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Re-codification of Greek Myth in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats

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ABSTRACT

William Butler Yeats is a name in the Irish tradition, folklore and literature that is impossible to be ignored and natural to be adored. What has been very duly noticed is his invaluable role in the Celtic cultural and literary revolution. However, one aspect of his prolific work, that requires more exploration, is also an adoption, adaptation and re-incarnation of the Greek mythology. And this paper sets out to scrutinize this inseparable feature that often figures in his bountiful work.

KEYWORDS Celtic tradition, mythology, Greek myths and epics, re-codification, Yeats

Introduction

Originality is a very evasive term. In spite of the claims of writers and the scrutiny of the critics, it is very difficult to ascertain the originality of ideas. We have been created by not only our environment but also by what we read and listen to. We knowingly and unknowingly absorb ideas from people around us and also from the authors whose works we read. Yeats remarks:

Works of art are always begotten by previous works of art. (*Essays and Introductions,* p. 352)

The text is not just the voice of the author but it is the song of the chorus. Any writing is an outcome of multiple voices, multiple views, multiple personalities. Roland Barthes terms it as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". Mikhail Bakhtin defies the notion of "pure texts". For Bakhtin, the text is an utterance and hence contextual. It emerges out of "dialogic relationships" that are present within and among the texts. A reading of Yeats shows a totally new kind of poetry that is unique in its content, elements and structure. On the other hand, his works also establish a very powerful connection between the past and the present. So many of his works take an inspiration from the Greek mythology and concepts. The fabric of Greek mythology weaves the different elements of his works and brings them into play with altogether new dimensions hitherto unexplored, unthought of and unuttered.

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Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial - out of profundity. And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to [...]? Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore - artists?

Nietzsche

Yeats's works are characterized by the apparent tension between the interior and the exterior forces. His love for the form and his reverence for ideas contest each other to yield a work that contains the best of both. When we observe the Hellenic traits in his works, this conflict becomes all the way glaring only to engage and pleasantly perplex the reader who gets lost in the labyrinthine structure and ideas.

Yeats's association with classics, particularly of Greece, has its roots in his very early age when he grew up under the guidance and tutelage of his father who read out texts such as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* to him, texts that had a marked classical base and allusions. Yeats later referred to these texts as "among the sacred books of the world" (*Essays & Introductions*, p. 65). These early experiences played a formative role in shaping his intellect and ideas. This also leads to Yeats's later association of Ireland with Greece:

Ireland is like ancient Athens where all were such talkers and disputants. England is like ancient Rome with its legions and cohorts and dull business of conquering the world. (Cited in O' Connor, p. 91)

Yeats indicated Ireland's cultural supremacy over England by comparing it with Greece. A "prose retelling of the Illiad" (*Autobiographies*, p. 47) developed his deep-rooted love and enchantment for Homer whom he considered as among "builders of my soul" (*Autobiographies*, p. 59).Homer's poetry set his guidelines and standards for Irish literature. He thought of Irish folk literature as "stories that Homer might have told" (*Autobiographies,* p. 61).

Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisin*, as pointed out by Katharine Tynan, is an endeavour to create an epic like poem and derives its insight from Chapman's Homer (Tynan p.190). However, according to Thomas Dume, it was more likely to have been either Lang and Butcher's translation of *The Odyssey of Homer* (1879), or Lang, Myers and Leaf s translation of *The Iliad* (1882). Yeats was familiar with both texts and used them subsequently for his references (Dume, pp. 177-178).

Yeats familiarity also extends to William Morris's *The Odyssey of Homer* (1887), from which he quoted in the 1937 version of *A Vision* (p. 226), and T. E. Lawrence's translation, *The Odyssey of Homer* (1932; 1935). Yeats remarked to Dorothy Wellesley about the latter that he regarded it as the "only serious literature" in his possession worth reading (*Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, p. 55).

Yeats's knowledge of Homer is also indebted to indirect sources. In the 1890s, many of Thomas Taylor's works were reprinted by the Theosophical Society. These also included his translation of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphsin the Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey* (1895), which unravels the figurative connotations of the Cave, encountered in the island of Ithaca upon Odysseus' return to his homeland. These are interpreted from the philosophic viewpoint of the Platonic tradition. Porphyry's *Cave* was a favourite of Yeats's and its undercurrents run through his essay, *The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* (1900).

