1-1-1965

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Recommended Citation
Hill, Douglas (1965) "The Other Presences in Irish Life and Literature," BYU Studies Quarterly: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol6/iss1/4

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The Other Presences in Irish Life and Literature

DOUGLAS HILL

Sir John Mahaffy once said, "In Ireland the inevitable never happens, the unexpected always." It is partly for this reason that the traveler there frequently comes away with an absurd rag bag of generalizations, quaint stories and customs, for example, that are often dazzling distortions of fact or captivating embellishments of truth. Once having publicly expressed them, however, he can return to Ireland only at the peril of good natured, but nevertheless, embarrassing derision. Perhaps some satisfaction comes in knowing that the Irish themselves are not much more accurate at analyzing their motives and emotions, institutions and histories. At worst they read their own publicity and imitate themselves shamelessly; at best they live lives of charming disorder and hospitable individuality. Indeed, the Irish, no less than the visitor, are perplexed by ambivalent beliefs, victimized by beautiful green hills and sparkling brooks, beguiled by mysterious Catholicism and pagan mythology. Therefore any study that undertakes a clarification of the Irish character must also be an apology, for no matter how careful the writer, how sound the argument or fresh the insights, error is likely to blunder in. But it is the very likelihood of error that makes the Irish endlessly fascinating.

If there is any consistent revelation of character at all, it seems to survive in literature. Discovery and rediscovery stimulate expression. The Irish literary Renaissance happily, but not necessarily fortuitously, coincided with the reawakening of the national and historical spirit. Perhaps one could never have occurred without the other. With almost an excess of patriotism and love of ancient lore, the Irish achieved independence from England and, at the same time, literary rediscovery. The patriots turned their patriotism to literature and the writers turned their literature to patriotism, but instead of wracking the land with sentimentality, they produced works of high

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merit and penetrating beauty. Their zeal for a new Irish state based on ancient tradition and Gaelic faith and tenacity led to a surge of creativity unlike anything Ireland had known for centuries. Today there is no common enemy around which the Irish spirit can rally, but the love of ancient Gaelic lore still burns as brightly as ever. The land still lends itself well to stories just as it did during the Renaissance and the days of the shanachies, or wandering story tellers. In other words, literature still has a momentous bearing in Irish reality and imagination.

The Irish still have the child’s capacity for belief. The child really lives in two worlds: the one is much the same as the adult’s, full of tangible, rational impingements on the mind; the other is no less real but exists in the imagination. What is true for one world may be false for the other, and certainly one cannot be explained by the other. Even when a child knows there is no hobgoblin in his room, he is not exempt from fright if it peers threateningly from the forests of his imagination. The adult makes no sense whatsoever and offers little comfort when he tells a child that his fears are only imaginary, because it is precisely those imaginary fears that are most vivid. Informing a child of the improbability of dragons lurking behind corners in a darkened house fails to dispel the reality of those evil creatures simply because they live in his imagination, and the truth of their existence is incontrovertible. The Irish, like the child, place their fears and hopes where they belong, without altering their significance or enervating their impact on their consciousness. And if they so choose they can transform the facts of one world into the facts of another. In a sense, the primal instinct to mythologize is still intact and flourishing. Though mythology isn’t necessary for literature, mythological thinking is—that is, the free use of the imagination, the searching nostalgia for the Hesperides of the mind or that tantalizing Irish land of youth, Tir na n’og. This mythological thinking, so evident in contemporary Irish life and literature, is what gives the Gael his peculiar visionary detachment from the harshness of his environment.

The lore of places is always with the Irish. They stand in Connemara when the air and sky are uncommonly still, looking out over the horizon where the clouds lie in streaks of dark and white silence. The turf is somber and rich in the subdued light—bank after bank of soft scumbled earth. Not a bird stirs
in the sunken fields. The lake gurgles queerly and the light reflecting off its surface is cold and bright. All the pagan enchantment of ancient Erin is here: the dark landscape, the icy light on the lake, the apprehensive cessation of animal sounds. There is a feeling of other presences and altered purposes. Conchubar seems to call from the waters and to beckon from bent reeds in the shallows. The Irish are bewitched and frightened. An excess of indefinable emotions pours through them as they stand confronted with the mystical past speaking to the present, whispering through the gorse and hawthorn shrubs surrounding the lake.

Again, the afternoon landscape near Maam Cross is dark and turfy and glides away into a thin milky mist under a polished nickel sky, now gleaming more brightly over the sea, now fading into the soft blue rubble of mountains in the north, rocks and turf thrown up by some great hand of the past. In the fine white haze of a moonlit night, the ancient trees, rocks, sod, and shrubs all melt and absorb each other and rise in silhouette against the sky like a broken body chewed and spat out upon the ground. All bear reminder of hordes and legions of men ripping and plowing up the centuries, then sinking into bogs like their dreams of glory and conquest. The wind is like the long steady cry from Angus’s horn announcing his arrival from the bowels of the earth. But Angus never comes, and the horn blows on endlessly.

