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CONSIDERING LIMINALITY AS A PASSAGE TO THE OTHERWORLD IN THE EARLY IRISH TALE AISLINGE ÓENGUSO AND OSCAR WILDE’S THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL

Abstract
An important piece of early Irish literary material, Óengus’ dream bears several similarities with Oscar Wilde’s The Fisherman and his Soul. It will be demonstrated that liminality (from *limen* meaning “threshold” in Latin), as epitomized by the presence of water in both tales, can be interpreted as a passage to the Otherworld. It is the liminal and otherworldly aspect of water that brings into existence the universal human aspiration towards the supernatural unification with the cosmos and the theme of all-encompassing love; recurrent *topoi* in Irish literature from the very beginnings until today. Furthermore, Wilde’s tale is not so much about the “devotional revolution” of religious transformation in a post-Famine Ireland, but an even more universal expression of a “revolutionary devotion”: the Fisherman’s unusual attachment to the forbidden. This supernatural yet human feeling of transition, “in-betweenness” or metaxy makes both tales operate in several dimensions across time and geographical space.

Keywords: Óengus, Otherworld, liminality, metaxy, Fisherman

‘Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his Soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?’

Aislinge Óenguso belongs to the remscéla (or introductory tales) to the Táin Bó Cúailnge (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), the latter relating the legendary fight between Queen Medb of Connacht and the warriors of Ulster for the Dunn Cúailnge (the Brown bull of Cooley). Although loosely related to the Táin, the tale’s crucial importance in early Irish literary material is indisputable. The story survives in a single vellum manuscript (MS Egerton 1782) written by members of the Ó Maolchonaire family (Ó Cathasaigh 1997: 431). The early Irish saga relating Óengus’ dream bears several similarities with Oscar Wilde’s most complex fairy
tale titled *The Fisherman and his Soul*. In this study, it will be demonstrated that liminality, as epitomized by the presence of water in both tales, can be interpreted as a passage to the Otherworld. Early Irish literature often deploys the theme of liminality (from the Latin term *limen* meaning “threshold”) in terms of “the state of being in between separate categories of space, time or identity” (Nagy cited by Bhrolcháin 2009: 57) as represented by borders and geographical landmarks such as mountains, rivers, lakes or even Ogham stones (Ní Bhrolcháin 2009:113). It will be argued that it is the liminal, otherworldly and purifying aspect of water that brings into existence the universal human aspiration towards the supernatural unification with the cosmos, and the theme of all-encompassing love; recurrent *topoi* in Irish literature from the very beginnings to the 20th century. Yearning for the harmony of the self and the theme of eternal love make these two stories operate in several dimensions across time and geographical space. Furthermore, it can be argued that *The Fisherman and his Soul* is not so much about the “devotional revolution” of religious transformation taking place in a post-Famine Ireland, but an even more universal expression of a “revolutionary devotion”; that is, the Fisherman’s unusual attachment to the forbidden. It is this supernatural yet human universal feeling that makes both tales bridge incredible gaps over time and space.

In the Mythological Cycle of extant manuscripts from the body of early Irish literature, the Dagda (the ‘Good God’), his wife Bóann (the River Goddess) and their son, Óengus all belong to the otherworldly people of the *Tuatha Dé*. The divinization of the River Boyne (Bóann) in the early *dindshenchas* already suggests in itself the importance of liminality in the story of this family. The famous Ulster Cycle equally makes mention of Óengus and his supernatural family and generally considers the mystic landscape of the Boyne Valley as an otherworldly location (see photo illustration below, Fig. 1).

![Fig.1 The mystic landscape of Newgrange in the Bend of the Boyne](image_url)
Aislinge Óenguso relates the story of Óengus, son of the Dagda, who falls in love with the beautiful supernatural woman Cáer Iborméith playing the harp each night beside his bed. After a long and persistent quest for his beloved, the hero’s love-sickness eventually gets verbalized and healed by the promise of eternal love in the mystic spheres of the Brú. The two lovers eventually change shape and turn into swans circling thrice around the lake and soaring into eternity.

