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## Yeats as a Folklorist: *The Celtic Twilight* and Irish Folklore

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### *Abstract:*

W.B. Yeats was one of the greatest Irish poets and dramatist, but he also had a key role in Irish folklore. What is more, most of his works are significant and original examples of a fruitful “encounter” between folklore and literature. The young Yeats was directly concerned with the collection and the publication of folklore. Initially he worked as an editor (*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* [1888], *Irish Fairy Tales* [1892]), drawing his material from authors who had collected the oral Irish tradition throughout the nineteenth century; yet his approach was very critical, and was meant to fashion his personal idea of Ireland’s folklore. With *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), Yeats became a noticeable folklorist, who addressed his material according to views and goals that were quite distant from the objective and detached methods of the ethnographic research of his times. Hence, are we legitimized to regard Yeats as a folklorist, despite his imaginative and “creative” use of folklore? How can his methodology be evaluated?

*Keywords:* Fieldwork, Folklore, Oral Tradition, Storytelling, W.B. Yeats

According to *Greenwood Encyclopedia* “ ‘Folklore’ refers to the academic study of folklore, also known as folkloristics, as well as to certain types of expressive culture” (Lau 2008, 359). Hence, folklore is meant both as a specific form of culture and as the discipline devoted to its study<sup>1</sup>. Coined by William Thoms in 1846, this term literally denotes “ ‘the lore of the people’ ”, and it includes “ ‘the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden times’ ” (Lau 2008, 359; see also Ó Giolláin 2000, 46-48). However, Lau clarifies that “to date, there has been no consensus as to how ‘folklore’ should be defined” (2008, 359)<sup>2</sup>. On the other

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive history of the concept and methodology of folklore see Dundes 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For a critical and postmodernist discussion about folklore – an approach perhaps more fitting for understanding Yeats as a folklorist – see, for instance,

hand, if one traces back the roots of folklore as an academic discipline in the Romantic era, and especially in J.G. Herder's theories about *das Volk* (2020), a key role in defining its nature and function necessarily pertains to its social and subjective component – the “folk” (Dundes 1980) –, namely, the lower classes of society. These are seen as the main bearers of the “lore”, which is intended as a traditional, alternative, usually underestimated and overlooked culture – at least until the Romantic era – compared to the modern, learned, official culture of the elites and ruling classes. Accordingly, folklore can be seen as a specific cultural heritage, that establishes a sort of subaltern and dialectical pole<sup>3</sup> within the broader cultural heritage making up a nation or a national identity under construction<sup>4</sup>. Since the Romantic period, this cultural heritage has been seen, as something both so precious – notably from a nationalist perspective (cf. Ó Giolláin 2000, 63-93; Anttonen 2005, 79-94) – and precarious – as it was handed down by oral tradition – to require learned people entrusted with discovering, collecting and adequately enhancing it. These people would be called folklorists, that is, students of folklore, although a number of them were artists, writers, intellectuals, even politicians who worked *also* as folklorists, especially in the nineteenth century. In other words, folklore was – and in part it still is – often practiced and used as a complementary and ideologically oriented subject matter (Anttonen 2005, 95-113).

Based upon these theoretical premises, what kind of relationship, if any, can be recognized between folklore as a (scientific) discipline and a writer like W.B. Yeats? Is there anything connecting him to the study of folklore, or more precisely, the study of the oral traditions of his country? In a sense, W.B. Yeats was not a folklorist, or better, his work as a researcher, collector and editor of Irish folklore was not exactly what we would expect from a folklorist. Björn Sundmark stresses how some prominent folklorists, such as Andrew Lang and Alfred Nutt, criticized Yeats and his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* for their lack of scientificity and objectivity and for preferring a subjective aestheticism (2006, 102). In Kevin Danaher's opinion, “it is hard to find anything Irish in Mr. Yeats, or anything of the ordinary people with whom, indeed, he had sympathy, but whom he never understood” (Dundes 1999, 50). According to Neil Grobman:

[...] his own activities in the field [of folklore] had artistic creation, not scientific scholarship or authenticity, as their main goal. [...] From a modern point of view [...] the greatest weakness in Yeats' collecting was the relative absence of ethnographic detail. Yeats rarely identified the names of informants<sup>5</sup> or localities from which he had gathered material, and rarely gave us a feeling for the lives of his informants, the kinds of situations in which stories are told, or the different ways individuals used traditional material. (1974, 117-118)

Clemente, Mugnaini 2001, in particular R. Schenda's contribution (73-88), R. Bauman (99-109), H. Bausinger (145-158), K. Köstlin (167-186). See also Anttonen 2005; Bausinger 2008.

