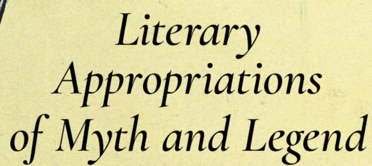

Literary Appropriations of Myth and Legend

IN THE POETRY OF

Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats

EWA MŁYNARCZYK

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INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES
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EWA MŁYNARCZYK (1982–2022) will be remembered as a most diligent student and PhD candidate at the Institute of English Studies. Always willing and happy to help with examinations or writing minutes for the Institute's Academic Council, Ewa made a significant contribution to our work. A very gentle and kind person, she radiated tranquil joy wherever she appeared. No wonder everybody who knew Ewa liked her and spoke about her with heartfelt appreciation and a sense of friendship.

It would not be possible to publish this posthumous edition of her monograph without the generous help of Professor Grażyna Bystydzieńska, Ewa's doctoral supervisor, who made final edits in the manuscript, Ms Małgorzata Ewa Skibińska, who prepared the text for publication with the help of Mr Jakub Niedziela, Ms Barbara Sobczyńska, who designed the cover, and Dr Anna Gutowska, who did the final round of proofreading.

The team involved in the editing and publication of this work would like to dedicate it to the memory of Ewa Młynarczyk and to her parents.

Agnieszka Piskorska
Head of the Institute of English Studies

Preface

For centuries, myth has proved to be a powerful vehicle for generating new, epoch-dependent meanings. After its temporary eclipse in the eighteenth century, myth's universal usability once again reasserted itself in the poetry of Romantic, Victorian and later nineteenth-century poets. As the functions of myth in English Romantic poetry have already been discussed in many seminal works,[1] in this book the Romantic heritage will serve as a point of reference for the study of the use of myth in the selected poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats.

It seems that the use of mythological motifs in this epoch has come to be seen in a negative light, as mere repetitions of heavily overused clichés. Such a viewpoint has been expressed by Bernard Richards in the Introduction to his *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830–1890*, as he explains why he has decided to exclude this thematic area from his study. He grudgingly admits that "[a] Victorian history would almost certainly have given more prominence to legend and mythology," only to concur with Gerard Manley Hopkins's criticism from a letter to Robert Bridges: "Believe me, the Greek gods are a totally unworkable material; the merest frigidity, which must chill and kill every living work of art they are brought into." Richards then stresses his point even further by quoting

1 Cf. among others, Harding 1995; Bush 2011; Brotemarkle 1993.

Philip Larkin as saying that classical and biblical mythology "not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the writer's duty to be original" (9).

Yet, the aim of the present study is to show that the works of Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris and Yeats prove that mythologies could still be employed in original and creative ways. Not only do these poets show keen awareness of the classical heritage but they also venture into other cultural areas, exploring Celtic and Norse themes and adapting them for their particular needs. Another important feature that they all share is the influence of the Romantic tradition on their works, so that these poets themselves may be perceived as the last Romantics.[2] Their individual attitudes to myth will be discussed in greater detail in the Introduction. At this point, it should only be mentioned that several of the poems to be discussed in the present study have not yet received their due share of criticism, some because of their sheer bulk (as in the case of Morris's four-volume *The Earthly Paradise*), others due to the fact that they have been perceived either as derivative and no longer original (such as Swinburne's later poetry) or as early attempts at poetic style not yet developed enough to be worth serious critical attention (such as Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín"). Moreover, it may seem a serious oversight to discuss the use of mythology in Yeats without touching upon the Cuchulain theme in his works. Yet, this motif appears to be much more prominent in his plays, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of the present work. Instead, I have focused here on his first major literary endeavour, "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889), and on three other minor, and perhaps lesser-known, poems from his early collections, *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

Apparently, there exists no one definition of myth that would be comprehensive enough to take into account all its various aspects. The diversity of the approaches to myth has been thus summed up by Joseph Campbell:

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2 Cf. Walter Hough's discussion of Morris and Yeats in *The Last Romantics* (1961). The significance of the Romantic heritage for the poetry of Tennyson and Swinburne has also been thoroughly examined in many studies dedicated to their lives and works, such as Kerry McSweeney's *Tennyson and Swinburne as Romantic Naturalists* (1981).

> Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age. (382)

Yet, no matter which aspect or function of myth is shown to be the most important in its original context,[3] in all of the above-mentioned cases, at its most essential, myth can be defined as a story. This feature has been most prominently put forward by Northrop Frye. In *The Secular Scripture: a Study of the Structure of Romance*, he traces the historical devaluation of the term 'myth' and points out that the distinction between a mythical and a fabulous story only depends on the social status it has in a given community, while from the literary perspective, myth and folktale/legend share similar narrative structures (8–20).[4] Furthermore, in "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," he also stresses its literary pliable nature:

> A myth may be told and retold: it may be modified or elaborated, or different patterns may be discovered in it; and its life is always the poetic life of a story, not the homiletic life of some illustrated truism. When a system of myths loses all connection with belief, it becomes purely literary, as Classical myth did in Christian Europe. Such a development would be impossible unless myths were inherently literary in structure. (1963, 32)

3 For a survey of approaches to myth in terms of its origin, function and subject matter in its primary context see: Segal 2004 and Ruthven 1976.

4 Cf. William Bascom's "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," where all the three subcategories of myth, legend, and folktale are subsumed into the main category of prose narrative (7). Percy S. Cohen also points to the narrative as the first defining characteristic of myth (337, 349).

The status of mythical narrative, initially of sacred import, in many cases has been degraded to that of a tale, a legend. Thus, as it was uprooted from its original context and has passed into the field of literary studies,[5] it has become a valuable source of material for many retellings, and consequently, proved especially open to new interpretations. This way, it may be posited that the original (primary) sacred meaning of myth has been replaced by another, secondary import.

Thus, the central argument of the present work is based on two main assumptions. Firstly, myth is a story of universal significance, consisting of recurrent patterns or motifs which may be found in various world mythologies. Secondly, a retelling of this story may vary in different circumstances, and its modifications may reflect the changing personal and historical situation of the storyteller/poet. The book draws on the selected concepts of myth criticism, an interdisciplinary field which borrows ideas from the theories of myth in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology among others to explore the complex relations between myth and literature. Concisely put, myth criticism may be defined as "[t]he study of both myths as literature and literature as myths — in the former case, myths are read for their own specific literary merit and as historical precursors to later literary texts [...], in the latter case, which has been the more influential of the two approaches, literary texts are read as creative reworkings of myths" (Buchanan 329).

My first point concerning the existence of common motifs underlying myths from different world mythologies derives from a psychoanalytical approach known as archetypal criticism, a literary theory which was partly based on C. G. Jung's notion of archetypes and made popular in the works of Northrop Frye. In *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Jung defines archetypes as "primordial images" (78), empty forms which exist in the human psyche and are filled with content only when they spontaneously manifest themselves in the consciousness (79).

5 Robert A. Segal points out that "[f]or literary myth-ritualists, myth becomes literature when it is severed from ritual. Myth tied to ritual is religious literature. Myth cut off from ritual is secular literature, or plain literature" (2021, 18).

Thus, a myth may be seen as a concretization of an underlying archetype, a universal mythological motif, which has taken on a more defined, specific shape (5, 58). Frye follows Jung in adopting the term 'archetype' to denote a smaller unit of myth, which he equals with Aristotle's 'mythos' or, as it is called in folklore studies, a 'motif' (1963, 24–25). In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, he distinguishes four such 'mythoi,' or basic literary genres — romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire — which may be traced as roots of all world literature. However, while he points to the resurfacing of common underlying themes in major works of literature, he stops short of exploring the reappearance of similar patterns and motifs in world mythologies themselves, and in this respect, it seems that it is Jung who goes further in his analysis, and hence makes possible a comparative approach to world myths which Campbell expounds in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

The idea that myths are composed of constituent units may also be found in Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist concept of 'mytheme.' In *Structural Anthropology*, he also presents myth as a story and its patterns as timeless (209, 210). Yet, unlike Jung, he posits that separate mythological patterns as such are meaningless (208), and they acquire their meaning only in their relations to other mythemes in a given story. He focuses on the internal unity in the composition within a myth. He groups mythemes into "bundles of relations" (211), so that a myth may be read both in a linear way, as a story, and vertically, thus revealing its true thematic relations. Therefore, a narrative may be disentangled and separated into smaller units, which may then be compared to other such motifs, themes or characters appearing in other mythical narratives. Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss points out that "[t]here is no single 'true' version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth" (218). In order to obtain a complete analysis of a myth, all its variants have to be taken into consideration.

In the myth critics mentioned above, mythical patterns and motifs constitute the deep underlying structure which manifests itself either in various mythical stories (Jung, Campbell, Lévi-Strauss) or in later literary

narratives (Frye). Yet, as has already been pointed out, on passing into the realm of literature, a mythical motif/story has become a surface structure which has lost its primary, sacred meaning. Such a revisionist approach to myth may be explicated by employing the concept of an 'empty signifier'[6] from another French myth critic, Roland Barthes. In the final chapter of *Mythologies*, "Myth Today," he uses the term 'myth' in the sense of ideology, which attaches itself to an already existing sign, hence becoming its secondary, acquired meaning. Thus, for Barthes, a modern myth is created when a traditional narrative loses its primary meaning and becomes an 'empty signifier' (127–128), that is, a signifier which has been detached from its original signified (its primary meaning) and may be attached to a new one. I suggest that a myth in its more traditional sense as a story about gods and heroes belonging to one of the world mythologies can also be viewed as such an empty signifier, that is, a matrix which may be filled with new meanings/signifieds depending on the individual and social contexts in which the artist retells the myth in a given epoch.

This brings me to the second and most important point in the literary studies of myth, namely, the context-dependent reception of a given mythical motif, which is manifest in the ways myths have been rehandled in the individual works of the four nineteenth-century poets. The relationship between the constant motifs of myth and its later transformations is the subject of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*. He points out that its reception has always been an important element in the shaping of myth, as even the oldest literary texts, such as Homer's epics, were preceded by a much longer period of oral tradition, with a continual and direct feedback from the audience influencing the final form of the work (151–152). As we are no longer able to access a myth in its most primary version, we should accept all its later modifications as equally valid. In his *Reception of Myth in English Romanticism*, Anthony John Harding draws on Blumenberg's ideas to point out that

6 The alternative version of this term, 'floating signifier,' was in fact first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950) to explain the concept of 'mana' (cf. Chandler 79).

the historical background of both the source material and the poet retelling the myth constitutes a crucial aspect in the study of myth, which was completely overlooked in the myth criticism of the 1950s and 1960s, with its reductionist tendency to focus only on the common underlying patterns (2–3). For Harding, it is especially important to see the Romantic poets as critical readers of myth, fully aware that it can only survive in its continuous mutations and appropriations, as "[t]he idea that much of human culture consists in finding new uses for existing but no longer understood customs, institutions, and beliefs is a product of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historicist study" (15, 18). As I will demonstrate in the Introduction, such an informed attitude to myth is equally true about Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris, and Yeats.

Thus, in my book myth is taken to be understood as a narrative which has shifted from the realm of the spiritual and religious into that of the literary, and has been adapted and transformed to fit the purpose of the artist ever since. Guy Gavriel Kay observes that "One of the first things learned in the study of myth is that the earliest version of a legend isn't always the most important. All renderings matter, and in the changes, the shiftings, we find truths about evolving worlds and societies" ("On Myth"). Hence, the evolution of myth, with its many variations and changing details will then reflect the attitudes both of the society in question and of the individual living in the given epoch. The message of a given rendition may be both very personal and universal. Personal, and yet indirect, as the mythological guise allows the poet to express his subjective emotions through the lips of the mythical persona; universal, as the message, though taken from an ancient tale, may still prove relevant for contemporary society. At the same time, a mythical narrative makes it possible for the poet to turn away from his times and find consolation in the legendary realm of gods and heroes. Both escapism and involvement in the current issues will be the two themes that underlie the use of myth in nineteenth-century English poetry.

The Introduction to the present study will aim at presenting the background information about the development of myth theories in

the nineteenth century, and, more specifically, the views on myth of Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne and Yeats. The following three chapters will then focus on the comparative analysis of a given mythical motif, namely, the quest, the otherworlds, and the outcast, as presented in the works of all the four poets, and drawn from Greek, Celtic and Norse myths and legends. Yet, it is the variations and nuances the four poets introduce into their source material and the consequent shifts in meaning that will be of major interest. While the last analytical chapter will be mostly concerned with the theme of poetic alienation and divine inspiration, the final group of the stories to be discussed there are of special importance as they encompass all the three main motifs.

INTRODUCTION

Myth in the Nineteenth Century

The major concepts of the twentieth-century myth criticism discussed in the Preface, including both, the comparative approach focusing on common mythological motifs, as well as the imaginative approach, allowing for reinterpretations of old myths and legends and endowing them with new meanings, can be found in the nineteenth-century approaches to myth, with their roots reaching back to the mythography of the late eighteenth century. In those years the general attitudes to myth underwent a crucial re-evaluation, a change from a disparaging view of myths as worthless fables and dead metaphors to the perception of myths as material worthy of a serious academic study and a valuable source for creative appropriations in literature.

Mythography and the Comparative Approach

The first attempts to apply the comparative approach to the study of myth date back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and are represented by works in syncretic mythography, such as the Reverend Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or, An Analysis of Antient Mythology* (1774–76), Edward Davies's *The Mythology and the Rites of the British Druids* (1809),

and George Stanley Faber's *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry* (1816). These works aimed at revealing the archetypal patterns underlying mythological systems from different parts of the world and, in this way, bringing to light the universal truths hidden therein. Even though the purportedly scientific methods of the syncretists were soon harshly criticised as extravagant and absurd,[7] their works still helped to establish the study of mythology as a serious area of research. Moreover, along with the popular handbooks on mythology, the so-called "Pantheons,"[8] the syncretists' works served as useful sources of information on mythology for the Romantic and Victorian poets. Davies's work on British druids is also an example of a newly-awakened interest in collecting and studying the native Celtic myths, which may be seen as a prelude to the later Celtic Revival of the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, the comparative approach was employed by two rivalling schools of thought at Oxford University — Friedrich Max Müller's comparative philology and Andrew Lang's comparative anthropology. Müller posited the theory that Greek mythology was in fact a "disease of language" (1873, 12), that is, what was originally a metaphorical description of the natural phenomena was later misinterpreted as stories about gods and heroes. Even though the old Aryan language of mythology had been forgotten, the true meaning of myths could still be decoded by means of analysing the roots of Greek mythological names and comparing them to the names of gods and heroes in the Indian Vedas. Müller's studies led him to the conclusion that the main Greek myths were in fact different stories about the sun-god chasing the dawn and conquering the darkness. Although Müller's concept of the solar myth underlying many hero myths enjoyed huge popularity

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7 For a more detailed discussion and criticism of these works see: Kuhn 1094–1097; Hungerford 3–34; Paden 76–79; Feldman and Richardson, Jr., 241–243, 397–400.

8 The encyclopaedic works on mythology of that period included John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788), John Bell's *New Pantheon* (1790), William Godwin's *The Pantheon* (1806), and Richard Payne Knight's *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1818) (Zwerdling 452).

and attracted many followers, it also met with severe criticism already in his own time.[9]

His main opponent, Andrew Lang, challenged Müller's etymological basis for establishing the origin of myth. In place of Müller's comparative philology, Lang put forward the method of comparative anthropology, or, what he called 'ethnopsychology,' which in turn may be seen as part of Darwin's theory of evolution (1886, 58–59). As he notes in *Custom and Myth*, "Similar phenomena, presenting themselves to be explained by human minds in a similar stage of fancy and of ignorance, will account for the parallel myths" (51). Following in the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor's footsteps, Lang looks for these parallels in the nineteenth-century accounts of beliefs among the native peoples of North America, Africa, and Oceania. This method made it possible to explain the similarities between myths from geographically and linguistically distant communities; it also helped to shed light on the mythopoeic way of thinking of the ancient Indo-European peoples. Lang admits, though, that race still makes its mark on mythical thinking in the way the common motifs are moulded into the final literary shape of myth, thus making the myths of Greece, India, and Scandinavia unmistakably distinct (1884, 26–27).

Still, what may be considered the central work in comparative anthropology of the nineteenth century is Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, originally published in two volumes in 1890, and later expanded into a twelve-volume edition published in the years 1911–15. Frazer takes his point of departure from a discussion of a kingship rite preserved in an ancient Roman cult, and then goes on to show parallels among a wide range of religious and magical practices drawn from various cultures around the world. Again, like Müller, Frazer attempts to gain insight into the religious beliefs of the ancient Aryans, however, in order to do that, he analyses the data collected among their descendants, the modern peasantry. As he observes in the Preface to the first edition, old customs

9 For a discussion of Müller's theory of myth see: Chase 45–48; Turner 104–111; Bullen 7–8; Dorson 394–405.

and superstitions have been preserved among preliterate societies, which still rely on oral culture, and whose mindset has not been affected by the intellectual revolution brought about through the spreading of the written word (1: viii–ix). In this respect, his approach is more akin to that of Lang's. Robert Ackerman calls Frazer "the practitioner *par excellence*" of the comparative method, and underlines the way in which his contribution to anthropological studies helped put the Greek religion into the right perspective: "The comparative approach emphasized how much the great achievement of Greece had been overlaid on the darkness of the old pre-Olympian religion, and also how close the ancient Greeks were to European peasants of the nineteenth century" (133). Moreover, *The Golden Bough* is also a study in the relationship of the king to his land, establishing the connection between the death and rebirth of the king and the vegetation myth.

Even though some of Frazer's findings have since been disproved as inaccurate and obsolete, the ritual approach he put forward in *The Golden Bough* gave rise to a new direction in classical studies, later taken over by the school of Cambridge Ritualists. Their work, in turn, inspired a new trend in literary criticism of the twentieth century, according to which a work of literature could be seen as a secular narrative which was originally attached to a ritual. This approach can be exemplified by such works as Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), Lord Raglan's *The Hero* (1936), and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), to name but a few (cf. Segal 1980, 176). Frazer's monumental work also had a considerable impact on modernist writers, with T. S. Eliot referencing both Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* as sources of inspiration for his *Wasteland*.

By the mid-nineteenth century, comparative mythology had become such a fashionable trend that a figure of a serious scholar-mythologist even made an appearance in one of the most important novels of the nineteenth century, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72). One of its main characters, the Reverend Edward Casaubon, devotes all his time to his research aimed at discovering the Key to all Mythologies. This is how he expounds the nature of his studies to Dorothea:

> For he had been as instructive as Milton's "affable archangel"; and with something of the archangelic manner he told her how he had undertaken to show (what indeed had been attempted before, but not with that thoroughness, justice of comparison, and effectiveness of arrangement at which Mr. Casaubon aimed) that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed. Having once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast field of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences. But to gather in this great harvest of truth was no light or speedy work. His notes already made a formidable range of volumes, but the crowning task would be to condense these voluminous still-accumulating results and bring them, like the earlier vintage of Hippocratic books, to fit a little shelf. (19)

The wording in this passage suggests that Mr. Casaubon may be read as a generic embodiment of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars. His notion that "all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed" brings to mind the attempts of the eighteenth-century syncretists to expose the Revelation underlying various religious systems, which is to be finally made "luminous with the reflected light of correspondences." Yet, this metaphor of light is put to ironic use later in the novel, as the narrator observes in chapter 20 that Mr. Casaubon was so absorbed in his research, which eventually proved futile, that "With his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight" (181). This allusion to the solar myth may also imply that he is supposed to be a fictional counterpart of Müller.

Even though the theories concerning myth discussed in this chapter are no longer considered valid and were questioned by other scientists and critics already in the times when they were first made public, they nevertheless testify to a gradual rehabilitation of myth as a respectable area of research. What is more, the popularity of mythography played an important role in restoring the connection between mythology and literature, as many of these works were known to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, poets and men of letters, and provided them with sources of inspiration for their own creative work.

Myth and the Poetic Imagination

While mythographers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attempted to decode myth and provide various fantastical and scientific explanations for its possible meaning and function in its original context, the poets looked for new, creative ways of re-appropriating it in their works. In other words, to use Barthes's terminology, it may be posited that the aim of the scientific approaches to myth was to reveal its primary signified, its sacred content behind the narrative. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century poets continued a long-standing tradition in which myth — as a story — had been absorbed into the common literary heritage, thus becoming an empty signifier which could be filled with new meanings, or, new signified. This positive view of myth as material for creative reworkings seems to be the offshoot of the gradual revival of interest in myth at the turn of the nineteenth century, which has been discussed above. The prominence of myth and legend as new sources of subject matter is especially visible in the poetry of Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne, and Yeats, and thus, the final part of this chapter will be devoted to the four poets' views on myth, which underlie their poetic appropriations of mythical and legendary themes discussed in the following analytical chapters.

Whether negative or positive, the role of the poetic imagination in the reshaping of myth had been universally acknowledged. Alex Zwerdling provides some interesting examples of the former from such eighteenth-century writers as Samuel Boyse, Thomas Blackwell, and the Chevalier Ramsay, who accused poets of corrupting the original doctrine, manipulating facts and fabricating false stories. As Zwerdling observes, "the poets were the real villains, content to pervert the truth in order to satisfy the taste for entertainment or to flatter a patron" (449). Such a notion of myth as a falsification of the truth made it highly unsuitable for serious poetic treatment in the Age of Reason. In fact, any references to classical mythology were strongly discouraged since they were considered to have long exhausted their creative potential.

One such writer who repeatedly criticised the use of mythology in other poets was Samuel Johnson. He finds fault with John Milton's introduction of "the heathen deities" and "a long train of mythological imagery" in *Lycidas* (39); he writes of Edmund Waller that he "borrows too many of his sentiments and illustrations from the old mythology," while "of these images time has tarnished the splendour" (69); he also attacks Thomas Gray's *Bard* for "the puerilities of obsolete mythology" (301). Pagan mythology was considered to be a repository of frivolous, absurd imagery and dead, artificial metaphors (Kuhn 1097–1099). Such mythological similes and metaphors could be barely acceptable as a school boy's exercise in poetic diction, but otherwise they were thought of as a sign of lack of originality in a poet. When employed at all, mythological allusions were only introduced for humorous or decorative effects, as was the case with the epic machinery in such works as John Gay's *The Fan* or, more notably, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.

On the other hand, however, the late eighteenth century also witnessed the emergence of a more sympathetic view of myth as a poetic expression of first philosophical notions about the world. It was this mindset of the first creators of myth and the mythopoeic faculty of the human brain that appealed to the Romantic poets. James Engell remarks that "the poet's ability to make myth out of experience and the materials at hand — that was what surpassed the names, however wonderful and resonant, of ancient gods" (252). The Romantic mythopoeia is best exemplified in the original mythical systems developed in the writings of William Blake, and later, also in the works of his disciple, William Butler Yeats.

This interest in the workings of the mythopoeic mind was also related to the Romantic nostalgia for the past, the past which presented itself as a world full of wonder, permeated with the divine spirit. This longing appears to have been the consequence of the disillusion with the civilised and increasingly industrialised modernity. William Wordsworth, while sharing the eighteenth-century aversion to making direct references to classical mythology, was yet captivated by such a mode of

perceiving nature as pervaded with the divine element.[10] In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth extols this mythopoeic faculty in the ancient Greeks, as he opposes their false idolatry and the Rhapsodists' fables to the Greek peasants' genuine faith in the manifestations of the holy spirit in the sun, the moon, the groves, meadows, and rivers everywhere around them. Walter Pater writes that Wordsworth's own exceptional sensitivity to the presence of the soul in inanimate objects, this pantheism in his poetry, "was like a 'survival,' in the peculiar intellectual temperament of a man of letters at the end of the eighteenth century, of that primitive condition, [...] that mood in which the old Greek gods were first begotten, and which had many strange aftergrowths" (1889, 46).[11] Max Müller, too, calls Wordsworth "this modern ancient" (1868, 61), and he specifically quotes examples of Wordsworth's poetic way of animating nature to illustrate his theory of the mythmaking process as a "disease of language" discussed above.

Moreover, a lament for a mythical Greece populated with the elusive gods can also be heard in Lord Byron's *Hellas*. Sadly, the pagan gods, Apollo, Pan, and Jove, grew weak and had to flee before the "killing

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10 In a note on his "Ode to Lycoris" (May 1817), Wordsworth observes that "No doubt the hackneyed and lifeless use into which mythology fell towards the close of the 17th century, and which continued through the 18th, disgusted the general reader with all allusion to it in modern verse; and though, in deference to this disgust, and also in a measure participating in it, I abstained in my earlier writings from all introduction of pagan fable, surely, even in its humble form, it may ally itself with real sentiment [...]" (1904, 558).

11 Such survivals of the pagan mindset into the Christian times seem to be a recurrent theme with Pater. In "Pico della Mirandola," he underlines the attempts to reconcile the Christian beliefs and ancient Greek myths in the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century, resulting in outstanding works of art, where "[c]lassical story was regarded as so much imaginative material to be received and assimilated" (1925, 48). He also traces the Hellenic spirit in "Winckelmann," which was so ingrained in the German historian's very nature that it was "itself like a relic of classical antiquity, laid open by accident to our alien, modern atmosphere" (1925, 220). Moreover, inspired by Heine's *Gods in Exile*, Pater entertains the idea of the Greek gods' literal survival into Christianity in his two short stories, "Denys L'Auxerrois" and "Apollo in Picardy," in which the elements of myths related to Dionysus and Apollo are translated into the narratives of their new lives in French medieval towns.

Truth" (l. 234) of Christianity (Jenkyns 177–8). Richard Jenkyns points out that it was Pan that was especially popular with the Romantic poets as the god of pantheists: "On the one hand, he was a naughty, goatish creature, gloriously free from the restraints imposed by civilization or Christian morality; on the other, he became in late Greek theology the god of universal nature" (179).[12] In this way, Pan seems to have embodied for the Romantic poets the two concepts they found particularly significant — freedom and nature.

Yet, when it comes to the appropriation of myth in the English Romantic poets, it is undoubtedly John Keats who is the most successful not only in embracing the mythical spirit but also in retelling the stories from classical mythology in a creative and imaginative way. He declares his fascination with the world of ancient fable in the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) and, in the Preface to *Endymion* (1818), he expresses his doubts as to whether he has managed to capture the soul of myth in his poem: "I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more, before I bid it farewell" (60). Fortunately, his later works such as his "Hyperion" poems and "Lamia" show that he did not "bid farewell" to the world of Greek mythology which he knew from Tooke's *Pantheon* and Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* just yet (Kuhn 455). Keats viewed mythical stories from a fresh, personal perspective and in this way succeeded in infusing them with a new life. Throughout his poetic career, Keats drew inspiration from classical mythology and the culture of antiquity, which manifests itself in many of his greatest poems, odes and his attempt at an epic, thus showing its influence not only in the subject matter, but also in his choice of literary genres.

This renewed interest in classical myth during the Romantic period is discussed in Hartley Coleridge's essay, "On the Poetic Use of the Heathen Mythology" (1822). From the very beginning, he aptly notices an

12 The banishment of the pagan divinities with the advent of the grey world of Christian faith is also an important theme in Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine," while the poet's sense of awe of the god Pan finds its expression in "A Nympholept."

important change in the portrayal of the gods when compared to their presentation in ancient literature: "We cannot help thinking, however, that the immortal emigrants have acquired new manners, and almost new faces, in their exile. They seem to rely less on their antiquity, and more on their beauty and accomplishments" (18). As he observes, the gods have lost their original manliness and simplicity, which were replaced by "an exquisite tenderness; a soft and melting radiance; a close and affectionate affinity to the gentler parts of nature" (19). Their changing portrayals reflect the different values that were revered in the cultures in which these literary works were produced. Thus, Coleridge here points to the significant fact that the reinterpretations of myth have been deeply rooted in their historical contexts.

In the Victorian epoch, the role of the poet in the shaping and reshaping of myth as well as the usefulness of myth for poetic appropriations were further discussed by historians, men of letters and poets. James Kissane (1962: 8) points out that an important voice in this debate belonged to the historian George Grote, who in the first two volumes of his *History of Greece* (1846) expounded his theory concerning the nature of myth. Grote strongly objects to rationalising myths either as history in supernatural disguise or as allegories, a trend that had begun with ancient Greek historians and philosophers, and still lingered into the nineteenth century. Instead, he posits that myth is the product of the mythopoeic process, the purpose of which was to fill in the gaps where the knowledge about the surrounding world was still inadequate (354). Arising from the religious feelings and imagination of the people, myths formed a body of traditional material which was recast, transformed and expanded through the creative genius of subsequent generations of storytellers and poets (433).[13] In this way, Grote makes a vital point about the mutability and adaptability of myth, indirectly validating its later literary embodiments. Such a view of myth as open

13 For Grote's discussion of how mythological stories were adapted and modified by the Athenian tragic poets of the fifth century BC see his *History of Greece* (1: 379–390).

to new interpretations was also shared by John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds.

These three men of letters represent what may be termed an aesthetic approach to myth, in which myths are perceived as objects of art, as opposed to philological and anthropological approaches, which sought to explain their linguistic and ritualistic origins (Kissane 1962, 14). Thus, it is not the first version of a myth that is the most important, but the one in which the myth has reached its fullest development. Kissane further points out that, apart from the emphasis on the artistic and psychological value of myth, what all the three writers also share is the "organic" theory of myth borrowed from evolutionism, which was characterised by the three stages of the development of its meaning. However, each of them discusses this concept from a slightly different angle.

This organic development of myth is best illustrated in John Ruskin's series of lectures, *The Queen of the Air: A Study of the Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm* (1869), where Ruskin likens the formation of myth to the growth process of a flower:

> And the real meaning of any myth is that which it has at the noblest age of the nation among whom it is current. The farther back you pierce, the less significance you will find, until you come to the first narrow thought, which, indeed, contains the germ of the accomplished tradition; but only as the seed contains the flower. As the intelligence and passion of the race develop, they cling to and nourish their beloved and sacred legend; leaf by leaf it expands under the touch of more pure affections, and more delicate imagination, until at last the perfect fable burgeons out into symmetry of milky stem and honied bell. (8)

As Ruskin focuses on the most elaborate and mature rendition of a myth, at the same time, he seems to undermine the endeavours of those scholars who are only interested in tracing its very earliest form and meaning. What they will find is but "the first narrow thought," "the germ" which at this stage only anticipates the myth's full bloom. Interestingly, the way Ruskin emphasises the poetic nature of myth and its ethical — but not overtly didactic — message is reminiscent of certain passages from Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry." Both extol Homer as one among the greatest

poets who clothes timeless moral truths in the guise of his morally imperfect, mythological characters of his epics. Such lack of outright moral teaching in these poets, which to Ruskin is a mark of all great art, may show that the poets themselves are unaware of the message they convey in their works. Shelley writes that in the past the office of the poet comprised the functions of both the legislator and prophet, “For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time” (748). Yet, as Shelley further remarks, poets are like “the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire” (762). In a similar vein, Ruskin observes that in the words of the greatest poets and teachers “there is often a meaning which they themselves cannot interpret, — which it may be for ages long after them to interpret, — in what they said, so far as it recorded true imaginative vision” (17). Since, as he declares, myth should be read, first and foremost, as a grand poetic vision:

> For all the greatest myths have been seen by the men who tell them, involuntarily and passively, — seen by them with as great distinctness (and in some respects, though not in all, under conditions as far beyond the control of their will) as a dream sent to any of us by night when we dream clearest; and it is this veracity of vision that could not be refused, and of moral that could not be foreseen, which in modern historical inquiry has been left wholly out of account; being indeed the thing which no merely historical investigator can understand, or even believe; for it belongs exclusively to the creative or artistic group of men, and can only be interpreted by those of their race, who themselves in some measure also see visions and dream dreams. (17)

Ruskin thus emphasises that from the very beginning, myth has belonged to poets. This visionary quality has been overlooked in the nineteenth-century scientific and historical pursuit of myth’s primary significance, hence such an interpretation of myth must perforce be incomplete and misleading. Therefore, the true universal meaning of Greek myths can only be grasped and expressed by other like-minded

poets, such as Keats and Morris. Every new poetic rendition of a myth will further contribute to revealing its message by giving it a fuller and better developed shape.

This intuitive, imaginative aspect of Greek myths is also an important point in Walter Pater's essays, "A Study of Dionysus" and "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," which were originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1876. He talks of myth-making as a complex process in which the name of a particular god becomes evocative of a wide range of subconsciously formed associations. Hence, Dionysus should be seen as "an actual person, in whom, somehow, all those impressions of the vine and its fruit, as the highest type of the life of the green sap, had become incorporate" (1895, 32). Once again, Pater argues that this way of perceiving nature, as if endowed with a living spirit, is what brings together the myth-maker of the past and the English Romantic poets such as Wordsworth or Shelley. Pater elaborates on this process of myth-making in greater detail in his essay on "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone." It consists of three stages, the first being a "half-conscious, instinctive, or mystical, phase" (1895, 90) in which vague impressions concerning natural phenomena are gradually moulded into a story, which is then taken over and further developed by the poets in the second, poetical or literary phase. In the final, ethical phase, the characters in the story become symbolic of moral and spiritual values. This transformation from the force of nature into human form and then, into abstract idea has been fully embodied in the myth of Demeter.

