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Kathleen A. Heininge

## “Untiring Joys and Sorrows”: Yeats and the Sidhe

In popular culture, the idea of Irishness has long been associated with the idea of fairies and leprechauns. This association has been explored by scholars who treat the Sidhe—also known as the *daoine maithe*, or the “good people”—as either a sociological or a literary construct. Most often, the sociological construct is somewhat insidious and the literary construct tends to be romantic. Recently, Angela Bourke has explored how the folkloric understanding of the fairies may be used to explain the otherwise inexplicable—for instance, when hormonal changes that come about through puberty or menopause were explained by saying that the fairies have taken the real person and left a changeling instead. Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (1999) examines the case of Michael Cleary, who burned his relatively independent wife to death in the hopes of forcing the fairies to change her back to the acquiescent wife that he desired.<sup>1</sup> Bourke finds the mythology of the fairy world so deeply ingrained in Irish culture that it blurs the lines between the literary construct and the sociological use.

Bourke, however, is not the first to explore these associations. William Butler Yeats attempted to resolve where the line was between the literary and the sociological, and often shifted in his own evaluations of where that line was to be drawn. In his early writing, he collected fairy stories, carefully listening and evaluating, until he seemed to hold his own opinions about the existence of the Sidhe, opinions that were reflected in his own poetry and essays. But his own opinions were at best ambivalent, and at worst contradictory, as we can see in the following passage:

Do not think the fairies are always little. Everything is capricious about them, even their size. They seem to take what size or shape pleases them. Their chief occupations are feasting, fighting, and making love, and playing the most beautiful music. They have only one industrious person amongst them, the *lepra-caun*, the shoe-maker. Perhaps they wear their shoes out with dancing. Near the

1. Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (London: Pimlico, 1999).

village of Ballisodare is a little woman who lived amongst them seven years. When she came home she had no toes—she had danced them off.<sup>2</sup>

A life of dancing is surely delightful, but the vision of dancing until one's toes are gone is a vision of torturous agony. Did Yeats, then, believe a fairy life was a life to be desired, or a life to be feared? Yeats's works provide numerous instances that would shed light on the question of whether he himself believed that the Sidhe were—in the simplest terms—good or bad. Most of the criticism that addresses the question of how Yeats considered the Sidhe examines the source material that Yeats employed, and most critics conclude that, if we look to the source material, the fairy world is bad. The underlying assumption, of course, is that it must be one or the other, and cannot be both. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, however, Yeats's own system of belief regarding the Sidhe is entirely consistent with other movements in colonial literatures—precisely because of that apparent ambivalence.

In *W. B. Yeats and the Tribes of Danu* (1987), Peter Alderson Smith offers several theories about the origins of the Sidhe. Each played some role in shaping Yeats's understandings of who he believes they are, and what their function might be. The Sidhe might be the spirits of the dead, or the ancient gods “in a degraded form,” or “a folk-memory of a very ancient race of mortals.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, Christianity has had its effect on fairy faith, and, as with so many other Celtic traditions, the fairy faith was assimilated into Christianity. In Yeats's time, the Christian understanding of this tradition was that

so many angels chose to leave heaven with Lucifer that God was in danger of being left alone. He therefore ordered the gates of heaven and hell to be shut simultaneously. Those who had already fallen as far as hell became devils; those who had not fallen at all remained angels; while those who were caught in-between became fairies.<sup>4</sup>

The collision of the ancient fairy faith with the Christianized world contributes significantly to Yeats's own apparently ambiguous belief. Christian belief implies belief in salvation, immortality, and the soul. Fairies are sometimes thought to be immortal—although supposedly able to be killed—and so the common belief is that they will live until Judgment Day, and then disappear. Because they are said to be soulless and thus unable to be saved, Judgment Day for the fairies is equated with extinction, not immortality. According to Edward Hirsch, “The

2. William Butler Yeats, *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (Original Date?? New York: Dorset Press, 1986), p.11.

3. Peter Alderson Smith, *W. B. Yeats and the Tribes of Danu: Three Views of Ireland's Fairies* (Totowa NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1987), p. 14.