<sup>3</sup> As famously stated by Antonio Gramsci, folklore should be studied as a “ ‘concept of the world and life’ largely implied in defined layers of the society, in contraposition [...] to the ‘official’ world concepts (or, in a larger sense, of the cultured parts of historically defined societies) which have happened through the history” (1950, 215; unless otherwise stated all translations are mine).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ó Giolláin: “ ‘Folk’ was a projection of an idealized peasant society onto the nation. [...] The opposition of tradition to modernity led to the Romantic idea of the ‘folk’, contrasted to cosmopolitan groups and with the modern urban proletariat in national society” (2000, 58-59).

<sup>5</sup> As regards this lack of data about informants, Björn Sundmark argues: “Yeats has been criticised by earlier folklorists, Richard Dorson, for example, for not always identifying his informants, but the reason is that as a believer himself, or at any rate as someone with great respect for fairy belief (and their believers), Yeats considered it harmful to reveal the true names of his informants” (2006, 104).

And yet, in a different sense, Yeats was indeed a folklorist, or better, his work in the field of folklore had a key, invaluable impact on the history of Irish folklore, as well as on the rise and the dissemination of folklore in Irish society, culture, and above all literature – as exemplified by his contribution to the Irish Literary Revival (O'Connor 1999; Mathews 2003). Diarmuid Ó Giolláin includes Yeats among the “Irish Pioneers” of folklore, together with T.C. Croker, D. Hyde, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge (2000, 104-106). Grobman himself notes that “W.B. Yeats’ interest in folklore played an important part in the development of folklore studies in Ireland. As a man of great personal energy and charisma, he was certainly capable of stimulating and supporting others to carry out systematic folklore research” (1974, 117).

Surely, Yeats did not tackle with the issue of Irish folklore through an objective, scientific perspective. His views and purposes were definitely at odds with those of a (theoretically) faithful and neutral ethnographic account<sup>6</sup>. First of all, he was a poet, an artist, an occultist, and a cultural activist; as such, he addressed his own field of research. On the other hand, and as argued by John W. Foster: “The scientific method was more offensive to Yeats than literary appropriation, perhaps because that method suggested to him a skepticism, at best neutrality, towards supernaturalism. Belief and poetry were to Yeats inseparable [...]” (1987, 208).

It could be argued that Yeats was a folklorist *de facto*, more than a folklorist *de iure*. In other words, his approach to Irish folklore was quite different from that of a *disinterested* and *orthodox* scholar of folklore, due to cultural, literary, and political reasons. However, this divergence from a positivist and objective paradigm makes his ideas and practices so interesting from an epistemological and methodological point of view. I would argue that it allows us to critically and productively review our assumptions about what folklore is and how a folklorist should deal with it and its bearers. Through his empathetic proximity – actual or ideal – to the world of peasants and their traditions, along with his more or less subjective and creative editing and use of Irish folklore, Yeats makes us reflect on the relationships a folklorist should have with his/her informants and their living context, as well as on the distance from which he/she should observe the folk traditions. These are usually collected to be *merely* recorded and preserved within learned books or institutional archives, where they are turned into fixed and unalterable items, which are then classified according to the paradigms of their “external discoverers” (Honko 2003 [1991], 34), thus ceasing to exist as performable and variable events framed in a living context<sup>7</sup>. As argued in an earlier work, from a “connected” or “re-connected” thing, folklore is made an “isolated” one (Carrassi 2017, 7).

