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The Allegory of Yeats's
"The Wanderings of Oisin"

by MICHAEL J. SIDNELL

In the 1899 edition of Poems, Yeats moved "The Wanderings of Oisin" from the front of the book to the back. Reviewers, he thought, concentrated on the poem merely because it came first, neglecting the rest. The effect of this transposition probably exceeded its aim since critics henceforward tended to treat Yeats's longest poem as an appendix to the Collected Poems.

Since the appearance over thirty years ago of Alspach's study of some of the sources of the poem there has been no extended examination of any aspect of "Oisin"; and this despite what seems to be a general renewal of interest in Yeats's early work. A monograph on Yeats's development up to 1900 offers us the assurance that "Alspach's record of direct borrowings does not substantiate a charge of plagiarism," a bizarre comment which has the virtue of getting us nowhere, by contrast with some psychoanalytical comments on some details of the poem which take us altogether too far. One such is the suggestion that the demon of the second book may be "orgasm incarnate" which, whatever truth there may be in it, suggests a reduction whereby Yeats's demon and, say, Moby Dick become indistinguishable. More usefully and characteristically, commentary on the poem directs attention to its style ("pre-raphaelite," "heavily lacquered," "the poetic diction of Wardour Street") and to the influence of Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Morris.

As for interpreting the allegory of the poem, I suppose that the chief arguments against interpretation would be: that the allegory is obvious; that the allegory is too obscure; that even convincing interpretation, if not unnecessary, would be self-defeating in that it would demonstrate

9. See, for example, Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1941), pp. 44, 47, 63-64, 74. Peter Faulkner in his William Morris and W. B. Yeats (Dublin, 1962), p. 9, dissents from the typical view of the influence of Morris on "Oisin."
that the poem was in the intrinsically uninteresting and inferior allegorical mode. Yeats himself, though his earliest efforts were a succession of allegories, held a theoretical objection to them as part of his inheritance from Blake. He was careful to distinguish, however, between works in which "allegory and symbolism melt into one another" and "allegory without symbolism."

And Yeats's distinction holds good for "Oisin," in which the symbolism (of sun and moon, for example) liberates the poem from allegorical particularity. Indeed, the tendency in the poem to proceed very rapidly from the allegorical figure to the "symbol of an infinite emotion" is the source of a good deal of its obscurity. But neither this tendency nor the functions of the symbols themselves can be seen in isolation from the allegorical basis of the poem.

Only Ellmann has pursued in any detail the outline that Yeats gave on several occasions:

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Oisin led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose. 12
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The terms of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" are close to those Yeats used, shortly after the first publication of the poem, in a letter to Katherine Tynan. Having earlier and unnecessarily warned her against trying to penetrate, in the second part of the poem, the "disguise of symbolism" to which he only had "the key," he now lamented and hinted: "'Oisin' needs an interpreter. There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking—infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose—hence the three islands." The hint is slight enough, offering no clues to details within this allegorical structure, to the connection between Fenian Ireland and the three islands, or to the relationship of the body of the poem to the dialogues of Oisin and Patrick at its beginning and end. All of these elements require the attention of an interpreter; so does the considerable accumulation of image and symbol in the poem that Yeats was to use over and again in later works. Interpretation of "Oisin" is, moreover, an examination of the laborious imaginative and intellectual foundation of many later works: "the swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that perhaps the sole theme—Usheen and Patrick? . . ." Oisin’s quest goes through many metamorphoses in Yeats's poetry and always with the same result. The poet mounts and re-mounts the Olympian colt but some weakness, be it of pride, indignation or solicitude, always brings him down to

11. Ibid., p. 149.
15. Ibid., p. 798.
earth again. It takes a lifetime to learn to obey the ordinance that Oisin disastrously ignores, "Horseman pass by!"

