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SPATIAL IMAGES IN THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННЫЕ ОБРАЗЫ В ПОЭЗИИ У. Б. ЙЕЙТСА

The article discusses the role of spatial images in selected poems of the famous Irish writer William Butler Yeats. Concrete and abstract spatial images in his poems are analyzed taking into account Yeats's personal life, philosophy and worldview, as well the historical and political happenings in Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century. The notion of chronotope is applied to the analysis of Yeats's poems to highlight the connection between their spatial organization and their themes and ideas. Yeats's interest in landscape and nature, and his use of specific geographical place names and abstract spatial imagery have a symbolic, aesthetic and ideological value in his works and are related to Yeats's evolving perception of his own self and the world around him.

Key words: poetry; Irish literature; Irish Literary Revival; W. B. Yeats; spatial imagery; chronotope.

В статье рассматривается роль пространственных образов в ряде стихотворений известного ирландского писателя Уильяма Батлера Йейтса. Конкретные и абстрактные пространственные образы в его поэзии проанализированы с учетом фактов биографии писателя, его взглядов и мировоззрения, а также исторических и политических событий в Ирландии в начале XX века. Анализ поэзии У. Б. Йейтса осуществлен с опорой на понятие хронотопа, что позволило подчеркнуть связь между пространственной организацией стихотворений и их тематикой и проблематикой. Обращение Йейтса к образам природы и использование конкретных географических названий и абстрактных пространственных образов в его поэзии имеют символическое, эстетическое и идеологическое значение, отражают изменения в самосознании поэта и его окружении.

Ключевые слова: поэзия; литература Ирландии; Ирландское литературное возрождение; У. Б. Йейтс; пространственные образы; хронотоп.

W. B. Yeats is considered to be one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. His poetry is renowned for exploring diverse themes such as love, Irish nationalism, and the occult. One of the most notable characteristics of Yeats's poetry is the strong sense of place that is present in his works. As noted by H. Raines in "The New York Times," even though he spent much of his childhood and young manhood in London, "Yeats wanted to become a uniquely Irish poet. <...> The lore and place names of his childhood territory around County Sligo – Lissadell, Knocknarea, Ben Bulbin, Ballisadare, Innisfree – were central to his early verse. Later, two places in County Galway – the Gregory family estate at Coole Park and Yeats's own summer retreat in a medieval castle called

Thoor Ballylee – provided the solitude and physical symbols for the great poetry of his middle years, the body of work that cemented Yeats’s claim for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923” [1].

The study of spatial imagery in Yeats’s poetry is complicated because of the poet’s elaborate style which takes elements from Irish and Greek mythology, English literature, European politics and Christian imagery, and because of the complexity of the poet’s imaginative thought and worldview which were influenced by his personal experience and his views concerning Irish politics and culture. Moreover, Yeats’s poetic activity extended over the period of more than 50 years, and his writing style was constantly evolving. The aim of the article is to present an in-depth analysis of the role of spatial images in Yeats’s poetry and to demonstrate how these images helped the poet to express his themes and ideas.

Yeats’s use of *concrete* spatial images enabled him to understand specific places and spaces and to project his vision to the reader. For example, in the poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (first published in 1893), Yeats evokes the island of Innisfree in County Sligo in Ireland and paints a picture of a peaceful and idyllic setting, with imagery of a *bee-loud glade*, a *small cabin built of clay and wattles*, and a *hive for the honey-bee*. This imagery reflects the speaker’s longing for the simplicity and beauty of rural life and conveys a bond between the speaker and the natural world. As noted by S. B. Khamdamova, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is a poem that represents Yeats’s romantic period (rather than his modernist art) when he wrote in a lyrical, romantic style and focused on the themes of love, longing and loss, and Irish myths, in it “the poet idealizes a small island of his youth as a place of escape” [2, p. 348]. Besides, Yeats was living in London at that time and was often homesick for Ireland, which is seen in these lines: *I will arise and go now, for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; / While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey, I hear it in the deep heart’s core* [3, p. 20]. There is a contrast between the peace of the cabin at the lake and the “pavements grey” of big cities. These two chronotopes – of the country and the city – are juxtaposed in the poem to emphasize the spiritual connection between people and nature. The focus on the Irish landscape and a particular locale which Yeats associated with the Gaelic heartland has an ideological aspect as well: it “could become emblematic of the homeland and thus a badge of anticolonial aspirations” [4, p. 61].

