TOWARDS AN APPROXIMATION OF YEATS' POETICAL LANDSCAPE IN HIS EARLY POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the development of William Butler Yeats' poetical landscapes, in his early poetry. Understanding Yeats' definition of symbols and his relation to Symbolism through the works of William Blake, I will analyse four different musical symbols across a selection of five poems taken from Yeats' first two collections— "*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*" (1889) and "*The Rose*" (1893). In this sense, I present a common line from these selected poems based on a mythological character travelling to an other-worldly island, where an imbalanced dialogue is maintained with fairies. In accordance with late-nineteenth century landscape perspective, the relationship between soundscapes and Yeats' musical symbols will be examined. By doing this, I seek to interpret the convergence of Celtic imagery within the emergence of a magical soundscape.

KEY WORDS:W. B. Yeats, Symbolism, Celtic imagery, soundscape.

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With the arrival of the nineteenth century, we begin to see a subject inhabiting and constructing a self-sufficient reality. The emergence of Romantic poetry reveals, as a consequence of this arrangement, the "constructive power of the mind where reality is brought forth through experience" (Frye 274). The outer world would be now understood as a reflector through which we visualise our inner workings (Frye 274). Art as a response no longer stands for representation and contemplation but a "magical mirror upon the world" (Paz 94), capable of changing its reflection. With the passing of Romantic poetry, we have a new modern art as a "self-destructing creation … erasing the boundaries between ancient and contemporary [times]" (Paz 21). Through these acts of self-immolation, the late nineteenth-century modernity was condemned to constantly create its own tradition.

However, we could also understand such conviction as the fruitful foundations of a productive state of mind. William Butler Yeats saw his past and future in such manner: "[W]e must hold to what we have that the next civilisation may be born … not from a void but of our own rich experience" (401). In order to thrive, the Romantic poet must move beyond this emptiness and belong to a larger process defined by its irregularities (Paz 22). Yeats in such a way describes himself as "a crowd … a lonely man … nothing" (309). With variation and exception being the new rule, we see character and individuality becoming pivotal constituents of the artist's self.

During the end of the nineteenth century, we can follow Yeats' early work searching for "a badge of identity for his own culture, something that would mark it off from the rest of the English-speaking world" (Heaney 175). Some of his first poems deal with typical legendary figures as Oisin and Fergus, warriors from ancient times dwelling with fairies in other-worldly lands. In the words of the contemporary Northern Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, he would come to find this cultural identity "in the magical worldview of the country people" (175). Yeats explains this preference accordingly, "The Celtic race had a realistic naturalism, a love of Nature for herself, a vivid feeling of her magic" (264). Understanding this predilection during his early works, we believe Yeats keeps in constant touch with a pre-Catholic, pre-English sensitivity of Ireland. Like the Romantic poet's enlivenment of the natural world, he works towards reviving the same spirit found in the ancient mythology and Celtic lore of his country.

By revitalising what he considered the essence of Ireland, W. B. Yeats became infused with the atmosphere of its landscapes in the form of a filial relationship. Due to this infusion we see his poetry depicting what Heaney called the "voice of the spirit of the region" (423), intertwined with not only the mythical figures of his country but its worlds as well. As he states himself, "this subject-matter is something I have received from generations, part of that compact with my fellow men made in my name before I was born" (312). In order to do so, Yeats must construct a poetical landscape of his own evolving civilisation, bringing forth at the beginning of a new century the images and themes which defined his country's cultural history.

Considering Yeats' intention of reconstructing a new Irish literary scenery, our purpose will be to discuss the elaboration of such poetical landscapes in his early work through four different musical symbols: journeys, islands, dialogues, and fairies[1]. Through a selection of his poems taken from *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889) and *The Rose* (1893), we aim to examine the confluence of Celtic imagery within the rise of a sonorous landscape. The primary sources for this end have been selected as they further portray the aforementioned symbols to better illustrate the confluence of Yeats' desired Irish national identity and music: "The Wanderings of Oisin" and "The Stolen Child" delineate the creation of other-worldly settings via the presence of fairies within traditional Irish folklore. Similarly, "Fergus and the Druid" and "The Everlasting Voices" provide additional insight as to how imbalanced dialogues procure a continuous back-and-forth across all entities. Moreover, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" portrays the poet's inclination for reviving a pre-Anglican Ireland by creating a convergence between past and present within a single location.

