island does not. Not all critics agree that accepting the terms of the Anglo-Irish antithesis was inherently self-defeating for Irish thinkers. Deborah Fleming, for example, reads Yeats's engagement with the Anglo-Irish antithesis as an example of reverse discourse, a series of rhetorical counter-moves by which Yeats takes over the terms of the paradigm—originally freighted with negative assumptions about the relative inferiority of Irish culture and character as compared to English culture and character—and converts them to positive values: "His textualizing of Irish myths, say, tales of bewitching 'Sidhes' and of noble heroes and poets, should be interpreted as the poet's own counter-reading of the denigratory and stereotype-ridden colonial reading of Irish subjectivity and culture."<sup>13</sup>

Despite the plausibility of interpretations such as Fleming's, much recent Yeats criticism has portrayed Yeats as deeply misguided in his cultural beliefs. Seamus Deane, one of the best-known critics of this sort, emphasizes the English invention of the Anglo-Irish antithesis: "Matthew Arnold introduced "the 'Celtic' idea as a differentiating fact between Ireland and England."<sup>14</sup> This is a significant claim with respect to Yeats's ethnographic consciousness and with respect to ethnography in general because of the fact that Arnold had lacked in-depth first-hand experience of Ireland and Irish culture. This fact drives home the importance of the shift in ethnographic practice that was underway during Yeats's lifetime. The era of so-called "armchair anthropology"—an era in which philosophizing, theorizing, and proclaiming things about cultures often went on unencumbered by any direct contact with the cultures or peoples in question—was drawing to a close, and ethnographic writing was increasingly (although not always completely) founded on the first-hand field experiences of the people who wrote the ethnographic accounts.

Although Yeats's ethnographic interests inform his poetry, they are most evident in his prose, which addresses them at greater length and in greater detail. One could, for example, locate and explain the ethnographic elements in a poem such as "Meditations in Time of Civil War," but for the most part Yeats's poems do not foreground the figure of the ethnographic participant-observer in ways that reward extended close readings. Yeats's prose, on the other hand, repeatedly does just that. Yeats's fascination with ethnographic approaches to Irish culture is undoubtedly the reason that so many of the review essays he wrote in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century deal at length with books that are clearly ethnographic in orientation. These essays also show Yeats's oscillations of thought, along with his willingness to engage in the kind of obviously self-contradictory arguments that Krupat identifies as characteristic of Boas, even in Yeats's pursuit of ethnographic understanding and accurate accounts of authentic Irish culture. In one such essay, Yeats takes an author named Emily Lawless to task for using a mental model or tactic that will be quite familiar to readers of Yeats's poetry and prose:

[Lawless] has accepted the commonplace conception of Irish character as something charming, irresponsible, poetic, dreamy, untrustworthy, voluble, and rather despicable, and the commonplace conception of English character as a something prosaic, hard, trustworthy, silent, and altogether worshipful, and the result is a twofold slander. This bundle of half-truths made her . . . magnify a peasant type which exists here and there in Ireland, and mainly in the extreme west, into a type of the whole nation.<sup>15</sup>

At bottom, Yeats objects to Lawless's reliance on or reflection of the Anglo-Irish antithesis. This objection is entirely puzzling in that Yeats subscribes wholeheartedly to the Anglo-Irish antithesis himself. Moreover, Lawless's treatment of west Ireland peasants sounds very much like Yeats's own treatments of similar inhabitants of the rural west, who came to stand in Yeats's work and thought for the essence of the nation.

Yeats displays this same sort of self-contradictory thinking, also directly in association with ethnographic accounts, in a review essay and a later reference to its subject matter. The essay, originally printed in the *Scots Observer* March 30, 1889 and titled "Irish Wonders," is largely devoted to discrediting the Irish-American author D.R. McAnally (Yeats renders his name as "M'Anally" throughout this essay) and the renderings of Irish folk culture in McAnally's *Irish Wonders: The Ghosts, Giants, Pookas, Demons, Leprechawns, Banshees, Fairies, Witches, Widows, Old Maids, and Other Marvels of the Emerald Isle* (1888). Yeats undercuts McAnally's claim to expert knowledge by pointing out his status as an American: "In his feeling for the old country there is a touch of genuine poetry. But the Ireland he loves is not the real Ireland: It is the false Ireland of sentiment." Yeats continues his attack on what he identifies as McAnally's suspect ethnographic methods and results, lacerating the author for vague references such as "'a knowledgeable woman' of Colooney, Sligo. The matter discussed is a fairy ball, 'seen by her grandmother's aunt.'" Yeats goes on to quote a long description of the fairy ball rendered semi-phonetically in order to represent the Irish accent of the native informant, and continues by declaring his own familiarity with the area in question:

The writer of this article [meaning Yeats himself], though he has not gathered folk tales in Colooney, has done so within two miles of it . . . but never has he heard anything like this . . . By saying it was the poor 'knowledgeable woman's' grandmother's aunt that saw the fiddling [fairies], Mr. M'Anally means, we suppose, to suggest the old calumny that nobody but somebody's distant relation ever saw a spirit. There is probably not a village in Ireland where a fairy-seer or two may not be found.<sup>16</sup>

Here we see Yeats exercising his own ethnographic authority, trumping the Irish-American author with his fieldwork and his local knowledge. (In fairness to Yeats, he also calls attention to a clear fabrication that casts the rest of the account into doubt: McAnally reports that the woman in question was following a fire-fly; Yeats points out that there are no fire-flies in Ireland.) This speaks to one of the problems surrounding ethnographic accounts—namely the difficulty of refuting or disproving an ethnographer's claims. Short of discovering an error such as inserting a non-native species in a purportedly native account, how is it possible to prove that something did not happen, or that a native informant did not say something in particular?

Yeats regularly attempts to preempt such questions by way of appeals to one sort of cultural authority or another. At times, ironically enough, he even enlists the cultural authority of the English system that he intends for Ireland to oppose, as in a further rebuke of McAnally in the American version of the same review (published in the *Providence Sunday Journal* July 7, 1889):

He is wrong in saying that the Banshee never follows Irish families abroad. There are several recorded stories of its doing so. One, for instance, I forget where, of an Irish family settled in Canada who are still followed by their Banshee. And one of the most distinguished British anthropologists told me that he has not only heard, but seen it, in a Central American forest. It came to announce the death of his father, who had just died in England . . . He had since then twice seen and heard it in London.<sup>17</sup>

Yeats is clearly buttressing his account of things by deploying the rhetoric of social prestige. That this rhetoric appears completely unfounded only emphasizes the point. Although Yeats takes others to task for vague references, his own references here (as is often the case throughout his prose) are somewhat less than precise; likewise, his nameless name-dropping brings the prestige value of the prominent British anthropologist into the equation. In this, Yeats's story acquires a veneer of authority and scientific legitimacy, which would doubtless improve the odds that the account might be taken seriously by non-Irish readers. The British anthropologist's experiences with the Banshee are, at this remove, both somewhat comical and quite practical in terms of promoting Yeats's cultural agenda. By exporting the Banshee to Canada and Central America, these accounts implicitly claim that this element of Irish folk culture has significance far beyond the island of Ireland. It is not clear from Yeats's account whether the English anthropologist had any family connection to Ireland whatsoever.

Regardless, by bringing the Irish Banshee to the seat of colonial power—turning the disquieted Irish spirit loose in London, apparently asserting that its power extends to people who are not even Irish—the account argues for and enacts a kind of victory of Irish folk culture over English logical positivism. Yeats's series of accounts implicitly argues for the broader relevance of Irish culture and, by extension, the relevance of Irish ethnography: If Irish folk beliefs have power or presence beyond Ireland, they are important, and they merit serious study. Surprisingly, Yeats directly and publicly contradicts himself by holding McAnally up as an exemplar of ethnographic accuracy both before and after attacking him in print. Yeats cites McAnally as a reliable source in his own *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and in an 1890 essay on Irish fairies.<sup>18</sup>