Interestingly, while in his essays Pater discusses Greek myths, he yet points out that the same mechanism of creating associations around the name of a god or goddess also took place in other cultures; the idea of the mother earth thus manifests itself not only in the figure of the Greek Demeter but also in the Germanic goddess Hertha, or the Egyptian goddess Isis. He acknowledges the importance of the approach espoused by comparative mythology in that it focuses on myth-making as universal to human imagination, and in this way helps to reveal the similarities in the modes of thinking between the first creators of myth and modern men.

Yet, Pater cautions the modern student of mythology to bear in mind that the fragmentary material he works on is poetry rather than religious dogma. Studying myths such as the one about Demeter and Persephone allows us insight into the workings of the minds of these first poets, its creators: "The abstract poet of that first period of mythology, creating in this wholly impersonal, intensely spiritual way, — the abstract spirit of poetry itself, rises before the mind; and, in speaking of this poetical age, we must take heed, before all things, in no sense to misconstrue the poets" (1895, 113). Thus, once again, it is this poetic aspect of myth which is the most significant in its interpretation, and which makes myth open to further poetic appropriations.

Finally, myth as a fit subject for universal art has also been discussed by John Addington Symonds in his essay on "Nature Myths and Allegories" (1890). He posits that ancient myths and legends should not be discarded in the modern age, as they are "the treasures of old-world speculation, the jewels of experience collected by our ancestors in times when life was simpler, the types of ever-recurring tragedy and ever-fresh emotion" (311). Yet, once again, it is not the earliest and crudest version of myth that should merit the artist's attention, but one in its later stages when "it has become the vehicle of thoughts and feelings essentially akin to ours, without losing its elder sense of the divinity in nature" (312). What renders it most appropriate for artistic treatment is the universality of its message. This has been achieved through the long process of the shaping of myth, in which it has been transformed and filtered through human experience of many generations:

> Pregnancy is the note of a true myth. The stuff of man's self has been absorbed and wrought into its substance by a process so analogous to growth, that the more we seek to fathom it the more we find there. The very quaintness of each detail is suggestive, capable of diverse applications, fit for varied uses. The wisdom it presents in symbolic shape has been so worn into harmony with human needs and human experience, that it cannot lose its value till the end of time. (313)

To Symonds, myths and legends provide an inexhaustible source of stories that could be put to use by all sorts of artists, such as poets, painters

and musicians, as an appropriate vehicle for expressing their own thoughts and feelings. He apparently agrees with Ruskin that new retellings will only better expose the wealth of meanings hidden in these ancient stories. As Symonds observes, "If used with true imaginative insight, there is no cause to fear lest the strain of modern adaptation should destroy the mystic beauty of the antique form. Myths, by reason of their symbolic pregnancy and spontaneity of origin, are everlastingly elastic" (313). He then enumerates examples of contemporary works of art which have successfully employed myths such as Wagner's use of the Tannhäuser legend, Shelley's treatment of the myth of Prometheus, Morris's renditions of myths and legends from various cultures in *The Earthly Paradise*, and the depictions of scenes drawn from mythology by Burne-Jones.

The question of whether mythology can still serve as a source of inspiration for poetry is also explored in "Old Mythology in Modern Poetry" (1881) by Andrew C. Bradley. The literary scholar posits that good poetry based on myth rather than on dogma[14] is still possible in the modern times, and goes on to analyse the necessary requisites that need to be fulfilled, and next, to provide some positive and negative examples of such modern poems. First of all, he observes that the mythological material needs to be reshaped so that "it may express ideas, feelings, experiences interesting to *us*, in a form natural and poetically attractive to *us*" (30). Yet, in order to achieve this, the poet has to be allowed full artistic freedom in his treatment of myth. Bradley stresses the importance of the poetic imagination in transforming the mythological material, and thus creating a harmonious whole in which the myth, the new ideas, and the poetic form become naturally unified. Grafting philosophical, religious or political ideas onto a myth, without having any genuine

14 While Bradley begins his article by relating the opinion that truly valuable poetry may only arise from the poet's innermost beliefs, he later contradicts it by stating that religious belief in the potential subject matter of poetry may in fact prove to be an obstacle: "Current religious ideas are unsatisfactory subjects because the artist's relation to them is not *free*; it is hampered either by his direct religious interest in them or by his theological disbelief in them" (45).

interest in the myth itself, will only produce a stilted, artificial effect. The most important criterion for evaluating such a poem is thus its aesthetic unity, which takes precedence over its moral content. In this respect, Bradley's argument brings to mind the idea of art for art's sake, which was anticipated in the writings of Arthur Hallam, propagated by Algernon Charles Swinburne, and later endorsed by W. B. Yeats. All in all, the poet needs to feel a special affinity, a sympathy with the legendary or mythical story in order to use it as a vehicle for a successful expression of his own mind. Among the poems in which the above-mentioned points find their fullest embodiment, Bradley distinguishes the two dramatic monologues by Alfred Tennyson, "Tithonus" and "Ulysses."

Indeed, it is Alfred Tennyson whose poems based on Greek myths seem to be the best known examples of employing mythological themes in the nineteenth-century poetry. What truly distinguishes his works from among many other Victorian poems also drawing on classical mythology appears to be his search for new aspects or lesser known versions of the given myths which have so far remained unexplored.[15] In the *Memoir*, his son Hallam Tennyson observes:

> He purposely chose those classical subjects from mythology and legend, which had been before but imperfectly treated, or of which the stories were slight, so

15 In this respect, A. Dwight Culler compared Tennyson, as well as Morris in his treatment of material in *The Earthly Paradise* and *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, to the poets of Alexandria of the third century BC: "Writing for a highly cultivated audience in the great research center of Alexandria, they were little inclined simply to tell over again the stories that had already been told by Homer and the Greek dramatists. If they could not find new stories, they would at least seek out little-known aspects of the old stories and would tell them from a novel point of view. [...] In thus focusing upon one little portion of the story with the rest sketched in briefly or by cryptic allusion, they naturally produced what, from a traditional point of view, was a one-sided or asymmetrical treatment of the myth. This they often intensified by odd forms, by the digression or the poem-within-the-poem, with the result that what was formally a subordinate part of the story became thematically the most important. For they were primarily interested in using the old myths as the materials for art — in creating out of narratives that a previous generation had taken rather seriously something that would be shapely, intense, learned, and graceful" (90–91).

> that he might have free scope for his imagination, "The Lotos-Eaters," "Ulysses," "Tithonus," "Œnone," "The Death of Œnone," "Tiresias," "Demeter and Persephone," "Lucretius." A modern feeling was to some extent introduced into the themes, but they were dealt with according to the canons of antique art. The blank verse was often intentionally restrained." (2: 13–14)

Such an approach allows the poet to retain the classical narrative and, at the same time, adapt it to his subjective personal viewpoint. This "modern feeling" introduced into the mythological story was particularly important to Tennyson. This can be seen in his remark to his son when he was approached about the myth of Demeter and Persephone, "I will write it, but when I write an antique like this I must put it into a frame — something modern about it. It is no use giving a mere *réchauffé* of old legends" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 2: 364).

Tennyson's originality in his treatment of mythological themes also lies in the way he makes use of these stories in his poems. He usually explores a particular moment from a given classical myth and leaves it open-ended, while the following events are barely alluded to (the coming of Ulysses in "The Hesperides," the foreshadowing of the following events from the *Odyssey* in "The Lotos-Eaters," the fate of Ulysses as retold in Tennyson's source — Dante's *Divine Comedy* — in "Ulysses") or not mentioned at all ("Tithonus," "Tiresias"). Hence, the words of the mythical persona may be set against the larger context of the myth, which was supposed to be already familiar to his audience.

While Tennyson mainly employed in his poems stories from Greek mythology and the Arthurian legend, he was also interested in the mythical heritage of other cultures. He once observed that "the Norse mythology [...] is finer than the Greek with its human gods, though the Greek has more beauty. The Norsemen thought that there was something better in the way of religion that would dawn upon the earth after the Ragnarok or twilight of the gods" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 256 n2). Moreover, his ventures into the world of Celtic legends were not limited to the Arthurian legend. His late poem "The Voyage of Maeldune" (1880) is based on the story he read in P.W. Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances* (1879)

and it gained enough popularity to be used by the critics for comparison with another poem treating of a Celtic voyage into the Otherworlds, Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín," when it was first published in 1889.

This "modern feeling" in Tennyson's treatment of the Arthurian legend in the *Idylls of the King* was what met with scathing criticism from Algernon Charles Swinburne. In his review of Tennyson's poem he finds the Victorian morality imposed onto the medieval story especially jarring as it ruins the original tragic conflict which was present in Malory, and so he mockingly calls the work "the Morte d'Albert" (Jump 339). Swinburne also drew on the Arthurian legend in his poems, but his own approach to employing myth and legend in poetry was markedly different. In explaining his own intentions behind his treatment of the medieval Tannhäuser legend in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866), while he states that he wanted to "rehandle the old story in a new fashion" (16), he also stresses that staying faithful to the medieval spirit was indispensable for its proper rendition: "Once accept or admit the least admixture of pagan worship, or of modern thought, and the whole story collapses into froth and smoke" (16).

The portrayal of Venus in Swinburne's "Laus Veneris" is an interesting example of the way he presents Greek gods in his works. The goddess of love, who has already undergone a transformation into a medieval demonic seductress, is nevertheless one of the two major goddesses appearing in Swinburne's poetry. While Venus symbolizes destructively passionate love accompanied by sexual exhaustion, Swinburne's Proserpine offers eternal sleep and oblivion in the Underworld. The two goddesses seem to represent two faces of the same powerful goddess. This archetypal awe-inspiring goddess is also Swinburne's "Hertha" (1870), the form of a hypnotizing first-person incantation only adding to the sense of all-encompassing power of this Teutonic earth goddess.

Thus, Swinburne's figures of gods drawn from classical mythology may perhaps be termed archetypal in the way they represent the most fundamental forces governing human life. Yet another Greek god that was especially important to Swinburne is Apollo, the god of light and poetry. Swinburne explains the significance of Apollo concerning his

poem "The Last Oracle" in a letter to Theodore Watts of 8 February 1876. Apollo is meant to appear as not

> merely son of Zeus the son of Chronos, but older than Time or any God born of Time, the Light and Word incarnate in man, of whom comes the inner sunlight of human thought or imagination and the gift of speech and song whence all Gods or ideas of Gods possible to man take form and fashion — conceived of thought or imagination and born of speech or song. Of this I take the sun-god and the singing-god of the Greeks to be the most perfect type attained, or attainable; [...]. (1960, 3: 137)

Hence, Apollo is not just one among many other Greek gods; to Swinburne he becomes "the most perfect type," the incarnation of the primordial power that first inspired man with the thoughts of the divine. Not surprisingly, Swinburne's central godly figure is also the god of imagination and poetry. This is also how Apollo is presented in "Thalassius," an interesting piece of mythopoeia, in which Swinburne creates a new mythological character, his *alter ego*, Thalassius, and leads him through the stages of a spiritual development so that, in the end, Thalassius is finally ready to be officially titled a poet by his father, Apollo, the god of poetry and sunlight.

Finally, the mythopoeic quality reminiscent of Romantic pantheism of Wordsworth and Shelley may also be traced in Swinburne's nature poetry. David G. Riede observes that "Swinburne's distinction, as the finest of the heirs of Romanticism, was to begin with the shattered vision of Wordsworth, the division of soul and sense, the philosophic mind, and work his way back to harmonious interpenetration of the self in nature" (201). Thus, the way Swinburne presents in his poems the sublime powers of the natural forces positions him firmly in the Romantic tradition.

While both Tennyson and Swinburne still found inspiration in stories and characters mainly drawn from classical mythology, at times also venturing into medieval legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, William Morris's sympathies clearly lay with medieval times. In fact, he may be considered as one of the most prominent

representatives of a cultural phenomenon known as Victorian medievalism. His interest in the Middle Ages manifested itself as early as his first literary endeavours of 1856 when he published his short stories in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, as well as in his first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858). Yet, it was in his most popular work of his times,[16] *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870), that Morris's fascination with legend and mythology found its fullest expression. A similar great popularity was only achieved by Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and John Keble's *The Christian Year.*

This four-volume work may be described as a year of storytelling, as it is neatly divided into twelve months, each including two tales — one taken from classical mythology and the other being a medieval legend. Such a diversity of stories has been accounted for in the introductory tale "Prologue: The Wanderers," where it is reflected in the cultural backgrounds of its three main protagonists, Rolf of Greek and Norse origin, who was born in Byzantium and later travelled to his father's native Norway, Nicholas, a Breton squire, and Laurence, a Swabian priest and alchemist in search of the philosopher's stone. The three companions were united by their great love of old lore, and in particular, tales of the fabulous Earthly Paradise, a world immune to aging and death. Their quest for this legendary land is finally triggered by the spreading of the Black Death. This event, as well as the appearance of a historical personage, King Edward III, who the Wanderers encounter on their way, positions the story in the fourteenth century. Employing such a realistic convention may also be seen as the foreshadowing of the Wanderers' failure to find the fabulous Otherworld. What they find instead, however, is some remote island inhabited by Greek settlers who welcome the battered and disappointed Rolf and Laurence amid their fold. What is important, the Greek Elders of the City are the more inclined to invite the Wanderers to stay with them because of their great respect for the cultural heritage that the Wanderers represent. To the Elders,

16 After the publication of the work he came to be known as "William Morris, Author of *The Earthly Paradise*" (cf. Maurer 1940, 247, fn2).

the Wanderers are "our living chronicle" (l. 2751),[17] who bring the promise of a "wealth of happy hours" (l. 2754) with the reviving of "the gentle music of the bygone years" (l. 2733). Consequently, the Wanderers stay on the island to share stories with their Greek hosts at the regular gatherings held twice a month, and the narrative frame for the series of retellings is thus established.

It seems that the words of the Elder of the City may be read as Morris's own views. What he valued most about myths and legends was the universal message they embodied which was passed on from generation to generation, as well as the oral tradition that accompanied them, the act of story-telling itself. Morris stresses their significance as vehicles of timeless truths in a letter of 24 March 1881, where he remarks:

> I have studied the subject enough [...] to know that since the dawn of history mankind has invented no typal new stories. Think now: the same story which Herodotus has heard from an Egyptian priest was told in our fathers [sic] days by a Swabian peasant to Grimm, and two years ago by a Hindoo nurse to an English child: surely this language must be more universal than the temporary tales of the squabbles of two bewildered clans. You may be sure that as long as art exists people will consciously or unconsciously go on telling the same stories, though doubtless when art is real they will do it in their own way. (1987, 2: 36)

Thus, while the surface narratives may take on different colouring depending on the time and place, the underlying message of the story remains the same. Its originality will only lie in the inventiveness of the storyteller. In fact, as May Morris records, her father's method of retelling a story was simply to "Read it through, [...] then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself" (qtd. in Morris 1966, 17: xxxix). The emphasis on retelling old stories is also present in the initial address to the Reader where the Author of *The Earthly Paradise* compares his tales to dried petals of once lovely flowers he gathered in a fair land:

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17 All quotations from William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* are from Florence S. Boos's two-volume edition of the poem (New York, London: Routledge, 2002).

> [...] thence I brought away
> Some blossoms that before my footsteps lay,
> Not plucked by me, not over fresh or bright;
> Yet, since they minded me of that delight,
> Within the pages of this book I laid
> Their tender petals, there in peace to fade. (ll. 3–8)

Although they are now dry and faded, they are yet cherished by the author for the memories they bring and may still be meaningful and enjoyable to his listener, even more so as the realm from which they originated is immune to the passing of time.

It is thus through the act of storytelling that also the listeners can share in a temporary suspension of time. In the "Apology" to the work, "the idle singer of an empty day" is likened to some medieval magician:

> Folk say, a wizard to a northern king
> At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
> That through one window men beheld the spring,
> And through another saw the summer glow,
> And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
> While still, unheard, but in its wonted way,
> Piped the drear wind of that December day. (ll. 29–35)

The magician's miraculous power to summon all seasons at once may be seen as a metaphor for the power of the storyteller who enthrals his audience with the stories of legendary heroes. Yet, paradoxically, since they never lived, they do not belong with the historical time, and their deeds will continue to live on in folk memory. The image of the king's hall overlooking all the four seasons also appears to be an apt metaphor for the whole *Earthly Paradise*, bringing together the timelessness of its stories and the twelve months into which the work is divided. Moreover, a northern king's hall at Yule-tide in itself presents a perfect time and setting for a communal gathering and telling stories, a situation which will be later mirrored in the frame narrative of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon."

The oral tradition of storytelling is also retained in the way each tale begins with the description of the community members assembling to listen to the story and closes with the portrayal of their reactions. Amanda Hodgson points to the way in which these framing narratives connect the tales to the changing seasons, and put more and more emphasis on the ever growing audience, as the Wanderers and their hosts, the Elders of the City, are later joined by the younger inhabitants of the island who can emotionally relate to the tales as well. As Hodgson remarks, this serves to demonstrate how "the habit of telling these stories has created a community into which the Wanderers have become integrated. And this community is one which, by embracing and handing on a common cultural inheritance, creates a unity between the past and the present" (1996, 351). Moreover, the influence of the oral tradition is also discernible in the formal aspects of *The Earthly Paradise*. Frye underlines the work's "clarity and lucidity of texture designed for sequential reading" (1984, 466). Other important features include "the standard 'running' meters," a directness of expression, as well as the lack of "discontinuous meditative quality that would obstruct continuous reading" (466). In fact, Frye sees in them a continuation of the long verse narrative of the Romantic epoch.

All in all, even though *The Earthly Paradise* was criticised already by Morris's contemporaries for its escapism and long-winded verse,[18] and its readership has been on the wane ever since, the book celebrating storytelling still enjoyed great popularity as a favourite Victorian family reading. It was praised in *The Saturday Review* of 30 May 1869 for the way it was adapted "for conveying to our wives and daughters a refined, although not diluted version of those wonderful creations of Greek fancy which the rougher sex alone is permitted to imbibe at first hand" (qtd. in

18 For a survey of Victorian reactions to the escapism of *The Earthly Paradise* see Maurer 1940, 247–276. In his letter to D. G. Rossetti of 10 December 1869, Swinburne comments on the third volume of *The Earthly Paradise* thus: "I have just received Topsy's book; the Gudrun story is excellently told, I can see, and of keen interest; but I find generally no change in the *trailing* style of work: his Muse is like Homer's Trojan women [...] — drags her robes as she walks; I really think a Muse (when she is neither resting nor flying) ought to tighten her girdle, tuck up her skirts, and step out" (1959, 2: 68).

Henderson 114). Fiona MacCarthy goes as far as to call *The Earthly Paradise* "a cult book, mainstay of mid-Victorian picnics," and points out that "[e]ven the intellectuals saw the poem as a respite" (264). She then quotes from a letter from George Eliot and George Henry Lewes to John Blackwood from Petershal in the Black Forest: "We take Morris's poem into the woods with us and read it aloud, greedily, looking to see how much *more* there is in store for us. If *ever* you have an idle afternoon, bestow it on the *Earthly Paradise*" (264).

While the retellings of the classical tales may at times sound somewhat lifeless, *The Earthly Paradise* is noteworthy for its tales based on medieval northern themes. One such example is "The Lovers of Gudrun," the medieval tale for November, which marks one of Morris's most successful attempts at recasting an Old Norse saga directly from its Icelandic sources, the tale which Morris himself considered his best piece of the whole third volume.[19] Morris was not the first nineteenth-century English writer to make use of Old Norse legends.[20] The revival of interest in the ancient poetry of the North was part of a larger European phenomenon of the late eighteenth century which aimed to help shape national identities through the study of the origins of local languages and cultures. As Heather O'Donogue remarks:

> Old Norse texts were presented as a significant and valuable alternative to the body of Greek and Roman literature, a status backed up by ideas which were beginning to circulate about the early Germanic languages being on a par with Latin and Greek as equal Indo-European descendants from Sanskrit.

19 In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton of 21 December 1869, Morris writes that he is sure "The Lovers of Gudrun" is "the best thing I have done" (1984, 1: 98); and, again, in a letter to Algernon Charles Swinburne of the same date he thanks the other poet for his critical remarks about the third part of *The Earthly Paradise* and observes, "I am rather painfully conscious myself that the book would have done me more credit if there had been nothing in it but the Gudrun, though I don't think the others quite the worst things I have done — yet they are all too long and flabby [...]" (1984, 1: 100).

20 The following discussion is mainly based on Heather O'Donoghue's *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (2004). See also: Nordby 1901; Herford 1919.

> In Britain, Old Norse-Icelandic texts could provide information about the early history of England and Scotland, and insights into the culture and *mentalité* of ancestral nations. (110)

In Britain, this newly-awakened interest in its native cultures resulted in Bishop Thomas Percy's translations of Old Norse material published in his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) as well as Thomas Gray's paraphrases of Old Norse poetry — his 'Norse Odes,' "The Fatal Sisters" and "The Descent of Odin" written in 1761. This coincided with the vogue for uncovering Britain's Celtic heritage, sparkled by the controversy accompanying the publication of James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (1760). The spirit of both Old Norse literature and Macpherson's Ossianic fragments, with their praise of heroism and the sublime, was influential in the transition from Augustan poetry of the eighteenth century into the aesthetic of Romanticism. The nineteenth century saw the publication of William Herbert's *Select Icelandic Poetry* (1804), which was the first direct translation of Old Norse poetry from the Icelandic language. Some later attempts at poetic appropriations of the Old Norse themes include Walter Savage Landor's "Gunlaug and Helga" (1806), and Matthew Arnold's "Balder Dead" (1855); moreover, Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology, appears as the protagonist of the first lecture of Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). Yet, it is William Morris whose profound studies of the language and literature of Iceland made the greatest contribution to its popularisation in the nineteenth century.

"For no other English poet," writes Charles Harold Herford, "has felt so keenly the power of Norse myth; none has done so much to restore its terrible beauty, its heroism, its earth-shaking humour, and its heights of tragic passion and pathos, to a place in our memories, and a home in our hearts" (75). Morris's lifetime fascination with the Old North, its medieval literature and culture led to the publication of over fifty pieces in prose and verse, stylised or directly based on Old Norse literature.[21]

21 For a full list of these works see Litzenberg 1933, 93–105.

The first northern influences may be found in Morris's early prose romances, most notably "Lindenborg Pool" based on a story from Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, and published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, and later, the tale "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" also drawn from Thorpe and published in Part III of *The Earthly Paradise*. His collaboration with the scholar Eiríkr Magnússon resulted in a series of translations of Old Norse sagas published in the *Saga Library* project, as well as Morris's own renditions of the *Laxdæla saga* in the aforementioned "The Lovers of Gudrun" in *The Earthly Paradise*, and the *Völsunga saga* in the epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). Morris's fascination with the Old Norse history and legend was crowned with his two trips to Iceland in 1871 and 1873, which gave him the opportunity to practise his Icelandic and gain first-hand experience of the atmosphere of the places he knew from the sagas. Apparently, what Morris found especially appealing in these Norse stories was the image of a society built upon the values of fellowship, equality and courage, an image which aligned with his own vision of an ideal society. What is more, as Karl Litzenberg demonstrates in his article, "William Morris and the 'Literary' Tradition," the revolution and a new social order which is to be brought about by the *ragna rök*, the apocalypse of Norse myth, may have influenced Morris's social and economic philosophy even before he started reading Marx (52).

It may be posited that myths and legends served as sources of inspiration for Morris's central literary works. The tales of *The Earthly Paradise* gave a respite from the ugly reality of Industrial England and Morris's easy manner of storytelling met with enthusiastic responses from his Victorian readers. Yet, contrary to the opinions of some critics, this interest in myth and legend was not merely driven by Morris's escapism. His in-depth study of medieval literature of the North gave shape to Morris's ideas about the perfect society of the future, while the immense work he put in the retellings and translations of Old Norse sagas helped to introduce Icelandic literature to a wider audience. Moreover, as Dinah Birch rightly observes, even though Morris was not directly involved with

the scholarly comparative studies of myth which developed in his times, the comprehensive approach to myth and legend which he shows in the compilation of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, encompassing stories of various cultural backgrounds, in a way makes him a comparative mythologist, too: "His syncretic thought enabled him to blur the edges of differing bodies of myth: classical, Icelandic, Christian — taking what he needed and making it his own" (10). She also points out that what Morris found of particular interest in myth was its timeless, ahistorical nature, its roots in the popular folk tales, which excluded a single authorship, and the element of the sacred wisdom, which was not restricted by Christian dogma, the features which had also been important to the Romantic poets (6). Interestingly, a similar view of myth and legend as both a folk story of the people and a repository of sacred images was what also attracted Morris's one-time follower, William Butler Yeats.

Undoubtedly, for Yeats, Celtic folklore and legend were central in the first phase of his literary career as he considered them to be the perfect subject matter for modern Irish literature. Under the influence of John O'Leary and his patriotic circle, Yeats came to think that after the hopes for gaining Home Rule had been thwarted with the fall of Parnell, it was time to concentrate on creating the Irish cultural identity, and the best way to do so was to turn to Ireland's traditional legends and folk beliefs. This notion can best be illustrated by Yeats's poetry based on Celtic legends, most notably his first major publication, "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889), as well as other shorter poems employing mythical personages such as the king Fergus mac Róich in "Fergus and the Druid" (1893) and the god Aengus Óg in "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1899), which are discussed in the following chapters.

Yet, Yeats's contribution to promoting Irish themes in literature is far greater than that and encompasses numerous articles and reviews, along with selections of folk stories he edited, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Representative Irish Tales* (1891), and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), and also his own collection of stories which he gathered in his native County Sligo, *The Celtic Twilight* (1893, revised in 1902).

Yeats's acquaintance with Lady Augusta Gregory provided another impulse for exploring local folk beliefs, while the publication of her translations of the Ulster Cycle stories in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) followed by *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) gave Yeats much better access to the mythological material he subsequently used in his two long poems "Baile and Aillinn" (1903) and "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" (1903), and also provided him with subjects for his later plays for the Abbey Theatre. Through his efforts to popularise native Irish myth and folklore in literature, Yeats came to be recognised as one of the key figures of the Celtic Revival, a cultural movement of the late nineteenth century. However, as James Pethica observes, after 1907, Yeats's interest in Irish legend gradually waned and there was a marked shift to other sources of poetic inspiration (142).

In his early articles and reviews, Yeats repeatedly stresses the need to employ Celtic legend in order to create genuine Irish literature which would embody the spirit and imagination of the nation. He illustrates his point by emphasising the significance of Celtic material in the development of European literature and, more broadly, in the shaping of the spiritual history of humankind:

> The influence of the Celt, too, has been a spiritual influence, and men are beginning *to* understand how great it has been. The legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail, which had so great an influence on the whole of Europe in the twelfth century, and so great a part in the foundation of chivalry, were Celtic legends, and some say Irish legends transformed by Welsh and Breton story-tellers. The legends that gave Dante the structure of his poems are believed to have been Irish legends of the visions seen by devout persons in a little island in Lough Dearg; and but for the legends and history of the Highlanders, who are in all things of one stock with ourselves, Sir Walter Scott could hardly have begun that great modern mediaeval movement, which has influenced all the literature and art and much of the religion of the nineteenth century. (1976, 70–71)

Having carried out a survey of the crucial points at which Celtic legend influenced European literature and culture, Yeats next goes on to comment on the anticipated revival of the Celtic spirit in literature:

> Until our day the Celt has dreamed half the dreams of Europe, while others have written them but to-day he is beginning to write his own dreams, [...]. The bulk of the poets of modern Ireland has been so exclusively political, or so exclusively national, in a political sense, that it has hardly busied itself like the poets of Wales and Brittany with the spiritual part of life, but now we have several poets who are speaking with what I think is the truest voice of the Celt. I call them spiritual, not because they are religious, in the dogmatic sense of the word, but because they touch our deepest and most delicate feelings, and believe that a beauty, not a worldly beauty, lives in worldly things. (1976, 71)

In another review, Yeats announces the decline of the potential of classical mythology and Arthurian material for modern works, while he favourably comments on those writers who have already turned for inspiration to Norse and Germanic legends:

> Modern poetry grows weary of using over and over again the personages and stories and metaphors that have come to us through Greece and Rome, or from Wales and Brittany through the middle ages, and has found new life in the Norse and German legends. William Morris's *Sigurd*, if it is as fine as it seemed to me some years ago, may yet influence the imagination of Europe, and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and *The Heroes of Heligoland* are already great influences, while Richard Wagner's dramas of *The Ring*, are, together with his mainly Celtic *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan and Iseult*, the most passionate influence in the arts of Europe. (1976, 125)

Once again, Yeats posits that it is now time to turn to the wealth of old Gaelic stories, still fresh and unexploited, which are bound to have a profound impact on the future development of literature worldwide.

In the same vein, Yeats praises the Irish poet Samuel Ferguson for taking the subjects for his poetry from the Irish cycle, and thus showing his followers the way to reinvigorate Irish literature with heroic themes and personages from the dawn of time (1970, 82). However, in this respect, Yeats is critical of the two English Romantic poets that had the greatest influence on his own poetic development, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake, for not drawing their mythical characters from the local tales and placing them in the local scenery. He reminisces in his

Autobiographies that he used to believe that "if Shelley had nailed his *Prometheus*, or some equal symbol, upon some Welsh or Scottish rock, [his] art had entered more intimately, more microscopically, as it were, into our thought and had given perhaps to modern poetry a breadth and stability like that of ancient poetry" (150).

It seems that Yeats took every opportunity to express his views about the proper subject for Irish literature even in private correspondence with his friends and acquaintances. In a letter to Katherine Tynan on 27 April 1887 he writes of his conviction "that we shall have a school of Irish poetry — founded on Irish myth and history — a neo-romantic movement" (1955, 33). Again, in a letter to Miss Elizabeth White on 30 January 1889 he advises: "You will find it a good thing to make verses on Irish legends and places and so forth. It helps originality and makes one's verses sincere, and gives one less numerous competitors. Besides one should love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one's life" (1955, 104).

Apart from writing articles for the press, Yeats was also involved in other projects aiming at promoting national literature and increasing national readership, such as setting up reading rooms and circulating libraries in Ireland as well as establishing literary societies — the Irish Literary Society of London, founded in December 1891 together with Thomas William Rolleston, and the National Literary Society, founded the following year in Dublin. The controversy surrounding the fact that a literary society for discussing Irish literature had been set up in London provided Yeats with yet another opportunity to state his aims: "he who studies the legends, and history, and life of his own countryside may find there all the themes of art and song. Let it be the work of the literary societies to teach to the writers on the one hand, and to the readers on the other, that there is no nationality without literature, no literature without nationality" (1970, 224).

A similar message emerges from Stopford A. Brooke's inaugural lecture entitled "The Need and Use of Getting Irish Literature into the English Tongue," which opened the proceedings of the Irish Literary Society in London. Brooke postulates the necessity of thorough and

accurate translations of ancient Irish texts and their proper modern retellings so that they may serve as the groundwork and inspiration for contemporary writers and poets in creating national Irish literature in English. Interestingly, he starts discussing his favourite examples of using Celtic mythical motifs for new work by praising Tennyson's "The Voyage of Maeldune" and "Merlin and the Gleam," and finishes with Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín." This is paired with another aim of the Society, namely, to rescue regional Irish folk-tales from oblivion, as these stories, too, reveal a wealth of poetic material. Brooke goes on to emphasise the necessary link that poetry has always established with "an imaginative world of the past" (55), and argues that, after the subjects drawn from Greek, Norse and Arthurian stories have already been exhausted for the nineteenth century, modern Irish writers should find a new impulse in their own Celtic heritage: "But the Irish stories are as yet untouched; and they have imagination, colour, romance of war and love, terrible and graceful supernaturalism, a passionate humanity, and a vivid love of natural beauty and sublimity" (56). Once again, turning to Celtic material will result in creating new original literature for the rising nation.

To Yeats, the significance of Irish legend and folklore was not limited to his patriotic endeavours. What he found in them was the antidote to the meagre poetry of political propaganda of Irish patriotic circles in Dublin on the one hand, and to the sole preoccupation with the form as the highest value in the decadent poetry by his friends from the Rhymers' Club, in the London of the 1890s, on the other. Celtic legends provided Yeats with a repository of symbols he could employ in his own poetry to speak of his personal experiences and emotions in a veiled, indirect way.[22]

22 Apparently, in *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), Yeats's use of mythological symbolism had become so obscure that one critic complained that the poet was arbitrary to the point of being unintelligible: "He frequently uses this mythological imagery in a sense of his own, though in his elaborate notes he acknowledges himself doubtful about the correctness of his interpretation — that he is, in fact, guessing at the meanings of the symbols he uses. But how shall the reader follow this arbitrary use of symbolism, or be certain where the poet himself is uncertain? The only road out is the clumsy expedient of explanatory notes.

