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Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

“My Curse Fall on Sweeney”:
A Critical Introduction to Seamus Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray*

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2017/2018

ABSTRACT

This B.A. Thesis has as its object of study the Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* (dating probably from the thirteenth century) in the English translation published in 1987 by Seamus Heaney with the title of *Sweeney Astray*. Our aim will be to make a historical and literary analysis of the text to understand that it can be read as a set of binomials, three types of binomials more exactly: history and mythology; religion and paganism; and prose and verse. The result of this analysis will prove the coexistence and, in some cases, also the conflict between these oppositions.

Keywords: Sweeney Astray, Seamus Heaney, history, prosimetrum, religion, mythology.

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado tiene como objeto de estudio el poem irlandés *Buile Suibhne* (que data probablemente del siglo XIII) en la traducción al inglés publicada en 1987 or Seamus Heaney, bajo el título de *Sweeney Astray*. Nuestro objetivo será hacer un análisis histórico y literario del texto para entender que éste se puede leer como un conjunto de binomios, tres tipos para ser exactos: historia y mitología; religión y paganismo; y prosa y verso. El resultado de este análisis será demostrar la coexistencia y en algunos casos también el conflicto entre dichas oposiciones.

Palabras clave: Sweeney Astray, Seamus Heaney, historia, prosimetrum, religión, mitología.

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INTRODUCTION

In this B.A. Thesis I intend to show that *Sweeney Astray*, an ancient Irish manuscript translated into English by Seamus Heaney in 1983, can be read as a composition of three types of binomials: the mixing of history and mythology, Christianity and paganism, and prose and verse.

The selection of this topic is due to the little attention that is paid to Irish history and literature in the degree I have just completed. I am grateful that my B.A. Thesis gives me the opportunity to acquire more knowledge about the history, literature and culture of Ireland.

We have considered it convenient to carry out a documental research in order to accomplish a revision of the different investigations so far. To help us in this analysis we will rely on some authors who have dealt with the topic before, such as J. W. Hanna's "The Battle of 'Mag Rath': Its True Site Determined" (1856), Feargal Ó Béarra's *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age* (2014), and Francis William Stubbs' "Early Monastic History of Dromiskin, in the County of Louth" (1897). Despite not being the only authors who have dealt with issues that relate to the topics and events in *Sweeney Astray*, they have been nevertheless the most important ones for our analysis, as we will see henceforth. It is necessary to mention that, although there are authors who deal with issues related to our text, we have no record that anyone has done a study like this one we are presenting.

Our work is structured in two main sections. The first section will be dedicated to listing the different manuscripts with the Irish original and translations of the manuscript into English. The second section will treat the description and study of *Sweeney Astray*, and will be divided in three large parts: the coexistence of history and

mythology, the coexistence and conflict between paganism and religion, and finally the analysis of prose and verse conforming the same text.

As for the methodology, what we will do is a close reading of the text we have chosen as the object of study, *Sweeney Astray*, to know its parts, its style, its story and characters, and its characteristics. This reading will entail a parallel reading of historical sources to know to what extent we can know the historicity or ahistoricity of the events and characteristics that populate the story.. The best known sources we will use for this are the Annals of Ireland: the *Annals of Tigernach*, the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Chronicum Scotorum*.

At the end of my B.A. Thesis, we will present the conclusions drawn from the analysis made in the previous sections. We will analyze the hypotheses set out at the beginning of this research to finally draw a global conclusion based on what we have studied.

1. MANUSCRIPTS AND TRANSLATIONS

The different copies of the original manuscripts containing the Irish original of *Buile Suibhne* and the different translations into English are the object of interest in this first chapter, as a contextualization for our analysis of Seamus Heaney's 1983 translation of this thirteenth century text (at least, that is considered to be the most probable date of composition).

According to Feargal Ó Béarra's chapter "The Literary Transmission of Buile Suibhne" in the book *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, edited by Albrecht Classen, the conventional number of copies of the manuscript is reduced to three, which are as follows: the Royal Irish Academy B iv 1, pp. 82a-95b, which was copied between the years 1671 and 1675 by Dáibhidh Ó Duibhgeannáin; the Royal Irish Academy K 44, pp. 131 - 180, which was copied by Tomhaltach Mac Muirghiosa between the years 1721 and 1722; and the Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels 3410, fol. 59a- 61b, which was copied by Mícheal Ó Cléirigh in the year 1629 (245).

However, in spite of the existing versions just mentioned above, according to Ó Béarra, the only valid versions correspond to the first two ones which we have described, that is to say, the two versions which belong to the Royal Irish Academy, dismissing the third one, since according to Classen "the third and oldest manuscript is not a copy of the text at all (...) it is rather a transcript of information relevant to the life of Saint Rónán Fionn mac Bearaigh taken from another, longer source. (...) We have, therefore, really only two surviving manuscripts of *Buile Suibhne*" (245).