As a narrative, "The Wanderings of Oisin" is circular in form. The end of the story joins its beginning in the arc of the dialogue of Oisin and Patrick, and the bulk of the poem is contained in a second, more commodious, arc of Oisin's account of his three-hundred-year quest. The larger arc is in a sort of shadow, the Fenians recalled by Oisin are not only dead but of another era and their pagan religion of a Happy Otherworld is only an old man's reverie. The present reality in the poem, the part in the light, as it were, is the smaller arc of Oisin's debate with Patrick, in which the Christian view of mortal and immortal life is represented as dominant. This relation between the arc in shadow and the arc in the light is described by Yeats in another context: "there is a kind of day and night of religion . . . a period when the influences are those that shape the world is followed by a period when the greater power is in influences that would lure the soul out of the world, out of the body. When Oisin is speaking with Saint Patrick of the friends and the life he has outlived, he can but cry out constantly against a religion that has no meaning for him."

The pagan conception of the Otherworld as an infinite extension of the sensuous pleasures of mortal life, contrasted with Christian idealism, is fundamental. The Otherworld is different in only one vital aspect from the mortal world of the Fenians. It is immutable. And with this in mind, we may answer Ellmann's objection to what he sees as a divergence of symbolism and narrative:

Oisin . . . is induced to leave Ireland behind and go to the three islands. But the three islands, instead of being a refuge from life, are a symbolical representation of it. Oisin's nostalgia for the life he has left behind him is therefore inconsistent. Similarly, a powerful contrast which Yeats draws in the poem between Oisin and Patrick, as representatives of pagan and Christian Ireland, seems irrelevant to the timeless portrait of life on the three islands.

But Oisin's nostalgia is not, until the end, for mortal life in general but for some particular aspect of it: on the Island of Dancing he remembers Fenian battles and in consequence goes, not back to the Fenians, but to the Island of Victories; there he remembers and desires the repose that he formerly enjoyed among the Fenians and finds it again on the Island of Forgetfulness. On the islands, three aspects of mortal life are immortally extended and separated into their pure forms; each perfected by the elimination of the two aspects incompatible with it. But, however good in itself, no aspect of life made infinite and immutable can satisfy the mortal Oisin. Fulfilment changes the object of desire, it does not eliminate desire itself. So at last, having tasted all possibilities of the Otherworld, Oisin is driven back to the world of time and change. And he is

trapped in it with the knowledge, making him worse off than before, that there is no remedy for its ills, even in an Otherworld, that can also preserve all its excellencies simultaneously. This is the pagan and, in intent, tragic vision that Saint Patrick cannot shake. It is also the objection to paradise found in Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning."

Oisin's refusal to spend his last days in prayer, resigned to bodily decrepitude, clearly follows from his pagan view of the Otherworld and this one. Moreover, since in his mortal existence Oisin has passed from youth to old age without interval, he has lost too much bodily life already to deny himself the little that remains. In narrative terms, Oisin's age is explained simply by the duration of his wild goose chase after contentment. Allegorically, however, it is not the duration of Oisin's journey but the experience itself that accounts for the transformation in the poet and in his perception of the world.

This experience, which makes Oisin as old in wisdom as the race itself, is at one level symbolized by the natural process of the setting and rising of the sun, and its duration is the space of a symbolic night. Oisin leaves Ireland and arrives at the Island of Dancing at sunset, and it is in "the golden evening light" (p. 421) that he leaves the island; the second island is approached in the darkness of the night, the third in starlight, and Ireland, once more, at dawn. That each island has its own rounds of day and night extends this symbolism spirally.

