

Perceptions of Human Nature in Celtic Tradition: Significance of the Figure of the Bird

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ANNOTATION. The article deals with dualistic perception of human nature as reflected in Celtic mythopoetics of death. By relying on linguistic data, various ancient Celtic texts and episodes from the epic heroic literature, the article tackles questions concerning relations between the body as the material part of a person and the soul as the spiritual one. Various hypotheses concerning significance of the figure of the bird are verified: whether the bird stands for the soul of the dead, operates as a psychopomp or is involved in the process of metempsychosis. The analysis reveals operational mechanism of the bird in the context of love and death, significance of shapeshifting into a bird, and instrumental use of the bird in situations related to the death-like state.

KEYWORDS: Celtic tradition, myth, death, dualism, bird.

INTRODUCTION

Death might be perceived of as one of the most important factors determining life: its mode, prevailing moral values, preferable behavioural models, etc. Issues related to death, such as conceptualization of the whole process of proper dying and burial, the mode of afterlife existence, picturing the world of the dead, etc., prove the perception of death and manifestation of that perception to be a vast cultural complex.

One of the most controversial questions concerning death that has been subjected to philosophical as well as scholarly debate for ages is the dualistic nature of a human being. It not only points to the problem of human nature, but also to the understanding of death itself, namely, whether death is the process of the soul leaving the body or not. Opinions concerning this issue are quite varied. There are scholars, for instance, who claim that “the Jewish authors did not think of death as the release of the soul from the body <...> [and that such] dualistic conception was far from their understanding of human existence” (Ormerod 2007: 176). Such conception from the Old Testament undoubtedly influenced formulations about

human nature in the early Christianity. The Greek philosophical tradition provides a wide spectrum of views from Epicureans and followers of Aristotle who regarded the soul as a rather substantive entity (Stefon 2014), to Pythagorean thoughts about reincarnation (Spence 1995: 112), to Platonism introducing the idea of soul as immaterial substance yet akin to the earthly world (Lincoln 1989: 135). This idea gave foundation to Neoplatonism holding an essentially dualistic conception of the human as being comprised of a spiritual substance, i.e. the soul, and a material substance, i.e. the body (Ormerod 2007: 176) – an attitude widely adopted and discussed by the Christian philosophers. This proves that the pre-Christian world was much more varied than it is sometimes allowed to be. Even a single tradition, e.g. Greek, could demonstrate a great variety of attitudes, let alone other cultures, which have left fewer sources but could maintain no less varied worldviews shared by different tribes. One should also bear in mind the long-term influence of Christian attitudes on both the sources themselves and on the commentaries about these sources.

It is obvious that revision of the understanding of human nature still remains a relevant subject worth being brought to the focus of scholarly attention in order to develop a better understanding of the Indo-European cultural framework. The so-called dualism is one of the possible approaches to human nature. The present paper finds its starting point at Jacob Ruyff's ideas on relation between anthropological dualism which is defined as "simply the view that human nature is so constituted that persons are beings who can survive organic death" (Cooper in Ruyff 2015: 456), and axiological dualism understood as "a form of anthropological dualism which asserts the relative value of the two primary aspects of the human person, often privileging the soul" (ibid.). These ideas serve as a background design of the article in raising such questions: was the distinction between body and soul typical to the pre-Christian thought? What was the relation between body and soul: were the two concepts understood to be independent, autonomous entities or interrelated? If yes, in what way? Is the spiritual part of a person complex or not? Presumably, death is the most convenient context to discuss these issues, therefore the focus of the article lies on the mythopoeics of death.

The aim of the present paper is to discuss the conception of death as reflected in various ancient Celtic texts and heroic epic literature to verify whether the perspective of a dualistic human nature could be applicable in Celtic pre-Christian culture. For the aim to be achieved, the following objectives were set down:

- to discuss the Indo-European conception of soul and body with regard to death and the dualistic perception of human nature;
- to examine the conception of death in Celtic culture;
- to explore the significance of the figure of the bird in Celtic mythopoeics of death with regard to death and the dualistic perception of human nature.

The empirical material referred to in the article represents Insular Celtic tradition and covers the period from the 8th to the 14th centuries. The number of various stories and episodes from the heroic epic literature belong to the mythological cycle, Ulster cycle and Fenian cycle. The number of investigated narratives amounts to no less than 170. Obviously, not all of them contain materials relevant for the present article; the collections that include presently quoted stories are given in the list of sources.

METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

There is little doubt of the belief in the afterlife existence among the Indo-European cultures (Olmsted 1994: 30). The nature and detailed aspects of its quality have been interpreted in many ways and yet remain open for further discussion. There are several problems that hinder arrival to a commonly agreed conclusion regarding the conception of death in pre-Christian cultures. First of all, undoubtedly, is the lack of direct data. While grave goods are often thought of as indicators of a “tangible afterlife” (Green 2011: 111) or of “a belief in the immortality of the individual, and his continued identity” (Spence 1995: 112), one has to admit these are only suggestions made by distant observers that might be far from the genuine worldview of the actual culture bearers. Similarly, runic or oghamic inscriptions – direct monuments of the local traditions mostly found on tombs – are rather scarce and sparing of detailed information.