4. Smith, p.131.

profound duality of the Sidhe—on the one hand they are described as having perfect bodiless beauty, on the other they are shadowed by a suggestion of being without souls—is well evidenced in the different theories of their origins,” origins which, Hirsch claims, seem to bring about a reconciliation between Christianity and paganism.<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial theory, particularly that of Homi Bhabha, sees this duality as exemplifying “the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—[where] the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.”<sup>6</sup> The domains of difference, in this case, are the pagan Irish belief in the *daoine maithe* and the tenets of Christian doctrine. Certainly, religion has always been one of the sites of contention at the heart of the colonial struggle in Ireland, as elsewhere, as the people attempted to reconcile their own beliefs with those being imposed upon them. While overlap and displacement of these domains of difference may appear ambivalent and inconsistent, they also indicate Yeats’s attempt to establish that space of intersubjectivity that is required in a colonized society. Homi Bhabha points out that “The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition.”<sup>7</sup> By trying to incorporate these “incommensurable cultural temporalities” into the concept of the Sidhe, Yeats straddles that border—what Bhabha calls the “elliptical *in-between*, where the shadow of the other falls upon the self”—where Ireland strives for its own cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> To Yeats, the world of the Sidhe itself straddles the border inherent in the binaries of Christianity and paganism.

The duality within the world of the Sidhe is not reconcilable. If the fairies are truly soulless, then they are assumed to be envious of humankind, jealous of our salvation at the expense of their own immortality, and they become insidious, evil creatures. But if they are the spirits of the dead, or “degraded” ancient gods, then it might be assumed that they have some beneficent interest in us, and may be called upon for help and good fortune. These mutually exclusive visions of the Sidhe lie at the heart of much of the apparent confusion in Yeats’s own discussions about the land of the fairies. Smith points out that “the fairies have had to find a niche for themselves within a hierarchy of souls that makes no provision for them” and that, although Christians have been “surprisingly tolerant of the fairy faith, they could not entirely approve of a creed unrelated to their

5. Edward Hirsch, “Wisdom and Power: Yeats and the Commonwealth of Faery,” *Yeats Eliot Review* 8, 1–2 (1986), 27.

6. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

7. Bhabha, p. 2.

8. Bhabha, p. 60.

own.” Consequently, Smith goes on to say, “The Sidhe are not altogether trusted. It is not certain that they wish well to mankind. For all that, men do not exactly hate the fairies; but they suspect that God may do so.”<sup>9</sup>

Yeats understood that, with respect to the prospect of immortality, the fairies are doomed, and, therefore, the people who are spirited away into the land of the Sidhe are equally doomed; as soon as a mortal being eats of the fairy food, that mortal can no longer return to the human world. Yeats finds this both alluring and terrifying. In *The Celtic Twilight*, he writes that “our feet would linger where beauty has lived its life of sorrow to make us understand that it is not of the world,” implying that the fairies are full of sorrow and envy because they are not immortal, but their beauty is still so great that it pulls us from our world.<sup>10</sup> But in the same work he also writes:

Sometimes a new-wed bride or a new-born baby goes with them into their mountains; the door swings to behind, and the new-born or the new-wed moved henceforth in the bloodless land of Faery; happy enough, but doomed to melt out at the last judgment like bright vapour, for the soul cannot live without sorrow. (CT 130)

Of course, the underlying heresy in this statement—which thereby continues to place Yeats’s concept of the Sidhe in the interstices—is the suggestion that a human can lose his or her soul without sinning, and the equally disturbing suggestion that this human, although doomed, would be “happy enough.”

This is the crux of the paradox for Yeats: the world of the Sidhe represents happiness and perfection, but it is a form of happiness and perfection which we do not choose, and into which we may be abducted without a say. The fairies kidnap us into their world, and do their best to keep us there by the allure of their beauty. Many have argued that the romantic images that we have typically come to associate with the fairy world are merely lies by which the fairies attempt to convince us to come away with them. There is much about the fairy world that commends itself. Yeats, however, is not entirely certain that perfection as attained through beauty is the only ideal to which we as humans ought to aspire. He believes that sorrow, struggle, and even a despair in the quotidian are necessary to our existence, our growth, and our salvation—a belief that defies our compulsion to put binary constructions on ideas such as good and bad, life and death, or heaven and hell. We long to reconcile these conflicting ideas, and cling to a conviction that they must oppose one another, in a manner that Yeats simply did not.

9. Smith, p. 130.

10. W.B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* (1893; New York: Signet Classics, 1962), p. 45; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (CT 45).