The different translations of the manuscript from Irish into English are classified into two modern editions. The first one is *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne) being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt, a Middle-Irish Romance*, edited with a translation, an introduction, notes, and a glossary by J.G. O' Keeffe. It was published in 1913 by the Irish Texts Society. The second translation is *Sweeney Astray*, the edition which we are

dealing with. It was published in 1983 by Field Day Theatre Company in Ireland and in 1984 by Faber and Faber in London.

2. DESCRIPTION AND STUDY OF *SWEENEY ASTRAY*

By way of introduction, we begin with a general overview of the main themes and events in *Sweeney Astray* as rendered by Seamus Heaney. In this text two main characters are presented, around which the story that it narrates is developed. On the one hand we have Sweeney, a King of Ireland who ruled over a pagan reign. On the other hand, we also have Ronan Finn, a cleric who strives to further the process of Christianization of Ireland. Thus, the story revolves around a conflict that takes place between these two main characters, Sweeney and Ronan, in which Sweeney disobeys the orders established by the cleric and attacks him. As a consequence, Ronan cursed Sweeney to become a bird. Then, in the shape of a bird, Sweeney wanders through different palaces of Ireland, escaping a number of dangers to, in the end, give in to the new Christian religion and ask for God's forgiveness for his pagan life.

The text is divided into three main themes: the saint's curse, the madness and roaming, and the death according to the prophecy. It is written both in prose and verse. The part corresponding to the text in prose is composed by the narrator's voice telling us facts, battles, descriptions, and including some dialogues. The part corresponding to the text in verse is composed by monologues given by some characters such as Ronan, Moling and Sweeney; dialogues between some characters such as Sweeney and Donal; Sweeney and Eorann; Sweeney and Lurchseachan; Sweeney and the Hag; Sweeney and the Man of the Wood; Sweeney and the cleric; and Sweeney and Moling; and also descriptions in the narrator's voice. The distinguishing features of the prose and verse sections will be discussed in the third section of this chapter.

In what follows, we will study the three dichotomies that make up the poem: the coexistence of history and mythology, the coexistence and conflict between Christianity and paganism, and the mixture between poetry and prose.

2.1. Coexistence of history and mythology

At this point we are going to deal with both historical and mythological events at the same time and, really, the main point is to find out to what extent these two factors are mixed. On the one hand, the author mentions places, events and even characters that could be either the product of his imagination or real. On the other hand, the story shows real events through real characters, and adds real facts that make it credible.

Both historical and literary characters come together in this work. We know that the mixing of reality and fiction in *Sweeney Astray* is something irrefutable. We will see how along with a historical event, such as the Battle of Mag Rath, some characters are introduced whose historicity or fictionality is in debate. The same duality between reality and invention is evident in the cast of the characters and the locations.

The first thing which we know that is real in this text is the Battle of Mag Rath. This battle is said to have taken place in AD 637, or even in AD 639, in Moira, a village in current Northern Ireland, and was fought by “Donal, son of Aodh” (King Domnall II) and “Congal Claon, son of Scannlan” (King Congal of Ulster) (Heaney, 6). As we have said, we know that the battle was real, and this is because it appears in several documents which we are going to treat now. If we take a look at the *Chronicum Scotorum*, we see references to the Battle of Mag Rath: “The battle of Mag Rath won by by Donall son of Aed and the sons of Aed Sláine but Domnall son of Aed ruled Temair at that time, in which fell Congal Caoch King of Ulaid and Faoulchi son of Airmedach King of Mide on a counterattack, with many nobles” (CS637). Apart from that, in the *Annals of Tigernach*, in section 1 of the year 639, we can see a reference to this battle. This section in the Annals postulates the following: “The Battle of Moira gained by Domhnall son of Aodh and in which fell Congal Caoch King of Ulaid and Faolchui with many nobles, among who fell Suibhne son of Colman Cuar” (T639.1).