There is a related symbolism in the figures that Oisin sees on the water as he and Niamh journey to each island:

and now a hornless deer
Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound
All pearly white, save one red ear;
And now the lady rode like the wind
With an apple of gold in her tossing hand;
And a beautiful young man followed behind
With a quenchless gaze and fluttering hair. (p. 413)

Yeats found these phantoms in Michael Comyn's "The Lay of Oisin on the Land of Youth," and they became potent figures not only in "Oisin" but also in the early conception of The Shadowy Waters. In the play, they are the very shadows that indicate the division of the original unity into light and dark, day and night. They presage the beginning of life and desire, which arise from the division:

The shadows that before the world began
Made Tethra bow down on his hands and weep
The shadows of unappeasable desire:
A red-eared hound that on the waters and winds

18. The page references given in parentheses after quotations from "The Wanderings of Oisin" are to Collected Poems.
Followed a whimpering fawn and boy that followed
A girl that had an apple in her hand.20

The notes Yeats wrote for *The Wind Among the Reeds* tells us more about these figures:

This hound and this deer seem plain images of the desire of the man “which is for the woman,” and “the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man,” and of all desires which are as these. I have read them in this way in the “Wanderings of Usheen.” . . . A solar mythologist would perhaps say that the girl with the golden apples was once the winter, or night, carrying the sun away, and the deer without horns . . . darkness flying the light.21

Oisin’s wisdom becomes complete when his own experience in the Otherworld brings the full understanding of the meaning of the phantoms. At their first appearance, Niamh refuses to explain them. She puts an end to Oisin’s questions with “Vex them no longer” (p. 414), and a finger on his lip. As Oisin and Niamh approach the second island, the phantoms appear again and this time Niamh distracts her lover’s attention from them with kisses and song. But when they appear in the third book at the approach to the third island, the meaning of the phantoms can no longer be hidden from Oisin:

And those that fled and that followed, from the foam-pale distance broke:
The immortal desire of Immortals we saw in their faces, and sighed. (p. 431)

There is no need now for Oisin to question Niamh. With the experience of the first two islands behind him his understanding is nearly complete. There can be no lasting contentment, for life is desire; and immortal life is the immortality of desire. The quest leads to the empty discovery that the longing, not the fulfilment, is the essence. There are many ways of saying it: “Love’s pleasure drives his love away,”22 and, “Man is in love and loves what vanishes,”23 are two of them. *At The Hawk’s Well* reiterates the theme.

As the quest itself takes place between the going down and the rising of the sun, and the phantoms are a further expansion of the same symbolism, so Oisin can be seen as like the sun itself. “The flaming lion of the world” (p. 440), as Niamh calls him, is as obviously a solar figure as the poet in several poems of *The Green Helmet* (most splendidly in “These are the Clouds”).24 Oisin leaves Ireland in the west, at the beginning of his quest, and comes back to it “out of the sea as the dawn comes.” Niamh, for her part, is described at her first appearance:

24. The cluster of images of lion, fallen king and fallen sun (reminiscent of and partly influenced by *Richard II* perhaps) make this a book of daylight, dejection and defiance in which Yeats is not unlike the Oisin at the end of the earlier poem.
A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
On a horse with a bridle of findrinny;
And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
But down to her feet white vesture flowed,
And with the glimmering crimson glowed
Of many a figured embroidery;
And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
That wavered like the summer streams,
As her soft bosom rose and fell. (pp. 409-10)

Ellmann finds this description "better suited to one of Rossetti's women
than to Oisin's lady," but this is not just Pre-Raphaelite portraiture.
The associations of the moon mingling with sunset, the flowing and
ebbing of the tide on the seashore and the appearance of the clouds at
evening are related to the figure of Niamh in much the same way as
Eliot's evening is to his "patient etherised upon a table," though not to
the same ironic effect.

When the Fianna are broken up at last, after hundreds of years of hunting, it is doubtful
that Finn dies at all, and certain that he comes again in some other shape, and Oisin, his
son, is made king over a divine country. The birds and beasts that cross his path in the
woods have been fighting men or great enchanters or fair women, and in a moment can
take some beautiful or terrible shape. We think of him and of his people as great-bodied
men with large movements, that seem, as it were, flowing out of some deep below the nar­
row stream of personal impulse, men that have broad brows and quiet eyes full of con­
fidence in a good luck that proves every day afresh that they are a portion of the strength
of things. They are hardly so much individual men as portions of universal nature, like the
clouds that shape themselves and reshape themselves momentarily, or like a bird between
two boughs, or like the gods that have given the apples and the nuts; and yet this but
brings them the nearer to us, for we can remake them in our image when we will.