While conventional belief wants heaven and hell to be separate and opposite, Yeats tended to conflate the two—deconstructing them. in a way—and agreed with Swedenborg that “heaven and hell are built always anew and in hell or heaven all do what they please and all are surrounded by scenes and circumstances which are the expression of their natures and the creation of their thought.”<sup>11</sup> To Yeats, purgatory and faeryland are not only not exclusive, but are simply two elements of the same thing. George Mills Harper, in pointing out some of the influences of Catholic doctrine on Yeats’s work, suggests that the idea of the “poor souls in Purgatory” being able to ask for prayers from one another is akin to being able to ask the fairy world for help. In each cases, the two elements are held to have equally supernatural powers. Consequently, Harper argues, “What Chesterton called the ‘small arrogant oligarchy’ of the living fell into perspective against this continual pressure of the swarming dead, out of sight, but not out of mind.”<sup>12</sup> Within fairy lore, life and death are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the way we ordinarily think: those people who are abducted by the fairies are neither alive nor dead in a conventional sense. They are no longer a part of our world, but they could return at any time and so their absence is not necessarily permanent.

This examination of the relationships between these binaries—which amounts to a deconstruction of some of the basic tenets of Western philosophy—is, according to Bhabha, a symptom of the colonial situation. “Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed.”<sup>13</sup> Yeats is writing in the voice of what Bhabha calls the “appropriate colonial subject”—that is, one who seemingly functions within the dominant system—in the sense that he continues to operate within the expected traditions of the Christian faith.<sup>14</sup> Yet, simultaneously, he brings these traditions into question by admitting the fairy world—a world that does not conform to those traditions, and a world whose followers do not seem to be concerned with reconciling those binaries.

The various personas that Yeats adopts at the time of his writing provide another lens through which we might examine his apparent ambivalence toward the Sidhe. At various times, Yeats ranges from the pure poet, embracing the fairy faith for the purposes of symbolism, to the anthropologist, recording

11. W. B. Yeats, “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places,” in *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, ed. Lady Gregory (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), p. 303.

12. *Yeats and The Occult*, ed. George Mills Harper (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1975), p. xvi.

13. Bhabha, p. 13.

14. Bhabha, p. 86.

a system of beliefs while straddling that line between the literary and the sociological. At times, he is a believer himself; at other times, an outsider. At times, he is from a Christian tradition; at other times, from a Celtic one. Each time Yeats changes his hat, as it were, he gives another glimpse of the possibilities held within the world of the fairies, and becomes another appropriate colonial subject. The anthropological approach gives us the ostensibly objective application of a system of belief. When Yeats speaks as the poet, as the one who adopts the fairy faith for his own purpose, he does not stray far from an anthropological stance, one in which he allows himself a bit of distance:

What is literature but the expression of moods by the vehicle of symbol and incident? And are there not moods which need heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland for their expression, no less than this dilapidated earth? Nay, are there not moods which shall find no expression unless there be men who dare to mix heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland together, or even to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or to thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks? Let us go forth, the tellers of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart longs for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet. (CT 33-34)

Here, Yeats is a believer on his own terms: does he literally expect men to “set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men,” or is he merely challenging us to believe in the impossibilities embodied in the fairy faith? Does this passage simply reflect a capacity for Keatsian “negative capability”—what Angela Bourke, in discussing fairy lore, calls “a painful tension between imagination and life”?<sup>15</sup> Or is it a reaction against being “overdetermined from without,” as Franz Fanon calls it, or Bhabha’s “metonymy of presence,” in which Yeats—through the fairy world—relocates the Irish identity between belief in the fairy world and the real world, between reality and imagination, and between paganism and Christianity, between life and death, between colonizer and colonized? Later, in yet another distanced and anthropological—yet still somewhat literary—voice, Yeats writes,

The Church when it was most powerful created an imaginative unity, for it taught learned and unlearned to climb, as it were, to the great moral realities through hierarchies of Cherubim and Seraphim, through clouds of Saints and Angels who had all their precise duties and privileges. The story-tellers of Ireland, perhaps of every primitive country, created a like unity, only it was to the great aesthetic realities that they taught people to climb. They created for learned and unlearned alike, a communion of heroes, a cloud of stalwart witnesses; but

15. Angela Bourke, “The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend,” *Éire-Ireland*, 31, 1–2 (Spring–Summer, 1996), 8.