The Battle of Mag Rath plays a very important role in the events told in *Sweeney Astray*, since it is the fact on account of which all the events spark, and the place where the curse of Sweeney begins. On the other hand, J. W. Hanna, in his essay “The Battle of ‘Mag Rath’: Its True Site Determined” holds that, as we have said, the Battle of Moira has historical evidences in the Irish annals. Hanna recalls that Charles O’Connor’s view that Mag Rath was in the present Moira, in the county of Down, has been unquestionably accepted. Nevertheless, Hanna gives an alternative version of the placement of Mag Rath by analyzing other authors, chronicles and topography. His arguments lie along these lines: “Whether this was the Mag Rath of the Battle or not, it is perfectly manifest that the description contains no clear indication to point out where Magh Rath was” (58); “Moira would be too contiguous to Duneight for the halting-place between the later and Newry” (58); “About a mile directly north-east of the Town of Newry, on the banks of the river Glenree, nigh its influence with the river which has its source in Derrylackagh, lies the great mount called the Crown Rath” (59); “Again, Newry is described as being in the abundant track of the hosts, and therefore in the immediate vicinity of the battle, while it is exactly south-west from the Rath” (60). In this way, and supporting those arguments, he establishes the possibility that the Battle of Mag Rath did not take place in Moira but in the vicinity of the Crown Rath beside Newry (61).

Is there also historical evidence for the two main characters of the story, Sweeney and Ronan Finn?

Ronan is the saint who curses Sweeney to being a bird during the rest of his life. We know that Ronan is a saint of Ireland, and in this tale he is represented as a cleric who went through Ireland christianizing the cities and villages. He is mentioned in *The Book of Lismore*, an Irish manuscript of the fifteenth century. This book contains several stories, among which predominate the lives of the saints. In particular, his name is quoted in life 12 of the Book: macaibh & Domhnall & Feradhach & Mael Cathaigh & Ronan & Suibhne (section 4756). There is also historical evidence of Ronan in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, in which there is an article by Major-General Francis William Stubbs. It states that Saint Ronan existed and his name

is still remembered in Ireland, and mentions his participation in the battle of Moira: “He is said to have suffered an indignity at the hands of Suibhne, son of Colman Cuar, prince of Dalaraida, whom he denounced; in consequence of which Suibhne went mad after the Battle of Mag Rath (Moira)” (103). It also mentions his appearance in the *Annals of Tigernach*, and also that he died in the year 664 of pestilence. Apart from those sources, Ronan is also mentioned in the *Martyrologium Dungallense*, the calendar of the saints of Ireland, and there we can find two Ronans. The first one, in May 23 (22.B):

Ronan Finn, he is of the race of Colla-dá-chrioch, according to the poem which is called Naemhshenchus of the saints of Inis Fáil. This is the Ronan who cursed Suibhne, son of Colman Cuar, king of Dal Araidhe; because Suibhne had dragged the saint dishonorably from the place where he was praying God, out of the church, and he cast his Psalter into a pool of water where it was drowned, and he did not permit him to remain in the church. For this reason Suibhne ran mad and frantic, as the Buile Suibhne itself relates (137)

The second one, in November 19 (18. G): “Ronán, son of Berach, of Druim-Fionnasclaing in Conaille Muirtheimhne, in Uladh. He was of the race of Laeghaire, son of Niall” (313).

Talking about Suibhne, who has been named Sweeney in Heaney’s translation, he is a character whose historicity has been discussed and is still discussed. Suibhne is mentioned both in literary texts and in historical texts. In terms of the literary evidences, Suibhne is mentioned in *Buile Suibhne*, that is the manuscript we are dealing with, and in *Cath Muighe Rath*, the stories which talk about him and his adventures. As for the historical sources, Suibhne is mentioned in the *Annals of Tigernach* and in the *Book of Lismore*. In the first one we read: “The battle of Moira gained by Domnall [...] among who fell Suibhne son of Colman Cuar” (T639.1). In the latter, we can find three references to Suibhne: in Life 2 (section 949): “finghal tar breitir *Coluim Cille* for Suibhne mac Colmain i cinn cethra *m-bliadam*”; in Life 3 (section 1741): “do-ronad fesin, ár it e ro marbhsat Suibhne mac Colmain Morir, for leth-laim”; and finally in Life

12 (section 4756): “macaibh & Domhnall & Feradhach & Mael Cathaigh & Ronan & Suibhne”.

Suibhne is mentioned in the *Annals of Tigernach* : “The battle of Moira gained by Domnall [...] among who fell Suibhne son of Colman Cuar” (T639.1). He is only mentioned in the *Annals of Tigernach* so we do not have enough sources to state that he was real.

