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Cursed to the Trees, Enchanted by the Woods: *Sweeney Astray*

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Cursed to the Trees, Enchanted by the Woods: *Sweeney Astray*

Abstract: Drawing on Jane Bennett's theory of "crossings and enchantment", this essay considers interspecies transformations in Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* (1983). As a bird-man, Mad King Sweeney discovers that the arboreal environment is a vibrantly interstitial space in which paganism and Christianity coexist. By negotiating this liminal space, he opens himself to forms of attachment and enchantment that radically ameliorate his accursed existence in the trees.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, arboreal, enchantment, liminality, crossings.

Résumé: S'appuyant sur la théorie de « croisements et d'enchantement » de Jane Bennett, cet article traite des transformations inter-espèces dans *Sweeney Astray* de Seamus Heaney (1983). En tant qu'homme-oiseau, le roi fou Sweeney découvre que l'environnement arboré est un espace interstitiel foisonnant où coexistent paganisme et christianisme. En appréhendant cet espace frontière, il s'ouvre à des formes d'attachement et d'enchantement qui améliorent radicalement son existence maudite au milieu des arbres.

Mots clés: Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, environnements arborés, enchantement, liminalité, traversées.

Sweeney Astray is the story of Sweeney, a 7th-century king of Ulster who, on hearing that Ronan Finn is marking out a church-site on his territory, assaults the cleric, throws his psalter into a nearby lake, and thus precipitates a series of curses that banish him to a life of madness in the trees¹. Once exiled from his kingdom, Sweeney abides in numerous roosts across the length and breadth of Ireland as a part-human, part-avian figure. Suffering dreadful privations and uttering his poetry of lamentation and praise, he awaits his death "at spear point", as Ronan's curse foretells². Eventually – and, it has to be said, somewhat uneasily – Sweeney undergoes an amelioration of his woes as he is enfolded by Saint Moling into the care of the very church against which he had once raved so violently.

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1. First published by the Field Day Theatre Company in 1983 and then by Faber and Faber in 1984, Seamus Heaney's version is based largely on James George O'Keeffe's first full translation into English: *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne): Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt, a Middle-Irish Romance*, James George O'Keeffe (ed.), London, Irish Texts Society, 1913.
 2. Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray*, London, Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 8. Page references in brackets refer to this edition. *Sweeney Astray* is *sensu stricto* a prosimetrum but, for convenience's sake, we will use the term "poem".

Whilst Ronan's curse is intended to diminish Sweeney to physical and intellectual inferiority – "bird-brain among branches" (p. 7-8) – what occurs is in fact something far beyond anything envisaged by the cleric. Mad Sweeney's responses to his accursed existence take the form of adventitious becomings and, hence, resonate compellingly with Jane Bennett's ideas on crossings and enchantment in which, as she puts it, "metamorphing creatures enact the very possibility of change; their presence carries with it the trace of dangerous but also exciting and exhilarating migrations"³. It is precisely by leaving the stratified social world in which he is king and crossing the threshold into the woods that Sweeney begins an imbrication with the natural world in all its harshness and its pleasures. Sweeney's knowledge of the manner of his death could well have resulted in terminal disenchantment. Unexpectedly, however, his metamorphosis results in an incomparably rich experience of life in the natural environments of Ireland.

While Sweeney flies across the full range of Irish topographies – mountains, glens, bogs, plains, and rivers – it is in certain trees and woods that his becoming-enchanted happens. The woods offer him a liminal environment, simultaneously beyond the social world from which he has been so peremptorily ejected and in some respects in close commerce with that world, in which his physical and mental transformations and privations are sublimated in intense poetic expression. The arboreal world is where things change, where borders and boundaries collapse. It is *in* and *through* nature that Sweeney is able to fend off disenchantment. For Sweeney, his "interspecies crossings" awaken within him a fierce "wonder at life"⁴.

