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# W.B. Yeats and The Waterboys: The Legacy of a Mystic Animated Ireland in Twenty-first Century Pop Culture

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## **Abstract**

William Butler Yeats was a pivotal figure in the configuration of a new Irish identity, especially after their newly gained independence in 1922. According to him, such national distinctiveness was to be found in the magic essence of a living nature and landscape capable of interacting with humankind, as opposed to the industrial, urban power of the British Empire. Nevertheless, globalisation in the twenty-first century implied an erasure of any type of identitarian traits. For that reason, Irish folk band The Waterboys were determined to restore such roots through their music. In their album *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats* (2011), they were able to combine both the main motifs in Yeats's poems with new musical elements in order not only to reinstate this mystic atmosphere around the Irish national feeling, but also to enhance such characteristics. This dissertation will therefore conduct an interdisciplinary analysis — mainly literary and musical — through the study of several songs included in the aforementioned album in order to demonstrate how The Waterboys succeeded in their attempt to reawaken and reconstruct a distinctive Irish conscience thanks to their selection and modification of Yeats's original poems, as well as to the additional reinforcement through musical features.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, The Waterboys, Irish identity, magic, animated nature.

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## 1. Introduction

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century coincided with the consolidation of the British Empire as a powerful nation and as the voice of the new industrial and modern world. Notwithstanding, after independence was declared in 1922 following a three-year national war, the simultaneous development of a new, smaller Irish nation was also taking place. The interpretation of the nation as an “imagined community,” — term coined by the Anglo-Irish historian Benedict Anderson at the turn of the twentieth century — is key to comprehend how the construction of a new country operates in accordance to the definition of its population’s national identity. In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson provided a definition to the homonymous concept, to which four major distinctive features can be attributed. First, the nation is “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion,” but at the same time “*limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lies other nations” (Anderson [1983] 2006, 6–7). In any case, it is the last two aspects which most importantly enable the configuration of an independent country. Hence, especially after the Enlightenment, it is to be perceived as a “*sovereign*” entity as opposed to the “divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” of the Middle Ages (7). Finally, the nation should also be understood as “a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” The latter description falls under the main concerns of this dissertation, which will attempt to analyse not only how the distinctive Irish traits were articulated in twentieth-century literature, particularly in the case of William Butler Yeats, but also how the legacy of this identity has prevailed in twenty-first century popular culture even during the era of globalisation.

Following this line of argument, any new nation requires differentiated cultural roots and traditions in order to achieve a proper national confirmation and distinction. While Britain, especially England, was regarded as the dominant hyper-civilised world of industries (Hutchinson and Aberbach 1999, 502; Welch 2015, 2), Ireland as a whole — perhaps excluding the Northern Irish region encompassed within the dominion of Britain — , displayed an obvious inclination towards a national identity consisting in the beauty and magic of an animated nature as a counter-image to anything British. This serves to explain the key role which Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) played in the construction of the identity of a more passional

and nostalgic nation which was in need of the modern version of a bard, that is, a national poet capable of singing the history of the new nation in the twentieth century. What is more, later on, the arrival of globalisation in the context of the twenty-first century implied an erasure of any kind of distinctive national traits as a consequence of the liquid and ever-changing nature of societies (Bauman 2006, 1). However, the world of Irish music benefited from the contribution of folk rock music band The Waterboys as a tool to avoid this identitarian loss through a return to its cultural roots by appealing to a magic and animist sentiment full of a nostalgia closely connected to nature — as opposed, again, to an over-unifying technological world — and rooted in Yeats's perception of the Irish landscape. In fact, such is the influence of W.B. Yeats on the music band that The Waterboys deliberately selected a name whose initials matched those of the poet.

For that reason, this paper will focus on a selection of songs by the aforementioned Irish band. While it will direct its attention mainly towards several of the songs included in the album *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats* (2011), it will also consider another extra song, “Stolen Child” — a poem from Yeats's 1889 collection *Crossways* — from one of their most renowned albums: *Fisherman's Blues* (1988). The latter song had already been set to music by Loreena McKennitt short before on her 1985 debut album *Elemental* and would continue to be of great interest for other twenty-first century artists. All of the aforementioned songs have been selected as the object of this study because they were all poems originally written and published by William Butler Yeats between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wherefore, such poems — and the songs which have been chosen for this analysis — illustrate and epitomise how the narrative of the new Irish community serves to shape a nation and to differentiate it from Britain in a postmodernist world. The musical adaptation of The Waterboys, in that way, implied a return to and a reconstruction of the cultural and identitarian roots of the Irish nation.