In this ingenious and concise reworking of the divine love topos, the notion of threshold (limen) and boundaries between dreams and reality, the conscious and the Freudian subconscious, reason and madness, health and sickness, wisdom and ignorance, the human and the supernatural are all remarkably present, and constitute the very essence and beauty of this tale. The division between these pairs of binary poles is epitomized by the presence of water in the tale. Not only is water (the River Boyne and the Loch Bél Dracon in Crotta Cliach (Ó Cathasaigh 1997: 436)) in itself a liminal space marking the boundary between the above-mentioned binary oppositions, but it is also a reflecting medium and a symbol of purity crucial to the story. Purity is also present in the white, subtle and vulnerable figure of the swan, which epitomizes the passage from the human to the supernatural in the tale, since Óengus’ beloved, Cáer Iborméith is able to transform into a swan and her magical power surpasses even her father’s.

Unable to reveal the identity of the beautiful woman playing the unearthly music of the harp every night beside his bed (see Illustration by Ted Nasmith, Fig. 2 and 3), Óengus cannot cope with the situation he is confronted with and falls into a state of ‘stupor’ (‘socht’) (Ó Cathasaigh 1997: 434) and wasting sickness. As Calvert Watkins points out, the ‘socht’ is a ‘pathological state imposed impersonally from outside’ on someone (ibid. 434). The theme of the otherworldly woman taking initiative is also present in the figure of Macha in The Pangs of the Ulstermen, another introductory tale from the Ulster Cycle. The wasting away of the emaciated mortal lover is another key theme also present in The Wooing of Étain. Óengus’ diagnosis is established due to the magical powers and prophetic skills of Fergne, the physician. However, the initial lack of verbalization by Óengus triggers his suffering and bodily decline, delaying the solution to his problem. Gray stresses the importance of the etymology in characters’ names. Óengus literally means ‘lone force’, while Cáer is reminiscent of the term ‘Caritas’ meaning spiritual love (Gray 2004: 23). According to the narratives of Plato’s Phaedrus and Phaedo (ibid. 23), only the soul can grasp the divine that the self yearns for desperately. The best way to strengthen one’s soul is ‘bodily denial and
fasting’ (ibid. 26), hence Óengus’ love-sickness. The term ‘cairdes’ is important because of its dual signification (Ó Cathasaigh 1997: 433). On the one hand, it refers to the sexual union between Óengus and Cáer as foreseen by Fergne, but it may also mean a ‘treaty of friendship’ as a hint at the relationship between the Dagdaí, Ailill and Ethal, or even Óengus, Ailill and Medb, main characters of the Ulster Cycle. As for the latter, the last sentence of the tale was probably added later to the story and the link to the Táin is supposed to be an invention. Ailill, king of Connacht, and his wife, Medb help Óengus win his beloved Cáer, which is why Óengus accompanies them to the Cattle-raid of Cooley. “This is how the friendship between Ailill and Medb and the Macc Óc arose, and this is how Óengus took three hundred to the cattle raid of Cúailnge” (Gantz 1981: 112).