However, what if a folklorist would look upon his material as an event to perform anew, rather than as an item to classify and to archive? What if he/she would consider that material not just as something *definitive* to be collected and taken away from its context in its *authentic* and *untouched* form, but rather as something *provisional* to be collected and, nonetheless, liable to be *subjectively* appropriated and potentially modified, perhaps through a *creative* blending of his/her own beliefs, ideas, stories with those found on the field? In other words, what kind of approach would be more suitable and useful to achieve a full and truthful understanding

<sup>6</sup> According to Nitai Saha: “Yeats despised traditional ethnographic practice and is thus better classified as a mystic rather than as a folklorist” (2014, 102). On the other hand, Yeats regarded folklore as a precious source of mysticism, of supernatural figures, events and beliefs, therefore he contended that “the folklorist should not be alone in interpreting peasant supernatural beliefs, but that the occultist was as well qualified to do so”; in his opinion, “the occult was ‘an enlargement of the folklore of the villages’ ” (Ó Giolláin 2000, 104).

<sup>7</sup> As pointed out by Mary H. Thuente: “[Yeats] railed against scientific folk-lore which treated what he considered living things as specimens not to be felt or allowed to penetrate the present” (1981, 71).

of the historical nature and cultural function of folklore, not simply of its incidental forms and verbatim expressions? These are burning issues for folklore scholars, and for a folklorist *sui generis* as the young Yeats was. As noted by Mary H. Thuente:

Yeats's own work as a folklorist illustrates [...] conflict in Irish folklore between *scholarly accuracy and poetic imagination*. His *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* [...] reflects his search for an *imaginative yet authentic depiction* of Irish folklore which avoided the extremes of a ponderous scientific air on the one hand, and a bogus stage-Irish charm on the other. (1977, 71, my emphasis)

“Scholarly accuracy” vs. “poetic imagination”, “authentic vs. imaginative”: between these opposite poles Yeats was one of the first intellectuals who looked for a sort of liminal (maybe utopian) middle-ground, where two different perspectives on folklore (scholarly and poetic) and two different ways of collecting, archiving and using it (authenticity<sup>8</sup> and (re)creativity) may coexist (Dundes 1999, 47).

As an editor of two major folk narrative anthologies early in his career – *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) – Yeats provided a critical overview of the main Irish collectors and collections of nineteenth century, while trying to find his own way and to sketch his own idea of folklore<sup>9</sup>. Having “decided to make himself an ‘Irish’ writer” (Thuente 1977, 64), he turned to Irish folklore, thus discovering “a rich, eclectic literary tradition which he could and did use for his own purposes” (78). In his view, folklore was already literature, though “the literature of a class [...] who have steeped everything in the heart: to whom everything is a symbol”, as he writes in the introduction to his first anthology. Accordingly, it became essential to take the beliefs and narratives collected among the Irish peasants seriously and carefully, for they provided much more than “light entertainment or [...] antiquarian curiosity” (76), as can be grasped from many of the pre-Yeatsian collections. The young Yeats, instead, looked at Irish folklore as a really valuable and promising *other world* – especially if compared to the modern, “realist” and “naturalist” world of the end of the nineteenth century<sup>10</sup>. This different world deserves to be kept alive and meaningful, also through its creative reworking, all the more if similarities and correspondences emerge, or seem to emerge, between the folklorist and his field of research.

In this respect, we need to turn to the first work of Yeats as a firsthand collector, *The Celtic Twilight*, whose first edition was published in 1893, with the subtitle *Men and Women, Dhoulas and Fairies* (a second, expanded and revised edition was published in 1902). Indeed, this is a quintessentially hybrid work, a *sui generis* blending of firsthand fieldwork (legends, folktales, anecdotes, life stories) and autobiographical memories, talks, spiritual experiences, commentaries, essays, poems<sup>11</sup>. A wide variety of textual materials (43 chapters) was organized accord-

<sup>8</sup> Can authenticity and folklore properly co-exist? “If we take it that folklore is deeply characterised by processes of diachronic mutation and synchronic multiplicity, then nobody and nothing is able, and allowed, to state what is authentic and what is not: all cultural items, phenomena, practices are equally legitimated by the sheer fact of existing” (Carrassi 2018, 174). For a comprehensive and critical analysis of this ambivalent and controversial concept see Bendix 1997.