Another source of evidence – early literature – that gives a more elaborate vision of the worldview long gone, should also be taken with a pinch of salt when the attempt is made to find the pre-Christian view. As it was mainly committed to writing by monks or people who had adopted Christian religion, the risk of ‘cultural contamination’, or, in other words, interpretation of the world in Christian terms, increases considerably. For instance, the rich corpus of the early Celtic literature was preserved in manuscripts by the local Irish monks who knew local traditions. Nevertheless, scholars still urge caution that “any theoretical formulations about Irish myth must account for Christian influences on and distortions of Celtic evidence” (Tymoczko 1985: 26). Data about other traditions accumulated by people who bore more adverse attitude towards pagan ways are even more susceptible to such distortions. Consequently, any analysis of ancient sources must consider the Christian worldview, even if imposed involuntarily.

Another issue worth discussion here is the merging of different ethnic cultures, which is very relevant in case of Celtology. It is a well-established fact that Celtic culture was immensely influenced by Vikings who established their settlements in what is contemporary Dublin and other Celtic lands, continually raided the

surrounding areas and maintained commercial as well as cultural relations with Celtic tribes (Mac Mathúna 1996: 178; Jones 2001: 204–240; MacKillop 2006: 49–50; Anderson 2010: 448; Williams 2017). It is very likely that Celtic and Germanic cultures merged just about or before the time when Christian monks were scribing down the local legends. One should not omit the fact that Celtic and Germanic tribes also co-existed as neighbours on the continent for many ages. Therefore, Germanic mythical worldview should also be taken into consideration in order to properly evaluate evidence from Celtic sources or when making judgements about the Celtic worldview.

Language is undoubtedly a very important aspect of culture that can open vast perspectives for researchers. However, since written tradition has been brought to Northern Europe, Ireland and the British Isles by the Christian culture, the language itself is not free from its influence. Some notions might be brought into the old languages rather than be their natural residents, while it is difficult to verify such evidence due to scarcity of the sources. Such cultural lenses affecting the data might be considered yet another problem of interpreting such a subtle question as perception of human nature.

The first data about Celts come from the classical sources: Sallust, Poseidonius, Caesar (Yeates 2009: 6). However, they were all strangers to the Celtic culture that could have made (and frequently did) misinformed claims and misinterpretations based on their own worldview or willingness to vilify their enemies in war (*ibid.*: 58). Yet, these authors' ideas often found their way into the works and minds of scholars, sometimes becoming the established truths. Therefore, a researcher in pursuit of Celtic thought must keep in mind the challenge of catching similar false baits.

THE INDO-EUROPEAN PERCEPTION OF HUMAN NATURE

Some researchers of the Celtic cosmology have concluded that the ancient Celts held a dualistic worldview (Калыгин 2002: 87). This statement would be supported not only by the division of the Ireland between people and the folk of *síd* on the vertical axis and between two brothers on the horizontal axis, but also by the division of the year into dark and light periods attested in the Coligny calendar as well as by traditions and rituals, cooperation between the male pole represented by the king and the female pole represented by the Goddess so obviously stated in the Sovereignty myth, and many other instances (Herbert 1992: 57). This may lead to the assumption that the Celts could have also applied the dualistic perspective on the conception of human nature, namely, they could have imagined the body and soul as separate and autonomous entities that at one time operate together, but proceed in separate ways after death.

Some scholars seem not to have any doubts as to whether the Celts believed in the existence of the soul. There are claims that “during the early centuries of their history the Celts believed the head to be the seat of the soul and their warriors collected the heads of their slain enemies as war trophies” (French 2001: 35). The war behaviour of the Celts and related implications rely on testimonies of the Romans. However, these do not give much genuine data concerning the concept that may reside beneath the notion of ‘soul’ nor can be counted as unquestionably true sources concerning the perception of human nature. Linguistic data, nevertheless, can help to formulate some perspectives.

Bruce Lincoln suggests that the nearest notion in the Proto-Indo-European language, which could be equated with the English ‘soul’ is **ṛsu-* ‘the breath’. It is the seat of life-force and vitality and supposedly “like other parts of the body, the breath departed at death, turning into the wind, its macrocosmic alloform” (Lincoln 1991: 14). The view is further supported by Earl R. Anderson who also contrasts the ancient Indo-European perspective to Plato’s dualistic approach which takes *psyche* as an entity separate from the body (Anderson 2003: 332). The connection of the concept close to ‘soul’ and breath is attested in the Celtic branch of languages: Proto-Celtic **anamon-* ‘soul’, a cognate of Lat. *anima* ‘soul’, is derived from PIE **h₂enh₁-mon-* ‘breath’ (EDPC: 34).