Even more importantly, Irish folk beliefs he encountered among the peasants of his native Sligo seemed to have satisfied his need for spirituality in that they served as a substitute for a more traditional religion he had rejected. As he observes, "Folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light" (1970, 284). Out of these folk stories and his studies of the occult Yeats devised his own personal set of beliefs.[23]

Interestingly, for one who lived in times when the studies of mythology and folklore were growing increasingly scholarly,[24] Yeats was decidedly unscientific. In a letter, which appeared in the *Academy* on 11 October 1890, he speaks of certain folklorists as lacking in a "needful subtle imaginative sympathy" which is necessary to convey the true spirit of folk stories. Instead, the man of science is often one "who has exchanged his soul for a formula; and when he captures a folk-tale, nothing remains with him for all his trouble but a wretched lifeless thing with the down rubbed off and a pin thrust through its once all-living body" (1970, 174). In fact, the references to such names as John Rhys, Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville and Alfred Nutt, which appear in his reviews and letters from the 1890s, show that Yeats was familiar with the works of the leading Celtic scholars of his day. Yet, as both Sinéad Garrigan Mattar and Phillip L. Marcus observe, Yeats turned to these writers only

This is not the true use of symbolism, and from a purely poetical standpoint is quite inartistic. It creates wanton difficulty. Mr. Yeats should at any rate be clear to the few who understand the system of mythological imagery. But his arbitrary use of it often leaves even them in the dark." (Francis Thompson, a review of *Poems* [1st edition, 1895; 2nd, 1899] and *The Wind among the Reeds* [1899], *The Academy*, 6 May 1899, in Jeffares 1977, 107–108).

23 In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes about his search for "a tradition of belief older than any European Church, and founded upon the experience of the world before the modern bias. It was this search for a tradition that urged George Pollexfen and myself to study the visions and thoughts of the country people, and some country conversation repeated by one or the other often gave us a day's discussion. These visions, we soon discovered, were very like those we called up by symbol" (265).

24 For the account of the rise of Celtology as opposed to the earlier fashion for Celticism in the nineteenth century see Garrigan Mattar 21–40.

for support of his own notions concerning the supernatural (Marcus 249–251; Garrigan Mattar 63–69).

By the end of the decade, however, Yeats's attitude to the folklorists seems to have changed. In "The Literary Movement in Ireland" (1899), he mentions "the new science of folklore and the almost new science of mythology" favourably, as contributing factors in a major awakening that would help create new literature based on universal feelings embodied in old legends (1976, 195). What is more, at some point, Yeats must have acquainted himself with the contemporary works in comparative mythography, since their influence may be traced in his later writings on the subject (Garrigan Mattar 53 ff). One such instance may be found in "Away" (1902), his final article of the series discussing Irish folklore, where Yeats tries to reconcile his own interpretations of folk beliefs with those posited in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Rhys's *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*; he even goes as far as pointing to similarities between Celtic and Norse legends and African indigenous beliefs.

Garrigan Mattar remarks that it was especially the works of Andrew Lang, who Yeats shared his literary and occult interests with, that effected the shift in the poet's views on myth. In his essay on "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1898, 1902), written in response to Matthew Arnold's lecture "On the Study of Celtic Literature" (1867) and Lang's own article "The Celtic Renascence" (*Blackwood's Magazine*, Feb 1897), Yeats argues that the melancholy, evanescent beauty and natural magic, which Arnold ascribed to the Celtic streak in English poets such as Shakespeare and Keats, are not exclusive to Celtic sensibility. Rather, they are characteristic of all literatures which have not lost connection with the ancient folk tradition preserving the imaginative power of the people living close to nature (1971, 176). While Yeats earlier criticised the scientifically-minded folklorists for drawing general conclusions from their study of folk tales to speak of "the primitive religion of mankind" (1888, xiv), he himself now employs such terminology and observes that "all the august sorrowful persons of literature, Cassandra and Helen

and Deirdre, and Lear and Tristan, have come out of legends and are indeed but the images of the *primitive* imagination mirrored in the little looking-glass of the modern and classic imagination" (1971, 182, emphasis mine). Garrigan Mattar points out that Yeats's "The Celtic Element in Literature" should be taken as evidence that the poet accepted Andrew Lang's views and was gradually moving away from his earlier Celticism towards a more comprehensive notion of primitivism postulated by the anthropologist (72).

At the time of writing this essay, Yeats still gave primacy of importance to Celtic tradition as the one which had had the greatest impact in shaping European literature. But the fact that he acknowledged that certain characteristics pertain not to a particularly Celtic — but universal — mindset anticipates an important change in his approach to myth in the later part of his life. It seems that Yeats says his poetic farewell to the world of Celtic mythology in "A Coat" (1914), a short poem in which he bitterly announces that from now on his "song" is going to leave behind a coat "Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies" (2–3) to go in the world naked. Yet, he never completely lost interest in mythology; but in later years, this interest evolved into a tendency to perceive history through mythical patterns.

Apparently, the concept of universal ideas underlying all folk traditions already appealed to Yeats as early as 1892, still at the height of his interest in Irish folklore. In an article on "Invoking the Irish Fairies," he writes of the fairies as "the lesser spiritual moods of that universal mind, wherein every mood is a soul and every thought a body" (1970, 247). Yeats later develops this concept of "universal mind," which he calls after Henry More the *Anima Mundi*, or a great memory, a repository of symbols and images, common to all races and nations (1980, 194–195, 262). In this respect, Yeats comes close to his famous contemporary he neither met nor read, C. G. Jung,[25] and his idea of archetypes, the universal images

25 For an in-depth discussion of the correspondences between Yeats's and Jung's thought see Olney 1980.

and motifs that are stored in the unconscious and may account for the similarities in myths and legends from diverse parts of the world.

While the later, modernist period of Yeats's literary career is beyond the scope of the present study, it is perhaps still worth noting that this opening up to universal symbolism led Yeats to employ in his poetry themes that were also drawn from Greek mythology. Moreover, his lifelong studies of the occult and his wife's automatic writing resulted in the development of his own idiosyncratic set of symbols, his personal mythological system, which he expounded in *A Vision* (1925, revised in 1937).

In the nineteenth century, myth was no longer discarded as mere fable, nor was it interpreted as history in a supernatural disguise. The comparative method helped to illuminate the similarities between beliefs of disparate cultures, and established the study of mythology as a respected field of scholarly research, in that myths were no longer treated as corruptions of the sacred revelation embodied in the Bible. The emerging discipline, anthropology, allowed greater insight into the mythopoeic mind, which the Romantic poets had discovered and celebrated among the country folk. Thus, the above-mentioned theories should not be viewed separately from literary studies. While classicists and philologists attempted to arrive at theories explaining the original significance of the major figures in world mythologies, the Victorian poets found in them new sources of inspiration for their dramatic personas. Moreover, this renewed interest in ancient mythologies also helped to awaken the public's interest in the mythologies and folklore native to the British Isles, embracing both the Celtic and Norse connections, which also provided sources for new directions in literature. All those developments had a considerable impact on the works of the four poets under discussion in the present book. Bryant and Faber may be traced among the influences in Tennyson's early poems, most notably, "The Hesperides" (Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 423, 425 fn); Morris both drew on Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* and, through his own translations of Icelandic sagas, contributed to the popularisation of Norse legends; in his "Hertha," Swinburne combined Germanic

mythological concepts with the ideas he must have learnt from his readings in the ancient Vedic texts (McGann 2008); and through his work as a reviewer, Yeats stayed up to date with the latest works in Celtic scholarship and folklore, while Nutt's essay on "The Celtic Doctrine of Re-birth" (1897) and Frazer's comparative anthropology corroborated his own apprehensions concerning the human soul and universal symbolism (Yeats 1976, 119–121; Gould 1991).

CHAPTER ONE

The Quest

Ever since antiquity, quests for supernatural objects, voyages to the otherworlds and journeys of discovery have constituted an important part of the heroic biography in myth and legend of various cultures. Already present in great classical epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, the motif grew to prominence as a popular literary device in the medieval romance, with the quest for the Holy Grail being one of its most representative examples. Thus, from the Middle Ages onwards the quest theme has been absorbed into the romance, and its development in later literature has been linked with the modifications of this genre. A quest may simply be defined as a journey; a journey, however, which is motivated by some clear purpose, be it a search for a magical object, supernatural wisdom or the quester's own true self that he ventures forth to discover. These goals already point to various forms the quest narrative may assume. The aim of this chapter is to analyse how the forms of a mythological journey have been adapted in the poetry of the four post-Romantic poets, Alfred Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats.

Let us first turn to the role of the journey motif. In the classical epics mentioned above its main function appears to be that of a plot device

which generates all the adventures of the heroes on their way to achieving their goal, whether they are moving forward or going homeward. The importance of this narrative scheme has been pointed out by Frye in his essay, "The Archetypes of Literature," and then further developed in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. In these works, Frye perceives the quest-myth as "the central myth of literature," which in turn gives rise to four main literary genres, romance, tragedy, irony and comedy (1963, 17–18; 1973, 215). The same function of the quest as a major organising principle, the monomyth generating various narratives not only in classical but also in other world mythologies, has been explored by Campbell in his seminal comparative work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

The diffuseness of the theme of the hero's journey and its many similarities in mythology and literature derived from folk motifs prompted both Campbell and Frye to define its underlying pattern. In his discussion of the monomyth, Campbell distinguishes a tripartite structure of "separation — initiation — return," which he then elucidates in the following way: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30). Frye, on the other hand, while following the same basic pattern of introduction — climax — resolution, stresses the darker side of the quest. He divides the quest narrative into four major parts; "the *agon* or conflict" introduces the theme of the journey and the initial minor adventures of the hero, which lead to "the pathos or death struggle" marking the turning point in the narrative; this is followed by the ritual death of the hero and his disappearance in the underworlds, often in the form of "*spargamos* or tearing to pieces" of his body; and finally, by "the anagnorisis or discovery," that is, "the recognition of the hero" who in his endeavour has proved himself worthy of this name (1973, 187, 192). A somewhat different underlying formula was later put forward and illustrated with various examples from both myth and literature in Frye's *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, which

emphasised the four general movements in the romance, two themes of descent followed by two themes of ascent, also concluding with the recognition scene.

More importantly, though, for both writers the literal, external quest often serves as a symbol of the more significant journey into oneself. Frye attempts to explain the meaning of the quest motif by pointing to its structural similarities with dreams and rituals, in this way making explicit connections with the psychoanalytical readings of Freud and Jung and the findings of Frazer:

> Translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality. The antagonists of the quest are often sinister figures, giants, ogres, witches and magicians, that clearly have a parental origin; and yet redeemed and emancipated paternal figures are involved too, as they are in the psychological quests of both Freud and Jung. Translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land. Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female. The precious objects brought back from the quest, or seen or obtained as a result of it, sometimes combine the ritual and the psychological associations. (1973, 193–194)

Thus, the quest may be perceived as representing the process of individuation, in which the youthful protagonist is forced to face his unconscious fears and anxieties on his way to achieving maturity. Even though not acknowledged explicitly, such psychoanalytical and ritualist motivation underlies the analysis of various stages of the quest in Campbell's study as well.

The internalization of the quest theme is also important in Tzvetan Todorov's "The Journey and its Narratives," in which he divides the journey types into "the spiritual and the material, [...] the interior and the exterior" (62). However, as he immediately points out, the two aspects are in no way mutually exclusive, on the contrary, they very often appear within the same narrative, in this way enriching it with many possible levels of interpretation. Moreover, a narrative, even though originally

meant as an account of a physical, literal journey, may in time take on a different, spiritual meaning (62). This aspect of the quest leads to yet another crucial distinction, namely, that between quest narratives which stress the importance of achieving some external goal as opposed to those which show the journey as in itself a valuable experience of inner self-discovery of the hero.

The shift from the external to the internal quest can also be found in the development of the quest motif in the English poetry of the nineteenth century. In "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," Harold Bloom observes that Romanticism brings about a significant change in the use of the motif, as the quest-romance is appropriated by the major poets of the epoch, such as Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. In the first phase of the Romantic quest, which he calls "the Prometheus stage" (11), the poet-as-hero is actively involved in a political, social and cultural revolt, while in the second and more important phase, "the Imagination stage" (11), he turns inwards, in search of the expansion of his imaginative faculty, and tries to liberate himself from the confines of nature and his own Selfhood. Bloom comments that "The internalization of quest-romance made of the poet-hero a seeker not after nature but after his own mature powers, and so the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself" (15).

The Victorian poets, as immediate heirs to the Romantic poetic tradition, continue to employ the motif of quest as a journey of inner discovery. Jerome J. McGann finds them "Alone on their unlivable islands amidst the threatening sea of life," as "they all drive themselves forth seeking some earthly or heavenly home which, unlike Hölderlin, they have never known and cannot remember." He calls them "Heroic and tragic explorers" who "are forever experimenting with different directions and paths, different ends and means" (1972, 27). McGann relates the popularity of the quest motif in Victorian poetry to the initial enthusiasm and later doubts accompanying the Victorian belief in progress (27), so widespread in the era which the Victorians themselves

perceived as the age of transition.[26] While this may be partly true as to the movement onwards, the idea of progress is yet connected with the belief in the development of mankind and, as such, this involves civilisation as a whole; personal progress was seen in relation to the advancement of one's position in society as well. On the other hand, the quest in Victorian poetry tends to lead the quester away from his people. The quester figure is very often portrayed as a loner, if not an outcast, who embarks on his journey because he feels alienated or cannot cope with the situation he finds himself in. The quest thus becomes a means of breaking away from the monotony of everyday life, but also a symbolic representation of his individual development. Such a character apparently appealed to Victorian poets who often portray him as their poetic *alter ego*.

The presence or absence of the above-mentioned structural components of the quest along with the distinctions between the physical and the spiritual quest, and its successful completion or lack thereof will be the subject of the present chapter. The first two poems under discussion, William Morris's "Prologue: The Wanderers" in *The Earthly Paradise* and Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Thalassius," present creative attempts at adopting the theme of the hero's journey, by modelling them on the already existing narratives. On the other hand, the tales from *The Earthly Paradise* as well as the poems by Alfred Tennyson and William Butler Yeats draw on the motifs and personages already present in traditional retellings of classical, Norse and Celtic myths and legends.

26 Walter E. Houghton sees the idea of transition as a key concept characteristic of the epoch, which was shared by many eminent Victorians such as Prince Albert, John Mill, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold among others (1–3).

Quest as a Structural Principle

In William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, the quest theme of "Prologue: The Wanderers" serves as a frame narrative for the overall structure of the whole work consisting of twenty-four verse tales, many of which again employ the motive of the hero's journey on the hypodiegetic[27] narrative level. The main narrative in the poem shows the endeavour of three friends, the Byzantine-born Norwegian Rolf, the Breton squire Nicholas and the Swabian priest Laurence who, spurred into action by the spread of the Black Death in Europe, finally decide to leave Norway and embark on a quest to find the eponymous legendary Earthly Paradise. After many years of adventures, in which renewed hopes are followed by bitter disappointments, the Wanderers, now battered and prematurely aged, reach an island inhabited by a Greek community and are invited by the Elders to spend the rest of their days together. Their regular gatherings provide the occasions for relaying the twenty-four tales drawn from both classical and medieval traditional myths and legends, in this way encompassing the cultural heritage of the hosts and their guests. The framework which is thus established places the stories against the background of the changing seasons of the year.

Interestingly, for an introduction to the realm of myth and legend, the journey of the Wanderers has been presented in an unusually realistic manner. In fact, unlike the first unpublished version of the "Prologue...,"[28]

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27 To adopt G. Genette's terminology, the narrative level in "Prologue: The Wanderers" may be called diegetic, and the Wanderers first become the diegetic narrators of their own quest, and next, together with the Greek Elders, of the following twenty-four hypodiegetic tales. The introduction to the "Prologue..." is narrated by an extradiegetic poet-narrator of the opening "Apology," the month lyrics, and the concluding "L'Envoi" (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 91–92).

28 Florence S. Boos points to the obvious similarities between the first version of the "Prologue..." and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," with some motifs also reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Princess," "The Day-Dream," and "The Palace of Art" (1991, 45–46). Among the possible sources for the realistic detail in revised version, Boos mentions William Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico or Conquest of Peru* and Washington Irving's *Life of Christopher Columbus* (1991, 63–66).

the final one much more resembles the voyage accounts of the medieval and Renaissance explorers, who also embarked on their journeys to discover some legendary lands (cf. Todorov 61) but the reality did not quite live up to their expectations. The echoes of such voyages reverberate in the warning Laurence gives his companions before making their first landfall in the New World:

> Think what may dwell there! Call to mind the tale
> We heard last winter o'er the Yule-tide ale,
> When that small, withered, black-eyed Genoese
> Told of the island in the outer seas
> He and his fellows reached upon a tide,
> And how, as lying by a streamlet's side,
> With ripe fruits ready unto every hand,
> They lacked not for fair women of the land,
> The devils came and slew them, all but him,
> Who, how he scarce knew, made a shift to swim
> Off to his ship: [...] (ll. 847–857)

Despite their initial enthusiasm, the Wanderers soon learn that the paradisiacal tropical islands they have reached hide some real dangers and their inhabitants are in nowise immortal. Their life on the islands is presented in very realistic terms as the Wanderers have to struggle with adverse weather conditions, tribal wars, and cannibals. They also witness disturbing local customs involving human sacrifice. Finally, their prevailing dream of finding the land of immortality makes them fall victim of a dreadful deceit. Moreover, the realism of "Prologue: The Wanderers" is from the very beginning established through references to historical events, such as stories of earlier expeditions of the Vikings, the Black Death as the impulse for the Wanderers' undertaking, and their encounter with King Edward III of England. Such a literary convention clearly excludes any possibility that the Wanderers' quest for a fabulous earthly paradise could have ended otherwise than in utter failure.

What appears to be yet another indication of the Wanderers' misfortunes is the regressive nature of their endeavour. Charlotte H. Oberg

unfavourably compares the quest of the Wanderers to those of Odysseus and Aeneas, and describes it as an "epic voyage in reverse" (35). By declining King Edward III's offer to join his men, Morris's protagonists reject the active life of military action crowned with the immortality of fame, and instead, choose to chase dreams of earthly immortality in the land of inaction. As Oberg points out, "their quest is psychologically regressive: their wish to find paradise, or the golden age of man, is, on the psychological level, an attempt to return to a state of infancy, or sensual gratification without attendant anxiety or care" (35). In this land of "golden age of man", however, the Wanderers learn from the native folk that the earthly paradise they are looking for is situated "eastward and seaward" (l. 1208), that is, the very direction from which they came, and consequently, they themselves are worshipped as gods. This shows that the dream of the legendary land of immortality is common to mankind, yet it is always located in the imaginary somewhere else, as opposed to the real here and now, and thus it cannot be physically achieved.

While the quest for a physical earthly paradise proves futile, the Wanderers still embark on yet another journey, an imaginary quest into the legendary and mythological earthly paradises, as they share their versatile cultural heritage with their Greek hosts. The Wanderers could not attain real immortality, but the very act of storytelling gives both the storyteller and the listeners at least a temporary illusion of eluding the passage of time. The stories provide them with the sense of continuity in the face of death they were trying to escape through their search for the earthly paradise. In this respect, the storytellers of the subsequent hypodiegetic tales resemble the main (extradiegetic) narrator of the whole work introduced in the "Apology."

Finally, in "L'Envoi," the poet sends the book itself on an arduous journey to secure his place in the world of literature. Like the poet in the "Apology," the book now becomes an "idle singer of an empty day" (l. 21), a pilgrim "In raiment rent of stories oft besung!" (l. 52) that sets forth to speak to the kindred spirits of the poet and perhaps win him immortality through worldly fame. Yet, most importantly, the poet modestly hopes

that on its quest the book will manage to "gain the Land of Matters Unforgot" (l. 33), a timeless realm of literature reminiscent of the order of great literary monuments discussed by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"[29] where it may even find and present itself to the Master of the Victorian poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, thus pointing to the medieval model for Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*.

At this point, it is worth mentioning how the quest theme has been used in some of the following twenty-four hypodiegetic narratives. Among the tales retold by the Greek inhabitants of the island can be found most of the classical quest myths,[30] such as Perseus's journey to conquer Medusa in "The Doom of King Acrisus," Psyche's toils to be reunited with her beloved Cupid in "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," Hercules's quest for the golden apples in "The Golden Apples," and Bellerophon's defeating of the fire-breathing Chimera in "Bellerophon in Lycia." All of the above happen to be successful; at the same time however, they can also be described as somewhat too smooth and lacking in vividness. Jessie Kocmanová rightly observes that this characteristic may be attributed to common, conventionalized depictions of those myths in the Victorian epoch and to Morris's lack of a first-hand experience of Greek culture and spirit (43–44). Moreover, Kocmanová also points to the fact that at least some of the tales were initially intended to serve as the basis for Edward Burne-Jones's illustrations in the original design behind *The Earthly Paradise* project, which may thus account for their dreamlike static nature (11).

29 "[…] the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity" (Eliot 38).

30 "The Deeds of Jason," originally intended as an *Earthly Paradise* tale, was expanded into seventeen Books and eventually published separately in 1867 as *The Life and Death of Jason*; hence, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

By comparison, the medieval tales which deal with the quest motif are much more variegated and problematic. Unlike the Greek culture heroes who return from their voyages victorious, bringing about some important change to their world, the protagonists in the medieval tales are punished for their excessive greed and curiosity, which made them embark on their quest in the first place, or fail the test that has been set before them by their fairy lovers. The protagonist of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" loses his fairy wife after he breaks the taboo she has imposed on him, and regaining her becomes the main goal of the quest. Conversely, the quest for the self leads the knight away from Venus only to lead him back to his supernatural lover in Morris's retelling of the Tannhäuser legend.

Yet another interesting example of a medieval tale which employs the quest motif, along with the theme of an intrusion into the plot from the pagan goddess of love, is "The Ring Given to Venus." The tale recounts how, in some distant land where the new Christian faith has not yet wiped out the old pagan belief and superstition, a young and wealthy lord accidentally marries the goddess Venus by putting his wedding ring on the finger of her statue. As the possessive goddess uses magic to claim the hapless Laurence for herself every time he attempts to join his newly-married wife, he is forced to seek help from the enigmatic Dan Palumbus, an ambivalent figure who is both a former magician and a converted priest. Equipped with a mysterious scroll, the unlucky bridegroom is sent to an abandoned and desolate part of the seashore at the foot of a hill, where he faces a night pageant of phantom figures and reclaims his ring from their hellish lord. A successful completion of his quest also seals the fate of the priest.

The very idea of identifying this tale as a quest narrative may not be immediately plain to the reader. While some of the other quest narratives include an inner transformation of the main character, this happens as a reaction to the external events in the tales. In "The Ring Given to Venus," on the other hand, the external events seem to serve as an illustration of the inner change taking place in the protagonist. In this way,

the tale much more resembles the quest as a symbolic equivalent of the process of individuation described by Jung and adopted by Campbell and Frye. The figure of Dan Palumbus may be seen as akin to the Jungian wise old man who appears in the story at its turning point to show the hero the right direction, and whom Jung interprets as an embodiment of a "personified thought," a messenger from the unconscious (2000, 216–218). Laurence's endeavour to regain his ring appears to be a version of the descent into the Underworld, which constitutes an important stage in many mythological quest narratives around the world. David Leeming observes that this motif may represent "the facing of death before full selfhood can be achieved" and serves as "the 'night journey' or 'dark night of the soul,' which points to the fact that the self, to be whole, must rule the inner world" (98). Therefore, Laurence's experience seems to be a test he has to pass in order to become both a husband and a lord in his land.

In the same vein, the conscious-unconscious dichotomy may be equated with the Christian and pagan elements in the tale. Even though rejected and officially replaced by the new religion, the old deities still linger in the collective unconscious of the people of the land, who still summon their powers in times of need, so that "rife was wicked sorcery there" (l. 45). Morris carefully sets the scene for the irruption of the supernatural into the narrative. Lush tapestries and carpets presenting mythological events cover the walls and floors of the young lord's castle. As Laurence approaches the statue, he is filled with strange forebodings:

> And now as Laurence gazed upon
> That beauty, in the old days won,
> He knew not from what pain and toil,
> Vague fear new-risen seemed to spoil
> The summer joy; her loveliness
> That hearts, long dead now, once did bless,
> Grown dangerous, 'gan to lead his mind
> On through a troublous maze and blind
> Of unnamed thoughts, and silently,
> With knitted brow, he drew anigh,
> And midst the babbling close did gaze
> Into the marvel of her face (ll. 331–341)

Initially, Laurence mocks the old beliefs as he gently taunts the seemingly lifeless statue of the pagan goddess before he entrusts her with his wedding ring. Yet, after six days of fasting and praying, he is ready to descend into the realm of the unconscious, and returns to everyday life with the light of the dawning day, which may be interpreted as a successful return to the level of consciousness and rationality. The phantom procession Laurence has to confront, now collectively condemned as the inhabitants of Hell, revisits the site of "the temple of a glorious race" (l. 842) which "Stood fair midst groves of whispering trees" (l. 844) long time ago and so "Thence come this folk remembering / Their glory once so great a thing" (ll. 845–6). On his way back, Laurence delights in the natural order around him as he feels the fresh breeze from the ocean and watches the fishermen and their families at work. What proves to be an important factor in his success is the support from Palumbus, who acts as an intermediary between the pagan and the Christian faith. His status in between the two worlds is reflected in his formidable physical appearance:

> [...] right tall
> He was; his straight black hair did fall
> About his shoulders; strong he seemed,
> His eyes looked far off, as he dreamed
> Of other things than what they saw;
> Strange lines his thin pale face did draw
> Into a set wild look of pain
> And terror. [...] (ll. 705–711)

In Laurence's plea for help the converted priest sees the sign that his time has come and hopes to be finally reconciled with God. Thus, in his reworking of a medieval tale from William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, Morris seems to be drawing parallels between the old superstition and Christianity on the one hand, and the protagonist's unconscious which has to be confronted for the sake of developing a fuller consciousness on the other.

The quest motif in *The Earthly Paradise* appears to serve as a test of the hero's character and his perseverance in pursuing his goal. The full completion of the quest in these tales is granted in accordance with the true intentions and motivation of the quester. When it is triggered by selfish and base motives, such as greed or illusions about gaining immortality, the questers are punished for their *hubris* and the whole endeavour ends in bitter disillusionment or a disaster; on the other hand, the journeys motivated by true love are rewarded with success and final reunion of the lovers. As Kocmanová points out, "Those who are infirm of purpose, or whose purpose is merely sensual gratification and selfish pleasure, can never reach their happiness, which turns to dust and dreams as they seek to grasp it" (74). Moreover, what can also be considered a successful quest tale is one in which the protagonist undergoes an inner change and, in the end, is ready to face his duties not only as a lover but also as a member of a community. This brings to mind the crowning scene of the hero's journey upwards in romance which, according to Frye, consists in the reconciliation of the hero with an idealised version of society, symbolising his ascent to the higher world (1976, 150). In this sense, the Wanderers, even though sorely disillusioned in their search for the earthly paradise, yet learn to appreciate the life they lead on the nameless island inhabited by the Greeks. The Greek community on the island may be seen as such an idealised society, an idyllic world, with its slow, leisurely pace of life tuned with the cycle of nature.

Overall, the quest may be seen as a unifying theme of the whole *Earthly Paradise*. Morris employs the journey motif in both its literal and metaphorical meanings, so that the hero's voyage into the unknown can also be read as an inner process of maturation. Yet, above all, the quest has been used on all the narrative levels as a metaphor of storytelling, which allows for the sense of a seeming suspension of the passing of time. Morris's questers-storytellers, the Victorian poet of the "Apology" and "L'Envoi," the Wanderers of the "Prologue…" as well as Gregory the Stargazer of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" all embark on a journey into the realm of ancient lore. All of them are

day-dreamers who find themselves unsuited for their times. Thus, their search ultimately proves to be a spiritual quest for a deeper knowledge of human nature, the value of love and companionship some of the protagonists manage to gain at the end of their journeys, as they become members of new communities.

Quest as a Poetic Autobiography

Unlike his contemporary Victorian poets, Swinburne does not seem to employ the quest motif very often. McGann even posits that Swinburne, influenced by the works of his Pre-Raphaelite friends, consciously turns away from "the poetry of quest, effort, and personal advancement" in favour of one focusing on "passion and sensation" (1972, 35). Yet, it is "Thalassius," the very poem McGann quotes in support of his argument, which seems to be constructed along the lines of a quest narrative. The poem presents the process of poetic maturing of a pseudo-mythical character Thalassius, son of Apollo, the Greek god of light and poetry, and a sea-nymph Cymothoe. Richard D. McGhee defines the thrust of the poem as "a story of the poet's quest for vision, for the gift of song, for the power of joy which brings order out of chaos and gives significance to experience" (130).

In a letter to Edmund Gosse of 10 October 1879, Swinburne himself mentions the idea of "a symbolical quasi-autobiographical poem after the fashion of Shelley or of Hugo, concerning the generation, birth and rearing of a by-blow of Amphitrite's." At the same time, however, he writes that he would not "dare claim fellow-sonship to Thetis with Pelides — reared like Ion in the temple-service of Apollo" (1960, 4: 106). This passage already shows the direction in which Swinburne will later develop his personal myth of poetic growth. While he does not find it proper to directly appropriate the son of the sea-goddess Thetis[31] as his mythical *alter ego*, he is still going to elaborate his lifelong fascination

31 Pelides, i.e. Achilles.

with the sea and his preoccupation with the figure of Apollo. The god's central role in Swinburne's private mythology has been pointed out by Yisrael Levin, who writes that the Greek god of light and poetry appears in Swinburne's poems and letters as a prototypical godhead[32] who manifests himself in all the other deities of all times, including the Christian God. More importantly, as the god representing the idea of Logos, Apollo is both the object of worship and the god who enables this worship to take place at all, since he bestows on man the power of speech and, by extension, the poetic and imaginary faculty (2008, 131–132). Thus, in the poem, Swinburne's love of the sea finds expression in the name he chooses for his hero-poet, Thalassius.[33] The name appears to be derived from 'Thalassa,' the Greek word for 'the sea,' but also the name of the mythological primordial personification of the sea. While by making his hero the son of Apollo, Swinburne positions his myth within the already existing framework of classical mythology.

Like many of Swinburne's later poems, "Thalassius" has met with mixed reception and the literary criticism on the poem is rather scarce. The poem has usually been interpreted literally as a "versified biography" of the poet, and it is only recently that critics have started to view it in broader terms as a mythic "portrait of the young artist" (Stuart 118), and "the archetypal pattern of a poet's progress" (Louis 1990, 78). Such a perspective allows for noticing the universal dimension of the story presented in the poem. Other critics, however, charge "Thalassius" with schematism (cf. Walsh 39). While it is true that the poem is based on a formula, the very fact that Swinburne is able to follow it proves that he is aware of a common structure underlying various myths of the same type. In such a comparative archetypal approach to myth he anticipates by some fifty years the findings concerning the structure of the hero myth delineated in Lord Raglan's *The Hero. A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936). Swinburne apparently tries to retain this archetypal

32 In a similar fashion, in "Hertha," a Teutonic earth-goddess becomes for Swinburne the embodiment of the archetypal mother-goddess.

33 www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Thalassa.html.

dimension in his poem in that most of the characters, apart from the eponymous Thalassius and his mother, the nereid Cymothoe, remain nameless. This is particularly striking in the case of the god Apollo, who is instead called "one brighter than the sunbright sphere" (l. 19)[34] and "The live sun's very God" (l. 21).

It is not surprising, then, that the stages of Thalassius's maturation quest may also be seen as corresponding to those of Campbell's monomyth and Frye's archetype of romance. Thaïs E. Morgan observes that "In terms of narrative structure, 'Thalassius' follows what Joseph Campbell has called the archetypal myth of the hero, including his birth (sects. 1–2), education (sects. 3–10), test (sects. 11–19), rescue (sects. 20–21), and apotheosis (sects. 22–23)" (141). In *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Frye describes four basic narrative movements as characteristic of the quest romance, which he relates to the traditional concept of a four-level world, namely, "the descent from a higher world; second, the descent to a lower world; third the ascent from a lower world; and, fourth, the ascent to a higher world" (97). It seems that at least the first three movements can also be identified in the narrative of "Thalassius."

The first, often in the form of the descent from the sky, marks the very beginning of the quest narrative, the birth of the hero, who has two fathers, the real one who is also a god, and a foster-father (Frye 1976, 99). This motif appears at the beginning of Swinburne's poem, as the baby Thalassius is found lying on the shore by "one wandering by the grey-green April sea" (l. 2). The very setting of this encounter reflects the liminal position of the child. Thalassius is neither fully mortal nor godlike; he is placed on the threshold between the sea and the land, in fact "something nearer sea than land" (l. 7). He is presented as "A sun-child whiter than the sunlit snows, / [...] born out of the world of sunless things" (ll. 34–35), and "the sun's child and the sea's" (l. 454), but he is also identified with "the sea-flower" (l. 37) and "the sea-bird" (l. 408).

34 Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from Swinburne's poems are from Leonard M. Findlay's edition, *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987).

These passages emphasise the child's bond with nature, which is also visible in that he is born in early spring, the time traditionally associated with the awakening and renewal in the natural world.

