

MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

And who am I to jeer at life-giving illusions?

(J.M. Coetzee: *Waiting for the Barbarians*: 1982 : 143)

Yeats had explored the depths of Irish myths, legends and folklore in his verse. This excursion into that other realm has been envisaged as an aid to the poet's attempt to transcend the bounds of reality. On the contrary, it may be argued that the poet used them consciously in order to root his poetry in the native soil. As a part of the Celtic Renaissance, Yeats harnessed the traditional sources to bring about a unity of the past and the present of Ireland. Through this fusion of the two, the poet suggested that national resources can enrich individual art.

Two ideas, which ultimately converge, constitute the soul or the spiritual principle which one may consider as the exigency of a nation. One lies in the past, and the other one in the present. One is the possession, in common, of a rich legacy of memories, the other is the present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion. Ernest Renan's belief that of the cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made men what they are, finds an echo in Yeats. A heroic past, grand men, their extraordinary feats, glorious achievements and ancillary splendour may be considered as the social

capital upon which one establishes a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present to commemorate the accomplishments, to have performed great deeds together and to wish to perform more are the conditions for being "national". Yeats endeavoured to restore the past in order to enrich the present.

Yeats sought to reinforce a national myth :

Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new 'Prometheus Unbound'; Patrick or Columcille, Oisín or Finn, in Prometheus' stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulbin? Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?

(Yeats : 1966 : 194)

The word myth is a "chameleonic term", says Henry A. Murray (Larue: 1975 : 4). It suggests a traditional story, usually focusing on the deeds of Gods and heroes, often in explanation of some natural phenomenon. The English term "myth" was derived from the Greek "muthos", meaning "word" or "speech", "the thing spoken", "the tale told", perhaps any information transmitted including both truth and fiction. Originally myths were handed down from one generation to another orally. Later the ancient myths were preserved in written forms. Thereafter myth became literature incarnating imaginary or fictitious divine creatures, events or stories.

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of

our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.

(Schorer : 1960 : 355)

It is "not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings but a hard working, extremely important cultural force" (Vickery: 1971: 9), a reality lived, "not mere fiction but a narrative resurrection of primeval reality" (Malinowaski: 1974 : 13). Yeats held a similar view relating myths to the needs and aspirations of man. It adds a vital aspect to human civilization creating codes of belief, faith in rituals, tenets of morality and standards of the heroic.

Yeats's treatment of myth was not insular. Initially he handled typically Irish myths in his verse. He said, "... my whole imagination was pre-occupied with the pagan mythology of Ireland" (1956 : 465). A notable variation set in when he used Greek mythology and Christian mythology remarkably to substantiate his notions. Finally, he created a myth out of the well-known, distinguished personalities of Ireland and a myth of the occult, as envisioned in *A Vision*.

Irish mythology, depending upon ancient Irish history and legends, had three main sources : the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster or Ultonian or Red Branch Cycle and the Fenian or Fianna Cycle. Cuchulain was one of the principal heroes and the best known figure of the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology. Originally named Setanta, he was the Irish Achilles or the Solar hero, the nephew and ward of

Conchubar, king of Ulster. He was supposed to have lived in the first century A.D. Of miraculous birth - the Sun God had assumed the shape of a giant hawk to rape a mortal maid Dectora - his life was a series of miraculous exploits. He killed the intimidating watchdog of the smith Culain while still a child. In order to appease the owner, he agreed to guard the house in the dog's place. Thence the name "Cuchulain", signifying "Culain's hound". He was small in stature but he became as terrible as the scorching Sun when provoked. Of his numerous feats of valour, which won him the love of many women, the chief was his single-handed defence of Ulster against the queen of Connaught, Maeve, who attacked it in order to carry off the Brown Bull of Cuailgne. Cuchulain even fought against his son Conula, and unaware of his real identity, killed him. He was killed by Lugaid, son of a king of Ulster, and the daughters of Calatin the wizard in vengeance for their fathers' slaughter. The heroic life and equally heroic death of Cuchulain captured Yeats's imagination. His unflinching patriotism, unswerving loyalty to his country and frenzied, defiant heroism was considered by Yeats to be the proper ideal for the Irish.

Yeats's fascination for the scintillating hero was evident in his long association with the myth which he touched upon in his poems, notes, introductions, plays, philosophical essays, historical studies, autobiography and published letters over a period of almost fifty years. The poem "The Death of Cuchulain" was published in the *United Ireland* in 1892 while the play *The Death of Cuchulain* was still

being revised during Yeats's last illness. Therefore it was evident that Cuchulain had become "as much a part of Yeats's world ... as Maud Gonne or Lady Gregory" (Unterecker: 1963 : 2).

According to one version of the myth, the invincible hero became insane with grief on identifying his slain son and died battling with the "invulnerable" sea-waves. This fight was represented in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (Yeats : 1993 : 37-40) which first appeared in the *United Ireland* on June 11, 1892 with the title "The Death of Cuchulain". Emer of Borda, the daughter of Forgael, and Cuchulain's wife who speaks to a man and her son in the poem was confused with Aoife, a woman of the Sidhe. The mother of Conlaech and the hero's mistress while he was undertaking advanced training in arms with Scathach, a lady warrior of Shye and an Amazon, Aoife was regarded as a fairy goddess or banshee. The Scottish warrior queen was conquered by Cuchulain and forced to grant him three wishes. She was also called Aoibhel and believed to reside on a forty-feet high rock near Killaloe, County Clare, mentioned as the "grey rock".