Similarly, in another poem, “The Wild Swans at Coole” (first printed in 1917) Yeats refers to a particular place in the southern part of County Galway that had personal significance for him and was associated with Irish history and culture. In 1894 Yeats met Lady Augusta Gregory who became his friend and patron and with whom he became involved with The Irish Literary Theatre which was founded in 1899 in Dublin (and became the base for the Abbey Theatre in 1904). Lady Gregory’s mansion of Coole Park was visited by famous Irish writers, painters and scholars (e. g. Sean O’Casey and George Bernard Shaw) and became the center of the Irish Literary Revival. For Yeats it was the most important place in his creative life, where for almost 20 years he spent summers and produced

some of his greatest poetry. In “Wild Swans at Coole,” Yeats creates an image of the lake in Coole Park that is filled with peace and tranquility: *The trees are in their autumn beauty, / 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* [3, p. 60]. John Masefield in his book “Some Memories of W. B. Yeats” recounts that once when he and Yeats were fishing, their passage flushed a flight of swans into the air and Yeats said quietly, “I’ve always thought this is the most beautiful place in the world” [qtd. in: 1]. However, in the poem the speaker also reflects on the changes that happened over the years since he first visited this place and saw the swans: *I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, / 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* [3, p. 60]. The recurring image of the wild swans at Coole symbolizes the speaker’s aging and the passage of time, but it also ties the present moment to the past and creates a sense of continuity over time. The image of the swans on the lake establishes the chronotope of memory in the poem; it emphasizes the inevitability of aging and the power of memory to connect us to the past: *Unwearied still, lover by lover, / 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* [Ibid].

In the poem “Easter, 1916,” written and first printed in 1916, Yeats describes the events of the Easter Rising (April 24, 1916), a pivotal moment in Irish history in its struggle against the British rule. In this period, Yeats became more closely connected to nationalist political causes and “shifted his focus from myth and folklore to contemporary politics, often linking the two to make potent statements that reflected political agitation and turbulence in Ireland and abroad” [2, p. 349]. The uprising was unsuccessful, and most of the Irish republican leaders involved were executed for treason. The Irish chronotope in the poem is created through the reference to the Easter Rising in the title, but also through the explicit mentioning of the names of the leaders of the Easter Rising that were executed: *I write it out in a verse – / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born* [3, p. 87]. Although Yeats had strained relations with some of the figures who led the uprising (for personal reasons and because he rejected violence as a means to secure Irish independence), he was shocked by their execution by the British: *I have passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words, / Or have lingered awhile and said / Polite meaningless words, / And thought before I had done / Of a mocking tale or a gibe / To please a companion / Around the fire at the club, / Being certain that they and I / But lived where motley is worn: / All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born* [Ibid, p. 85]. Thus the ideological and psychological distance between the speaker and the revolutionaries is eliminated to emphasize the price these people paid and their role in changing the course of Irish history. The mentioning of the color green also refers to the Irish Republican movement and adds to the Irish chronotope of the poem. Yeats

highlighted the historical significance of the Easter Rising and its impact on the nation by depicting the process of changing, and this creates a sense of immediacy and urgency in the poem: *The horse that comes from the road, / The rider, the birds that range / From cloud to tumbling cloud, / Minute by minute they change; / A shadow of cloud on the stream / Changes minute by minute; / A horse-hoof slides on the brim, / And a horse plashes within it; / The long-legged moor-hens dive, / And hens to moor-cocks call; / Minute by minute they live: / The stone's in the midst of all* [3, p. 86]. In this poem, Yeats expresses the themes of political change and historical events, and he uses the time and space of Dublin in Easter in 1916 to emphasize the impact of those events on individuals and the whole nation and to commemorate the sacrifice of the lives of the leaders of the Rising.

One of the most striking examples of Yeats's use of *abstract* spatial imagery can be found in the poem "The Second Coming" (first published in 1920). In this poem, Yeats describes the *widening gyre*, a spiral-like image that suggests outward expansion as it goes up. This image conveys an understanding of the world's turmoil and its uncertain future; it symbolizes the breakdown of societal order and the impending Apocalypse and Second Coming. It also serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of history, with societies rising and falling in a never-ending spiral. Thus, the abstract imagery of place serves as a tool for the poet to convey a sense of the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterizes human existence in general as well as to reflect the particular political and social upheavals of his time, specifically the atmosphere of post-war Europe and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence. The mentioning of another abstract spatial image – *the sands of the desert* where *A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds* [Ibid, p. 91] – adds to the sense of unease and uncertainty in the poem. Critics agree that this *rough beast that slouches towards Bethlehem to be born* is not "a particular political regime <...>, but a broader historical force, comprising the technological, the ideological, and the political" [5].