A NOTE ON YEATS' SYMBOLISM

Bowra defines the essence of Symbolism as "its insistence on a world of ideal beauty, and its conviction that this is realised through art" (6). The Symbolist movement, accordingly, seeks to convey a supernatural experience through the language of visible things (Bowra 5). Having these notions transcended its country of origin[2], William Blake adapts them as they might help him create something within the invisible dimensions of existence (Picón 60). As Blake explains himself, "we

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1 Although the connection between these elements and the concept of "musicality" is not apparent at first glance, this linkage will be explained in further detail down the line.

2 The Symbolist movement originated in France around mid-nineteenth century

must struggle to really mount towards the imaginative world, and not allow ourselves to be deceived by 'memory,' disguising itself as imagination" (Ellis & Yeats xxxii). In this sense, by enjoying a constant intercourse with the world of spirits— "Thirteen years ago I lost a brother and with his spirit I converse daily … [I] see him in remembrance in the region of my imagination" (Ellis & Yeats xxvii)—Blake embodies the Symbolist merger of poet and mystic as a dreamer of dreams giving bodily form to spirits.

Despite having acquired, within time, a reputation of impenetrability, misunderstood by his peers forced to decode both his language and images (Picón 60), Blake's aesthetic ideas affected Yeats' own identification with Symbolism. To this end, Bowra characterises Yeats' early work as "part of a larger experience, as a means of communication with the spiritual world which lies behind the visible" (185). Moreover, Yeats portrays the Romantic poet as "a symbolist who had to invent his own symbols" (353). Fascinated thus by both magic and occultism, he sought to disclose the symbolic system hidden within the complexity of Blake's writings.

In his own introduction to the works of Blake[3], Yeats explains, "[Blake] would not moderate his passion for he was ever combative against a time which loved moderation … because it was a time of 'unbelief and fear' and of imaginative death" (xlii), justifying Blake's outsider role as a necessary response to his own time. Inspired by such outcast a role, Yeats attempted to systematise and explain to his readers his own private symbolism with the publication of *A Vision* in 1925. Before that, however, and despite his artistic ambitions towards a communal corpus of belief, his earlier symbols are mostly occult in nature—a trait which often prompted bafflement from contemporary critics (Karin 54). Consequently, as we do not rely on an explicit symbolic system bridging the gap between his writings and philosophy, our analysis of Yeats' first poems requires an approximation of what he understood as *symbols* and from which we have derived our musical ones.

Yeats states, "All Art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic" (356). Thus, although he believed words to inevitably call forth different associations, he limits the use of symbols to the expression of emotions in isolation (Bowra 185). In this sense, he explains,

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3   Although *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* (1893) was edited by both Yeats and E. J. Ellis, the "Introduction" was only authored by Yeats himself.

"all sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions" (272). Symbols, accordingly, represent for Yeats an endless string of possibilities as long as they elicit an emotional response. Correspondingly, Bowra defines Yeats' symbolism of sounds and ideas as "a return to imagination, to the state between waking and dreaming … [his poetry] is to be a record of a state of trance" (187). Along these lines, Yeats' approach to symbolism mimics Valery's ideas on poetry and abstract thought: "Poetry is an art of language; certain combinations of words may produce an emotion which others will not" (79). Both authors ultimately understand poetical language as a means to an end, words working towards the evocation of events, moods, and persons.