As for the other characters that appear in the story, first we will present those characters that have historical evidence, and then those that do not:

- Congal Claon gave the order to summon Suibhne to go to the battle of Moira. The *Book of Lismore* identifies Congal Claon as Congal Claen, king of Dal Naraidi, the Dal-Aire, in Heaney’s translation. However, in the *Annals of Tigernach* Congal Claon is identified as Congal Caoch, king of the Ulaid (T639.1). In this way, both mention him as being two different people.
- Donal has an important role in the story as he is the one who wins in the Battle of Moira. Donal is mentioned in the *Annals of Tigernach* as Domhnall: “The battle of Moira gained by Domhnall son of Aodh” (T639.1). In the *Cronicum Scotorum* he is also mentioned: “The battle of Mag Rath won by Domnall” (CS637).
- Aodh is the father of Donal in the story. He is mentioned in the *Annals of Tigernach*: “The battle of Moira gained by Domnhall son of Aodh” (T639.1); and he is also mentioned in the *Cronicum Scotorum* as Aed: “The battle of Mag Roth won by Domnall son of Aed” (CS639.2).
- Colman Cuar is mentioned in the story as the father of Suibhne, and it coincides with what we can see in the *Annals of Tigernach*: “The battle of Moira [...] among who fell Suibhne son of Colmán Cuar” (T639.1).

Here we have those characters for which we do not have historical evidence:

- Bearach is the father of Ronan Finn in the story, but we do not have enough information to say if he was real or not.
- Eorann is the wife of Suibhne in the story, but we do not have any evidence of her existence.

In addition to the verification of characters and events, the names of places also participate in this debate between truth and fiction. These places are important given the nature of the poem: Sweeney flies over them once Ronan has turned him into a bird, fleeing from different things.

First of all, we are going to present the places which are relevant in the story:

- Moira (page 6) is the place in which the main event takes place, which is the battle of Moira. Moira is a village in County Down, in the northern part of Ireland. Ronan goes there to establish the peace between Donal and Congal Claon.
- Killaney (page 3) church in the story refers to St. Mary's church in Killarney, in the northwest side of Ireland. In the story it appears as 'Killaney', the place where Ronan was at the beginning of the story.
- Ros Bearaigh in Glen Arkin (page 9): both names are related to Irish surnames, but we cannot find their placement so we do not know if they are real places or not. It is the first place to which Sweeney arrives to take cover.
- Kilreagan (page 10), nowadays Kiltegan, is a village in west County Wicklow in Ireland. In the story the author states that it is situated in Tyrconell, a different County that is the present-day County Donegal. Sweeney arrives there and perches on a tree by a church.

These are two places whose localization we do not know:

- Glen Bolcain (page 13) is another place to which Suibhne arrived. Nevertheless, we do not know if it is real or not, because we cannot find its placement. Glen

Bolcain is described in the story as an asylum for the madmen of Ireland, and Sweeney stays there some time.

- The same thing happens with Cloonkill (page 16), where Sweeney stays one night, and Kilnoo (page 18), that is just mentioned: we cannot ascertain their historicity.

The following is a list of places that are only mentioned:

- Slemish, Mourne, Cooley, Slieve Patrick and Slieve Gullion (page 18) are mountains in Northern Ireland. Slieve Patrick (page 18) is really named “Croagh Patrick”. Those places are not contextualized.
- Kintyre (page 18) is a peninsula in western Ireland.
- Rasharkin is a small village in Northern Ireland, in County Antrim.

At the end, Sweeney arrives to St. Mullins (page 76) where he has a conversation with St. Moling, and he finally dies there. St. Mullins is a village located in the south of County Carlow, in Ireland. Its name comes from Saint Moling, who founded there a monastery. In this way, St. Mullins is a real and verifiable place.

In his coming to St. Mullins, Sweeney is freed by Saint Moling from the curse when he confesses to him, and then he dies. Thus, we can see in that moment Sweeney’s conversion from paganism to Christianity.

2.2. Religion and paganism in conflict

In this section we are going to enter into the conflict between religion and paganism which is present in the story from beginning to end. To put this fact in a historical context, we have to talk first about how Christianization and paganism came to coexist in Ireland.

Until the fifth century, Ireland, on the fringes of the Roman Empire, remained pagan. Ireland was Christianized from the year 400 AD to 800 AD. During that period monasticism was the most common Christian practice. The evangelizing missions and the expansion of the monks spread through the British Isles, where monasticism was born, but also through the continent. In fact, monasticism was born in Ireland with Saint Patrick. He founded monasticism between the years 430 AD and 460 AD. Christianization on the part of Saint Patrick was not accepted by all the Irish Kings. Nevertheless, he was allowed to travel around the island baptizing, erecting churches, etc. Irish monasticism has some specific traits, such as a rigorous individual asceticism, a high number of monks per monastery, jurisdiction in the hands of the abbots, a source of Latin education, and a missionary zeal (the belief that the evangelizing pilgrimage has to be a sacrifice). From Ireland, monasticism is going to expand during the fifth and the sixth centuries towards Great Britain and the European continent; and from this Irish monasticism, the Benedictine Roman monasticism began to emerge in the year 480 AD.

