

## Keats and Oisín—A Study in Narrative Technique

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What do Romantic poets and modern poets have in common? Is there a common basis for all schools of poetry? John Keats and William Butler Yeats, besides the similarity in name, share a certain affinity in narrative technique that suggests a common ground not only for these two poets, but perhaps for all aspiring poets across the span of centuries. A comparison of their early narrative work indicates a certain closeness between the two poets that may not have been obvious apart from these narrative efforts. Poets, in fact, are human beings just like the rest of us.

Keats' "Endymion" was a major undertaking for a young poet of twenty-two years old. It was the longest poem that he ever completed in his short lifetime. The writing of it was actually done in response to a challenge from Shelley, whose own corresponding long effort was "The Revolt of Islam."<sup>1</sup> All of the major Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, yearned to write long poems of lasting value for posterity. This they considered the ultimate challenge. The fact that most of them are better known for their shorter lyrics (with the possible exception of Wordsworth's "Prelude" and Byron's "Don Juan") is perhaps one of the ironies of history. It was a major blow to the young poet, and some believe may have hastened his early death. Nobody understood the poem well. Also, Keats' good friend and mentor, Leigh Hunt, helped to exacerbate the negative attacks on Keats as a result of his political involvements which were highly unpopular in certain quarters. All in all, the young Keats suffered a great deal.

This poem, like Yeats', is best understood as an autobiographical allegory depicting the young poet's deepest dreams and desires. Endymion is Keats. He is making career decisions that are intensely personal and significant for him and for his future as an artist. The same is true for Yeats and Oisín. Both "Endymion" and "The Wanderings of Oisín" are about young poets preoccupied with their careers. Nothing else matters to them but poetry.

Poetry was to his mind the zenith of all his aspirations; the only thing worthy the attention of superior minds; so he thought; all other pursuits were mean and tame. He had no idea of fame or greatness but as it was connected with the pursuits of poetry and the attainment of poetic excellence.<sup>2</sup>

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1) The story goes that Shelley issued a challenge to Keats to write a four-thousand-line poem within six months.

2) Sir Sidney Colvin, *Life of Keats*, p.31.

A friend and fellow student of Keats, who knew the young poet in medical school a year before the writing of "Endymion," comments upon his single-minded devotion to his future career. I believe that the same thing could have been easily said for Yeats. Yeats began writing miscellaneous poetry as a teenager, and by his early twenties was already very dedicated. He began writing "Oisín" at the age of twenty. The youthful vigor of both "Endymion" and "Oisín" is a salient characteristic of both poems, at times almost amounting to a defect. Neither poet had as yet a place in history. Both were starting on what they considered to be a wild adventure of their own choosing. Both were young and enthusiastic. The results are interesting albeit imperfect.

The four books of "Endymion" tell the story of Endymion's travels, from humble origins, down under the earth's surface, under water, and high into the stratosphere. We learn in Book I that Endymion is troubled in some difficult, complex way:

Who stood therein did seem of great renown  
 Among the throng. His youth was fully blown,  
 Showing like Ganymede to manhood grown,  
 And, for those simple times, his garments were  
 A chieftan king's, beneath his breast, half bare,  
 Was hung a silver bugle, and between  
 His nervy knees there lay a boar-spear keen.  
 A smile was on his countenance; he seemed  
 To common lookers-on like one who dreamed  
 Of idleness on groves Elysian.  
 But there were some who feelingly could scan  
 A lurking trouble in his nether lip,  
 And see that oftentimes the reins would slip  
 Through his forgotten hands. Then would they sigh,  
 And think of yellow leaves, of owlets' cry,  
 Of logs piled solemnly. Ah, well-a-day,  
 Why should our young Endymion pine away?<sup>3)</sup>

It turns out that Endymion only shares the fate of all of his fellow human creatures, but, as a poet, he feels things more keenly. He is weighted down with "reality." The young Keats about this time faced a career decision, wanting to be a poet and at the same time wanting to serve humanity and alleviate human suffering as a medical doctor. He faced a true dilemma. This dilemma is reflected in Endymion's "nether lip" already in Book I. Later in the poem the internal conflict becomes even more pronounced:

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3) Notcutt, H. Clement, ed., *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, by John Keats; Oxford Univ. Press. 1927.