Furthermore, as Yeats explains, "All literature in every country is derived from foreign models … it is the presence of a personal element alone that can give its nationality in a fine sense" (283), whichever elements he might perceive to hold a symbolic essence will inevitably belong to a greater scene. For this reason, Yeats' early poetry lies more substantially linked to the figures and motives of Celtic lore. In this sense, he states, "I hated that dry eighteenth-century rhetoric but they had one quality I admire … they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people" (301). Yeats understood that forming the literature of a country ultimately depends on the union of human artifice, conventional images, and originality.

YEATS' NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HIS EARLY POETRY

During his first years, accordingly, Yeats seeks to portray an idealised representation of Ireland as a means of promoting his own nationalistic causes. As Maud Gonne[4] explains, "the land of Ireland we both felt, was [sic] powerfully alive and invisible … The Ireland I live in is very different from the Ireland of our dreams, because our dream is not yet achieved" (Yeats 331-2). In order to understand symbols as the free evocation of emotions, Yeats' literary movement works towards a revitalisation of past sensibilities by bringing forth what he considered "immortal models" (373) of Celtic ascendency to his own work. For, as he states, "All folk literature, and all literature that keeps the folk tradition, delights in unbounded and immortal things" (373).

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4 Co-founder with Yeats of the "Irish Literary Revival" in the late-nineteenth century.

An example of such an endeavour is "To Ireland in the Coming Times" where Yeats writes, "Know, that I would accounted be | True brother of a company | That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong" (1-3). Nevertheless, despite the apparent manifesto-like nature of the poem as he states, "While still I may, I write for you | The love I lived, the dream I knew, | From our birthday until we die" (33-5), Yeats' movement dwells more with poetics than with politics. As he explains, "When modern Irish literature began, O'Grady's[5] influence predominated … yet he was no Nationalist as we understood the word, but in rebellion, as he was fond of explaining, against the House of Commons" (381). Yeats' "non-political Irish Society" (381), for this reason, does not consider itself 'nationalistic', as the movements of Ireland's early-twentieth-century political scenario envisioned[6] but suggests an ancestral communion of man with his origins. To this end, Yeats' early poems occur in a far-removed land, both geographically and temporally speaking, where the lyric speaker can find a sense of belonging as well as distance from his native world.

OTHER-WORLDLY ISLANDS AND THE ACTION OF TRAVELLING

In "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," accordingly, Yeats displays a world of seclusion, wisdom, and freedom from societal restrictions. Although some critics characterise Yeats' early period under a guise of impersonality and indifference (see Tindall 77), the poem's declarative style depicts his version of the utopian landscape as a direct expression of the self. The speaker thus proclaims, "I will arise now, and go to Innisfree, | And a small cabin built there, of clay and wattles made" (1-2); the enunciation of his speech constituting a conscious desire to shape the isle into a personal refuge from civilisation. Nevertheless, as the speaker states, "I will arise and go now, for always night and day | I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; | … I hear it in the deep heart's core" (9-12). This retreat from civilisation operates both as a geographical destination as well as an inner visualisation.

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5 Standish O'Grady (1846-1928), writer of Irish history and mythology. Contradictorily to Yeats' views, O'Grady advocated for a Celtic revival whilst being part of the Church of Ireland, a province of the Anglican community, as well as being of aristocratic descent.

6 Among those executed after the unsuccessful "Easter Rising" of 1916, launched by Irish republicans to end British Home Rule and establish an independent Irish Republic were several writers and poets such as Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), Thomas McDonagh (1878-1916) and Joseph Plunkett (1887-1916).

The action of reaching this other-worldly island, consequently, depends from both a metaphysical and physical journey into a new landscape. Even though it is mostly represented through a series of physical mobilities— "Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee, | And live alone in the bee-loud glade" (3-4)—peace is also given a bodily status. The speaker, in this sense, states, "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, | Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings; | There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow" (5-7).