As king of Dal-Arie he would have passed through the forests of his kingdom as hunter on the trail of prey. Of those forays the poem reports no wonder, no sense of enchantment. But as an undefinably-hybrid thing he is *fully* part of a natural world teeming with species of animal and arboreal life with whom and with which he is in constant commerce. It is via this "interactive fascination" that he escapes the simple binary terms of Ronan's curse⁵. As king he reacted to difference in similarly binary and aggressive ways; as an interspecies he encounters difference with a surprised "feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter" with his new environment and other species⁶. We can read Ronan's curse, therefore, not solely as a punishment but rather, with an eye to Bennett, as bringing into being a "surprising encounter" that leads to Sweeney's enchantment which, in turn, finds expression in his spare and beautiful poetry⁷.

For Seamus Heaney, Sweeney is the embodiment of the palimpsestic and at times antithetical character of the landscape. The early Irish landscape was, Heaney

3. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Princeton – Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 17.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13, 32. Jos Smith briefly suggests that Sweeney can be read as an example of Bennett's "crossings". See Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 71-72.

5. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life...*, p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

remarks, “sacramental, instinct with signs implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities”⁸. As we will demonstrate, Sweeney, as interspecies, is able to access and give articulation to these invisible realities. Commenting on the development of early Irish nature poetry, Heaney identifies a characteristic tension in the imagination between *pagus*, “the pagan wilderness [...] unrestrained,” and *disciplina*, “a religious calling that transcends the almost carnal lushness of nature itself”⁹. This, he suggests, comes most vividly to the fore in Sweeney’s story as set out in *Buile Suibhne*:

It was the bareness and durability of the writing, its double note of relish and penitence, that first tempted me to try my hand¹⁰.

And herein lies the fundamental doubleness of both Sweeney’s story and his voice. Cursed to the trees by Ronan’s bell, Sweeney’s penitential journeying reflects the *disciplina*. But yet his praise of nature’s richness is an echo of *pagus*. In his essay “The God in the Tree”, Heaney appears to sense the possibilities of enchantment in nature when he points to *two* gods in the tree: “the Christian deity” and the “powers of the Celtic otherworld”¹¹. Bennett offers a “quasi-pagan model of enchantment” that seeks to offer an alternative to the “powerful and versatile Western tradition [...] that make[s] enchantment depend on a divine creator”¹².

Figured initially as landscapes that, in their apparent desolation, are fittingly punitive for a frenzied king in disgrace, the woods shift in the course of the poem to realms that are, despite their harshness, full of beauty and wonder. Far from mere wilderness, the woods of Ireland are vibrantly interstitial spaces in which paganism and Christianity coexist. They are the habitats in which Sweeney forges ways of living his different configurations, unbound to either dispensation, free to move between the worlds of animals and humans, the natural and the social, insanity and reason.

Into the woods

Sweeney Astray is part of a much older tradition of “wild men in the woods” stories that emerged prior to the arrival of Christianity in Ireland and Britain¹³. Sweeney’s

8. Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place”, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*, London, Faber and Faber, 1980, p. 132.

9. Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree”, in *Preoccupations...*, p. 183.

10. Seamus Heaney, “Introduction”, in *Preoccupations...*, p. ii-iii.

11. Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree”, p. 186.

12. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life...*, p. 12.

13. The “wild man in the woods” genre is ancient and extends beyond Europe. William Sayers has argued that *Buile Suibhne* bears striking similarities to the story of Nebuchadnezzar as he appears in the Book of Daniel. See William Sayers, “The Deficient Ruler as Avian Exile: Nebuchadnezzar and Suibhne Geilt”, *Ériu*, vol. 43, 1992, p. 217-220; Penelope B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 1974. See also Bridgette Slavin, “The Irish Birdman: Kingship and Liminality in *Buile Suibhne*”, in *Text and Transmission in Medieval Europe*, Chris Bishop (ed.), Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, p. 17-45.

enforced migrations are a consequence of his repeated assaults against the authority of a Christian Church that by the mid-7th century was establishing itself as “the newly dominant [...] ethos” throughout most of the island¹⁴. Although the Christianization of Ireland was a remarkably pacific process (there are no recorded instances of martyrdom among early missionaries), an “older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament” persisted at odds with the new dispensation¹⁵. In embodying this recalcitrance, Sweeney finds himself both “the enemy and the captive of the monastic tradition”¹⁶. This is not without psychological consequences. In the manuscript notebooks of *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney records his initial thoughts on the task of translation ahead of him: Sweeney is both “GUERRILLA / TRUCE BREAKER” and “SURVIVOR OF WAR” and “VICTIM”¹⁷. More explicitly, Heaney remarks:

Sweeney is at once Lear and Poor Tom. [...] His voice slips naturally into postures of complaint. He is paranoiac and schizophrenic¹⁸.

