Beyond the Literal: A Survey of Mythopoeia in W.B. Yeats' Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to draw from few scholarly articulations in folkloristics which posit myth as projective systems of collective aspirations. The paper attempts to further locate mythic appropriations in literature as falling on the temporal axes of the past and the present, wherein which it engages in a complex process of personalization and depersonalization. It further attempts to undertake a short survey of poems of William Butler Yeats, as they dramatize the anxieties of the modern age.

Keywords: Myth, W.B. Yeats, Poetry, Modernism.

In his essay "Four Functions of Folklore" (1954), William Bascom notes, "Folklore like language is a mirror of culture"(337). By folklore, Bascom means any cultural modes of expression which are integral to generating and sustaining community consciousness; some of which falls into the traditional categories of myth, legends, proverbs, folk songs etc. Apart from the obvious connection Bascom makes between cultural modes of expression and community integration (through imagination), he will go on to add that in some cases folklore goes beyond the reflective function to take on a projective role. By this one means that folklore not only mirrors culture as understood by the community but rather it re-presents the aspirations or fear or anxieties of the community, consciously or unconsciously. Herein, Bascom suggests a movement away from the literal to a symbolic. In fact, much of the structuralist studies on myths in the second half of the twentieth century, in western academia, showed similar interests.

The study of myths, especially within the disciplinary interests of folkloristics, previously followed the Finnish method of collecting, collating and archiving works of folklore. This mode of study primarily focussed on philological interests, historical and geographical assertions using folklore etc. However influenced by Ferdinand De Saussure's articulations in *A Course in General Linguistics* (1916), some scholars such as Levi Strauss and Alan Dundes proposed a movement away from the literal enquiries in myth towards a semiotic analysis of the same. Strauss in the "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955) attempts to understand the semiotic, which lies beyond the Saussure's articulation of langue and parole:

It is that double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical, which explains that myth, while pertaining to the realm of the parole and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of the langue in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute object on a third level which, though it remains linguistic by nature, is

nevertheless distinct from the other two…But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future (430).

In using temporal frameworks of past and present, Strauss argues that there is a future or an eternal dimension to myths which goes beyond the immediacy of a community. He argues that patterns which underlie the structures of mythic expressions carry on this function of universality and everlastingness. Strauss goes on to demonstrate a pattern of decoding by the use of the myth of Oedipus. The interest of this paper however is not a psychoanalytic or structural understanding of myth, but is in the overarching understanding of myth's universality and its pedestalized function. Mikhael Bhaktin in "Epic and the Novel" comments on the epics' location in an absolute past as opposed to the novel which visibly operates in the present. Perhaps it the inordinate distance of the subject caught up in the present, from these cultural expressions of the inaccessible past that renders it's as a realm of nostalgia, high held values; by extension didactic. However, could one limit the function of myth to the past alone?

Literature has variedly employed mythic tropes and imageries in its resources, enabling a re-dramatization of the past in the present. The inaccessibility of the absolute past in which these myths are located has been found useful for many an author to appropriate these myths into thereon narratives. It has to be admittedly demonstrated that myth, though located in the past, is activated by the present and is therefore articulated differently in each of its utterance. For instance, the first collection of folk tales in Germany was brought out by the Brothers Grimm as *Deutsche Sagen* (1816-1818). The role of this collection in constructing an essential national identity for German people through German legend has largely been commented upon. The romantic and the national impulses which governed German academia from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century have been instrumental in co-constructing a mythic past in contemporary. Therein which, not only does the present becomes a product of the past but the past as well becomes a product of the present.

W.B. Yeats' poetry draws heavily on allusions from the Celtic legend, Irish folklore, classical mythology, Neo-Platonic tradition, Christianity and other eastern religions. In his poetry, we encounter a layered activity of personalisation and depersonalisation, making complex mode of engagement with his poetry. Through the integration of these mythic elements in his poetry, Yeats makes a conscious transition from "personal utterance"-s to one that activates the "collective unconscious". This paper will investigate the political and personal implications of this act of transference and consequently, the use of myth in Yeats' poetry. In fact, Yeats simply doesn't use in him poems but is enmeshed in a process of myth-making in itself.

The use of myth becomes more of an imperative than a stylistic adornment in modern reality. Northrop Frye, commenting on modern literature, in *Anatomy of Criticism* notes of the:

three organizations of myth and archetypal symbols in literature. First, there is undisplaced myth.... Second, we have the general tendency we have called romantic, the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience. Third, we have the tendency of "realism" to throw the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story. Ironic literature begins with realism and tends toward myth, its mythical patterns being as a rule more suggestive of the demonic than of the apocalyptic. (139-140)

In his observation, Northorp Frye attempts to chart out three distinct ways in which modern literature uses myth, wherein which negotiations of the present are impinging on the representations of myth therein. One may consider William Butler Yeats into the second category, which seeks the order of mythic pattern into the fast disintegrating modern reality. Here lies the complexity of the mythopoeia of Yeats.