Irish Christianity was therefore essentially monastic: in the texts of the first moments there is no allusion to secular clergy. Secondly, monasticism at that moment was not a conventual association, but it *did* expect celibacy. The conversion of Ireland was quick, and at that moment there begins the duality; that is, the old was not destroyed but progressively Christianized, so now there is a union between the Celtic and the Christian. From this union, our two main characters emerge: Sweeney and Ronan. They represent the pagan and religious conflict that takes place due to this coexistence of paganism and Christianity.

The moment in which Christianity was introduced in Ireland meant a great change in terms of society, culture, literature and belief. It brought Latin into Ireland as the ecclesiastical language, and the Church became very important in that society. Although in the year 500 A.D. paganism still remained present, Ireland was practically Christianized by 800 AD.

Prior to Christianization, the prominent religion was the Celtic religion, which was fundamentally polytheistic. According to the book *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence* by John Wolffe, processes of conversion like this went through different phases: the conflict, the conversions of some parts of society to the new religion, and finally their coexistence for a certain time. He says that “conflict denotes a situation where religious differences are perceived to be irreconcilable” (6). This is what happens in our story: there is a conflict between the pagan king Sweeney and the religious man Ronan. In a religious conflict, each party believes that its belief is the true one, and that the other must submit or disappear. On the other hand, conversion, the second stage, “denotes a change of religious allegiance, including change from secularity or secularism to active religious conviction and practice” (7). Finally, coexistence “could be understood as subsuming the other two categories in so far as it denotes the mere presence of two or more religious traditions within the same geographical area” (7). Coexistence can occur through acceptance, assimilation, or simply coexistence with small conflicts in between.

Therefore, we can transfer this three-staged process to the events which are narrated in *Sweeney Astray*, by analyzing some examples.

He found the cleric glorifying the King of heaven and earth, in full voice in front of his psalter, a beautiful illuminated book. Sweeney grabbed the book and flung it into the cold depths of a lake nearby, where it sank without trace. Then he took hold of Ronan and was dragging him out of the church when he heard a cry of alarm (Heaney, 4)

This extract belongs to what we call ‘the moment before the conflict’, when Sweeney realizes that Ronan is in his reign. Sweeney takes Ronan’s psalter and throws it to the lake. This is an example of the intolerance towards another religion at the beginning of its growth. This moment represents the first moment in which paganism and Christianity coincide in Ireland.

He marched out like that until he encountered Ronan with eight psalmists from his community. They were blessing the armies, sprinkling them with holy water, and they sprinkled Sweeney with the rest. Sweeney thought they had done it just to mock him, so he lifted one of his spears, hurled it, and killed one of Ronan’s psalmists in a single cast. He made a throw with the second spear at the cleric himself, so he pierced the bell that hung from his neck. (Heaney, 7)

In this passage, the ‘main conflict’ between paganism and Christianity takes place. Sweeney meets Ronan with eight other psalmists blessing the armies with holy water without the consent of the former, and Sweeney decides to cast his spears, so that one kills one of the psalmists and another one crosses Ronan’s bell. This fact is a clear offense towards Ronan, and therefore towards his religion. As we have said before, the conflict reflects a confrontation between religions, showing that the differences between them have no solution. Thus, from this moment we could think that there is not going to be an agreement between Sweeney and Ronan.

My curse fall on Sweeney
for his great offence.
His smooth spear profaned
my bell’s holiness. (Heaney, 7)

This is the ‘peak of the conflict’ between Sweeney and Ronan. Ronan curses Sweeney for having profaned the holiness of his bell, and condemns him to roam Ireland in the form of a bird. It is the main fantastic fact that takes place in the poem.

The herd’s sharp spear wounded me
and passed clean through my body.
Ah Christ, who disposed all things, why

was I not killed at Moira?

Of all the innocent lairs I made
the length and breadth of Ireland
I remember an open bed
above the lough in Mourne.

Of all the innocent lairs I made
the length and breadth of Ireland
I remember bedding down
above the wood in Glen Bolcain.

To you, Christ, I give thanks
for your Body in communion.
Whatever evil I have done
in this world, I repent. (Heaney, 83)

After spending some time wandering around Ireland, Sweeney arrives at St. Mullins, where he sees his end come. There, in the presence of St. Moling, he repents of all that he has done during his pagan life, and thanks God for allowing him to enter his communion. This is a 'conversion', that is, the change from one religion to another, in this case from paganism to Christianity. From this moment on, there would come the stage of 'coexistence' between the two religions.

In short, we can see that Seamus Heaney reflects in his translation of *Sweeney Astray* that there were moments of conflict in that change from paganism to Christian religion in Ireland.