Oisin is not a sun-god and Niamh is not a moon-goddess; though the
lovers are constantly associated with sun and moon, it is usually through
simile. So Niamh, not being the moon, hurries Oisin to the place where
she "would be when the white moon climbs, / The red sun falls and the
world grows dim" (p. 413). As we have seen from the notes to
The Wind Among the Reeds, Yeats thought of the symbolism of sun and
moon as inherent in the story he was retelling, and in this symbolism
Yeats discovered aesthetic implications:

Old writers had an admirable symbolism that attributed certain energies to the influence
of the sun, and certain others to lunar influences. . . . I myself imagine a marriage of the
sun and the moon in the arts I take most pleasure in; and now bride and bridegroom but
exchange, as it were, full cups of gold and silver, and now they are one in a mystical
embrace . . . in supreme art . . . there is the influence of the sun (as well as the moon)

25. The Man and the Masks, p. 137.
27. These lines and another similar one were added in 1895 with the intent, it appears, of strengthen­
ing the symbolism of sun and moon. See Variorum Poems, p. 9, ll. 102-105, and p. 12, l. 152. Morton
Seiden sees Oisin as sun-god, Niamh as moon-goddess and the demon as "the sun in its evening or win­
and the sun brings with it not merely discipline but joy; for its discipline is not of the kind the multitudes impose upon us by their weight and pressure, but the expression of the individual soul turning itself into a pure fire and imposing its own pattern. . . . When we have drunk the cold cup of the moon's intoxication, we thirst for something beyond ourselves. . . .

Yeats's distinction between solar and lunar influences is the main feature in the symbolic structure of "The Wanderings of Oisin." At the beginning and the end of the poem we see the poet in the mortal world and in his solar aspect. The world of the greater part of the poem has immortal, supernatural and lunar associations. The exploration of the second, lunar, world is the record of a poet's quest for something beyond himself or, as he might have said later, an antithetical self.

Yeats identified himself with Oisin and it is not difficult to reverse the process to some extent and to see the three islands not only as stages in a poet's progress but as phases of Yeats's early career in particular. However, Ellmann's association of Sligo, London and Howth periods of Yeats's youth with the three islands is much too closely biographical and, in the case of the second book, it carries the implication of a monstrous inflation of a boyhood experience.

The allegory of the first book is straightforward. On the Island of Dancing, Oisin experiences a youthful and sublime harmony with nature. Aengus's house of "wattles, clay and skin" (p. 417) reminds us that this place draws its scenery largely from Slish Wood and Lough Gill and has literary associations with Walden Pond. The shells on the shore symbolize, as elsewhere in Yeats's early poetry, introspection; and to a similar effect the birds in the trees ponder "in a soft vain mood / Upon their shadows in the tide" (p. 415). With their "melting hues," the shells, and with their "rainbow light," the birds express a passive and indolent harmony. The more active harmony of art and nature is signified by the graceful boats of the immortals, which have

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carven figures on their prows
Of bitterns, and fish-eating stoats,
And swans with their exultant throats. (p. 415)
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The allegory of youthful ecstasy is expressed through rhythm, symbol and statement. Aengus apprises Oisin of the essential principle of the Ever-Young, that "joy is God and God is joy" (p. 418). His people embody it. They rejoice in the limitless possibilities of natural good and perfect freedom. This allegorical dream is of the natural world freed from the conditions of time and change. On the Island of Dancing, no "kingfisher turns to a ball of dust" (p. 422). But Oisin, as poet, cannot express such a world. When he sings of "human joy," his hearers weep and snatch his harp away. The poet, it appears, cannot escape his

30. In 1888, the house was made of "antlers and shaggy skin." See Variorum Poems, p. 17, l. 249.
mortal sadness, a condition personified as "the grey wandering osprey Sorrow" (p. 418). Without it, one might say, there would be no poetry, merely rhythm. The figure of the predatory osprey, or sea-hawk, functions by contrast with the other birds on the island and suggests also Oisin's longing for the exhilaration of battle.