From the political turbulence of Ireland, triggered off by the Easter Uprising 1916 to the violence let loose at the international level through the Russian Revolution and World War-I, as Yeats writes in his "The Second Coming", "things fall apart, and the centre cannot hold". This fragmented reality then, cries out for a departure from the normative forms of representation to one that holds the chaotic centre. As T. S. Eliot observes in his essay "Ulysses' Order and Myth" , Myth for Yeats becomes "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is in the contemporary history". This persistent engagement with myths, archetypes and symbols, according to Carl Jung, generates an extraordinary sense of release in the readers as though they are caught by an overwhelming power (Jung 1980). It is precisely this feeling of release that aligns itself with the Freudian concept of myth as an anti-self, mirroring the desires-of a poet and a community for a sense of order.

Yeats' "The Second Coming", draws on Christian and pagan allusions, becomes an apocalyptic vision of the modern reality. Yeats writes, "Surely the Second Coming is at hand./ The Second coming! Hardly are those words out/When a vast image of Spiritus Mundi/ Troubles my sight:" The synthesis of the Christian allusions of anticipations of Christ's Second coming ,which is treated with Yeats's mythic power of metamorphosing it into Anti-Christ's coming and pagan imageries of Sphinix in the poem, informs us of Yeats' in deep understanding of the interrelationship between various mythologies and religions. In fact, In *A Vision* his understanding of history as "interlocking double spirals because… everything that man can think is bound to complete itself in that shape", as Gayatri Spivak accurately says, is one that is conceptualised through these conflations in the poem (678). The formulation of a personal myth becomes a process at work in the Yeats' poetic cannon. Yeats said: "I have often had the fancy that there is someone myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought." (Allen 91). One can sense an on-going search in Yeats' phantasmagoria. Yeats, over the years have adopted various mythical masks of Oisin, Cuchulain, Aedh, Aengus, Michael Robartes, Red Hanrahan etc. ,from the very first publication of The Wanderings of Oisin in(1889).These masks however are subject to his Yeats' deviation and digression of myth to involve artistic creation. "The song on the Wandering Aengus" is one such autobiographical love poem, in which

Yeats wears the mask of Aengus from the Irish myth and conceptualises him as a wandering old man. Yeats writes:

> And someone called me by my name:/ It had become a glimmering girl/ With apple blossom in her hair/ Who called me by my name and ran/ And faded through the brightening air./ I am old with wandering/ Through hollow lands and hilly lands,/ I will find out where she has gone,/ And kiss her lips and take her hands;

If Yeats adopts the mask of Aegnus-the Irish God of love, youth and poetic inspiration, the woman with "apple blossoms in her hair" is the elusive Maud Gone, who continues to haunt much of Yeats' poetry. However, the poem yet again posits a search- a search of desire and one towards a "Unity of Being". According to Philip Marcus, "the 'glimmering girl' corresponds to the hidden side of the male protagonist's psyche, the opposite with which his consciousness must achieve connection with, to become whole and individual" (xvii). The poem also propels towards a search for organic unity in terms of literary creation as well. Yeats thus, blends his personal quest with a mythical one, simultaneously distancing himself from and identifying with his masks. This complicates Yeats' artistic endeavour to objectify truth, and yet to retain its truth value. One is then left with the understanding the inability to completely intellectualise or emotionalise Yeats' poetry.

Yeats' poetic mythopoeia is also tagged by a political drive to create a space for Irish literature. Yeats' own sense of nationalism is reflected in the invocation of Irish and Celtic mythical heroes and legends in much of his poetry. One of the much used masks adopted b Yeats is that of Cuchulain, the elaborated Irish war-hero. Through this mask, in as much as accessing the collective unconscious of the masses, he also places the Irish legends in the same level as that of the Greek and other myths. There is also a political agenda of mobilising Ireland for the Irish revolution and literacy revival. In the poem, 'Cuchulain Comforted' there is a alignment of Cuchulain's fate with that of Ireland's, which was once also forced to shed its heroic garb under a another's a "ancient rule": "Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;/ Mainly because of what we only know" Yeats well recognizes his own role as a nationalist poet in "To Ireland in the Coming Times". He writes:

> Now, that I would accounted be/ True brother of a company/ That sang, to sweeten Ireland's/ wrong,/ Ballad and story, rann and song;/ Nor be I any less of them, Because the/ red-rose-bordered hem/ Of her, whose history began/Before God made the angelic clan,/ Trails all about the written page.

Yeats sees himself as the inheritor of a rich Irish past and sings away on directing his overriding passion for "faeries, dancing under the moon, A Druid land, a Druid tune!", for the nation's cause. This journey towards a primordial order conceptualised through Christian and eastern myths, then figures itself as a motif of journey in Yeats' poetry. The journey to a paradise-like/Utopian space or to an alternate space of divine experience, seen in poems like- 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Lake Isle of Inns free', 'At Algeciras -- A Meditation upon Death'-, within the realms of imagination and magic, weaves within its layers a deep spiritual quest and

longing. Thus, Yeats uses myth to imply a longing which is essentially personal as well as political in nature. Myth becomes a literary space of dramatizing cultural, emotive, and political landscapes of modern experience.

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