2.3. *Sweeney Astray* as a prosimetrum

The coexistences of the Christian religion and paganism and of history and mythology that shape *Sweeney Astray* are paralleled by the coexistence of prose and verse in both the original and Heaney's translation. In fact, this is one of the main features which define this literary text. As we have mentioned in the previous sections, the manuscript is written in prose and verse, and we must ask ourselves if this peculiar mixture comes from the Irish tradition.

The people in charge of the writings in the period in which we are contextualizing this work were the Christian monks. But the oldest literature in Ireland comes from the pagan times, so that the subjects it dealt with were not always to the monks' total liking. With the introduction of Christianity, the monks began to write under the influence of the Latin language and culture, and thus a vernacular literature based on the Latin verse was born. In spite of this, there already existed an Irish literary tradition in which the figure of the *filidh* or 'official poet' stands out. In this way, the profession of the poets was very important and remarkable at that time, assuming that it was a profession that took a long time in learning and a great discipline. Those poems had a great freshness and originality, although the poetry was something monotonous. In fact, some of the poems in *Sweeney Astray* may have been the work of these poets according to Ó Béarra (14); the text was put in writing after the Christianization of Ireland, perhaps as late as the thirteenth century.

As we have already mentioned, this work is composed of fragments in prose interspersed with verse compositions. This literary genre is called *Prosimetrum*, which is the term for a text which is composed by parts in prose and parts in verse, and this is not uncommon at all in the ancient Irish literature; prose and verse were mixed, usually developing the action in prose, and in the parts in verse providing descriptions, dialogues and states of mind.

We will proceed, first, to analyze the part corresponding to the prose fragments. The prose in *Sweeney Astray* is mainly dedicated to facts, battles, descriptions and some dialogues. We are going to find out what the author is using them for:

- The developing of the story: this refers to the events which are taking place, and how the characters face them. The main events which take place in the story are the following: Sweeney discovers the existence of Ronan; the Battle of Moira; Sweeney faces Ronan; Ronan curses Sweeney and the latter becomes a bird; Sweeney runs away and begins to roam Ireland; finally, the story of Sweeney finishes in the moment of his death.

After that, Ronan came to Moira to make peace between Donal, son of Aodh, and Congal Claon, son of Scannlan, but he did not succeed. Nevertheless, the cleric's presence was taken as a seal and guarantee of the rules of the battle; they made agreements that no killing would be allowed except between those hours they had set for beginning and ending the fight each day. Sweeney, however, would continually violate every peace and truce which the cleric had ratified, slaying a man each day before the sides were engaged and slaying another each evening when the combat was finished. Then, on the day fixed for the great battle, Sweeney was in the field before anyone else. (6)

After that, Sweeney rose out of his swoon. Moling took him by the hand and both went towards the door of the church. When they reached the door Sweeney leaned his shoulders against the jamb and breathed a loud sigh. His spirit fled to heaven and his body was given an honourable burial by Moling. (85)

- Presentation of the places and landscapes which become part of the story: the author describes everything that happens and the locations where they take place. In fact, the insistent enumeration of the places is one of the main characteristics of this text.

He stayed in Roscommon that night and the next day he went on to Slieve Aughty, from there to the pleasant slope of Slemish, then on to the high peaks of Slieve Bloom, and from there to Inishmurray. After

that, he stayed six weeks in a cave that belonged to Donnan on the island of Eig off the west of Scotland. From there he went on to Ailsa Craig, where he spent another six weeks, and when he finally left there he bade the place farewell and bewailed his state, like this (50)

The next morning Sweeney started again. He passed Moyfevin and the clear, green wavering Shannon; he passed the inviting slopes of Aughty, the spreading pastures of Longhrea, the delightful banks of the River Suck, and landed on the shores of broad Lough Ree. He spent that night in the fork of Bile Tiobradain, which was one of his favourite hide outs in the country. It was Creegaille, in the east of Connatch. (66)

- Monologues and dialogues. As far as monologues are concerned they belong usually to Sweeney, and he expresses in them how he is feeling at that moment. Normally, monologues precede a poem, for example the following extract:

Then Sweeney said:

—From now on, I won't tarry in Dal-Arie because Lynchseachan would have my life to avenge the hag's.

So he proceeded to Roscommon in Connatch, where he alighted on the bank of the well and treated himself to watercress and water. But when a woman came out of erenach's house, he panicked and fled, and she gathered the watercress from the stream. Sweeney watched her from his tree and greatly lamented the theft of his patch of cress, saying:

—It is a shame that you are taking my watercress. If only you knew my plight, now I am unpitied by tribesman or kinsman, how I am no longer a guest in any house on the ridge of the world. Watercress is my wealth, water is my wine, and hard bare trees and soft tree bowers are my friends. Even if you left that cress, you would not be left wanting; but if you take it, you are taking the bite from my mouth.