Thalassius is found and subsequently raised by his foster father, who teaches the boy the value of love, hope, liberty and honour. The foster--father is the first of the enigmatic nameless figures in the poem who defy a complete identification with their real-life or mythological counterparts, and in this way comply with the universal generic pattern of the poetic myth. He is portrayed as "A warrior grey with glories more than years" (l. 41) who was "born of man's most highest and heavenliest birth" (l. 39). More significantly, however, he is also

> A singer that in time's and memory's ears
> Should leave such words to sing as all his peers
> Might praise with hallowing heat of rapturous tears
> Till all the days of human flight were fled. (ll. 44–47)

Hence, quite appositely, the mentor of the budding poet is an illustrious poet himself, one whose song will stay with many generations to come. Critics have tended to see in this father figure one of Swinburne's literary predecessors and his personal role models, such as Walter Savage Landor (McGhee 128; Findlay in Swinburne 1987, 265 n), William Blake (McGhee 128) or even John Milton (Wilson 384). His teachings take the form of "the high songs" (l. 63), which he imparts to his young disciple in a solemn tone reminiscent of a religious initiation. Thalassius is fed "For bread with wisdom and with song for wine" (l. 52) and with "Fine honey of song-notes goldener than gold" (l. 55). Such wording likens the young poet's education to receiving the sacrament of Eucharist (cf. Louis 1990, 73–77; McGhee 128).

The next stage of Thalassius's quest consists in another descent as, "clothed with love and fear that love makes great, / And armed with hope and hate" (ll. 244–245), the hero leaves the sheltered world of abstract ideals and embarks on his journey, no longer assisted by his guardian. Instead, he is accompanied by an ambiguous figure of the god of Love,

who at first seems a lovely and helpless child, too shy to speak, yet his true nature manifests itself in certain aspects of his physical appearance. While he may seem "A dumb thing mild and hurtless" (l. 264), there is something in the hard look of his seemingly blind eyes that draws "men's own to mar their sight" (l. 256) and "round his brows the curls were snakes that curled, / And like his tongue a serpent's" (ll. 260–261). When he finally decides to reveal his real self to Thalassius, his slight stature grows to a formidable size resembling that of a tower and "shadowing heaven and lightening hell" (l. 293). When he finally speaks, he introduces himself as the harbinger of sorrow and death.[35]

This disturbing portrayal of Love introduces a sense of underlying menace into the conventional image of Eros as a playful child. As in the case of the hero's nameless foster-father earlier in the poem, the identity of this god of Love has caused many speculations. Following Wilson, Levin goes as far as to identify him with Apollo himself, who is here shown in his destructive aspect (Wilson 388–9; Levin 2008, 135). Indeed, in the poem, he emphasises his absolute control over Thalassius's life as he claims to be "thy lord before thy birth / I am he that is thy lord till thou turn earth" (ll. 298–299). McGhee views Thalassius's encounter with the god of Love as a prelude to the hero's subsequent indulging in unbridled sexuality and passion, to "his plunge into the passionate life, into the life of sensations which will enslave him" (128). In terms of the concept of a mythological universe as consisting of four levels, this would mean the hero's descent from the level of the unfallen world of ideals, represented by the foster-father, into the ordinary world, which yet bears the marks of the lowest level, "the demonic world or hell" (Frye 1976, 98).

The passages describing Thalassius's amatory adventures beside his "dread lady," a *femme fatale* type later associated with the name of Erigone,[36] are dominated by the images of insomnia, restlessness, and

35 Earlier in the poem, death is described as having "sightless-seeming eyes" (l. 73).

36 Leonard M. Findlay provides the following note: "daughter of Icarious, King of Attica, she was loved by Dionysus, who wooed her in the form of a grape-cluster. On discovering her father's murder, she killed herself and was transformed into the constellation

insatiable lust followed by physical exhaustion, which find their reflection in the rage of unnatural phenomena. The hero is roused from his sad musings by the first signs of an impending storm, as if foreboding "some timeless birth, / Intolerable and inevitable" (ll. 320–321), at the coming of which "the wan wide sea shuddered; and earth shook underfoot" (ll. 319–320), while "Heaven, darkling, trembled like a stricken thrall" (l. 322). The unnaturalness of this "shapeless earthly storm of shapes" is further stressed through the repetitions, as "a noise of tempest and a light" (l. 325) is "not of the lightning" (l. 326), the sound is "not of the thunder" (l. 328) and the swiftly passing clouds in the sky are not what they seem to be. The images of revelry that are to follow are introduced with an elaborate simile in which they are likened to the orgies and bloodshed in the decadent Roman Empire. Yet, what is particularly notable in this part of the poem is that even though Thalassius apparently enjoys his time in this Bacchic company, he remains speechless against the clamour of thunders and the shrill of maddening music. These passages mark the nadir of the hero's quest, his descent into the underworld of passion devoid of spirituality. Yet, this seems to be an important stage in the poet's development, the Blakean stage of experience which leads to a higher state of innocence. Wilson observes that "This fiery baptism is, nevertheless, thematically necessary, for it is one step in the poet's progress toward self-fulfillment. Specifically, the poet's awakened passion, albeit objectless, does relieve him of the static emotion of grief" (391).

Thalassius is finally awakened from this nightmarish grip of blind passion by the call from his mother. On "some winter's dawn of some dim year" (l. 412), he suddenly loses interest in the love-making and his company, and turns seawards, where he falls asleep. This passage constitutes the turning point in the whole quest and, as such, is worth quoting here in full:

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of Virgo." Findlay sees her as symbolic of Swinburne's "earlier drunken excesses" (Swinburne 1989, 265n).

> And in his sleep the dun green light was shed
> Heavily round his head
> That through the veil of sea falls fathom-deep,
> Blurred like a lamp's that when the night drops dead
> Dies; and his eyes gat grace of sleep to see
> The deep divine dark dayshine of the sea,
> Dense water-walls and clear dusk water-ways,
> Broad-based, or branching as a sea-flower sprays
> That side or this dividing; and anew
> The glory of all her glories that he knew.
> And in sharp rapture of recovering tears
> He woke on fire with yearnings of old years,
> Pure as one purged of pain that passion bore,
> Ill child of bitter mother; for his own
> Looked laughing toward him from her midsea throne,
> Up toward him there ashore. (ll. 421–436)

The hero's submergence in the sea represents his return to his native element, which allows him to restore the heavenly joy he knew as a child, and thus experience a renewal of creative powers. Louis observes that "the process of union with nature appears, in true Wordsworthian fashion, as the process of recovering one's childhood" (1990, 74). At the same time, Thalassius's turning inwards is a crucial stage in his growth as a poet, as this is where he finally discovers the source of his true song, his own unique poetic voice (cf. Wilson 392). This is achieved as "his own soul's separate sense" (l. 471) is mingled with the song of the sea and so the divisions blur and dissolve until Thalassius himself is "no more a singer, but a song" (l. 474). Thus, unlike in the case of the Romantic poets who, according to Bloom, have to transcend the limits of nature in order to reach their poetic maturity, in Swinburne's poem, nature assists in the widening of the consciousness of the hero and in his achieving full imaginative power.

By employing the image of the sea as a source of regenerating powers, Swinburne touches upon a potent mythical symbol. The sea may be seen as representing the unconscious, a precarious space which may be either lethal or regenerative (Chevalier 837). It is also:

> a place of birth, transformation and rebirth. With its tides, the sea symbolizes a transitory condition between shapeless potentiality and formal reality, an ambivalent situation of uncertainty, doubt and indecision which can end well or ill. Hence the sea is an image simultaneously of death and of life. (Chevalier 838)

This is also very much in accordance with what Frye writes about the descent into the lower world, which may take the form of a submarine world, and which he also sees as "the image of an unconscious which seems paradoxically to forget everything and yet potentially to remember everything" (1976, 148). Moreover, Frye also notes that this kind of descent is often made possible through dreaming (1976, 99).[37] In a similar way, Thalassius reconnects with the sea in his dream, experiences its glory and recovers his youthful purity. Thus, in Swinburne's poem, the second theme of descent, as presented by Frye, has been doubled in that it first appears in its negative aspect, as a descent into hell, and later as a redemptive, regenerative descent into a submarine world where his powers are restored through the reunion with his native element — the sea. In fact, perhaps rather paradoxically, this descent into the sea also brings to mind Frye's final stage of the theme of ascent, the aim of which is the return to the Edenic "world of original identity" (1976, 149).[38]

This period of reaching inner peace through the hero's communion, first with the sea and then "with his own heart" (l. 440), is a necessary preliminary stage to the final recognition and acknowledgement scene in which Apollo claims Thalassius as his son and confers upon him the

37 In this respect, Frye apparently follows Jung, who also views the unconscious as a lower world, "a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins; where I am indivisibly this *and* that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me" (Jung 2000, 21–22).

38 Louis also points to "a pattern of alienation from a primitive state of bliss, and eventual return to a condition which contains that primitive state, but is superior to it in glory and complexity" (1990, 128).

gift of poetry. Again, in these passages, Swinburne employs a language suggestive of the spiritual initiation of the hero. The awaking of his creative power is described as a returning grace, a breath of a gentle wind, which revives in him "father's fire made mortal in his son" (l. 452). Finally, the scene of Apollo's benediction resembles one of epiphany, as the god does not materialise before his son, but his presence is experienced as an abundance of sunlight, which glints through the waves and fills the soul of Thalassius with the sense of the numinous. This religious discourse in the poem has also been noticed by Louis who views the final scene as "a kind of limited apotheosis" of the hero (1990, 75). Yet, Thalassius is not granted immortality in the sense of eternal life; instead, Apollo officially acknowledges in his son the power over the language "To feed men's hearts with visions, truer than truth" (l. 492), and therefore bestows upon Thalassius the gift of "The sound of song that mingles north and south, / The song of all the winds that sing of me, / And in thy soul the sense of all the sea" (ll. 498–500) (cf. Morgan 145). By thus claiming his poetic *alter ego*'s descent from the god Apollo, Swinburne also indirectly establishes his own position as a god-inspired visionary poet.

The quest in Thalassius may be perceived as one for the poet's song. On his way, the young hero is first taught the song of Liberty by his foster-father; next, he ventures into the world on his own, unprotected, and is bewildered with the Bacchic song of the revellers. Eventually, through his reunion with the sea, he not only regains his voice, now powerful with both joy and sorrow he has experienced, but he is infused with the song of nature and himself becomes a song. At this point he is finally ready to face his real father, Apollo, who recognises Thalassius as his son and a true poet. Louis emphasises the importance of all those kinds of song in the formation of the poetic identity of the hero. She observes that "The true Apollonian song" has to be nature poetry, however, "it must also contain and transfigure the republican and the Bacchic songs, uniting principle and passion, deliberation and spontaneity, the artificial and the organic, in one music as large, fluid, and inclusive as the sea" (1990, 131).

After all, it seems that McGann may be right in stressing the role of passion and sensation in Swinburne's poetry. Swinburne's quest is not one of energetic action and direct presentation; rather, the poet almost verges on the obscure in his depiction of the subsequent stages of Thalassius's journey as merging with the descriptions of natural phenomena and the changing seasons of the year. Swinburne works here by means of allusion and suggestion, evoking the mood of the scene through elaborate similes and synaesthesia. A good illustration of such a cross-sensory metaphor may be found in the conception scene where the union of the sun god and the sea is accompanied by "Light heard as music, music seen as light" (l. 31).

McGhee observes that "The lyric poet may make external what is internal, but it might not be too incorrect to say that the visionary poet of 'Thalassius' is making internal what is external" (133). The ambivalence of this comment reflects the dual nature of the quest motif in the poem. On the one hand, it may be seen as the Romantic internalised quest in which the protagonist's aim is to discover his identity as a poet. A similar theme may be found in Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley to name but a few (Bloom 1970, 18–24). On the other hand, however, this process of poetic growth has been externalised, as it were, in that this inner journey has been projected outwards and presented as a mythical narrative. This aspect of the quest in Swinburne's poem has also been noticed by Stuart, who enumerates the Romantic conventional motifs which also appear in "Thalassius": "the movement from fiery purgatory to saving water, the artist's ordination as a priest; a youth's cyclical reawakening to his youth; a youth in search of father and identity" (127). In this respect, Swinburne's poem is most akin to Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, which also employs a mythical narrative to a similar end. Thus, in "Thalassius" Swinburne adapts the already existing mythological structure of the heroic quest myth and the framework of classical mythology in order to create his own myth of the spiritual quest for poetic power.

A similar approach, in which the poet appropriates the mask of a mythical persona as his poetic avatar and creates a narrative to show

the internal process of his poetic growth, may be found in two poems by Alfred Tennyson and William Butler Yeats. Through its title, Tennyson's "Merlin and the Gleam" seems to bear obvious connections with the Arthurian legend, a major literary theme which occupied the Poet Laureate for over forty years. However, this late dramatic monologue, written and published in 1889, is in fact very loosely related to the story presented in the *Idylls of the King*. As the poet himself suggested, "Merlin and the Gleam" should rather be read as a poetic autobiography. In the "Preface" to his *Alfred Tennyson: A Memoir*, Hallam Tennyson recollects his father's aversion to the idea of a formal biography which was instead to be substituted with this very poem (1: xii). He goes on to explain that the figure of Merlin symbolised for the poet "that spirit of poetry," whose magic from the very early years "bade him know his power and follow throughout his work a pure and high ideal, with a simple and single devotedness and a desire to ennoble the life of the world" (1: xii). Yet again, as in the case of Swinburne's "Thalassius" discussed above, attempting to interpret every detail in "Merlin and the Gleam" in the light of the facts from Tennyson's life appears to be somewhat too literal an approach to the poem (cf. Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 1412–1413); and, as Hallam Tennyson notes it elsewhere (2: 126–7), his father was rather reluctant to expound the full meaning of the symbols in his poetry. Therefore, it is probably more rewarding to stay with the poet's own words that "the Gleam" stands for "the higher poetic imagination" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 2: 366), and view the consecutive parts of the poem as representing the stages of its development.

The words spoken by the legendary bard and wizard resemble a hypnotic incantation with which he mesmerises and entrances his auditor. Such a highly enigmatic and elusive tenor of the poem has been created by means of its imagery and metre, with its trochaics and dactylics in two-stress lines resembling the rhythms of Old Welsh and Anglo-Saxon verse (Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 1412). The poem opens with a scene reminiscent of the beginning of S. T. Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," as Merlin reveals his name to an enthralled seafarer:

O young Mariner,
You from the haven
Under the sea-cliff,
You that are watching
The gray Magician
With eyes of wonder,
I am Merlin,
And *I* am dying,
I am Merlin
Who follow The Gleam. (ll. 1–10)[39]

This introductory passage already signals the main points in the poem. The speaking persona asserts his identity as Merlin, "The gray Magician" (l. 5), who is dying and thus addresses his speech to a "young Mariner" (l. 1), one fit for taking over his quest for the Gleam.

Once again, it is possible to interpret the stages presented in Parts II–VIII of the poem within the structural framework of the quest narrative established by Frye. Merlin relays the first call and the teachings of the mysterious Master, the early stages at which the Gleam was freely "Moving to melody" (l. 22) among nature and folk alike, and the momentary discouragement and poetic silencing ("The melody deadened" (l. 32) brought about by some unfavourable voices. Still, "The Master whispered / 'Follow the Gleam'" (ll. 33–34), and so the bard resumes his quest, and the Gleam, ever fleeting, leads him through the woodland and cavern peopled with elves and gnomes, through the idyllic "Pasture and plowland" (l. 54), until, "with a melody / Stronger and statelier" (ll. 62–63), it brings Merlin to Camelot. However, in Part VII, the glorious vision of the city is soon clouded with darkness, and disappears, while the Gleam fades to "a wintry glimmer" (l. 83). This eclipse does not last very long, though; the Gleam re-emerges once again to grow even brighter and fill each "Hamlet and city" (l. 104) with its melody until it finally touches Heaven at the end of Merlin's life. Hallam Tennyson posits a reading of the poem according to which these parts represent the

39 All quotations from Tennyson's poems come from Christopher Ricks's edition of *The Poems of Tennyson* (London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969).

subsequent stages of his father's development as a poet, that is, his early poetry peopled with fairy creatures, the unsympathetic criticism of his work, his renewed inspiration drawn from nature and the rural scenes depicted in his *English Idyls*, his fascination with the Arthurian legend, which was for a time marred by the death of Arthur Hallam, and his renewed faith which stayed with him until the end of his life (1: xii–xv).

Yet, despite these similarities in the structure of the two poems, Tennyson's mythical autobiography significantly differs from Swinburne's "Thalassius." The terseness of the lines in "Merlin and the Gleam," fashioned in the spirit of Welsh riddles, contributes to its heightened allusiveness and symbolism, with each phase of the quest focusing on the fleeting glimpses of the Gleam and the accompanying melody. It is therefore the Gleam, and not Merlin, that is the real protagonist of the poem. The reader is thus presented not with a connected narrative of the bard's becoming a fully-fledged artist, but with a series of ever shifting images, lit up by the Gleam, which present the various sources of the poet's inspiration at different stages of his life.

As has already been suggested, the links with the Arthurian legend in the poem are sketchy and undeveloped. In this way, the Arthur of the poem may stand both for the legendary king who "cannot die" (l. 80) and for the poet's prematurely departed friend, Arthur Hallam, "The king who loved me" (l. 79). It may be argued that also Nimuë, Merlin's infamous beloved, is present in the poem in the form of the Gleam, which was the true meaning behind that figure, as the poet learnt from his perusal of various traditional accounts of the legend (H. Tennyson 2: 366; Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 1412). In this way, Merlin's relentless chasing after the wily and deceitful temptress, also recounted in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, in "Merlin and the Gleam," takes on a new significance, as it now represents the bard's following the poetic call.

"Merlin and the Gleam" is a late poem symbolically retelling the poetic shaping of the ancient poet and magician at a liminal point in his life, the crossing of the last frontier. The "border" is here used in both its physical and metaphorical meanings of the word, as Merlin states that:

And so to the land's
Last limit I came—
And can no longer,
But die rejoicing,
For thro' the Magic
Of Him the Mighty,
Who taught me in childhood,
There on the border
Of boundless Ocean,
And all but in Heaven
Hovers The Gleam. (ll. 109–112)

This is thus his farewell, and a triumphant one at it, since he has finally managed to reach his fleeting vision. This passage may also hint at a possible identity of the mysterious Master; the Mighty Wizard of line 11, who first taught Merlin to follow the Gleam and whose voice has always encouraged him on his way onwards, may be seen as God Himself. Ultimately, the Gleam appears to be the divine spark from Heaven which returns there at the moment of the bard's death. Its supernatural nature is then emphasised in the following triad; the Gleam is "Not of the sunlight, / Not of the moonlight, / Not of the starlight!" (ll. 120–122). And as it is still visible in the sky, Merlin is now only concerned with passing his poetic testament, his lifelong call to follow the Gleam, onto the young Mariner and his companions, so that they will not hesitate to continue his journey beyond the margins of the familiar world.[40]

An even greater conciseness and symbolic encoding of the quest have been achieved in W. B. Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1899). Whereas Swinburne makes his hero a son of Apollo, in his monologue, Yeats assumes the persona of Apollo's Celtic himself, Aengus Óg. In traditional accounts, this Irish god of youth, love and poetry becomes the protagonist of the search for Cáer, a beautiful girl he has seen in his dream and subsequently fallen in love with (MacKillop 17–18).

40 In this respect, the poem clearly echoes Tennyson's earlier "Ulysses," which is discussed in the later part of this chapter.

In Yeats's poem the god also follows a mysterious girl; yet she does not seem to be that particular girl from the myth.

Surprisingly enough, the poem was inspired by a Greek folk song, but, as Yeats observes, "the folk belief of Greece is very like that of Ireland, and I certainly thought, when I wrote it, of Ireland, and of the spirits that are in Ireland" (qtd. in Jeffares 1971, 61). As the poet further explains, the background of the poem was provided by an old man from Galway, who told him the following story:

> One time I was cutting timber over in Inchy, and about eight o'clock one morning, when I got there, I saw a girl picking nuts, with her hair hanging down over her shoulders; brown hair; and she had a good, clean face, and she was tall, and nothing on her head, and her dress no way gaudy, but simple. And when she felt me coming she gathered herself up, and was gone, as if the earth had swallowed her up. And I followed her, and looked for her, but I never could see her again from that day to this, never again. (61)

This episode has served as the starting point for Yeats's highly symbolic mythical narrative of the poetic quest. The poem consists of three stanzas, each presenting a glimpse into the story. In the first stanza the speaker relays how he felt a sudden urge to go into the woods, where he got himself a hazel wand and caught a trout in the stream; in the second, the trout, brought home by the speaking 'I,' mysteriously changes into a girl who then disappears from his sight. In the last stanza, some time has apparently elapsed, as the speaker is weary of his search for the girl he has fallen in love with; yet, he does not lose hope that one day he will eventually find her.

In Yeats's poem, this seemingly simple narrative is rich in allusions to other stories from Celtic mythology. To begin with, both hazel wood and hazelnuts have widespread associations; a hazel wand is often linked with magic and the druidic order. Hazelnuts, on the other hand, are the source of mystic knowledge, and as they drop into the well, they become food for salmon, which then pass the gift onto Celtic heroes, as was the case of Fionn mac Cumhaill, the hero of the *Fenian Cycle* (MacKillop 231, 265–6). In Yeats's poem, the role of the salmon has been taken over

by a trout. Furthermore, the girl's ability to change shape suggests that she belongs to the *sídhe*, the Irish fairies, which is also implied by the "apple blossom in her hair" (l. 14).[41] In Celtic mythology, apples are native to the Otherworlds, the best-known being the Arthurian Avalon, the name of which derives from 'afal' (Old Welsh 'aballon'), the Welsh word for 'apple' (MacKillop 29). In the poem, the speaker wishes to "pluck till time and times are done / The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun" (ll. 22–4). This last image has yet posed some problem to the critics and has been interpreted, in the light of Yeats's interest in the occult, as "the mingling of the solar and the lunar" (Albright in Yeats 1994, 443 n), an alchemical symbol of unity,[42] and a fitting image for the end of the poem.

Thus, as Brijraj Singh observes, Yeats's symbolism does not consist merely in arranging together a set of symbols, the entire poem turns into one integrated symbolic whole (138). In this case, the unifying image is that of the shape-shifting girl, who may be seen, once again, as an embodiment of poetic inspiration every poet is bound to pursue all his life, the Tennysonian Gleam. Its elusiveness has been rendered through the images of fluttering and glimmering and the already mentioned silver colour. As the speaker is fishing, white moths fluttering in the air are as if mirrored by the "moth-like stars […] flickering-out" (l. 6) in the sky. When the trout is brought inside, before the warm glow of the fire, "something rustle[s] on the floor" (l. 11), and the fish turns into "a glimmering girl" (l. 13), who soon vanishes into "the brightening air" (l. 16).

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41 All quotations from Yeats's poems are from Daniel Albright's edition of *The Poems* (London: J. M. Dent, 1994).

42 As Yeats would have known from his occult studies, in alchemy, the union of Sol (the red king) and Luna (the white queen) in the chemical wedding symbolised the combination of sulphur and mercury in the process of obtaining the philosopher's stone, the legendary cure for all diseases. More importantly, the chemical wedding also stood for the healing process of the divided soul on its way to achieving perfect harmony (Abraham, 35–39, 145–148). In this sense, Aengus's longing for the final reunion with the mysterious girl may be interpreted as the longing for making his soul whole again through the fulfilment of love.

The poem is crowned with the final image of unity of silver and gold, the former being the colour of the girl and the supernatural and the latter harking back to the fire in the speaker's head in line 2. Thus, the unity in the poem is of two kinds, both thematic and synaesthetic.

There still appears something incongruous about the figure of the speaker in the poem. After all, why should the god of youth ever grow old as the speaker apparently has done in the third stanza? In fact, he may be identified as the mythological Aengus solely through the title of the poem, and, as Daniel Albright points out in the notes to his edition of Yeats's *Poems*, the earlier one was simply "A Mad Song" (457). This may show that Yeats's original idea was to present a song about a nameless poet figure, especially as it was in turn attributed to another wandering poet, Red Hanrahan, in the 1905 text of Yeats's "Hanrahan's Vision" (458). Red Hanrahan is an important figure in the whole series of *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, where he is portrayed as a folk "king of the poets of the Gael, and a maker of the dreams of men" (Yeats 2003, 36). Gregory Castle perceives him as "closest to embodying the ancient Celtic bard," while he observes that "His quest, by amalgamating elements of Christian tradition, mysticism, and folklore, provides an alternative to the traditional Grail story, with the quasi-legendary, quasi-mystic bard in place of the questing knight" (75). Thus, in "The Song of Wandering Aengus," Yeats creates an *alter ego* of himself as the last folk poet-wanderer to sing the ancient lore of his native land, as Yeats himself apparently wanted to be perceived by his fellow men.

As in Swinburne's "Thalassius," both in Tennyson's "Merlin and the Gleam" and in Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus," the mythical/legendary persona has been adopted as an avatar of the poet. Yet, the myth and legend as such serve only as a pretext for the poet's reflection on the fleeting nature of the poetic vision. The literary techniques the poets use are significantly different. Whereas Swinburne takes a mythical pattern and constructs his own narrative centred on a new mythical figure, the other two poets explore the elements already present in the existing myth/legend and endow them with symbolic and personal

overtones. This is especially marked in Yeats's poem, as the poet expands the meaning behind the images which are already familiar from traditional Celtic accounts of myth and folklore by enriching them with occult symbols. Moreover, unlike Thalassius and Merlin, Aengus is not granted a full command over his poetic vision, and thus it is not the achievement as such but the sense of ever searching that comes to the fore as the main theme of the poem.

Perennial Questers

"Thalassius," "Merlin and the Gleam," and "The Song of Wandering Aengus" all employ the quest motif as symbolic of the process of poetic maturation, which is presented as a complete autobiography. The following two poems, Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Yeats's "Fergus and the Druid" focus on the dichotomy between the private and the public self of the poet. Both poems present an episode related to a particular mythical narrative; both of them, however, are based on a later addition to the myth in question. Since the original story would already be well-known to the public, there was no need to retell it in full, and thus the structure of each of the two poems is compressed to one scene, in this way emphasising the central theme of the journey. I will argue here that the two poems, when considered together with their earlier source texts, create a net of complementary thematic inter-relations.

Tennyson's "Ulysses" (1842) is probably one of the most representative and therefore the most discussed of the Victorian quest poems. This dramatic monologue was also very important to Tennyson himself, as it was written in 1833, "soon after Arthur Hallam's death," and expressed the poet's "feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam*" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 196). The poet assumes here the mask of the Homeric hero, who is delivering a speech to his fellow mariners in order to persuade them to accompany him on one more quest, away from barren Ithaca.

Tennyson's poem is based on Tiresias's prophecy in the *Odyssey*, Book II, according to which, after reaching his home island, the hero is to embark on yet another journey and death will come to him from the sea. The main source of the poem, however, is a later medieval elaboration of this idea, found in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (cf. H. Tennyson 2: 70, 464), where Ulysses is condemned to the eighth Circle of Hell for his excessive cunning. In fact, Dante's hero never reaches Ithaca. Instead, he is ever spurred onwards by "the zeal […] / To explore the world, and search the ways of life" (*Inferno*, Canto XXVI, ll. 96–97),[43] until, in the end, "Tardy with age" (l. 104) he sets out on his last voyage to the west, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and finds his death in a whirlwind shortly before reaching the mount of Purgatory, that is, the terrestrial paradise (Boitani 33). Of particular importance to the Victorian poem are the words with which Dante's Ulysses urges his companions to be courageous and follow him in this last endeavour, since they "were not form'd to live the life of brutes, / But virtue to pursue and knowledge high" (ll. 116–117).[44] Apparently, they also reverberate in the words of the Tennysonian Ulysses when he expresses his desire to "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (ll. 31–32), and later, as he calls his mariners "One equal temper of heroic hearts" (l. 68) and appeals to them "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (l. 70). Thus, it seems that the medieval version furnished the Victorian poet with all the necessary elements for his dramatic monologue. Yet, one crucial difference between the two poems lies in the change in the implied attitude towards the hero's venture. While the Dantean Ulysses is punished with eternal sufferings in hell, his Tennysonian counterpart has been presented in a more positive

43 All quotations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* come from the 1805 translation by H. F. Cary, which was most probably used by Tennyson (cf. Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 560).

44 To Todorov, Dante's Ulysses represents "a perfectly balanced relation between interior and exterior journeys: he moves in space in order to know the world, in particular, human vices and virtues; and he exhorts his companions to follow him since they were not 'made to live like brutes / But to follow both science and virtue' (Canto XXVI)" (65).

light, as an embodiment of the spirit of exploration. In this vein, the poet Aubrey de Vere emphasises the positive message of the poem when he comments that "It shows us what Heroism may be even in old age, though sustained by little except the love of knowledge, and the scorn of sloth" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 505).

Why does this Victorian stance on the poem differ that much from the medieval appraisal of this mythical character? It seems that by the beginning of the Victorian epoch, the quester figure had undergone a significant re-evaluation. A. Dwight Culler observes that "To the medieval mind *curiositas*, the desire to go beyond the limits of what is ordinarily prescribed for man, is a sin, and the Pillars of Hercules were the *ne plus ultra* of the ancient world" (93). He goes on to point out that "Tennyson's task it was to take the narrative of Dante and the spirit of the Renaissance and Romantic age and make Ulysses into a symbol of the eternally restless, the insatiable element in the mind of man" (94).[45] This yearning for ever moving forward is expressed in Ulysses's words that he "will drink / Life to the lees" (ll. 6–7). He perceives the world as constantly beckoning to him and wooing him with the appeal of the unknown: "[...] all experience is an arch where through / Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move" (ll. 19–21).

Just as the protagonists in Morris's poem were searching for the earthly paradise, the hero also mentions reaching the Happy Isles. Yet, unlike in the case of Morris's "Prologue: The Wanderers," this image is not the physical space where one is no longer susceptible to aging and death; in Tennyson's poem this name is evoked as yet another symbol of the beyond, of reaching outside the boundaries of the familiar world.

45 William Bedell Stanford also argues that "Though some touches of despondency return before the poem is ended, what finally triumphs is a mixture of a Dantesque desire for knowledge and the reckless courage of the English sea legends. Dante had seen only danger and distraction as the final fate of Ulysses the explorer. Tennyson, living in a post-Columbian age, familiar with the deeds of English explorer-adventurers from Cabot to Cook, impressed by the expanding power of England's empire and navies, could adopt the Navigator Hero as an emblem of justifiable scientific enterprise and of a commendable pioneering spirit" (204).

However, in so far as this is also the place of the final rest for the illustrious heroes, this means that they may meet there "the great Achilles, whom we knew" (l. 64), and so this may imply that the final boundary for the questers is death. Ulysses is aware of that as he says that his purpose is "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die" (ll. 60–61). Culler sums it up by positing that this voyage, started at twilight, "is a voyage into all that is obscure upon the map, all that is dark and mysterious in the human consciousness, all that is shadowy either in this world or the next. It is certainly a voyage into Death, for all Romantic heroes, from Werther on, have known that this is the ultimate experience" (97). On the contrary, A. A. Markley observes that Ulysses's restlessness may in fact be the sign of his attempt to evade death. To support his view, Markley refers to the lines in the poem which show the hero's will to live one's life on earth to the full, such as "every hour is saved / From that eternal silence, something more / A bringer of new things" (ll. 26–8) and "Death closes all: but something ere the end, / Some work of noble note, may yet be done" (ll. 51–2) (2004, 126). Hence, what Ulysses stresses in the monologue is not the melancholy sense of giving in to the inevitable, which some critics would like to see in the poem, but the affirmation of active life, the conviction that some heroic deeds still wait for him out there to be accomplished.

Ulysses's lofty visions of unfettered freedom and movement have been contrasted in the poem with the image of the island, the symbol of confinement and inertia, which the hero desperately wants to escape. Ithaca, the destination which his Homeric counterpart struggled to reach so relentlessly, in the eyes of Tennyson's Ulysses, presents itself as "this still hearth, among these barren crags" (l. 2). Nor is the picture of his native people particularly favourable; they are "a savage race / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (ll. 4–5), an image which is reminiscent of men turned into beasts on Circe's island. Among these beast-like folk and his "agèd wife" (l. 3), Ulysses finds himself idle and apparently wasting his time. Unlike Tennyson's King Arthur in the *Idylls of the King*, who is firm in his resolve to stay in Camelot and do his duty

when his knights are chasing the visions of the Grail, his Ulysses feels ill at ease in his role of a king and looks back on his past life with nostalgia:

> [...] I am become a name;
> For always roaming with a hungry heart
> Much have I seen and known; cities of men
> And manners, climates, councils, governments,
> Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
> And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
> Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
> I am a part of all that I have met; (ll. 11–18)

Piero Boitani aptly describes this identity crisis of the hero by positing that he "opens up a gap devoid of content and full of questions," thus becoming "a sign devoid of a potentially embodied signifier: a myth open to the future" (104). Hence, as Ulysses has outlived his original myth, he appears to be in need of another one which will help him redefine himself anew. Similarly, the Ulysses story of his final quest which Tennyson found in Homer and Dante also served the poet as an empty signifier that he filled with his own meaning.