because they were as much excited as a monk over his prayers, they did not think sufficiently about the shape of the poem and the story. One has to get a little weary or a little distrustful of one's subject, perhaps, before one can lie awake thinking how one will make the most of it. They were more anxious to describe energetic characters, and to invent beautiful stories, than to express themselves with perfect dramatic logic or in perfectly-ordered words. They shred their character and their stories, their very images, with one another, and handed them down from generation to generation; for nobody, even when he had added some new trait, or some new incident, thought of claiming for himself what so obviously lived its own merry or mournful life.<sup>16</sup>

These “shredded” images get mixed up in the minds of the people, and in Yeats's mind as well, to the point that the images themselves begin living their own lives and taking on their own texts. And yet, Yeats implies, it is through his outsider's interpretation of them that the stories take on meaning—as though without his voice and his eyes, the stories would remain merely common gossip, a jumble of ephemeral belief. Yeats gives us as an instance of this “shredding” the example of Bidy Hart, a woman for whom Christianity and the Sidhe coexist unquestioningly:

Heaven and Fairyland—to these has Bidy Hart given all she dreams of magnificence, and to them her soul goes out—to the one in love and hope, to the other in love and fear — day after day and season after season; saints and angels, fairies and witches, haunted thorn-trees and holy wells, are to her what books, and plays, and pictures are to you and me. Indeed they are far more; for too many among us grow prosaic and commonplace, but she keeps ever a heart full of music. “I stand here in the doorway,” she said once to me on a fine day, “and look at the mountain and think of the goodness of God”; and when she talks of the fairies I have noticed a touch of tenderness in her voice. She loves them because they are always young, always making festival, always far off from the old age that is coming upon her and filling her bones with aches, and because, too, they are so like little children. (WIF 79)

But what does Yeats himself believe? That fairies exist? That they hover between the reality of sociological implications and literary fantasy? How often, when he adopts an anthropological voice, does he also speak from his own belief? At one point Yeats notes that

I did not believe with my intellect that you could be carried away body and soul, but I believed with my emotions, and the belief of the country people made that easy. . . . I began telling people that one should believe whatever had been believed in all countries and periods, and only reject any part of it after much

16. W. B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 329; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (WIF 329).

evidence, instead of starting all over afresh and only believing what one could prove.<sup>17</sup>

Although Yeats experienced that same feeling of condescension toward the “fairy faithful” that some modern critics seem to feel toward Yeats himself, he still was unable to reject entirely the possibility of the Sidhe. Later, he wrote:

And yet I do not think I have been easily convinced, for I know we make a false beauty by a denial of ugliness and that if we deny the causes of doubt we make a false faith, and that we must excite the whole being into activity if we would offer to God what is, it may be, the one thing germane to the matter, a consenting of all our faculties.<sup>18</sup>

Yeats has not been easily convinced, but he has been convinced nevertheless. But to what extent?

I believe when I am in the mood that all nature is full of people whom we cannot see, and that some of these are ugly or grotesque, and some wicked or foolish, but very many beautiful beyond any one we have ever seen, and that these are not far away when we are walking in pleasant and quiet places. Even when I was a boy I could never walk in a wood without feeling that at any moment I might find before me somebody or something I had looked for without knowing what I looked for. And now I will at times explore every little nook of some poor coppice with almost anxious footsteps, so deep a hold has this imagination upon me. (CT 75)

As an apparent believer, then, Yeats challenges us to join him in what he calls the “consenting of all our faculties,” and leads us to ask again, what would he have us believe? Are the fairies good or bad? Has he himself decided? Does the land of the fairies represent heaven or hell, or a conflation of the two, or a completely different, interstitial third option? Regardless of his adopted voice— that of anthropologist or of poet—Yeats is consistent in his idealization of the fairy world and in his conflicted ideas about what that idealization implies. Smith explains:

Fairyland, like Eden, does represent perfection. In his later work, of course, Yeats was to place the Sidhe under Phase Fifteen of the Moon. But whereas, in the traditional conception of Eden, perfection is of all things most greatly to be desired, Yeats is undecided whether it can be born. One thing that is certain is that visitors to fairyland remain changelings: one must purchase that life at the cost of this. The achievement of fairyland, of vision, or of perfection entails the destruction of this world. Sometimes the destruction of this world seems equiv-