Fig. 2 The Dream of Aengus by Ted Nasmith

Fig. 3 Cáer flees suddenly by Ted Nasmith
While asleep, the boundaries between reality and dream, the conscious and the subconscious are rather blurred in Óengus’ story. As an early Irish dream-narrative, Óengus’ oneiric adventures reveal much about contemporary belief in the Otherworld. Many assert that the dreams of early Medieval Europeans “were not outlets for the libidinous id but entrees to other worlds and realities” (Bitel 1991: 39). I argue that both processes are in operation in this tale. Óengus’ dreams of Cáer Iborméith enable him to experience the supernatural, but also give way to his secret instincts, drives and yearnings. In Óengus’ dream, the passage to the Otherworld is catalyzed and fostered by the presence of water; a liminal space and a medium for purification. The protagonist eventually “finds his woman in a lake in the sid, which was the Irish word for both a burial mound and the Otherworld” (ibid. 43). It is also important to note that in secular literature, everyone had equal access to the Otherworld through dreams, whereas “in Christian literature, the clerical elite tried, albeit not completely successfully, to create boundaries and restrict access to the heavenly Otherworld of dreams” (ibid. 42). Nevertheless, it is to be stressed that in this example of secular dream-narratives, the hero is not an everyday mortal, but the son of the Dagda. Thus, he already carries in himself the potential to reach the Otherworld not only through his dreams, but also in the contemporary reality of the mythopoetic space established by the narrative frame. Although the frontiers between sleeping and wakefulness are rather blurred, it is precisely this in-between state of transition that enables the hero to reach the Otherworld and enter an equally uncertain and vague, floating dimension of the illo tempore.

The desperate quest for wholeness, the timeless and universal human aspiration towards the supernatural are also present in Oscar Wilde’s most complex fairy tale titled The Fisherman and his Soul, in which the object of the Fisherman’s love is an intangible supernatural being: a mermaid. Wilde’s fairy tale is a reworking of the “undiné myth” (Killeen 2016: 172) he encountered through the Scandinavian legends his mother Lady “Speranza” Wilde had translated in her poems. Thus, Wilde would have assimilated the myth in his early childhood spent on “maternal waters” in company of Lady Wilde. Liminality plays a crucial role in A Warning, Undiné and The Fisherman, as well. They all revolve around the story of the mortal lover and their beloved living in the underwater realm of marvels. The Fisherman’s ending is reminiscent of Wilde’s fairy tale:

The water rushes-the water foams-
The cool wave kiss’d his feet.
The maiden’s eyes were like azure skies
And her voice was low and sweet.
And sung to him—she clung to him—
O’er the glittering stream they lean;
Half drew she him, half sank he in,
And never more was seen.

In her notes to Undiné, Lady Wilde observes:

A man without the influence of love may rise to any height; love is not the absolute requirement for his elevation, as it is for woman’s; but, bound to an inferior nature, he must fall, and does fall invariably, irrecoverably, precisely down to her level. There is no hope for him. He cannot resist the fatal miasma of commonplace. He falls for ever into the dull abyss of mediocrity. (Jane Wilde, note to Undiné)

There is a clear-cut opposition between this statement and what Wilde voices in his fairy tale, however. Rather than falling into mediocrity, the protagonist attains a higher level of existence through the otherworldly adventures with his beloved.

The quest for self-knowledge starts with the Artist’s “discursive voyage over the maternal waters” in Barthesian terms (Stanton 1985: 58). Roland Barthes theorizes in the 1970’s that in the process of artistic creation, there is a utopian displacement from the paternal order into the maternal universe. The aim of the displacement is “to recapture the originary bliss in/with the Mother” (ibid. 59) as a utopian desire for freedom. In the erotic play between adamic Son and maternal body, the Artist is in quest of self-knowledge and harmony.

“Mamma’s boy”, this is how The New York Times called Oscar Wilde at the beginning of his lecture tour in America. His “affected effeminacy” (McKenna 2004, 40) would largely be attributed to his upbringing by a dominating mother. As Morley observes, Oscar spent most of his childhood under the influence of his mother Jane Francesca Elgee “Speranza”, who herself was fast becoming a “stage mother” fulfilling herself through her child (Morley 1976: 18). She treated Oscar with extreme care and utmost respect “almost as though he were her precursor rather than she is” (Ellmann 1987: 5). As she wrote to a friend: “I am not anxious about Willie […], but I expect simply extraordinary things of Oscar” (Morley 1976: 19).