Yeats also asserts his own ethnographic authority in the long ethnographic sections of the 1901 essay "Magic," in which he relates several accounts of Irish peasants' beliefs in and encounters with supernatural phenomena, as well as his own experiences talking with such peasants and conducting personal research into such phenomena by way of séances. Although a brief summary such as this is sufficient to establish the general ethnographic interests of the essay, it is only through closer attention to specific word choices that the basic mechanisms of Yeats's rhetoric of authority become visible. Yeats, quite simply, establishes his ethnographic authority in part by taking it for granted. He presents himself as an expert who has done extensive field work, and who therefore has the ability to refute the accounts of others because of his special first-hand knowledge of the local culture: "I myself could find in one district in Galway but one man who had not seen what I can but call spirits, and he was in his dotage. 'There is no man mowing a meadow but sees them at one time or another,' said a man in a different district."<sup>19</sup> Yeats also strengthens his position by way of repeated references to his personal experiences such as "I once saw"<sup>20</sup> and repeated references to his field notes such as "I find in my diary."<sup>21</sup> These kinds of rhetorical moves effectively establish Yeats's ethnographic authority, allowing him to explain Irish culture to outsiders (and, to a certain extent, to Ireland itself):

[Irish] peasants still believe in their ancient gods who gather in the raths or forts . . . and they believe . . . that the most and best of their dead are among them. The ancient gods, or spirits, styled 'The Others' by the peasants take most children who die. They prefer the young but they take the old also. They prefer the good and pious, and do not like the old and cross people. The 'living' often meet the 'others' and recognize among them friends and neighbours.<sup>22</sup>

This statement is an example of what Edward Callan (quoting W.H. Auden's elegy for Yeats) calls the "Irish vessel" Yeats, an example of Yeats's writing that presents him as a container of essential Irishness, which readers may then imbibe. A quotation from Yeats's "A General Introduction for my Work" presents an extreme manifestation of the self-effacement inherent in this element of Yeats's work: "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing."<sup>23</sup>

Although Callan does not make any move toward ethnography, this aspect of Yeats's accounts of Irish culture clearly has a strong relationship to his ongoing negotiation of his position as an Irish cultural authority. The longer example above reminds readers that Yeats was interested in establishing his cultural authority both within Ireland and with a wider, non-Irish reading public. The explanation of the word *raths* is superfluous for Irish readers; it is a direct concession to the needs of non-Irish readers, who are unlikely to have encountered the term. The significance of the Irish vessel aspect of Yeats's work becomes more evident through a comparison to the aspect of Yeats's work that displays (either directly or via references to notes and diaries) the particulars of Yeats's first-hand experiences studying Irish culture. Unlike Yeats's aforementioned references to his personal experiences and his field notebooks, this Irish vessel account of Irish peasant belief downplays the presence of the observing, recording non-native presence. The ethnographer effectively becomes invisible or at least transparent in this account. In accordance with Yeats's statement above, the ethnographic voice is not that of an individual, but rather a disembodied spokesperson for the crowd—a delivery system for an explanation of cultural beliefs as cultural facts.

Yeats's early prose collection *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) also downplays the distinctions between natives and an observing ethnographic other, but via a different set of narrative strategies, as Yeats's introduction makes clear:

I have . . . written down accurately and candidly much that I have heard and seen, and, except by way of commentary, nothing that I have merely imagined. I have, however, been at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries, go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine.<sup>24</sup>

One of the results of this approach is that *The Celtic Twilight* repeatedly presents faery belief as a fundamental aspect of Irish life by way of statements that ostensibly report the experiences of Irish peasants and sound very much as if Yeats himself uncritically accepts them as accurate. This leads to moments when Yeats speaks with a kind of self-assurance and willingness that, given the circumstances, appears presumptuous by today's standards: "No matter what one doubts, one never doubts the faeries, for, as the man with the Mohawk Indian [tattooed] on his arm said to me, 'they stand to reason.' Even the official mind does not escape this faith."<sup>25</sup>

Much of *The Celtic Twilight* is comprised of stories that, as Yeats's aforementioned comments suggest, are difficult to distinguish as Yeats's own or as faithful transcriptions of the accounts of Irish peasants. Most could be either, insofar as they leave out first person pronouns and instead report what happened to someone else, inevitably unidentified by any substantive information, in a series of limited-omniscience narratives. A section called "The Old Town" is a notable exception to this tendency. Writing in 1902 in what is clearly his own narrative voice (as opposed to the mediated voice of a peasant), Yeats described an event that he thought might have been a first-hand encounter with Irish faeries:

I fell, one night some fifteen years ago, into what seemed the power of faery. I had gone with a young man and his sister—friends and relations of my own—to pick stores out of an old countryman; and we were coming home talking over what he had told us. . . . I cannot think that what we saw was an imagination of the waking mind.