One is tempted, however, to ask if the Irish really do believe in these historical or mythological presences. The answer is yes. They are just as real to the Irish imagination as the hobgoblin is to the child’s. In Irish Folk Stories and Fairy Tales, Yeats has this to say:

There are, of course, children of light who have set their faces against all this, though even a newspaper man, if you entice him into a cemetery at midnight, will believe in phantoms, for every one is a visionary, if you scratch him deep enough. But the Celt is a visionary without scratching.

Devin Garrity says in his introduction to The Irish Genius:

What about fairies and leprechauns? It is reported that when a certain Hollywood producer went to Ireland recently in search of some genuine “little people,” he was given a rough time. Perhaps the Irish attitude might best be summed up by a certain old country woman who was asked whether
she believed in fairies and who gave the only possible answer, “Of course not, but they’re there”—as indeed they are.

One who has read about Irish pookas, cluricaunes, and fir darrigs need only bicycle across a moonlit bog in Western Ireland once to agree with Yeats, the old countrywoman, and Devin Garrity.

But even when the writer finds nothing to remind him of historical or mythological characters and events, his vision is animated with the contradictions of the landscape. The Western counties are an enigma. The grass doesn’t grow, it explodes to the surface then glows with an inner fiery-green intensity. Even the melancholy bogs seem to smoulder with life when the mist hangs low over the land, smoking in a precipitate attempt to burst into flame. And the land itself rolls and twists rhythmically like a waking giant. Yet with all this readiness and renewal of life, the land is bleak, the trees are stunted and seem to be almost screwed out of the ground. The shrubs lie close together in a tangle of protection, and their little yellow blossoms are defiant rather than joyous. Granite slabs and boulders obtrude everywhere like cairns and dolmens, fragments of castles and villages. Even when the wind breathes more benignly the trees remain permanently bent and misshapen, so that on the mildest days life huddles close to the ground.

Even the mountains, cold and hazy, have an elusiveness, exceeding that of the clouds; for in the clouds elusiveness is expected; in the mountains, substantiality. But when the mountains are neither here nor there, they must be hallucinatory or simply a dalliance of the imagination.

In Connemara, the trees, walls, and boulders cast very long shadows that sometimes suggest late afternoon rather than ten or eleven in the morning. The meadows are bright from the angled sun; overhead the sky is dark with clouds, making the intensity of light quite a perplexity. The bright sunshine occurs unexpectedly—in a grove of oaks, upon a wet road, over a lake. It looks as if it seeps up through the landscape rather than down upon it. Everywhere the senses are shocked into a new reality like the flagrant mysterious violation of shadows and lights in a Chirico painting.

Near the Salmon Weir Bridge on the River Corrib, gulls break upon the sky. Their wings rush and beat in the wind
their winnowing cries are almost lost. They wheel and hover over the weir, then bank through an updraft and fall out of sight only to suddenly pull steeply into the sky again and into a sudden gust of wind that carries them over the white roar of water breaking from the spillway. Beyond the calamity of screaming gulls the strange byzantine spire of University College rises out of and above the thickness of trees; and even further, beyond the lean white houses overlooking the river, the green hills of Ireland are dappled with the sun.

Yeats said that if mankind did not "remember or half remember impossible things, what Aran fisher-girl would sing?" Indeed, what Irishman would tell his stories or recite his poetry if he didn't half remember or half see the impossible in his world. Surely Padraic Pearse must have half believed and half disbelieved, like an intoxicated man, the hedgerows swamped with dewy spider webs on the shores of Lough Aroolagh, and the little smoky islands, indecisively green, and vanishing before his eyes like a dream; or the lime-washed cottages across the lake hovering on the verge of oblivion as the mist grew deeper and frostier over the vine-woven earth.

Can the collective unconscious of the Irish ever be suppressed? In few societies is the past so vigorously a part of the present. In few societies is the contemporary scene so colored by antecedent belief.

One should never doubt the possibilities of the Irish imagination at all. Having endured seven centuries of subjugation, the Irish are now almost ferociously determined to retain their individuality. Words, which they have become so adept at using, are perhaps the best way they have discovered to assure the rehabilitation and preservation of Irish values and beliefs. Certainly having come upon the overwhelming truth about their environment they are right in refusing to exchange it for something more comfortable or more glamorous. There is little likelihood that they will succumb to an easier but less creative life. They are like the trees shaped by the wind from the sea. Bending with the wind, however, isn't a debasement, but a condition of survival, an alertness to the vicissitudes of life, and a strong affirmation of life itself. As long as the Irish retain their strength of character and love of language, literature will never suffer more than a temporary decline. Its death would mean the death of everything distinctively Irish.