Evidence from the Germanic side, the long-term neighbours of the Celts, could also shed some light on the subject. Proto-Germanic **saiwalo-* ‘soul’, probably of non-Indo-European origin, as Guus Kroonen indicates, is semantically close to Lith. *siela* ‘soul, heart’, OCS *sila* ‘strength, force, miracle’, Ru. *сила* ‘strength, force’, but Germanic has a different suffix (EDPG: 423). There is abundance of Proto-Germanic words, however, which indicate the aforementioned relation between the concepts referring to the immaterial part of a person to those of ‘breath’: **anan-* ‘to breathe’, **dwēsa-* ‘foolish’, **ēdman-* ‘breath’, **gaista-* ‘ghost, spirit’ (EDPG). It should also be noted here that beside this connection, Germanic linguistic data also contains items demonstrating relation between the immaterial part of a person and reason or mind, such as **hugi-* ‘understand, mind’ or **sefan-* ‘mind’ (EDPG).

E. R. Anderson notices that in Old English, the term *sawul* is a secondary one to denote the immaterial part of a person and it mainly occurs in religious discourse in the context of death. Meanwhile, the terms *hyge* and *mod* are more commonly found in the context of life, especially when talking about the human spirit leaving the body during life and returning to it (Anderson 2003: 333–334, 336). E. R. Anderson also comes to a well-informed conclusion that Indo-Europeans, judging from comparative linguistic data, did not distinguish between rational and emotional aspects of a human being (ibid.: 332).

Concerning the location of the immaterial part of a person, Germanic lexical data reveals that at least OE *sawul* was localised in the upper part of the body (ibid.: 331). Sometimes the immaterial part of a human being could leave the body – the belief attested in Germanic (ibid.: 336), Celtic (Spence 1995: 79), Slavic (Máchal 1964: 227) mythologies. The wide spread of this motif suggests that it might have been an Indo-European concept¹. Yet, these instances clearly have nothing to do with death because the spirit could return to the body without affecting the life². There is much stronger evidence that the concept of the soul as an entity separate from the body was quite alien to the Germanic people who did not keep dualistic approach towards the human nature (Klare quoted in Березовая 2002: 228; Smith 2007: 8). The belief in the whole unity of the human seems to have been so strong that it even pervaded Christian works. For instance, Jacob Riyeff, having investigated *Vercelli Homily IV* whose author appears to have been better versed in Old English than Latin, came to a conclusion that it “affirms complementarity of body and soul and their mutual implication in one another” (Riyeff 2015: 453).

The terms referring to the material part of a person mainly deal with separate parts or organs of the body, or particular aspects of the body such as shape, heat or cold. There are some references to meat or flesh as being type of food but there is no direct data that would enable linking the body and soul. Nevertheless, there are some notions that involve such semantic elements as ‘life’, for instance, Proto-Germanic **liba-* ‘life, body’ derived from **liban-* ‘to stay’, which is derived from **libēn-* ‘to live’ (EDPG: 335). So, the terms for ‘body’ mostly refer to the concepts that belong to the sphere of life and various means of supporting it. It is interesting to note that Proto-Germanic **papa-* ‘path’ could have been borrowed from Proto-Celtic **bato-* ‘death’ which came to mean in the modern Celtic languages ‘to pass away’ (ibid.: 396). This suggests that life was associated with staying, whereas death with journey or leaving. However, the question as to what travels and what stays remains open.

There are many entries concerning the concept of death, but they are not very eloquent. Proto-Celtic **anku-* ‘death’, **bāsto-* ‘death’, **bato-* ‘death’, **marwo-* ‘dead’ or **merwi-* ‘lifeless’ do not give more information except for the denotative meaning. Proto-Celtic **marsto/i-* ‘fate, untimely death’ also refers to violent death, disgrace and sorrow (EDPC: 258). Similarly, cognates for the Proto-Germanic

1 The English term ‘spirit’ came into use in the modern sense of the word only in the mid-13th century and is related with Lat. *spiritus* ‘breathing, breath, wind’; distinction from the concept ‘soul’ occurs in Christian terminology and is not observed in earlier periods (OEtD).

2 It should be mentioned that much later Celtic folklore data demonstrate the beliefs that witnessing one’s spirit is a sign of the person’s death or that the soul leaves the body of the deceased in the shape of a butterfly (Ross 1976: 46; Milne 1987: 11).

**nawi-* ‘corpse’ refer to oppression, agony, death (EDPG: 385). Thus, ancient peoples should have had the distinction between violent and natural death. But again, these entries remain silent concerning relation between the material and immaterial parts of a person.

All in all, the linguistic data suggests that dualistic approach to the human nature in the early periods of European culture is highly doubtful. The Proto-Indo-European linguistic data indicates that ‘breath’ – a concept closest to the ‘soul’ as the immaterial part of a person – is actually not a separate entity. Though it ensures life, it has no autonomous existence after the biological life of the body ends. The closest neighbour of the Celts, the Germanic culture, demonstrates belief in unity between the body and the immaterial part of the person. Even though several different aspects of immaterial part of a person have been distinguished, one has to admit they appear more as aspects of the human being as a whole, not as aspects of the immaterial part only. Even when the ‘spirit’ leaves a living body and returns to it, the spirit, actually, has nothing to do with that particular immaterial part of a person that ensures life as contrasted to death. The Celtic linguistic data also relates the concept of soul to that of breath. Therefore, one may assume that there is a high possibility that dualistic perception of human being is somewhat alien to the indigenous Celtic thought.