Ulysses's pitch, justifying his decision to abandon his family and his royal duties in favour of pursuing a new adventure, has led some critics to read the poem ironically. E. J. Chiasson argues that Ulysses's words should not be read as the views of the poet himself, as they go against the values Tennyson embraces in *In Memoriam* (171). Other critics, however, have shown the ways in which Ulysses's monologue may be seen as the expression of Tennyson's feelings at that particular point of his life. Linda K. Hughes offers an interpretation of the poem in which Ulysses's glorious adventures and travels become a figurative equivalent of Tennyson's and Hallam's journeys in Europe; Ulysses's cry that he has become just a name reflects the poet's apprehension concerning his future poetic career after the publication of the 1832 volume of *Poems*; and the sense of oppression and stagnation that Ulysses experiences so acutely in Ithaca may be read as Tennyson's own feelings about his difficult domestic situation made even worse after Hallam's death (1979, 196–198; 1987, 94).

It is no wonder, then, that the speaker yearns to break free and find a way to move forward. And the best way for the poet to go forward, as adds Dorothy Mermin, is to write new poetry (29). Rudolf F. Storch, on the other hand, reads the dramatic monologue more broadly, in terms of cultural opposition between the poet and the Victorian society, with its pursuit of materialism. As he observes, "The poet accuses his age of not knowing him and forcing him into exile, at the same time that he has reviled his age for being unworthy of his art" (295).[46]

Yet, such an interpretation of the poet's stance seems to be further complicated in the poem by the introduction of the Telemachus figure. Tennyson's Ulysses decides to leave his reign to his son, who he considers to be much better suited for this role. He presents Telemachus to his people as:

> Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
> This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
> A rugged people, and through soft degrees
> Subdue them to the useful and the good.
> Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
> Of common duties, decent not to fail
> In offices of tenderness, and pay
> Meet adoration to my household gods,
> When I am gone. He works his work, I mine. (ll. 35–43)

When discussing this passage, Culler points to the two contrary, but at the same time complementary, ways of life represented by Telemachus and Ulysses, namely "the active and the contemplative," both of which he finds necessary (96). Yet, such a clear-cut categorisation appears to be somewhat problematic in the case of these two mythical characters. While it is true that Ulysses is a visionary, whose craving for new adventures has been fed on his previous experiences, it is difficult to see the hero as "a representative of the contemplative life," whose vision is to be

46 This theme of the poet as a solitary outcast against society will be given more space in the third chapter of the present work.

"translated into reality" by Telemachus (Culler 1977, 96, 97–98). Rather, Ulysses may be regarded as both a dreamer and a man of action. However, it seems that it is both Ulysses and Telemachus that in some way serve as poetic representations of the position of the poet in relation to society. Tennyson's early visionary poetry was soon to be reconciled with the duties of the poet as a public persona who found himself obliged to use his voice to speak out about his country's political and social issues.

Thus, in conclusion, it is worth pointing out that unlike its medieval antecedent, Ulysses's quest in the Victorian poem is a visionary one, a projection the hero makes before his fellow mariners. This has been achieved through the form of the dramatic monologue, which shows the mythical persona at the very moment of delivering his speech, leaving the outcome of the journey potentially open-ended, and allowing for the psychological insight into the speaker's motives. Therefore, Tennyson's poem also marks an important shift in the nature of the quest. It is no longer the goal that is of utmost importance, but rather the very fact of moving forward. As Frye has pointed out in "The Journey as Metaphor," "Tennyson's type of journey, which is frequent in the Romantic period, is a continuous discovery, and any final destination can be only stagnation" (1990, 221).

A similar conflict between a public duty and a private yearning to pursue higher knowledge is the main theme in Yeats's dramatic poem, "Fergus and the Druid" (1893). The eponymous character, Fergus MacRoy, is a mythical hero of the Ulster Cycle, who, in the traditional legend, is cheated out of his reign by his new wife, Nessa, after he has agreed to allow her son, Conchobar mac Nessa, to rule his kingdom for one year (MacKillop 216). But the Fergus of Yeats's poem appears as an altogether different persona, who has given up his crown to his step-son of his own accord, in order to follow the ancient knowledge of the druids.

In shaping his speaking persona, Yeats was influenced by a contemporary retelling of the story in Samuel Ferguson's "The Abdication of Fergus MacRoy" from *Lays of the Western Gael: and Other Poems* (1865). This version was particularly appealing to the younger poet, as it presented

the hero not only as a mythical Celtic king, but also as a poet who has resigned from public duties so that "he might live at peace, hunting in the woods" (qtd. in Yeats 1994, 430n). In fact, this source text displays many similarities with Tennyson's "Ulysses." Fergus perceives himself as:

> [...] but an empty shade,
> Far from life and passion laid;
> Yet does sweet remembrance thrill
> All my shadowy being still. (ll. 33–36)

Like the Greek Ulysses in the Victorian monologue, the Celtic hero finds his reign irksome whereas his real interest lies elsewhere, as he would rather devote his time to wanderings in the wood and composing new songs:

> Rather would I, all alone,
> Care and state behind me thrown,
> Walk the dew through showery gleams
> O'er the meads, or by the streams,
>
> Chanting, as the thoughts might rise,
> Unimagined melodies;
> While with sweetly-pungent smart
> Secret happy tears would start. (ll. 21–28)

Hence, it is with no regret that he finally abdicates in favour of his step-son, Conchobar, whom he presents to his nobles in a way reminiscent of Ulysses's words about his son, Telemachus:

> Conor is of royal blood;
> Fair he is; I trust him good;
> Wise he is we all may say
> Who have heard his words to-day. (ll. 65–68)

Therefore, Ferguson's "The Abdication of Fergus MacRoy" provides all the necessary detail against which to view Yeats's later poem.

As Albright explains, Yeats "found the story of Fergus's abdication useful for defining the competition between the desire to be a poet and the desire to be a man of action" (Yeats 1994, 430 fn). In the poem, this conflict has been embodied by the two contrary standpoints represented by Fergus and the shape-shifting Druid. Fergus finds himself in an uncomfortably intermediary situation; while he is no longer the ruler of Ulster, he still complains that:

> 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 (ll. 17–20)

What ensues is an exchange of arguments in which both speakers try to convince the other party of the other's superior position. The Druid points out to the hero that the life in pursuit of wisdom has rendered him incapable of the active life of the king as warrior and lover. To Fergus, however, "A king is but a foolish labourer / Who wastes his blood to be another's dream" (ll. 27–28).

In the end, the Druid grants the king's wish to teach him "the dreaming wisdom" (l. 23) and gives him "this little bag of dreams" (l. 29), which Fergus promptly unlooses in a scene which strongly resembles the unloosing of Pandora's box, as the outcome proves to be shockingly different from the one that was expected. The king, suddenly immersed in the experience of the Druid, exclaims:

> I see my life go drifting like a river
> From change to change; I have been many things —
> 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 —
> And all these things were wonderful and great;
> But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.
> Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
> Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing! (ll. 31–40)

This passage marks a crucial point of the whole poem, as Fergus is thus being subjected to the shape-shifting state of the Druid he yearned for, which he is yet unable to control. As a result, he finds himself devoid of any sensation but great sorrow, and starts appreciating his former life as a king. Albright comments that the two characters represent two opposing forces, the Druid stands for "the imagination, a formless mother of forms", while Fergus in his role of the king symbolises "the perfected image, shapely and coherent" (Yeats 1994, 432 n). As either cannot enter the state of the other, Fergus here turns into an "annuled poet" (432 n), no longer able either to move forward or turn back to his previous orderly life. Thus, once again, the two states seem to be those the poet has to embrace in his difficult role of both a solitary quester after knowledge and a public figure increasingly engaging in the political life of his country.

When it comes to the use of the quest motif in this poem, it is interesting to notice that it depicts the moment of achieving the goal of the quest, that is, the actual gaining of the experience the character has been searching for. While the speakers in both poems choose to follow the call of their private self over the public one, in the case of Tennyson's poem this means choosing the life of action over the stagnation on the island; however, the choice seems to be the very opposite in the case of Yeats's Fergus, as he retreats into the woods, away from the political life of his country. However, he soon finds himself too weak to face the consequences of his choice. Paradoxically, reaching the goal of his quest leaves him deprived of dreams and hopes.

All the poems discussed in the present chapter employ mythological and legendary themes as their representations of the quest theme. It seems that there is a relation between the structure of the quest and the degree to which a traditional mythical source has been adapted to suit the purposes of the poet. In the case of "Prologue: The Wanderers," where

William Morris draws on the legendary medieval and Renaissance voyages as his subtext to reconstruct a complete new narrative, its meaning is primarily that of a physical quest. In the following three poems by Swinburne, Tennyson and Yeats, the quest motif, partly based on the mythical sources and partly fashioned by the poet, increasingly takes on a spiritual meaning, as the autobiographic narrative is symbolic of the process of poetic growth. The mythical story serves only as a starting point for the poet, so that the personas of the mythical questers are taken out of their original narratives to represent more than just legendary characters, becoming the *alter egos* of the poet. Finally, in the last two poems by Tennyson and Yeats, the quest moves even more in the direction of inner self-discovery on Todorov's axis of interiority. Both Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Yeats's "Fergus and the Druid" only hint at their underlying stories, even though they draw on later, lesser-known versions of the legend. Both poems also represent the inner conflict of the poet between his active and contemplative selves. However, Ulysses appears to combine both visionary and active nature in the projection of his final quest into the unknown, while Fergus finds himself suited for neither of the two roles, as he leaves the throne to his step-son but is not prepared to cope with the knowledge of the Druid.

In all the poems, exploiting myth and legend enables the poet to achieve what Bloom has described as the transcendence of the limiting self in expanding the poet's imagination and his poetic faculty (Bloom 1970, 15). In William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* this means losing oneself in the retellings of old stories and forgetting about the mundane historical here and now of the poet. In Swinburne's "Thalassius," this moment of transcendence constitutes the essential stage in the formation of the poet, presented as losing oneself in the sea, the symbol of the unconscious, and becoming one with the song. In Tennyson and Yeats this enlarging of one's consciousness has been made possible through adopting a mask of a legendary persona. The mask in Tennyson's dramatic monologues allows the poet to explore a given mythical situation while imbuing it with personal colouring, thus showing it as at

the same time personal and universal. This feature of the genre has been also pointed out by Linda K. Hughes in her survey of the development of the dramatic monologue. She follows Robert Langbaum in her remarks that what made the genre so popular in the Victorian epoch was the fact that "it enabled the Victorians both to follow the Romantics in seeking truth within a subjective realm and to distance themselves from the subjective 'I' through a more objective poetry" (1987, 5). This technique displays several affinities with Yeats's theory of the mask, which he developed much later in the course of his literary career. This theory finds its expression in the dramatic quality of the later poems, often in the form of a dialogue between two characters presenting two opposing views of the poet himself. However, it is possible to trace its roots already in his early poems in which the speaker adopts a mask of a mythical Celtic quester. These poems are also excellent illustrations of the poet's attempts to use the native Irish legends as sources for original literary work, the stance which Yeats also propagated in his numerous essays and articles.

CHAPTER TWO

The Otherworlds

The motif of the mythical Otherworlds may be seen as both thematically complementary and antithetical to that of the quest. While the latter embodies the need of ever moving forward in the pursuit of some goal, the former often represents the state of the paralysis of the spirit. The two motifs are thus related in many significant ways. In the first place, as is the case in Morris's "Prologue: the Wanderers," reaching the earthly paradise may be the main purpose of the quest. In a somewhat similar fashion, the Isle of the Blessed appears in Tennyson's "Ulysses" as an imaginary destination of his journey into the night. In both poems, these paradisal spaces are connected with the characters' yearning to escape the mundane, to get away from reality. Yet, it seems that the Otherworlds can only be reached at the invitation from one of its inhabitants. Moreover, the Islands of the Blessed, while luring the protagonists with the promise of idyllic life, eternal youth and immortality, more often than not turn out to be disillusioning. Such a close connection between the two motifs may also be illustrated by two Old and Middle Irish narrative types concerned with a voyage to the Otherworlds, the *Echtra* and the *Imram* (MacKillop 168, 270).

On the other hand, some protagonists find themselves in the Otherworlds as if accidentally, without any previous intention to reach them.

In such cases, the supernatural realm can prove to be a serious obstacle to the quest, not only due to its specific spatio-temporal conditions, but also because of the psychological influence it gradually exerts upon those who spend some time within its bounds. As a result, the seeker is diverted from his course and loses the sense of time, while the life he has led before gradually becomes blurred and unreal. In this respect, the Otherworlds may be seen as the very opposite of the idea of the quest with its change and progress. At the same time, however, a visit in the Otherworlds may mark a crucial stage of the quest, in which the hero undergoes a series of character-forming trials and gains a proper vantage point from which to view the reality after his return.[47]

Whether intentional or not, the flight to the Otherworlds may be seen as the symbol *par excellence* of escapist tendencies in the nineteenth-century literature. The escape into the Otherworlds may also be read as a withdrawal of the artist into the realm of art. Therefore, the ways in which this motif has been presented in the poems of Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris and Yeats under discussion in this chapter may shed light on each poet's views on the relation (or lack thereof) between art and society with its social and political concerns. Yet, before moving on to a detailed analysis of the motif in the particular poems, let us first take a cursory look at its representations in traditional and literary sources.

47 Joseph Campbell equals the otherworldly spaces with the hero's unconscious and points out that "This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight" (58).

The Chronotopes[48] of the Otherworlds

The recurrence of the Otherworlds theme in world mythologies and legends may be interpreted as reflecting the universal dream of humanity to regain the mythical Golden Age, the original ideal state without evil and death. In many cases this paradisal land has not been lost beyond hope of recovery, it is only the access to this land that has been limited to the truly exceptional individuals. Thus, this realm often manifests itself as the intrusion of a supernatural, timeless dimension into the common world of mortals. Such a concept of the otherworldly earthly paradise is embodied in the mythical Greek islands situated in the West, beyond the known world, such as Atlantis, the Island of the Hesperides or the Islands of the Blessed.[49] In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, this is the final abode of the most illustrious Greek heroes, who are transferred to the Islands while still living:

> And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them; for the father of men and gods released him from his bonds. And these last equally have honour and glory. (15)

Thus, Cronos, the Titan-King of the mythical Golden Age, after being dethroned by his son, becomes the ruler of the Islands of the Blessed. In this way, the notion of paradise is transferred from a temporal to spatial dimension, from the beginnings of time, *in illo tempore*, to use Mircea Eliade's term (1963, 11), to a distant realm which exists contemporaneously with the present.

48 In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin appropriates the term 'chronotope' from relativity theory to discuss "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84).

49 My discussion of the classical Islands of the Blessed is greatly indebted to the entries on 'Elysium' and 'Fortunatae/Fortunorum Isolae' in Smith (1996, 156, 170) as well as the entry on the 'Realm of Elysion' at Theoi.com (www.theoi.com/Kosmos/Elysion.html).

In other classical writers the Fortunate Islands are known as the Elysian fields. In Homer's *Odyssey*, it is the latter name that is used for the paradisal realm in the West ruled by Radamanthys, where Menelaos is destined to pass the rest of his days among other heroes. The place is presented in Book IV as one protected from snow, tempests and thunderstorms. Roman writers, on the other hand, saw Elysium as part of the fields of Hades, situated beyond the river Lethe and reserved for all the virtuous dead. This is where Aeneas is led to meet his father Anchises in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> [...] they came to a land of joy, the pleasant lawns and happy seats of the Blissful Groves. Here an ampler ether clothes the meads with roseate light, and they know their own sun, and stars of their own. Some disport their limbs on the grassy wrestling ground, vie in sports, and grapple on the yellow sand; some tread the rhythm of a dance and chant songs. There, too, the long-robed Thracian priest [Orpheus] matches their measures with the seven clear notes, striking the lyre now with his fingers, now with his ivory quill. (577)

Other illustrious inhabitants of Elysium continue to pursue their favourite pastimes, no longer troubled by the cares of earthly life:

> The same pride in chariot and arms that was theirs in life, the same care in keeping sleek steeds, attends them now that they are hidden beneath the earth. Others he sees, to right and left, feasting on the sward, and chanting in chorus a joyous paean within a fragrant laurel grove, from where the full flood of the Eridanus rolls upward through the forest.
>
> Here is the band of those who suffered wounds, fighting for their country; those who in lifetime were priests and pure, good bards, whose songs were meet for Phoebus; or they who ennobled life by arts discovered and they who by service have won remembrance among men — the brows of all bound with headbands white as snow. (579)

As the notion of reincarnation was gaining popularity, the two realms merged into one so that the Islands of the Blessed were viewed as the higher Elysium, the final place of advancement for those exceptional

mortals who had already merited a pass to the Elysian fields three times before (Pindar 16).

Later ancient geographers and historians attempted to show that the Islands of the Blessed were in fact real islands of particularly favourable conditions, situated in the west, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, in the Atlantic Ocean (Smith 170). However, their attempts to provide geographical whereabouts of the Islands of the Blessed may also be read as an indication that in the minds of the ancient people the possibility of reaching those lands was not altogether out of the question. This notion finds its parallel in the medieval way of thinking about Eden and Hell as actual geographical locations, the former situated in the East and the latter in the West or in the North (cf. Lotman 172; Woodward 513).

Not surprisingly, the idea of a paradisal realm was also popular in the literature of the period. In his *Memories and Visions of Paradise*, Richard Heinberg points out that "In romance, allegory, and didactic treatises, medieval imagination again and again attempted a description of either an earthly or an otherworldly garden of delight filled with fountains and fruit-laden trees, sweet-songed birds and pavilions decked with flowers, crystals, and jewels" (134). Medieval accounts of terrestrial paradises constitute an intriguing mixture of pagan lore and Christian belief, in which local legends of Otherworlds from various regions are often recast and re-evaluated through the lens of a Christian viewpoint. Many narratives follow the common pattern in which a mortal, be it a knight, an explorer or even a saint, finds the way or is transported to a realm of everlasting youth, abundance and merriment, where he is entertained by the fairy inhabitants of the land.

In Celtic legends, the Irish monk Saint Brendan of Clonfert, and the Irish heroes Oisín, Bran and Mael Duin all travel to the Irish Fortunate Islands, which appear under various names, such as *Tír na mBan* (the Land of Women), *Tír na nÓg* (the Land of Youth), *Tír na mBeo* (the Land of the Living) and *Tír Tairngire* (the Land of Promise). These Celtic Islands of the Blessed were believed to be "settled by the semi-divine Tuatha Dé Danann, after their defeat by the mortal Milesians" (MacKillop 405) and,

like their Greek counterparts, were situated in the western ocean. This was also the traditional location of the Celtic Elysium, Avalon, the Island of Apples, where both the wounded King Arthur and Ogier the Dane were carried by Morgan le Fay after their final battles. However, according to another popular belief, Avalon was identified with Glastonbury. This concept of the Otherworld as situated in a different dimension yet sharing the same geographical location with a place in the world of mortals has been common in Irish folklore, where the Fairyland can be found under the fairy mounds (*sídhe*[50]), in caves, ruined castles, raths or at the bottom of the lakes (MacKillop 200, 359). The belief that an unlucky mortal may stumble into the realm of the fairy by accidentally crossing their paths prevailed in western Ireland late into the nineteenth century and was recorded by both W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. The borders between the mortal world and the supernatural Fairyland were believed to disappear on the most important pre-Christian festive day, Samain, held on 1 November, the date which marked the turn of the Celtic year (MacKillop 377–378).

According to another medieval tradition, the Otherworld appeared as a pagan bower of bliss, ruled over by a fairy temptress, a medieval version of the Greek enchantress, Circe. In the German legend of Venusberg, the realm is accessed through a deep cave in the mount of Horselberg. Unlike in the Celtic tales, it is presented in strongly deprecatory terms, as a heathenish kingdom of unbridled love, and thus as a trap for Christian knights. In a similar fashion, in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser employs mythological Otherworlds as places of temptation, which serve to test the virtue of temperance in its main protagonist, the fairy knight Guyon. The central image of the Book, Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, is another representation of the island of Circe, where the false enchantress keeps her enthralled lovers in an idyllic garden, while her former victims, turned into despicable monsters, guard the passage to her abode. A much more ambivalent rendition of the same motif may

50 By extension, the term has also been commonly used to denote their fairy inhabitants.

also be found in John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Here, the intentions of the fairy remain unexplained and the whole account of the knight's visit to "her elfin grot" (l. 29) appears to be a dream vision the confused knight has dreamt "On the cold hillside" (l. 36).

In Romantic poetry, the legendary realms are internalised as dreamlands that are accessible only to the mythological *alter ego* of the poet. Again, this is particularly the case in Keats's epics where he elaborates the images of classical Greek Otherworlds to create spaces for his heroes' journeys into the unconscious. In his early *Endymion*, the protagonist descends through a cave into the Underworld which yet does not resemble the gloomy realm of Hades. Instead, Endymion passes through a maze of fantastic grottos, deep abysses, streams and ridges, a strange region of "One faint eternal eventide of gems" (Bk. II, l. 225). On his way, he comes across the temple of Diana and the Bower of Adonis,[51] which may be read as the signs of his future union with his beloved Cynthia, the moon goddess. Both images, a temple and a pastoral vale, also reappear in Keats's fragmentary *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. In his potion-induced dream, the poet-to-be is granted a vision of a temple in which the priestess Moneta reveals to him the image of the last remnants of what used to be the Golden Age and its once glorious ruler, Saturn, now bent with sorrow and imprisoned in "this eternal quietude" and "the unchanging gloom" of the Vale (Canto I, ll. 390, 391).

In Keats's later works, the mythical Otherworlds are replaced by the timeless realm of visionary experience and art, which, once again, plays an important role in the transformation of the dreamer into a true poet. Yet, the poet's attitude to the dichotomy between this visionary world and the world of mortality and mutability at times appears ambivalent.

51 Cf. Stuart M. Sperry points out that "Keats may have sought, as some critics have argued, to suggest in the Bower of Adonis the kind of apotheosis he intended for his hero. With its accumulated store of cream and ripened fruit where the sleeper dreams of his coming joys with Venus, the Bower represents that perfectly self-contained world of sensuous and imaginative experience for which Endymion longs, idealized beyond all threat of interruption. The sleeping Adonis resembles, as much as anything, the infant, in the womb or cradle, whose every need is satisfied" (50).

On the one hand, as in "Ode to a Nightingale," the bird's nocturnal song allows the speaker to forget "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" (l. 23) of everyday life, and fly away "on the viewless wings of Poesy" (l. 33). In this timeless moment, the poet is united with all the other listeners of the song across the ages, both real and legendary. While his senses are dulled with "a drowsy numbness" (l. 1), his inner perception opens up on to the "embalmed darkness" (l. 43) of the night. This fleeting otherworld of vision is counterbalanced with the world of timeless art in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The mystery surrounding the scenes from the times long past again arouses the poet's imagination and the unheard melodies of the piper appeal not to the physical ear but to the transcendental spirit of the speaker. The lovers are immortalised as young and happy, they will never be affected by the passing of time, sorrow or death. Yet, at the same time, their actions will never be completed and their desires never fulfilled. Thus, in the final stanza, the urn is called a "silent form" (l. 44), "Cold Pastoral" (l. 45), which, as Paul Wright points out, "captures the tension of the urn: it suggests the warmth of pastoral or idealised country scenes, and the coldness of static art" (Keats 2001, 483 n). The world of art is presented as both immortal and inhumane.

The Otherworlds, Escapism and Art for Art's Sake

Keats's poetry, with its flights into the world of imagination and sensations, is an important point of departure for the discussion of the poetry of Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris and Yeats in that it anticipates the nineteenth-century escapism, which is present in the early poetry of all the four above-mentioned poets. In so far as the recurrent theme in the nineteenth-century poems on the Otherworlds is the detachment from the world of everyday life and its concerns, whether moral, social or political, they may also be seen as connected to the aesthetic movement and its principle of art for art's sake. The latter term was first introduced in English literature by Swinburne in his *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868).

In a statement which may be read as his poetic manifesto and another response to the scathing criticism he had received upon the publication of his first volume of *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, he states:

> Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her (or if not she need hardly be overmuch concerned); but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be taken away even that which he has — whatever of capacity for doing well in either way he may have at starting. (91)

As can be seen in the above-quoted passage, the main idea behind art for art's sake is to liberate art from its moral or any other external obligations. While Swinburne does not negate the possibility of art carrying a moral message, he stresses its aesthetic aspect as the more important of the two and in this way justifies an artistic representation of topics which may be considered repulsive or in any other way inappropriate for high art. As he puts it elsewhere, art should be judged on its own terms only, when this fails, no high purpose can redeem it (Swinburne 1875, 41).

The concept of art for art's sake met with disapproval from Tennyson, Morris and Yeats. Yet, it seems that some aspects of aestheticism inform their works at the early stage of their respective poetic careers. In his famous review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, published in *Englishman's Magazine* for August, 1831, Arthur Hallam shows the fledging poet as a representative of the Poets of Sensation, with his important predecessors being Shelley and Keats, whose poetry is first and foremost concerned with a harmonious embodiment of beauty. He presents this kind of poetry as superior to that of reflective thought exemplified by Wordsworth, in which the poetic image is subordinated to the philosophical idea it is supposed to illustrate. As Hallam explains, "Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied, during its periods of creation, by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art" (Jump 35). In other words, Hallam apparently restates here the Keatsian notion of beauty as the only truth in art. Moreover, Culler points to the heightened trance-inducing musicality of Tennyson's poetry as one

of its most characteristic features (Culler 4–5). Thus, it may be argued that Tennyson's early poetry anticipates quite a few important concepts later associated with the idea of art for art's sake.

Such an attitude to art in Tennyson is yet soon abandoned. Urged by his other critics,[52] and himself very much interested in the most important issues of the day, he turns in his later poems to the moral, social and political concerns of his epoch. In fact, this change in his views on the relationship between art and life is so profound that the slogan of art for art's sake provokes the Laureate to declare:

> Art for Art's sake! Hail, truest Lord of Hell!
> Hail Genius, blaster of the Moral Will!
> "The filthiest of all paintings painted well
> Is mightier than the purest painted ill!"
> Yes, mightier than the purest painted well,
> So prone are we toward the broad way to Hell. (qtd. in H. Tennyson 2: 92)[53]

Tennyson apparently suggests here that focusing on the alluring beauty of immoral topics, chosen over the moral ones by the advocates of art

52 In his otherwise positive review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) in *Westminster Review* (January 1831), William Johnson Fox observes that "A genuine poet has deep responsibilities to his country and the world, to the present and future generations, to earth and heaven. He, of all men, should have distinct and worthy objects before him, and consecrate himself to their promotion" (Jump 32). In another review, which appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (May 1832), Christopher North dismisses Tennyson's poetry by claiming that "At present he has small power over the common feelings and thoughts of men. His feebleness is distressing at all times when he makes an appeal to their ordinary sympathies. [...] What all the human race see and feel, he seems to think cannot be poetical; he is not aware of the transcendent and eternal grandeur of common-place and all-time truths, which are the staple of all poetry" (Jump 52).

53 The posthumous publication of this epigram in Hallam Tennyson's *Alfred Tennyson: A Memoir* (1897) provoked an embittered remark from Swinburne, in which the younger poet points out that "whenever Tennyson himself was not serving this lord of hell, the law which compels every artist to do his very best in his own line, and not allow the very noblest intention or instinct or emotion to deflect or distort or pervert his hand, he drivelled: he drivelled as pitifully as in this idiotic eructation of doggrel [sic]" (Hyder 1943, 233).

for art's sake, leads to moral degeneration and the fall of ethics in art. His repudiation of the credo of aestheticism might have sounded the more caustic as it involved ideas which the Laureate himself had by this time reluctantly rejected (Findlay 1971, 224). Moreover, Jerome Hamilton Buckley points out that the reason behind such a hostile reaction from the poet was that Tennyson found the idea of art for art's sake dangerous for the integrity of contemporary culture: "in the late sixties each separate department of knowledge, including art, seemed to be losing its sense of the social enterprise as a spiritual and moral whole and affirming instead the inhuman self-sufficiency of its own technical discipline" (165). Still, yet another reason for Tennyson's angry reaction to art for art's sake may be found in the immediate context of writing the epigram quoted above. As his son observes, it was composed in direct response to the negative criticism concerning the moral message of the new *Idylls of the King*, which had just been published in the 1869 volume (2: 91–92).

It was also William Morris who shared the Victorian belief that art should be socially useful and, in his case, available to all. In opposing art for art's sake, Morris mainly objects to Swinburne's remark that "the sacramental elements of art and poetry are in no wise given for the sustenance or the salvation of men in general, but reserved mainly for the sublime profit and intense pleasure of an elect body or church" (1868, 36). Thus, he rejects Swinburne's view on art on the grounds of its exclusivity, and instead propagates equal and democratic access to all arts:

> I do not believe in the possibility of keeping art vigorously alive by the action, however energetic, of a few groups of specially gifted men and their small circle of admirers amidst a general public incapable of understanding and enjoying their work. I hold firmly to the opinion that all worthy schools of art must be in the future, as they have been in the past, the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life. And further, that now that democracy is building up a new order, which is slowly emerging from the confusion of the commercial period, these aspirations of the people towards beauty can only be born from a condition of practical equality of economical condition amongst the whole population. ("The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle" [1893] qtd. in Mackail 1899, 2: 296)

In the same passage, however, Morris asserts that the purpose of art is the expression of "the beauty and true pleasure of life." In view of his dismissive attitude to the whole discussion around art for art's sake (Thompson 668), it is perhaps rather ironic that Walter Pater found Morris's works to be the perfect example of aesthetic poetry. In his review, which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in October 1868,[54] the critic praises Morris's medievalism for its intensity of sensuous detail, its detachment from the modern world, and its dreamlike atmosphere. For Pater, *The Earthly Paradise* is the very embodiment of the idea that the formal beauty in art may be an end in itself.

It seems that in the poetic theory of William Butler Yeats, the history of the nineteenth-century aestheticism has turned full circle.[55] He revolts against the poetry of his nineteenth-century predecessors, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, which he finds overburdened with science, politics, philosophy and ethics (cf. 1976, 39). In his "Introduction" to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats observes that:

> The revolt against Victorianism meant to the young poet a revolt against irrelevant descriptions of nature, the scientific and moral discursiveness of *In Memoriam* [...] the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Browning, and the poetical diction of everybody. (ix)

Instead, when discussing his early poetry, he points to the influence of the philosophy of Walter Pater (1980, 302) and, more unexpectedly, to the poetic theory advocated by Arthur Hallam in his essay on Tennyson's first poems (1971, 347), which has been discussed above. However, despite his participation in the meetings of the Rhymers' Club, Yeats is not completely on the side of aestheticism either. In "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature" (1892), he is critical of the idea of art as autotelic

54 The review, revised and entitled "Aesthetic Poetry," was later included in Pater's *Appreciations* (1889), while its final part became the famous 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* (1873).

55 My discussion of Yeats's notions about poetry is partly based on Singh (1978, 106–141).

and completely divorced from the concerns of modern life. He considers such an approach to be inadequate for the role poetry should play in the Ireland of his time, where it should be related to the national cause and based on Irish heroic themes. He thus finds himself in between two extremes represented by the decadent notion of art as an end in itself, which was popular in the English circles at the time, and the lack of concern for the poetic form that he observed in his Irish contemporaries (1970, 248–250).

Yeats's stance on art for art's sake is still more ambivalent in that he appears to endorse some of its main ideas concerning the nature of poetry in his own theory and verse. One of these ideas is reflected in his view of art as occult and discernible only to the circle of elects possessing enough background knowledge to disentangle its hidden message, which he expounds in his essay titled "What is 'Popular Poetry'?" (1901). Moreover, in "The Autumn of the Body" (1898), Yeats sees the future role of the arts as those that are about "to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things" (1971, 193). Thus, poetry is supposed to be the expression of intense moments, fleeting moods embodied in symbolic language. As he elaborates on the idea in "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), these moments may be rendered by a unique combination of sounds, colours and forms, constituting an image which then invokes in the reader a particular emotion. In the same essay, Yeats further remarks that these moments of insight may be prolonged when one gives in to the influence of hypnotic rhythm:

> The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. (1971, 159)

Hence, Yeats's idea of poetic trance evokes not only Swinburne's hypnotising cadences, but also Tennyson's preoccupation with the trance-inducing

quality of certain sounds that he discovered in his boyhood,[56] and, further back in time, the poet's self-abandonment in the waking dream or vision brought by the unearthly song of the bird in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

The four poets' changing attitudes to aestheticism are thus an important part of their views on the place and role of art in society. The remaining part of the present chapter will be concerned with the ways in which these notions have been reflected in their poetic representations of the mythical Otherworlds: the Greek otherworldly realms in Tennyson and Swinburne, the terrestrial paradises in Morris, and the Celtic Islands of the Blessed in Morris, Tennyson and Yeats.

Greek Otherworlds: The Land of Oblivion

In their early poetry, both Tennyson and Swinburne employ the images of Greek Otherworlds to portray spaces that are of particular significance to the poet. Moreover, in both cases, these mythical realms serve as metaphorical representations of mental states of the speakers in the poems. The differing attitudes of the two poets to aestheticism and escapism in poetry discussed above influence the ways these imaginary spaces are represented in the following poems. While in Tennyson the magical islands are of precarious nature, and should not be approached by those unprepared, Swinburne's Otherworlds bear much more positive connotations as places of refuge and repose, before an important change may be effected in the poet.

56 "A kind of waking trance I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me thro' repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 320).