After a brief review of previous research on the mystic nature of the Irish landscape and identity and on the key role which W.B Yeats and, later on, also The Waterboys play in its configuration, this dissertation will therefore devote its first section to the analysis of the use of magic symbols and figures, followed by a study of other natural elements *per se* and their influence. Finally, this paper will examine how other Classical or historical and political references also contribute to such construction of the nation. In all cases, the focus will be placed not only on the motifs exploited by Yeats, but also on how the instrumental and melodic elements introduced by The Waterboys enhance the configuration of the characteristic Yeatsian atmosphere around Ireland.

## 2. Literature Review

Any newly independent country requires the promotion and assimilation of a particular tradition in order for a distinctive national identity to emerge. As British historian Eric Hobsbawm argued in his introduction to the book *The Invention of Traditions*, such traditions — and the set of practices subsumed under them — are likely to be invented in accordance with ritual or symbolic norms and practices which, while modifiable, are to be founded in the past, whether real or invented ([1983] 2012, 1). This past, without a doubt, necessarily implies a sense of continuity or reiteration which becomes crucial in the intricate process of inventing and establishing unique conventions, especially in industrial — and postindustrial — societies (3).

In that sense, William Butler Yeats advocated that political and cultural independence were tightly intertwined. Such claim could also be extended to literature and, of course, to Yeatsian poetry (McHugh 1962, 25). Being a supporter of the Irish-independence Easter Rising of 1916, Yeats began a quest for the Irish cultural and literary roots, deeply influenced by the nineteenth-century sense of nationalism and the fondness for nature of British Romantic poets such as William Blake, John Keats or Percy Bysshe Shelley (Bragg 2008, 08:29). For that reason, Yeats was determined to become the poet of the Irish nation and Celtic lore early on in his literary career to materialise and spread the invented Irish tradition. Wherefore, he claimed that Ireland's true identitarian roots were to be found in the sophisticated and pro-magical Gaelic bardic tradition, which he then combined with more innovative literary forms and the use of the English language (Marcus 1987, xvi; Hutchinson and Aberbach 1999, 510). Likewise, *The Waterboys* — already at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries — would attempt to incorporate modern musical elements into the Irish essence of Yeats's poetry.

In the aforementioned search for a distinctive Irish voice both before and after achieving political independence, Yeats adopted a more transcendent and nostalgic approach to poetry and nature as a consequence of not only his feeling as an outsider during his adolescence in London, but also to his stay in Majorca during his later years. Thus, mysticism and the supernatural became pivotal in his literary construction of reality (Bragg 2002, 02:50). In that way, he could successfully blend elements from fairy stories with Classical Greco-Roman and Celtic mythology in order to distance Ireland from the British bourgeois world. Yeats felt deeply attracted to and worshipped the mysterious nature of Irish folklore, the magic and mysticism of which escaped rationalistic or even empirist and materialistic patterns (Bragg 2002, 07:21; Mattar 2012, 142; Marcus 1987, 158; Yeats 1993, 25–30). A key concept to define Yeats's

pagan perception of the green Irish landscape was that of “animism,” a term which was coined and first defined by nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor as “the stage at which ‘naturalism,’ an entirely materialist understanding of the world, was superseded by a stage in which souls and spirits were considered to play a part in the functioning of life” (quoted in Mattar 2012, 138). Hence, not only magical creatures but also nature itself were regarded as living entities *per se* which proved capable of establishing relations with humankind and awakening a nationalist sentiment in them (Mattar 2012, 150; Welch 2015, 8). In any case, having recognised the urgent need for an Irish literary project to express the legends of the nation and its magic, Yeats resorted to a world of imagination which was based on phases and cycles. Just as history, he incorporated in his new artistic code his perception of nature as cyclical — just as in the phases of the moon or the seasons of the year — but at the same time as “beyond the categories of space, time and personality” (Bragg 2002, 21:08; Yeats 1993, 29–30). Thus, he would exploit and combine such natural phenomena as symbols of magic and fantasy with the contemporary historical circumstances with the aim of providing the foundations of a truly Irish literary creativity.