<sup>9</sup> For a specific and in-depth analysis of these two works let me refer to a specific article published in this same journal: Carrassi 2014.

<sup>10</sup> “Let us listen humbly to the old people telling their stories, and perhaps God will send the primitive excellent imagination into the midst of us again. Why should we be either ‘naturalists’ or ‘realists?’” (Yeats 1893, 189).

<sup>11</sup> As brilliantly summarized by J.W. Foster, *The Celtic Twilight* “gives us what Yeats has heard (folk testimonies and traditions), what he has seen (firsthand experiences and visions), and what he thinks (commentary and speculation)” (1987, 236).

ing to deeply personal and subjective criteria, where one can hardly discern a unity (Kinahan 1983), but which vividly suggests the author's intolerance of all sorts of boundaries, outlines, taxonomies, for fear that they could embalm and wither Irish traditions and their bearers. As mentioned previously, Yeats strives to keep folklore a living and meaningful stuff.

Not surprisingly, therefore, "[he] was the first major talent of the Irish revival to contemplate fiction's respectful emulation and appropriation of folklore, to let art vie with science and popularization in recognition of the productions of the peasantry" (Foster 1987, 236). In his search for a third way<sup>12</sup>, which would be different both from a strictly scientific approach as well as from a simple-minded and irresponsible divulgation, Yeats was able to give folklore its right and legitimate value. In a letter of 1890 sent to the editor of the journal *The Academy*, Yeats seemed to reject, or more precisely, to lessen the importance and the usefulness of a meticulous, "honest" scholarly work; but he also suggested a concrete and contemporary role model embodying his ideal of folklorist, which would show the actual viability of a different kind of science:

I deeply regret when I find that some folk-lorist is merely scientific, and lacks the needful subtle imaginative sympathy to tell his stories well. [...] The man of science is too often a person who has exchanged his soul for a formula; and when he captures a folk-tale, nothing remains with him for all his trouble but a wretched lifeless thing [...]. *I object to the 'honest folk-lorist', not because his versions are accurate, but because they are inaccurate, or rather incomplete.* [...] To me, the ideal folklorist is Mr. Douglas Hyde. A tale told by him is quite as accurate as any 'scientific' person's rendering; but in dialect and so forth he is careful to give us the most quaint, or poetical, or humorous version he has heard. (Qtd. in Dundes 1999, 48, my emphasis)

Ultimately, Yeats believed that folklorists are just as fallible as any other scholars and researchers<sup>13</sup>. This is because their work is incomplete, as they are unable to reveal the deep soul, the inner truth of a folk narrative, as well as its imaginative, spiritual and living power. In other words, Yeats claimed that a folklorist should not be merely an observer, or taxonomist of the phenomena discovered on the field, but rather, someone who is able to recognize the hidden and deeper meanings thereby becoming part of the field itself. This also involves attuning his/her own mind to that of his/her informants to interpret these meanings. Yeats was somehow anticipating the so-called "interpretive turn" in postmodern anthropology (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 39-72) as well as the related paradigm of "thick description" (Geertz 1973).

In the introductory chapter to *The Celtic Twilight*, entitled "This book", Yeats explains the ideas and goals of his work as folklorist, elucidating his personal attempt to embody a different kind of folklorist – then to suggest, from his point of view, a less fallible approach to folklore. More precisely, he defines himself as an "artist" wishing "to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this *marred and clumsy world*, and to show *in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people* who would look where I bid them" (Yeats 1902, 1, my emphasis, hereafter *CT*). It is made immediately clear that Ireland, or better Irish folklore, which is made up of "beautiful, pleasant and significant things", is the

<sup>12</sup>About the encounter between orality and literature made possible by the medium of folklore collections, John D. Niles argues for a "Third" realm of literature – that is, the category that is neither oral nor written in nature, but that exists in a half-understood, betwixt-and-between zone that is bordered on one side by oral performance *per se* and on the other by elite literature" (2013, 234).