His hospital experience had shown him something of the pain and misery that are the lot of so many people, and his sympathies were strongly moved. Just as Endymion, then, was perplexed by the apparent clash between the appeal of the Indian maiden and the claims of the goddess who had called forth his passionate devotion, so Keats appears to have wondered how he could manage to reconcile the instincts which prompted him to 'do some good to the world' with the desire to achieve distinction as a poet. Obviously the career of a doctor offered plenty of scope for doing good in a most practical manner, and we may be sure that those of his friends who wanted him to continue in that profession would not be slow to make use of this argument. On the other hand he could not lightly dismiss the hopes and aspirations towards poetry that had filled him with such enthusiasm. As we might expect, his mood varied. At one time the sufferings of his fellow man, at another the idea of becoming a poet, made the stronger appeal. This we can see from his letters, and it is vividly pictured in the fourth book of "Endymion."<sup>4)</sup>

The fourth book of "Endymion" includes the "Song of Sorrow," which, along with the "Hymn to Pan" in Book I and the famous opening lines of the poem, comprise some of the finest fragments within the long narrative. Consider the closing lines of the "Hymn to Pan" in Book I as a harbinger of the great odes which were to come shortly thereafter:

Be still the unimaginable lodge  
 For solitary 'thinkings; such as dodge  
 Conception to the very bourne of heaven,  
 Then leave the naked brain: be still the leaven,  
 That spreading in this dull and clodded earth  
 Gives it a touch ethereal-- a new birth:  
 Be still a symbol of immensity;  
 A firmament reflected in a sea;  
 An element filling the space between;  
 An unknown-- but no more: we humbly screen  
 With uplift hands our foreheads, lowly bending,  
 And giving out a shout most heaven rending,  
 Conjure thee to receive our humble Paeon,  
 Upon thy Mount Lycean!

The shepherds are offering their prayers and sacrifices on the altar of Pan, who represents not only the bounty of Nature, but also the renewal of English literature by

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4) Notcutt, pp. li-lij. Mr. Notcutt in his Introduction offers a very thorough and convincing allegorical interpretation of "Endymion."

the new school of poetry after what was considered to be its deterioration at the hands of the neo-classicists of the 18th century. Keats had a particularly low opinion of Alexander Pope. The "Hymn to Pan" signifies the resurgence of English verse by the new Romantics. It is a good example of Keats at his best.

At the end of Book IV the Indian maiden and Diana, the moon goddess, become one and the same entity. Keats' dilemma between beoming a doctor and becoming a poet is satisfactorily resolved. He will become a poet. His service to mankind is satisfied in every way. There is no contradiction involved, and never was. The quality and excellence of Keats' poetry down through the centuries bears out the integrity of his decision.

Yeats' "Oisín" is also an autobiography. Yeats did not necessarily want to be a medical doctor, but he was at this time indecisive and unclear as to what direction his poetic career would take. "Oisín" gives form and definition to the future poet. A remark that Yeats made in passing on another topic altogether sheds great light on his intentions while writing "The Wanderings of Oisín," which he completed at age twenty-six:

Many of the poems in "Crossways," certainly those upon Indian subjects or upon shepherds and fauns, must have been written before I was twenty, for from the moment when I began "The Wanderings of Oisín," "which I did at that age, I believe, my subject-matter became Irish."<sup>5)</sup>

"Crossways" was Yeats' first volume of poetry. It includes "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," "The Song of the Sad Shepherd," "Anashuya and Vijaya," and "The Indian to His Love." It was published the same year as "The Wanderings of Oisín." In "The Wanderings of Oisín" Yeats becomes quintessentially an Irish poet. He settles upon his poetic universe and his poetic personality. He essentially rejects everything that is not of an Irish flavor. His embracing of the Fenians, legendary old warriors, at the end of Book III of his three-part narrative sums up his resolve:

Ah me! to be shaken with coughing and broken with old age and pain,  
Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with remembrance and fear;  
All emptied of purple hours as a beggar's cloak in the rain,  
As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked under a weir.  
It were sad to gaze on the blessed and no man I loved of old there;  
I throw down the chain of small stones! when life in my body has ceased,  
I will go go Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan, Lomair,  
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast.<sup>6)</sup>

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5) The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats; Macmillan. 1993.

