

THE OTHERWORLD IN *THE VOYAGE OF BRAN*: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract - The essay aims at evaluating the description of *afterlife* in the old Irish tale, *The Voyage of Bran*, a text which has never been translated into the Italian language and which was written between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century. The essay is organized into two parts. First of all, I will consider the cultural dimension and the general literary descriptions of the *otherworld* in the Celtic scenario, by evaluating the influences of the Christian reality. Secondly, I will carefully analyze the text with a comparative approach and with particular attention on the value of space. I will show how the pagan otherworld is organized in relation to specific narrative elements: the invitation of a fairy, the magic branch, the journey over the sea, fantastical objects and animals. At the same time not only is the Christian echo determined by specific paradisiac elements, such as the presence of virtues and the lack of negative passions, but the Celtic frame encloses and develops a religious discourse based on the birth of Christ, on Fall and Redemption. By means of this double construction, the literary representation reflects the historical change: on the one hand, the place is described in relation to *topoi* which clearly belong to the pagan heritage, on the other hand it conveys a profound Christian message. The conclusion will offer a complete idea of the narrative of afterlife space in literary and multicultural terms, as a result of a suggestive syncretism.

Keywords: Afterlife Spaces; Celtic Literature; Otherworld; Multicultural Perspective; Comparative Approach.

1. A Celtic scenario

The theme of afterlife has always entailed a decisive impact on the literary system arising from unanswered questions and imagined possibilities. The reasons which determined the elaboration of otherworlds are quite diversified and respond to specific cultural needs. In his *Les routes de l'autre monde* Bar asserts:

Le motif pour lequel est entrepris le voyage est également des plus variés : ce peut être le hasard qui y mène, ou les traces d'un animal que l'on chasse, thème assez répandu. On peut s'y rendre sur l'ordre d'un roi ou pour y trouver un mari, pour obtenir la réponse à une question, pour se procurer un objet magique, pour y arracher au mauvais esprit un enfant qu'il a ravi ou un contrat pernicieux qu'il détient, pour rajeunir ou pour retrouver des mots qui vous échappent, et encore parce que les fées ont besoin d'une marraine ou d'une sage-femme humaine, ou pour rendre visite à un ami mort qui est venu vous voir à Noël (Bar 1946, p. 2).

The journey embodies the means which connects literary traditions, although the motivations which cause the departure can be different. Similarly, the space that allows the access to the otherworldly dimension presents divergences:

Les moyens d'accès offrent eux aussi la plus grande diversité : c'est très fréquemment par une caverne ou un orifice quelconque que l'on accède aux mondes souterrains. A d'autres mondes situés au delà des eaux, ou sous les eaux, c'est évidemment une navigation qui mène. Ailleurs il faut suivre une route, ailleurs franchir un pont qui se relève vivement, manquant de vous écraser. D'autres explorateurs ont à passer le pont de verre, le pont de l'épée au tranchant affilé, ou le pont situé sous l'eau. [...] Il existe enfin des procédés plus étranges : c'est une feuille ou un nuage qui

vous emmènent dans leur vol, une chaîne formée d'aiguilles enfilées l'une dans l'autre ou même de flèches lancées successivement [...] (Bar 1946, p. 3).

The arrival is then characterized by «spectacles étranges et symboliques» (Bar 1946, p. 4), while the length of time does not follow the human rhythm. The literary systems share, as a sort of collective unconscious, atavistic *topoi* which are then declined in relation to the authorial intentions and specific narrative constructions.

The Celtic culture offers a considerable number of tales on the *otherworld*, it developed distinct characteristics according to its own system of belief (Byrne 2016, p. 8). The first structural aspect is the journey over the sea. What indeed distinguishes the origins of the Celtic literature is the *corpus* of the *immrama*, which can be regarded as one of the first modern literary forms (Ciconte 2005, p. 270):

In conclusione, la grande esperienza celtica irlandese di viaggi nell'oceano costituisce il materiale di partenza su cui, lentamente, cominciano a formarsi gli *Immrama*; questi, dopo una lunga gestazione orale, arrivano ad avere forme sempre più strutturate, fino alla composizione definitiva e scritta che ha inizio alla fine del VII secolo (Ciconte 2005, 278).