The tragic story of Cuchulain "battling with the bitter tide" (1993: 35) in a state of insanity after the fatal fight with his son was treated dramatically in the *Baile's Strand*. The forlorn, "night long" (1993 : 324) battle with the "ungovernable sea" (1993 : 392) was a sight left to other spectators while the fool and the Blind man, driven more immediately by their predominant instinct, decided to steal

bread from the empty houses. This "character isolated by a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory" (1993 : 392), the Fool and the Blind man are taken up again in "The Circus Animals' Desertion".

The myth is transformed into a visionary poem in "Cuchulain Comforted". It is reminiscent, in many of its details, of Dante's Purgatory, where there is a valley to which kings, negligent of higher spiritual values, through their exclusive preoccupation with war and love on the earth, are consigned. Cuchulain with his fatal wounds and warrior's habiliments and gait is a soul that finds it difficult to unwind itself of the mummy cloth of memories wrapped around it. The spirits of the kingdom stare at him and seek to divest him of his earthly garment. The shroud makers are preparing a shroud-like apparel for the souls coming to the place to be invested with the celestial body. The spokesman of the spirit world informs Cuchulain that they were on earth

Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

Or driven from home and left to die in fear.

(1993 : 396)

In terms of Yeats's "System", they represent Cuchulain's celestial masks, his "anti-self" or the "Daimon". Their voices are "bird-like". They have no human speech according to the received tradition, which is ancient as well as broad-based. Equally traditional is the fact that they live and act together to show that in death they have transcended

their particular identities and become part of the larger class: "all we do / All must together do" (395). Their song reminds one of similar hymns uttered by the spirits in Dante's Purgatory as they lift their eyes towards Paradise. The poem, composed two weeks before the poet's death, is indicative of the poet's preoccupation with the idea of death and his belief that death opens the door to another kingdom. The Irish myth blends with his personal myth of *A Vision*. Moreover, the choice of the mythical, extroverted and passionate hero reminds the reader that Cuchulain on his "burnished chariot" (391) was the mask which the introverted, sentimental young poet had himself found most congenial at one time. Cuchulain is a figure celebrated by the poet as a hero who merged with the later national heroic figures into an emblem of Irish heroic possibility. Thus, Yeats's Cuchulain stood "in the Post Office / With Pearse and Connolly".

Fergus MacRoy, the son of Roigh, was the king of Ulster and was one of the heroes of the Red Branch Cycle. After the death of his half brother, Fachtna-the-Giant, Fergus succeeded him to the throne. He married Ness. According to one version of the myth, he was tricked out of his kingship by Ness, the mother of Conchobar. Yeats took up a different version of the myth in "Fergus and the Druid". In this version Fergus, the legendary poet, gave up his throne to Conchobar, Ness's son by another marriage, because of his love for her. Moreover, he wanted to spend his days away from the tensions of kingship, indulging himself in feasting, fighting and hunting. In his conversation with the "druid" or the priest, seer and healer in Gaelic Ireland, Fergus

mentioned his strange predicament:

I feast amid my people on the hill,
And pace the woods, and drive my chariot wheels
In the white border of the murmuring sea;
And still I feel the crown upon my head.

(1993 : 36)

He craves for absolving himself of kingship, leave material pursuits and "learn the dreaming wisdom" (36) of the Druid. He is warned and advised to abstain, for such a search may inevitably lead to ruin. Heedless, Fergus loosens the cord of the Druid's "little bag of dreams" (37) given to him. Immediately he finds strange sights before him. He sees his "life go drifting like a river / From change to change". The belief in reincarnation fuses with the myth : "I have been many things ...", says Fergus. Though he is able to pass through the different cycles, the "wonderful and great" visions, he faces the queer self-realization : "But now I have grown nothing, knowing all" (37). Only "great webs of sorrow" (37) confront him. Leaving the real world for the world of the Druid, Fergus finds that he can suit himself to neither.

Yeats founded "the proud dreaming king who flung the crown/
And sorrow away" (77) in the "The Secret Rose" upon Fergus. He confessed :

I have founded the man 'who drove the gods out of their
Liss', or fort, upon something I have read about Caolte
after the battle of Gabra, when almost all his

companions were killed, driving the gods out of their Liss, either at Osraighe, now Ossory, or at Eas Ruaidh, now Asseroe, a waterfall at Ballyshannon, where Ilbreac, one of the children of the goddess Danu, had a Liss.

(qtd. in Jeffares: 1984 : 66)

Yeats was probably influenced by Standish O' Grady and Eugene O' Curry's writings.

"Who Goes With Fergus?" presents a poet-king of wishfulness. He has "pierced the deep wood's shade" and "danced upon the level shore". Therefore, he bids all to "brood on hopes and fears no more", nor to "brood / Upon love's bitter mystery" (Yeats: 1993 : 49). To consider Fergus is "to know the power of imagination over nature" (Bloom : 1970: 109) and also to recognize Yeats's range in the use of Irish Myths.