Perception of death by the Insular Celts as revealed by cognitive linguistics does not give any hints on dualistic perception of human nature either. The research has shown that the Irish used to perceive death as loss (from the perspective of the mourning people), absence of senses, deformation of matter, harmful substance, departure, burial and, finally, death as death (Михайлова 2002: 14). These concepts might be grouped as those referring to the change of a human body (absence of senses, deformation of matter), change of / within the environment (loss, departure, burial) and external factors (harmful substance, death). Notably, there is no clear indication of soul or any similar entity taking part in the process of death – the majority of the concepts stress the change either in the state or location of the body. Even though the concept of departure is dubious in this respect, it may still equally refer to both the body and the immaterial part of a person.

Logically, the exploration of the human nature thus should include both the state of the human as a subject undergoing various death-related states and the realm of the afterlife. This article focuses on the first aspect in order to reveal what relations between the material and the spiritual parts of a person are depicted in mythological narratives. The realm of the afterlife, however important in the discussion of the human nature, will have to be excluded for now as it is too vast a subject.

ROLE OF THE BIRD IN THE CELTIC MYTHOPOETICS OF DEATH

Miranda Green has observed that avian iconography plays a significant role in the Celtic mythopoeitics of death. She also claims that “birds were regarded <...> as having links with the otherworld and as representative of the spirit when freed from the body” (Green 2011: 178). In other words, birds might be viewed as symbolical expressions of the immaterial part of a person. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the motifs of legends and epic literature where birds play some role might reveal new insights about the Celtic understanding of the human nature. It may also help to check whether the initial implications about the unity of the body and soul in pre-Christian times is supported by the Celtic narrative tradition. The following discussion will concern the relation between figures of human and bird in the context of death or death-like situations.

Shapeshifting into Birds

The state of the body and its change corresponds to a perception of death discussed above. Shapeshifting, therefore, is one of the core phenomena to be discussed. The ancient Celtic mythical stories feature many cases of shapeshifting into a bird. *The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn* tells of a story about the most prominent Irish hero Cú Chulainn who tries to hunt two wondrous birds and misses his target for the first time in his life. Afterwards he falls asleep and dreams of two women who come and whip him. Because of this Cú Chulainn falls into some kind of stupor for a year. Then Cú Chulainn meets two women who appear to be the same who came in the shape of birds earlier and they tell him that they are the queens of the Otherworld who shapeshifted to ask for his help. Cú Chulainn falls in love with one of them and stays in the Otherworld for a while (EIMS: 157–178). The action of the story takes place either in a non-earthly environment or in-between life and death, i.e. in some kind of paralysis that corresponds to the concept of death as an absence of senses. Yet, it is Cú Chulainn who is in the state of death, while the figure of the bird is not related to him but to the otherworldly women causing such a state. In other words, if the birds represented some part of Cú Chulainn’s identity, they should be somehow connected to him; however, now they operate as external agents, or even more precisely in this particular case, as the covering for external agents.

Another mythical story that features the motif of shapeshifting into a bird is *The Wooing of Etaín*. The story contains several interrelated episodes where women, clearly members of the fairy folk, are transformed into swans. One recension of the story contains an episode titled *The Dream of Óengus*, which tells about the love affair of the Irish god Óengus who sees a maiden in a dream and falls in love with her. When the Tuatha – the people of the goddess Danu – finally find her, it appears that

her powers are greater than those of her own father, because she can live as a human one year, and as a swan next year. That is the reason why the father cannot wed her to anyone. She decides on her own whether to accept Óengus' proposal. Cáer – such is the maiden's name – falls in love with Óengus and he, in turn, shapeshifts into a swan every other year so that they could always be together (EIMS: 110–112).

This story is followed by another one where Mider, the lord of the Otherworld, falls in love with Etaín. His jealous wife cannot stand the competition and turns the maiden into a pool of water. After numerous metamorphoses, Etaín finally regains the human shape and is married to Echu. But Mider finds and abducts her before the eyes of all the guests gathered at the feast – he turns her and himself into swans and the two of them fly away (EIMS: 57). The difference between the swan-Etaín and swan-Cáer lies in the degree of their independence. Cáer is the decision maker, while Etaín acts like an object of desire and is completely dependent on the circumstances and actions of other characters. What is more, Cáer is able to change her shape at her own will, whereas Etaín cannot control it at all. Despite how different the circumstances of the two women in the story are, the cases of shapeshifting into birds denote the same situation: the ability to acquire another shape is more indicative of the otherworldly nature of the character rather than a result of their death. That is, they both continue living, even though their subsequent form of life – human or bird or both – remains unknown.