In 1917, Yeats bought and restored a 14th-century stone tower called Thoor Ballylee situated only a few miles from Coole Park. Yeats and his young wife wanted a place of their own and used Ballylee as a summer home from 1917 to 1929. Thoor Ballylee became the setting and the central image of Yeats's works published in the collections "The Tower" (1928) and "The Winding Stair and Other Poems" (1933). In his letter written to his father on July 16, 1919, Yeats wrote about Thoor Ballylee: "I am writing in the great ground floor of the castle – pleasantest room I have yet seen, a great wide window opening over the river and a round arched door leading to the thatched hall <...>. There is a stone floor and a stone-roofed entrance-hall with the door to winding stair to left, and then a larger thatched hall, beyond which is a cottage and kitchen. In the thatched hall imagine a great copper hanging lantern <...>. I am writing at a great trestle table which George keeps covered with wild flowers" [qtd. in: 6, p. 44]. Even though in the letter Yeats describes this place with so many physical details, in his poetry Thoor

Ballylee figures as a more abstract image, a powerful symbol of Irish history and culture, of ancestry and tradition. In the poem “Blood and the Moon” Yeats writes: *I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare / This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair; / That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there* [3, p. 124]. In another poem, “My House” (from “Meditations in Time of Civil War”), he writes about the tower: *A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone, / A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth, / A candle and written page* [Ibid, p. 102]. From these lines we can see that for him it was also a symbol of stability, “a retreat from the turbulent political events of the day – a “blessed place” where he could be with his family and write poetry” [6, p. 45].

“Sailing to Byzantium,” one of the most famous poems of W. B. Yeats, was written in Thoor Ballylee and was included into the collection “The Tower” (1928). The city of Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul), was known in history as a city of outstanding cultural and artistic achievements. It was the capital of the Byzantine Empire and was renowned for its art, architecture, and religious artifacts. Yeats travelled to Italy during his lifetime and saw the mosaics at Ravenna and in Sicily, visited Capri and Rome, and in the poem he evokes Byzantine art and represents the city of Byzantium as a place of beauty, luxury and splendor by mentioning *the gold mosaic of a wall, a golden bough, gold enameling*. The poem was written when Yeats was not a young man any more, and it reflects modernist tendencies in his art and a sense of the poet’s nostalgia for a richer intellectual and cultural experience beyond the physical one: *That’s no country for old man. The young / In one another’s arm, birds in the trees, / – Those dying generations – at their song, / The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, / Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born, and dies. / Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect* [3, p. 94]. In this context, Byzantium becomes a symbol of art and beauty that transcend death: “The poem’s real topic is the transformative force of artist; the capacity of craftsmanship to express the unutterable and to venture outside the limits of self” [2, p. 350]. Thus, the toponym “Byzantium” in the title not so much identifies a geographical location and the setting of the poem but rather creates a particular chronotope – of ancient culture, art and learning – that is developed through the images of *sages standing in God’s holy fire* and *Grecian goldsmiths*. Yeats in a draft script for a 1931 BBC reading of his poems: “I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts about that subject I have put into a poem called ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells, and making the jeweled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city” [qtd. in: 7, p. 111].

In conclusion, spatial imagery in Yeats’s poetry serves as a powerful tool for conveying the poet’s ideas about people, Ireland, the inevitability of aging, the passage of time, the permanence of art. Pat Sheeran noted: “Throughout his work

<...> there is a constant, obsessive juxtaposition of a mythical place which signifies timelessness and stability set against the actual turbulent world of incessant storm, change and fury” [8, p. 153]. Through vivid and evocative descriptions of particular places and spaces, Yeats brings his poetry to life and creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy. The various chronotopes in his poetry – of the country and the city, of memory, of ancient art and culture, of Ireland’s past and present – reflect the poet’s personal concerns as well as the broader historical and political context of his life and work. Yeats imbued specific locations in Ireland (Innisfree, Coole Park, Thoor Ballylee) with particular meanings and connotations, conveyed a sense of history and continuity, expressed his connection to the surrounding world. On the other hand, Yeats’s use of abstract spatial imagery (such as the *widening gyre*) allowed him to communicate deeper meanings in his poetry. In all cases, place as a physical locale and a psychological space is a major creative force in the works of W. B. Yeats.

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