Conchubar, the king of Ulster reigning at Emain Macha, was the central figure in the saga "The Fate of the Children of Usna" from which Yeats and Synge derived materials for the Deirdre plays. Yeats unintentionally made subtle variations in the story of Conchubar's death in "The Secret Rose" :

... the king whose eyes
Saw the Pierced Hands and Rood of elder rise
In Druid vapour and make the torches dim;
Till vain frenzy awoke and he died;

(1993 : 77)

According to the original version, Conchubar was told about the

crucifixion of Christ and did not see it in a vision.

The allusion to "Usna's children" in "The Rose of the World" points to Naoise, Ainle and Arden who were beheaded by Conchubar. Deirdre, the daughter of king Conchubar's story teller, prophesied to herald doom upon Ulster. When the Ulstermen decided to kill her, Conchubar intervened. He expressed his wish to make her his future queen. In order to protect her from his countrymen, he kept her in the charge of the nurse, Lavarcam. Despite the isolation, she fell under the charm of one of the Red Branch heroes, Naoise, a son of Usna mentioned in Yeats's poem "Under the Moon". They fled to Scotland along with Ainle and Arden, and lived amiably until Conchubar sent them a proposal of peaceful return through Fergus. Contrary to the oath he had given to Cathbad-the-Druid, who had used magical spells to bring about the capture of Usna's son, Conchubar mercilessly ordered their beheading. Deirdre's lament over the slaughtered bodies has been treated by Ferguson and Yeats. According to the initial version, she stabbed herself thereafter. Another version related how Conchubar forced her to live with him for a year and then wished to hand her over to Owen, her husband's killer, but she leaped from the chariot while travelling with Conchubar and Owen and brought an end to her tragic life. She was a figure from Irish mythology who, according to Yeats, closely corresponded to Helen, from classical myth, and through Helen, to Maud Gonne, an intense and zealous contemporary.

The young warrior Naoise is presented in "Under the Moon",

throwing "a sail upon the wind" (1993 : 91). The two lines: "lad and lass / That sat so still and played at the chess" (324) refer to the pair. "The Spouse of Naoise, Erin's Woe" mentions Granuaile in addition. Grania or Grace O' Malley was an Irish pirate queen who lived in the west of Ireland. "Granuaile" in the writings of Irish writers like Lady Gregory, personified Ireland.

Aengus, the God of love, youth, beauty and poetry, reigned in Tir-nan-oge, the country of the young. Son of the Dagda by Boanna, this Gaelic God had a golden harp and his kisses were supposed to be transformed into birds. Hovering over his head, the birds sang exquisite songs that affected young lovers in a peculiar fashion. He was considered to be the God of lovers, in the sense that every man could say, "Whenever I am in love it is not I that am in love but Aengus who is always looking for Edaine through somebody's eyes" (Ellmann : 1953 : 313-14). The legend associated with the God of youth who sought to embrace a graceful maiden who visited him in a dream but failed was transformed by Yeats. In "The Song of Wandering Aengus", the maid takes the shape of a little silver trout. When ensnared by the God's hazel wand, the fish transforms into "a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair". She calls him by his "name and ran / And faded through the brightening air" (Yeats : 1993 : 66). Aengus searches for the girl but in vain. Though grown "old with wandering", he dreams of finding her, to "kiss her lips and take her hands; / And walk among long dappled grass" (67). The reference to the "apple blossom" reminds one that when Yeats had

first met Maud Gonne, he had compared her complexion with the bloom of apples : "Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window". (1956: 123). Thus, the ancient Irish myth of Aengus not only reinforces the poet's eagerness to be a part of the Celtic Revival, but takes on an additional significance. The universal and the personal, the past and the present coalesce. The quest of Aengus may also be interpreted as the undaunted pursuit of the poet for his lady love who seemed to him "a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation 'She Walks like a goddess' made for her alone" (1956: 123). The national myth was strengthened by adding the implications of a personalized myth.

"Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland" mentions Maeve, wife of king Ailell, the Queen of Connaught and also the queen among the Sidhe. The myth of Queen Maeve, projected again in "The Old Age of Queen Maeve", highlights her unfaltering courage and determination set off against a disintegrating and vacillating age. The myth of Aengus was related to that dealing with Maeve. It was believed that Aengus, desperate in his love, entreated Maeve and Ailell for help, and through their help was able to achieve his love.

Yeats used many mythological details in his elaborate narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisín* which was written in his early twenties. The poet admitted that the first few pages were developed from an

old poem written by a half-forgotten Gaelic poet who lived in Ireland in the previous century. In the quarrels between the Saint and the blind warrior, he had used suggestions from various ballad dialogues of Oisín and Patrick, published by the Ossianic society. He considered the idea of the three islands as his own, having no root in tradition other than the Irish peasant's notion that "Tir-nan-oge" or the Country of the Young was made up of three phantom islands. Oisín, the legendary Gaelic warrior and bard, the son of Finn and Saevé (of the Sidhe) was snared by Niamh or "Child or Shee", the daughter of Aengus and Edain. Symbolizing beauty and brightness Niamh with her call, "Away, come away" (Yeats : 1993 : 61), is presented in the lyrics "The Hosting of the Sidhe", and again in "Under the Moon" and "Alternative Song for the Severed Head in "The King and the Great Clock Tower"". "News For the Delphic Oracle" opens with a sigh of the "golden codgers" (376) and highlights "Man picker Niamh" who "leant and sighed / By Oisín on the grass" (376). The epithet is not derogatory but literal, for the maid told Finn,:

I have not yet, war-weary king,
Been spoken of with any man;
Yet now I choose, for these four feet
Ran through the foam and ran to this
That I might have your son to kiss.