Before moving on to the analysis of the role of mythical islands in Tennyson's early poems, it is worthwhile to take a look at how the shift in Tennyson's attitude to aesthetic detachment may be seen in the changing representations of the secluded abode of the artist in other poems which appear in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and *Poems* (1832). In "The Poet's Mind" (1830), such an abode is the sacred fertile vale of the poet's mind that should be guarded against the unwanted intrusion of the rationalist, who is too shallow and dull to be able to share this world with him. A similar image of an isolated space in which the personification of the artist fully devotes herself to her artistic activities and contemplation of beauty also reappears in "The Palace of Art" and "The Lady of Shalott" from *Poems* (1832). Both the poet's Soul and the Lady are separated from the world outside and the life of community in their respective palace and towers on a magical island. However, such a detached contemplative attitude to life, whether voluntary or not, in the end proves to be insufficient. As has been recorded in the *Memoir*, Tennyson wrote "The Palace of Art" as a response to his friend's remark, "Tennyson, we cannot live in art" (1: 118), and thus it expresses the poet's negative view on the separation of merely aesthetic function of art from its other obligations towards society. This intent was clear to his contemporaries. Aubrey de Vere summed up the import of the poem as "the danger resulting from that 'Art Heresy' of modern times, which substitutes the worship of Art for its own sake in place of that reverence which man should feel for it, only when it knows its place, and is content to minister at the altars of Powers greater than itself, viz. Nature and Religion" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 505). In fact, in both "The Palace of Art" and "The Lady of Shalott," where the main theme is the relation of the artist to the world, the confrontation with reality is ultimately inevitable, albeit painful or, in the case of the Lady, even fatal.

Thus, it seems that *Poems* (1832) marks a significant change in the poet's ideas on art and society. The spaces of aesthetic refuge have been presented in a negative way to show that the Romantic visionary-poet is no longer adequate since a true Victorian artist has to participate in the

life of his fellow men. However, Tennyson's stance on the place of art in society is much more ambivalent in his two poems on classical themes from this volume, "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters." Both poems draw on the representations of magical islands from Greek mythology to create a dichotomy between the static world of sensuous beauty and the world of action. Still, the choice between those two that is implied in these poems is far less straightforward than is the case in the other two poems from *Poems* (1832) mentioned above.[57]

After its first publication, "The Hesperides" was withdrawn from further editions by the poet, probably due to the criticism the poem received in the reviews (Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 423), until it was reprinted in Hallam Tennyson's *A Memoir* (1897). In his headnote to "The Hesperides," Ricks suggests various sources for the poem, the most likely of which being *The Voyage of Hanno* translated by Thomas Falconer (1797). On the other hand, in his in-depth analysis of the poem, G. Robert Stange also draws the reader's attention to Hesiod's *Theogony* as a possible source of all the essential elements in the story and to the epigraph from Milton's *Comus*. This fusion of various sources is characteristic of Tennyson's approach to the mythical stories, as he uses classical material to create his own imaginative work (733–734).

While overtly Greek, the story about the western garden, where the Hesperides, Hesperus and the dragon guard the sacred tree with golden apples, lest their secret wisdom be revealed to the world, bears strong connotations with the Biblical story of the Fall of Man. Just as Adam and Eve on eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil learn of the matters they are not ready to comprehend, so, in Tennyson's poem, "If the golden apple be taken / The world will be overwise" (ll. 63–64). The consequences of the stealing of the golden apples are further elaborated in Part III of the poem:

57 The following analysis of "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters" was published by me in 2015 as "Alfred Tennyson's Visions of the Otherworlds and the Vocation of the Poet."

> Lest the old wound of the world be healèd,
> The glory unsealèd,
> The golden apple stolen away,
> And the ancient secret revealèd. (ll. 69–72)

What exactly is the meaning of this "ancient secret"? And why is it not to be "preached abroad" that "Five and three / [...] make an awful mystery" (ll. 28–29)? Christine Gallant looks for an explanation in symbolic numerology of Pythagoreanism of the fifth century BC: "The numbers represent the unity of the elements in the garden (the Three Sisters, the dragon, and Hesper) and of the cosmos, symbolizing the elements of the Sisters' self-contained universe just as numbers for the Pythagoreans symbolized the orderly harmony of the cosmos" (157). However, Stange offers a different interpretation, which seems to be much more in tune with Tennyson's views on art at the time of writing the poem. Namely, he sees "The Hesperides" as an allegory of poetic creation and explains the links between the Three Sisters, the golden apples and the root of the tree as "a figure of the connection among the artist, his art, and his inspiration" (732, 735). Thus, the poem becomes a statement of the aesthetic approach to Art, where the artist remains isolated from the external world and guards the source of his poetic inspiration against unwelcome intruders from the East.

The opposition between the East and the West, the morning and the evening, is especially underlined in the final parts of the poem. Unlike the Biblical Eden, which has been located in the East, but in accordance with the traditional depictions of the mythological Islands of the Blessed, the island of the Hesperides lies in the West, off the African coast. Moreover, as we learn from the song, "Hesper hateth Phosphor, evening hateth morn" (l. 82). The apple tree has to be sheltered from "the cool east light" (l. 97), and it is twilight that appears to be the most congenial time for the growth of the golden fruit, which then becomes "Holy and bright, round and full, bright and blest" (l. 93).

With the motif of a paradisal garden sheltering the sacred poetic wisdom here embodied by the golden apples we seem to be back in the

secluded realm of "The Poet's Mind." Yet, it appears that the position of the poet has changed. As is also implied in "The Lotos-Eaters" and the later "Ulysses," the poet has now taken on the role of a restless quester, and as such, may be identified with the adventurous Hanno (cf. Culler 51). He is no longer the lord, nor even an inhabitant, of the garden of Hesperides. Instead, he is an accidental overhearer of the song of Sisters three, a privilege he is granted for his boldness to reach out beyond the margins of the familiar world. The introduction of Hanno, a Carthaginian explorer of the fifth century BC, results in the merging of the mythical and the historical dimensions. The mythical island does not simply appear to a hero in a mythical narrative but seems to be a remnant of a mythical past which intrudes into the historical times. While Hanno belongs to the real world, with its natural passing of time, the time on the western island seems to be suspended and, at this point, the arrival of Heracles to steal the apples is only a dim foreboding of the future events. As the Sisters emphasise it twice in their song, the wars and conflicts of the real world never affect the quiet of the sacred garden: "The world is wasted with fire and sword, / But the apple of gold hangs over the sea" (ll. 104–105).

The suspension of time is matched on the one hand with an unusual stillness and calm which precede the introduction of the song, and the laziness and lack of movement on the magical island itself on the other. The voices of the Three Sisters come to Hanno "like the voices in a dream" (l. 12), while the other sounds from the shore are suppressed and everything around seems to be extraordinarily peaceful. Peace also pervades the song itself as the Hesperides sing of the tropical evening on their island:

> Round about all is mute,
> As the snowfield on the mountain-peaks,
> As the sandfield at the mountain-foot.
> Crocodiles in briny creeks
> Sleep and stir not: all is mute. (ll. 18–22)

Yet, Hanno never reaches this paradisal land. The proem only relays how he has been temporarily hypnotised by the song of the Hesperides on

his way to explore unknown lands. Markley observes that "As Hanno sails away it seems that he is missing the point of the Hesperides' song, which emphasizes beauty in mystery — art and culture — in contrast to the relentless search for other treasures" (2004, 58). Yet, this accusation appears to be somewhat untenable. Since Hanno's is not the life of artistic contemplation, he should not venture into the sacred isle of the Hesperides; he may only learn about this realm accidentally, from the echoes of the Sisters' song. Hence, the role of the Sisters seems to be twofold; on the level of the story, they sing to prevent themselves, Father Hesper, and the dragon from falling asleep and neglecting their duty, while on the level of the structure, their song is the only means by which the otherworldly island is recreated in the poem.

A song about the purpose and nature of singing, it may be considered a pure expression of the self-referentiality of art, one of the key concepts of the later art for art's sake (cf. McSweeney 1981, 46). The incantatory, enchanting nature of the Sisters' song has been achieved by means of repetitions: "The golden apple, the golden apple, the hallowed fruit" (l. 14, 112), irregular rhyming patterns: "Guard it well, guard it warily, / Watch it warily, / Singing airily (ll. 113–115), and sensuous Keatsian imagery: "The luscious fruitage clustereth mellowly, / Goldenkernelled, goldencored, / Sunset-ripened above on the tree" (ll. 101–103).

An even more ambiguous portrayal of an escapist, detached attitude to life can be found in "The Lotos-Eaters," another poem about an enchanted island from Greek mythology. Its theme is based on a brief episode from the *Odyssey* (Bk. IX, 82–104) in which Odysseus and his companions reach the island of the peaceful Lotus-eaters. When three of the mariners taste the flowery food, they fall into a lethargic state and they are no longer willing to continue their journey home, so that Odysseus has to bring them back on the ship by force. In its style and metre, Tennyson's poem is also reminiscent of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*[58] and its various images of otherworldly bowers of bliss (Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 429).

58 The influence of *The Faerie Queene* on "The Lotos-Eaters" is also visible in Tennyson's employment of the Spenserian stanza in the first part of his poem.

Moreover, the thrust of the Lotos-eaters' song may best be summarised by Despaire's words on the meaninglessness of toil in life: "Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, / Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please" (*The Faerie Queene*, I. ix. st. 40).

In Tennyson's poem, the Lotos-eaters' paralysis of will and inanition have been projected onto the portrayal of the island. It is a land where "it seemèd always afternoon" (l. 4). This suspension of time is further underlined by the simultaneous appearance of the setting sun and the full moon: "Full-faced above the valley stood the moon" (l. 7), while at the same time, "The charmèd sunset lingered low adown / In the red West" (ll. 19–20). Moreover, the flow of the many streams also appears to be affected by the mood of drowsiness as they are "like a downward smoke, / Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn" (ll. 10–11), and the falling water is not a roaring waterfall one might expect but "a slumberous sheet of foam below" (l. 13). Even the air is swooning with languor and "breathing like one that hath a weary dream" (l. 6). Yet, this stasis is apparently only illusory, which has been implied by the repetition of the verb "seem." Such a description may be ascribed to the subjective, drug-induced vision of the mariners who have eaten of the lotus. However, the above-quoted lines appear in the poem *before* the actual tasting of the fruit is narrated. Hence, a question arises — whose vision of the island has been presented in the introductory stanzas? Do the mariners see it as an otherworldly land of dreams even before the lotus has influenced their perception?

The ontological status of the land becomes even more ambiguous and disconcerting when one realises that, in creating his image of the island of the Lotos-eaters, Tennyson draws on many details characteristic of the classical descriptions of the Underworld. On their arrival, the mariners are approached by the inhabitants of the island:

> And round about the keel with faces pale,
> Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
> The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came. (ll. 25–27)

Their paleness and listlessness are undoubtedly the effects of feeding on the lotus, yet, in this way they also resemble the pale spirits aimlessly wandering the plains of Hades. When the mariners taste of their flowery fruit, the results are reminiscent of drinking of the Lethe, the mythical underground river of forgetfulness. They gradually become convinced that they will never return home. In the 1842 version of stanza VI, which skilfully foreshadows the later events from the *Odyssey*, the mariners sing that "Dear is the memory of our wedded lives, / And dear the last embraces of our wives" (ll. 114–115), but they see their past lives as fading memories and are not willing to "come like ghosts to trouble joy" (l. 119) on their home island where their deeds are but "half-forgotten things" (l. 123). The only boon they now long for is "long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease" (l. 98). This "dreamful ease" in death is also symbolised by the poppy growing on the island (l. 56).

The interpretation of "The Lotos-Eaters" has been the subject of much discussion. Apparently negative in its import, while strangely alluring in its cadences, it seems to be yet another expression of Tennyson's vacillating views on the role of the poet and his art. Catherine Barnes Stevenson reads the poem as a veiled warning against the consequences of taking opium which Tennyson could observe in his father and brother, and as the poet's attempt at fleeing from the problems of real life into the world of sensuous poetry (122–123). In fact, a poetic equivalent of the influence of opium on one's sensory perception may be found in the passages describing the mariners' growing weariness and the distancing of the voices of their companions, which sound to them as "voices from the grave" (l. 34), while the beating of their hearts is painfully heightened in their ears. As they gradually fall under the spell of the lotus, their state reminds one of that resulting from a long-term use of the drug, a sense of alienation, leading to the dissolution of social bonds and family ties (Stevenson 130–131). Their estrangement from their families has been even more emphasised in the sixth stanza added in the revision for the 1842 publication, already quoted above. The mariners forsake the active lives they have been pursuing, and succumb to the growing sense of

torpor, yearning for death, the end of the natural cycle that will finally release them from their meaningless toil.

What is more, in the revised final stanza, the mariners' decision to remain on the lotus island is no longer justified by mere sensual pleasure they derive from eating the fruit, but is explained as their yearning to become dissociated from human passions just like the cruel, indifferent Epicurean gods above. These gods delight in human suffering because it brings them "a music centred in a doleful song" (l. 162). This passage, which seems to anticipate later claims of the proponents of art for art's sake that the theme of art should be independent of its moral value, may be seen among the severest criticism of aestheticism in the early Tennyson. Since the ultimate success or failure of the mariners' quest is solely dependent on the whim of those fickle deities, any further struggle is pointless and it is best to "live and lie reclined / On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind" (ll. 154–155). Thus, in the 1842 version of the poem, Tennyson apparently tries to stress the point that in their motivation to give in to the illusory, lotus-induced calm, the mariners are not only selfish and antisocial, they are also amoral.

Still, even though morally questionable, the song of the Lotos-Eaters possesses an entrancing charm achieved through its sensuous imagery and its varying metres:

> Lo! in the middle of the wood,
> The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud
> With winds upon the branch, and there
> Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
> Sun-steeped at noon, and in the moon
> Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow
> Falls, and floats adown the air.
> Lo! sweetened with the summer light,
> The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
> Drops in a silent autumn night. (ll. 70–79)

as well as repetitions and consonance:

> Most weary seemed the sea, weary the oar,
> Weary the wandering fields of barren foam. (ll. 41–42)
>
> All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
> In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
> Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease. (ll. 96–98)

The Choric Song seems to be lulling the senses with its drowsy melodiousness and thus blunting its message, a feature which was found particularly outraging in Swinburne's poetry some thirty years later.

Such a Keatsian depiction of a slowly ripening apple reminds one of the sacred apples of "The Hesperides," a poem which directly preceded "The Lotos-Eaters" in the 1832 volume of *Poems*. Other similarities between the two poems may be found in their structure and theme. Both poems open with a brief narrative frame which is followed by the lyrical Choric Song. Both elaborate a familiar Tennysonian motif of a fertile valley sheltered by the sacred mountains with its exotic settings, luxuriant vegetation, and the pervading sense of idleness suggestive of oppressive heat. Moreover, in both cases, the questers from the outside world are lured with sacred fruit, the tasting of which transports one into a higher world of poetic wisdom. But while Zidonian Hanno is only momentarily arrested by the song of the Hesperides and continues his journey, the mariners become trapped on the enchanted island.

In his seminal study of "The Lotos-Eaters," Alan Grob focuses on the paradoxical state of those who have eaten lotus as "deep asleep [...], yet all awake" and compares it to one in which the Romantic artist shuts himself off from external sensations in order to free the imagination and thus allow for the expansion of inner vision (123). Yet, the mariners are apparently not predisposed to make creative use of the wisdom of the sacred fruit and turn into true poets; they are overwhelmed and paralysed by the drug-induced, heightened vision of reality, and thus the enchanted island becomes a dangerous obstacle to their quest. Once again, it seems that the sympathies of the poet lie with the quester figure in the poem, the one who is unaffected by the intoxicating lotus

and remains firm in his resolution to pursue his goal. The presence of Odysseus is only briefly signalled in its first two lines: "'Courage!' he said, and pointed toward the land, / 'This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon'" (ll. 1–2). Yet, those two lines, the hero's address to his companions, modify the import of the whole poem:

> Thematically, the first two lines of the opening stanza, giving the action and speech of the unnamed Ulysses, stand in isolation from the rest of the poem. They remind us at the outset of the epic narrative, and especially of its ending: we are ironically aware throughout of the strong will of Ulysses, the spirit expressed in the trumpeting of the first word, 'Courage!' We know that when the time comes, that hard voice will ring out again and the mariners will troop back to the oars. Their listless attempt to decide to make no decisions, to will not to will, to renounce all aspiration but the passive search for pleasure, has no chance against the single-minded determination and iron will for action of their leader. The word 'Courage' echoes ironically behind all the languid tones of the chorus. (Priestley 56)

The quest Odysseus urges his companions to resume is rendered as "climbing up the climbing wave" (l. 95); hence the energy and freedom of the boundless ocean is opposed to the island's "still waters" (l. 48) and "the long bright river drawing slowly / His waters from the purple hill" (ll. 137–138) representing the Lotos-eaters' melancholy inertia.

All in all, it appears that the antithesis of the two familiar motifs in Tennyson's early poetry, the otherworldly garden of imagination versus the quest, is once again realised in the two modes of life in "The Lotos--Eaters": an idle existence in the world of illusory, lotus-induced, sense of happiness on the enchanted island chosen by the mariners and the life of action represented by the strong-willed Odysseus (cf. Grob 119). The conflict between these two attitudes to life may be seen as symbolic of the poet's dilemma concerning the role of the poet he should adopt; the position of aesthetic detachment and immersion in one's inner vision is contrasted with one of social and moral commitment. In 1832 this conflict seems to be unresolved. It is only with the revisions for the 1842 edition of *Poems*, and especially with the introduction of the new final stanza, that

the purely aesthetic pursuit of sensuous beauty is openly condemned on moral grounds and discarded for a more energetic attitude of Odysseus.

The four poems from the 1832 volume thus clearly show how Tennyson gradually abandons his solitary Otherworlds of art and ventures forwards to lend his poetic voice to the major concerns of his times. In this way, the early Romantic Tennyson turns into the epitome of the Victorian poet. This shift in perspective is further emphasised in his revisions for *Poems* (1842); "The Hesperides" — the only poem which, through both its subject and poetic technique, seems to endorse aestheticism — is suppressed by the poet, while other poems undergo alterations aimed at making their moral message even more explicit to the reader. In his review of the 1842 volume in the *Edinburgh Review* for April 1843, James Spedding observes that the poet "addresses himself more to the heart, and less to the ear and eye" and that the 1832 poems have been improved "with a view to strip off redundancies — to make the expression simpler and clearer, to substitute thought for imagery, and substance for shadow" (Jump 143).

The theme of retreat into mythical Otherworlds also appears in Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hesperia," two poems from his *Poems and Ballads: First Series* published in 1866. In their tone and imagery, these two poems bear many important similarities to Tennyson's "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters." In fact, Swinburne's poems may seem to mirror the latter two in reverse order. Yet, unlike in the case of the Laureate's poems of the enchanted islands, in Swinburne's works the motif of escape into the otherworldly lands is not offset by that of the journey, so that both "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hesperia" present more unified images derived from one governing emotion. The close connection between these two poems results from the fact that they were intended by the poet to be parts of a larger design; together with "Dolores," the three form what Swinburne called the "lyrical monodrame of passion" (Hyder 1970, 54).

The excesses of "Dolores" are followed by the stillness of "The Garden of Proserpine," which the poet describes as "that brief total pause

of passion and of thought, when the spirit, without fear or hope of good things or evil, hungers and thirsts only after the perfect sleep" (Hyder 1970, 55). This emotion has been embodied in the image of the Underworld presided over by Proserpine, the Greek goddess of the dead. As William R. Rutland suggests it after Georges Lafourcade, a possible source of the poem might have been the *Gardin of Proserpina* in Book II of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (273 fn). However, the goddess Proserpine and her Underworld realm also constitute an important part of Swinburne's personal myth and figure significantly in his other writings from the same period.

In "Hymn to Proserpine," also published in the 1866 volume of *Poems and Ballads*, the speaker addresses her as "Goddess and maiden and queen" (l. 92) and prays to be granted the gift of death and to be admitted to her kingdom:

> In the night where thine eyes are as moons are in heaven, the night where thou art,
> Where the silence is more than all tunes, where sleep overflows from the heart,
> Where the poppies are sweet as the rose in our world, and the red rose is white,
> And the wind falls faint as it blows with the fume of the flowers of the night,
> And the murmur of spirits that sleep in the shadow of Gods from afar
> Grows dim in thine ears and deep as the deep dim soul of a star,
> In the sweet low light of thy face, under heavens untrod by the sun,
> Let my soul with their souls find place, and forget what is done and undone.
> Thou art more than the Gods who number the days of our temporal breath;
> For these give labour and slumber; but thou, Proserpina, death. (ll. 95–104)

The description of the Underworld works here by means of paradox and antithesis. The world of the living is lit by the sun and the moon, but the only light that is available in the realm of perpetual night is "the sweet low light" of Proserpine's face (l. 101). In this land, "silence is more than all tunes" (l. 96), and all other sounds are muffled and turn into distant murmurs. All the earthly passions are here spent and overcome by forgetfulness in eternal sleep, thus the main flower is the emblematic poppy and the red rose is replaced by the white one. Their scent is spread by the faint wind.

While this rendition of the land of spirits focuses on creating the effect of eternal calm mainly through the visual and auditory imagery, it is the olfactory concrete detail that has been developed in another depiction of Proserpine's realm in a passage from Swinburne's unfinished novel, *Lesbia Brandon* (1864–67). Lying on her deathbed in a dark room, the eponymous character relays her dream vision thus:

> I saw Lethe; it was not dark water, nor slow. It was pale and rapid and steady; there was a smell of meadowsweet on the banks. [...] And when one came close there was a new smell, more faint and rank; it came from the water-flowers; many were dead and decaying, and all sickly. And opposite me just across there ran out a wharf into the water: [...] I remember the green ooze and slime on the piles of the wharf; it was all matted with dead soft stuff that smelt wet. Not like the smell of the sea, but the smell of a lock in a river. And no boat came, and I didn't want one. (Swinburne 1962, 345)

Unlike its poetic counterpart, this description seems to be especially palpable and realistic. The overwhelming sense of death is achieved through the smells of decay, characteristic of the plants growing near water. In a similar way, the wharf is depicted in minute detail, complete with the "ooze and slime" and "dead soft stuff that smelt wet." Surprisingly, though, in her dream, Lesbia does not need the boat to carry her over to the other shore. The river she sees is not the Styx but the Lethe, which might suggest that she is already in the realm of the dead, and so she can also see its queen:

> Then I tried to see Proserpine, and saw her. She stood up to the knees almost in full-blown poppies, single and double. She was not the old Proserpine who comes and goes up and down between Sicily and hell; she had never seen the sun. She was pale and pleased; there was nothing in her like memory or aspiration. The dead element was vital for her; she could not have breathed in higher or lower air. The poppies at her foot were red, and those in her hand white. (345–346)
>
> She had grey eyes, bluish like the mingling of mist and water; and soft hair that lay about her breast and arms in sharp pointed locks like tongues of fire. (346)

The goddess is again surrounded by red and white poppies, which have traditionally been associated with sleep and death. Yet, here we are presented with a much more detailed portrayal of Proserpine and it differs from the one known from the myth. This is not the daughter of Demeter, who seasonally joins her mother in the world of vegetation only to return to Hades for the remaining half of the year. The Proserpine of Lesbia's dream is a native of the kingdom of the dead, and is devoid of "memory or aspiration." The last part of the vision provides glimpses of the landscape of the Underworld:

> And behind her the whole place all at once became populous with pale figures, hollow all through like an empty dress set upright; stately shadows with a grey light reflected against them; and the whole world as far as I saw was not in darkness, but under a solid cloud that never moved and made the air darker and cooler than the mistiest day upon earth. And in the fields beyond the water there was a splendid harvest of aconite: no other flower anywhere; but the grass was as pale, all yellow and brown, as if the sun had burnt it. Only where the goddess stood there were poppies growing apart; and their red cups, and the big blue lamps of the aconite, all alike hung heavily without wind. (346)

While in the poem the land is plunged in eternal darkness, here it seems to be "the mistiest day upon earth," with the sun hidden behind "a solid cloud." As a result, all is bathed in "a grey light" spreading over the shadowy figures of the pale inhabitants, the pale grass, and the pale queen herself. It is only the poppy and the aconite — an extremely poisonous flower of Greek mythology — that can blossom in this land of stagnation.

Elusive and almost bodiless, the goddess Proserpine symbolises in Swinburne the very opposite of Venus, the goddess of physical love (cf. Louis 1999, 316–317). In "The Garden of Proserpine," her Underworld kingdom becomes an ideal refuge from the insatiability of unbridled desire and the sadomasochism explored in the preceding "Dolores," where they yet proved disappointing and insufficient, because unaccompanied by the gratification of spiritual love. Hence, the sense of extreme weariness that permeates "The Garden of Proserpine" is not of merely physical kind. Its spiritual dimension has been emphasised by Ruthland who explains

it as "the reaction of the soul to the weary, grievous fever of living; the aspiration of the spirit that has in its youth found that all is pain and vanity towards an hereafter that will at least no more be life" (274).

This extreme weariness thus becomes the main theme of the poem. Tired with "blown buds and barren flowers / Desires and dreams and powers" (ll. 14–15) of the "Dolores" phase, and frustrated in his yearning for true love, the speaker turns to the world "where all trouble seems / Dead winds' and spent waves' riot / In doubtful dreams of dreams" (ll. 2–4). Here, pale nameless spirits of the dead spend their slumberous existence among "Pale beds of blowing rushes" (l. 29) and in "fruitless fields of corn" (l. 34), where the only growing plant is the sleep-inducing poppy. As in the prose passage quoted above, the day here is permanently clouded and misty, and the dawning of a new day is compared to the coming of "a soul belated" (l. 37). Moreover, this is also a repository of dead hopes and withered loves:

> There go the loves that wither,
> The old loves with wearier wings;
> And all dead years draw thither,
> And all disastrous things;
> Dead dreams of days forsaken,
> Blind buds that snows have shaken,
> Wild leaves that winds have taken,
> Red strays of ruined springs. (ll. 65–72)

The speaker is grateful for the finality of death that promises the release from "too much love of living" (l. 81), its uncertain joys and sorrows. He longs for eternal peace in the realm of changelessness ruled over by the pale goddess Proserpine. His nihilism has been further emphasised by means of anaphora in the last stanza of the poem:

> Then star nor sun shall waken,
> Nor any change of light:
> Nor sound of waters shaken,
> Nor any sound or sight:
> Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,

> Nor days nor things diurnal;
> Only the sleep eternal
> In an eternal night. (ll. 89–96)

Along with the poem's frequent use of consonance and its trance-like, rhyming trimetres, this helps to recreate the languorous tone of the poem on the level of prosody.

The speaker's death wish for "the sleep eternal / In an eternal night" (ll. 95–96) in the last lines of the poem evokes a similar yearning for "long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease" (l. 98) of the mariners in Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters." In fact, the speaker in Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" seems to be another such pale and weary lotos-eater, deprived of his will to act by the debilitating power of Proserpine's "deadly wine" (l. 32). What is more, Swinburne's Underworld realm is presented as "A sleepy world of streams" (l. 8), which again recalls the portrayal of the island in "The Lotos-Eaters" as "A land of streams" descending towards the ocean "like a downward smoke" (l. 10). In both poems, this image is contrasted with that of endless toil of human existence symbolised by sowing and reaping. Thus, what Jerome McGann sees as the meaning of Swinburne's poem, "the sleep-trance" as "an ultimate condition of freedom from the dialectics of loss and gain. […] an artistic postulate born of the knowledge that no man can live humanly in the world of getting and spending" (1972, 178) appears to be true also in the case of Tennyson's work.

On the other hand, in its intermediary position between "Dolores" and "Hesperia," the two acts of Swinburne's monodrama, "The Garden of Proserpine" is also reminiscent of The Cave of Quietude in Book IV of Keats's *Endymion*. While Endymion is falling down, unconscious, after his ride in the air, his soul enters this hellish den of dreamless sleep where "anguish does not sting; nor pleasure pall" (l. 526) and "where silence dreariest / Is most articulate; where hopes infest" (ll. 539–540). Yet, this is only a transitional state of calm and purification of the soul, before the hero can be released from mortality and finally acknowledged as the goddess Cynthia's bridegroom. In a similar vein, the nihilism of

Swinburne's poem, which Louis perceives as adumbrating the pessimism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1999, 333), should not be read as an end in itself, but rather as an interlude before the re-awakening of hope in "Hesperia."

The latter poem marks the final act of Swinburne's lyrical monodrama, a personal myth, which the poet elucidates in the following way:

> 'Hesperia', the tenderest type of woman or of dream, born in the westward 'islands of the blest', where the shadows of all happy and holy things live beyond the sunset a sacred and a sleepless life, dawns upon his eyes a western dawn, risen as the fiery day of passion goes down, and risen where it sank. Here, between moonrise and sunset, lives the love that is gentle and faithful, neither giving too much nor asking — a bride rather than a mistress, a sister rather than a bride. (Hyder 1970, 55)

Swinburne adopts here the name of a mythical western Island of the Blessed from Book III of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where it refers to Italy (Hyder 1970, 55 fn), and turns it into the name of its eponymous goddess, Venus's daughter,[59] and the poet's beloved. She comes as the third archetypal woman figure after Dolores, the Lady of Pain, and Proserpine, the Lady of Sleep, and brings the speaker the consolation of compassion. While she is only an unattainable dream, a cherished memory from the past, she can still redeem him from the self-destructive passions and the spiritual death of the two previous phases. The escape she offers differs from those two in that it is not merely another form of retreat into oblivion. On the contrary, this final act is truly liberating and gives source to a new inspiration, here represented in a Romantic fashion as the autumnal wind.[60]

59 "Straight from the sunset, across white waves whence rose as a daughter / Venus thy mother, in years when the world was a water at rest" (ll. 11–12). All quotations from Swinburne's "Hesperia" are from *The Works of Charles Algernon Swinburne*, ed. Laurence Binyon (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1995), pp. 61–67.

60 Cf. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and "A Defence of Poetry," where he speaks of the poet's mind in a state of creation as "a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (758).

Significantly, this wind blows from the "region of stories" (l. 3) situated in "the golden remote wild west" (l. 1) that is "Full of the sunset, and sad, if at all, with the fulness of joy" (l. 2). Hence, in Swinburne's poem, the image of the mythical Islands of the Blessed, bathed in the light of the setting sun, is thus appropriated and transformed into a timeless realm of poetic inspiration. The wind brings the speaker "a perfume of songs and of memories beloved from a boy" (l. 4) and is filled "as with shadow of sound with the pulse of invisible feet" (l. 6). These memories recollected with nostalgia may yet turn into a new beginning for the poet as they reach out "to the bays of the present" (l. 5) and further, "to the shallows and straits of the future" (l. 7). Moreover, as was the case with the classical Fortunate Islands, those "happy memorial places" (l. 33) in the west are the place of both the last repose and "lordly delight of the dead" (l. 34) and are lit "with the light of [their] ineffable faces" (l. 35). McGann sees these illustrious dead as the poet's literary predecessors that he recognises as his kin. He also points out that this ideal land of the Blessed is much more real to the poet than the natural transitory world he lives in (1972, 219).

Interestingly enough, the Otherworlds of memories and legends can only be accessed when the poet loses himself in a wild flight on "Swift horses of fear or of love" (l. 76), which are "swifter than dreams" and "stronger than death" (l. 77). Such a representation of the ascent of imagination as a night ride may once again evoke a similar ride in Keats's *Endymion*. However, in Swinburne's poem, it stands for both the fast unfettered movement of the horses, and, in a figurative sense, a swift passage through the joys and suffering of life:

> By the meadows of memory, the highlands of hope, and the shore that is hidden,
> Where life breaks loud and unseen, a sonorous invisible tide;
> By the sands where sorrow has trodden, the salt pools bitter and sterile,
> By the thundering reef and the low sea-wall and the channel of years (ll. 79–82)

Hence, the melancholy, reflective tone of the poem, also achieved through its dactylic and anapaestic hexameters, in the final part is mixed with the

exhilaration the speaker derives from the physical movement of the ride, the sound of the hoofs, and the refreshing wind that blows in the faces of the riders. His exhilaration is yet checked with a doubtful note in the last line of the poem.

As has been suggested above, Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hesperia" from *Poems and Ballads* (1866) in their import may be seen as a mirror image of Tennyson's "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters" from *Poems* (1832). All the four poems employ the theme of the mythical Greek Otherworlds in order to reflect on the situation of the poet. Yet, in Tennyson's poems the frame introduces the mythical personages as their speakers and auditors, thus creating distance between the world of the poet and that of the myth. On the other hand, in Swinburne's poems the speaker remains nameless, unspecified, and hence outside of the mythical realms. Paradoxically, in this way, his poems are both deeply personal and yet impersonalised, modern and timeless, in that the mythical worlds they recreate are concretizations of the poet's inner states. As Catherine Maxwell observes, "aesthetically transformed subjectivity becomes not an expression of the writer's personality or his quotidian self, but the artistic persona or symbolic identity he adopts in his poems" (18). Another important contrast between the two pairs of poems consists in their differing final messages achieved through the order in which they appear in the respective volumes. While Tennyson's sequence emphasises the negative side of losing oneself in the lotus-induced oblivion as opposed to the deeply intimate yet creative world of the preceding "Hesperides," the final position of Swinburne's "Hesperia" in his monodrama of passion reverts this order by focusing on the regained imaginative freedom of its speaker after the deadly torpor permeating "The Garden of Proserpine."