In fact, Sweeney is “paranoiac and schizophrenic” not simply as a result of his transformation, but from the outset of the narrative. In the historical context of early medieval Ireland, he would have been a *rí tuaithe*, a king of a territory of perhaps two-thousand subjects, owing allegiance to a *rí ruirech*, the king of the province. As a minor ruler, he would have been bound by the principles and protocols of good kingship, which were frequently promoted in vernacular prose and poetry. Maintaining these regnal qualities was, as Edel Bhreathnach notes, a “constant concern of early medieval Irish churchmen, lawyers and poets”, if not always of the kings themselves. “Core attributes of the ideal king”, she states, were “encapsulated in the concepts of hospitality, justice, peace, strength, truth and valour”¹⁹.

It is at the Battle of Moira that Sweeney’s deficiencies as a ruler are most vividly displayed, as he breaches the terms of engagement set out by Ronan (arbiter of the battle), and then hurls a spear, killing one of the cleric’s acolytes, who had had the temerity to sprinkle him with holy water. In an attempt to kill Ronan himself, Sweeney throws another spear that “pierced the bell that hung from his neck” (p. 7). This results in Ronan’s curse:

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

14. Seamus Heaney, “Introduction”, p. ii.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree”, p. 186.

17. Seamus Heaney, “Notebook with ms drafts for the poem ‘Sweeney Astray’”, MS 41, 932/1, Dublin, National Library of Ireland.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Edel Bhreathnach, “Perceptions of Kingship in Early Medieval Irish Vernacular Literature”, in *Lordship in Medieval Ireland: Image and Reality*, Linda Doran, James Lyttleton (eds.), Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2007, p. 21.

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. (p. 7-8)

Sweeney's violent repudiation of the Church is not restricted to his assaults on Ronan and his followers. We are told that he has earlier flouted good advice offered him by Colmcille (p. 12). And the fact that Ronan's holy bell – the bell that Sweeney's spear pierces – belonged originally to Patrick, "the first saint" (p. 8), suggests the thoroughgoing nature of Sweeney's rejection of the Church from its origins through to its current hegemony. Later, when Sweeney enters the deepest passages of his exile, each term of Ronan's curse is explicitly evoked: his synesthetic responses to the bellowing of stags recalls the clanking of Ronan's holy bell; his preoccupation with stags' antlers and the top-most branches of trees evoke the spears with which he has done so much damage at Moira; his terrifying ordeal when he is harried by "bleeding headless torsos and disembodied heads" (p. 69) summons those he killed in violation of the rules of battle set out by the cleric.

Ronan's curses have multiple consequences for Sweeney. By being transformed, his authority as king is annulled, he is exiled from the company of men and women, and *crucially*, he is cursed to the trees. From a state of questionable sanity, he shifts into alternating bouts of raving madness and melancholic dejection as he flies interminably over the plains and mountain ranges of Ireland in search of respite and relative safety in the forests that become his new abodes. In these arboreal landscapes, Sweeney reflects on his losses and bemoans his indignities and hardships, while at the same time paying tribute to the natural world of which he finds himself a constituent part.