(1993 : 411)

The chivalrous "sea-rider Oisín led by the nose" (1993 : 391) by Niamh who carried him off across the sea to a fairyland with her on her horse, is mentioned even as late as in "The Circus Animals'

Desertion".

The pre-historic invaders of Ireland were the Firbolgs, a mythological race who fought vainly against the Fomorians before the advent of the Tuatha de Danaan. They were "short dark plebian people" (Jeffares : 1984 : 10). Yeats explained Fomoroh as meaning "from under the sea, and is the name of the gods of night and death and cold. The Fomoroh were misshapen and had now the heads of goats and bulls, and now but one leg, and one arm that came out of the middle of their breasts. They were the ancestors of the evil fairies and, according to one Gaelic writer, of all misshapen persons. The giants and the leprechauns are expressly mentioned as of the Fomoroh" (1895 : 18). The Fomorians were envisioned as "the world-troubling seamen" (1993: 17). The Tuatha De Danaan refers to the race of the Gods of Dana. In the notes attached to the collection of poems published in 1895, he described them as the powers of light, life and warmth who overcame the Fomoroh, representative of night, death and cold. They later came to be associated with the fairies. "Dark Balor-a" was a Fomorian king described by Yeats as the "Irish Chimaera". In Greek mythology, the Chimaera was a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, body of a goat and tail of a serpent or a dragon. Dark Balor-a was the leader of the battle fought on the strands of Moytura, near Sligo.

"All Mannions come from Manannan" (1993 : 371) or Manannan Mac Lir, the Gaelic God of the Sea, says the speaker in

the first segment of "Three Songs to One Burden". The "sword" in *The Wanderings of Oisín* had the name engraved "thereon in Ogham letters" (1993 : 427). Aedh was the proverbial God of Death. There was a superstition that the music from his harp would bring instant death to its hearer. According to bardic tales he was one of the two deities who appeared before Cuchulain prior to his death.

The Blandid myth, used in *The Wanderings of Oisín* was also rooted in Ireland. She was the daughter of the lord of Manainn and the wife of the king of Munster. Daire's son, Curaoi, helped Cuchulain to oust Manainn, and as a reward he claimed Blandid. When Cuchulain refused to grant his wish, he forcefully carried her away. Later Blandid conspired with the Solar hero to seize Curaoi and punish him for the humiliation heaped upon her.

These typically Irish details fix the poem on Ireland. Even while Oisín wanders with Niamh in the fairy-land, he is haunted by the reminiscences of his own race and land. He thinks of the Fenian world and all that it stands for. The yearning is for the home, the root that he had left but could never forget. This same longing was felt by Yeats throughout his life and is manifest in his poetry. He admitted in "The Trembling of the Veil" : "Though I went to Sligo every summer, I was compelled to live out of Ireland the greater part of every year, and was but keeping my mind upon what I knew must be the subject matter of my poetry" (1956 : 151).

The immortal fairies of the ideal world of Tir-nan-oge seem to

be partly satisfied with their realm of permanent gaiety, bliss and youth. These inhabitants of the land of Shee yearn to establish a communion with the mortal world. *The Wanderings of Oisín* expresses how the immortals covet the earth. Moreover, they appeal to mortals to enter their territory. O' Driscoll's bride, Bridget, is stolen by the fairies (1993: 63), but the child is sweetly persuaded :

Come away, O human child !
To the waters and the wild
With a faery hand in hand
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand. (1993 : 20)

The characters that derived directly from the myths were used by the poet in order to lend his verse a distinctive quality that was typically Irish. "Orchil" (19) was a Fomorian sorceress described by Standish O' Grady as a Queen or ruler of the underworld, very influential and effective in her witchcraft. Fand (1993 : 77) was the wife of Manannan Mac Lir and the "nine Maines" (1993 : 130) were the sons of Queen Maeve by Ailill. King Guaire who "walked amid his court / The palace-yard and river side" (1993 : 125) was the king of Connacht, renowned for his hospitality and magnanimity. He appeared again in Yeats's play *The King's Threshold*. Goban or Goibruí (115) was an ancient god of the Tuatha de Danaan, the legendary Mason (Yeats : 1959 : 66) whose ale conferred immortality to the people who drank it. Eithne (1993 : 87) was a goddess of the Tuatha de Danaan who was given Sliabh Aughty, a mountain range as her dowry.

A change in the use of mythologies set in when the poet realized "... all my priceless things/Are but a post the passing dogs defile." (1993 : 143). The shift was highlighted in "A Coat", where the poet said that he had made his

song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat.

(1993 : 142)

Looking at the changing scenario he thought "there's more enterprise/
In walking naked" (1993 : 142).