Similarly, the folk music band The Waterboys would scrutinise and explore the Irish folklore and landscape — frequently through Yeats’s poetry — in order to overcome the rootlessness provoked by globalisation since the second half of the postmodernist twentieth century. As a matter of fact, despite being Scottish, Mike Scott, lead singer and founder of the band, found in Ireland the key to access a spiritual, magic world which could provide the answers to the many questions posed by a materialist and dangerously industrialised world (Smyth 2016, 117). In that way, The Waterboys’ contribution to the Irish folk music world was essential to “describe the gap between the fairy world and that of everyday reality” (131). Their success was to be found in their ability to enhance the Yeatsian mystic construction through signature sounds such as those of the “dreamlike mosaic of flute, bouzouki, folk fiddle, piano, saxophone, and bells” (Ingham 2017, 336). In the next section, this paper will analyse how both the instrumental and melodic features of the musical adaptations and the deliberate selection and choices of modifications made by The Waterboys to Yeats’s poems contribute to the portrayal of a distinctive Irish history and the nostalgia provoked by it, as well as to the evocation and reconstruction of the aforementioned animist, fantastic and almost oniric world of legends, myths and fairies.



### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Magic and Mysticism in Nature

In several poems, Yeats explores the presence of magic figures and forces at work in nature. For that reason, The Waterboys introduced instruments and other modifications in terms of lyrics which contributed to the materialisation and configuration of a mystic and animated natural atmosphere. As a matter of fact, the main singer of the band defined the genre of *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats* as “folk rock and fairy music” (Thomson 2010). Wherefore, this justifies the role of The Waterboys as key agents in the reconstruction of the Irish identity.

To start with, the protagonists of the song “The Hosting of the Shee” — originally published by Yeats in 1899 — are the supernatural fairies who, according to Yeats, were “gods of pagan Ireland” in Celtic mythology (Yeats 1888, 1). Such magic creatures were also known as *Sidhe* or *Shee* in Gaelic, a word also used to name the wind, which may evidence the intertwinement of both nature and magic. In that way, this semantic ambiguity becomes a useful rhetorical device to suggest the animistic character of nature (Mattar 2012, 149). In the song, this is enhanced by an upbeat and loud opening passage which combines the sounds of the tamborine with other natural noises which remind of the wind and therefore contribute to the creation of a legendary atmosphere of journeys and adventures. In the first stanza, there are already references to Knocknarea in Yeats’s hometown Sligo, which serves to locate the legend in a real setting, followed by allusions to the godlike and supernatural figures of Clooth-na-Bare, Caoilte and Niamh. All of the aforementioned mythological characters are closely connected to weather conditions and other natural phenomena such as the wind or mountains, but also connote the nostalgia of a yearning to escape from a sorrowful reality in order to enter the land of eternal youth. This initial stanza is repeated only in The Waterboys’ song and becomes its chorus, which emphasises the presence of magic forces in the world and the sadness governing reality.

Similarly, in the first verse, the song expresses the anxiety provoked by a dread of mortality in opposition to a magic landscape which is beyond temporal categories and limits, and the movement of the last line to first position to open this stanza helps to convey the desire to achieve immortality. The presence of awakening winds also brings earth to life in connection to the double sense of the word *Shee*. Additionally, the fairies’ power to “come between [men] and the hope of [their] heart” (Waterboys 2011, track 1) illustrates the human inability to comprehend magic and to differentiate the real from the imaginary world, since their mental and emotional processes are also beyond reasonable patterns. At the end of the song, the

repetition of fairies' calling people to "come away, away, away, away..." points to the need to leave the material world behind in order to access the aforementioned mystic and alive nature.