An Interlude: The Images of the Earthly Paradise

Next to the quest motif, the idea of eponymous legendary earthly paradise in its different variants informs and connects all the narrative levels of Morris's work. It is used both in the metaphorical sense, as the timeless realm of myth and legend, where the poet invites his listeners, and in the literal one, as the goal of the Wanderers' quest in the "Prologue…." It also figures in some of the myths and legends themselves, such as "Ogier the Dane," discussed in the present chapter, as well as "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" and "The Hill of Venus" analysed in the third chapter.[61]

Since most critical attention has focused on the introductory "Apology," with its call to the flight into the world of fantasy and romance, the work has been considered one of the most representative examples of Victorian escapism. Douglas Bush observes that "This great body of verse from which the actual world is excluded lulls us into drowsy numbness as quickly as the earthly paradise itself would have done if men had ever found it" (324). In fact, the Victorian poet of the "Apology" seems to be another lotos-eater who introduces himself as "The idle singer of an empty day" (l. 7), and "Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time" (l. 22). He seems to be echoing the words of Tennyson's mariners to "Let what is broken so remain" (l. 125) with his cry "Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?" (l. 23). By stating that "Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing" (l. 1), the poet relates his work to the earlier tradition of Miltonic epic only to contradict it, as he gives in to the sense of belatedness and paralysis. Instead, he invites his readers to "a shadowy isle of bliss / Midmost the beating of the steely sea" (ll. 38–39), so that his tales may provide his audience with a temporary refuge from the ugly reality of nineteenth-century Industrial England. This motif of escape into the realm of storytelling continues into the first

61 Other tales of *The Earthly Paradise* in which the protagonist enters or is borne into the Otherworlds include "The Watching of the Falcon," "Cupid and Psyche," and "The Man Who Never Laughed Again."

lines of the "Prologue…," as the poet urges his listeners to "Forget six counties overhung with smoke, / Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke, / Forget the spreading of the hideous town" (ll. 1–3), and instead invites them to fourteenth-century London, "small, and white, and clean" (l. 5). Thus, the earthly paradise may be read metaphorically, as the realm of imagination, the world of art, which allows for the preservation of ancient stories and its timeless wisdom. In this sense the quest for the earthly paradise may be seen as the search for the state of mind in tune with its cultural heritage.[62]

However, this escape into the world of fantasy stands in sharp contrast to the realism of "Prologue: The Wanderers." Whereas the earlier "Prologue…" included supernatural phenomena, such as dream visions and enchanted cities — one eternally consumed yet unaffected by the flames, and another with an enchanted castle whose dead inhabitants had been preserved in lifelike postures, bringing to mind a rather gruesome version of the world forever arrested mid-motion in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in the final version, the fabulous elements have been dropped from the main narrative or relegated to the sources that inspired the Wanderers' quest in the first place. Rolf recollects how his friend, Nicholas the Breton squire, would tell him tales of "Strange lands and things beyond belief to see" (l. 138):

> He, counting Asgard but a new-told thing,
> Yet spoke of gardens ever blossoming
> Across the western sea where none grew old,
> E'en as the books at Micklegarth had told,
> And said moreover that an English knight
> Had had the Earthly Paradise in sight,
> And heard the songs of those that dwelt therein,
> But entered not, being hindered by his sin. (ll. 141–148)

The passage preserves the image of the ancient mythical Fortunate Islands, the lands of eternal youth situated somewhere in the west.

62 Cf. Silver 30–31; Latham 74; Hughes 2010, 101.

However, Morris's vision of the earthly paradise has been filtered through his medieval sources. "An English knight" (l. 145) may be identified as Sir John Mandeville, whose partly-fantastical adventures were the subject of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* from the fourteenth century. The mention of his name thus betrays Nicholas's knowledge of the contemporary medieval accounts of the earthly paradise (Boos 1984, 407 fn; Maurer 1950, 227). Characteristically medieval is also the moral overtone of the passage; just as Lancelot is denied a full vision of the Holy Grail in the Arthurian Legend, in this case, a sin precludes the English knight from entering the realm. Its paradisal prelapsarian nature is further stressed in Nicholas's vision of the land waiting for them beyond "that desired gate / To immortality and blessed rest" (ll. 358–359):

> Certes no Greenland winter waits us there,
> No year-long night, but rather we shall find
> Spice-trees set waving by the western wind,
> And gentle folk who know no guile at least,
> And many a bright-winged bird and soft-skinned beast,
> For gently must the year upon them fall. (ll. 362–367)

Hence, the realm they hope to find represents the very opposite of the world they know and dread: a tropical climate with its virgin flora and fauna instead of the bleak polar night, and equally untainted gentle folk living far away from human deceit.

Yet, as has already been pointed out in the previous chapter, the realistic setting of "Prologue: The Wanderers" excludes the possibility of ever reaching such an earthly paradise. The only versions of immortality and timelessness the Wanderers encounter in this world appear to be only dreadful resemblances of what they are searching for (cf. Boos 1984, 413). On the summit of a hill on one of the islands they come across a baffling scene:

> Dead corpses, by some deft embalmer dried,
> And on this mountain after they had died
> Set up like players on a yule-tide feast;

> Here stood a hunter, with a spotted beast
> Most like a leopard, writhing up his spear;
> Nigh the old man stood one as if drawn near
> To give him drink, and on each side his head
> Two damsels daintily apparelled;
> And then again, nigh him who bore the cup,
> Were two who 'twixt them bore a litter up
> As though upon a journey he should go,
> And round about stood men with spear and bow,
> And painted targets as the guard to all,
> Headed by one beyond man's stature tall,
> Who, half turned round, as though he gave the word;
> Seemed as he once had been a mighty lord. (ll. 1075–1090)

As the Wanderers later find out, the corpses belong to the servants and family who have been killed and propped around the dying king of one of the local tribes. This "dreadful stage" (l. 1095) where "the ghastly puppets" (l. 1096) are fashioned in lifelike positions may be seen as a warning to the Wanderers, a sign that what they can find in this world is only a grotesque imitation of a deathless state. As Amanda Hodgson observes, the enchanted islands of the first version of the "Prologue..." have been replaced by lands inhabited by local tribes which are "reminiscent of the very primitive cultures which were the focus of anthropological research during the 1860s, and in the study of which the problem of distinguishing myth from history was so central" (1996, 350). Another caricature of immortality appears later in the tale when the Wanderers, ever gullible in their eagerness to follow any tidings of the land of their dreams, are imprisoned in a temple as living gods, and their companions' lives are sacrificed to them before their eyes in a hideous mock-ceremony. This state of life-in-death is described as a nightmarish and hopeless stasis, a harrowing experience of enforced inertia.[63]

63 Both images have their counterparts in the following tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. The embalmed corpses positioned in a lifelike manner appear as guardians of hidden treasures in an underground chamber in "The Writing on the Image," while the eponymous maid in "The Lady of the Land" longs to be released from the spell of immortality.

Interestingly, Morris's attitude to the Wanderers' endeavour is already explicit in the earliest title he originally intended for the introductory tale, "The Fools' Paradise" (Morris 1966, 3: xiii). While this title was ultimately discarded, it still echoes in the words of Rolf, one of the surviving Wanderers, as he curtly dismisses the legendary realm of their dreams as "our lost fool's paradise" (l. 2100). Thus, Morris apparently wanted to distance himself from what was later to be read as the poetic manifestation of an escapist turn in his poetry.

Ultimately, the closest version of an earthly paradise the Wanderers finally find is a nameless island inhabited by a peaceful community of Greek refugees, whose life in harmony with the changing seasons of the year may be seen as idyllic or even utopian.[64]

As the Wanderers gradually start to accept sorrow, aging and death as inevitable parts of human existence, they also learn to enjoy the bounty of nature around them and find comfort in the communally shared experience of storytelling. The idealistic pastoral life led by the Greek settlers, which is depicted in the lyrics for each month and the introductory lines to each tale, later finds its way into Morris's socialist writings presenting a utopian vision of an ideal society.

Celtic Otherworlds: The Blessed Islands

As the nineteenth century witnessed a growing interest in the studies of Celtic mythology, more attention was also given to one of its most prominent themes, the Celtic Otherworlds. The various portrayals of the mythical fairylands were collected and surveyed in Alfred Nutt's long essay on "The Happy Otherworld" (1895). In the following three works by Morris, Tennyson, and Yeats, each poet takes up the motif of the hero's

64 Cf. Michael Holzman's remark that "The ironic mode of the revised 'Wanderers' is initiated in that it is utopia itself that they, in their failure, find" (104). Carole G. Silver identifies the island with Atlantis (30). However, such a reading is at variance with the message of the "Prologue...," that is, in the real world, any legendary land must remain unattainable.

sojourn in the Celtic mythical islands to explore the detrimental effects it has on the mortal's psyche. All the three poems may also be read as expressions of each poet's stance concerning the conflict between the demands of reality and the imaginary world of art.

In her discussion of "Ogier the Dane," Boos observes that "Morris was probably attracted to the tale by its mention of Avalon, for him an ideal image of the garden refuge beyond time as an 'earthly paradise'" (1979, 48). Indeed, this French medieval tale, which Morris adapted from Le Comte de Tressan's "Ogier le Danois" in *Corps d'extraits de Romans de Chevalerie* (1782), provides an interesting foil for the main theme of the "Prologue: the Wanderers." Ogier's story may be seen as the fulfilment of what the Wanderers dreamt of and struggled for in their long quest — the attainment of eternal youth and immortality in the mythical Otherworld. On the other hand, it is the very fact that this boon is unsought for and Ogier is transported to share his life with Morgan le Fay in Avalon only after passing a life full of glorious deeds that distinguishes it from the events of the main narrative in the "Prologue..." and other *Earthly Paradise* tales treating of the quest into the Otherworlds.

At this point, it is perhaps interesting to take a closer look at Morris's depiction of this paradisal land itself. To the eyes of the suffering protagonist, Avalon appears as a lush bower of bliss, an eternal spring with its blossoms and birds singing in the trees. More surprisingly, however, the place is inhabited by the heroes of old times, now thought of as dead:

> And in the happy land of Avallon
> Quick glide the years o'er his unchanging head;
> There saw he many men the world thought dead,
> Living like him in sweet forgetfulness
> Of all the troubles that did once oppress
> Their vainly-struggling lives. [...] (ll. 844–849)

In this respect, Morris's Island of the Blessed is reminiscent of Virgil's Elysium, also peopled by the illustrious heroes who devoted all their time to their favourite pastimes. What is emphasised here is the notion of a leisurely existence, a sweet forgetfulness no longer troubled by the

cares of the earthly lives. In this changeless state, the immortals know nothing of death or treason; they never long for wealth and fame, and instead are rewarded with ideal love devoid of the pain of unfulfilled desire. Still, in the narrator's intent to convince his audience that "And yet they wearied not for any change, / Nor unto them did constancy seem strange" (ll. 855–856) there seems to reverberate the somewhat ironic voice of the speaker in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" calling the people forever frozen on the marble urn "happy" over and over again in the third stanza of the poem.

While the French legend focuses on Ogier's military feats in the two heroic lives he leads in between his sojourns in Avalon, in Morris's retelling, these appear only as background information for the main theme of the story, namely the lapses of memory and the changes in consciousness of the protagonist, effected by the shifts from the world of mortals to the Otherworld and back.[65] The process of his being reborn into immortality and eternal youth is presented as painful, and despite the prospect of sharing an ever joyous, untroubled life in the paradisal land with a beautiful woman, to Ogier she, too, seems unreal, like "The very best of well-wrought images" (l. 756), and he is flooded with memories of his previous life:

> His eyes, grown dull with changing memories,
> Could make no answer to her glorious eyes:
> Cold waxed his heart, and weary and distraught
> With many a cast-by, hateful, dreary thought,
> Unfinished in the old days; and withal
> He needs must think of what might chance to fall
> In this life new-begun; and good and bad
> Tormented him, because as yet he had
> A worldly heart within his frame made new,
> And to the deeds that he was wont to do
> Did his desires still turn. (ll. 761–771)

65 In her Introduction to Volume 3 of the *Collected Works of William Morris*, May Morris also stresses how her father has managed to strip the story of "all historical lumber" and "seized on the essential quality of mystery in the tale" (xxii).

While naturally active in his mortal life, he is now forced into a life of passivity and merrymaking among the supernatural folk. His comeback into mortal life to save France from another enemy is initiated with another identity crisis, as he happens upon a chronicle recounting his own deeds. Yet, this state soon changes, as returned into the life of active strife and glory, Ogier once again feels truly alive and in love with the Queen. In the light of his new happiness, the narrator's pejorative comment on "that long, dragging, useless year" during which "with dulled and glimmering memory / Ogier was grown content to live and die / Like other men" (ll. 1312–1315) appears rather incongruous. However, his regained bliss is yet again interrupted by Morgan who reclaims the knight for herself, restores his immortality and memories of his life in Avalon, and cancels any recollections of his second life in France.

This tale, presenting the altering mortal and immortal lives of the protagonist, with his recurrent falling into dream-like states and the resulting confusions of identity, is perhaps one of the most complex and ambivalent stories of Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*. Boos posits that this chain of altered states finally leads the protagonist "to acceptance of an ideal love beyond time and space" and sees Ogier as "a romantic allegory of psychological transformation in a hero who gains, loses, and regains an original love" (1979, 48). Yet, such a reading seems to be rather artificial and forced. From the beginning, Ogier is predestined to become a lover of the possessive fairy, who is disappointed with the lack of gratitude on his part when he still longs for his earthly life. Morgan then intervenes in his second mortal life just in time to prevent Ogier from formally entering a relationship with another woman. Hence, immortality and a life on the ideal Island of the Blessed are imposed on him quite without his ever expressing any such wish. The renowned knight seems to be trapped in the life of peaceful indolence which he finds insufficient, unsatisfactory. As Hodgson rightly points out, "Only in 'real' France, where love is transitory and life finite, can deeds of heroism be performed" (1987, 61). She then goes on to add that "At the centre of [Morris's] vision of human life lies the paradox that although

man is subject to terror in the face of mortality, it is death which makes youth, love and beauty so valuable" (61). Thus, the tale does not appear to endorse escapism and an aesthetic detachment from real life. On the contrary, it is the affirmation of a life spent in a meaningful and active way, which, while not free from struggle and pain, is yet rewarded with the feelings of passionate love and comradeship. The Wanderers' reaction to the tale also shows that their viewpoint has undergone a significant change. The story of "that once longed-for land" (l. 24) now evokes in them only a passing melancholy. Now that they have finally come to accept the fact of human mortality, even though desolate, they are "not yet of every joy bereft" (l. 32).

The psychological effects that the Otherworlds may exert upon mortals also come to the fore in Tennyson's "The Voyage of Maeldune" (1880). In this monologue, the Poet Laureate recasts one of the medieval Irish *Imrama*, a story of the voyage into the Celtic supernatural islands he found in Patrick Weston Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances* (1879). As Hallam Tennyson recollects, his father "intended to represent in his own original way the Celtic genius, and he wrote the poem with a genuine love of the peculiar exuberance of the Irish imagination" (2: 255).

In the original story, Maeldune and his crew are diverted from their pursuit of his father's killer by a magical storm, hence, this is a case in which the Otherworlds are an obstacle to the quest rather than its goal. In Tennyson's poem, the narrative leading to Maeldune's departure has been neatly compressed into the first two stanzas, so that the main focus of the monologue falls on the adventures in the Celtic Islands of the Blessed.[66] The poet omits the intrusion of the supernatural as the cause of Maeldune's wanderings, and, instead, underlines what is to become the main theme of his rendition, namely, madness and the worsening relationships among his crew, an aspect which is absent in Joyce's version.

66 In his depiction of the Islands, Tennyson proves to be both selective and creative towards his sources. He retains seven of the numerous islands from his source material and completes his vision of the Celtic Otherworlds with the additions of the antithetical Silent Isle, the Isle of Flowers, and the Isle of Fire of his own invention.

While some of the islands initially appeal to the mariners with their natural bounty, familiar from Tennyson's earlier descriptions of the island in "The Lotos-Eaters," others are immediately repulsive, with the cries of monstrous birds and no less terrifying calls of witches, or frightening, with strange fires on the Isle of Fire and incessant clash of bells on the Isle of the Double Towers. Eventually, however, all prove equally insidious and unnatural, so that the silence is "quiet as death" (l. 20), the beautiful flowers never give fruit; on the other hand, the gigantic grapes and berries madden Maeldune and his comrades with "the poisonous pleasure of wine" (l. 62), and the carefree days spent on the Bounteous Isle make them feel weary with their pointless inaction. Gradually, in their mounting hatred and aggression they turn against one another. This is especially visible in their reaction to the inertia on the Bounteous Isle:

> And we took to playing at ball, and we took to throwing the stone,
> And we took to playing at battle, but that was a perilous play,
> For the passion of battle was in us, we slew and we sailed away. (ll. 94–96)

Others, in a daze, leap into the fire on the Isle of Fire or plunge in the sea, lured by the illusive beauty of the underwater palaces. The iambic-anapaestic hexameter gives the poem a lulling rhythm emphasising the intoxicating charm the islands exert on the mariners, while the use of anaphora and other parallel structures hark back to the legend's roots in the oral tradition. Each stanza ends in the escalation of negative emotions, and Maeldune's repeated efforts, just like Ulysses's in "The Lotos-Eaters," to bring together what is left of his crew and continue on their mission.

This pattern is ultimately reversed in the penultimate stanza, where the spell is undone, as the mariners are saved by the gentle words of a Christian saint dwelling on the Isle of a Saint, the last island they visit on their quest. The ancient hermit, with a voice "low as from other worlds" (l. 117), manages to persuade Maeldune out of his initial intent to take revenge by showing him the futility of perpetuating mutual hatred. Saddened yet reconciled to "suffer the Past to be Past" (l. 124), the weary mariners peacefully meet their offender and find their way back home to the Isle of Finn.

Thus, Tennyson employs the motif of a journey into the Celtic Otherworlds to show an allegory of human life with its many temptations. Buckley reads the poem as an embodiment of one of the most recurrent themes in Tennyson's poetry, that is, "the arrival through the pain and tribulation of the life journey at an ultimate recognition of moral truth" (219). Each island, as he observes, represents in a magnified way one feature connected with excessive self-indulgence in sensual pleasures, which can only bring about despondency and destructive passions (219). Hence, the poem, which seems to be the multiplication of the imagery from the early "Lotos-Eaters," is unequivocally critical of the escapist detachment from life. Instead of peace and happiness, the supernatural bounty of the islands bewilders the mortal voyagers to the point at which they lose control over their emotions and actions.

Tennyson's attempt at handling an Irish theme may not have been entirely successful. The poet was criticised for misunderstanding the spirit of the original legend, and especially for introducing the gradual demoralisation of the mariners, which was foreign to the source material, and betrayed the English view of the Irish people as violent and boastful louts (Brooke 1894, 495–496). At the same time, however, "The Voyage of Maeldune" still played an important part in the development of the Celtic Revival in that it was brought up by the movement's propagators as an example of a successful modern poem based on a Celtic legend (Brooke 1893, 38–39; Yeats, 1970, 286, fn 10).

Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889) is equally important, since it is his first major work in which he puts his own advice into practice and adapts a Celtic myth in his poetry.[67] Writing to Katherine Tynan in 1888, Yeats revealed that "In the second part of 'Oisín' under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key.

67 The main outline of the story in Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín" is based on the 1856 translation of Michael Comyn's *Laoidh Oisín ar Thír na nÓg* ("The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth") of the mid-eighteenth century, and dialogues of Oisín and Patrick, which were also published in the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* (Kinahan 101). For a detailed discussion of Yeats's sources for the poem see: Alspach 849–866; Kinahan 85–125.

The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did, it would spoil the art" (1955, 88). This comment shows that from his early days, Yeats perceived myth as something more than just a pleasant story. Rather, he was well aware that the mythical narrative could be endowed with a deeply personal meaning, which should yet remain hidden from the common reader. That Yeats himself considered "The Wanderings of Oisín" to be his first major work in his poetic career may be seen from the fact that, many years later, he moved it to the opening position in his revisions for the *Definite Edition* of his poems (Unterrecker 47). In adopting the long narrative poem, Yeats follows his then masters Samuel Ferguson and William Morris. The influence of the latter can be seen not only in the poem's formal aspects, but also in its theme and imagery. Like in the case of Morris's "Ogier the Dane," the narrative retold in Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín" combines the motif of an outstanding mortal claimed by a fairy woman and carried into her native otherworldly realm with the insight into the workings of the protagonist's mind under the influence of the supernatural surroundings of the Celtic Otherworlds.

However, by incorporating the songs of the islands' inhabitants, the Danaan folk, Yeats gives voice also to the fairy point of view on the meaning of happiness, which is then contrasted with Oisín's mortal perspective. The reigning ideology of the *Tír na nÓg* is expressed in the song of the dreaming Aengus:

> Men's hearts of old were drops of flame
> That from the saffron morning came,
> Or drops of silver joy that fell
> Out of the moon's pale twisted shell;
> But now hearts cry that hearts are slaves,
> And toss and turn in narrow caves;
> But here there is nor law nor rule,
> Nor have hands held a weary tool;
> And here there is nor Change nor Death,
> But only kind and merry breath,
> For joy is God and God is joy. (Bk. 1, ll. 276–286)

On this ideal Island of the Dancing, neither Change nor Death overshadows the days devoted to pure joy of the eternally young Immortals. Such a depiction of pleasant pastimes, glimmering and dazzling with its many colours, is in fact reminiscent of a Morrisian tapestry;[68] scenes from life are thus elevated and transformed into their representations in art (cf. Albright 64–65, 76). Another insight into the fairy way of thinking is given in Niamh's song of times gone by, when mortals used to unite with their fairy brides and leave behind their mortal life that "fades and flickers and dies / Yet love and kiss on dim shores far away / Rolled round with music of the sighing spray" (Bk. II, ll. 12–14).

Yet, to the mortal bard, this otherworldly dreamy happiness is only a shadowy imitation of real joy and he cannot find his place there. From his very arrival to the Happy Islands, the Fenian warrior-poet is marked off as a stranger due to his earthly clothes and the song "of human joy" (Bk. I, l. 234) he plays on his harp, which disheartens and troubles the Danaan folk. The very changelessness and monotony of pleasurable activities, such as singing, dancing, hunting and fishing, which are never tinged with sorrow, ultimately prove unsatisfactory to the Fenian warrior. After spending one hundred years in a dream-like state of forgetfulness, Oisín is accidentally reminded of his old world by a piece of wood from "some dead warrior's broken lance" (Bk. I, l. 367). The memories of the heroic deeds of the Fenians make his eyes "grow dim / With all the ancient sorrow of men" (Bk. I, ll. 380–381), and awake in him a longing for a different kind of entertainment.

68 As has already been noted, this resemblance does not seem to be incidental. At the time of composition of the poem, Yeats was under the influence of Morris's verse and personality. He recollects in *Four Years: 1887–1891*: "Just before I had ceased to go there [to Kelmscott House] I had sent my 'Wanderings of Oisín' to his [Morris's] daughter, hoping of course that it might meet his eyes, and soon after sending it I came upon him by chance in Holborn. 'You write my sort of poetry', he said and began to praise me and to promise to send his praise to *The Commonwealth*, the League organ, and he would have said more had he not caught sight of a new ornamental cast-iron lamp-post and got very heated upon that subject" (Yeats 1980, 146).

This yearning is only temporarily satisfied on the Island of Victories. Even though the time on this island passes "with nor dreams nor fears, / Nor langour nor fatigue" and is described as "an endless feast, / An endless war" (Bk. II, ll. 222–224), the struggle is yet inconclusive and cannot bring Oisín complete satisfaction, while the dark and gloomy tower with its "seaweed-covered pillars" (Bk. II, l. 32) only deepens his sense of exasperation. Once again, the sense of restlessness is stirred in Oisín by the recollections of the Fenians, this time symbolised by a beech-bough borne by the wave.

Neither can true contentment be found in the eternal oblivion on the third island, the Island of Forgetfullness. Here Oisín and Niamh join its inhabitants, strangely beautiful, gigantic creatures with feathers and claws, in their trance-like slumber induced by the sound of a magical bell-branch held by one of the sleepers. As the motionless figures lie in the valley among the oaks and hazels of the huge forest, and themselves become one with nature, with owls' nests entangled in their locks, they are strongly evocative of the monumental figure of the dreaming Saturn in Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. Albright sees the third island as "the most lyrical, hypnotic, and sterile of all" (109). As he further points out, "The milky smoke of those long lines blots out all form as surely as the trees blot out the starlight; the metre gutters out into a shadowy intricacy of rhythm, as Oisín spends his last hundred years on the most subtle, the most aesthetic island of all" (109). Still, its peace fills the mortal hero with even greater sorrow:

> Wrapt in the wave of that music, with weariness more than of earth,
> The moil of my centuries filled me; and gone like a sea-covered stone
> Were the memories of the whole of my sorrow and the memories of the whole of my mirth,
> And a softness came from the starlight and filled me full to the bone.
> (Bk. III, ll. 69–72)

Quite ironically, it is on this island that he is most strongly overcome with the memories of his own mortal world and its heroic generations.

When a weak starling from that world falls at his feet, he finally shakes off all the drowsiness and decides to return to Ireland.

Hence, despite Niamh's attempts to meet the needs of her lover, none of the three Otherworldly islands proves truly satisfying. The fairy woman herself is gradually overcome by human sorrow and despair, her happy Danaan song is replaced by weeping, and she does not know the answer to Oisín's question about the location of the Island of Content.

The state of continued repetition of a particular action on each of the three islands is also mirrored in the pageant of mysterious phantoms that Oisín and Niamh see each time they move to another island:

> [...] now a hornless deer
> Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound
> All pearly white, save one red ear;
> And now a lady rode like the wind
> With an apple of gold in her tossing hand;
> And a beautiful young man followed behind
> With quenchless gaze and fluttering hair. (Bk. I, ll. 139–145)

Once again, their pursuit is prolonged in infinity, yet, unlike the folk on the islands, they never reach their goal, and "The immortal desire of Immortals" (Bk. III, l. 4) visible on their faces remains forever unfulfilled. Niamh's uneasiness about these shadows may be caused by the fact that they embody an emotion that is alien to this fairy princess whose every wish is immediately fulfilled. To Oisín, on the other hand, this otherworldly quest evokes the memories of his hunts with the Fianna. It may also be seen as a parallel of their own quest for happiness, which, while it lasts, is still open to unexpected changes, as opposed to the state of contentment on the islands, which lulls the senses and only wearies Oisín.

Thus, it seems that the happiness that can be achieved on the ideal otherworldly islands is only superficial and shadowy, as it is devoid of any real emotions. As Frank Kinahan points out, "To say that the soul cannot live without sorrow is to affirm that the spirit of man feeds on change, whether the change be for worse or better, and that in the

absence of change the soul meets the same end as any other living being that lacks its proper food" (112). In the early days of his career, Yeats worried that his poems were "almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight" rather than "the poetry of insight and knowledge" (Yeats 1955, 63) he wished to write in the future. Thus, "The Wanderings of Oisín" may be read as a story about the artist figure who is drawn to the world of imagination and Ideal Beauty only to find that, in the long run, this world of seemingly perfect happiness proves to be insufficient and unfit for a poet who wants his art to be grounded in real emotions and express profound truths. While Yeats's Oisín appears to be a much more positive character than the confused Ogier of Morris's verse tale and the demoralised companions of Maeldune in Tennyson's monologue, in each case the general import remains similar. Much as the Otherworlds lure the mortals with the promise of the gratification of their every need, they prove to be dream-like imitations of the real world, hollow images suspended in time.

In the final analysis, it appears that the images of the mythical Otherworlds in the poetry of Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris and Yeats stand for the world of aesthetic beauty and imagination as opposed to the real world of action. The choice between these two realms implied in these poems may be thus seen as expressive of each poet's stance concerning the two competing roles of the poet in the nineteenth century — the position of aesthetic detachment versus that of social and political involvement. As has been shown above, of the four post-Romantic poets, only Swinburne openly embraced the idea of aestheticism in art. His view is reflected in the way he portrays the Greek supernatural realms in his poetry. They provide the speaker in "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hesperia" with a refuge from the destructive passions of carnal love, which only brings disappointment and frustration. The oblivion of "The Garden of Proserpine" proves to be a necessary state of retreat

into the passionless world of sleep, before a dream vision of Hesperia offers the speaker a renewed hope. This is achieved through his sense of connection with his literary predecessors who, even though dead, are forever dwelling in the deathless realm of literary fame in the western Isles of the Blessed.

Thus, it seems that Swinburne turns out to be the most escapist of the four poets. The attitude of Tennyson, Morris and Yeats towards the idea of poetic detachment from reality is much more ambivalent. In Tennyson's poems, the two stances on art and life have been embodied in the figures of the artist and the quester. While Tennyson appears to be initially attracted by the position of the former, personified by the Poet of "The Poet's Mind," the Soul of "The Palace of Art" and the Lady of Shalott, he later visibly sides with the latter position represented by Hanno of "The Hesperides" and Ulysses of "The Lotos-Eaters." Even though the poetic world of the Greek islands appeals to the questers' senses with its languid charm, it has yet a demoralising effect on those mortals who let themselves be ensnared in its listlessness. This message is even more accentuated in "The Voyage of Maeldune" where the questers are sidetracked from their goal by the illusory pleasures of the Celtic Otherworlds and, as a result, gradually grow mad with the sense of satiety, and turn against one another. Significantly, it was moral degeneration of art that the Poet Laureate came to see as the major threat behind the idea of art for art's sake.

Morris appears similarly ambiguous in his attitude towards aestheticism in art. In *The Earthly Paradise*, he creates the realm of myth and legend as a refuge from nineteenth-century Industrial England, which he found abhorrent. Yet, what he criticised in the concept of art for art's sake was the dissociation of the beautiful from the useful. Hence, in the Wanderers' quest for the eponymous earthly paradise, he presents in a negative light their renunciation of an active and socially useful life for the sake of pursuing an unreal world of dreams. In his "Ogier the Dane," the hero is granted his stay in Avalon with Morgan le Fay as a final reward after a life full of heroic deeds. Yet, this is not his own

choice; a mortal in the fairyland grows passive and is only occasionally troubled with the reminiscences of his previous life. He can only feel alive and fully himself again when he returns to the mortal world and resumes the role of the warrior.

Finally, Yeats recreates in "The Wanderings of Oisín" the legendary figure of the warrior-poet Oisín who turns into a quester in the Celtic Islands of the Blessed. The magic of the three islands resembling a richly--woven tapestry proves unsatisfying, vain. Oisín is thus torn between his love for the fairy Niamh and the nostalgia for his past life with the Fenians, where true happiness was felt much more deeply because it was constantly overshadowed by sorrow, defeat and death. Thus, mortal happiness could be experienced much more fully than the eternal entertainment, fight, and sleep in the realm of the Danaans. In a similar way, aesthetic beauty which is an end in itself lacks the fullness of real human life with its many emotions. As the mythical Otherworlds turn out to be enticing yet insufficient, Tennyson, Morris, and Yeats are all drawn towards the more familiar images of pastoral bliss, natural beauty and the homeliness of simple life.

CHAPTER THREE

The Outcast

In Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín," the eponymous hero-poet finds himself trapped in between the two worlds, the world of mortals and the realm of the fairy, neither of which can truly be his home again. Yeats has Oisín relay his adventures in the Celtic Otherworlds to St. Patrick from the perspective of an ancient man who has returned to the world he left behind three hundred years ago only to find it devoid of its past heroic glory. People have shrunk in stature while his companions from the Fianna have now become part of an ancient pagan legend. Yet, since he has touched the ground, he can no longer rejoin his beloved Niamh in *Tír na nÓg*. This sense of alienation appears to be a recurrent theme in the poetry of all the four post-Romantic poets. In the poems to be discussed in this chapter, the poet dons a mythological or legendary guise to speak of the burden of his exceptional poetic sensibility, here presented as resulting from the speaker's contact with the supernatural, which distinguishes but also isolates him from his fellow men. This, in turn, leads to the mood of stagnation, which will be explored in the dramatic monologues of the Greek mythological figures of Tithonus and Tiresias in the first part of the chapter, and, on the other hand, the mood of restlessness, represented by the protagonists of the medieval legends discussed in the second part. The final part of the chapter will be concerned with the way the motif

of being torn between the two worlds has also been explored through a folk narrative, as glimpses of the Otherworld keep disturbing the life of a common man in Yeats's "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland."

The Poet as a Visionary — a Prophet or an Outcast?

The idea of the poet as a solitary visionary endowed with an unusual insight into a higher reality seems to have been inherited by the Victorian and later nineteenth-century poets from their Romantic predecessors. In his famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), William Wordsworth writes of the poet as an exceptional individual who is "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (601–602). Samuel Taylor Coleridge develops this image further, as, in "Kubla Khan," he presents the poet as an awe-inspiring, otherworldly figure, a seer translating into words a sublime vision that is granted him through the power of Imagination:[69]

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise. (ll. 49–54)

However, the vision, directly accessible to the poet, but not to those around him, apparently creates an invisible barrier between this poet-prophet and his fellow men, so that they may only approach him "with holy dread" (l. 52), that is, with wonder and incomprehension. At the same time, this divinely-inspired vision is fleeting and beyond the control of the poet.