To the ancient myths derived from tradition, Yeats added a statement of values completely true for himself. This was the poet's personal myth built on Faculties, Principles, and whirling gyres. It amounted "to a complicated algebraical formula which arranged in intelligible order the whole of his knowledge and experience" (Stock: 1961 : 143) *A Vision* related to ideas scattered through his previous writings, sometimes bringing out latent meanings. In order to comprehend the basic nature of the work, one has to know the poet's experiences, his readings of history, occult and Hermetic Study, and his philosophy, all of which synthesised into a new organic unity in *A Vision*. He formulated a theory of history based upon a notion of human existence as a series of endlessly repetitive cycles. It is "a variation of the familiar idea which Mircea Eliade has called the 'myth of the eternal return'". (Zwerdling: 1960 : 91).

After 1910 Yeats added a unique mythology of the Irishmen who had come close to myths through their death. In the prefatory poem to the "Responsibilities", he calls upon the "old fathers" or the ghosts of his ancestors, to pardon him :

Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

(1993 : 113)

Among the ancestors were the "old Dublin merchant" Jervis Yeats, the rector John Yeats : "old country scholar, Robert Emmet's Friend" and Yeats's "silent and fierce" old grandfather. These men lived above the trivialities of "profit and loss". Yeats was eager to emphasize their nobility and reckless virtue in view of their disparagement by George Moore in his autobiography, to which the poet alludes bitingly in the epilogue to the 'Responsibilities'. The poet's ancestors, he asserted, shall always remain "beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof" (1993 : 143).

The friends of the Rhymers's Club like Dowson and Beardsley, were often confused and dissolute. Death purged them, and after death they represented only their belief in their art. The "Companions of the Cheshire Cheese" (Yeats: 1993 : 115) form a "proper audience for a poem which balances the life of art against the life of action" (Ellmann: 1953 : 114).

"To a Shade" is addressed to the "thin shade" or ghost of Parnell. His monument was lately constructed at the end of O'Connell Street, but Yeats could not forget how the patriot was whimsically transformed into a victim by the multitude. The poet reminds the ghost of the ardent Irish nationalist that the Philistines are "at their old tricks" (Yeats: 1993: 123) again. The "old foul mouth", or William Murphy, who had once cast aspersions upon Parnell's character has succeeded in humiliating yet another noble individual, Hugh Lane. Lane was offering the country people his rare collection of art which would endow

their children's children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood ...

(1993 : 123)

The "unquiet wanderer", restless even after death for the welfare of the country, is bid to go back to its grave at Glasnevin: "You had enough sorrow before death/Away, away! You are safer in the tomb" (1993 : 123).

Parnell was addressed as a "thin shade" not "only because a ghost has no body but because Parnell's desires for the future have been so starved since his death" (Ellmann: 1953 : 114). In the unpublished poem on Robert Gregory, 'Reprisals', Yeats called upon Parnell's ghost to listen and then sent him away for the poet felt there was nothing congenial for him to hear in contemporary Ireland.

Robert Gregory, killed in action over Italy, was simultaneously treated as a symbol of aristocratic breeding and defeated potentiality. He was also raised to the level of a myth. Soldier, scholar and horseman, regarded as "our Sidney and our perfect man" (Yeats: 1993: 150), he became an "epitome" (1993 : 151) of life.

Mabel Beardsley was linked by the poet to the immortal dead who have "laughed into the face of / Death." (1993 : 179). Her name found place amidst a group of spirits, half historical, half mythical : the heroine of the Fenian Cycle of Irish myths, Grania; an imaginary "old cardinal" who might have praised the Venetian painter Giorgione "at his latest breath" (179); Achilles who nonchalantly faced death after the demise of his friend Patroclus; Timor; Babar; Barhaim. Like all these grand personalities, she "lived in joy" (179) and "so living, had constructed the only human equivalent to immortality's 'predestined dancing-place'" (Untereker: 1969 : 146).

The line between Irish myths and legend has often been blurred, especially as the retelling of heroic deeds has been passed on through generations. Regarding the use of legends Yeats proclaimed in the *Dublin University Review* :

Of all the many things the past bequeaths to the future,
the greatest are the legends; they are the mother of
nations. I hold it the duty of every Irish reader to study
those of his own country till they are familiar as his
own hands, for in them is the Celtic heart.

(1886 : 941)

Legends are unauthenticated stories from earlier times, preserved by tradition and popularly thought to be historical. "The Madness of King Goll" treats one such legend in which the king is struck with a compelling wanderlust - "a whirling and a wandering fire" (Yeats: 1993 : 18) - in the midst of kingly splendour. Son of Morna, Goll was a prominent Fenian king, equally proficient in the art of war and learning. He left his home in the third century Emain to lead his countrymen against a band of pirates plundering the coast. During the confrontation he was seized by a vision that forced him to break his spear and escape. Abandoning the material world, he moved into a realm where he felt mysterious presences. He wandered, and filled with an irresistible urge, he sang :

And now I wander in the woods
When Summer gluts the golden bees,
Or in autumnal solitudes
Arise the leopard - coloured trees.