Likewise, nature appears to be capable of causing incomprehensible magical phenomena in "Song of Wandering Aengus," in which a silver trout is transformed into a lady. The slower, constant tempo of the song resembles the regular meter of the 1897 original poem, which reminds of the rhythm of the protagonist — Aengus, a Celtic god of love and youth — in his quest to find affection and romance while he is wandering in a natural setting of a hazel wood where magic can happen and interact with humanity. In that way, the fire lit by Aengus symbolises a romantic passion full of irrational impulses. Although it might seem a slightly more obscure interpretation, the poem might symbolise the poet's search for identity and for the words to represent the beauty in the Irish nation and its art (Welch 2015, 9). Still, Aengus does not lose his hope for a brighter future, and neither does Yeats as far as Irish culture is concerned. The song ends with a reference to gold and silver, which points to national splendour, followed by a final instrumental break with the signature sounds of the flute and the tamborine, which are associated to storytelling and the magic adventures which may arise when wandering.

Following this line, the last track of the album, "The Faery's Last Song," introduces the sound of bells, which resembles the magic of fairies and is maintained throughout the whole song. The song, extracted from Yeats's 1884 play in verse *Island of Statues*, deals with the issue of mortality as well. Despite their long lives, fairies might be susceptible to death when their power is lost, especially when humans stop believing in them (Yeats 1888, 3). The aforementioned Celtic myth present in the play and, of course, the song, serves as a way to express the contrast between a Christian Heaven for humans and the soulless decay and death of fairies symbolised by the falling of a leave during the autumn or winter, which also reveals the cyclical but transient character of both life and nature. Notwithstanding, The Waterboys' song omits two whole stanzas from the original, which are substituted by a repetition of the second one to emphasise the passion to be found in both dancing and in nature — a magical and musical materialisation of the *carpe diem* motto — , which will be mentioned again when analysing the song "Sweet Dancer." In any case, this passion appears to be accentuated thanks to the repetition of the reference to the fairies' "dance in the sun" (Waterboys 2011, track 14), in which a feminine voice joins the lead singer of the band, Mike Scott, which might evoke the fairies' song of celebration of life. The end of the song consists of a lyricless fragment in which the same feminine voice seems to be replicated and overlapping, which might aim not only to

overcome the boundaries of time and individuality but also to create an ethereal but nostalgic atmosphere when the fairy is singing her last song, as the title suggests.

Finally, in “Stolen Child,” included in the early album *Fisherman’s Blues* (1988), The Waterboys modify the initial stanza and use the call for a journey away as its chorus and even its refrain, similarly to “The Hosting of the Shée.” The Waterboys use not only the sounds of bells and the flute as in many other songs, but also the reverb effect in order to auditorily construct a magic setting in which a living nature becomes the source of an escapist desire as it is addressing a child to persuade him to “come away” to the world of fairies and restore human innocence (Marcus 1987, 28). In that way, both the original 1886 poem and the song provide “[a] sense of ambivalence attending both realities — the fairy and the material — that raises ‘The Stolen Child’ above standard contemporary Celtic fare” (Smyth 2016, 131). Indeed, the song deepens this opposition by including an instrumental break dominated by a flute, which helps characterise the mystic Irish nature as the original source of kindness and virtue. This song might become especially striking because the verses are not sung but declaimed or recited, which exposes the intertextuality between Yeats’s oeuvre and The Waterboys’, as well as the transitional nature of this song — recorded over a decade before *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats*. Hence, the music band seem to give voice to the original poet — accompanied by the sound of the Irish fiddle — to enable him to narrate the folklore of the nation. What is more, the last repetition of the chorus combines the voice of the reciter with Mike Scott’s singing each line after him, which evidences the passing from Yeats’s nineteenth-century vision to the twentieth-century revival and nostalgia in *Fisherman’s Blues*. The song closes with a fade-out and overlapping of bells and reverbed voices singing the departure of the human child “With a fairy, hand in hand / From a world more full of weeping than he can understand” (Waterboys 1988, track 12).

