

AGNIESZKA KALLAUS¹

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2023.41.2.02

University of Rzeszów, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9354-9179>

“Speech delighted with its own music”: Birds as Symbols of the Creative Process in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Edward Thomas

Abstract. The article focuses on the symbolic meanings of birds in selected verse of two distinguished 20th century English language poets—William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and Edward Thomas (1878–1917). There have been hardly any critical attempts to compare their creative output, despite Thomas’s reviews of Yeats’s works which prove a strong impact of Yeats’s style and sensibility on Thomas’s mind. Here, a comparative analysis is offered of bird symbolism in “The Wild Swans at Coole” (1917) by W.B. Yeats and “The Unknown Bird” (1915) by Edward Thomas, where both poets use birds as symbols of the creative process. In their reliance on symbols, they draw heavily on Romantic dialectic to resolve the inner conflict in consciousness and bridge the gap between the poetic self and the natural world. Also, the article is intended to show the impact of Romantic sensibility on the poets’ original styles, which confronts tradition with modernity.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, Edward Thomas, bird symbolism, creative process, Romantic sensibility, modernism, swans, birds

1 Address for correspondence: Instytut Neofilologii, Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, Al. Mjr. W. Kopisto 2B, 35-315 Rzeszów, Poland. E-mail: akallaus@ur.edu.pl

I welcome you that have the mastery
 Of the two kinds of Music: the one kind
 Being like a woman, the other like a man.
 Both you that understand stringed instruments,
 And how to mingle words and notes together
 So artfully that all the Art's but Speech
 Delighted with its own music;
 (W.B. Yeats, *The King's Threshold*)

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and Edward Thomas (1878–1917) belonged to the most important 20th century English language poets who widely used bird symbolism to project their emotional and spiritual inner selves onto the natural landscape. Although they were nearly contemporaries, writing in the times of the Great War, there have been scarcely any critical attempts to compare their creative output. This deficiency could be a consequence of some difficulty in aligning them with any aesthetic movement. Edna Longley (2013) is one of the few critics who have recognized certain, though not obvious, parallels between Yeats and Thomas: “his [Thomas’s] poetry throws into relief dimensions of Yeats’s poetry that recede when Yeats is consigned, with Eliot and Pound, to the file marked ‘modernism’” (2013: xiii). This ambiguous status of both poets can be attributed to their original and highly individual way of connecting tradition with modernity. Both were strongly attached to Romantic heritage for its interest in nature and landscape, but were modernists in respect of the formal qualities, subject matter, themes and modes of expression.

As Longley (2013) observes, Thomas is seldom compared to Yeats, “despite the felt affinities suggested by his reviews of Yeats’s work” (2013: 68), which show his deep-felt admiration for Yeats’s mastery of style and prove the notable impact of Yeats’s sensibility on Thomas’s mind. Quoting the lines from the king’s speech opening *The King’s Threshold* in a review of Yeats’s play from 18th June 1904, Thomas observes: “‘Speech delighted with its own music’ is the best definition of Mr Yeats’s verse” (quoted in Longley 1981: 81). In the same review, he writes on Yeats’s mastery of blank verse: “I seem to find, with astonishment, that verse is the natural speech of men, as singing is of birds” (1981: 81). In his monograph *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England* (2009), Jacek Wiśniewski offers illuminating insights into the parallels between the two poets, especially as regards their perfect command of style and shared sensibility. Wiśniewski observes that Thomas “was one of the first critics to recognize the accomplishment of W.B. Yeats’s poetry and drama” (2009: 4). Quoting an extensive passage from Thomas’s review of Yeats’s play, the scholar argues: “Yet for the next twelve years he [Thomas] went on to write in prose which occasionally reached the level of ‘speech delighted with its own music’” (2009: 71).

I find Thomas's comments on Yeats, as well as Wiśniewski's reflections, to be an encouragement to explore the affinities between Yeats's and Thomas's poems, especially their use of birds as symbols of the creative process. I will argue that the "natural speech", which resembles the "singing of birds", is the distinctive feature of both poets' styles that approach "speech delighted with its own music" (quoted in Longley 1981: 81).

Both poets were post-Romantic as regards their interest in nature, strong reliance on the pastoral tradition, attachment to natural imagery and the musicality of language. Writing about Yeats, Denis Donoghue points to the mystic quality of language as a driving force at the heart of his creative process. In contrast to modernist poets, following Eliot and Pound, who thought of language as a closed system of words set up in a network of associations which constitute "the only reality there is, for the life of the poem" (Donoghue 1968: 128), Yeats used language for its dramatic quality, that is "the dynamic element which bridges the gap between consciousness and experience" (1968: 135). What joins Yeats with Thomas is the mystical dimension of their poetry, which finds expression in the symbols they employ. Longley observes that "the term 'Symbolism' illuminates (and is illuminated by) their common aesthetic bearings" (2013: 68). Their understanding of symbolism consists in the suggestive appeal of a symbol, evoking the emotions that escape a mere intellectual analysis. Yeats defines a symbol in his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900):

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or [...] call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. (Yeats 1961: 156-157)

For Yeats, the symbol is then an expression of "some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame" (1961: 116), and a means of giving "body to something that moves beyond the senses" (1961: 164), which discloses its subconscious or transcendental contents to consciousness through free associations and suggestion. The same suggestiveness, sometimes escaping logical judgement or eluding definition in critical terms, can be observed in Thomas's poems. Anthony L. Johnson (1987) finds this quality—which he defines as "a poetic of suggestion", in contrast to "a poetic of statement"²—to