(1993 : 18)

The poem makes use of a refrain that clinches the flow of the poem. Initially it suggests Goll's insanity, but as the poem progresses the line: "They will not hush, the leaves a - flutter round me, the beech leaves old" (17-20), gains in meaning. The fluttering of the leaves is itself a kind of "natural supernaturalism, a force that Goll vainly sought to master, first through kingship and then through poetry". (Bloom: 1970: 109). Yeats used the legend to show that kingship failed because it yielded to vision and phantasmagoria failed as it

had to surrender to nature. Yeats described his father's portrait of Goll, with the young poet sitting for model, as "a pathetic memory of a really dreadful time" (Yeats: 1954 : 94). It matched his other retrospective opinions on his early life, the memories of "little of childhood but its pains" (1956 : 11).

In the argument prefixed to the narrative poem "Baile and Aillinn", Yeats says :

Baile and Aillinn were lovers, but Aengus, the Master of Love, wishing them to be happy in his own land among the dead, told each a story of the other's death, so that their hearts were broken and they died.

(1993 : 459)

After death they were transformed to swans, linked to each other with a golden chain. They "fly round / coupled with golden chains, and sing as they fly" (1993 : 88). A yew tree grew upon Baile's grave; a wild apple tree grew upon Aillinn's. Ribh, an imaginary character, standing at the graves of the legendary lovers, says

Of Baile and Aillinn you need not speak,
All know their tale, all know what leaf and twig,
What juncture of the apple and the yew,
Surmount their bones;

(1993 : 327)

"The Withering of the Boughs" makes use of this legend.

Douglas Hyde referred to the legend associated with the

"Wood of Wonders" in his edition of the tale of adventures concerning the children of the king of Norway. Cod, the hero, met a mystic ox in the Forest of Wonders and killed him. Later he saw in a vision a fair bevy approaching him, led by a queen and a golden coffin carried by four before her. Yeats used the legend when the speaker in "Under the Moon" says that he has "no happiness" in dreaming of far-away lands :

Wood-of-Wonders, where one kills an ox at dawn,
To find it when night falls laid on a golden bier.

(1993 : 91)

Finn or Fionn was the principal hero of the southern or later cycle of Irish legends. This was also called the Fenian Cycle. Modern anthropologists consider him as a historical personage, a contemporary of king Cormac in the third century A.D. As the son of Cumal and father of Ossian he has mythical associations. Cormac appointed him as chief of the Fianna or Fenians, a semi-mythical, semi-historical military body composed of men having exceptional prowess, raised for the defence of Ireland against Norse raids. Finn, renowned for his veracity, sagacity and generosity, was chosen their leader. According to the legend, the Irish hero was in love with Grainne, the daughter of king Cormac. Exceptional as a warrior and hunter, Finn was unfortunate in the sphere of love. He sought to marry Grainne, but she fell in love with Finn's nephew, Diarmait O' Duibhne and eloped with him. The long story of their flight and Finn's unsuccessful pursuit ended in his temporary acceptance of the

situation. Finally he caused Diarmait's death and himself perished in a public brawl with mutinous Fenians in 283 A.D. The Fenian force was exterminated by King Cairbre at the end of the third century. During Yeats's time the Fenians were an association formed among the Irish for promoting the overthrow of the English government in Ireland. The legend of Finn was used along with that of Caoilte, the swiftest runner of the Fianna. "Caoilte tossing his burning hair" (1993 : 61) was not only a companion of Finn but also a comrade of Ossian, Finn's son. "Paistin Finn" (1993 : 325), the "sole desire" of the man "shrunk to skin and bone" (325), was a Munster folk tune, very popular in Ireland.

Yeats was aware of the different legends which were associated with Father Christian Rosencreuz, the patron saint of the Rosicrucian orders. It was believed that father Rosencreuz achieved perfection at the time of his death and so his body lay miraculously undecayed for a hundred and twenty years. His followers rejoiced with wine, dance and roses at his attainment. Their rejoicing was followed by intense lamentation as they regretted the fact that the Father could not be brought back to life, nor could they participate in the astuteness that was "shut into his onyx eyes" (1993 : 136) as he slept "in his tomb" (136). This Rosicrucian myth was involved in the initiations of the Golden Dawn and used by Yeats in "The Mountain Tomb".

The legend of Diarmud or Diarmait was associated with the legends relating to the Irish hero Finn. The lover of Grainne was

killed by a boar on the Sligo mountain : "That thing all blood and mire, that beast-torn wreck" (1993 : 313). The typical Irish legend has a close parallel in the legend of Adonais.

The legend relating to the crones of the grey hawk or the Sidhe who went to see the child of the Irish Queen was recorded by Yeats in *Mythologies*. One of them let a drop of her blood fall upon the infant's lips. This gave rise to queer feathers, resembling those of the hawk, on the child's head. There was a law in Ireland that forbade an individual with a physical blemish, to ascend the throne. When the aged King died, the child was made the king. The people of the country were told to wear similar feathers in order to convince the child that it was natural. Eventually he discovered the truth and went away from the kingdom, forsaking everything. Yeats used the legend in his verse to lend it vitality:

And all alone comes riding there
The king that could make his people stare,
Because he had feathers instead of hair.