The youthful period ends and the poet continues his quest for some state that will satisfy his mortal nature, seeking now for danger, uncertainty and the self-assertion "equal to good or grievous chance" (p. 421) that they call forth. So he proceeds to the Island of Victories.

The second book is the most obscure. After he had written it, Yeats feared that he might have been "like the people who dream some wonderful thing and get up in the middle of the night and write it and find next day only scribbling on the paper." It was the most inspired and poetic (though not the most artistic) part of the poem, he thought, "a kind of vision." The writing of it left him exhausted. 31

In part, the allegory of each book works by a set of contrasts with the others. So on the approach to the second island the sea is no longer smooth and clear, but turbulent; and Niamh's song, which had been sweet and comforting on the way to the first island, is now sensual and exhilarating. But when she sings of the marriages of fairies with men, which were possible in ancient times, "before God was," tears trouble her song. We are in an historical middle age, in which the regulation of divine and natural laws have broken up the old freedoms. And in a smaller figure we have an individual middle age, with its ambition, struggles, choices, strength and sensuality. There are, of course, "middle ages" to every period of life, not just in the one life-span.

More than half the second book is a prelude to its main action, Oisin's battles with the demon, and for a moment I pass over the prelude to tackle interpretatively the demon himself. When, after a night of waiting, the demon still has not appeared to Oisin, Oisin seeks him out, and a figure more pathetic than fearsome is discovered:

on a dim plain  
A little runnel made a bubbling strain,  
And on the runnel's stony and bare edge  
A dusky demon dry as withered sedge  
Swayed, crooning to himself in unknown tongue:  
In a sad revelry he sang and swung  
Bacchant and mournful, passing to and fro  
His hand along the runnel's side, as though  
The flowers still grew there. . . . (p. 428)

This dried-up, self-contradictory little demon, pretending, or suffering the delusion, that he is still tending a living garden, talking to himself in a private language, is inescapably a critic or scholar—as seen of course by a poet. The runnel or stream in this passage symbolizes, as elsewhere

in Yeats, fertility and creativity. The barrenness of the demon's little waste-land, not being attributable to lack of water, seems to be due to the ministrations of the demon himself. Yeats stated the condition of which the description of the demon is an allegorical elaboration, as I read it, in an essay of 1886: "If Ireland has produced no great poet, it is not that her poetic impulse has run dry, but because her critics have failed her. . . . The essay goes on to mount a vigorous and rather nasty attack on Professor Dowden, who, it is variously implied or stated, had been too concerned for his professorial emolument, too West-Britonish, too unpatriotic, too selfish and indifferent to encourage Sir Samuel Ferguson, and who was therefore responsible for the latter's failure to live up to his promise as an Irish poet. Poor Dowden becomes the epitome of the Irish critic, characterized as possessing tact, industry and judgement but no convictions; one who keeps his "ears to the ground listening to the faintest echo of English thought." With the superb pomposity of youth, Yeats rounds on his chosen antagonist: "It is a question whether the most distinguished of our critics, Professor Dowden, would not only have more consulted the interests of his country, but more also, in the long run, his own dignity and reputation, which are dear to all Irishmen, and if he had devoted some of those elaborate pages which he has spent on the much bewritten George Eliot, to a man like the subject of this article." In *Autobiographies*, the attack on Dowden is more subtle and more damaging, with Yeats using his father's disparagements as both sword and shield. In the pattern of that work, Dowden and O'Leary are presented as contraries: the first a provincial, discouraging and narrow personality; the second an Irishman of generous sympathies and noble mind.