2 "A *poetic of statement* and a *poetic of suggestion* are defined as "qualitatively differentiated components contributing to an overall poetic. A *poetic of statement* derives from the signified, whose messages will tend to be readily accessible to consciousness, whereas a *poetic of suggestion* derives from the

be a distinctive feature of both poets' dialectic style that owes much to their Romantic and post-Romantic legacy:

The poetry of both bears some of the distinctive hallmarks of late Romanticism; in particular, it displays a rich spectrum of resolutions of a dialectic in which a poetic Self defines itself through the contact with a resistant Other. But the precise forms taken by that dialectic in the poetry of Yeats and Edward Thomas are strikingly different. (Johnson 1987: 85)

By recalling Lacan's psychoanalysis, Johnson attracts one's attention to the dialectic between the logical message, which is transmitted to the intellect (the left hemisphere) through language, and the intuitive suggestion, transmitted immediately to the senses (the right hemisphere) through sounds and images. Their poems constitute an attempt to communicate the totality of experience through the medium of symbols and the associations they evoke.

Both poets rely on "instinctive (organic, emotional, archetypal) symbols" (Longley 2013: 91) and resort to language as an "instrument by which a man meditates between himself and a world not himself; an instrument in the service of a reality that is not linguistic" (Donoghue 1968: 129). Their dialectic is convergent with Gadamer's understanding of symbol, which "does not simply dissolve the tension between the world of ideas and the world of the senses'; rather it is a space where this tension is often aggressively performed" (Dwan 2019: 8). To both poets, the symbol offers a dramatic space for the mediation between the ideal and the empirical: "it is less a representation than a performance or event in which the absolute discloses itself" (2019: 11). Thus, their language and symbols offer revealing insights into a reality independent of consciousness, which is a quality shared with the Romantics. However, in order to open imagination to spiritual experience, they adopt modern aesthetics: the simplicity and economy of language, vivid and lively natural imagery, clarity and transparency of the form. The reading of their poems reveals a sensibility which Thomas R. Whitaker (1989) assumes to be the most adequate grounding for any study of poetry: "a dialogical understanding of human experience, an openness to unconscious and transcendental sources of thought and action, and a conviction that poetic form can be a very precise medium for the discovery and articulation of our responses to life" (1989: xii).

2. Bird symbolism in Yeats's and Thomas's poems

Both poets are appreciated for the unique musical quality of their language, which attracts the reader's ear to the sounds and strongly appeals to the imagination. Yeats's poems

signifier, whose messages will tend to operate on a pre-conscious plane but to penetrate the psyche all the more deeply because of the signifier's resistance to analytic formulation" (Johnson 1987: 85).

were praised for their exquisite dramatic quality (vivid images, full of life) while Thomas used highly poetic language in his prose which resembled poetry due to the sounds, rhythm and the choice of words. Both visual and aural qualities of their verse can be easily detected in the symbols they employed in their poems. This paper will focus on bird symbolism and the way it works to display the poets' inner conflicts and dramatize the tensions between their consciousness and experience. Their selected poems will be examined with respect to how the musical quality of the verse, its rhythm, sounds and meter perceptible to the ear (or, more precisely, the "inner ear") of the reader stir the imagination to conjure up images perceptible to the "mind's eye".

To compare how birds work as symbols in their poetry, I have chosen two poems written approximately in the same period, during the First World War: "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917) by W.B. Yeats and "The Unknown Bird" (1915) by Edward Thomas. These poems mark a transitional stage in their lives and express the inner crisis in which the poets found themselves. They also show a turning point in their creative careers, foreshadowing their personal and artistic transformation.

The poem "The Wild Swans at Coole"³ opens Yeats's collection under the same title. The whole volume reveals Yeats's attempt to transform his personal experience into a more universal and symbolic vision. Donoghue argues that "the best way to read Yeats's *Collected Poems* is to think of it as dramatizing a great dispute between Self and Soul; Self being all those motives which tie one to earth and time, Soul being the freedom of imagination transcending the finite" (1968: 141–142). The poem displays the tension between the Self, tied to time and change, and the Soul, represented by the timeless beauty of the swans. Widely explored in Yeats's poetry, swans undergo a transformation: "From their role as immortal lovers in the dream-like magical world of Irish mythology, swans evolve into a more dramatic and complex mythological symbolism in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, both on a personal level and in a universal dimension" (Billigheimer 1986: 55). Yeats himself described the swan much later (in a 1932 letter to his wife) as "a symbol of inspiration" (quoted in Hone 1965: 425), but this symbol can be associated with many different concepts. The swans, besides their symbolic significance, have a physical existence as real birds, located in a physical space. In the title, the birds are specified as "the swans" (the definite article stresses their particular meaning to the poet) that are "wild" (uncontrollable) and attached to a particular place, i.e., Lady Augusta Gregory's estate at Coole Park, which Yeats frequently visited and where he met his almost lifelong love and muse, the actress and Irish activist Maud Gonne (see Levine 1981: 411–426). Although

3 The poem was written between 1916 and 1917, probably in October 1916. It was first published in *The Little Review* in June 1917 and then became the title poem in the 1917 and 1919 collections *The Wild Swans at Coole* (Levine 1981: 418–419). The analysis refers to the second version, published in the 1919 collection (enlarged and revised).

the biographical context is not indispensable for interpreting the poem, the personal element—Yeats’s disappointment and despair at the rejections of his marriage proposals by Maud Gonne and then her daughter Iseult, as well as his stay at Lady Gregory’s residence to cure his broken heart—provides a significant context for reading the poem as the poet’s meditation on loneliness, ageing, pain and longing for the memories of youth.