(1993 : 325)

The persons mentioned in "The Tower" "are associated by legend, story and tradition with the neighbourhood of Thoor Ballylee or Ballylee Castle, where the poem was written" (Yeats: 1993 : 532). Mrs. French, the eighteenth century inhabitant of Peterswell, was related to Sir Jonah Barrington who described the incident of the ears and the ensuing troubles. The peasant beauty and the blind poet were Mary Hynes and Raftery. The incident of the man drowned

in Cloone Bog was recorded in the "Celtic Twilight". Yeats further added : "The ghosts have been seen at their game of dice in what is now my bedroom, and the old bankrupt man lived about a hundred years ago. According to one legend he could only leave the Castle upon a Sunday because of his creditors, and according to another he hid in a secret passage" (Yeats: 1993 : 532). These associations have been dexterously used in the poem.

The traditional beliefs, customs and sayings preserved among the common people of Ireland have been variously used by Yeats. The poet's researches on folklore were voluminous. In 1889, he declared that he had worked his way through "most, if not all, recorded fairy tales" (1970 : Vol 1 : 139). In the 1902 draft of *The Speckled Bird*, he made Michael, his own fictional portrait of youth, claim that he had read all the old magical books he could find.

The Theosophical Society encouraged the members to study folklore, emphasising the concept that such a study would eventually inspire men to the revival of "long lost" but important secrets. Madam Blavatsky explained to the disciples of the society that an exposition of "the hidden meaning" of fairy tales would take the intuitive reader back to a comprehension of the "first principles of nature" (1877 : 406). She believed that it was the fairy tale that preserved the "profound religion of our forefathers" (1908 : 458), and a careful study of popular superstition and folklore could help the novice or "neophyte" further his knowledge of the "secrets" that belonged to the beginnings.

Yeats was deeply influenced and a few poems of the early phase have specific basis in such readings.

In 1825 Croker's *Fairy Legend* referred to a fairy-stricken youth who wandered by the ditch throughout the day, muttering to himself as though there was someone accompanying him. Carleton spoke of the fatal consequences of this kind of aimless, unwilling meandering, though his dreamer found himself in Scotland:

He appeared to be what the Scotch call 'fey' - that is; to act as if he were moved by some impulse that leads to death, and from the influence of which a man cannot withdraw himself.

(1845 : 98)

Such a human dreamer, with his queer, "moody" fits of temperament, his strange but acknowledged solitude and his tendency to hold discourse with invisible entities, was not a literal child of the Sidhe, but their spiritual progeny, deeply influenced by them. The description of the fairy struck mortals appear in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. It says that those individuals who are loved by fairies are not always carried off to far-off regions. They may merely grow silent and strange, and wander in lonely, tranquil places.

The man who "stood among a crowd at Dromahair", "wandered by the sands of Lissadell", "mused beside the well of Scanavin", and "slept under the hill of Luguanel" (Yeats: 1993 : 49-50), can be traced back to the same tendency of strolling under fairy impact. "The Man

who Dreamed of Fairyland" got its folklore corollary not in the common custom of the Sidhe to castigate the frugal or to intimidate and frustrate the lover, but in an offence against the fairies that was unusual. The man arrived at a holy well at Scanavin which was considered to be a fountain of health and healing. It was supposedly blessed by a saint. The dreamer was following an ancient Irish folk custom in resorting to the holy well in order to ponder upon his "sudden vengeance" upon his "mockers", but the curative power of the sacred well had no effect upon the man seeking retribution on those who may have injured him. The doctrine held that only untroubled individuals could take advantage of what the well offered. The man, seeking to assuage his disturbed soul, could not reap the best out of the well.

Irish folk tales that fascinated Yeats, mentioned different categories of grasses that were considered to be sacred among the Sidhe. Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* mentions bits of charmed "knot grass" that mortal feet brushed at their peril. The first was "Faud Shaughran" or the "stray sod" (1888 : 183) that provided irresistible impulse to travel on, all through the night, delirious and restless. The second was "Fair-Gortha" or the "hunger-striden sod" (184), that produced extraordinary cravings of hunger and weakness. The "one small knot-grass growing by the pool" (Yeats: 1993 : 50) grew out of Yeats's "deep and generalized knowledge of even the shadier nooks of the Irish folk tradition" (Kinahan: 1988 : 74). The idea of the enchanted grass as found in

Carleton, Kennedy and O' Hanlon, was used by Yeats to advance the belief that the Sidhe's wrath encompassed individuals who come in contact with the charmed grass. Thus, the man who dreamed of fairy land was restless. He was always on the move, facing a potential doom.

The child who was snared to move into another realm "full of berries / And of reddest stolen cherries" (Yeats: 1993 : 20) owed his existence to the poet's knowledge of the "wider and more treacherous implications of Irish fairy lore" (Kinahan: 1988 : 75).

The boy was lost to the hillside; the man who dreamed of fairyland died. They were both oblivious of the factor that destroyed them. They were so eager to accept the shining, welcoming hand of the unknown that they missed the serpent beneath, the steel hidden in the sleeve. Irish fairy lore was replete with tales in which the Sidhe act hostile without any provocation whatsoever. Their action was often beyond human understanding.

Reincarnation, an idea reiterated in Yeats's verse, was steeped in Irish folklore and ancient religion. Mongan avowed his past incarnations:

I have been a hazel-tree, and they hung
The Pilot Star and the Crooked Plough
Among my leaves in times out of mind:
I became a rush that horses tread
I became a man, a hater of the wind.