### **3.2. Natural Scenery**

In Yeats’s oeuvre — and, of course, in The Waterboys’ musical adaptations — there are also poems which make no explicit reference to magic but still exploit nature as a powerful device in order to create an ideal and almost bucolic atmosphere in which the self is capable of finding emotional and spiritual fulfillment. This can be noticed in songs such as “Sweet Dancer,” the source poem of which was probably dedicated — around the beginning of the 1930s — to Margot Ruddock, with whom Yeats was romantically involved since 1934. The figure of Ruddock was key during Yeats’s staying in Mallorca, since they shared a profound admiration

for the landscape and nature of the island and for art in more general terms. Indeed, she might be the “sweet dancer” of the poem who, accompanied by the soft and light sounds of the guitar, the piano, the cello and, most importantly, the Irish fiddle again, might serve to emphasise the significance of the pleasure found in one’s own passions and amusements. The Waterboys’ decision to include this poem in their album is of great interest because its protagonist may simultaneously be used not only as a device to encourage individuals to reject social constraints and follow one’s desires, but also as the typical feminine personification of the nation. In that way, both Yeats and The Waterboys deemed Ireland as a passionate place which allowed enjoyment and freedom. The fact that the female protagonist successfully escaped from an overcrowded “bitter youth” and a “black cloud” (Waterboys 2011, track 5) might remind of the Irish struggle to gain independence from Britain. Later on, as an adult, she has been enabled to forget the urban hyperrational mindset and to rejoice in a nature which seems to be as sweet as the dancer.

Halfway through the song, The Waterboys included a verse containing fragments from two other works by Yeats. The first half of this verse is extracted from the poem “He and She,” published in 1934. This poem is especially relevant because the excerpt included in “Sweet Dancer” depicts a living, even personified moon — one of the recurrent elements in Yeatsian poetry — capable of joining the protagonist’s song. The second part of the stanza, however, belongs to Yeats’s play *The Hour-Glass* (1914), which is an “attempt to build a spiritual world in a play as opposed to the tangible one” (Parker 1967, 356). In both cases, nature is regarded as animated and conducive to a pleasurable spiritualism beyond the material world. Coincidentally, this stanza is sung by a female singer, which contributes to the identification of the nation as a female singing her newly acquired freedom, as mentioned. The song closes with a refrain of the chorus added by The Waterboys which repeatedly addresses the “sweet dancer” and, for that matter, the “sweet” Irish nation.

On a similar note, the song “White Birds” — originally published in 1936 in a poetic anthology edited by Yeats himself — also reflects on the achievability of love and imagination in nature. Those “white birds on the foam of the sea” — probably seagulls — are able to fly away from mundanity and mortality and, hence, imply the Romantic possibility of time being suspended (Waterboys 2011, track 6). Just as in “Sweet Dancer,” The Waterboys insert a fragment from another source — *The Shadowy Waters* (1886) — which in this case acts as the bridge of the song. The band probably selected this fragment of Yeats’s dramatic poem because it includes many references to poetry through natural symbols such as the birds — coinciding with the main focus of the song — , the “running stream” and the “flower of the branch.” The

two latter motifs point to the train of thought and the creative flow which are in constant motion or blooming, respectively. Conveniently, the bridge is the only section of the song which breaks the melodic and rhythmic regularity and sounds noticeably louder. In that sense, The Waterboys may have intended to highlight the character of the Irish coastline as favourable for creativity. Additionally, the last minute of the song introduces background sounds of seagulls to help the hearer to imagine such scene both visually and auditorily.

In all of the aforementioned songs, Yeats and The Waterboys present a nature which is unaffected by human intervention. Nevertheless, this is particularly observable in the song “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” because it begins with instruments such as drums or bass, which stresses the primitive but pure state of nature when not industrialised. As a matter of fact, Innisfree as the setting of the 1888 poem and the song is crucial since it was an unhabited island where Yeats used to spend his summers as a child and, hence, “an island paradise he longs to return to, where he can exist in perfect simplicity with nature” (Beattie 2015, 122). In that sense, isolation is not feared but desired, which reminds of the Romantic or even Celtic experience of a pleasant quietude in nature as opposed to the imperial and overwhelming progress of London, where, as mentioned, Yeats was forced to spend his adolescence. The second stanza of the poem mentions natural noises which do not disturb the hearer but contribute to his peace of mind and happiness instead, which is enhanced in The Waterboys’ song by the introduction of soft whispers in the background and therefore suggests the possibility of nature having its own soothing voice. In contrast, in the third stanza, the poetic voice finds himself standing “on the roadside or on the pavements gray” (Waterboys 2011, track 7), that is, an urban environment which awakens an escapist desire in him. To illustrate such sorrow, the lead singer of The Waterboys resorts to a lower singing pitch when remembering the “low sounds by the shore” which he hears “in the deep, the deep heart’s core,” as opposed to the high-pitched and loud noises of the city.