Sweeney's becoming

Throughout *Sweeney Astray*, considerable emphasis is placed on the mutuality of Sweeney's condition and his arboreal habitat. Sweeney proclaims: "I need woods for consolation" (p. 55). He rests for as long as a year in the company of "mad friends" (p. 22) in the sanctuary of the "pleasant woods" (p. 13) of Glen Bolcain²⁰. In this "natural asylum where all the madmen of Ireland assembled once their year in madness was complete" (p. 13), Sweeney establishes a new dominion almost

20. Although there are twenty-two references to Glen Bolcain in *Sweeney Astray*, its actual location remains obscure.

immediately after he is exiled from Dal-Arie. As his “ark and his Eden” (p. 21), Glen Bolcain is the place to which Sweeney repeatedly returns to find solace:

[...]
 a starved, pinched, raving madman,

 but sheltered in that lovely glen,
 my winter harbour, my haven,
 my refuge from the bare heath,
 my royal fort, my king's rath. (p. 65)²¹

Sweeney presents this particular landscape as his natural court: “life outside Glen Bolcain” becomes unimaginable to him (p. 23). Yet even in this “Eden” he is not free from suffering:

[...]
 I am the madman of Glen Bolcain,

 wind-scourged, stripped
 like a winter tree
 clad in black frost
 and frozen snow. (p. 17)

In this liminal environment, Sweeney is exposed to severe conditions of wind, coldness, blizzards, and the piercing thorns of bushes and trees. However, the woods of Glen Bolcain also offer consolations in the form of shelter, food, and companionship, all of which ensure his survival.

There is, furthermore, an etymological felicity whereby the roots of the noun “madness” can be found in the Old English word, “woodness”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to an early use of the noun “woodness” as denoting a) “Mental derangement, insanity, mania, frenzy, lunacy, craziness”; b) “Extravagant folly or recklessness; vehemence of passion or desire; wildness, infatuation”; c) “Violent anger, wrath, fury, rage; extreme fierceness, ferocity, savageness, cruelty”²². All three definitions aptly describe Sweeney's character. The adjective “wood” insinuates “out of one's mind, insane” and, intriguingly, there is a further connection between the adjective “wood” meaning “mad” and the Old Irish word for poet, *fáith*²³. Sweeney's

21. Inevitably, “bare heath” invokes *King Lear*, and in so doing we sense *Sweeney Astray*'s place in a tradition of the outcast king stretching from Nebuchadnezzar to, in the Irish literary tradition, Yeats' “The Madness of King Goll” (1889) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (1927), through to Kavanagh's poet-figure in “Inishkeen Road: July Evening”: “I am king/ Of banks and stones and every blooming thing” (Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, Peter Kavanagh (ed.), Newbridge, The Goldsmith Press, 1972, p. 19).

22. “Woodness, n.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

23. “Wood, adj., n.2, and adv.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Likewise, the Irish word *geilt* (used to describe Sweeney in the early manuscripts of the text) can either translate as terror, cowardice, frenzy, and fear or can refer to someone who dwells in the woods or deserts: a wild man or woman. See Feargal Ó Béarra, “*Buile Shuibhne: vox insaniae* from Medieval Ireland”, in *Mental Health*,

state of madness is ambiguous and he shifts between moods of anger, pity, and acceptance; even in heightened moments of hallucination, he is self-aware. “Mad as you are, you are sharp-witted” (p. 77), says Moling.

Complementing this etymological link, the arboreal landscape of *Sweeney Astray* is richly symbolic and highly codified. The woods perform a variety of functions: they are prison and sanctuary, wasteland and Eden, poison and cure. As such, they correspond to Sweeney’s newly-formulated liminal being. Ronan perceives the woods as a fitting environment for Sweeney to perform his eternal contrition, and there is certainly something purgatorial in the ascetic nature of Sweeney’s forest-dwelling. His banishment to the trees is an entirely appropriate punishment when we think of woods as the natural preserve of outlaws. Describing himself as “disabled now, outcast” (p. 16), Sweeney lives “[...] in solitude, / no glory flames the wood, / no friends, no music” (p. 14). In *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, Corinne J. Saunders shows how woods functioned in complex and at times contradictory ways, as sites of “exile, escape, prophecy, penance, vision and temptation”²⁴. She suggests that “[t]he forest, like the Biblical wilderness, may ultimately lead its inhabitant to a higher level of spirituality, its discomforts allowing for a proof of faith and a sloughing off of the sinful past”²⁵. In this sense, *Sweeney Astray* follows medieval conventions of imagining woods as unregulated and uncivilized, standing in opposition to civil culture but yet as places where – for our protagonist, at least – enchantment occurs.