Yeats’s depiction of the swans here shows his stylistic transition from his early poetics, rooted in Romanticism, towards a modernist aesthetics, and marks his departure from the pastoral convention drawing on Celtic legends and fairy tales. The fusion of these two aesthetic modes is reflected in the balance between the subjective and objective perspectives. Yeats’s ambiguous interpretation of the swans—either as an impersonal image or as a reflection of his personal feelings—was discernible in an early draft of the poem: “They’re but an image on a lake / Why should my heart be wrung” (quoted in Levine 1981: 419). Levine observes that the poem was born out of “the profound disjunction between past and present meanings of that image on the lake” (1981: 419). The two versions⁴ of the poem, in 1916 and 1919, manifest a transition from the “ode to private memory” to “the poet’s symbolic vision” (1981: 420). The attempt to reconcile the Romantic subjectivity with a more universal vision emerges from Yeats’s dynamic dialectic.

The poem opens with an evocation of the autumn landscape, reminiscent of Keats’s ode “To Autumn”, with its “Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness”. In Yeats’s poem, the introduction of the swans mirrored in the still waters of the lake shows a perfect harmony between the image and its reflection—the physical world and eternal beauty.

The trees are in their autumn beauty, (1)
 The woodland paths are dry,
 Under the October twilight the water
 Mirrors a still sky;
 Upon the brimming water among the stones
 Are nine-and-fifty swans. (6)

The empirical reality of the swans—as authentic birds, not distant symbols from Celtic legends evocative of his early poems—attests to the personal character of the poet’s encounter with the swans and offers a possibility to transcend personal experience into a universal dimension. In the opening lines, the poetic imagination and the

4 In the first printing, the arrangement of the stanzas was different: 1, 2, 5, 3, 4, which made the poem end on a more pessimistic note: “All’s changed” (O’Neill 2004: 119). According to Levine (1981: 420), the poem was revised between November 1917 and March 1919, which was natural in the light of Yeats’s marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees in October 1917 and the purchase of a permanent home at Thoor Ballylee, near Coole Park, as well as the onset of his wife’s automatic writing that led to the symbolic system of *A Vision*.

reflecting mind are placed in the landscape, besides the poet's mind, which undermines the concept of classical mimesis.⁵ The mirror does not reflect the poet's mood, but the sky, which displays modern aesthetics. The opening stanza shows a static image, but underneath there is a dynamic movement evocative of the forthcoming change, as well as the passing of time. There is an attempt to reconcile time (the transience of "October twilight") and eternity (the stillness of the mirror reflection). Time is associated with the change of the seasons, while eternity is represented by the beauty of the swans. The artist seeks the sense of himself neither in the eternal images that pre-exist in Nature (unlike a Romantic poet) nor in the swans' beauty, which is an inherent quality of the object (as in modern aesthetics). Instead, Yeats creates a beautiful image that emerges from the dramatic encounter between the temporal (the poetic self) and the eternal (the soul or image). Thus, the fleeting swans are transformed into an eternal image of beauty through his creative process.

Freezing the image in a double "still frame" (the "still sky" reflected in the "brimming water") creates an illusion, while closing the line abruptly with the archaic phrase "nine-and-fifty swans" detaches the swans from the poetic persona and reinforces his alienation from the landscape. The reference to exact numbers in the phrases "nine-and-fifty swans" and "[t]he nineteenth autumn" seems to undermine the initial sense of a subjective, sentimental narrative (implied in the "autumn beauty") and can be seen as an attempt at exact analysis, typical of a modern poem. These fifty nine swans are both mythological creatures and real birds linked to Yeats's personal experience. The symbolic number "nine-and-fifty" is derived from Celtic folklore⁶ and is set against the recurrent nineteen autumns that have passed since the poet made the first count—the contrast places the swans both in the realm of the imagination and in the natural world. Likewise, nature is liberated from the poet's mind to become a pretext for meditation.

The poem works through the suggestions, implications and understatements evocative of the poet's inner conflict between the personal emotions (implicit in the sounds and structure) and the rigour of the impersonal mode that imposes a formal control onto the wildness of the swans. The tension results from the interaction between the apparent "stillness" of the image in the opening lines and the undercurrent movement within the structure of poem, suggestive of the forthcoming change.

5 In Romantic "expressive" theories of art, the classical notion of *mimesis*—defined as a reflection of the external world in art—transforms into that of poetry being a projection of the poet's inner state of mind, in contrast to modern "objective" theories, which grant poetry "the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake" (Abrams 1971: 28).

6 According to the commentary on the poem, they were well described in Lady Gregory's *Coole* (1931): "there were fifty-nine swans there when Yeats wrote the poem, in a mood of intense depression" (Yeats 1996: 551). The symbolic number "nine-and-fifty" has been adopted from the folk ballad "Thomas Rymer" and refers to the horse with "fifty silver bells and nine" hanging from its mane (Billingheimer 1986: 56).