Yeats goes on to describe seeing a series of inexplicable bright spots of light moving across the road, on the horizon, and across a nearby river. He strengthens his account by mentioning that "after that for some days came other sights and sounds, not to me but to the girl, her brother, and the servants. Now it was a bright light, now it was letters of fire that vanished before they could be read, now it was a heavy foot moving about in the seemingly empty house."<sup>26</sup>

This is significant as a moment when Yeats attempts to extend his ethnographic authority beyond that of an authoritative collector of peasant beliefs and experiences, thereby staking a claim to some first-hand knowledge of faery phenomena. Regardless of whether he intended to tell nothing but the truth, the means by which he does this are somewhat questionable. By this point in *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats has already blurred the lines between his narrative persona and the mediated voices of Irish peasants. He explains this above as a form of truth-telling, a narrative technique apparently intended to present readers with some unvarnished truth that they will evaluate on its own merits. Although it seems to set things at the readers' feet, this maneuver also transfers total narrative power to the author, whose narrative voice encompasses or appropriates all the other speaking voices because of the lack of distinction between them and because the Irish peasants, with the notable exception of the man with the Mohawk tattoo, are not identified in anything but very vague terms. Because the girl, her brother, and the servants remain anonymous (Yeats does not even provide the kinds of clues that would likely let biographers discover their identities), Yeats's account of their experiences carries much of the rhetorical force of a disciplinary ethnographic account, but without the kinds of particulars that would verify or strongly suggest its verifiable adherence to the related experiences of particular people.

At Lady Gregory's request, Yeats wrote essays and explanatory notes for Gregory's *Visions And Beliefs In The West Of Ireland* (1920) a book on which Yeats and Gregory collaborated extensively, doing field work together and taking down verbatim notes of conversations with residents of the west Ireland villages they studied. Gregory was sufficiently aware of the collaborative nature of the fieldwork that she delayed the publication of the book for some time in order to give Yeats time to contribute two lengthy ethnographic essays ("Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" and "Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-Lore") and to complete his extensive notes for the volume. These essays and notes demonstrate both the depth of Yeats's ethnographic interest in Irish peasant life and an attention to detail that would surprise the numerous critics who have (inadvertently reproducing the terms of the Anglo-Irish antithesis) characterized Yeats as a dreamy idealist with little patience for hard facts.

In identifying and explaining peasant beliefs such as "Tir-na-n-og, the country of the young, the paradise of the ancient Irish. It is sometimes described as under the earth, sometimes all about us, and sometimes as an enchanted island" and relating peasant accounts of supernatural phenomena such as "Supernatural strength is often spoken of by the people as a sign of faery power,"<sup>27</sup> Yeats creates clear distinctions between his ethnographic self and the individuals who express these beliefs to him. The vagueness of Yeats's accounts—that is, the fact that they typically do not identify native informants by name—seems less problematic, and certainly less unusual, in light of Stocking's identification of this type of vagueness as a common trait of early ethnography, particularly the kinds of nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts that would have exerted the most influence on Yeats's sense of how cultural inquiry should proceed:

“[M]uch of its data had been collected in loosely descriptive natural history or purely anecdotal terms (‘a gentleman in Bombay assures me . . .’).”<sup>28</sup>

Yeats’s glosses of peasant beliefs do not differ significantly from the kind of interpretive writing one would expect to find in ethnographic accounts at least up until the middle of the twentieth century. Yeats condenses and summarizes elements of the subject culture’s belief systems, as indeed any ethnographer practically must in order to smooth data into a coherent and relatively concise narrative. Despite this type of authorial control, Yeats’s explanatory notes indicates that he paid attention to the details of the native informants’ accounts to a greater degree than critics have often assumed:

In my record of this conversation [reported by Gregory in one of her essays] I find a sentence that has dropped out in Lady Gregory’s. The old man used these words: ‘And I took down a fork from the rafters and asked her was it a broom and she said it was,’ and it was that answer that proved her in the power of the faeries. She was ‘suggestible’ and probably in a state of trance.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after his inclusion of the missing sentence, Yeats adds a different kind of explanatory remark: “I have been several times told that a great [supernatural] battle for the potatoes preceded the great famine. What decays with us seems to come out, as it were, on the other side of the picture and is spirits’ property.”<sup>30</sup> This passage typifies the easy shift from reporting native accounts (“I have been several times told”) to stating the beliefs contained in accounts as simple facts without recourse to native informants—that is, stating beliefs in a way that makes them seem to be Yeats’s own, or at least beliefs Yeats shares. This type of characteristic shift has no doubt contributed to the critical tendency to think of Yeats as gullible, and perhaps a bit ridiculous, and to disregard much of what he claimed about Irish culture. Such a dismissive critical move is more difficult to justify when one realizes the extent to which Yeats apparently acted in good faith as a mouthpiece for rural subjects. This is not to say that every cultural comment he made over the course of his lengthy public career should now qualify as accurate reporting, but it is important to recognize the fact that a number of his claims perhaps should, insofar as they follow the kinds of procedures that characterized the ethnographic practices of the day.