In a similar vein, Joep Leerssen observes that the medieval court’s “code of civility” was based upon a “de-naturing” of social life²⁶. In this regard, Sweeney’s exile to the treetops sees him forcibly *re-natured*, as he shifts abruptly from a king residing at court to a levitating creature roaming the landscape. Stripped of his royal attire – denuded, in other words, of all the markers of civilization, of his cardinal position in Dal-Arie – he is transformed from a lavishly-clothed, adorned, trophied, and armed-to-the-hilt potentate to a naked, bruised, frost-bitten “bird-brain”²⁷. “I have lived among trees”, he says, “going cold and naked” with “no

Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age, Albrecht Classen (ed.), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2014, p. 242-289 and particularly p. 263-269. Note that Ó Béarra lists as the third definition for the term *geilt*, based on the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, “a crazy person living in the woods and supposed to be endowed with the power of levitation”. He highlights the absence of verifiable other source texts that substantiate such a definition, wondering “what other texts apart from *Buile Shuibhne* (if any) were excerpted to arrive at such a definition” (*ibid.*, p. 266). On Heaney and *geilt*, see Stephen Regan, “Seamus Heaney and the Making of *Sweeney Astray*”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, p. 331-332.

24. Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1993, p. 18-19.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Joep Leerssen, “Wildness, Wilderness, and Ireland: Medieval and Early-Modern Patterns in the Demarcation of Civility”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1995, p. 27.

27. Sweeney’s interiority encompasses *both* human and animal attributes (a “bird-brain” brings with it the “fears of a bird”). This opens up avenues for further inquiry, particularly in relation to Philippe Descola’s suggestion that “similarity of interiorities [of human and non-human] justifies extending a state of ‘culture’ to nonhumans” (Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Janet Lloyd (trans.), Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 129).

spear and no sword" (p. 14). Repeatedly bemoaning the loss of life at court with its endless banquets, entertainments, admiring women and retinue, he now lives an eremitic life on a diet of water and watercress. He is able to leap (p. 35) and fly and is endowed by Ronan with the "fears of a bird" (p. 24); he is "feathered" (p. 46) and "plumed" (p. 23); he nests and "roosts" (p. 85). Sweeney is, however, far from alone or isolated. He lives "bare" (p. 5) among "herons"; he "is wintering out among wolf-packs" (p. 23); he finds himself in the company of foxes, woodcocks, blackbirds and badgers (p. 42). Sweeney's transformation into an unclassifiable being permits his sensuous "active engagement" with nature and its inhabitants, and opens up his perception to multiple beings and states of being which in turn is fundamental to his enchantment²⁸.

Whilst to the newly-transformed Sweeney the woods are a place of exile, the emergence of his poetic voice as a form of redress against his purgatorial conditions allows him to sense resemblances to that world from which he has been banished. He remains within a territory that is in many ways in tune with his former societal status. As king of Dal-Arie, we can assume that Sweeney would have owned and had access to forests: the poem's various references to hunting indicate the woods as the king's preserve. Prior to Ronan's curses, Sweeney was accompanied by his fellow noblemen and warriors, but now he is in the company of wolves and birds. And while previously, he was armed and poised to attack, he is now in his "bare pelt" (p. 18), "in panic/a rickle of skin and bones" (p. 27). Formerly the hunter, he now feels hunted: he is "on the run" (p. 22), feeling "so terrified,/so panicky, so haunted" (p. 75). Fear, then, is intrinsic to Sweeney's existence. "But", as Bennett argues, "fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to be"²⁹. And Sweeney is never paralysed by his state of anxiety. His sojourn in the woods is not simply one of punishment and mortification: as we will show, something far more ambiguous happens to, and within, him.