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me (7)
 Since I first made my count;
 I saw, before I had well finished,
 All suddenly mount
 And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
 Upon their clamorous wings. (12)

There is a shift from the impersonal image in the first stanza to the personal expression in the second—it introduces a subjective perspective on time (the “nineteenth autumn has come upon me”). The poetic persona is introduced here for the first time and becomes intrusive throughout the whole stanza (the “I” is repeated four times in the first three lines, which suggests the poet’s deliberate effort to take control over the disappearing image). The swans “suddenly mount” before the poet can finish the count, that is before he can extract a static image from changeable nature. It is not nature that endows images with eternal beauty, but the artist who is trying to grasp a reflection of one fleeting moment in his own perception. There is a sudden change destroying the still structural order of the previous stanza. The attempt to achieve harmony is abruptly broken by the sound of the swans’ “clamorous wings”, when the birds “suddenly mount” and “scatter wheeling” in “broken rings” (which recalls Yeats’s “gyres”).⁷ Although the visual image is dispersed (the swans disappear from sight), a sudden upsurge of energy is released from the sound (the “bell-beat” of the wings) and the dynamic structure of lines 15–18 (enjambments), which sets the static image in motion.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, (13)
 And now my heart is sore.
 All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
 The first time on this shore,
 The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
 Trod with a lighter tread. (18)

The transition in the third stanza links the present with the past in the poet’s memory. The interaction between the static mood of the first stanza and the dynamic movement of the second offers a new perspective on the swans and their effect on the poet’s emotions:

7 In Yeats’s cosmogony, progress was presented as series of intersecting cones, or “gyres”, which illustrated a 2,000-year progression of eras in history (see Yeats 1966: 68). The imagery in the 1917 version of the poem prefigures the iconography he adopted in his later works, based on *A Vision* (1920), after he departed from the early symbolism drawing on Celtic legends and liberated himself from the obsession with Maud Gonne.

looking at these “brilliant creatures” now gives him pain. His “heart is sore” at a sense of inner division between himself and the swans, which have scattered in “broken wings”. He has lost possession of the image. The repetition of “twilight” from the first stanza widens the gap between the present and the past and deepens the feeling of loss. The phrase “All’s changed” (recalling “Easter 1916” and Yeats’s disillusionment after the tragedy of the Easter Uprising) traps the poet again in the mundane sphere governed by time and change, while the swans remind him of eternal beauty, now distant and unattainable. The sense of being torn apart between contradictory impulses is intensified through the simultaneous reference to the senses of sight (watching the “brilliant creatures”) and hearing (the “bell-beat” of the swans’ wings). It is hearing the dynamic sound of the wings—rather than seeing the static image of the swans drifting on the still water—that makes the poet recall his youth when he “Trode with a lighter tread”. The energy returns to the poem for a moment thanks to the audible interplay between the plosives in “bell-beat” and the sonorous “trode” – “tread”. However, the underlying mood is nostalgia for time that is fleeting and the inner split between the poet and the swans, making their beauty beyond reach.

Unwearied still, lover by lover, (19)
 They paddle in the cold
 Companionable streams or climb the air;
 Their hearts have not grown old;
 Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
 Attend upon them still. (24)

The fourth stanza transfigures the swans into an eternal symbol of “passion and conquest” that will “wander where they will”. In contrast to the poet, whose “heart is sore”, “their hearts have not grown old”—they are constant in their youth, “unwearied” beauty, and their ability to mate for life, as they paddle “lover by lover” in “companionable streams”. This immutability is reinforced by the repetition of “still” in the first and last lines. Although the poetic persona is absent from the landscape, his presence is implied through the contrast between the swan’s young inexhaustible hearts and the solitary poet’s broken heart. Unlike the ageing poet, they are resistant to time and change (although he actually describes different swans than the ones he saw in his youth). The swans he creates are not real birds, but a projection of the poet’s mind. Their timelessness arises neither from the physical world (fleeting and transient) nor from the eternal ideal (immortal but unattainable), but from the dynamic interaction between passion (the heart) and contemplation of eternal truths (stillness). The image thus gains independent life, although it is born out of the poet’s passion and suffering.

But now they drift on the still water, (25)
 Mysterious, beautiful;
 Among what rushes will they build,
 By what lake's edge or pool
 Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
 To find they have flown away? (30)

The final stanza liberates the swans from the sphere of a private memory into a symbolic realm. The poem ends with a vision of “mysterious, beautiful” creatures that “now drift on the still water” but will fly away some day. The swans are immortal, but trapped in a world governed by time. Another frame is imposed on this image by recalling the stillness from the first stanza, but this time the image is inverted, since “still” refers to the water, not to the sky. The swans’ “mysterious” beauty provides a temporary reconciliation between the eternal beauty of the “brilliant creatures” and the transient “autumn beauty” of nature. The poem ends in an open question about the future, stressing the perpetual uncertainty of the vision, which can disperse at any moment. Wild swans will exist somewhere and enrapture others with their beauty, but they will disappear from the poet’s sight—he will lose the possession of the image. This loss is revealed in the imperfect inner rhyme between “awake” and “away”, visible to the eye, but inaudible to the ear. Although the poem ends on a promising note, pointing to the potential of the image to delight others, the reader is left with the feelings of disappointment and sorrow as the swans are missing from the landscape.

Although the poem begins and ends with an impersonal static image, the implicit movement within its structure attracts the reader to the undercurrent hesitant moods. According to Michael O'Neill, the poem “works through understatement and implication” (2004: 120) due to the dynamic use of the word “still”. The word is repeated four times: in lines 4, 19, 24, 25, which moves the poem forward and accounts for the feelings of anxiety and unrest underneath its apparent structural order. “Unwearied still”, the swans drift on the “still water” that mirrors the “still sky”, which creates multiple illusions and opens the space for mystery. This “dance of ‘stills’ grows mesmeric” (2004: 120) but makes the reader aware of the poet’s “unstill” feelings beneath the apparent stillness of the landscape.