17. Quoted in Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1984), p. 32.

18. Yeats, “Swedenborg,” p. 297.

alent to its transfiguration; at other times, however, it seems that to enter the Otherworld we must literally die—and perhaps the world will die with us. Hence arises the vacillation that characterizes Yeats's response to fairyland. Never, indeed, does he simply reject it. When that point comes, he ceases to write about it. But there are times when Yeats strives towards vision only to find at last that the sight of the gods cannot be endured, and other times when he would embrace perfection come what may.<sup>19</sup>

While the rejection of the world contains an element of horror, it also carries an element of relief, of “transfiguration,” of salvation, for, as Yeats says in “The Stolen Child,” “the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.”<sup>20</sup> Perfection may be difficult to bear, but it is still perfection, and the perfect world of the Sidhe—contrasted with the imperfect world of the humans, particularly of the oppressed and colonized humans—carries an undeniable allure.

Whatever the world of the Sidhe is—heaven, or hell, or a third, separate entity—the folkloric tradition makes clear that it is very near to this world. Crossing over is not unheard of, and is often highly ritualized in the ancient traditions, as W. Y. Evans-Wentz notes:

To enter the Otherworld before the appointed hour marked by death, a passport was often necessary, and this was usually a silver branch of the sacred apple-tree bearing blossoms, or fruit, which the queen of the Land of the Ever-Living and Ever-Young gives to those mortals whom she wishes for as companions; though sometimes, as we shall see, it was a single apple without its branch.<sup>21</sup>

Cúchulainn and Oisín were both known to have crossed over into the Otherworld—sometimes called Tír na nÓg, the Land of the Young—and to have returned alive. Yeats wrote at some length on both figures. In *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats envisioned Ireland as a place where communication from one world to the next was quite common, a part of everyday life, something to discuss as one would discuss the weather:

In Ireland this world and the world we go to after death are not far apart. . . . Indeed there are times when the worlds are so near together that it seems as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond. . . . I have read a story of a woman whose ghost haunted her people because they made her grave-clothes so short that the fires of purgatory burned her knees. The peasantry expect to have beyond the grave houses much like their earthly homes, only there the thatch will never grow leaky, nor the white walls lose their lustre, nor shall the dairy be at any time empty of good milk and butter. But now and

19. Smith, p. 158.

20. W. B. Yeats “The Stolen Child,” in *Selected Poems and Four Plays*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), p. 3; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus (*SPFP* 3).

21. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford: University Books, 1966), p. 336.

then a landlord or an agent or a gauger will go by begging his bread, to show how God divides the righteous from the unrighteous. (CT 100)

To cross over from heaven or hell, a spirit must ostensibly have some unfinished business on earth, or be trying to intervene in some human's life. Why would the fairies want to cross over into our world, and why would they want to steal people from our world to join theirs? It cannot be simply a matter of sorting the righteous from the unrighteous, with the implication that God has divided the fairies hierarchically much as in Dante's vision of the afterlife. Judgment Day is significant to the Sidhe only insofar as it represents the end of existence; the actual concept of being judged for all eternity is irrelevant to them, and, thus, the righteous and the unrighteous are equally irrelevant. Heaven, hell, and purgatory are for those whose time has come to die, while Fairyland is for those who can serve as useful to the people of the Sidhe. This is an issue widely debated among all those of the fairy faith: do the fairies steal people for their own selfish ends, to entertain or serve them? Or do the fairies steal people to give them the opportunity to escape the drudgery and sorrow of life? Again, are the fairies good or bad, beneficent or malevolent, kindly or selfish? Yeats continues to try to answer this question through a anthropological consideration of the Irish people:

The most of the Irish country people believe that only people who die of old age go straight to some distant Hell or Heaven or Purgatory. All who are young enough for any use, for begetting or mothering children, for dancing or hurling, or even for driving cattle, are taken, I have been told over and over again, by "the others", as the country people call the fairies; and live, until they die a second time, in the green "forts", the remnants of the houses of the old inhabitants of Ireland, or under the roots of hills, or in the woods, or in the deep of lakes. It is not wonderful, when one remembers this nearness of the dead to the living, that the country people should sometimes go on half-hoping for years, that their dead might walk in at the door, as ruddy and warm as ever, and live with them again. (WIF 172)