There are two particularly uncanny aspects to Sweeney's experiences. One is spatial, the other temporal. First, Sweeney takes on a *total* knowledge of Ireland, its topography, toponymy, and inhabitants, so much so that he always appears to be in *known* territory: in other words, he is never lost. On the very day of his transformation "he was a hurtling visitant of plain and field, bare mountain and bog, thicket and marshland, and there was no hill or hollow, no plantation or forest in Ireland that he did not appear in that day" (p. 11). Second, in addition to this miraculously-acquired knowledge of *every* place and placename in Ireland, Sweeney also becomes a prophet. Ronan may have specified the manner of his death, but Sweeney knows that it will take place at Moling's monastery at St Mullins. At the heart of *Sweeney Astray*, in its longest and most famous section in which he praises Ireland's trees, Sweeney prophesizes:

28. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life...*, p. 5.

29. *Ibid.*

My only rest: eternal
 sleep in holy ground
 when Moling's earth lets fall
 its dark balm on my wound. (p. 45)

Whilst he possesses this knowledge, he does not know exactly *when* he will meet his fate. One of the unintended consequences of Ronan's curse, then, is Sweeney entering a "surprise state" that includes "a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition"³⁰. So while there is no escaping Ronan's reach in that Sweeney is fated to die by spear-point, this does not lead to a meek acceptance of his accursed state³¹.

That Sweeney chooses to roost in particular trees exemplifies his steadfast attempt to mitigate his dethroned and exilic position. He primarily associates himself with yew trees that were classified in ancient Irish law as "lords of the wood"³². His first hideout after his transformation at Moira is "in a yew tree in the glen" at Ros Bearaigh (p. 9)³³. Found there by his kinsmen, Sweeney "spoke out of the yew", referring to the tree as "*his* tree" (p. 10)³⁴. In claiming ownership, he establishes his "high court in the yew" (p. 50), thus retaining his elevated position in relation to his former subjects³⁵. It is notable that Sweeney frequently rests in yews close to holy wells or churches, locations associated respectively with pagan and Christian forms of worship, something noted by Cambrensis:

30. *Ibid.*

31. When Heaney collaborated with photographer Rachel Giese on a revised version of *Sweeney Astray*, he supplemented the text with a new sequence of poems entitled *Sweeney's Flight* (London, Faber and Faber, 1992). Michael Nott senses that the "original title, *Sweeney Astray*, suggests aimlessness, a rambling without beginning or end, whereas *Sweeney's Flight*, naming Sweeney's endeavour rather than describing his state, suggests a fleeing from danger, a departure or retreat, and implies a sense of purpose. [...] Heaney's retitling acknowledges, if not a specific destination to Sweeney's roaming, a different experiential relationship with the natural world" (Michael Nott, *Photopoetry, 1845-2015: A Critical History*, London – New York, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 220).

32. Fergus Kelly, "Trees in Early Ireland", *Irish Forestry: Journal of the Society of Irish Foresters*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1999, p. 41. The other "lords" were oak, hazel, ash, pine, holly, and apple. Trees were evaluated by their usage, their comparative stature, and their longevity, and a complex system of penalties was in place for their misuse. Indeed, there are surviving references in 7th-century texts to a lost law tract titled *Fidbretha* (Tree Judgments) that indicates woodland as a legal jurisdiction. See Niall Mac Coitir, *Irish Trees: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, Cork, The Collins Press, 2003, p. 13.

33. For further instances see: "he went into the yew tree of the church"; "he cowered in the yew tree" at the church at Drum Iarann in Connacht. At one point, he rests "for six weeks in a yew tree" in Rasharkin (p. 28, 74, 29).

34. Emphasis added.

35. Yews were strongly associated with kingship in medieval Irish culture. In the story of the Fianna, an ancient Irish legend, we find reference to the yew as "the most beautiful of the wood, it is called a king" (Lady Augusta Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland*, London, J. Murray, 1910, p. 41). Ironically, although the yew tree offers shelter and sanctuary, it is also associated with violence as the tensile strength of its branches made it a favourite material in the production of spears and bows: see Niall Mac Coitir, *Irish Trees...*, p. 142. The spears that inaugurate and, in the end, fulfil Ronan's curse would, most probably, have been fashioned from yew.

[...] you will see them principally in old cemeteries and sacred places, where they were planted in ancient times by the hands of holy men, to give them what ornament and beauty they could³⁶.