Yeats’s persistent interest in distinctly Irish supernatural phenomena calls to mind a phrase common in Ireland today: *off with the fairies*. The phrase approximates the way a number of recent critics have regarded Yeats and also resonates with Yeats’s career-long interest in the supernatural folk beliefs that gave rise to the phrase. The phrase functions in contemporary Irish conversation not as an expression of literal belief in the supernatural, but as a less than serious reference to the supernatural folk beliefs of previous generations: The phrase is something of a good-natured put-down or an indication that the person labeled as *off with the fairies* is not being logical, that he or she is talking nonsense or behaving strangely. (The phrase is sometimes applied to victims of Alzheimer’s disease, and in such cases the phrase is more poignant than humorous.) One of Yeats’s lengthy notes to *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* indicates his fascination with the Irish folk belief in fairy abduction:

The most puzzling thing in Irish folk-lore is the number of countrymen and countrywomen who are ‘away’. A man or woman or child will suddenly take to the bed, and from that on, perhaps for a few weeks, perhaps for a lifetime, will be at times unconscious, in a state of dream, in trance, as we say. According to the peasant theory, these persons are, during these times, with the faeries, riding through the country, eating or dancing, or suckling children. They may even, in that other world, marry, bring forth, and beget, and may when cured of their trances mourn for the loss of their children in faery. This state usually commences with their being ‘touched’ or ‘struck’ by a spirit. The country people do not say that the soul is away and the body in the bed, as a spiritist would, but that the body and soul have been taken and somebody or something put in their place so bewitched that we do not know the difference.<sup>31</sup>

Yeats’s references to “countrymen and countrywomen” simultaneously gesture toward rural Irish people and forge a linguistic link between rural identity and national identity, an assertion of essential Irishness that surely did not escape Yeats. The quotation marks around *away* are a subtle ethnographic touch; they present the word as an authentic expression of the belief, and they also distance Yeats from the belief somewhat. Yeats’s reference to “a spiritist” is—like his earlier translation of the word *raths* for the benefit of non-Irish readers—a means of identification with a wider, non-Irish audience, in this case an audience that would be familiar with the idea of a more generic form of contact with the supernatural and hence more at home with the idea of a spiritist. In this passage, Yeats’s use of the first-person plural pronoun is especially noteworthy, both in its importance to this passage and in its significance for Yeats’s ethnographic thought in general: “as we say” and “so bewitched that we do not know the distance” identify Yeats with this wider, non-Irish (presumably largely English) readership rather than with Irish readers who would likely have no need of the explanatory touches Yeats provides.

In order to explain the local methods of trying to remedy fairy abduction, Yeats makes an appeal to a kind of cultural relativism, thereby engaging once again with the developing rhetoric of ethnographic thought both on a local level and on a global level:

The missionaries expel them [the fairy substitutes] in the name of Christ, but the Chinese exorcists adopt a method familiar to the west of Ireland—tortures or threats of torture. They will light tapers which they stick upon the fingers. They wish to make the body uncomfortable for its tenant. As they believe in the division of body and soul they are not likely to go too far. A man did actually burn his wife to death, in Tipperary a few years ago, and is no doubt still in prison for it. My uncle, George Pollexfen, had an old servant, Mary Battle, and when she spoke of the case to me, she described that man as very superstitious. I asked what she meant by that and she explained that everybody knew that you must only threaten, for whatever injury you did to the changeling the faeries would do to the living person they had carried away. In fact mankind and spiritkind have each their hostage. These explanatory myths are not a speculative but a practical wisdom. And one can count, perhaps, when they are rightly remembered, upon their preventing the more gross practical errors. The Tipperary witch-burner only half knew his own belief. ‘I stand here in the door,’ said Mary Battle, ‘and I hear them singing over there in the field, but I have never given in to them yet.’ And by ‘giving in’ I understand her to mean losing her head.<sup>32</sup>