<sup>13</sup>I borrow the concept of fallibility of folklorists from a conference I attended in 2017 at the university of Tartu, entitled "Folklorists are fallible".

core of the book, and that its audience are the Irish people (“my own people”) who need to be led to discover an unknown world. In addition, Yeats aims at creating another world out of that world, a little and distinctive world which is offered not as a general, common collection of folk traditions, but rather, which stands out as a personal, significant “vision”, where folklore is seen through the more or less distorting eyes of a visionary.

In the following lines Yeats clarifies his aims and his methods:

I have therefore *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*<sup>14</sup>, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries, go their way *unoffended or defended by any argument of mine*. The things a man has heard and seen are threads of life, and if he pull them carefully from the confused distaff of memory, any who will *can weave them into whatever garments of belief please them best*. (*Ibidem*, my emphasis)

Here, we are introduced to three major features of the book:

1) Yeats’s work on Irish folklore resembles that of an accurate and faithful collector, who has recorded first hand experiences neutrally, and not through his individual imagination;

2) this work is still different from what a scholar (safely) distant from his informants, and who has been able to separate his learned, rational thinking from the traditional, superstitious beliefs of the peasantry would do. As an artist more than a scholar, as an occultist more than a folklorist, Yeats recognizes his closeness to that magic and mysterious world which has been disclosed, before him, by the “lore” of the “folk” he met on the field. Accordingly, not only the men and women, but also supernatural beings evoked by their stories are given full freedom of expressing themselves, with no intellectual commentary;

3) once stored in our own memories, all the things we have seen, heard, known, lived – hence all the beliefs, experiences and stories a folklorist has collected during his fieldwork – become, consciously or unconsciously, available to be re-fashioned, re-created, re-lived according to our own values, needs, aims, so as we may “weave” something more or less different from the original ones, yet fitting with the new and changing contexts where we happen to operate.

These are the key principles Yeats conformed to, or claims to have conformed to, in his work as a folklorist. Right or wrong, suitable or unsuitable, reliable or unreliable as they could seem, what really counts is how they are applied throughout the book. To this end, I have selected just a few excerpts from *The Celtic Twilight* which, in my opinion, can help us to exemplify and understand the *modus operandi* of Yeats on the field and in collecting and transcribing his ethnographic records.

In the chapter “A Teller of Tales” we read:

Many of the tales in this book were told me by one Paddy Flynn, a little bright-eyed old man, who lived in a leaky and one-roomed cabin in the village of Ballisodare, which is, he was wont to say, ‘the most gentle’ – whereby he meant faery – ‘place in the whole of County Sligo’. [...] He was indeed always cheerful, though I thought I could see in his eyes [...] a melancholy which was well-nigh a portion of his joy; *the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive natures and of all animals*. (*CT*, 4, my emphasis)

This is the first chapter that Yeats devotes to describing and contestualizing one of his informants, just like a scholarly folklorist, though his style is more sketchy and poetic, while distancing

<sup>14</sup> On this point cf. Sundmark: “[t]his anticipates the kind of self-reflexive and autobiographical ethnographic writing that has emerged in the field of ethnography and social anthropology since the 1980s” (2006, 106).

himself from an ethnographic approach. Yeats is not a scholarly folklorist. For him, it is fundamental to view the storyteller as a visionary, the bearer of a higher knowledge, thereby to suggest a profound affinity between the informant and the peculiar type of folklorist he ultimately is.

In the second chapter, “Belief and Unbelief”, Yeats writes:

One woman told me last Christmas that she did not believe either in hell or in ghosts. [...] ‘but there are faeries’, she added, ‘and little leprechauns, and water-horses, and fallen angels’. [...] No matter what one doubts one never doubts the faeries, for, as the man with the mohawk Indian on his arm said to me, ‘they stand to reason’. (CT, 8)

Through the views expressed on the field by his informants, Yeats aims at establishing the folk paradigm upon which his “little world” will take shape. This leaves no doubt, therefore, about the consistency and even the rationality of the existence of fairies, as well as the legitimacy of believing in them – unlike, significantly, the beliefs related to the religious sphere – simply because this is what the folklorist has picked from the people met on the field. Fairies and fairylore are thus depicted not as issues to be objectively address and question, but as crucial beliefs of an imaginative, visionary world-view, which must be accepted in itself, though it may seem distant from the folklorists learned paradigms<sup>15</sup>.