Yeats may also be acquainted with *Taylor's Select Works of Porphyry* (1823). This text offers a Neoplatonic interpretation

of the Odyssean tale. It also dwells upon the immortality of soul, its divine origin and its memory of earthly life. This belief is also reflected in a number of Yeats's writings, particularly in *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places* (1914) and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917).In his poems, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1921) and "The Cold Heaven" (1912) these Neoplatonic impressions are brought to the fore.

Homer was a sustained model for ingenuity and craftsmanship for Yeats. It was Homer that provided Yeats with the specifications and guidelines, "savage strength" and "tumultuous action" combined with simplicity, "tranquil beauty" and subtlety of expression (*Uncollected Prose* 1, p. 363). In the *Discoveries* essay "Why the Blind Man was made a Poet" (1906), Yeats narrates the ubiquity and pertinence of Homer's poetry, which is not an observation but a glorification of life. "We have never seen", he comments, "anything Odysseus could not have seen while his thought was of the Cyclops, or Achilles when Briseis moved him to desire" (*Essays and Introductions*, pp. 277-279).

There was an unprecedented rise in mythology in Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century. This was inevitably linked to the Irish national movement and a re-assessment of the Irish culture and literature. It was at this time and to this cause that Yeats contributed his modern epic poem, *The Wanderings of Oisin*. The thematic outline was communicated by Yeats in a letter of 1889 to Katharine Tynan:

There are three incompatible things that man is always seeking - infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose - hence the three islands (*The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* 1, p. 141).

The expedition of Oisin is a notion that one can invariably trace to *Odyssey*.

In the Homeric epic tradition, the beauty of a mortal woman entices the godlike hero and leads to a downfall of heroism which in turn commences an age of darkness. In *Oisin*, however the enticement of a beautiful goddess to the Otherworld contains a promise of an eternal life in sensual enjoyments. Nevertheless, the thematic pre-occupations shared by the two poems are very remarkable and they also share a textual harmony in their treatment of the return. The mythical, magical islands too bear a similarity with *Odyssey* that one cannot fail to notice. Oisin's battle against the demon remains uncertain, just as Odysseus' struggle against Scylla does, because both supernatural creatures represent forces which can only be momentarily abated but not entirely subdued.

Yeats's early poem "The Indian upon God" displays harmony with the Greek thought in Platonic and Neo-platonic terms. The image in the form of water-reflection of the living creatures follows the principle of imitation as well as generation. The element of water is associated with Generation whereas the reflection is an imitation. Yeats often offers the dualistic view of the world: "The things below are as the things above" (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 146).

In *Timaeus*, Plato puts the concept of the natural world as an object not of thought and logic but that of opinion assisted by the senses. Its origin is traced to a cause and, as a creation, it is a copy generated in the image of what is eternal and unchangeable (28a-29b). In his treatise "On the Intellectual Beauty", Plotinus too posits a similar idea, saying that the universe has sprung from the divine world, of which it is an image, and to exemplify in its "mingled" beauty the "unmingled" beauty of the creating principle. These are the ideas that form the hypothesis of Yeats's poem "The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart" (1892) although here it is the image of the beloved that is used to reconstruct the world "like a casket of gold".

Yeats's "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" (1890) and "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water" (1903) have a take upon the notion of reflection (i.e. imitation). They link reflection with entrapment. They pitch a reversal of the Narcissus myth. The speakers here, suffering the infirmity of the old age, are engrossed in contemplative activities rather than being pre-occupied with recreating or restoring beauty. Yeats also carries forward this theme in another of his poems, "The Two Trees" (1892). The beauty and goodness of innocence emanating from the heart are juxtaposed with the evil and ugliness linked to self-consciousness. The beloved's peeking into the "bitter glass" connects us to the principle of imitation that is not pure but distorted as the glass is a dead reflector. In "Beggar to Beggar Cried" (1914), Yeats creates a premonition of "devil in the looking-glass".