6) Collected Poems, pp. 446-447.

Oisín chooses to adopt the Fenians in a very convincing way. The Fenians are ancient warriors from Irish antiquity. By saying that he will “dwell” with the Fenians, Oisín perhaps means that he will tap Irish folklore and history for his poetic identity, and will not seek extensively outside Ireland for his poetic materials. He will look inward for his inspiration. It is a strong statement.

“Oisín” begins with the young hero’s journey to the country of the “young” on horseback with his child bride Niamh from across the sea. Niamh is the daughter of Aengus and Edain, who watched over young lovers.<sup>7)</sup> Book I describes a fairy-tale romance of endless bliss. It includes some of the best poetry of the entire narrative:

An old man stirs the fire to a blaze,  
 In the house of a child, of a friend, of a brother.  
 He has over-lingered his welcome, the days,  
 Grown desolate, whisper and sigh to each other;  
 He hears the storm in the chimney above,  
 And bends to the fire and shakes with the cold,  
 While his heart still dreams of battle and love,  
 And the cry of the hounds on the hills of old.

Oisín and Niamh attain their goal temporarily, but it is short-lived. They spend one hundred years together in the country of the young. Even while they are enjoying their carefree “Danaan leisure” in a land of painless pleasure, though, they stumble upon “some dead warrior’s broken lance” and are recalled to their “duty,” which is in the land of real people and real problems, the world of the “poet.” The poet must ultimately embrace suffering humanity.

But we are apart in the grassy places,  
 Where care cannot trouble the least of our days,  
 Or the softness of youth be gone from our faces,  
 Or love’s first tenderness die in our gaze.  
 The hare grows old as she plays in the sun  
 And gazes around her with eyes of brightness;  
 Before the swift things that she dreamed of were done  
 She limps along in an aged whiteness;  
 A storm of birds in the Asian trees  
 Like tulips in the air a-winging,  
 And the gentle sound of the summer seas,  
 That raise their heads and wander singing,  
 Must murmur at last “Unjust, unjust,”  
 And our speed is a weariness, falters the mouse,

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7) Aengus is a king of sorts.

And the kingfisher turns to a ball of dust,  
 And the roof falls in on his tunnelled house,  
 But the love-dew dims our eyes till the day  
 When God shall come from the sea with a sigh,  
 And bid the stars fall down from the sky,  
 And the moon like a pale rose wither away.<sup>8)</sup>

Oisín hears the call of the Fenians even in Book I. By Book III it amounts to a battle cry. "Oisín" is based on the "Middle Irish dialogues" of Oisín and St. Patrick, a Christian apostle and the patron saint of Ireland, and a 19th century Gaelic poem that in particular describes Oisín's journey to the "country of the young." Some of the symbolism comes from King Arthur.

Book II of "Oisín" is ostensibly based on the Glaucus episode in Book III of "Endymion." There is some evidence that Yeats read and studied Keats. He even makes direct mention of the noble Romantic poet in one of his dialogue poems, "Ego Dominus Tuus:"

No one denies to Keats love of the world  
 Remember his deliberate happiness.

*Ille*

His art is happy but who knows his mind?  
 I see a schoolboy when I think of him  
 With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,  
 For certainly he sank into his grave  
 His senses and his heart unsatisfied,  
 And made-- being poor, ailing and ignorant,  
 Shut out from all the luxury of the world,  
 The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper--  
 Luxuriant song.