Lastly, a song which deserves special mention in terms of musicality is “A Full Moon in March.” The song, extracted from Yeats’s 1935 homonymous dance play, displays a surprising correlation between the content of its lyrics and chord progression. The poem in the play was Yeats’s reinterpretation and rewriting of a nursery rhyme, to which he provided a darker and sinister meaning since, instead of featuring two children — Jack and Jill — fetching water and one of them falling, the poet transformed the story into that of the murder of one of the infants (Sato 2016, 26–27). The melodic development of The Waterboys’ song contributes to this perverse twist of the original nursing rhyme through the use of minor chords when singing the death of the child, which convey a sense of nostalgia or sadness (Crowder 1985,

314), and semitonal chord descents, in which “a chord that instills musical tension generates the expectancy that a more relaxing chord will resolve this tension” (Bigand, Pamcutt, and Lerdahl 1996, 126). Such musical tension evokes a feeling of fear of the unknown or death, which is even more deepened in the last verse of the song when accompanied by thunder sounds. In any case, the resolution of the chord tension is eventually achieved when The Waterboys repeatedly sing the title of the song, at which point two major chords convey the solemnity and majesty of the Earth’s satellite, a natural element which is able to endow the song with mysticism but most especially aesthetic ecstasy.

### **3.3. Historical and Political References**

There are other instances of poems which were included in *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats* because, instead of only describing the Irish essence, they also define what Ireland is not. Otherwise stated, such poems are unmistakable examples of what is regarded as “the other,” since they identify the members who are to be encompassed within the Irish national identity and community, but also those who are perceived as outsiders (Triandafyllidou 1998, 593). In that way, Yeats provided an opposition, as has been repeatedly noted, between a natural and magic Ireland and a more urban, hectic and oppressive Europe, especially Britain. “September 1913,” for instance, reveals the poet’s viewpoint on the contemporary political panorama of Ireland — after an industrial dispute in August 1913 demanding union rights — and declares his contempt for those neglecting the past of the nation or even consigning it to oblivion. For that reason, Yeats mentions several key figures in the Irish independentist movement: John O’Leary — who, according to him, embodied the Irish national beliefs (Bragg 2008, 13:34) — or other eighteenth-century revolutionary leaders against the British rule such as Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone or Lord Edward Fitzgerald. In opposition to such political role models, Yeats reprimands or even accuses the readers — who now become hearers in The Waterboys’ song — of a greed which threatened to provoke the demise of the nation. Following this denouncement, the singer of The Waterboys laments and shouts that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” (Waterboys 2011, track 10) almost as if it was a cry of despair and hopelessness. Similar is the case when referring to exile and loneliness, which obviously conveys a feeling of alienation in a country which the poetic voice — and the singer — struggles to identify as his own. This nostalgia of a forgotten Romantic past seems to be accentuated by the repetition of “in the grave,” which is now sung by a feminine voice who assumes the lead until the end, as if it was the personified — and feminised — nation mourning her own downfall.

Following this line, The Waterboys' album also includes two songs which make reference to both World Wars, two of the most serious armed conflicts in history. First, in "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" — originally written in 1918, at the end of the First World War (1914–1918) — the poetic voice gains awareness of his inevitable fate in the conflict, in which he will have to serve the army of an oppressive Britain. Wherefore, the chord progression and Mike Scott's singing in the musical adaptation of the poem resemble those of a military march, since the protagonist is already foreseeing his role but also his death in battle. In any case, the airman cannot relate to the violence and the cruelty of the war, since he firmly asserts that "My country is Kiltartan Cross" — a barony situated in Ireland — , at which point the song introduces obvious major chords which imbue the aforementioned location — the home to which he actually belongs — with solemnity and glory. Nonetheless, his lack of drive leads him to a reflection on the possibility of happiness and the meaninglessness of life. At the end of the poem, this rumination is intensified by the presence of a chiasmus in the following lines:

I balanced all, brought all to mind

The years to come seemed waste of breath

A waste of breath the years behind

In balance with this life, this death. (Waterboys 2011, track 11)

After this, the last two lines are duplicated in The Waterboys' song in order to stress the emotional and identitarian emptiness experienced by the airman. What is more, the last opposition between "this life, this death," when repeated, is not sung but spoken, which might auditorily simulate the airman's "waste of breath," lost in a war fought for other people's country and not his own.