The theme of distortion arising out of imitation is pursued again "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" (1932) wherein the poet presents a very negative perception of the mirror. In *Word from Music Perhaps*, the mirror is replaced by the eyesight that is distorted and hence impedes the vision of "Nature's pure unchanging light" but this is brought to an optimistic end by an assertion of divine perfection.

"Before the World was made" (1929) dwells upon the idea of Mask as the inverted mirroring of the self. In a journal entry of 1909, Yeats introduced an early rendition of his Mask doctrine in terms of sexual love:

In wise love each [lover] divines the high secret self of the other and, refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life. Love also creates the mask. (Mem, p. 145)

Unlike the previously discussed poems, here the mirror is a benevolent force enabling self-realization and a vision of model selfhood.

The give-and-take of the real and the unreal, the original and the imitated gives the artistic process a thrust and a boost that leads to beautiful works of art abundant with innovative concepts. In Nietzsche, this accord is the unison of the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle. It is here that the architect of the self-image (Narcissus) reaches out to the calm creator of the luminous form (Apollo) on the terra firma of the natural impulse that preserves the continuity of life (Dionysus).

In "The Tower", Yeats attempts such reconciliation through the medium of his art. His endeavour at unifying the various images of man in harmony with the universe and self-actualization finds way in "The Phases of the Moon" (1919). This poem strikes a chord with another of his poems "Byzantium" where the generation and phantasmagoria of the imagery is very enticing. "Under Ben Bulben" (1939) also endows power upon art to provide ideal images. In "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" (1937), the poet uses the images "permanent or impermanent" to embody timelessness and reinstate concord and substance to a disintegrated and estranged world.

Yeats puts forward his theory that it is the power of imagination that can unify nature, life and art and restore coherence and meaning to life. And for that, it is necessary to deconstruct all distorted images before we forge ideas into a beautiful shape to mould life and art. When the Apollonian illusion is impaired, the artist commences his journey Dionysian realm. The poem "Fergus and the Druid" (1892) contains a discourse on such transformation. "The Song of Wandering Aengus" brings about the unification of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In contrast, "At Galway Races" (1909) postpones this harmony to a time in future owing to Yeats's belief that it is very difficult to transform a society dominated by materiality and abstract thought. The artificiality of the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) designates the utopian nature of the speaker's flight to a de-materialised and abstracted mode of existence. For all its artistic splendour, the transformation is a laboured phenomenon.

Yeats's poetry also dwells upon "terrible beauty". Beauty, signifying aesthetic, artistic beauty and beauty of a transformed

society, giving way to tempestuous energies and unprecedented creativities, demands violence. It can become the harbinger of the age of "The Second Coming". And such beauty, equated with that of Helen, requires a "Troy for her to burn". . "The Tower" resembles Homer's praise of Helen in the maddening effect of beauty. "Leda and the Swan" (1923) enacts Yeats's idea of violent transformation connected to the cyclical movement of history and its mechanism of renewal operating within culture. Violence is an inevitable aspect of beauty. It brings about the disruption of the prevalent social order and ushers in a new era of endless creative and artistic possibilities that may result in harmony with the best minds of the past and the present.

Yeats's ideal is that art is not an instrument of social morality but it is the general conscience of the mankind. It has an amazing power to fashion the uninhibited energies of the individual and the society. Yeats mentions in On the Boiler (1939):

If human violence is not embodied in our institutions the young will not give them their affection, nor the young and old their loyalty. A government is legitimate because some instinct has compelled us to give it the right to take life in defence of its laws and its shores. (*Explorations*, p. 441)

Thus, Yeats dreams of a new world reconstructed on the principles of beauty, creativity and change. It requires a total demolition of the old structures to open fresh avenues for the best and the beautiful. This new world needs the beauty entrapped in all the past civilizations and mythology to fashion and structure itself, creating a wonderful space for the mankind to live and flourish in.

Conclusion

Yeats is a revolutionary writer, seeking harmony out of chaos; the harmony that he can bring in with help from the finest and choicest examples that are available in Greek mythology. He invites the most excellent ideas from the best cultures and seeks their re-distribution and re-codification to design a world hitherto undreamt of. This world shall derive melodiousness and rhythm out of a chaos that will end all the unnecessary and unimaginative. As D. H. Lawrence articulates:

Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun. But after a while, (...) commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens on to chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum.

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