Another instance in the Celtic mythology where a woman is turned into a bird comes from the Welsh side. *The Fourth Branch of The Mabinogion* tells the story of Llew Llaw Gyffes, supposedly a Welsh variant of the Irish god Lug. Llew Llaw Gyffes has a wife Blodeuwedd who was artificially created out of flowers. After betraying her husband and trying to kill him, Blodeuwedd is turned into an owl: “because of the shame [she has] brought upon Llew Llaw Gyffes, [she] never dare[s] show [her] face in daylight for fear of all the birds” (M: 63). The transformation into an owl is the punishment for her crime. She is condemned to a worse torment than death: as an owl, she does not belong to the world of humans, and she is an outcast among the birds as well. Gwydion, who turns her into a bird, says: “all the birds will be hostile towards you. And it shall be their nature to strike you and molest you whenever they find you” (M: 63). Blodeuwedd is thus doomed to double death though retaining her life forever. It is noteworthy that Blodeuwedd played a significant role in the death of Llew Llaw Gyffes, but she did that in the human form. When turned into a bird she had been already removed from her husband and does not have any effect on his life furthermore. Neither this stops the existence of Blodeuwedd herself. On the contrary, she will have to suffer both physical molestation and social exclusion from the fellow birds, which only confirms the unity of the body and of what might be understood as the spiritual needs.

There are a few cases where shapeshifting into a bird is carried out by male characters and they deal with fatherhood of heroes. One instance comes from the story about conceiving Cú Chulainn: his future mother has a dream where god Lug comes to her and explains that it was he who appeared in the shape of birds to lure her away from home and to make her pregnant (EIMS: 133). Quite similar situation is depicted in the story *The destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, where the hero Conare chases some unusually large, strange coloured white speckled birds to the shore of the sea. There they cast off their feathers and tell that they belong to the Conare father's army. The bird-men have exclusive knowledge of Conare's genealogy and his future (EIMS: 65–66). In this context, shapeshifting into a bird appears to be a preparatory stage for introducing a hero into the earthly world – either physically by conceiving him, as in the case of Cú Chulainn, or socially by establishing honourable origins of a man and thus paving his way to a high status in society, as it happens to Conare.

The given examples reveal that the motif of shapeshifting into birds is mainly found in love stories and it does not indicate death – there is no information about the bird 'leaving the narrative scene' and the body remaining. On the contrary, the body acquires another shape and continues living by the act of shapeshifting. Besides, the motif of shapeshifting is also related to stories of conceiving the great heroes. Notably, shapeshifting into birds, voluntarily or involuntarily, is performed by characters who are of otherworldly origins. The majority of them are females who have experienced some kind of transformation before: from female into a puddle of water or an insect, from flowers into a female. Shapeshifting into a bird thus refers to changing one's appearance but retaining the so-called spiritual side of the personality. In other words, no distinction between the body and soul as autonomous entities is made. Moreover, the very act of shapeshifting denies the possibility of metempsychosis, i.e. the transmigration of the soul to another body of the same or different species, as it clearly implies that the same body changes its appearance and not the soul changes its location of residence.

Birds as Instruments

Another role of the figure of the bird that might be frequently found in the ancient Celtic mythical stories and epic literature is employing a bird as some kind of instrument. For instance, Rhianonn who is closely associated with Celtic goddesses possesses birds with marvellous skills: the birds can wake the dead and make the living asleep (M: 196). It should be noted here that on the mythical plane sleep can be interpreted as the absence of senses, hence, a certain semantic allomorph of death, which is popular in the Celtic tradition (Михайлова 2002: 15–16). Therefore, the birds of Rhianonn act as means to cause the change of the state between death and life, yet it should be emphasized that they do not stand for death nor

are the consequence of death as it should be if the figure of the bird is supposed to represent the soul of the dead leaving the body.

Though in this particular case the text does not indicate in what way the birds cause life or sleep, one may easily imagine that it is by their singing because such motif is widespread in the ancient Irish literature. Some instances from the *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* can serve as perfect illustrations: the poem tells of a marvellous Créde's house thatched with feathers of different colours where "though covered with wounds and bleeding, a man would be put to sleep, / By the sounds of the wondrous birds singing, from the sun-filled bowers above" (TEI: 26). Similarly, Úaine, the daughter of Buide from the *síd* has a flock of birds that produce the most wonderful music in the world. The music has a similar effect as whipping in the *Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn*: Cailte, a time-worn yet still capable warrior, admits while listening to the music that "[t]hough I have been in a multitude of fierce fights of victory, and have been on many expeditions, and in many battles and combats, today I have not the strength or vigour to go outside with all the rest" (TEI: 202). Here the birds act as agents by means of which the strength is taken away from a prominent hero because their sounds are too sweet for him to handle. Again, the birds do not appear as substitutes for Cailte's strength but as the reason of its loss, though they come as agents not related to the hero.

The birds may also act as a more straightforward means of communication among humans. In *The Second Branch of the Mabinogion*, Branwen teaches a starling to speak and trains it to recognize people so that the creature can fly to her brother Bendigeidfran in another island and carry the letter informing him about her misfortunes and mistreatment at the hands of her own husband. Bendigeidfran takes his men from the Wales and goes to Ireland to save his sister, consequently, great slaughter occurs, and many warriors are slain (M: 28–29). The function of the bird in this particular case is to act as a messenger in a situation that is finally concluded by a mass destruction. In other words, the bird is the agent that participates in a destructive act; however, it is neither the cause nor the outcome of this destruction but merely a means enabling it to happen. Such a function seems to be quite irrelevant in the supposed functioning of the spiritual part of a human being at the point of death. The more so that the sender of the bird is only suffering death much later after the slaughter and thus the bird is not directly related to her sad demise either.