This passage is worth quoting at length because it exemplifies important aspects of Yeats’s ethnographic practice, some of which figure prominently in standard modern ethnography: indications of doubt; a privileged relationship with a native informant; sidelong references to other cultures (to establish a sort of moral equivalence between cultures in order to avoid creating the impression of a freak culture or an aberrant society); and the explanation or interpretation of a local belief system as a sort of text. Yeats reads the system and explains it in a non-literal way the local believers presumably would not. Note also the Yeatsian cultural nationalism, the implicit moral in Yeats’s explanation of where the man went wrong: If the man had known his culture more thoroughly, we are to believe, the tragedy would have been averted. There is also some ambiguity about the *them* in the field, although it is apparently the fairies Mary Battle heard singing. By framing her comment the way he does, Yeats makes it clear that he does not regard simply believing in fairies (or hearing them sing) to be equivalent to losing one’s head.

Foster ascribes an almost imperialist motivation to Yeats’s interest in Irish fairies, explains how the supernatural could function to legitimate Yeats’s claims to Irish cultural authority and identity, and reminds readers of the historical connection between ethnographic pursuits and occult studies:

Yeats remade an Irish identity in his work and life. In the process he reclaimed Ireland for himself, his family and his tradition. He began by asserting a claim on the land, particularly the Sligo land, through its people: the discovery of folklore and fairy belief. Difficulties arose: he could, for instance, be attacked as incapable of interpreting Ireland religiously, as he was a *Protestant* mystic. But folklore and anthropological interests, besides being often connected in the 1890s with theosophical or occult investigations, opened a way into nationalism via ‘national tradition (as Scott and others had shown long before). It could also demonstrate the links between Yeatses, Pollexfens and the ‘real’ Irish people around them.<sup>33</sup>

Although this explanation of some of the functions of Yeats’s ethnographic interest in Irish supernatural phenomena is entirely convincing and, I believe, entirely correct, Foster then commits a rare misstep, asserting that “It was necessary for Yeats passionately to adhere to the idea that Sligo people did believe in fairies and talked about them all the time. So they did, of course—to children, as Lily Yeats remembered. The difference was that her brother expected to go on being talked to about them.”<sup>34</sup> Foster follows this with an endnote reference to a reference in Yeats’s sister Lily’s scrapbook, a mention of household servants telling the children supernatural stories. Although Foster’s tone suggests that right-minded County Sligo adults did not believe in fairies, his partially paraphrased endnote quotation of Lily’s remarks indicates nothing of the sort: “The Merville servants ‘played a big part in our lives. They were so friendly and wise and knew so intimately angels, saints, banshees and fairies.’<sup>35</sup>” These remarks make no suggestion that the adults thought of the stories as untrue or as juvenile fare. A grim reference to an aforementioned event involving earnest belief in fairies proves, in fact, that being off with the fairies could in Yeats’s time mean something very different than its contemporary meaning—something very different than a term of ridicule that could accurately be directed at Yeats for his fascination with fairy phenomena—and that it could be deadly serious in the most literal sense. Yeats’s reference to the Tipperary man who burned his wife to death prompts a brief editorial note by William H. O’Donnell:

“Michael Cleary was convicted of manslaughter in July 1895 and sentenced to twenty years of penal servitude for burning his wife, Bridget, to death, thinking that she was a fairy changeling. Convicted with him were her father, her aunt, four of her cousins, and two other neighbors.”<sup>36</sup> Bridget Cleary’s tragic death, which Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (2000) examines in great detail, should certainly be recognized as more than a convenient piece of supporting evidence, but I refer to it here because of its relevance to Yeats. The gruesome facts of the event and the simple number of people convicted along with Michael Cleary testify to the persistence and seriousness of belief in fairy abduction in the Ireland of Yeats’s time. In hindsight, this seems an extreme example of what we might think of as cultural division. The belief system of the countrymen ran headlong into the judicial system of turn-of-the-century Ireland, with the result being criminal convictions for the participants in Bridget Cleary’s killing. Although as a British colonial holding at the time Ireland had its justice system imposed from without, there has of course been nothing like an accommodation of this kind of belief in the government of independent Ireland.