The special vulnerability of the young to fairy abduction helps us to understand that Yeats is, in fact, not as ambivalent about the Sidhe as he may appear. The ambivalence does not belong to Yeats so much as it belongs to the subjects about whom he writes. Age is always important for both the Sidhe and for Yeats. According to tradition, those who are young and able are most eligible to be taken by the Sidhe; those who are old are of indifferent use. The fairies take people who might add to the beauty of their land: people who can dance and sing and sport, tend the cattle, and provide mortal mother's milk for the children of the Sidhe. The people most desired by the fairies are those who are lovely and have many years to give to the service of the fairies. Infants, brides, and

young men are the most desirable people to steal. Yeats notes that even the traditional Irish view of heaven reflects a sense of youth's usefulness:

In the west of Ireland the country people say that after death every man grows upward or downward to the likeness of thirty years, perhaps because at that age Christ began his ministry, and stays always in that likeness; and these angels move always towards "the springtime of their life" and grow more and more beautiful, "the more thousand years they live," and women who have died infirm with age, and yet lived in faith and charity, and true love towards husband or lover, come "after a succession of years" to an adolescence that was not in Helen's Mirror, "for to grow old in heaven is to grow young."<sup>22</sup>

Youth and age also figure in Yeats's conception of the Sidhe. In Yeats's telling, it is the young—or the very old and weary—who are most strongly drawn to the Land of the Fairies and, concomitantly, to reject the quotidian. Again and again, for Yeats, it is the young who are attracted to the idea of perpetual beauty and dancing and singing and fun, to a life like that depicted in "The Stolen Child," where "To and fro we leap / And chase the frothy bubbles" (*SPFP* 3), to the idea of a future without bleakness. It is the old who are attracted to the possibility of longevity, to the end of bone-wearying labor, to a respite in drudgery, to the promise made in "A Faery Song": "Rest far from men. / Is anything better, anything better?" (*SPFP* 12). We see this clearly in the play *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) and in much of Yeats's poetry. Aengus, in "The Song of Wandering Aengus," sees "a glimmering girl" who "faded through the brightening air" and changed his life.

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun. (*SPFP* 22)

In "The Song of the Old Mother," an old woman who works all day long envies the young their dreams and idleness: "While I must work because I am old, / And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold" (*SPFP* 23). She clearly longs for the release offered by the wind, the wind of the fairies that makes the children sigh, the wind that offers respite. Yet the same voice that longs for this release also fears it:

22. W. B. Yeats "Swedenborg," p. 305.

Being young you have not known  
The fool's triumph, nor yet  
Love lost as soon as won,  
Nor the best labourer dead  
And all the sheaves to bind.  
What need have you to dread  
The monstrous crying of wind?

Those who are young do not recognize the loveliness of the everyday, and only those who are young, apparently, are able to revel in such beauty as described in "The Stolen Child":

. . . the lowing  
Of the calves on the warm hillside  
Or the kettle on the hob  
Sing peace into his breast  
Or see the brown mice bob  
Round and round the oatmeal-chest. (SPFP 4)

The young cannot reject such lovely things. Once again, Yeats proves keenly aware of the ambivalent nature of even asking whether the fairies are good or bad.

Critics have often asserted that Yeats understood the Sidhe to be an evil force, and clearly to be avoided. Maeve Good says, "The supernatural, appearing as the Sidhe, reveals the beautiful and terrible figure of the Muse, the anti-self, the Daimon, a force hostile or indifferent to man, yet essential to his moment of truth and tragic recognition."<sup>23</sup> Frank Kinahan insists that the Sidhe represents an escape from the world in which Yeats lived, and claims that Yeats's later work is a reversal of that flight, in which Yeats "decided for the earth"<sup>24</sup>—as though there is no evidence in Yeats's earlier work of a desire to stay in the world. Smith seems to agree:

Fairyland for Yeats represents an escape from the fallen world, but the escape itself is difficult and of questionable desirability. The price of escape is complete alienation from the quotidian world. . . Yeats sees himself as striving for escape but recoiling in horror.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, such critics establish the dichotomy between the fairy world and mortal world—and, in so doing, imply a typology which holds that the mortal world is primary—without acknowledging that the lines between the two

23. Maeve Good, *W.B. Yeats and the Creation of a Tragic Universe* (London: MacMillan, 1987), p. 62.

24. Frank Kinahan, *Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism: Contexts of the Early Work and Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. xiii.