As evidenced by the Irish documentary titled Māthair (“Máthair”) about the relationship between mother and son, Oscar admired his mother. Lady Wilde often read aloud pieces of literature including Melmoth The Wanderer written by her uncle Charles Maturin,
Walt Whitman’s poetry, German philosophy and her own poems or translations of poems to Oscar. The almost Proustian involuntary imprinting of those pleasant and blissful afternoon teas in the intimate company of his mother and the blue china pot delicately filled with hot tea did not ever vanish from Oscar’s memory. The products of Wilde’s literary creation and the sexual material embedded in his works are the result of this curious relationship with his extravagant mother. Like the hard-working and ardent nationalist poetess Lady Wilde, Oscar equally set out to write with the ambition to acquire fame and success. It is here that begins “the child’s drama of artistic creation” (Kritzman 1988: 854). As Knox points out, Wilde’s “ostentatious self-confidence” as an adult was a result of Lady Wilde’s enormous confidence in him when he was a child. His strong self-confidence was perhaps further strengthened by “an identification with his father’s feeling of omnipotence”, who carried out legendary deeds as a doctor, as well as an archaeologist. (Knox 1991: 9).

Sigmund Freud uses archaeological tropes to describe the “stratified structure of the psyche and the excavatory work of psychoanalysis with its project of digging for buried truth” (Purdy 2002: 451). Nevertheless, “archaeology, like psychoanalysis, can encompass both retrieval and construction” (ibid. 452).

Both Óengus’ dream and Wilde’s fairy tale deal with the protagonist’s spiritual transformation and the stages of his uniting with the divine as already observed and described by Plato (Gray 2005: 17). The scheme suggested by Plato involves the following main steps: the presence of unearthly beauty in the here-and-now captivates the protagonist; his desperate longing to possess it drives him mad; he subsequently falls in a miserable condition of bodily decline, suffering and emaciation; the renewed quest for the beloved necessitates a guide for the protagonist, who eventually finds himself in a divine place of “in-betweenness” and recognizes the overwhelming supernatural powers of his beloved; he becomes one with her and grows wings to fly away with her into eternity (ibid. 18). To some extent, the Fisherman goes through the same stages until the final resolution of the story.

Rather than the mere depiction of the dichotomy between body and soul, The Fisherman and his Soul goes much beyond the duality suggested by its title. Undoubtedly, the tale raises the question of the splitting of the soul and the corporeal, the emotional and the intellectual, the sensuous and the spiritual, the dangerous and the safe, the forbidden and the acceptable, beauty and utilitarianism, Paganism and Christianity. However, its “polarized sensibility” (Budziak 2008: 223) ultimately consists in the reunion of opposites and also, in
the description of the “in-between” or metaxy (ibid. 219), which constitutes the very essence of human existence and leads to the wholeness and harmony of the self.

Wilde gives voice to the mesmerizing marvels of marine life through a subtle and exquisite description of the mermaid’s beauty. “Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail […]” (Collins 2003: 236). In this inversion of the conventional word order, an anadiplosis can be revealed by the repetition and the insistence on “Silver and pearl […]”, which conveys not only a sense of majesty to the fantastic realm of fairy tales, but also clearly reflects Wilde’s preoccupation with style, his “goût du précieux” (Kohl 1989: 57), “his aristocratic predilection for the select, the exclusive, the elite” (ibid. 57). The depiction of oriental splendour by means of orientalist excess (McAteer 2020: 43) is also worth noting in the way Wilde minutely describes the Sea-folk and the underwater world through the Mermaid’s enchanting song. “And she sang a marvellous song. For she sang of the Sea-folk who drive their flocks from cave to cave […]” (Collins 2003: 236). The mesmerizing power and lure of her song are rendered by long sentences beginning with “She sang of […]” and teeming with juxtaposed parallel structures of nouns and qualifying adjectives such as: “of the big whales”, “of the happy Merman” (Collins 2003: 237). The allusion to the Sirens gives rise to intertextual hints, especially referring to those in The Odyssey by Homer. “[…] of the Sirens who tell of such wonderful things that the merchants have to stop their ears with wax lest they should hear them, and leap into the water and be drowned …” (ibid. 237). Likewise, in Óengus’ dream, music plays a key role in the seduction of the mortal lover.