All these literary compositions share the journey over the sea as a recurrent element which takes inspiration from the geographical position of Ireland in front of the ocean and a deriving ordinary practice. At the same time the access close to water implies a cultural idea:

Death and rebirth are equivalent to the end of a period of life and the beginning of a new one. The border line of transition is indefinite. That is why transition in myths often takes place in the element of water, the ever-moving waves of the sea. Nature and the real world are the basis of the belief in rebirth, the belief in life after death, and the belief in the immortality of the soul (Löffler 1983, p. 12).

From this perspective, similarly to some classical meanings belonging to the Greek and Christian tradition (Sobecki 2008, p. 25), the sea represents a border:

The entire voyage takes place at sea, which is in itself already a liminal, and certainly a perilous place. The sea is the perfect betwixt-between; it touches heaven and earth, and stretches from the known world of the Western Irish coastline into the unknown. Humans can use the ocean surface like a road, but its surface is particularly untrustworthy, offering what one might call 'open access' to the otherworld (Hillers 1993, p. 66).

As a consequence, "the island realm across the Western ocean is the most frequent conception of the otherworld in Irish mythology" (Löffler 1983, p. 118). Other intrinsically pagan elements are the presence of fairies who invite human heroes to start a journey in order to reach the otherworld and the proximity of this dimension to the Earth. The female presence in the Celtic culture is an archetype as it perceived land and sovereignty as feminine and "the union of the Otherworld woman with the hero is a literary reflex of the mating of the king with the goddess" (Olsen 2014, p. 58):

En Irlande, les deux mondes étaient juxtaposés et en contacts fréquents ; en principe, les mortels ne pénétraient dans le séjour des fées que sur leur invitation. Cependant, dans la nuit du 1er novembre, à la fête de « Samain », les esprits se répandaient dans le monde des vivants, et ceux-ci de leur côté pouvaient accéder aux ouvertures, provisoirement béantes, des « Sîde » ou résidences féeriques (Bar 1946, p. 73).

Common to all the different conceptions is that they are part of this earth and frequently to be found close to the habitation of mortals, regardless whether the otherworld is conceived as the

residence of gods or supernatural beings, as an earthly paradise, or as an abode of the dead. (Löffler 1983, p. 29)

The otherworld, which establishes a dialogic connection with the mortal realm, can be presented as a beautiful and edenic place or otherwise with negative qualities. Other aspects which belong to the ancient Irish literature and permeate the descriptions of afterlife are magic, which originally represents “a catalyst for adventure” (Saunders 2010, p. 181) and fairy tales’ elements which will also converge in the Christian Middle Ages and in the courtly novel of the twelfth century.

The Celtic idea of the otherworld, as a place to reach after a journey over the symbolic ocean and after the invitation of magic beings, assumes different *nuances* during the sixth century when the syncretism between the pagan heritage and the Christian values becomes unavoidable; Ciconte considers it “il momento eroico della storia della chiesa irlandese” (2005, p. 277). It is well known that the cultural and literary story is organized in relation to specific processes of affiliation and mutual dependency which are translated into the acceptance, the rejection and the transformation of inputs deriving from different encounters and fertile intersections (Curtius, pp. 27-28). As the Greek and Latin aesthetics, which is the basis of the modern one, was strongly influenced by the Oriental culture (Tatarkiewicz 1979, pp. 367-368, p. 374); similarly, the Celtic cultural system was in turn deeply modified by the impact with Christianity, which activated “una cristianizzazione del paganesimo ancestrale” (Cardini 1981, p. 133). This process of transfiguration was developed in a reciprocal sense, as the pagan influence entailed “la personalizzazione gotica dei testi sacri” (ivi, p. 133). The syncretism was not pacific, but it implied specific problems:

In any event, whatever the precise historical background to these legends may have been, the total evidence makes it clear that those who formulated ecclesiastical attitudes tended to make a distinction between benign paganism and malignant paganism and to regard druidism as the embodiment (Mac Cana 1976, p. 96).

Starting from this moment on, the Celtic system underwent a historical change due to the Christian invasion with a decisive reverberation on the literary description of the otherworld and afterlife which is now strongly semanticized in relation to the new encounter. First of all, this modified the practice of navigation over the ocean which acquired a religious meaning, as Irish monks started to navigate in order to find pure meditation (Wooding 2000, p. 17, Ciconte 2005, p. 277). Secondly, new motifs started to circulate in the pagan *humus*, as a response to the processes of Christianization that Latin monks were carrying out.

In relation to this, I am going to discuss the literary result of this cultural and religious syncretism and to show how the Celtic frame conveys a Christian message. The aim of this textual analysis is indeed to show how the description of the afterlife and of the otherworld reflects both tendencies.