In "The Wanderings of Oisin," the titular character visits different islands—of Dancing, Victories, and Forgetfulness—found in fairyland before returning to modern Ireland. In the same vein as the comparisons in "Innisfree," Oisin's descriptions of nineteenth-century Ireland—

> Your bell-mounted churches …
>
> And a small and feeble populace stooping with mattock and spade,
>
> Or weeding or ploughing with faces a-shining …
>
> Awaiting in patience the straw-death (III 163-7)

—pale in comparison to the mystical musicality of fairyland. Consequently, Oisin explains, "Wrapt in the wave of that music … | The moil of my centuries filled me … | And a softness came and filled me full to the bone" (III 68-72), ennobling the cultural landscape of rural life with legendary figures and determining which landscape should be immortalised through poetry.

Respectively, the representation of Yeats' idealised islands acts in direct consonance with the new understanding of landscape perception[7]. As Besse states, during the Enlightenment, artistic depictions of the natural world were the product of a "classical distance … [allowing] the landscape to appear to the eyes of the beholder emerging in front of his eyes" (2). Art, in this manner, becomes a finished imitation of nature. However, during the nineteenth century, landscapes begin to be regarded as the activation of a determined use of space (Besse 4). Alain Roger defines them, consequently, not as objects but as a "representation, value, a discourse dimension, a human dimension, or even as a cultural formation" (15). This new perspective thus establishes the subject as an inhabitant of the landscape by foregrounding his sensitive presence. As Besse explains, "We are

7 "New understanding" seen through the lens of Yeats' late-nineteenth century point of view

immersed in landscapes rather than contemplating them ... we inhabit a landscape before looking

at it" (2). Contact with the surrounding world, accordingly, transforms polysensory experiences into

the main articulator of the outer world.

As previously stated, Yeats' symbols are inherently linked to the invocation of emotions.

Derived from sounds, colours, and forms, Yeats' symbolism depends on achieving a sense of

uniformity. As he explains, "when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation ... they

become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made of their

distinct evocations" (272). His symbols, in this sense, act in direct consonance with the melodies he

saw as proper of poetry. In the same vein as Valery states "between Voice and Thought, Thought

and Voice, presence and absence, oscillates the pendulum of poetry" (95), Yeats defines the

emotional response of his work in a musical relation. As he states, "a little lyric evokes an emotion,

and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic

... it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life" (361). There is no

distinction between poem or song, poet or singer for they both have the ability to convey a unique

sensitive reaction. For this reason, although our symbols do not illustrate the idea of musicality

in its literal sense, we do consider them to be *musicalised* to the extent in which they depict an all-

encompassing sentiment.

The most suitable balance between the aforementioned landscape perspective and the poet's

musical symbols is the concept of soundscape. As Besse defines them, soundscapes relate to how

"the natural world generates identifiable sounds [which] can be considered characteristic of them"

(7). Acoustically speaking, additionally, soundscapes depict the totality of all sounds within a specific

location and from a distinct point of view (see Cain et al. 232-3; de Coensel & Botteldooren 887).

However, a more fitting definition should consider the sources behind the particular sounds. By

including the sounds composed by living organisms—*biophony*—non-biological ambient elements—

geophony—and people—*anthrophony* (Farima et al. 204)—soundscapes represent the summation of

both living and non-living performances as they create a unique acoustical pattern.

Thus, following Oisin's journey across various representations of fairyland, the central focus

of emergence for the audible landscape depends on the natural *biophonic* elements. As he explains, upon arriving on the first island, "To that low laughing woodland rhyme … | Round every branch the song-bird flew, | Or clung thereon like swarming bees" (I 175-81), the magical landscape surrounding him creates its own melodies. Oisin, as a consequence, is relegated to a secondary role in the articulation of the poem's soundscape. Furthermore, as the harp Oisin has been playing with is taken away (I 231-6), objects demonstrate their own sonorous qualities, capable of having their supernatural properties tainted by human themes.