The richly detailed, exotic, and meticulously “précieux” character of the Wildean depiction of the sea is also rendered by the extensive use of precious mineral imagery, for instance “of the palace of the King which is all of amber, with a roof of clear emerald, and a pavement of bright pearl […]” (ibid. 237) As far as the style is concerned, it oscillates between the archaistic and the contemporary. The extensive use of archaisms and obsolete expressions in terms of direct speech not only conveys a sense of the past, but it also implies liturgical language, especially in case of the priest’s speech. Rather than leading to artificiality or affectation, these archaistic passages anchor the story in a remote past. The sea is indeed the “fons et origo of human life” (Budziak 2008: 228). Not only is it a habitat teeming with fantastic creatures, but it may also represent the point of origin of evolution and the unfathomable past. The ocean is where all life started. The Fisherman completely abandons himself to the beauty of the Mermaid’s song and indulges in the magical realm of “Tritons”,
“big whales”, “Sirens”, “the mackerel, cuttlefish, barnacles, the nautilus, the great Kraken, the sea-lions, the sea horses” (Collins 2003: 237). By following the beautiful Mermaid, “the Fisherman not only dives into the biological fons but also plunges into a mythological no-time (illo tempore, before history started)” (Budziak 2008: 229). The Mermaid’s submarine realm epitomizes a “pre-fallen”, paradisaical state of existence. It is the sermonizing voice of the Priest which warns the Fisherman about the Sea-folk: “And as for the Sea-folk, they are lost, and they who would traffic with them are lost also. They are the beasts of the field that know not good from evil, and for them the Lord has not died” (Collins 2003: 239).

Despite the diversity of species living in this pre-fallen world, the sea is a unique entity on its own, which can be justified by its personification at the end of the tale: “The black sea came nearer, and the white foam moaned like a leper. With white claws of foam the sea grabbed at the shore” (Collins 2003: 257). Likewise, the Soul warns the Fisherman that “for ever doth the sea come nigher, and if thou tarriest, it will slay thee” (ibid. 257). The sea is mourning the Mermaid. It is only when the waves gently sweep away the boundaries between the ocean and the shore, body and soul, ignorance and cunning, that the Fisherman’s all-encompassing love is fulfilled. The supremacy of love in this tale becomes clear when the Soul pronounces the following sentence by the end of the story: “Love is better than wisdom and more precious than riches, and fairer than the feet of the daughters of men. The fires cannot destroy it, or can the waters quench it” (ibid. 257). What the Soul mentions here echoes its corrupt worldly experiences (his stealing of the Mirror of Wisdom, the Ring of Riches, and the temptation of the dancing girl to which the Fisherman ultimately yields, resulting in the Mermaid’s death).

The biblical cadence of the sentences that follow in the diegesis is particularly remarkable. Subsequent sentences all begin with the conjunction “and”: “And his Soul besought him to depart, but he would not, so great was his love” (ibid. 257), which again underlines the fact that the power of Christian love is crucial to the story. Wilde’s tale clearly has biblical overtones evoking “St Paul’s praise of sacrificial love over worldly wisdom” (Budziak 2008: 239). According to Norbert Kohl, “the incorporation of archaic, even biblical turns of phrase” (Kohl 1989: 56) imbue the action with “a sort of magic amounting […] to Christian exaltation” (ibid. 56). Killeen equally emphasizes the centrality of the Church to The Fisherman and his Soul (Killeen 2016: 160). He argues that the tale is Wilde’s response to the process of “devotional revolution” in a post-Famine Ireland, according to which the superstitious rituals of Folk-Catholicism are gradually subdued by new devotional practices of Tridentine Catholicism (ibid. 162). Divine and demonic at the same time, the Mermaid’s
figure epitomizes Irish Catholicism. Serpent-like and feminine, she also symbolizes the Fall, and is thus regarded as a dangerous creature in the era (Auerbach qtd. in Killeen 2016: 167).