It becomes clear that the bird as an instrument at the disposal of some other-worldly character may cause loss of senses or strength. By the way, there is no information whether the birds are ordered to bring out such consequences or whether it is their natural ability. Nevertheless, all sources clearly indicate that they belong to goddess-like females. The Welsh story suggests the function of communication carried out by a bird at the request of a woman. The role of

a messenger implies an ability to access different worlds and thus alludes to the function of a psychopomp, i.e. the carrier of the souls to the afterlife realm. Yet, one has to admit that in the present case the assumption would be too bold for several reasons. Firstly, the bird moves between different isles, not the worlds – the realities are seemingly the same on the both sides of the sea. Secondly, the action of the bird directly affects neither the state of the sender nor that of the receiver, it only enables communication. Thirdly, the bird does not participate in any way in the ensuing destruction of the two armies; in other words, at the moment of death the bird is ‘removed’ from the narrative scene. Consequently, the bird might be considered to be a sign of the Otherworld, but the assumptions about its relation to the soul or any functions prescribed to the area of the soul do not seem to be grounded.

Birds in the Context of Destruction and Death

Birds play a significant role in the context of death and destruction in the Celtic mythology. They can cause the destruction on their own right, and not as instruments at someone else’s will as discussed previously. For instance, three ravens come on the eve of Samain every year and steal three boys (TEI: 198). Similarly, Flann son of Flann tells Cailte in the *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* that three flocks of birds come from the sea with gnawing beaks: “[b]reath of fire comes from their throats and the wind that comes from their wings is as cold as the wind of spring” (TEI: 176). The birds carry away all the crop, all the fruit and all the offspring so that the land is left barren and, presumably, without any future as the youth of every species is taken away. No one knows where the birds take their prey and why they choose this particular land as their target, i.e. whether someone has sent them or they come on their own will, but it is clear for the local residents that they have to leave the land for the predator birds because they cannot find means to defend themselves against the creatures. Notably, in these instances the birds take away physical entities and leave nothing after themselves.

A very similar motif can be found in a much earlier story *The Birth of Cú Chulainn*. A flock of mysterious birds are described as having frequented the areas of Emuin: they “grazed there until not so much as a root or a stalk or a blade of grass remained” (EIMS: 131). The men of the kingdom went to hunt the birds which were chained in pairs with silver chains. The men were lured far away because they “were enchanted by the birds’ flight and their singing” (EIMS: 132). This is the beginning of a chain of events in the consequence of which Cú Chulainn was conceived. The destruction brought about by the birds is thus meant to start one of the greatest periods in the Irish mythological history – the birth of the most famous and prominent warrior. It is also only the beginning of the interaction between the birds and the hero.

The species of the birds is not indicated in the story but any of them can be related to military affairs. Following the biographical line of Cú Chulainn one may discover what roles the bird may acquire in the hero's life. According to Miranda Green, water birds are related with war activities (Green 2011: 104). In the early Celtic literature, water birds have a very specific time of appearing: they do that in the very beginning of the path of a warrior. Besides Cú Chulainn being conceived with the help of supernatural birds, the story *The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn* tells of his later adventures. Here, taming of the swans is depicted as one of the earliest achievements of the young hero, which resulted in his initiation to the warrior class. Coming back from a deer hunt, Cú Chulainn sees a flock of swans and asks if he needs to kill or just tame them. His charioteer answers that "the bravest and most accomplished warriors bring them back alive" (EIMS: 145). Cú Chulainn fulfils the task successfully and afterwards is adorned as a warrior by the queen. Metaphorically, the taming of the swans suggests manifesting the successful adoption of warrior skills and abilities.

Similarly, the initiation process involves an encounter with birds in the story *Death of Aífe's Only Son*, where Cú Chulainn's son sets out to find his father and on his way is occupied with a curious game:

He had a heap of stones in the boat, and he placed these in his slingshot and dealt stunning blows to the birds overhead, so that the creatures were knocked unconscious; afterwards he revived them and sent them back into the air. He performed the jaw feat with his hands until his upper jaw reached his eye. After that, he modulated his voice until he had laid the birds low a second time, and he revived them a second time as well (EIMS: 148).

Though the species of the birds is not detailed in the text, the very fact that he hunts them while in a boat implies them to be some water birds. Notably, the boy's power over the life force of the birds echoes the lesson learned by his father, namely, that a truly great warrior prefers controlling to killing.

Having in mind also that water birds – three cranes – were believed to guard the gates to the Otherworld (O'Connor 2000: 35), the birds might be a symbolical representation of the liminal state of a warrior, that is, his constant lingering between life and the risk of death. In this line of thought, encounter with the water birds in the initiation stage might signify the resolution of the person to undertake dangerous military activity as his way of life. Symbolical implications of water may also be of importance in this discussion – water is associated with birth and rebirth in many cultures. So, the first feat of a warrior to be carried out in relation with water might be interpreted as his symbolical birth into the military profession.