25. Smith, p. 19.

worlds can blur. They also attribute the desire for, or fear of, that fairy world to Yeats himself, without seeing that he is simply representing that world from the anthropological view, as a reporter and as the appropriate colonized subject. Yeats assuredly has his opinions about the Sidhe—but his opinion is that the opinions are varied, and for quite specific reasons. The simultaneous desire for and fear of the Sidhe is rooted in the colonized world in which Yeats lived; in his effort to find a space for himself, he found that the world of the Sidhe, a world that symbolized for him the “metonymy of presence” of which Bhabha speaks, could forge a space that both allows for, and rejects, the colonizer’s position.

Unless we entertain the unlikely position that Yeats himself was so conflicted that he did not really know what he was saying from one work to the next, this conclusion seems evident. Yeats makes a case for the quotidian, but he also makes a strong case against it, and represents the fairy life as desirable to many. Speaking of Bidly Hart, he tells us:

Her news about the creatures is always quite matter-of-fact and detailed, just as if she dealt with any common occurrence: the late fair, or the dance at Rosses last year, when a bottle of whisky was given to the best man, and a cake tied up in ribbons to the best woman dancer. They are, to her, people not so different from herself, only grander and finer in every way. They have the most beautiful parlors and drawing-rooms, she would tell you, as an old man told me once. She has endowed them with all she knows of splendour, although that is not such a great deal, for her imagination is easily pleased. What does not seem to us so very wonderful is wonderful to her, there, where all is so homely under her wood rafters and her thatched ceiling covered with white-washed canvas. We have pictures and books to help us imagine a splendid fairy world of gold and silver, of crowns and marvellous draperies; but she has only that little picture of St. Patrick over the fireplace, the bright-coloured crockery on the dresser, and the sheet of ballads stuffed by her young daughter behind the stone dog on the mantelpiece. Is it strange, then, if her fairies have not the fantastic glories of the fairies you and I are wont to see in picture-books and read of in stories? (WIF 78)

In her old age, Bidly fantasizes about the other world, where things are not so very different from the world she knows except that they are secure and stable, grand and splendid. Bidly Hart imagines what we would take to be a Christian, although nontheologized, conception of heaven—but she does not have to die in order to partake of its glory. It is an idealized concept of the Sidhe—and one that Yeats recorded many times—insisting that going with the fairies was not always a bad thing:

But all are not sad to go. I have heard “there were two men went with poteen to the island of Aran. And when they were on the shore they saw a ship coming as

if to land, and they said, 'We'll have the bottle ready for those that are coming.' But when the ship came close to land it vanished. And presently they got their boat ready and put to sea. And a sudden blast came and swept one of them off. And the other saw him come up again, and put out the oar across his breast for him to take hold of it. But he would not take it, but said, 'I'm all right now,' and sank down again, and was seen no more. (WIF 165)

It is often suggested that the fairies tell grand tales about their lives to lure gullible people into their land, but that the tales are untrue, and the fairies cannot be trusted. Yeats offered the following fairy speech, as an example of this temptation:

O beautiful woman, come with me to the marvellous land where one listens to a sweet music, where one has spring flowers in one's hair, where the body is like snow from head to foot, where no one is sad or silent, where teeth are white and eyebrows are black. . . cheeks red like foxglove in flower . . . Ireland is beautiful, but not so beautiful as the Great Plain I call you to. The beer of Ireland is heady, but the beer of the Great Plain is much more heady. How marvellous is the country I am speaking of! Youth does not grow old there. Streams with warm flood flow there; sometimes mead, sometimes wine. Men are charming and without a blot there, and love is not forbidden there. O woman, when you come into my powerful country you will wear a crown of gold upon your head. I will give you the flesh of swine, and you will have beer and milk to drink. O beautiful woman. O beautiful woman, come with me! (WIF 213-14)

The fairies might well lie about such things to ensure that people would wish to go with them. Yet, Yeats does not represent their claims as falsehood. He continually tells us tales of people who have been with the fairies and returned; although such people corroborate the fairies' fine tales, they are for some reason nonetheless happy to return to the world when given the opportunity:

She spoke often of the grand things she saw underground, and how she used to have wine to drink, and to drive out in a carriage with four horses every night. And she used to be able to see her husband when he came to look for her, and she was greatly afraid he'd get a drop of the wine, for then he would have come underground and never left it again. And she was glad herself to come to earth again, and not to be left there. (WIF 214)