2. An example of cultural and literary syncretism

When the *Immram Bruin meic Febail* (*The Voyage of Bran son of Febail*) was written, a strong tension was perceived between the two cultural systems; as a consequence, the text reflects the fascinating attempts to find a mediation and a conciliation. The purpose of the author was indeed to create an aesthetic relationship between the pagan concept of the Otherworld and the Christian concept of Paradise:

His particular contribution was to convey the identification artistically without making explicit statement of it and without distorting the traditional view of the pagan Otherworld, while at the same time contriving to copperfasten the equation of Christian and pre-Christian by drawing a

clear analogy between the Birth of the Hero myth as related of Mongin and the Incarnation of Christ (Mac Cana 1976, p. 95).

From the very beginning the text *maintains* a typical pagan element, it starts with a magical layout: the protagonist Bran is alone, he hears music behind him – music is a central element which permeates the entire narration –, he falls asleep because of the sweetness of the melody, when he wakes up, he sees close to him “a branch of silver with white blossoms”¹, which he takes. Bran is put into the conditions to take that branch, he is clearly guided by superior forces. In the royal house, an unspecified woman appears “in strange raiment”. Up to now, the reader can identify two elements which belong to the pagan reality: the branch, as a magical object, and the woman who explicitly belongs to a different reality, as she suddenly and inexplicably appears:

Twas fifty quatrains the woman from unknown lands sang on the floor of the house to Bran son of Febal, when the royal house was full of kings, who knew not whence the woman had come, since the ramparts were closed.

'A branch of the apple-tree from Emain
I bring, like those one knows;
Twigs of white silver are on it,
Crystal brows with blossoms.

The branch constitutes a kind of symbol of recognition of the nature of the woman who does not belong to this reality but to the kingdom of Emain. The branch, which is perfectly adorned, is the magical object which *connects* the two realities, the human dimension and the otherworld, and its presence activates the suggestive beginning of the narration. The «royal house full of kings» is the third important pagan choice as «that the royal stronghold is one of the points of Otherworld access is also apparent on those occasions when an Otherworld emissary appears suddenly within its boundaries» (Carey 1987, p. 5). The royal house, as a specific human space, establishes a dialogic connection with the otherworld, whose representative is this woman. The *incipit* reflects an enchanted environment on the whole: the hypnotic music, the esoteric branch, the magical sleep of the protagonist, a potential fairy, the royal house: these are elements which originally belong to the Celtic dimension, the beginning reflects on the whole the pagan root of the text.

The following words of the woman provide the reader with a specific representation of the otherworld, which recalls the extreme beauty of this place, it is evoked as a sort of *locus amoenus*:

'There is a distant isle,
Around which sea-horses glisten:
A fair course against the white-swelling surge,-
Four feet uphold it.

'A delight of the eyes, a glorious range,
Is the plain on which the hosts hold games:
Coracle contends against chariot
In southern Mag Findargat.

'Feet of white bronze under it
Glittering through beautiful ages.
Lovely land throughout the world's age,
On which the many blossoms drop.

'An ancient tree there is with blossoms,
On which birds call to the Hours.

¹ For all the textual indications, see Meyer 1985, pp. 2-35.

'Tis in harmony it is their wont
To call together every Hour.

'Splendours of every colour glisten
Throughout the gentle-voiced plains.
Joy is known, ranked around music,
In southern Mag Argatn el.

The reader does not exactly know where this otherworld is, the woman only uses the adjective “distant”. At the same time, although it is expressed as far, the author provides the reader with a specific geographical indication, this island is in southern Mag Findargat. If space is to some extent indicated, on the island time exists in relation to eternity, to a timeless and unspecified present, the woman refers to the fact that this place is “glittering through beautiful ages” and it is a “lovely land throughout the world's age”; it seems to cross the historic phases and stands out as eternal beauty. Moreover, time entails a different rhythm as under an ancient tree birds call the Hours, this indication conveys another fairytale motif. The spatial and temporal dimension possesses a specific and distinct aura that cannot be compared with the mortal realm. The woman starts celebrating this place named Emain: it is delightful, beautiful, coloured, joyful, harmonized by music and a fertile nature. The description, in terms of adjectives and nouns, is organized in relation to the semantic field of beauty, which enriches the spatial environment in different terms. The place possesses another *nuance* of Celtic derivation, since glistening sea horses live there. The woman continues to expose the dynamics which characterize Emain:

Unknown is wailing or treachery
In the familiar cultivated land,
There is nothing rough or harsh,
But sweet music striking on the ear.