Following this line, the poem "Politics," written in 1938, deals with political tensions prior to the Second World War (1939–1945). For that reason, The Waterboys begin their musical adaptation with the sound of the saxophone and the oboe, which are later joined by a trombone to add even more seriousness and gravity to the issue. In that way, the use of such wind instruments might function as a reminder of the armed conflict. Indeed, the poem also includes allusions to the development of the ongoing Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Notwithstanding, having been composed by Yeats only a year before his death, the poem exhibits a more vitalistic tendency.

Even though the beginning of an international armed conflict was imminent and a deep dread was spreading all over the world, the poetic voice cannot help but remember and wish for his lover's embrace despite hearing "war's alarms" (Waterboys 2011, track 12) This, again,

demonstrates the passion which operates as one of the chief driving forces of Ireland and reinforces the opposition between the Irish romantic desire and the patriarchal game of politics. Whereas the poetic voice appears to be unable to fix his attention “on Roman or on Russian or on Spanish politics,” he only cares about his devotion for “that girl standing there” and his nostalgia of her. That may be the reason why — just as in “A Full Moon in March” — The Waterboys again employ a surprising chord tension in order to highlight the source of evil in the world, which reflects the Yeatsian claim that inner emotional experiences should prevail over masculine fights for political and social supremacy and leadership. The protagonist’s reminiscence of the girl becomes even more vivid when the first stanza is repeated and, moreover, sung by a female voice — possibly the girl herself, either as part of his imagination or as a real person who is also longing for him. The last lines of the song are a repetition of “But oh, that I were young again and held her in her arms,” which reflects a nostalgia of intimacy. The last note, however, is elongated by the singer as if the consumation of such passionate love was only a thing of a past which both lovers are yearning to recover but can never be reached again.

### **3.4. Classical Elements and Figures**

The last section of this analysis will focus on the Classical allusions dominating two of the songs in *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats*. Although the purpose of such references or their connection to Irish identity might initially seem unclear, they actually contribute to the configuration of Irishness in a striking way. In “News for the Delphic Oracle” — one of Yeats’s late poems which was included in a posthumous 1957 poetry compilation — the poet mentions not only several Greek philosophers, but also mythological figures. The Waterboys’ song, hence, begins with some abrupt instrumental and melodic pauses, which create a sense of questioning or doubt. Nevertheless, halfway through the first verse, the sounds of flutes and the cor anglais — also known as English horn — are introduced, which reminds of the exotic character of the Mediterranean Greco-Roman world. In this case, the poem and the song are set in Greek Delphos, a sacred location where the oracle could be consulted for major decisions during Classical times (Lloyd-Jones 1976, 60). In order to create this legendary and majestic atmosphere around Delphos — or Pytho — , the powerful sound of the trombone joins the aforementioned instruments and, later on, so do the bells, which attempt to bring to mind the epic character of adventures in Classical literature.



Already in the first verse, after referring to Oisín — the so-called greatest storyteller of Irish mythology according to legends —, Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras or Plotinus are mentioned but serve different purposes. On the one hand, the former was enormously influential on early ontologies thanks to his recognition of the existence of an apparent natural order and measure (Morrison 1956, 156). Contrariwise, Plotinus opted for a more transcendent approach to reality, similar to the Irish construction of the magic nature. Indeed, the latter Greek thinker, highly influenced by Plato, advocated that the body was a source of angst since it was regarded as a corruptible prison to the soul (Barnes 1942, 358). This connects to the first track of The Waterboys' album — “The Hosting of the Shee” —, in which fairies wish for humans to escape from the rationalism of a “mortal dream” of their mundane life. Such liberation from the rational constraints of an excessively ordered world can also be particularly perceived in how both Yeats and The Waterboys present the nymph Thetis and her husband Peleus as representatives of the well-established institution of marriage but, instead of having them as the final image of the poem, are overthrown by a party of other nymphs — a possible parallel for Irish fairies — and the comic figure of satyrs led by Pan, the Greek god of music and the wild (Cade-Stewart 2015, 190). In that sense, such natural mythological creatures which cannot be controlled correlate with the intended portrayal of mystic Irish nature. In fact, after this wild bacchanalia where such figures “copulate in the foam” (Waterboys 2011, track 3), the same initial flutes and English horn close the song in order to reinforce the use of exotic Classical imagery as a counterpart of the incomprehensible and untamable Irish landscape.