Another distinctive feature of Yeats’s style is its exquisite musical quality based on the interplay between the sound and the image. The swans are evoked in the “mind’s eye” due to their visual beauty, rather than their song, but it is the sound of the swans’ beating wings and their wheeling movement that fill the static landscape with energy. The musical turn of phrase reflects Yeats’s Gaelic roots, enriching his English with features of Gaelic prosody, which, in Stephanie Noirard’s observation, defines Yeats’s Irish idiom.

The Irishness of the poem is rather to be found in its prosody. Indeed, several features of Gaelic poetry may be found here such as the reliance on assonances (/eI/ /I/) and alliterations (/s/, /t/, /b/); on the repetition of words (upon, still); on word ladders (“ring-wing”, “count-mount”, “stone-swan”); or on *aicill*, a process by which a word inside a line is made to rhyme with the last line of another (“awake”/“away”). (Noirard 2009: 238)

As Donoghue observes, “Yeats’s characteristic poems are cries, laments, prayers, stories, legends, rebukes; human sounds rather than objects” (1968: 133). The poem expresses Yeats’s cry over the loss of youth and happiness, and evidences his dramatic effort to recreate the sense of poetic self through the image. Yeats uses the mask of the swan to hide his private feelings behind the “mysterious beauty” of the image. He intends to seize the vision before it disappears but is not able to do so. Yet, the swans’ beauty can give him a moment of rapture before he awakes from a dream to the sorrowful reality. His poem is an attempt to create his own inner landscape and fill it with symbols that he moulds in his imagination. His swans are both real and eternal, their existence is grounded in the physical, material world, but they also enter a spiritual sphere through the artist’s creative power to transform his personal experience into a universal vision. The energy comes from his dramatic ability to bridge the gap between consciousness and experience. Although the balance is restored for a while (with the swans floating on the still water), the inner conflict remains unresolved—the poem ends in a vision which vanishes from the poet’s view before he is able to get hold of it. As Kelly Sullivan comments, “These swans also break free of symbolism, resisting any attempts to count them [...]. But they allow him to empathise with the future viewer whom they will delight” (2021: 96). Notably, Yeats’s later poems show a tendency for a gradual release of the swan from the symbolic dimension. The symbolic swan was superseded by “something more literary avian” (2021: 91) and finally “leaped into the desolate heaven” (Yeats 1996: 316) in the poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”. “This distinction between representing and experiencing - or, [...] between echoing and directly showing - preoccupies aspects of Yeats’s poetic oeuvre, particularly in relation to birds and other animal life” (Sullivan 2021: 91). Thus, the poet’s attempt to make the swan present through its absence links Yeats’s bird symbolism with Edward Thomas.

Critics (e.g., Horne 2020) often detect a deep sense of melancholy and dissatisfaction discernible underneath the surface of Yeats’s and Thomas’s poetry, which is brought to the fore in their descriptions of nature, especially their symbolic depictions of birds. While to Yeats nature is associated with the transient human condition, with birds becoming the symbols of eternal beauty, to Thomas nature becomes a space to explore the absence of and encounter with other living creatures, both human and non-human, such as birds. Both poets’ sensibilities show the impress of Keats, especially the poet’s desire to suspend judgement and identify oneself totally with the object of inspiration. Keats defined this

quality in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, of 21st December 1817, as “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (quoted in Wiśniewski 2009: 139). As Wiśniewski observes, “Thomas associates the poetic moment—unpremeditated and unsought for, sudden, surprising and hard to capture, or captured “unwontedly”—with the self-transcending of ecstasy.⁸ It may be represented in his poems by the lovely notes sung by an unknown and never seen bird ...” (2009: 139). While Yeats’s poem voices his cry over the loss of the image that disappears from his sight to delight other men’s eyes, Thomas is more of a passive listener to the voices of nature who lets the birds fill the empty space of his inner landscape. His images are not imaginary but natural, and it is their material existence that turns them into symbols. Nature is distant and indifferent to human beings, but it has its own language to which the human inner ear can be attuned. Rowan Middleton suggests that many of Thomas’s poems “concern both the physical aspects of nature and a quiet search for something beyond the physical that is felt to be there, even if access to it is uncertain or unachieved” (quoted in McAvoy 2020: 16).

Christopher Horne (2020) observes that unlike Yeats’s poems, whose power lies in a transcendent vision, Thomas’s “poetic landscapes are never wholly removed from his participation in WWI, there arises a contradiction between the Romantics’ transcendent mode and the psychological realities of war” (2020: 106). Listening to the birds singing helps the poet to overcome his frequent bouts of depression and to forget about his traumatic war experience. Unlike Yeats, who uses the solitary birds, including the swans, as natural symbols to represent subjectivity,⁹ individuality and self-sufficient loneliness, Thomas often describes small anonymous birds and tends to link their singing with the coming of seasons.