'Without grief, without sorrow, without death,
Without any sickness, without debility,
That is the sign of Emain--
Uncommon is an equal marvel.

The author focuses on the lack of corruptive values and negative feelings, but all is organized in relation to a sweet music which seems to permeate this marvelous place. The woman reiterates then again the “beauty of a wondrous land”, lovely, fair, incomparable. More than once she refers to treasures, wealth, beauty, sweet music, good life, wine, which on the whole can be regarded as *topoi* in the description of beautiful distant places. Emain seems to be organized in relation to Eden, to the Christian Paradise. In general, “the Otherworld is seen as the consummation of benign paganism, as a realm in which primitive virtue reigns and which is in a sense a naive prolepsis of the Christian Heaven”, (Mac Cana 1976, p. 98). At the same time, I would add, the agglomeration of magical elements belonging to the Celtic cultural dimension contributes to complicate this perception. The beauty of Emain is in particular due to the presence of mysterious and enchanting components:

'Then if Aircthech is seen,
On which dragonstones and crystals drop
The sea washes the wave against the land,
Hair of crystal drops from its mane.

The echo of the Christian Paradise is syncretically combined with dragonstones, hair of crystals which suggestively drop from the mane of animals. Also later, the woman refers to “yellow golden steeds” and still others that are crimson and blue. After this description, which mixes both

cultural elements, she refers to an event which seems to evoke the birth of a man, who can be regarded both as Christ or St. Patrick (Mac Cana 1976, p. 98):

'A host will come across the clear sea,
To the land they show their rowing;
Then they row to the conspicuous stone,
From which arise a hundred strains.

And later the prophecy continues:

'There will come happiness with health
To the land against which laughter peals,
Into Imchiuin at every season
Will come everlasting joy.

And again she repeats:

'A great birth will come after ages,
That will not be in a lofty place,
The son of a woman whose mate will not be known,
He will seize the rule of the many thousands.

This prophecy seems to evoke the birth of Christ and the figure of Virgin Mary, who will change the destiny of mankind. From this moment on the text seems to acquire a specific meaning close to the religious tone, it celebrates the divine power in relation to the classic Christian formulations:

'A rule without beginning, without end,
He has created the world so that it is perfect,
Whose are earth and sea,
Woe to him that shall be under His unwill!

Tis He that made the heavens,
Happy he that has a white heart,
He will purify hosts under pure water,
'Tis He that will heal your sicknesses.

The pagan concept of the Otherworld meets and develops specific elements of the Christian orthodoxy: the birth of Christ, the unknown father; to some extent, it echoes the virginity of Mary, the omnipotence of God. What is interesting is that a female voice, potentially a fairy, which is part of the cultural pagan system, becomes the expression of a Christian change: this represents a clear-cut example of how much the two cultures are entwined.

After this presentation, she encourages Bran to start this journey to reach the Land of Women. This happens with another magical event, which traces the pagan influence:

Thereupon the woman went from them, while they knew not whither she went. And she took her branch with her. The branch sprang from Bran's hand into the hand of the woman, nor was there strength in Bran's hand to hold the branch.

Both the strange disappearance of the woman and the way in which she takes the branch, which reinforces the idea it is an object of connection, are pagan narrative elements. After a Christian digression, the narrative opens to another Celtic reference, as Bran starts his voyage over the sea. As I have already pointed out, in the Irish mythology the sea implies a passage, Bran is ready to cross a

boundary and to interact with another transcendental reality, this ever-moving environment connects the two dimensions. During this journey, the protagonist meets Mannanan who says that “a son would be born to him”, talking, again, as the woman before, about a conception which is going to happen, evoking the prophecy of the birth of Christ. The voyage over the sea, with all the pagan meanings it entails, is the frame for another Christian discourse. But again it expresses the syncretism between the two realities, as these elements are entwined with a spatial configuration belonging to the magical Irish tradition. In the land of Mannanan it is indeed possible to find sea-horses, rivers which pour honey, he says that this land is not rough, but based on “friendliness, without mutual slaughter”, it is organized in relation to opulence and wealth, “without sin, without crime”. The Christian sense of sin is connected with the enchanting pagan presence of sea-horses.