And he made this poem:

Woman, picking the watercress

and scooping up my drink of water,
were you to leave them as my due
you would still be noon the poorer.

Woman, have consideration,
we two go on different ways:
I perch out among tree tops,
you lodge here in a friendly house. (46, 47)

The dialogues which are introduced in prose are normally short between two or three characters. They are introduced by a presentation of the situation in prose, and then the author introduces the dialogues blending both the direct speech and the indirect speech, and this is a common characteristic in the story. We can see these characteristics in the following quote, which contains a dialogue between Sweeney and Lynchseachan in which they talk about the personal situation of each one of them:

—It is a pity, Sweeney, he said, that you ended up like this, in bird of the air, without food or drink or clothes, you that went in sink and satin and rode foreign steeds in their matchless harness. Do you remember your train, the lovely gentle women, the many young men and their hounds, the retinue of craftsmen? Do you remember the assemblies under your sway? Do you remember the cups and goblets and carved horns that flowed with pleasant heady drink? It is a pity to find you like any poor bird flitting from one waste ground to the next.
—Stop now, said Sweeney, it was my destiny. But have you any news for me about my country?
—I have indeed, said Lynchseachan, for your father is dead.
—That is a seizure, he said.
—Your mother is dead too, said the young man.
—There'll be pity from nobody now, he said.
—And your brother, said Lynchseachan.
—My side bleeds for that, said Sweeney.
—Your daughter is dead, said Lynchseachan.
—The heart's needle is an only daughter, said Sweeney.
—And your son who used to call you daddy, said Lynchseachan.
—Indeed, he said, that is the drop that fells me to the ground
After that, Sweeney and Lynchseachan made up this poem. (29, 30)

- The transitions from prose to verse: that is, the fragments in prose introduce what is going to happen in the fragments in verse. As we have said before, a poem is normally preceded by monologues. Nevertheless, not all the poems follow this pattern so that it is not always necessary to have a monologue. In this extract we can find that transition from prose to verse, in which the author narrates a situation and then Sweeney gives us one of his poems:

Donal, son of Aodh, won the battle that day. A kinsman of Sweeney's called Aongus the Stout survived and came fleeing with a band of his people into Glen Arkin. They were wondering about Sweeney because they had not seen him alive after the fight and he had not been counted among the casualties. They were discussing this and deciding that Ronan's curse had something to do with it when Sweeney spoke out of the yews:

Soldiers come here.
You are from Dal-Aire
and the man you are looking for
roosts in this tree.

The life God grants me now
is bare and strait;
I am haggard, womanless,
and cut off from music. (10)

The narrator in these fragments in prose is not implicated in the story, but he rather limits himself to narrating what is happening. The tone is objective, since the narrator tells what he sees, what happens to the characters. He speaks in the third person and figures as a spectator without expressing his opinion.

At this point we have to analyze the part corresponding to the text in verse. It is composed by monologues, dialogues and descriptions.

- Monologues by Sweeney, Ronan, and Moling.

The monologues by Sweeney are made up of recollections of something which has already taken place, but also of memories and reflections, feelings, pleas, lamentations, and pieces of advice.

I pined the whole night
in Deville's chapel
for Dal-Arie
and peopled the dark.

with a thousand ghosts.
My dream restored me:
the army lay at Drumfree
and I came into my kingdom,

camped with my troop,
back with Faolchi and Congal
for our night at Drumduff.
Taunters, will-ó-the-wisps,

Who saw me brought to heel
at Moira, you crowd my head
and fade away
and leave me to the night. (20-21)

The monologues by Ronan are made up of lamentations and threats, such as the curse on Sweeney:

My curse fall on Sweeney
for his great offence.
His smooth spear profaned
My bell's hollyness,

cracked bell hoarding grace
since the first saint rang it –
it will curse you to the trees,
bird brain among branches.

Just as the spear-shaft broke
and sprang into the air
may the mad spasms strike
you, Sweeney, forever.

My fosterling lies slain,
your spear-point has been reddened:
to finish off this bargain
you shall die at spear point. (7-8)

The monologue by Moling talks about Sweeney, about his life, what he has gone through, and his destiny, all this at the moment right after his death:

I am standing beside Sweeney's tomb
remembering him. Wherever he
migrated in flight from home
will always be dear to me.

Because Sweeney loved Glen Bolcain
I learned to love it, too. He'll miss
the fresh streams tumbling down,
the green beds of watercress.

He would drink his sup of water from
the well yonder we have called
the Madman's Well; now his name
keeps brimming in its sandy cold.