While Yeats’s swans show his attempt to transform his personal experience into a universal vision and hide his private experience behind the mask of his swans, Thomas’s poems strongly rely on the physical reality and personal experience, which form the basis of his natural symbolism. The symbolic “unknown” bird is grounded in the poet’s actual experience. In *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, Thomas’s autobiographical novel, the author (who portrays himself as Mr Torrance) recalls the sinister cypress where no birds built nests and only one bird perched and sang, which cheered him up and annoyed his father:

8 See: Thomas’s abandoned project, an essay on “Ecstasy”, which includes thirteen typescript sheets and proves Thomas’s deeper understanding of Keats’s “ecstasy” as “alienation or destruction of mind”, opposite to its primary sense of “standing outside, in a frenzy or stupor, fearful, excited” (Wiśniewski 2009: 138–139).

9 Yeats writes about birds in his introduction to the play *Calvary* (1920): “... such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river, while the beasts that run upon the ground, especially those that run in packs, are the natural symbols of objective man” (quoted in Jeffares & Knowland 1975: 167). This is the iconography he employed in his later works, based on *A Vision* (1920).

Birds were continually going in and out of it, but never built in it. Only one bird sang in it, and that was a small, sad bird which I do not know the name of. It sang there every month of the year, it might be early or it might be late, on the topmost point of the plume. It never sang for long, but frequently, and always suddenly. It was black against the sky, and I saw it nowhere else. [...] I laughed at it, and was not at all sorry to see it there, for it had stood on that perch in all the happy days before, and so long as it remained the days would be happy. My father did not like the bird, but he was often looking at it, and noted its absence as I did. The day after my sister died he threw a stone at it—the one time I saw him angry—and killed it. (Thomas 2020: 146–147)

In “The Unknown Bird”, Thomas shows a fusion of personal and impersonal elements, which links his sensibility with Yeats’s. Thomas’s poem attempts to create a unique personal vision—an intimate union between the poet and the bird—which is based on the absolute rejection of the self that passively surrenders to the vision. In the poem, Thomas recalls a unique moment from the past when he heard a bird singing. The poem reflects the poet’s struggle to strike a balance between the personal and the universal. In contrast to Yeats, who specifies the context for the swans in the title, Thomas’s bird is entirely abstracted from the context. As Johnson observes, what we find here is “the paradoxical presence of a bird that is all absence” (Johnson 1987: 98). The title points to the contradictory nature of the bird as “unknown” on the one hand, and familiar to the poet on the other. The definite article stresses the bird’s particular value to the speaker and makes it represent the whole of nature. However, in contrast to Yeats’s poem, which reflects the speaker’s creative effort to take possession of the image, in Thomas’s poem it is the bird—or rather its song—that takes possession of the poet’s self, which passively surrenders to the sound of the three lovely notes it whistles.

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard (1)
 If others sang; but others never sang
 In the great beech-wood all that May and June.
 No one saw him: I alone could hear him
 Though many listened. Was it but four years
 Ago? or five? He never came again. (6)

From its very beginning, Thomas’s poem displays paradoxes or contradictions that reveal his hesitation and search for the deeper meanings inherent in nature, which is distant to humans and full of mystery. The bird is “unknown”, but the poet acknowledges its reality, speaking from experience: “I alone could hear him”. The bird’s unique status (to the poet) is accented through personification— “he” appears in the first line and is contrasted with insignificant “others” (other birds or singing creatures), which never sing. As Siriol McAvoy

remarks, “The ambiguity of this poem lies in whether this bird, a classic emblem of poetic inspiration, is part of the speaker’s self—a fantasy, generated by the mind—or whether it has its own, separate existence” (2020: 17). The real existence of the bird (but for the poet) is questioned from the outset—the experience is so mystical that it eludes sensual perception. The opening lines reduce the image to the sound, since “no one saw him”—the bird is not seen, not even heard “though many listened”, its voice is “too soft to be heard”, and what is heard is not even a song, but “Three lovely notes”. This mystical bird cannot be seen even by the poet. The reduction of the context is emphasized with the conditionals and negations: “others never sing”, if they sing at all. The bird’s voice is audible only to the poet, which points to their unique relationship: the bird was heard at a distance and but for a moment, it was reduced to only three notes. However, there is a strong impact of the rhythmically stressed “three lovely notes” on the reader’s ear, which opens the consciousness to sensual and intuitive perception of the bird as a real being. The language of nature, however strange and incomprehensible, sounds “lovely” to the ear.

Thomas questions the reality of time and memory as the foundation of his experience. The speaker is not sure when he heard the bird: “Was it but four years / Ago? or five?”—there are two question marks—he is unable to locate the sound in time and places the bird somewhere in the spiritual realm, out of the physical world. Shifting “Ago?” to the next line stresses the speaker’s uncertainty about the reality of time; it could well have been a dream (“as if he and I were in a dream”). Unlike Yeats, whose reference to the exact number of swans counted shows his attempt to possess the image, Thomas’s senses are sharpened in a passive wait for the recurrence of the bird to possess him, but to no avail: “He never came again”.