The yew's association with death, eternity and the afterlife, indicates the half-pagan layer in the narrative that gestures towards Sweeney's liminal state: caught between pagan and Christian dispensations.

According to Celtic mythology, the yew was among the five Irish legendary trees regarded

[...] as the source of sacred wisdom and [that] were closely associated with the druid priests as the men of learning responsible for maintaining forms of sacred wisdom, the poet replacing the priest as the last vestige of the old religious order³⁷.

To a large extent, then, Sweeney's becoming-poet – a process intimately bound up in his changing relationship with the arboreal environment in general and yew trees in particular – involves a taking on of a wisdom pointedly absent during his time as king.

Yet at the same time, it is only as bird-man, as arboreal being that Sweeney enters into proper relationship with Christ and Christian practice. Despite his earlier attacks on the Church, Sweeney increasingly follows *disciplina*. Throughout the text the narrator refers to Sweeney's resting places as "stations"³⁸. With this term, Heaney introduces the element of pilgrimage into Sweeney's wanderings. As Janet Timbie explains,

In Christian usage, the *statio* (= standing or military guardpost) or station is originally the fast on Wednesday and Friday [...]. The meaning of station evolves from fasts to assemblies on fast days to ecclesiastical assemblies [...] to the *place* of liturgical assemblies³⁹.

In more common Christian usage, station refers to those specially designated places and times of reflection during pilgrimage. Sweeney's, however, is a solitary pilgrimage; we find him resting on one occasion in "his cold and lonely station" (p. 48).

36. Giraldus Cambrensis, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, John J. O'Meara (ed.), Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1982, p. 111. Alexandra Walsham compellingly outlines how pagan traditions were consciously manipulated by re-inhabiting sacred landscapes. As an example, she refers to yew trees in English churchyards which can be understood "as living relics of ecclesiastical attempts to colonize previously hollowed spaces" (Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 28-29).

37. Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010, p. 13.

38. Stephen Regan compellingly brings into dialogue *Sweeney Astray* with Heaney's collection *Station Island*, also published in 1984 (Stephen Regan, "Seamus Heaney and the Making of *Sweeney Astray*", p. 333-338).

39. Janet Timbie, "A Liturgical Procession in the Desert of Apa Shenoute", in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, David Frankfurter (ed.), Boston, Brill, 1998, p. 420.

Sweeney's journey through the woods is one of penitence, marked by an adherence to Christian practices such as fasting on Fridays. For instance, as he encounters a woman giving birth by the church at Cloonburren, he is enraged that she is doing so on a fast day (p. 19). Repeatedly, he implores "Christ", "God", the "Lord" to have mercy on him:

Keep me here, Christ, far away
from open ground and flat country.
Let me suffer the cold of glens.
I dread the cold space of plains. (p. 66)

Sweeney's awareness and acknowledgement of his sin appear to be in keeping with Ronan's disenchanting curse. Yet this is countered by the wood's enchantment.

On this lonely pilgrimage, Sweeney, instead of wishing for a return to court, comes to yearn for the solace of the woods. On Ailsa Craig, "[a] hard station!" (p. 53), he laments:

I tread the slop
and foam of beds,
unlooked for,
penitential,

and imagine treelines
somewhere beyond,
a banked-up, soothing,
wooded haze[.] (p. 54)

The repentant aspect of his pilgrimage is reinforced by Sweeney's description of the inhospitable and wounding arboreal environment. His physical transformation leaves him exposed to the elements and he has no roof over his head as he "roosts" in tree-tops. Thus, despite the refuge offered to Sweeney by the woods, the beauty of his habitat is countered by its roughness, especially during winter season:

Hard grey branches
have torn my hands,
the skin of my feet
is in strips from briars

and the pain of frostbite
has put me astray[.] (p. 18)

Exposed to the elements, Sweeney suffers deep cuts and lasting wounds, clearly aligning him with the sufferings of Christ:

My dark night has come round again.
The world goes on but I return
to haunt myself. I freeze and burn.
I am the bare figure of pain. (p. 70)

Stephen Regan senses that Sweeney's association "with trees makes possible numerous allusions to Christ's crucifixion"⁴⁰. This is amplified when we return to the symbolic richness of the yew.