Yeats, however, is a different kind of folklorist. His beliefs are not so distant from those of his informants. His faith in the imaginative and visionary world-view expressed by the Irish folklore is further confirmed and deepened in the following lines, taken from the chapter “Enchanted Woods”. Here, Yeats highlights the radical distance between ourselves, the modern and enlightened men, from the simple and wise people, with their ancient and different world-views:

I say to myself, when I am well out of that thicket of argument, that they are surely there, the divine people, for only we who have neither simplicity nor wisdom have denied them, and the simple of all times and the wise men of ancient times have seen them and spoken to them. (CT, 108)

In “Dust Hath Closed Helen’s Eye”, again, we find a remark with an ethnographic flavour. Although conscious of the limitations and deficiencies of his memory, Yeats stresses the importance of collecting oral narratives on the field. More importantly, he stresses the key role of an accurate transcription through which we can get a faithful and effective preservation of the oral tradition:

When I was in a northern town awhile ago I had a long talk with a man who had lived in a neighbouring country district when he was a boy. [...] *I wish I had written out his words at the time, for they were more picturesque than my memory of them.* (CT, 48-49, my emphasis)

The accuracy in transcribing the oral narratives is an issue further emphasized when it concerns a second-hand fieldwork. In “The Friends of the People of Faery”, Yeats gets an account from a friend, who asks the informant to repeat her oral performance, just to provide a faithful and reliable transcription of a story previously heard. Later on in the book, this is turned into a written record:

A friend has sent me from Ulster an account of one who was on terms of true friendship with the people of faery. It has been taken down accurately, for my friend, who had heard the old woman’s story some time before I heard of it, got her to tell it over again, and wrote it out at once. (CT, 198)

<sup>15</sup> As argued by Kathleen Raine in her introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*, “there is, in these gleanings and reflections of the young poet a quality of simplicity, of innocence. There is in them nothing of the amused detachment of the collector of ‘folklore’, still less of the unamused detachment of the anthropologist” (Yeats 1981, 19).

Interestingly, on the field, one may find evidence of a sort of “literary awareness” by the folklore bearers. They seem to recognize, in their oral traditions, an aesthetical value that only a poet such as Yeats could turn into a literary work, so as to highlight the artistic potential implied in folklore. In other words, Yeats is legitimizing his own work as a request coming from below: “[w]hen the old man had finished the story, he said, ‘Tell that to Mr. Yeats, he will make a poem about it, perhaps’ ” (*CT*, 60). Paradoxically, Yeats himself declines such an explicit request, recognizing that both his poetry and his mind are not always able to conceive a work that expresses the beauty and the significance of an oral narrative:

Alas! I have never made the poem, perhaps because my own heart, which has loved Helen and all the lovely and fickle women of the world, would be too sore. There are things it is well not to ponder over too much, things that bare words are the best suited for. (*Ibidem*)

In the chapter “The Old Town”, like elsewhere in the book, Yeats describes what he actually does and has to do as a field researcher, including his long walks across the countryside and the villages in search of people with stories to tell. Nevertheless, his focus quickly shifts toward the consequences of the collected stories on his mind and imagination. He therefore emphasizes a subjective involvement in his field of research while rejecting the objective distance of a scholarly folklorist. His field is not merely observed but also personally lived, something that speaks directly to him as a man:

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 [...] *to pick stories out of an old countryman*; and we were coming home talking over what he had told us. It was dark and our imaginations were excited by his stories of apparitions, and this may have brought us, unknown to us, to the *threshold, between sleeping and waking*, where Sphinxes and Chimaeras sit open-eyed and where there are always murmurings and whisperings. (*CT*, 137, my emphasis)