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone, (7)
 Nor could I ever make another hear.
 La-la-la! he called, seeming far-off—
 As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,
 As if the bird or I were in a dream.
 Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes
 Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still
 He sounded. All the proof is—I told men
 What I had heard. (15)

The further lines evidence the poet’s individual effort to establish a personal connection between the bird and himself. The bird is alone and the poet is alone—this loneliness forms the grounds for their intimacy. This union is confirmed by the position of “alone”: the stress on “alone” in line four, “I alone could have heard him” (‘I was the only one’), points to their unique relationship, exclusive of “others”. The word “alone” is repeated in

line 7, “when I heard him I was alone” (‘lonely, without company’)—the bird’s notes were heard in silence. The poet questions even his ability to hear any bird whatsoever (“Nor could I ever make another hear”). The character of their exquisite encounter is undefined and undetermined, beyond any system designed by science (the naturalists), and depends on the poet’s passive and receptive disposition to wait for the bird to speak to him—the consciousness is entirely open to an outer experience. On the verbal and semantic level, all communication is denied, as the bird is reduced to a disembodied song, which is graphically marked as “la-la-la” (being the poet’s impression of the sound, rather than the real tweet uttered by a bird), which to the poet’s senses feels like “bodiless sweet”. The denial of verbal communication is confirmed on both empirical and semantic planes: he sounded “seeming far off”, “as if a cock crowed past the edge of the world”, “As if the bird or I were in a dream”. The senses are attuned to listening for a very distant sound to be heard from “the edge of the world”, which may bridge the gulf between the self and the natural world, and awaken one’s consciousness.

The structure of the poem, which is graphically divided into two parts with a split in line 15, shows an attempt to strike an inner balance between its both parts—the first referring to the bird, the second to the poet. The balance is restored with the repetitions of the same words in a different context, stressing the dynamic relationship between the poet and the bird. The bird is first heard at a distance, which is gradually being reduced as the sound approaches the speaker: the bird “neared me”, yet was “distant still”. Putting these phrases in one line eliminates the spatial dimension. Unity is achieved for a moment, as the bird and the speaker merge into a single “plain” sound. The consciousness opens to the mystery of a creative act, an incarnation of the voice.

I never knew a voice, (16)

Man, beast, or bird, better than this. I told
 The naturalists; but neither had they heard
 Anything like the notes that did so haunt me,
 I had them clear by heart and have them still.
 Four years, or five, have made no difference. Then
 As now that La-la-la! was bodiless sweet:
 Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say
 That it was one or other, but if sad
 ‘Twas sad only with joy too, too far off
 For me to taste it. But I cannot tell
 If truly never anything but fair
 The days were when he sang, as now they seem. (28)

The reality of experience is supported with the dry statements of facts: “He sounded”, “I told men”, “what I had heard”. This is tangible proof of the bird’s existence in the poet’s experience and provides empirical grounds for that knowledge. While the mysterious bird becomes a part of the speaker’s inner self on the sensual plane, this is denied on the semantic plane. The line cleft crosswise splits the poem into two parts, creating a visual gap between experience and knowledge. The expression “I never knew a voice” (instead of “I never heard a voice”) suggests that the mystic knowledge revealed to the speaker by the bird is different from the scientific knowledge of the naturalists. The contrast between the negations used to describe naturalists (“neither had they heard/ Anything like the notes”) and the poet’s intuition that bordered on certainty (“that did so haunt me”) points to the speaker’s desire to become one with nature. This uncertain and hesitant attempt to hear the birdsong is gradually transformed into the poet’s absolute command of the secret language of birds: “I had them clear by heart and have them still”. Repeating “have” in the past and in the present tense suggests the timelessness of the birdsong, while the adverb “still” (meaning ‘now as before’) testifies to the “reality” of the voice. The emotional balance is gradually achieved (was it more “sad” or joyful”, “sad only with joy too”), which transforms the sense of time: “four years, or five, have made no difference”. Time does not matter because the poet hears these notes “now” as he heard them “then”. The song marks the moment of creation which transcends time—the bird’s voice is always perceptible to the senses: it is simultaneously heard (“la-la-la”) and tasted (“bodiless sweetness”)—the synaesthesia opens the senses to intense concentration that enables the bringing to presence what is “all absence”. There is no bird, not even a song, only three notes “la-la-la” (strange as they may sound) heard in the distance – but their constant presence in the speaker’s consciousness is acknowledged by the dynamic progression of the sound over time and space: “distant still”, “have them still”, “now I know”. The sense of time and space is abandoned, while possession becomes one with knowledge.

The encounter with the bird is elusive to others’ knowledge or experience (no one heard the bird “Though many listened”), or eventually to the poet himself (“I cannot tell” when it was). The syntax of the final lines is so strewn with negatives, hesitations, “buts” and “ifs”, that it undermines Thomas’s ability to opt for any resolution, except for this “bodiless sweet” sensation that comes from his private and subjective experience.

This surely I know, that I who listened then, (29)
 Happy sometimes, sometimes suffering
 A heavy body and a heavy heart,
 Now straightway, if I think of it, become
 Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore. (33)

The final lines restore a perfect balance to the poem's structure. The poet gains deeper knowledge, bordering on certainty ("this surely I know"), which comes from attentive listening to the bird's song ("I who listened"). This subjective, mystic knowledge allows the speaker to reconcile the contradictions, and finally restore integrity to his troubled physical and mental condition: a "happy sometimes" and "sometimes suffering"; "a heavy body" and "a heavy heart". The inner conflict—reflected in the poet's consciousness by a hesitant, uncertain struggle between "buts" and "ifs"—is reconciled but for a moment (like in Yeats's poem) and gives a sudden impulse to "a heavy body and a heavy heart" to proceed with the journey. The word "straightway" suggests "straight away" ('suddenly') and a "straight way" ('course of the journey'). The final tone is joyful (unlike Yeats's despair)—the sound heard somewhere in the distant regions of memory invigorates the poet's "heavy" body and soul with a vital force to overcome his physical exhaustion and mental depression, and advance in life. He becomes as "Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore"—the spirit transcends the weary physical and mental condition while the self becomes one with the bird "wandering beyond my shore". The impulse from the birdsong opens the mind to a fresh upsurge of energy, making it possible to exceed the limits of empirical experience and progress into the mystical.