There are presumably great advantages to going with the fairies—advantages to both the person going and to those left behind:

Sometimes one hears of people "away" doing the work of the others and getting harm of it, or no good of it, but more often one hears of good crops or of physical strength or of cleverness or of supernatural knowledge being given and of no evil being given with it except the evil of being in a dream, or being laid up in bed or the like, which happens more or less to all who are "away." (WIF 310)

Why would people be so glad to come back, if the fairy world were so grand? And, if the fairies lied about their world, why would humans who had visited their lands report that their tales were all true? Yeats suggests that the truth rests in the duality of the fairy nature itself:

Witness the nature of the creatures, their caprice, their way of being good to the good and evil, to the evil having every charm but conscience — consistency. Beings so quickly offended that you must not speak much about them at all, and never call them anything but the “gentry,” or else *daoine maithe*, which in English means good people, yet so easily pleased, they will do their best to keep misfortune away from you, if you leave a little milk for them on the window-sill over night. On the whole, the popular belief tells us most about them, telling us how they fell, and yet were not lost, because their evil was wholly without malice.<sup>26</sup>

Yeats’s poetry abounds with instances of duality. In these lines from “The Unappeasable Host,” “the unappeasable host / Is comelier than candles at Mother Mary’s feet” (*SPFP* 21) Yeats reveals the problem: if the host is truly unappeasable, regardless of what humans might do to assuage it, how can it be comelier than the requests sent to the Mother of God? If “Desolate winds that beat the doors of Heaven, and beat / The doors of Hell and blow there many a whimpering ghost” (*SPFP* 21) represents the desirable, then why ask, as he does in “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” “And where is there hope or deed as fair?” (*SPFP* 20) In the alternating images of troubling wildness and intriguing power, these poems show not only the Yeats’s ambivalence about the Sidhe, but also about this world. In *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats tells of meeting “Sorcerers” who could speak to the “faery beings” in trance states, and speaks of his dividedness after the encounter:

For some days I could not get over the feeling of having a number of deformed and grotesque figures lingering about me. The Bright Powers are always beautiful and desirable, and the Dim Powers are now beautiful, now quaintly grotesque, but the Dark Powers express their unbalanced natures in shapes of ugliness and horror. (CT 58)

The fairies, the Powers, were capricious, like the wind; in fact, Hirsch reminds us that they often were associated with the wind: “the fairies who find ‘their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind’ are also a sexual and apocalyptic symbol, bringing in a tempting, troubling and possibly uncontrollable energy.”<sup>27</sup> The troubling and uncontrollable energy—a people who could cause one to dance until one’s toes are worn completely away—is both alluring and frightening at the same time.

26. W. B. Yeats, *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*, p. 10.

27. Hirsch, “Wisdom and Power,” p. 27.

In this way, the Sidhe provide a metaphysical analogue for Ireland's colonial situation. Colonized peoples often hold ambivalent feelings toward the colonizers—frequently, a recognition that the colonizers brought much that was good, simultaneous with an awareness that much that was already good was destroyed. Similarly, Yeats's ambivalence about the Sidhe—as well as his ambivalence about death, or about remaining in this world, and even about Ireland's political situation—stems from his capacity to recognize the simultaneous pull of both worlds: the desire for perfection and the fear of living within perfection, the desire for an end to strife and the desire to continue living. Yeats makes a clear statement about his own need to reconcile these ambivalences in *The Celtic Twilight*:

It is one of the great troubles of life that we cannot have any unmixed emotions. There is always something in our enemy that we like, and something in our sweetheart that we dislike. It is this entanglement of moods which makes us old, and puckers our brows and deepens the furrows about our eyes. If we could love and hate with as good heart as the faeries do, we might grow to be long-lived like them. But until that day their untiring joys and sorrows must ever be one-half of their fascination. Love with them never grows weary, nor can the circles of the stars tire out their dancing feet. (CT 85)

By refusing to create a black-and-white relationship between the Sidhe and the world, Yeats forces us to interrogate our own conflicted ideas about life, death, and the possibility of an afterlife. Certainty about these ideas is never as clearly felt as Christianity would have it. As Yeats shows, these ideas may be negotiated through a third possibility, the Sidhe.