Dowden was probably the original on which the allegorical caricature was based and, though it is only necessary to the allegory that the demon should be some figure similar to the Dowden portrayed elsewhere, the particular correspondence can be pursued further. Like the demon in the poem, Dowden in *Autobiographies* is described as "withering in barren soil." Dowden "seemed to condescend to everybody and everything," an attitude for which the demon's transformation into a massive fir tree would be an appropriate figure. Another of the demon's forms, that of "a drowned dripping body" (p. 428), evokes a response which has something in common with the effect upon Yeats of Dowden's admission that he completed his book on Shelley for the sake of an old promise, though he had lost his liking for the subject. That

34. Ibid., p. 924; Frayne, pp. 88-89.
36. Ibid., p. 87.
37. Originally "a nine days' corpse." See *Variorum Poems*, p. 40, l. 179.
revelation "chilled" the young Yeats, and the book itself betrayed its author as "a conscientious man hiding from himself a lack of sympa­thy." The very idea of the demon's transformations may owe some­thing to Yeats's view of Dowden as a man who adopted "a professional pose," and who would not trust his nature. The demon is a cold one and Dowden's emotional nature was deficient too; he "believed too much in the intellect," said J. B. Yeats. And if we inquire into the demon's detached attitude to the lady he holds captive, that too has something in common with Yeats's idea of Dowden as a repressed sensu­alist who "confessed . . . that he would have wished before all things to have been the lover of many women." But whatever the relationship between Yeats's Dowden and his demon, the perceptions that went into the two characterizations were surely related.

To return to the beginning of the second book and the castle, with its elaborately symbolic architecture, in which the demon lives. Ellmann sees its "dark towers" (p. 423) as a "symbolical England seen through Irish eyes," and the demon and the lady as "the symbolic portrayal of English oppression of Ireland." The demon and the castle in this inter­pretation have the same allegorical function, and there are other objec­tions to it. One of them is that Manannan, the Celtic sea-god "who reigned over the country of the dead," originally built the castle for his subjects, a "mightier race" (p. 427) which has vanished along with Man­annan himself. A relic of an age long preceding the Christian dispensa­tion with its "milk-pale face / Under a crown of thorns and dark with blood" (p. 427) (as Oisin notes in an aside to Saint Patrick), it is also older than the heroic age. The castle dates from a time "when gods and giants warred" (p. 424) and beyond that, one of the statues flanking its great stairway has been in existence "Since God made Time and Death and Sleep" (p. 424). The castle has clear Fomorian associations (primar­ily through Manannan himself but also through "death and dismay and cold and darkness") and in his assault on it, Oisin (who enters the castle to "the flashing beat / Of Danaan hooves" in the first version) is continuing the battle that has been fought since the beginning of the world:

I suggest that the battle between the tribes of the goddess Danu, the powers of light, and warmth, and fruitfulness, and goodness, and the Fomor, the powers of darkness, and cold, and barrenness, and badness upon the Towery Plain, was the establishment of the habitable world, the rout of the ancestral darkness; that the battle among the Sidhe for the harvest is the annual battle of summer and winter; that the battle among the Sidhe at a

38. Autobiographies, p. 87.
39. Ibid., p. 95.
40. Ibid., p. 86.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 235.
43. The Man and the Masks, p. 51.
44. See Variorum Poems, p. 808.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p. 31, l. 31.
man's death is the battle of life and death; and that the battle of the Black Pig is the battle between the manifest world and the ancestral darkness at the end of all things; and that all these battles are one, the battle of all things with shadowy decay. 47

At the end of the second book, we hear the demon's song of decay:

I hear my soul drop down into decay,
And Manannan's dark tower, stone after stone,
Gather sea-slime and fall the seaward way,
And the moon goad the waters night and day,
That all be overthrown. (pp. 430-31)

Oisin against the demon, light against dark, Danaan against Fomorian, poet against critic, even Yeats against Dowden—all the battles are one.