3. Conclusion

Both Yeats and Thomas were modernists drawing on Romantic tradition, in whose works Romantic sensibility was filtered through modern aesthetics. Both poets relied on post-Romantic heritage based on Keats's mysticism, which attempted to bridge the gap between the poetic self and the natural world. They shared the same Romantic sensibility evident in the mind's disposition to respond to natural phenomena—they were open to the metaphysical dimensions of existence and found in nature the energy to communicate with their unconscious or spiritual spheres. They applied birds as symbols to resolve the inner conflict between consciousness and experience lying at the heart of the creative process. Though different, their poems—when read together—display a remarkable resemblance as regards the musicality of the language, the powerful and suggestive impact of the sound and imagery upon the reader's senses, and the ability of verse to turn imagination to spiritual experience. The symbolism of birds proves the poets' creative effort to achieve a balance between fact-based knowledge and intuitive insight, which opens the mind to the mystical. Both poets attempt to strike a balance between sound and image through the natural rhythms and music of speech, which attunes the reader's ear to the "pre-ordained energies" inherent in words. Yeats's swan iconography reflects his deliberate endeavour to recreate the sense of the poetic self through the image, while Thomas's symbolism manifests a total surrender of the self to the sounds of nature, which helps him regain integrity and balance. Their poems show an effort to extract from nature the primitive sense of life, the primeval energy and

inner pulse which invigorates the spirit. While both poets resort to bird symbolism to provide an insight into the mystery of creation, their impulses are running in opposite directions. While Yeats makes a reference to the visual aspect of the image (the swans' beauty), Thomas appeals to the sense of hearing. It is hearing the birdsongs—more often than seeing the birds—that offers him an insight into the sphere beyond the ordinary experience and attunes his consciousness to the mystical quality of the vision. Yeats's poetry shows his creative struggle to adjust language to the demands of his powerful imagination, while Thomas's poetry reveals his disposition to attune his ear to the music inherent in nature, which resembles “the singing of birds” and gives a natural rhythm to his verse. Diverse as it is, the symbolism of birds—as image and voice—proves to offer a therapeutic value to both poets and helps them overcome feelings of melancholy, sadness, pessimism, and loss.

References

- Abrams, M.H. 1971. *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Billigheimer, R.V. 1986. 'Passion and conquest'. Yeats' Swans. *College Literature* 13.1: 55–70.
- Donoghue, D. 1968. *The Ordinary Universe. Soundings in Modern Literature*. New York: Ecco Press.
- Dwan, D. 2019. Important Nonsense: Yeats and Symbolism. *New Literary History* 50.2: 219–243.
- Hone, J. 1965. *W.B. Yeats 1865–1939*. London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd.
- Horne, Ch. 2020. 'With Their Light Footsteps Press': Edward Thomas, W.B. Yeats, and the Symbolism of Loss. *The Albatross* 10: 106–112.
- Jeffares, A.N. & Knowland, A.S. 1975. *A Commentary on the Collected Plays by W.B. Yeats*. London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd.
- Johnson, A.L. 1987. The Poetry of Suggestion: W.B. Yeats and Edward Thomas. *Poetics Today* 8.1: 85–104.
- Levine, H.J. 1981. 'Freeing the Swans': Yeats's Exorcism of Maud Gonne. *ELH* 48.2: 411–426.
- Longley, E. (ed.). 1981. *A Language Not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*. Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd.
- Longley, E. 2013. *Yeats and Modern Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McAvoy, S. 2020. *Edward Thomas. Selected Poems (Faber)*. WJEC AS/A Level English Literature. Unit 2: Poetry Post-1900. CREW. Resources for Teachers. Swansea University. Available from: https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/EdwardThomas_01.pdf [Accessed 24.02.23]
- Noirard, S. 2009. 'The Wild Swans at Coole'. Poem Analysis. *Cercles Occasional Paper Series*: 233–241.
- O'Neill, M. (ed.) 2004. *The Poems by W.B. Yeats. A Routledge Study Guide and Sourcebook*. London: Routledge.

- Sullivan, K. 2020. Presence of an Absence: Yeats's Solitary Swan. *International Yeats Studies* 4.1: 91–98.
- Thomas, E. 2020. [1913]. *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*. London: Duckworth & Co. The Project Gutenberg eBook. Available from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/63268> [Accessed 18.02.23]
- Whitaker, T.R. 1989. *Swan and Shadow. Yeats's Dialogue with History*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Wiśniewski, J. 2009. *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Yeats, W.B. 1961. *Essays and Introductions*. London: MacMillan.
- Yeats, W.B. 1966. *A Vision*. New York: Collier Books.
- Yeats, W.B. 1976. *The Collected Plays*. New York: MacMillan.
- Yeats, W.B. 1996. *Yeats's Poems*. A. Norman Jeffares (ed.). London: MacMillan.

Agnieszka Kallaus. Graduated from Warsaw University in 1995, having written the M.A thesis on the image of dancer in W.B. Yeats's poetry. It was reviewed by Professor Jacek Wiśniewski, who then supervised her Ph.D. dissertation on the myth and ritual in the dramatic and theatrical output of W.B. Yeats and Jerzy Grotowski, defended at Warsaw University in 2006. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Studies at the University of Rzeszów. Her main research areas include contemporary Anglophone and Polish drama and theatre.