I argue that the story is not so much about the social and religious changes taking prevalence during the “devotional revolution”, but rather an expression of the individual’s “revolutionary devotion” to the exotic element of folklore, which takes place in a transitional “mythopoetic space” of timelessness. The maintenance of a dialectical relationship with the remote past not only legitimizes the present in historical terms (Killeen 2016: 153), but it also explains the immense scope of eternal Love. It is through the voicing of the overwhelming feeling of this “revolutionary devotion” that the Fisherman begins his journey to the Otherworld with his beloved Mermaid once his heart is broken. Moreover, “Love itself is not enough to enact reconciliation. It is only through the Love wrought in brokenness that true totalization can be achieved” (ibid. 171). Therefore, my chosen motto (see page 1) deploys the theme of the broken heart and purification, and is taken from Wilde’s ultimate masterpiece, The Ballad of Reading Gaol composed at Berneval-sur-Mer in Normandy after Wilde’s release from prison (Wilde 1898 in Collins’ The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde 2003: 898).

The universality of human feeling voiced in the tale is also evidenced by rhetorical devices, such as the antonomasia the narrator has recourse to. With the use of capital initials, a clear shift is in operation between the generic, common nouns “the Fisherman”, “the Mermaid” and “the Priest” to proper names. Therefore, generalization, universalization and the individual are equally represented in the designation of the characters. The tale’s metatextual dimension implying the process of artistic creation is evident from the Fisherman’s, as well as the author’s quest for self-knowledge and harmony.

The Fisherman’s heartbreak constitutes the climax of the story and symbolizes the reconciliation of contrasting qualities within the human heart. “And as through the fullness of his love his heart did break, the Soul found an entrance and entered in, and was one with him even as before. And the sea covered the young Fisherman with its waves.” According to recent criticism, although “the Fisherman cannot return to the innocence of the sea” (Nassaar 1995: 221), he attains a higher state of innocence “with his soul in his heart, in life after death” (ibid. 221). Nassaar also stresses that—contrary to the ending of Andersen’s The Shadow, which constitutes a major intertextual reference to Wilde’s tale—“the victory of all-embracing Christian love” (Nassar 1995: 222) in The Fisherman and his Soul is Wilde’s deliberate response to Andersen’s “nihilistic values” (ibid. 222). Indeed, The Shadow represents an anomaly in the body of Andersen’s tales since it ends with the triumph of evil:
the vicious Shadow manages to master the learned man and eventually destroys him. Conversely, the Christian framework in Wilde’s tale offers a hope of salvation.

Wilde insinuates that the very essence of human existence is to be found in the whole: man needs to encompass all the three entities that are present in his self: the body, the soul and the heart, the latter being the locus of his love. Only then can he reach a state of completeness, even if it is an intermediate position on the boundaries between the “Apeiron (or arche or primal chaos) and the Nous (or wisdom as divine intelligence)” (Budziak 2008: 242) symbolizing the two extremes between which a human being occupies a transitional zone (that is “the in-between or metaxy”, according to the metaphors established by Eric Voegelin.) Neither the naivety and innocence of the submarine realm (the Apeiron), nor the corrupt world of the Soul (the Nous) is enough to make a human being complete. The notion of love is central to the accomplishment of wholeness. This tale is therefore a celebration of metaxy. Rather than being two separate and compartmentalized units, the sea and the land, the body and the soul are empty without each other.