Likewise, "Fergus and the Druid" depicts a wandering figure who defines himself in the setting of motion. Unlike Oisin's adventurous quest, however, Fergus' journey revolves around achieving a state of renunciation from earthly desires with the assistance of a druid's magic. Additionally, differing from Oisin's journeys, as Fergus narrates, "I see my life go drifting like a river | From change to change; I have been many things" (31-2), his travels have been sensual instead of physical experiences, stemming from a lack of control over the symbolic reality of the druid's power. As Fergus provides a first-person account of his travels, the poem's soundscape is primarily realised through *anthrophonic* elements. Each musical entity found within every landscape, consequently, is depicted as a filtered representation of the poem's aural mobility.

In this sense, Fergus' descriptions of pressureless activities—*feasting* with his people (17), like Oisin *danced*, *pacing* (18), Oisin *slept*, and *driving his chariot* (19-9), and Oisin *fought*—permits the reader to journey alongside them. Furthermore, having opened the druid's "little bag of dreams" (30) as instructed, the poem's remaining musical mobilities become a fragmented assemblage of multiple forms and creatures (33-6). Within this dream-like reality, the soundscape is articulated through a plethora of different actors reverberating across their actions, simultaneously occurring inside Fergus' mind and through his speech. Yeats' characters, accordingly, struggle with their sense of belonging, longing for a spiritual satisfaction that ultimately fails.

DIALOGUES AND FAIRIES

Paradoxically speaking, although each other-worldly island signifies a desire for seclusion and distance from the modern world[8], the description of each journey extends an invitation to the

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8   Understanding "modern" from the lens of Yeats' late-nineteenth century point of view.

reader to travel along the way. Along these lines, although Yeats' early poems follow the structure of a dialogue, they illustrate an imbalanced pattern between leading and secondary characters as well. Respectively, from 41 verses in "Fergus," only nine are said by the druid whilst from 889 in "Oisin," only 13 are not said by its titular character. The soundscapes in Yeats' early poetry, therefore, are mainly of an *anthrophonic* quality.

This disproportionate exchange ensures the articulation of each landscape to primarily depend on the main speaker's perspective. As St Patrick's chastisements (I 31) in "Oisin" and the druid's warnings (25-7) are ultimately ignored, the poem's soundscapes form themselves around a dichotomy of reverberation and silent reception. Thus, even though a dialogic poem supposes a dialogue between two characters, Yeats' imbalanced conversations extend the limits of such conception.

To this end, the speaker in "The Everlasting Voices" requests, "O sweet everlasting Voices, be still | Go to the guards of the heavenly fold | And bid them wander obeying your will" (1-3), asking for silence to a group of nameless and unresponsive entities. Despite the apostrophic style, like in "Innisfree," assuming the presence of an interlocutor and audience, this poem fails to present a replying counterpart. In this manner, although the poem begins and ends repeating its titular refrain— "O sweet everlasting Voices, be still" (1; 8)—the actual voices are never shown interacting with anyone else.

Moreover, in the same light as previously mentioned poems, "The Everlasting Voices" continues Yeats' tradition of an other-worldly atmosphere. Accordingly, by depicting silence through natural mobilities—"Have you not heard that our hearts are old, | That you call in birds, in wind on the hill, | In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore" (5-7)—Yeats articulates a musicality capable of imitating the supernatural essence of these nameless, speechless creatures. However, according to Yeats himself, these voices are meant to represent the Sidhe[9]. For this reason, the poem depicts a twofold ironic signification within one landscape: a voice demanding silence from an unseen force and a poet requesting quietness from his folkloric tradition.

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9   According to Yeats, "Sidhe is often translated 'fairies' … it must be remembered that they are really the ancient Irish gods and are usually (when visible) of at least human size" (491).

In this sense, Yeats requires these spoken exchanges to bridge the gap between the boundaries of mortal reality and these mythological creatures. As seen in Oisin, for example,

And in a wild and sudden dance

We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance

And swept out of the wattled hall

And came to where the dewdrops fall …

And there we hushed the revelry (I 290-95),

to be able to sing the right notes opens up a dialogue and a sense of belonging with the natural world and the Fenian folk[10]. Thus, as Oisin narrates upon first arriving, "And once a sudden laughter sprang | From all their lips, and once they sang | Together, while the dark woods rang" (I 215-17), the sounds this race produces echo the properties of their home world. Music, consequently, acts as a device to incite affiliation and camaraderie.