Likewise, “Mad as the Mist and Snow” — originally written in 1929 — includes allusions to Classical authors such as Marcus Tullius Cicero, Horace and Homer — the writer of some of the major epic poems, the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. They join philosopher Plato, best known for his distinction between the material and the ideal worlds. The reference to the night as a place for thinking is conducive to the perception of the external world as “mad as the mist and snow” (Waterboys 2011, track 8), which become symbols of mysticism as they impede any viewing faculties, just as magic. This might entail the impossibility of any existing clear reality, which is actually incomprehensible and exclusive of logical explanations. Following this line, even celebrated figures of Classicism such as Cicero and Homer, who are supposedly thought of as rational thinkers, are described as “mad as the mist and snow” instead. Halfway through the song, the incorporation of the sound of the cello contributes to providing a Celtic Irish tone which serves to illustrate the fusion between the Classical epic remembrance and the irrational nature of Irish supernatural phenomena. In the closing instrumental break, the shrieking sound of the cello joins several overlapping reverberated voices who sing the title of the song. In the

end, none of the aforementioned sounds can avoid the final fade-out which unmasks their lack of control over nature or their own existence.

#### 4. Conclusion

William Butler Yeats succeeded in the construction of an Irish identity at the advent of the twentieth century which allowed the differentiation from the industrial British Empire. This identity was based on the magic character of an imagined Irish environment, full of fairies and other natural forces capable of intervening in human affairs. While magic and the primitive and even pure state of nature allowed the definition of Irishness, to fulfill such purpose, Yeats also resorted to diverse tools. On the one hand, the poet focused on the negation and “othering” of urban Britishness (Triandafyllidou 1998, 593–94). On the other hand, he also devoted part of his literary oeuvre to the use of references from the Classical world in order to question the human ability to comprehend the Irish animated and mystic nature, as well as to reject the need for a rational approach to it.

In any case, the later decades — especially with the arrival of globalisation in the twenty-first century — posed a threat to such identitary roots. As a matter of fact “the science of comparative anthropology could become the inspiration for a new literature, replacing the very animistic ontologies that it dismissed as delusive with an inclusive (if sceptical) account of them” (Mattar 2012, 145). Notwithstanding, the erasure of such roots was successfully avoided thanks to The Waterboys’ musical contribution. In any case, the Irish music band were and are still able to fuse such identitarian preservation with the coexistence with other manifestations of popular culture which are not necessarily Irish such as Scottish Romantic poet Robert Burns or English music band The Beatles. In any case, this intertwinement between the old and the new serves as a way to upgrade and update themselves. Thus, the preservation and continuity of Yeats’s literary contribution evidences the success and persistence of his legacy in the twenty-first century.

In that way, The Waterboys, through the retrieval of the Yeatsian perception of the nation, embody the national neo-interpretations and reconstructions. The selection among Yeats’s poems which were later set to music by them — both “Stolen Child” in *Fisherman’s Blues* (1988) and all of the songs included in *An Appointment with Mr. Yeats* (2011) — revealed and rescued the foundations of such identity. What is more, they were capable of enchancing such elements and motifs through the introduction of musical elements and other modifications in terms of lyrics which then contributed to the creation of the atmosphere intended by Yeats.

In that way, Yeats's poetry could allow the reader not only to picture a view of the Irish landscape but, thanks to *The Waterboys*, also to hear the natural and magical sounds present in an alleged true Ireland. Both Yeats and *The Waterboys* succeeded in preserving a primeval and pagan Irish landscape, yet also magic, animated and alive as opposed to a technological, dehumanising and postmodern world.

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