As critics further observe, “Isolated from each other, the purely emotional and the merely intellective, or the corporeal and the spiritual, are fruitless” (ibid. 244). They are, in fact, as barren, cold, and sterile as the inorganic precious mineral imagery used by the author when referring to the Mermaid or to the Soul (in relation to the Celtic orientalist description of the east and its treasures). Without love, the human being is therefore lifeless. The triumph of love, however, enables him to become a true “living jewel”. This is precisely the engine for Wilde’s tale; the pulsing heart with its systolic and diastolic movements between the polarities of the Apeiron and the Nous; the drone and murmur of the waves that gently caress the shore.

The quest for wholeness, as mirrored in The Fisherman and his Soul, is one of the age-old, elemental features of human existence. Liminality, symbolized by the seashore in Oscar Wilde’s story, epitomizes the philosophical notion of metaxy or the ‘in-between’. In both stories, the love between the two protagonists is eventually consummated and its supremacy over the mundane, worldly values is finally acknowledged. However, the main difference is that the main characters unified by the strength of their love live happily ever after in Aislinge Óenguso, while they die in a physical sense in The Fisherman and his Soul. Nevertheless, the protagonists pass out on the liminal seashore in each other’s arms and consequently live together in the Otherworld, which is also a possible interpretation for Aislinge Óenguso. Having circled the lake three times, the two lovers in Aislinge Óenguso eventually fly to Óengus’ home, Bruig ind Maicc Óic. While Duffy points out that the Fisherman’s Mermaid is a symbol of homosexual desire for anatomical reasons (Killeen 2016: 159), carnal desires and
bodily longing for the other are not explicitly dealt with in either of the two tales. What is essential instead is that the protagonist reaches a higher state of existence through the spiritual unification with his beloved. If the Mermaid embodies the object of homoerotic desire, then this kind of attachment surpasses bodily needs and represents a higher order in Wilde’s narrative. Oscar Wilde’s “Greek feelings towards other young men were spiritual and emotional, more than sexual” (McKenna 2004: 8). Whether heterosexual or homoerotic, the protagonist’s attraction to the Mermaid does not directly raise the question of sexuality. What matters from the point of view of the central message is that it is all about an overwhelming emotion and the consequential unification with the cosmos to attain a higher level of existence. Therefore, *The Fisherman and his Soul* is not so much about the “devotional revolution” of religious transformation (Killeen 2016: 161), but rather a sort of “revolutionary devotion”, that is, the Fisherman’s unusual attachment to the forbidden embodied by the exotic figure of the Mermaid for whom he would give his Soul. This supernatural yet human, universal feeling makes both tales bridge incredible gaps over time and space. In Óengus’ *dream*, the motif of wings and flying represents the spatial and chronological *illo tempore* of the Otherworld.

As a conclusion, liminal space, and the state of metaxy, both symbolized by water, are just as important as the supremacy of Love and its Christian message in both Wilde’s story and the 16th century reworking of Óengus’ dream. The bodily decline of the mortal lover and the motif of the broken heart as later voiced in Wilde’s ultimate masterpiece *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* are crucial to the tales studied, since they anchor *The Fisherman and his Soul* and even the early Irish myth of Óengus’ dream in a Christian context. *Aislinge Óenguso* can be considered as a ‘Christian-Platonist parable’ on the spiritual journey of the soul and an erotic allegory of divine love (Gray 2004: 31). The two stories evoke universal themes and motifs as old as human civilization. The human aspiration towards the harmony of the self and the theme of eternal love makes both stories operate in several dimensions across time and space. Not only do both tales represent a psycho-literary quest for the wholeness of the self through the transitional zone of metaxy, but they also epitomize the Artist’s ultimate aspiration for harmony and self-knowledge which finds expression in the process of writing. Finally, it is interesting to note how the mystic Irish landscapes of the *Brú na Bóinne* and the fictional seashore are interwoven with early myths, tales, and sagas, and how the landscape itself establishes the link between mythology and literature from the beginnings until modern times.
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