Simultaneously, these dialogues not only link characters together but create a distance between Yeats' preferred Irish culture and his contemporary Ireland. Although he laments how Oisin's typical "unbounded emotion and wild melancholy are troublesome things in the world of today" (376), he ascertains his allegiance to a Protestant-Anglican tradition. Accordingly, Yeats states, "I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake … everything I love has come to me through English" (385). However, despite being a man of contradictions, these musical mobilities represent an explicit voice which allow his cultural personal Symbolism to sustain a conversation with the inhabitants of this longed-for land.

Belonging to an ethereal world, the fairy folk are usually portrayed as holding a balance between pleasantness and displeasure by deceiving and beguiling people (see McLaughlin 137; Pokorná 71). Yeats' fairies, however, are in most cases one-sided and benevolent personifications of timelessness and perfection. He describes the Sidhe as "[journeying] in whirling wind … when old country people see the leaves whirling on the road they bless themselves, because they believe the Sidhe to be passing by" (476). To him, fairies normally stand for the keepers of the realm of natural

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10   Derived from the term "Fianna," not connected with the derogative use of the term in Northern Ireland to refer to Irish Nationalists and Catholics

imagination with fairyland being a sojourning place for the soul.

Nonetheless, "The Stolen Child" describes the tale of a child being taken from his home by the fairies. As the multiple speakers explain, "We foot it all night, | Weaving olden dances, | Mingling hands and mingling glances" (16-8). Yeats contrasts fairyland's music and joy against an unsatisfying reality. However, this comparison relies uniquely in the fairies' perspective. Like the uneven dialogue in "Voices," the magical declaration of the poem's refrain—

Come away, O human child!

To the waters and the wild

With a faery, hand in hand,

For the world's more full of weeping that you can understand

(1-4; 24-7; 38-41)—is constantly presented to a speechless child. In this manner, the refrain not only shows the differences between both worlds but also resembles a magic spell cast to dominate the infant.

In comparison to other characters traversing to an other-worldly island, this protagonist's youth guarantees a direct conflict of agency. Unlike Oisin and Fergus, the child never replies or interacts with the magical elements, being left without the possibility of articulating his own voice through natural musical mobilities. With the child eventually acquiescing to their will (42-3), the poem interrupts Yeats' traditional vision of the Sidhe's world as a perfect and painless realm. Thus, despite their promises of a destination unlike "a world more full of weeping than he can understand" (54), the fairies set up a journey with this child away from the rural comforts of traditional Ireland—"He'll hear no more the lowing | Of the calves on the warm hillside | Or the kettle on the hob" (44-6).

CONCLUSION

My purpose with this article has been to discuss the elaboration of Yeats' early poetical landscapes through the analysis of four different musical symbols: journeys, islands, dialogues, and fairies. Through a selection of five different poems from his earlier period, we have sought to examine the confluence of Celtic imagery within the emergence of a magical soundscape. I have

demonstrated that a selection of stories are connected by their presentation of journey into a supernatural island where an asymmetrical conversation is sustained with fairies. As we have seen, Yeats' first poems are filled with contradictions. Although they invite the reader to travel alongside the speakers to other-worldly lands, these journeys illustrate a desire for seclusion and remoteness. Even though they wish to establish a dialogue between these mythical creatures and themselves, the conversational nature of each poem is biased in favour of the speakers' point of view.

To this end, as the title proposes, this article can only be an approximation of the symbols found in Yeats' early period. Limited by the scope of this work, we have only glimpsed at the possibilities of applying this form of landscape perception to the works of Yeats—be it either in his earlier publications or later on in his career. Therefore, although we have proposed to explore Yeats' poetical landscapes, only further research can elaborate a more concise definition of the term.

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