Sweeney is directly linked to the figure of Christ via the particular trees of yew, hawthorn and blackthorn. The yew, with its connotations of death and sanctuary, is also believed "to be the tree upon which Christ was crucified"⁴¹. Speaking "from [his] high court in the yew", Sweeney states: "I have no place to lay my head" (p. 50), evoking Christ's words "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20)⁴². These signifiers of Christ-like suffering become more overt with Sweeney's announcement only a few stanzas later with "my cut feet, my drained face": "I am crucified in the fork of a tree" (p. 66-67)⁴³. Furthermore, the hawthorn, buckthorn and blackthorn are associated with Christ's crown of thorns. Seeking out places to rest, Sweeney, at one point, chooses "a tall ivy-grown hawthorn." However, he "could hardly endure it" and "the thorny twigs would flail him so that he was prickled and cut and bleeding all over" (p. 13). In search of another "station" early on in his pilgrimage, he lands on a "young blackthorn" for his bed, but is wounded by the thorns:

He changed from that station to another one, a clump of thick briars with a single young blackthorn standing up out of the thorny bed, and he settled in the top of the blackthorn. But it was too slender. It wobbled and bent so that Sweeney fell heavily through the thicket and ended up on the ground like a man in a bloodbath. (p. 13-14)

It is in the trees where his penance is enacted:

[...]
disabled now, outcast
for the way I sold my Christ,

fallen almost through death's door,
drained out, spiked and torn,
under a hard-twigged bush,
the brown, jaggy hawthorn. (p. 16)

Reflecting on his fate, Sweeney finds himself between life and death. In this purgatorial state, amidst the branches and the tree-tops, he is no longer firmly grounded on earth, nor has he yet reached heaven.

40. Stephen Regan, "Seamus Heaney and the Making of *Sweeney Astray*", p. 329. Regan highlights that Heaney had no "reservations in emphasizing the penitential qualities of Sweeney's suffering".

41. Niall Mac Coitir, *Irish Trees...*, p. 3.

42. Stephen Regan, "Seamus Heaney and the Making of *Sweeney Astray*", p. 330.

43. "I am a bent tree / in misfortune's wind", says Sweeney in an early draft (Seamus Heaney, "Sweeney Astray", Draft (13 January 1973), MS 41, 932/1, Dublin, National Library of Ireland).

Conclusion

Irish woods are figured in *Sweeney Astray* as liminal spaces apposite for Sweeney's threshold-existence between life and death, human and animal, and "between craziness and reason" (p. 15). His exile is not complete, as he returns intermittently to civilization. His isolation is not total, as he meets and enters into relationships with humans and animals. His transformation is not final, as he is "restored to his old shape and manner" (p. 34) during his temporary return home. Crucially, he is not in a state of constant madness, as "his sense and memory came back" (p. 34). Indeed, Sweeney's poetic voice attests to a cogent and clear-headed self-reflection.

But Sweeney becomes something *other* during his time in the woods. While he never entirely relinquishes his sense of himself as king, he nonetheless changes shape, repeats endlessly his losses, suffers hallucinations, is exposed to the elements, and experiences pristine visions of the Irish landscape, flora and fauna. He slowly transforms his view of the woods from a purgatory to a place in which he finds sanctuary and a degree of peace. From secular obscurity as a minor king, Sweeney ascends into indigenous sainthood and is celebrated for the poetry that both records his travails and provides a means of endurance. As a king and a "blooded swordsman" (p. 30), he inflicted needless suffering on those he considered his enemies. But as a bird-man and a penitent he enters into a form of perpetual suffering balanced with the enchantment of his poetic understanding of changed circumstances. Sweeney's nature poems articulate, to adapt Heaney's words about Patrick Kavanagh, a lonely but resilient "inner freedom": they attest to "a way of re-establishing the authenticity of personal experience and surviving as a credible thing"⁴⁴.

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44. Seamus Heaney, "The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh", in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings*, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, p. 14.