In Yeats’s general explanation of fairy abduction, the pronoun identification allies Yeats with a more cosmopolitan readership rather than with the people he describes or with Irish citizens in general. Yeats used similar maneuvers frequently, from signing essays he wrote for newspapers in Ireland and America “your Celt in London” to more specific identifications with the people of the west of Ireland, particularly Sligo. As is evident from these examples and from aforementioned cases of Yeats presenting drastically different versions of himself, Yeats’s identifications with cultural groups and identity categories shifted according to the ethnographic self he wanted to present in a given argument and the kind of ethnographic authority he wanted to establish. I propose to call these ethnographic rhetorical strategies *identifications*, a term that, in its similarity to *identification*, comprehends the fictionality of Yeats’s ethnographic identifications and the subtlety with which he constructed them.

Ethnographic identification is a relatively unrecognized and unstudied component of Yeats’s cultural authority. The tendency in recent years, especially among postcolonial critics, has been to discredit Yeats broadly by emphasizing aspects of his background and his thought that make him seem a colonial agent in Irish drag. This has for some time been the critical counterpart to the confusion of Yeats with Ireland. Yeats’s Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy lineage, his periodic outbursts of frustration and outright disgust with the Irish public, and his fascination with elements of fascism have drawn the most hostile critical attention, and not without reason. Further attention to Yeats’s identifications will contribute to the ongoing conversation about Yeats’s roles in Irish culture by calling attention to an oversight in this postcolonial criticism of Yeats. Focusing more on the extent to which Yeats attempted to ground his views in actual Irish cultural beliefs—many of which he studied and recorded in accordance with the prevailing ethnographic practices of the day—will balance the postcolonial attacks on Yeats by future critics and the so-called de-Yeatsification cabal<sup>37</sup>. I say *balance* rather than *refute* because the issues raised by such critics should not be disregarded, nor should my approach be misread as a simplistic apology for Yeats, who at times invented what he could not discover, and at times expressed anti-democratic opinions that are impossible for any contemporary critic, no matter how sympathetic, to explain away.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bruner, Edward M. “The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self.” In *Anthropology and Literature*. Benson, Paul, ed. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ridington, Robin. “A Tree That Stands Burning: Reclaiming a Point of View as from the Center.” In *Anthropology and Literature*. Benson, Paul, ed. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Deane, Seamus. *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880-1980*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Stocking, George W. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: Free Press, 1987, p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> Krupat, Arnold. *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, R.F. *W.B. Yeats: A Life—Volume One: The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, p. 130.

- <sup>13</sup> Fleming, Deborah. "Sing Whatever is Well-Made: W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism." In *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*. Fleming, Deborah, ed. West Cornwall, Connecticut: Locust Hill Press, 2001, p. 281.
- <sup>14</sup> Deane. *Celtic Revivals*, p. 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Yeats, W.B. "Irish National Literature, II: Contemporary Prose Writers—Mr. O'Grady, Miss Lawless, Miss Barlow, Miss Hopper, and the Folk-Lorists." In *Uncollected Prose*. Collected and edited by John P. Frayne. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970-76, p. 369.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.
- <sup>17</sup> Yeats, W.B. "Irish Wonders." In *Letters to the New Island*. Reynolds, Horace, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934, pp. 198-99.
- <sup>18</sup> Yeats, W.B. "Irish Fairies." In *Uncollected Prose*. Collected and edited by John P. Frayne. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970-76, pp. 175-82.
- <sup>19</sup> Yeats, W. B. *Essays and Introductions*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 42.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-8.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>26</sup> Yeats, W.B. *The Celtic Twilight*. Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire : Smythe, 1981, pp. 88-9.
- <sup>27</sup> Gregory, Augusta. *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 278.
- <sup>28</sup> Stocking. *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 65.
- <sup>29</sup> Gregory. *Visions and Beliefs*, p. 279.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- <sup>33</sup> Foster, R.P. "Protestant Magic: W. B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History." In *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*. Allison, Jonathan, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 97.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104, n.43.
- <sup>36</sup> Yeats, W.B. *Later Essays* William H. O'Donnell, ed., with assistance from Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994, pp. 456-57, n.68.
- <sup>37</sup> Krause, David. "The De-Yeatsification Cabal." In *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*. Allison, Jonathan, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.