At the entrance to the castle, Oisin and Niamh pass between pillars, the contraries that uphold the world, perhaps, as the pillars are in the symbolism of the Order of the Golden Dawn; in Regardie's account:

the eternal balance of light and darkness which gives force to visible nature. 48

They also pass between two statues which seem to represent the eternal and the temporal, ideal and actual, spiritual and physical or all such antinomies. 49 At first the only light comes from the "surging phosphorus" (p. 424) stirred up by their feet (p. 427)—perhaps the light of experience—and as they proceed, moonlight (imagination?), a torch and the sword of Manannan, both weapon and a light, further repel the darkness. The torch and Manannan's sword of light are brought to Oisin by the lady he releases.

The lady is heard before she is seen, singing of her brothers (at home, with her sisters, "in ancient Eri" explicitly in the first version and implicitly in the same place in later ones). 50 The appearance of this Irish lady is characterized by faint and sickly light, "funeral tapers" and "moonlit vapours" (p. 425). The demon has chained her to two old eagles and she has lost all hope of deliverance. The lady is clearly, though feebly, on the side of light. The torch that she brings to Oisin after her release is, I suggest, inspiration; Manannan's sword of light, Irish tradition; and she herself the Muse in her Irish form bound in the chains of a Dowdenish contempt for Irish subject-matter in poetry. And for these suggestions, I offer the persuasion that they cohere in an intelligible allegory and are partly traditional poetic properties. As for the eagles with "their dim minds . . . on ancient things," they are like the eagle in P. W. Joyce's version of the "Voyage of Maildun," 51 except in their failure to renew their youth. Perhaps this difference indicates the significance of the lady's chains: there is an Irish Muse, but she is

47. Variorum Poems, p. 810.
49. The Man and the Masks, p. 52.
50. Variorum Poems, p. 32, ll. 50c–50e.
thought of as belonging wholly to the past until Oisin, like Yeats in the Ferguson essay, comes to liberate her.

The great hall of the castle to which Oisin, Niamh and the lady come is a high-domed "multitudinous home of faces" (p. 428). The faces carved in the stone represent, perhaps, the great predecessors whom Oisin aspires to emulate when he puts himself to the test of the fight with the demon. He waits under the gaze of the past, the immensity of his aspiration symbolized by the sea-gull "under the roof" (p. 426), drifting so high that Oisin's shout cannot reach it. The perfect whiteness of the bird suggests the appropriate Danaan associations. It is appropriate too, in view of the meanness of the character and proportions, that the demon should be found behind "the least of doors" and outside this great hall of tradition.

Between the battles in which Oisin is always victorious but the demon never defeated, the hero is tended by both Muse and fairy mistress, his spirit and his body sustained by "wine and meat and bread" (p. 429). The battles continue until a beech bough reminds Oisin of tranquil moments with his father "white-haired Finn / Under a beech at Almuin . . ." (p. 430). Then Oisin and Niamh depart for the last island, leaving indeterminate the final fate of the liberated but not repatriated Muse.

The sea surrounding the third island is so foaming and misty with "milky smoke" (p. 431) that it obscures the world. And on the island vision and thought are diffused; it is a magic, vaguely mystical world. The thick wood that the couple passes through has none of the vibrant rhythmical life of the trees on the first island but is lifeless. The trees which blot out all detail are those sacred to the ancient druids, hazel and oak. Through the dark portal of this gloomy wood Oisin and Niamh enter the valley of the sleepers.

As the first island suggested youthful life lived wholly for the present and the second a middle age full of the sense of the past, so the third dwells on futurity and age. The skies, like the trees are "dew-cumbered" (p. 434), seeming to presage as in "The Valley of the Black Pig," the moment just before the extinction of the world. In the allegory of the poet's quest, this third book represents a phase in which magic and visions become the chief preoccupation.

Alspach saw the sleepers as "the heroic dead of Ireland," but Yeats's figures do not have the same kind of meaning as those in the sources from which he probably derived them. The weapons of the sleepers are something more than works of art, "more comely than men can make them" (p. 433). The sleepers have a beauty that has not been seen "since the world began" (p. 435) and possess the peculiarities of huge bulk, the claws of birds instead of hands and feathered ears. This

52. See Yeats's note after the title of "The White Birds," Variorum Poems, p. 121.
last feature they share with "The King that could make his people stare, / Because he has feathers instead of hair"—the hero of the story "The Wisdom of the King," whose feathers betoken his supernatural kinship and wisdom.