On the other hand, it is not always necessary to leave home to be able to find what Yeats as a folklorist expects from his fieldwork. For instance, in the chapter “Drumcliff and Rosses”, he writes that these lands “were, are, and ever shall be, please Heaven! *places of unearthly resort*” (*CT*, 148, my emphasis). That is to say, in Yeats’ view, that these are the most promising and productive contexts for a researcher in the field of folklore, or better, in the “unearthly” and visionary side of the Irish folklore, namely the only genre of folklore Yeats really takes into account: needless to say, he deliberately and programmatically acts as a selective folklorist<sup>16</sup>. In fact, having “lived near by them and in them” (*ibidem*), and because his “forebears and relations have lived near Rosses and Drumcliff” (*CT*, 158), he acknowledges having “gathered thus many a crumb of faery lore” (*CT*, 148). Later on in the chapter, he provides further details about his fieldwork, describing, for instance, a concrete and direct experience as a listener in a storytelling session. He focuses clearly on one of the countless and endlessly repeated stories of the “good people”, but also on the role played by the storytellers and the oral transmission in preserving and keeping alive the narrative tradition:

One night I sat eating Mrs. H — ’s soda-bread, her husband told me a longish story, much the best of all I heard in Rosses. Many a poor man from Finn M’Cool to our own days has had some such adventure to tell of, for those creatures, the ‘good people’, love to repeat themselves. At any rate the story-tellers do. (*CT*, 152)

<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, all the scholars working on the field, including the folklorists, whether consciously or not, act as selective collectors, according to the principles, paradigms, goals, values and so on guiding their researches.



Perhaps in the last chapter, “By the Roadside” – an emblematic title, I would say, for a researcher working on the field – Yeats better summarizes his ideas about folklore, oral traditions, popular world-view and, consequently, the deep reasons pushing him to have a profound interest in them. They are certainly more the ideas of an artist than those of a folklorist, as shown when he refers to “folk art” as “the oldest of the aristocracies of thought”. Nevertheless, he is an artist who, for better or worse, has left one of the most intense and significant testimonies of concern and involvement in folklore. The following is a remarkable reenactment and evaluation, though idealized and romanticized<sup>17</sup>, of folklore as a complex historical and cultural phenomenon:

There is no song or story handed down among the cottages that has not words and thoughts to carry one as far, for though one can know but a little of their ascent, one knows that they ascend like medieval genealogies through unbroken dignities to the beginning of the world. Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. (*CT*, 232-233)

In order to try to formulate a conclusive interpretation of Yeats as a folklorist, I find the following opinion by Björn Sundmark quite illuminating:

I would say that Yeats’s methods and editorial practices appear groundbreakingly modern today. Thus, by contextualizing his material to the point of including himself (as in *The Celtic Twilight*) he anticipates anthropological practices of fieldwork and observation-participation that are common today. He ‘[writes] the self into the ethnographic process’ as Amanda Coffey calls it. And by paying close attention to the storytelling moment itself, Yeats creates an acute sense of place, history and identity. (2006, 107)

Through his subjective and participant methodology, his all-encompassing contextualization, as well as his biased yet dynamic approach to the field of research and to the informants, Yeats distanced himself from the role-model of a classic folklorist of his age. However, though this distance, he reveals and anticipates a new kind of scholar, the kind of scholar we recognize today – since the so-called “reflexive or literary turn” (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 103-130) – as more suitable for the specificity and the inherent limitations of the social sciences. In so doing, he emphasizes the actual processes – usually concealed by Romantic and positivist folklorists – implied in the collecting of folklore on the field. Nowadays, we know that a really objective distance from the field is impossible, because the researcher affects his/her field of research, as well as the context, and the people met on the field affect the researcher. Between the folklorist and the informants there is an exchange and a sharing of ideas, spaces, and experiences, which all contribute to a piece of folklore. This applies to all types of folklore, whether scholarly or literary, learned or popular, verbatim or creatively transcribed. The result is always unique and complex, subject to ever shifting historical, social, cultural, ethical, and political conditions. In my view, in *The Celtic Twilight* – a work that a hybrid kind of writer/folklorist has produced within a hybrid set of contexts and situations – Yeats makes us aware of the intrinsic fallibility of any of the methods employed to investigate the human and cultural phenomena, but even more of the vital, perhaps questionable, productivity of this same fallibility.

<sup>17</sup> “For Herder, the *Volksgeist*, or ‘spirit of the people’, was best captured in the oral traditions of the peasant classes, whose cultural traditions were not mediated by education, industrialization, or the general trends toward modernity” (Lau 2008, 359).

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