(Yeats: 1993 : 81)

Mongan was an eminent Celtic wizard and king famous for the reminiscences of his past lives. Yeats shifted the focus from the cycle of new lives to the fact that so many rebirths had only intensified the misery of Mongan's present life as a dejected lover. In this poem Yeats "combined some rather confused Irish legends of Mongan with the clearer Welsh Legend of Taliesin" (Ellmann: 1953 : 47).

Fergus discovered the previous lives he had lived in "Fergus and the Druid":

A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold.

(Yeats: 1993 : 37)

Each successive change - water, light, tree, slave and king - was perhaps interesting in itself, but to know of all the changes at once is not good. A wandering man, moving through Ireland, arrives at the house of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Lieutenant and General for the Parliament of England posted in Ireland and questions :

... the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen,
were are they?

(1993 : 350)

He comes to the awareness that "though all are underground", their spirits survive : "it proves that things both can and cannot be" (351). An idea of reincarnation which was used in "Under Ben Bulbin" was

gathered from India, through Mohini Chatterjee. It was not derived only from typically pagan Irish tradition.

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul
And ancient Ireland knew it all.

(1993 : 398)

Yeats collected folklore with Lady Gregory in the west of Ireland. The poet hoped to gather from the peasants a spontaneity and a multitude of images sanctioned by tradition. He believed that the peasants possessed a unique kind of ancient knowledge. The legends that he gathered provided him with literary reserves on which he could draw at frequent intervals.

The poet coalesced legends when he said that the gods of ancient Ireland inspired the bones of the heroic dead, reminding them of the valley or dyke of the black pig, where their ultimate victorious battle was to be fought. Lady Wilde's reference to a particular mode of burial for warriors influenced Yeats : "The dead were placed in a standing position, their arms and shield beside them, and a great circular cairn of earth and stones was raised over them" (1888 : 145). The heroic king of Munster and Mogha Neil lay in their sepulchres in this manner. Yeats thought of the ancient Irish warrior and King of Connought, Eoghan Bel, killed at the battle of Sligo in 537 A.D. He was buried in an upright position with his red javelin in his hand, pointing towards the sea. In the note to "The

Valley of the Black Pig" Yeats said : "All over Ireland there are prophecies of the coming rout of the enemies of Ireland, in a certain valley of the Black Pig, and these prophecies are, no doubt, now, as they were in the Fenian days, a political force" (1993 : 526-7). For generations the Irish peasants comforted themselves in their misfortunes with visions of a battle, to be fought in the mysterious valley, and their staunch belief that they would eventually vanquish their enemies. The Variorum edition quotes Yeats : "A few years ago, in the barony of Lisadell, in County Sligo, an old man would fall entranced upon the ground from time to time, and rave out a description of the battle, and I have myself heard said that the girths shall rot from the bellies of horses, because of the few men that shall come alive out of the valley" (161). In a tale in "The Celtic Twilight" he referred to it again : "Presently our talk of war shifted, as it had a way of doing, to the battle of the Black Pig, which seems to her a battle between Ireland and England, but to me an Armageddon which shall quench all things in the Ancestral Darkness again" (1908 : Vol. v : 154). The network of legends is condensed in his verse :

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come from the shore :
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

(1993 : 396)

The peasant and their credence were used in the early ballads

dealing with the old fisherman, Father O' Hart, Moll Magee, the Foxhunter and Father Gilligan. An illustration of the typical folk tale the artist may collect from the peasants was provided in "The Hour Before Dawn". Yeats's association with Dorothy Wellesley reinforced his idea regarding the "peasant foundations of art" (Underecker: 1969: 262). He informed Edmund Dulac that he aspired to go back to simplicity of utterance, and the easiest way to do it was by "writing for our Irish unaccompanied singing". In some poems Yeats sought a language which would help them gain maximum circulation. A former drunkard moved towards ancient Ireland's "holy island" of Lough Derg in search of enlightenment, after having "fasted for some forty days on bread and buttermilk". The old man who sat beside him, "all the dead" and the boat man accompanied him, but all he heard was "fol de rol de roly O". At the end of his journey when he returned to the "public house", all he had to say was "fol de rol de roly O" (Yeats: 1993 : 361). The drunken man urged his "pretty punk" to "come swish around" him, and

... keep me dancing still
That I may stay a sober man
Although I drink my fill.

(1993 : 359)

"Learned historians" (1993 : 354) who strove to rewrite history in order to tarnish Ireland's reputation, were brutally criticized through poems like "The O' Rahilly", "The Ghost of Roger Casement" and "Come Gather Round me, Parnellites". The poet asserted that the reality of

Ireland was preserved in the legends of the people :

... stories that live longest
Are sung above the glass.

(1993 : 356)

"Under Ben Bulbin" was the last affirmation of the different sources of Yeats's faith, the occult tradition rooted in ancient prophecy and the folk belief of the Irish peasants.

Legends, myths and folklore have a quality in common. They enter popular imagination and are retained in the memory of the people. Yeats endeavoured to salvage the rich Irish heritage through his use of myths, legends and folklore. His interest in and love for the proud, heroic mythological past of Ireland was remarkable. His despair at the ignoble and gross contemporary status of Ireland was immense. He hoped for a future that would rediscover the heroic past and traditional values. This inclination showed Yeats as a Janus, looking both ways, on the past and future, standing on the present, and always concentrating on his soil.