A spatial dichotomy is then established with the human earth, which is implicitly characterized by sin, as he clearly reiterates:

'We are from the beginning of creation
Without old age, without consummation of earth,
Hence we expect not that there should be frailty,
The sin has not come to us.

As the Land of Women, the Land of Mannanan is wealthy and above all it is untouched by sin. Again it refers to the situation of the earth where everything is based upon perversion and destruction, and later he recalls a new prophecy:

'It is a law of pride in this world
To believe in the creatures, to forget God,
Overthrow by diseases, and old age,
Destruction of the soul through deception.

'A noble salvation will come
From the King who has created us,
A white law will come over seas,
Besides being God, He will be man.

He refers to the double nature of this figure as a man and as a Christ, but under the form of a pagan hero, who is now semanticized in relation to the story of Christ and to the *topos* of transformation:

'He will delight the company of every fairy-knoll,
He will be the darling of every goodly land,
He will make known secrets-a course of wisdom-
In the world, without being feared.

'He will be in the shape of every beast,
Both on the azure sea and on land,
He will be a dragon before hosts at the onset,
He will be a wolf of every great forest.

'He will be a stag with horns of silver
In the land where chariots are driven,
He will be a speckled salmon in a full pool,
He will be a seal, he will be a fair-white swan.

The pagan *otherworld* becomes the spatial basis to develop a strong reference connected with the birth of Christ, but it still maintains typical descriptive traits. Metamorphoses is indeed a specific

characteristic of the Celtic cultural system, as “supernatural beings are able to transform themselves, others of their race, or human beings. Transformations into animal-shapes, mainly bird forms are frequent” (Löffler 1983, p. 22). Bran reaches the Island of Joy and finally the Land of Women; he becomes the queen’s consort. The presence of this woman, who could be the initial one, conveys the pagan origins of the text, as in general the woman of the island realm represents fecundity (Löffler 1983, p. 544). This Otherworld has clearly to do with joy, opulence, fertility, it is a *locus amoenus* on the whole, where the forces of life, embodied by the queen, undoubtedly reign. At the same time femininity implies an original pagan meaning, the two fairies seem to be “genuine manifestations of the same sovereignty goddess, here depicted as autonomous and always in control of events” (Olsen 2014, p. 61). These fairies have retained the original and pagan characteristics of the sovereignty goddesses and they take the hero in an idyllic dimension.

Driven by homesickness for Ireland, Bran’s comrades leave the place but when they arrive on Earth, they turn to dust. To some extent it seems that the reconnection with the human dimension causes the death of these navigators.

Conclusion

This representation of the *otherworld* implies a fascinating syncretism between pagan and Christian sources which reflects the contemporary changes in the Irish cultural *humus*.

Some scholars defined *The Voyage of Bran* as a thoroughly Christian poem (Mac Cana 1975, p. 33), Carney for example asserts that these *immrama* were of monastic provenance (Carney 1955, p. 9). By means of a closer textual approach, I assume, it is possible to consider that different elements, related to the world of magic, belong to the pagan dimension; the text still *maintains* Celtic traits which are part of their rich tradition of otherworlds, providing us with a beautiful example of syncretism. Clear pagan elements are: the hypnotizing melody causing the sleep of Bran, the branch as magical object which connects the two realities, the royal house as point of access to the Otherworld, the invitation of a fairy as pagan sovereignty goddess, the value of sea as space of transition, the fairytale elements which animate the otherworld, such as dragonstones, the value of transformation, the queen of the Land of Women which archetypically recalls the Celtic symbol of fertility, fecundity and sovereignty. This frame opens, then, to a religious discourse, which denounces the Christian nature of the text and the authorial intention. The text recalls the prophecy of the birth of Christ, the omnipotence of God, the holy mystery of the birth of Jesus, the beliefs of Fall and Redemption and for all these reasons the text will be a narrative source for the Christian *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (Mackley 2008; Iannello 2011). In some ways, specific elements of the two cultures converge, such as the lack of negative vices and the celebration of positive values in the otherworldly dimension which characterize both the other pre-Christian tales and Eden. In other cases, the author creates a process of assimilation between the pagan hero and the figure of Christ by means of a pagan literary escamotage: transformation. On the whole, religious elements are developed in the Celtic narrative frame, at the same time, later, as a result of a reciprocal influence, Celtic legendary motifs and fairytale elements will flow in the courtly novel written in the twelfth century (Auerbach 1956, pp. 136-137).

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