The key to the symbolic meaning of the sleepers lies in the claw of one of them, "a branch soft-shining with bells" (p. 434). This same bell-branch in the poem "The Dedication to a Book of Stories . . ." is the narcotic which eases but does not cure evil and distracts men from ordinary business and high designs alike. Through the medium of this bell-branch, "sleep's forebear" (p. 435)—that is to say, day-dreaming—Oisin joins the company of sleepers. He has passed into a state of reverie and joined, as I interpret, a visionary company who are the phantasmagoria of his longings for beauty, heroism and greatness; conceptions which like beauty in "The Rose of the World" preexist the created beings who in succession embody, or try to embody them.

So Oisin spends a hundred years in which Fenians and heroes of the Red Branch become a confusion of contemporaries. The dreams are shadows without substance, inactivity confused with activity: "So lived I and lived not, so wrought I and wrought not with creatures of dreams" (p. 438). Oisin here is like the Kevin of The Countess Kathleen:

Alone in the hushed passion of romance,  
His mind ran all on sheogues, and on tales  
Of Finian labours and the Red-branch kings,  
And he cared nothing for the life of man.  

And both Oisin, here, and Kevin are self-portraits of the artist as dreamer.

There are times when Oisin half wakes from his magical sleep, indications of the approach of dawn on one level and of the intrusion of the real world on the dreamer on another. Finally, ending the hundred years of sleep, the exhausted starling reminds Oisin of the Fenians setting out at dawn for the day's hunting and he is moved to action. This time the horse that has borne Oisin on his journey appears unsummoned, for it knows that "the ancient sadness of man" (p. 439) is moving again in Oisin's bosom and that the questing poet, at the end of his dreams, must go back to where all such aspirations start.

The horse is no doubt from the stable of Manannan, one of those which "could cross the land as easily as the sea," and "are constantly associated with the waves." And he is a kind of Pegasus (who was also begotten, be it remembered, at the springs of Ocean and by the sea-god

57. Ibid., p. 41.  
Poseidon, Manannan’s Greek cousin), the supernatural power that carries Oisin to the completion of his quest. Yeats rejected, in the writing of “Oisin” an “elaborate metaphor of a breaking wave, intended to prove that all life rose and fell as in (the) poem,” but the white horse symbolizes some such impulse.

So the dawn comes round, and with it the resumption of ordinary life. One of the most successful passages in the poem describes Oisin’s arrival in Ireland. After the dew-sodden, drab and lifeless Island of Forgetfulness, the sensuous richness of mortal nature expunges all Oisin’s regret at leaving Niamh:

Till, fattening, the winds of the morning, an odour of new-mown hay
Came and my forehead fell low, and my tears like berries fell down. (p. 442)

But when Oisin learns that the old pagan and heroic times have disappeared during his absence and when he sees the degenerate products of the Christian dispensation, he longs again for Niamh. That is to put the matter in its narrative context; in the context of symbol and allegory, it should be expressed in another way: “The desire of the woman, the flying darkness, it is all one! The image—a cross, a man preaching in the wilderness, a dancing Salome, a lily in a girl’s hand, a flame leaping, a globe with wings, a pale sunset over still waters—is an eternal act; but our understandings are temporal and understand but a little at a time.” As three dreams of a single night or as a three-hundred-year history, it is all one; in the poet’s eyes the world is transformed and he is ready now to leave mortality for good. But the act of contempt (helping the mortals with their sacks of sand—their burden of time-consciousness) fixes him in the world he despises. What is the poet to do? To proclaim with useless defiance a view of the world, and of Ireland in particular, that is romantic, pessimistic, unchristian and, in a sense that O’Leary would have approved, Fenian: “I will go to the Fenians be they at flame or at feast.”

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60. “From Wheels and Butterflies,” rpt. in Explorations, pp. 392-93.