The "luxuriant" song would naturally be a strong attraction to Yeats, who also had a strong predilection for Blake and Shelley. Yeats himself was a Romantic poet for almost half of his poetic career. In the Glaucus episode of Keats Glaucus is a fisherman. He dives into the ocean and finds that he can swim. He meets and falls in love with Scylla, who rejects him, and then encounters Circe, who bewitches and enfeebles him. All of this takes place under water. Book II of "Oisín" also takes place water. Oisín encounters a "dusky demon," "dry as a withered sedge," whom he ultimately vanquishes in battle, and departs with Niamh to the "Island of Forgetfulness." The "Isle of Many Fears" provides a stark contrast to the "country

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8) Collected Poems, p. 442.

of the young" in Book I where Oisín and Niamh live in harmony together for at least one hundred years. Book II contains both pagan and Christian references, appropriate considering the pagan backdrop of Irish folklore and concomitant presence of Irish Catholicism. The "demon," "eagles," and "statues" imply a pagan ideology, whereas the various references to God and the "man of croziers" give a Christian rendering to the poem. Yeats' dislike of Roman Catholicism shows through again.

As Keats with "Endymion," the youthful Yeats made important, intensely personal career choices during the composition of "Oisín." For Keats the decision was to become a poet rather than to become a doctor and a surgeon. For Yeats the decision was to look inward for poetic inspiration, to tap his Irish roots, rather than to attempt to become hopelessly cosmopolitan. He would look to the heroes of the past for poems of the future. He would become the national poet of Ireland. Elsewhere, Yeats explains some of the symbolism of Book I when Oisín and Niamh make their idyllic voyage to the "country of the young" where they spend one hundred years together:

My deer and hound are properly related to the deer and hound that flicker in and out of the various tellings of the Arthurian legends, leading different knights upon adventures, and to the hounds and to the hornless deer at the beginning of, I think, all tellings of Oisín's journey to the country of the young. The hound is certainly related to the hounds of Annwoyn or of Hades, who are white, and have red ears, and were heard, and are, perhaps, still heard by Welsh peasants, following some flying thing in the night winds; and is probably related to the hounds that Irish country people believe will awake and seize the souls of the dead if you lament them too loudly or too soon. An old woman told a friend and myself that she saw what she thought were white birds, flying over an enchanted place, but found, when she got near, that they had dogs' heads; and I do not doubt that my hound and these dog-headed birds are of the same family. I got my hound and deer out of a last-century Gaelic poem about Oisín's journey to the country of the young. After the hunting of the hornless deer, that leads him to the seashore, and while he is riding over the sea with Niamh, he sees amid the waters-- I have not the Gaelic poem by me, and describe it from memory-- a young man following a girl who has a golden apple, and afterwards a hound with one red ear following a deer with no horns. This hound and this deer seem plain images of the desire of the man 'which is for the woman,' and 'the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man,' and of all desires that are as these. I have read them in this way in 'The Wanderings of Oisín,' and have made my lover sigh because he has seen in their faces 'the immortal desire of Immortals.'<sup>9)</sup>

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9) Collected Poems, pp. 525-26. These are Yeats' own notes, written years later.

Much of the symbolism in "Oisín" is similarly esoteric. Yeats draws liberally upon his own imagination and upon Irish mythology. Many of the images are romanticized. The particular ones mentioned above occur in Book I and describe phantoms that appear to the young lovers:

We galloped over the glossy sea:  
I know not if days passed or hours,  
And Niamh sang continually  
Danaan songs, and their dewy showers  
Of pensive laughter, unhuman sound,  
Lulled weariness, and softly round  
My human sorrow her white arms wound.  
We galloped; now a hornless deer  
Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound  
All pearly white, save one red ear;  
And now a lady rode like the wind  
With an apple of gold in her tossing hand;  
And a beautiful young man followed behind  
With quenchless gaze and fluttering hair.  
'Were these two born in the Danaan land,  
Or have they breathed the mortal air?'<sup>10)</sup>

"Oisín" is full of colorful images. It shares with "Endymion" and Keats the "luxuriance" of Romantic verse. In "Oisín" Yeats makes generous use of imaginative folklore and Irish legend. Both Yeats and Keats extend their youthful imagination in the fullest possible way.

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10) Collected Poems, pp. 413-14.