Birds often appear in military contexts, especially when violent death is the core of a story or an episode. Avian imagery often accompanies the praising words about Brittonic kings concerning their valour and fame gained in battle in some of the earliest Welsh poems about the seventh century rulers *Poems about Cadwallon and Cynddylan*: the heroes are said “to bring crows down in front of the wall”, i.e. to kill many enemies at the defence; “measure gauntlets in grey eagles” and to have “the hand [that] fed birds”, i.e. the hand that has killed many enemies left for the carrion eating birds to devour (CHA: 326–327); the eagles are sated because they had generous gifts of corpses (CHA: 373), they drink blood of prominent slain heroes (CHA: 382–383), the steeds eager to go to battle are compared to eagles (CHA: 309). Despite their metaphorical nature, these descriptions seem to be meant to vividly describe the gruesome reality of a warrior’s life rather than to suggest some mythological implications.

Nevertheless, the association of the dead bodies with birds of prey or carrion eaters is not accidental – the birds were thought to represent (or maybe even embody) the Celtic triad of the battle furies Morrigan, Nemain and Badb – the constant companions of warriors (Olmsted 1994: 285; Sjoestedt 2000: 30; O’Connor 2000: 65; Mees 2009: 146). Actually, the crow is the last creature to perch on the body of a hero. One of the most prominent examples illustrating such final encounter comes from the story *The Death of Cú Chulainn* where the hero demonstrates an outstanding stamina: after having his entrails smitten out of his belly Cú Chulainn still manages to go to the lake to have a drink and all numerous enemies are afraid to approach him in fear of danger. Only after seeing the crow perching on his head they realize that Cú Chulainn is dead and dare to come close and cut his head off (CHA: 140). Similarly, the ravens are pecking at the head of a fallen hero in the Welsh heroic poetry (CHA: 327). The latter case is a heart-breaking lament over the loss of the man. The reference to the raven creates the note of irreversibility of death that pervades the whole poem and pins more accurately than any possible comparison of the past joys to presently empty halls of a king so popular in ancient songs and poems.

The final encounter between a hero and a bird may bear two symbolical implications. On the one hand, the bird may represent the goddess; so, this final episode in a hero’s life may signify the conclusion of the ever-lasting union between the war goddess and her so-called servant, i.e. a warrior – similarly to the images of the Germanic Valhalla where heroes are said to feast with their fellows and war divinities in eternal unity. On the other hand, the bird may be a sign of the final, irrevocable death – as if the goddess in the shape of a carrion eating bird has come to devour the hero away from the earthly existence. What is happening with the hero after this moment remains unclear – the perching of the crow on the body is the last known event happening to the man; no records of the post-mortem adventures of the hero in the Otherworld, the world of the dead or the like, are

known. In other words, there is no evidence to claim that the bird participates in the transition of the soul of the hero into the realm of the afterlife, but it is a clear sign that his journey in this life has ended.

Summarizing the discoveries about the relation between birds and warriors, it is possible to assume that the bird is a constant companion of a militant hero throughout his life: his introduction into the profession is marked by an encounter with water birds, the martial prowess and success is often associated with eagles, whereas the final destruction features participation of carrion eaters. However, birds are never identified with martial heroes and usually act as separate and independent creatures. The function of particular species of the birds might be established, yet none of them refer to possibilities of relating the figure of the bird with a manifestation of a spiritual part of the hero. Generally speaking, the bird is a common agent in the situations of destruction and death, but its role is rarely directly related to the destruction itself. The bird more often functions as a sign – of martial qualifications and prowess, of death, of danger – but not as the cause of all these states.

CONCLUSIONS

The topic of dualistic perception of human nature has never ceased being relevant. The relation between the body as the material part of a person and the soul as the immaterial one can be perceived in various ways in different cultures as well as within one tradition. The aim of the article was to see what extrapolations of the relation can be observed in the Celtic branch of the Indo-European cultures.

According to the data discussed in the paper, the Indo-Europeans had an understanding of the body as a very complex entity comprised of different parts and organs and subject to various states: cold, heat, liveliness, lifelessness. The so-called immaterial part of a person that ensured life, on the other hand, was perceived of as a non-complex unity. It was related with the concept of breath and was believed to disperse without leaving any legacy in the world. No distinction between the emotional, rational or other insubstantial states was made. At the later stages of the culture, as the Germanic data suggests, various immaterial parts of a person were discerned, especially related with the cognitive capacities, but they are in no way related to the immaterial part that ensures life. In other words, various immaterial parts of a person refer to the complexity of the human as a whole and not to the complexity of the spiritual part. The Celtic perception of death does not give indications of the dualistic perception of the human nature as it mainly concerns the state, location or effects on / of the material substance or the whole human being.

In the Celtic mythology the figure of the bird is sometimes thought to represent the soul or act as a psychopomp. The analysis of various early Celtic narratives and

epic heroic literature revealed several possible relations of the birds and humans: shapeshifting, birds used as instruments and birds operating as independent agents – the latter mainly bringing destruction or death to people. There is a special significance of the bird in the life of a warrior-hero: bird-like figures have some role in the process of conceiving the hero, water birds participate in initiating the hero into the professional class of warriors, eagles often denominate his martial prowess, whereas carrion eaters signify the death of the hero. Therefore, the bird seems to be a constant accompanier of a warrior throughout his life. However, there is no data of the role of the bird in the afterlife.