I waited long but knew he'd come.
I welcomed, sped him as a guest.
With holy viaticum
I limed him for the Holy Ghost

Because Sweeney was a pilgrim
to the stoup of every well
and every green frilled, cress topped stream,
their water's his memorial.

Now, if it be the will of God,
rise, Sweeney, take this guiding hand
that has to lay you in the sod
and draw the dark blinds of the ground.

I ask a blessing, by Sweeney's grave.
His memory flutters in my breast.
His soul roosts in the tree of love.
His body sinks in its clay nest. (84-85)

- Dialogues: the dialogues are usually long and belong normally to only two characters, for instance, dialogues between Sweeney and Donal, Sweeney and Eorann, Sweeney and Lunchseachan, Sweeney and the Hag, Sweeney and the Man of the Wood, Sweeney and the cleric, and Sweeney and Moling.

And Sweeney said:

Sweeney: Hag, did you come here from your hill
to spring me over wood and hill?
Is it to be a woman's ploy
and treachery send me astray?

The Hag: Sweeney, your sorrows are well known,
and I am not the treacherous one:
the miracles of holy Ronan
maddened and drove you among madmen.

Sweeney: If I were king and I wish I were
again the king who held sway here,
instead of the banquet and ale-mug
I'd give you a fist on the mouth, hag. (35)

- Descriptions. They are normally in the narrator's voice; in this way, the narrator describes the situations and how the characters face them. We can find descriptions of events, such as Sweeney's turning into a bird in the first fragment

below, and descriptions of places and landscapes, in the second fragment here quoted:

His brain convulsed,
his mind split open.
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings
and launchings came over him,
he staggered and flapped desperately,
he was revolted by the thought of known places
and dreamed strange migrations.
His fingers stiffened,
his feet scuffled and flurried,
his heart was startled,
his senses were mesmerized,
his sight was bent,
the weapons fell from his hands
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.
And Ronan's curse was fulfilled. (9)

Glen Bolcain is like this:
it has four gaps to the wind,
pleasant woods, clean-banked wells,
cold springs and clear sandy streams
where green-topped watercress and languid brooklime
philander over the surface.
It is nature's pantry
with its sorrels, its wood-sorrels,
its berries its wild garlic,
its black sloes and its brown acorns. (13)

In this way, the author makes descriptions both in prose and in verse to explain or put in context the same things, but he also uses the verse to show the feelings of the characters.

The tone of the narrator is the same as the tone in the prose text; he is not involved in the story at any time.

CONCLUSIONS

The overall objective of this B.A. Thesis was to study and analyze a little-known text from a literary tradition that has received little attention in English Studies, the degree that I have taken. We have structured our study into a number of sections that give us a complete insight of the main characteristics of this text.

First we have focused on the contextualization of the original manuscripts and the translations into English of the Irish text. One we have thus put the version that we handle in its context, we go on to analyze it in terms of form and content.

A brief introduction of the main themes in the text is followed by a discussion of the text's themes and formal features. Our discussion is organized around three binary oppositions that we believe underlie the surface of this complex text.

The coexistence of history and mythology is the first of those. We have studied the main fact around which the story revolves, the characters, and the places in which important events take place. Here, we have contrasted this information concerning the manuscript with the actual information which we have about Ireland at that time, concluding that historical and mythological facts and names are mixed in the story.

As for the coexistence of religion and paganism, we have seen not only their coexistence but also the conflict between them. The reason for this is that the events in the text take place in a moment in which the pagan environment in Ireland is invaded by a process of initiation of Christianization, and both are united in a conflict between paganism and religion that gives rise to the story narrated in the manuscript. The conclusion of this point could be that, in spite of the conflict, there was also coexistence between the Christian religion and paganism, and this text clearly reflects in many ways the beginning of Christianity in Ireland.

A for the formal features, in the analysis of the prose and verse form of the text, we have analyzed the coexistence of these two types of writing in Heaney's translation as well as its meaning and organization. Prose and verse have its specific uses: prose is used for the developing of the story, descriptions, dialogues, monologues, and transitions from prose to verse; and verse is used for monologues, dialogues and descriptions. They are mixed but they have an underlying logic and, moreover, they share most of their aspects.

As a final conclusion, in this text we have found the history and mythology of Ireland treated as if they were only one thing; we have found also the point of view of religion and paganism, representing the two sides of the process of Christianization in its decisive point; and finally we have found a mixing of prose and verse which was not random but had specific functions depending on what the narrator wanted to tell the reader. In brief, the study of Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* gives us a deeper vision of the history of Ireland and shows the importance of the history and the literature of Ireland.

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