Examination of the significance of the bird in the Celtic tradition shows that the bird is not likely to stand for the soul in the mythological framework. It operates as a sign of the otherworldly dimension in one way or another, but neither introduces nor substitutes any capacities of a human being. Close relation between the body and personality, i.e. soul, in the process of shapeshifting reveals that though the shape of the body is changed, it is still the same body, so the theory of metempsychosis does not stand on the firm ground here. Neither does the theory of the bird functioning as a psychopomp, because the bird might appear as means of communication, yet be restrained for acting in a single reality. All in all, the Celtic narrative data discussed in the paper does not support the theory of dualistic perception of a human nature.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- IE – Indo-European
 Lat. – Latin
 Lith. – Lithuanian
 PIE – Proto-Indo-European
 OCS – Old Church Slavonic
 OE – Old English
 ON – Old Norse

Žmogaus prigimties sampratos ankstyvojoje keltų tradicijoje: paukščio figūros reikšmė

AUDRONĖ GEDŽIŪTĖ

S a n t r a u k a

Raktažodžiai: keltai, mitas, mirtis, dualizmas, paukštis.

Straipsnyje keliami su dualistine žmogaus samprata susiję klausimai. Straipsnio tikslas – patikrinti, ar dualistinė žmogaus prigimties samprata taikytina keltų tradicijoje. Tyrime remiamasi indoeuropiečių kalbotyros duomenimis, senosiomis airių ir valų legendomis, taip pat herojinio epo epizodais; atsižvelgiama į kylančius metodologinius iššūkius – tiesioginių duomenų stoką, galimą duomenų iškraipymą tiek juos užrašant, tiek interpretuojant dėl skirtingų kultūrinių aplinkų ir tradicijų.

Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama sielos ir kūno santykiui aptarti. Pastebima, kad dualistinė žmogaus samprata, itin būdinga krikščioniškajai kultūrai, ikikrikščioniškuose šaltiniuose ne tokia akivaizdi. Tiek Senojo Testamento aiškintojai, tiek senovės graikų filosofai pateikia gana įvairių požiūrių spektrą, pradedant sielos ir kūno vienvone, galimybe sielai reinkarnuotis ir baigiant sielos kaip savarankiškos esybės samprata. Pažymėtina, kad net ir apytikriai tuo pačiu laikotarpiu ar toje pačioje kultūroje atsiradusiose teorijose nėra vieno bendro požiūrio į žmogaus prigimtį, tad rizikinga taikyti vieną formuluotę kitoms kultūroms.

Remiantis indoeuropiečių kalbotyros duomenimis, daroma išvada, kad ankstyvaisiais kultūros gyvavimo laikotarpiais vyravo kompleksinė kūno samprata: kūnas suvoktas kaip sudarytas iš dalių ir organų, galintis patirti ar spinduliuoti karštį, šaltį, būti negyvas ir pan. Nematerialioji žmogaus dalis, užtikrinanti gyvybę, kompleksišku nepasizymi. Ji dažnai tapatinama su kvėpavimu ir manoma, kad po mirties ji išsisklaido nepalikdama jokių pėdsakų; skirties tarp racionalios ar emocinės būsenos, kaip sielos dalių, nėra. Vėlesniais kultūros raidos etapais jau pastebima didesnė nematerialiosios žmogaus dalies įvairovė, ypač susijusi su kognityvinius gebėjimus nusakančiomis sąvokomis. Vis dėlto reikia pripažinti, kad šios sąvokos atspindi žmogaus kaip esybės, o ne jo sielos, t. y. nematerialiosios dalies, kompleksiškumą.

Straipsnyje taip pat tikrinama mokslininkų iškelta hipotezė, kad paukštis keltų kultūroje gali simbolizuoti iš kūno išlaisvintą sielą, todėl daugiau dėmesio skiriama paukščio figūros ir žmogaus tarpusavio koreliacijai, ypač atsižvelgiant į mirtį ar į mirtį panašias būsenas apibūdinančias situacijas. Išskirti trys paukščio veikimo mechanizmai: pasivertimas paukščiu, t. y. kūno formos keitimas išlaikant dvasinę tapatybę; instrumentinis veikimas, t. y. kai paukštis veikia kaip miegą sukiantis ar jėgą atimantis instrumentas galingesnės anapusinio pasaulio būtybės rankose arba kaip komunikacijos priemonė; savarankiškas paukščio veikimas, keliantis grėsmę dėl savo grobuoniško pobūdžio ir aptinkamas visuose su karine veikla susijusių herojų gyvenimo etapuose.

Tyrimas parodė, kad keltų kultūroje paukštį laikyti sielos simboliu nėra pagrindo. Atmestinos ir metempsichozės ar paukščio kaip psichopompo funkciją atliekančios būtybės teorijos. Sąveika tarp žmogaus ir paukščio nerodo ir dualistinę sampratą galinčių patvirtinti ryšių.

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