69 As Jung remarks, "Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthrals and empowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring" (1972, 82).

As Percy Bysshe Shelley will later describe it in "A Defence of Poetry," "the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (758). It appears and vanishes without any fore-knowledge or conscious effort on the part of the poet,[70] and both Coleridge and Shelley express regret that, when it comes to composing poetry, the poet is only left with a faint shadow of the original vision.

The exceptional sensibility that is necessary in a poet to attain the joy of poetic vision also renders him particularly susceptible to pain and suffering. Thus, the dreamer in John Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* is yet another one who, as in Coleridge's poem quoted above, has "drunk the milk of Paradise" (l. 54) and, consequently, achieves the insight into things concealed from common men. However, his drinking of the potion in the Edenic garden is only the first step in his initiation into poethood. In his pursuit of the higher vision he first has to climb the steps to the altar, the agony of which is described, in Moneta's words, as "What 'tis to die and live again before / Thy fated hour" (Canto I, ll. 142–143). But it is the deep sense of compassion for humanity he gains from the insight into Moneta's sorrowful memories that can transform him from a mere dreamer into a true poet. Thus, Keats's work presents a double image of the poet. On the one hand, he is supposed to be "a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men" (Canto I, ll. 189–190), one who empathises with his fellow men and "pours out a balm upon the World" (Canto I, l. 201); on the other, the dreamer in the poem is his very opposite. He "venoms all his days / Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve" (Canto I, ll. 175–176). The knowledge he gains from the vision of the fallen Titans only increases his suffering and hence sets him apart even further. Frank Kermode observes that "The 'difference' of

70 Jung translates this phenomenon into the language of psychoanalysis as "an autonomous complex," that is, "a psychic formation that remains subliminal until its energy-charge is sufficient to carry it over the threshold into consciousness. Its association with consciousness does not mean that it is assimilated, only that it is perceived; but it is not subject to conscious control, and can be neither inhibited nor voluntarily reproduced. Therein lies the autonomy of the complex: it appears and disappears in accordance with its own inherent tendencies, independently of the conscious will" (1972, 78).

some of the English Romantic poets is almost too well known; they were outcast because they had to pay for their joy and their vision. Sometimes they attributed their condition to some malady in themselves, but they also blamed the age in which they lived" (1966, 7).

In fact, while the poet's isolation from the external world seems to be a necessary condition for achieving the poetic vision, this alienation of the poet was, as it were, also imposed on him from outside as a result of the changing social and economic conditions. With the growing industrialisation and the progress of science at the turn of the century, the poet seems to have found himself in the position of a misfit, a representative of an outmoded way of thought, who has to reassert the significance of his role in order to be readmitted as a valid member of society. Hence, Wordsworth argues that "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science", and he goes on to show that the role of the poet is that of "the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love" (604). But it seems that the fullest exposition of the universal importance of the poet for humankind may be found in Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," written in 1821 in response to Thomas Love Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry" published in 1820.

In a parodic manner, Peacock recasts in his essay the Utilitarian stance on poetry, showing it as no longer useful, harmful even, to the members of contemporary society. While reading ornamental poetry may be accepted as a pleasurable recreation, it is still a waste of time which brings no advantage to the rationally-minded modern man and may only distract him from the serious business of the day. In the present unpoetical age of brass, a poet chooses for his works themes that are whimsical and absurd, and thus he is

> a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours. (16)

In his conclusion, Peacock predicts that the significance of the poet will soon be on the wane, as a growing number of people will be more interested in the pursuit of knowledge and morals rather than following the poetical phantasmagorias.

In his reply to Peacock in "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley stresses the universal importance of the poet to humanity of all times. Once again, he is both set apart and central to the proper functioning of society. He is the solitary singer whose "auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (749). The poet alone is in touch with the unseen higher reality whence he apprehends the concepts of the beautiful and the true, which he then imparts to his fellow men. Thus the figure of the poet partakes of the divine and, through his art, may rescue mankind from the trap of enslaving materialism and mechanical science. In the final passage, Shelley boldly asserts that poets "are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; [...] Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (762).[71] Hence, not only is the poet useful to modern society, but he is paramount to the preservation and cultivation of its essential moral values.

This Romantic concept of the poet finds its continuations in the Victorian epoch in the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater. In Carlyle's lecture on "The Hero as Poet," presented in 1840, the same year as Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," the poet is yet another one in the succession of the heroic figures of all times. The affinities with

71 For Jung, the influence of great art on humanity lies in the way the artist brings up the archetype from the depths of the unconscious and gives it a new shape for his times so that his art can heal the psychic imbalance of his epoch (1972, 82–83). As he adds elsewhere, "In this way the work of the artist meets the psychic needs of the society in which he lives, and therefore means more than his personal fate, whether he is aware of it or not. Being essentially the instrument of his work, he is subordinate to it, and we have no right to expect him to interpret it for us. He has done his utmost by giving it form, and must leave the interpretation to others and to the future" (1972, 104).

the Romantic viewpoint discussed above may be found in the way Carlyle draws parallels between the Poet and the Prophet. He traces a common linguistic and cultural origin of both to the office of the *Vates*. Both have penetrated "into the sacred mystery of the Universe" (105) and it is their duty to disclose this secret to their fellow men. Carlyle then tries to differentiate the two figures by observing that "The *Vates* Prophet [...] has seized that sacred mystery rather on the moral side, as Good and Evil, Duty and Prohibition; the *Vates* Poet on what the Germans call the æsthetic side, as Beautiful, and the like. The one we may call a revealer of what we are to do, the other of what we are to love" (106). Yet, he concludes, "these two provinces run into one another, and cannot be disjoined" (106). Moreover, like Wordsworth, Carlyle portrays the poet as differing from other men in the degree of his poetic sensibility, as one endowed with the ability to "discern the inner heart of things, and the harmony that dwells there" (138). Out of the two poets that Carlyle discusses as his epitomes of Universal Poets, Dante and Shakespeare, it is especially the former that seems to fit into the pattern of an alienated Romantic visionary. Dante is thus imaginatively portrayed as an exiled lonely wanderer, a troubled soul who, after the disappointments of his earthly life, turns his mind away from the external world to focus on the embodiment of his vision in the *magnum opus* of his lifetime, the *Divine Comedy*.

Such a quasi-religious aspect of the poetic and, in a broader sense, artistic vocation was later explored by Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, albeit in markedly different contexts. In "The Study of Poetry" (1880), Arnold makes high claims for the pivotal role of poetry in contemporary society. He argues that men will increasingly "turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us," and he adds that "Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" (1020). Thus, it seems that in the times of religious crisis, poetry should be perceived as a new faith, with the central figure of the poet as a Shelleyan prophet, a guardian of the most important human values. This concept of poetry (art) as a kind of new, secular counterpart of religion, with the worship

of beauty at its centre, was also characteristic of aestheticism of the late nineteenth century, a trend greatly influenced by the works and lifestyle of Walter Pater. However, the decadent poet-priest no longer sought acclaim from society. To the contrary, he felt increasingly isolated from it and viewed himself as a member of an altogether different order of men, who devoted their time to a lonely pursuit of the epiphanic moments of heightened sensations.[72] As Meyer Howard Abrams remarks, "We are on the way, by this time, to the stereotype of the *poète maudit*, endowed with an ambiguous gift of sensibility which makes him at the same time more blessed and more cursed than the other members of a society from which he is, by the destiny of inheritance, an outcast" (103). Hence, in the late nineteenth century, the poet once again found himself in the position of an exile from society, and returned to live on its margin.

As this brief survey of attitudes shows, the Romantic inheritance of the poet as both prophet and/or outcast appears to be influential throughout the whole nineteenth century. The two roles the Victorian poet may thus assume also correspond to what Alan Sinfield terms the strategies of incorporation and marginalization, that is, the ways in which Utilitarians attempted to deal with poetry and its place in Victorian society. The poet could either prove himself useful by promoting a noble cause and inspiring patriotic feelings in the nation, or, on the contrary, he should only explore marginal topics such as subjective states of mind (Sinfield 17–19). Moreover, as was the case with the aesthetic otherworlds versus reality conflict discussed in the previous chapter, also the choice between these two figures is inextricably linked with the poet's view of the relationship between art and life. As such, the self-perception of the poet either as a highly-regarded public figure or an outsider played an important part in the shaping of the literary careers of Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Morris and William Butler Yeats.

72 For the myth of the Aesthete as a lonely poet-priest see Beckson 240–241.

It is especially the life of Alfred Tennyson which seems to be one of a reclusive visionary who was pressed into accepting the role of a national poet-prophet by his contemporaries, a position officially confirmed by his appointment to the office of Poet Laureate, only to be discredited and mercilessly ridiculed by his later critics. His fascination with the visionary mode is particularly visible in such early poems as "Timbuctoo" (1829), "The Mystic" (1830) and "The Poet" (1830). "The Mystic" treats of the poet in more general terms as one in possession of a greater insight and divine knowledge, while "The Poet" shows strong influences of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"[73] in that the winged poetic word becomes the herald of Freedom and Wisdom. But perhaps the fullest and most interesting realisation of the Romantic stance outlined above is that in Tennyson's Cambridge prize poem, "Timbuctoo."

A vision of the legendary Timbuctoo is brought to the poet as a result of his solitary musings on other such cities — Atlantis and Eldorado. It is preceded by the visitation of a "young Seraph" (64) who, apart from the most direct connotations with Miltonic epic, also brings to mind the figure of Moneta/Memory of Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. The Angel reveals himself to be the Spirit of Fable, a guide who assists man in his struggle upwards "step by step to scale the mighty stair / Whose landing-place is wrapt about with clouds / Of glory, of Heaven" (ll. 194–196). The Spirit reveals to the poet that he has been singled out of all men to be granted the expanding of his mortal faculties, while his lips have been filled with the power of the word. The poet thus becomes the Wordsworthian "upholder and preserver" of the truth lying in the ancient wisdom of tales, soon to yield its place to the greater power of discovery, which will reduce the legendary glory of Timbuctoo to unattractive reality — shrunken, dark and prosaic. The recollection of this extraordinary encounter is retold in retrospect and, as in the case of another vision of a magnificent city in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," it is now but a dim memory, "Less vivid than a half-forgotten dream" (l. 133). William E. Buckler

73 Margaret A. Lourie also points to the parallels between Tennyson's "The Poet" and Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (7–8).

has described "Timbuctoo" as a crucial Victorian text, a "paradigm of poetic perception and procedure," in which "an imaginary emblematic *persona* moves through a mythic action by which his whole sense of himself, of his world, and of his role in that world is altered" (38). The poem is informed by the sense of Romantic nostalgia for the old world of wonder receding before the progress of science, which is especially accentuated at the end of the poem with the image of the all-enclosing darkness.

This propensity for the visionary mode is another feature of Tennyson's early poetry, next to its aestheticism, that met with criticism. In his review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), Christopher North wryly observes that "Mr. Tennyson is sometimes too mystical; for sometimes we fear there is no meaning in his mysticism; or so little, that were it to be stated perspicuously and plainly, 'twould be but a point" (Jump 59). A similar comment may be found in a review by William Johnson Fox, who points out that Tennyson "has higher work to do than that of disporting himself amongst 'mystics' and 'flowing philosophers'" (Jump 32–33). He then goes on to admonish the young poet that his true vocation should lie elsewhere:

> It is not for such men to sink into mere verse-makers for the amusement of themselves or others. They can influence the associations of unnumbered minds; they can command the sympathies of unnumbered hearts; they can disseminate principles; they can give those principles power over men's imaginations; they can excite in a good cause the sustained enthusiasm that is sure to conquer; they can blast the laurels of the tyrants, and hallow the memories of the martyrs of patriotism; they can act with a force, the extent of which it is difficult to estimate, upon national feelings and character, and consequently upon national happiness. (Jump 33)

In fact, in its presentation of the role of the poet, this passage combines both, Shelley's grand vision and the Utilitarian strategy of incorporation of poetry as valuable for society discussed above. The power the poet wields over the minds and hearts of his readers should not be wasted on providing mere diversion. On the contrary, he should find the way to make himself useful for society, to contribute to the high standard of its

morals and patriotism (cf. Sinfield 18). In other words, he should assume the role of the prophet and provide spiritual guidance to his people.

It seems that the later Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of the second half of the nineteenth century, at least to some extent and for a time, managed to achieve such a status in the eyes of his contemporaries. In the abundant fan mail he received he was "applied to for spiritual counsel, consolation, and information on how the poetic faculty works" (Altick 279).[74] Frederick W. H. Myers, a Victorian poet and critic, discusses the importance of the Laureate's poetry in his essay "Tennyson as Prophet" (1889). He hails Tennyson as "a sage whose wisdom is kindled with emotion, and whose message comes to us with the authority of a great personality, winged at once and weighted by words of power" (Jump 396), and as "the prophet simply of a Spiritual Universe: the proclaimer of man's spirit as part and parcel of that Universe, and indestructible as the very root of things" (Jump 411). He then points out how, amid the bleakness of doubt and scepticism of the post-Darwinian world, Tennyson restores faith in the dignity of life and in the continual ascent of human virtues. In the same year, however, another critic, John Mackinnon Robertson, finds Tennyson's posing as a national prophet rather jarring. He remarks that "the ermine of the peer *will* trail its ceremonious length below the seer's exiguous mantle" and observes that, compared to Tennyson's earlier work, his later poems sound as a "rhymed recapitulation of the bad-blooded objurgations of gout-stricken Toryism" (Jump 414). All in all, Tennyson's mysticism never completely disappeared from his poetry, but instead, evolved into one of his most important characteristic features. It re-emerges in the transcendental experiences of the elder poet in "The Ancient Sage," in the Gleam that Merlin follows in "Merlin and the Gleam," and in "The Holy Grail" of the *Idylls of the King*, where

74 Cf. Hallam Tennyson's remark on the post his father received ("Letters were not unfrequently addressed to him asking what his opinions were about Evolution, about Prayer, and about Christ." [1: 322]) and Emily Tennyson's comment in her diary that, on their return from a trip to France in 1874, she "had to answer many letters from unknown correspondents, asking advice from A. as to religious questions, and desiring criticism of poems, etc." (qtd. in H. Tennyson 2: 157).

the misleading visions appearing to the Knights of the Round Table are contrasted with Arthur's insights into the absolute after his daily duties are fulfilled. Tennyson often assumed the mask of a wise old man, yet, as in his later years he felt increasingly at odds with his times, this wise old man often appears to be misunderstood and solitary.

For Algernon Charles Swinburne, the elevation of the poet to the position of the prophet was mainly related to his personal concept of a poetic afterlife; that is, a belief that the greatest poets of all times constitute an elect body of men, and that the poetic calling is passed from one generation of visionary poets onto another in a kind of "apostolic succession" (McSweeney 1981, 141). That Swinburne perceived himself as one of their rank may be evidenced by his remark in a letter to Edmund Clarence Stedman in 1875 that he belongs to "the Church of Blake and Shelley" (1960, 3: 14). What is more, as we have seen in the first chapter, in "Thalassius," he makes his mythological *alter ego* the son of no less than Apollo, the Greek god of light and poetic inspiration.

In the course of his poetic development, Swinburne found a proper outlet for his own prophetic voice when he openly engaged himself in promoting a particular political cause. Swinburne's enthusiasm for the Italian Risorgimento and admiration for Giuseppe Mazzini, one of its most important figures and Swinburne's personal hero, grew even stronger when, on 30 March 1867, he met the Italian activist, who enlisted the poet to support the Italian cause with his song. These new poems, written between 1869 and 1870, were finally published as *Songs before Sunrise* in 1871. The volume also marks a new direction in Swinburne's poetry, which might be seen as a complete reversal in his poetic creed away from the principle of art for art's sake espoused in his earlier *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Indeed, in a letter from 10 March 1867, Mazzini himself urged the poet not to "lull us to sleep with songs of egotistical love and idolatry of physical beauty" and instead "shake us, reproach, encourage, insult, brand the cowards, hail the martyrs, tell us all that we have a great Duty to fulfill" (qtd. in Connolly 19). However, McGann argues that this new poetry of action should not be narrowly interpreted as merely political. He observes that

Swinburne uses the theme of the fight for the Italian Republic only as a point of departure for the glorification of liberty: “the freedom Swinburne announces is essentially not a political state at all but a state of mind common to many different individuals in many different times and circumstances” (1972, 241). It is thus interesting to see in what way this universal concept has been supported through the use of myth.

On the other hand, William Morris, with his pragmatic attitude to writing poetry as a pleasurable pastime, appears to be a rather unlikely candidate to the title of a Romantic poet-prophet. Thus, it is the more surprising to find out that he was hailed as such by his one-time admirer, W. B. Yeats. In his review of Morris’s *The Well at the World’s End* (*Bookman*, November 1896), the younger poet sets Morris in opposition to Shelley, who, in the mind of the general public has become representative of “the poet and the artist unfitted for practical life” (Faulkner 415). Instead, Yeats argues, it is William Morris who deserves the name of a true prophet, since his vision of beauty inspired and ennobled all his actions. Hence, Morris should be seen by the future generations as an exemplary poet who managed to integrate the ideal with the real, “for he more than any man of modern days tried to change the life of his time into the life of his dream” (Faulkner 416). This view is also shared by Elizabeth Strode, who sees Morris as the other type of Keats’s dreamer in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, one of those

> Who love their fellows even to the death,
> Who feel the giant agony of the world,
> And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
> Labour for mortal good? (Canto 1, ll. 156–159)

She claims that this activist type devotes his time to work for the common good, instead of wasting it on useless speculation (Strode 80–81). Quite paradoxically though, there seems to be a strange discrepancy between Morris’s energetic social life and the languorous mood of his later poetry, and the theme of alienation features prominently in the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*.

It is no wonder that W. B. Yeats should employ the Romantic concept of the poet-visionary to talk about one of the heroes of his youth as he himself apparently espouses the Romantic notions concerning the figure of the poet and the nature of his creation discussed above. A disciple of Shelley, Blake and Pater, Yeats seems to have absorbed and transformed their ideas to accommodate them to his own theory of universal symbolism. From early on in his life, Yeats was drawn to the idea of the poet as a solitary exceptional man, be it a Prince Athanase or a melancholy Alastor in pursuit of some occult knowledge:

> In later years my mind gave itself to gregarious Shelley's dream of a young man, his hair blanched with sorrow, studying philosophy in some lonely tower, or of his old man, master of all human knowledge, hidden from human sight in some shell-strewn cavern on the Mediterranean shore. (1980, 171)

This image of a lonely poet that devotes his time to contemplation in seclusion, away from the public, also reappears in other writings by Yeats (cf. Yeats 1971, 378) where it is opposed to the Victorian notion of poetry at the service of society. In this way, Yeats seems to follow in the footsteps of Swinburne and Pater, and the late nineteenth-century concept of aestheticism. Louis MacNeice points out that this exile of the poet from society in the nineties should in fact be seen not as a cure to what he calls "Victorian disease," but its symptom, something Yeats himself was reluctant to admit (109).

Moreover, in accordance with the Romantic tradition, Yeats's poet is not only a solitary sage, but also a visionary, endowed with the divine creative spark and an extraordinary insight into the invisible reality, the *Anima Mundi*. In "The Symbolism of Poetry," he posits that "Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself" (Yeats 1971, 158–9). In the moments of revelation, the poet becomes "a vessel of the creative power of God" (Yeats 1971, 202); yet, unlike the Romantic poets, who were completely subjective to the whims of their visions, Yeats finds a way to evoke and

at least partially control them by means of concentrating on particular symbols. Finally, Yeats's poet is also a great enchanter who binds the minds of the passers-by with his incantations (Yeats 1971, 43).

The idea of the poet as a mystic is in turn related to another aspect of Yeats's poetic theory that is characteristic of aestheticism, but to some extent also of Swinburne and Arnold, namely the notion of poetry as a substitute for religion. Yeats writes how he, after having been deprived of "the simple-minded religion of my childhood" by Huxley and Tyndall, attempted to fulfil his need for spirituality by creating his own religion, "almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians" (Yeats 1980, 115–116). Once again, his personal beliefs find their expression in his essays. In the already quoted passage from "The Autumn of the Body," Yeats almost echoes Arnold by stating that "The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests" (Yeats 1971, 193). It is also in "Ireland and the Arts" that Yeats presents the artists as "the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith" who "must baptize as well as preach" in order to inspire passion in the people (Yeats 1971, 203). This elevated quasi-religious function of poetry in Yeats has yet been endowed with a personal slant, his lifelong interest in the occult. This was to culminate in a mystical Celtic Order which Yeats intended to found together with Maud Gonne and his astrologer uncle, George Pollexfen, in a ruined castle on Lough Key. Yeats worked on this project intermittently throughout the late 1890s, experimenting with visions and devising the rituals for the order based on Celtic mythology (Yeats 1980, 253–254; cf. Ellmann 124–130).

For Yeats, reality was the source of symbols for the ineffable. Yet, despite his idea of high art as the new religion with the solitary artist as the new priest, it would be an oversimplification to state that he shut himself away from real life. To the contrary, he thought that a timeless, universal work of art should be rooted in direct experience, in genuine emotion as opposed to everything generalised and conventional, which

he despised. The complexity of the relationship between the poet devoted to his work and the man of action preoccupied Yeats for most of his life. This dilemma is the subject of his poem "The Choice" (1932), but it is probably best expressed in a passage from the "General Introduction" for his work of 1937, where he observes that:

> A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. [...] he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. (Yeats 1971, 509)[75]

Thus, to Yeats, the poet appears to be a construct, a figure that makes use of real-life emotions and transforms them by means of poetic language and imagery, "a phantasmagoria," which in his early poetry consisted of a mixture derived from his two main interests — Celtic folk and legend on the one hand, and his occult studies on the other.

The Mood of Stagnation

The image of a mythical persona trapped in between a mortal and a divine state appears in Tennyson's "Tithonus" and "Tiresias," two dramatic monologues which were first written in 1833 and substantially revised before their much later publications in 1860 and 1885, respectively. Both poems, along with the third, "Ulysses," give expression to the poet's moods in response to the death of his friend, Arthur Hallam, and yet, it is difficult to draw a simple parallel between the mythical situations explored in these monologues and the situation of the poet at that time.

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75 Jung apparently reaches a similar conclusion when he comments on the relationship between the personal life of the artist and his art: "The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is 'man' in a higher sense — he is 'collective man,' a vehicle and moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind" (1972, 101).

Critics have long been puzzled by the way in which a mask of age that Tennyson adopts here was relevant to the feelings of the young poet. More importantly, while "Ulysses" appeared in the 1842 *Poems*, why did Tennyson initially decide not to publish the other two dramatic monologues? Finally, does the secondary context of later revisions of "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" influence and change the original import of the poems? While Tennyson's "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" should be analysed together as the two other responses to the death of the poet's friend, it is also interesting to see how the figure of the mythical seer has been employed in Swinburne's poem from *Songs before Sunrise* (1871).[76]

As Tennyson has stated in his note to the poem, Tithonus was "beloved by Aurora, who gave him eternal life but not eternal youth. He grew old and infirm, and as he could not die, according to the legend, was turned into a grasshopper" (qtd. in A. Tennyson 1908, 2: 340). The figure of Tithonus is thus a perfect embodiment of the feelings of alienation and not belonging. He is forever expelled from the race of man through Aurora's gift but, with the passing of youth, he can no longer feel equal to his divine lover. From the first stanza, this state of life-in-death has been made acute through the contrast between Tithonus's unnatural existence in the palace of Eos and the natural cycle of life and death, further emphasised through the repetition in the first line, which he can still glimpse on the earth below:

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
> The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
> And after many a summer dies the swan.
> Me only cruel immortality
> Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
> Here at the quiet limit of the world,
> A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream

76 My analysis of the two "Tiresias" poems by Tennyson and Swinburne was published in 2012: "The Seer as an *Alter Ego* of the Poet in the 'Tiresias' Poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne."

> The ever-silent spaces of the East,
> Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. (ll. 1–10)

Unlike the vapours which liquefy and return onto the ground, Tithonus cannot be relieved of his burden of immortality and rest in peace with the dead. Instead, he is forever trapped in his abnormal state in "The ever-silent spaces of the East" (l. 9) while, as a result of an unfortunate oversight in his wish, his body continues to undergo the natural process of aging. The Hours, apparently jealous of the favour Aurora bestowed upon her lover, have still taken their revenge on him and, as he complains, "though they could not end me, left me maimed" (l. 20). The palace of dawn, symbolical of the beginning of life, has grown incompatible with Tithonus's present condition, so that he seems to be confined there against his will. He pleads with the goddess: "Yet hold me not for ever in thine East" (l. 64), and in "Tithon," the first version of the poem from 1833, he openly wishes the Hours would carry him to the West, the direction traditionally associated with the twilight of life.

Thus, Tithonus's imprisonment is shown as both spatial and temporal. This latter aspect also emerges in Tithonus's memories of his former self. The image from the first stanza where he presents himself as "A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream" (l. 8) is further expanded in the next stanza, as he laments:

> Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—
> So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
> Who madest him thy chosen, that he seemed
> To his great heart none other than a God! (ll. 11–14)

What seems to be particularly striking in this passage is Tithonus's use of the personal pronoun 'he.' Tithonus's existence has been prolonged for such a long time that his former life as a mortal man appears to him as belonging to someone else. Moreover, as Arthur D. Ward points out, "defining himself by the opinion of Eos has made him first incapable, and finally undesirous, of defining himself at all. Now that he is old, his union with her has crumbled from glory to travesty; the main source of

his pride is poisoned" (313). This identity crisis is again manifest in the fifth stanza, where, on recollecting the emotional response that the sight of Aurora used to evoke in him, he adds, as if in parentheses, "if I be he that watched" (l. 52).

The afore-quoted passage also reveals Tithonus's youthful *hubris*, which led him to ask the goddess for the gift of immortality, the direct cause of his present torments. Tithonus's interminable aging may hence be seen as a punishment for his vainglorious wish to trespass the natural state of mankind, a wish he has come to regret:

> Why should a man desire in any way
> To vary from the kindly race of men,
> Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
> Where all should pause, as is most meet for all? (ll. 28–31)

These words, while slightly modified, already feature in the early "Tithon" and appear to be crucial in showing why Tennyson himself originally intended the poem to be a "pendent," that is, a companion and counterpart, to his "Ulysses" (H. Tennyson 1: 459). Despite the fact that the mythical personas in both monologues are aged men who look to the west in the hope of finding there a way out from a situation that means stagnation and oppression, their resolutions are essentially contradictory. Ulysses yearns to escape from his island into action, a journey which will give him at least a temporary illusion of eluding death. He seems to be insatiable in his urge to ever reach beyond the margin of the familiar world, to transgress the boundaries imposed upon ordinary mortals. Tithonus, on the other hand, humbled by the consequences of his extravagant wish, now craves to be released back into the boundaries of mortality so that he may find oblivion under the "grassy barrows of the happier dead" (l. 71).

The poem captures one of many such recurrent moments during Tithonus's endless misery at which his memories, apprehensions and hopes of regaining human mortality are occasioned again and again by the daily arrival of a new morning and the rise of Aurora. Her portrayal in the poem is ambiguous, ever shifting between the figure of the

goddess and the natural phenomenon she personifies. Aurora's ambivalence is also visible in her lack of response; while she seems to be present throughout the dramatic monologue as the auditor of Tithonus's lament and his pleas, she only weeps silent tears. Her voice is but a memory that Tithonus remembers as "Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet" (l. 61), unintelligible murmurings among the kisses which bring to mind the "language strange" (l. 27) of the faery lady in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Indeed, the present condition of Tithonus also resembles that of the bewildered knight's in Keats's ballad, who wakes alone "on the cold hill's side" (l. 36) and is depicted as "So haggard and so woe-begone" (l. 6), pale and withering. In a similar fashion, Tithonus recollects how he used to grow "dewy-warm / With kisses balmier than half-opening buds / Of April" (ll. 58–60), but all he can now experience is cold: "Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold / Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet" (ll. 66–67). Finally, another parallel may also be seen in the autumnal aura of both poems.

The biographical context of writing "Tithonus" has tempted some critics to seek uneasy correspondences between the mythical personas and the two friends. Yet, while Tithonus's melancholy and hopelessness may be read as the expression of Tennyson's feelings in the period of mourning, equating Arthur Hallam with Aurora appears to be downright preposterous. The complications arising from such an approach have been analysed by Theodore Redpath:

> If, however, we think of the immortality as, in any sense, Hallam's, then Hallam would need to become Aurora, and the picture would be skewed. The sorrow and diminution must surely, in any case, be that of the poet; and *Hallam* had suffered no diminution by *survival*. It is safer, then, in my view, to eschew any attempt to identify Hallam as a character in the poem. Indeed, it could well have been a fear on Tennyson's part that people would be tempted to make such identifications [...] that partly caused him not to publish the poem with 'Ulysses'; (126)

Another interpretation of the poem in which the attitude of Tithonus may be directly related to the private life of the Tennyson family is the one suggested by Mary Joan Donahue in "Tennyson's 'Hail, Briton!' and

'Tithon' in Heath Manuscript." She points out that Tithonus's abnormal longevity may be connected with the feelings of Emily Tennyson's, the poet's sister and Arthur Hallam's betrothed, who voiced her grief in a letter to Alfred from 12 July 1834, in which she talked of her intention to visit the house of the Hallam family: "I can no longer continue in this deepening grave of tears... depend upon it I will do all in my power to go to Moulsey. What is life to me! if I die (which the Tennysons never do) the effort shall be made" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 135). Donahue observes that in both, the poem and the comment, "the weariness with life, the longing for death as an unattainable pleasure, is the same" (416).

On the other hand, a metaphorical reading of the poem appears to be much more plausible. Redpath suggests another biographical interpretation, according to which Aurora's glow stands for the inspiration and joy Tennyson derived from his friendship with Arthur Hallam and lost after Hallam's death (126).[77] Moreover, in more universal terms, this myth of immortal Tithonus, the lover of a Greek goddess, may also be seen as a tale about the fate of the artist (cf. Kissane 1970, 136). Since antiquity, the poet has been thought to be blessed with immortality through his works. Yet, the divine spark of creative power not only elevates but also separates him from his fellow men. Once the poet loses the ability to be inspired by beauty, here presented as Tithonus's response to Aurora's glow, he is left with the painful memory of his illustrious past and the sense of being suspended in between the godlike and the mortal condition. This lament for a waning poetic faculty may apply both to the young poet shocked after the death of his close friend as well as to the much older Poet Laureate at the time of the publication of the poem in 1860.

A similar theme of isolation as a result of a divine gift reappears in the dramatic monologue of the poet as a prophet-outcast, "Tiresias." Deprived of worldly sight and instead endowed with prophetic power by the angry Athene after he has chanced upon her in her bath, the seer now tries to

77 Such an approach is also espoused by Culler: "With the death of Hallam he [Tennyson] had lost Joy, that active, sacred power by which the poet creates worlds about him, by which he glorifies the earth. To the poet the loss of Joy is the loss of imagination" (87).

be acknowledged as one among Theban people by averting the imminent war. However, in order to achieve his goal, Tiresias has to persuade prince Menoeceus that his self-sacrifice is the only way to save his kingdom.

When compared to its classical sources,[78] Tennyson's dramatic monologue introduces three significant changes into the portrayal of the ancient prophet. To begin with, it seems that Tiresias's encounter with the divinity was not altogether unintentional. In fact, Tennyson's Tiresias yearns "For larger glimpses of that more than man / Which rolls the heavens, and lifts and lays the deep" (ll. 20–21) since his youth, and he is wandering on the hill "With some strange hope to see the nearer God" (l. 28). Hence, in Tennyson's retelling of an episode from Callimachus's *Fifth Hymn*, the young Tiresias's search for water to quench his thirst turns into a symbolic quest to quench the thirst for forbidden knowledge (cf. Markley 1999, 43). His inquisitiveness already predestines him for his future role of a sage.

The second important addition, Athene's curse which renders Tiresias's prophecies ineffective, lies at the very core of Tennyson's dramatic monologue. But in order to see its full meaning in the poem let us first analyse the traditional position of Tiresias. The seer may be perceived as a concretization of one of Jungian archetypes, the Wise Old Man. Jung observes that "[t]he wise old man appears in dreams in the guise of a magician, doctor, priest, teacher, professor, grandfather, or any other person possessing authority," who "always appears in a situation where insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc., are needed but cannot be mustered on one's own resources. The archetype compensates this state of spiritual deficiency by contents designed to fill the gap" (2000, 216). Hence, in mythology, the position of the Wise Old Man is defined in relation to the main hero who he provides with the invaluable guidance at the crucial point of the hero's quest. Tiresias fulfils this role in Book 11 of the *Odyssey* when his ghost emerges from the depths of Hades and appears before Odysseus to advise him

78 In his edition of *The Poems of Tennyson*, Christopher Ricks enumerates, among other possible sources, Euripides's *The Phoenissae* and Callimuachus's *Fifth Hymn* (568–569, 570).

on the further course of his journey home. It is also the position the Victorian Tiresias struggles to gain in Tennyson's poem. However, his role as a helper has been thwarted by what seems to be the poet's addition to his classical sources, probably from the myth of Cassandra (Culler 88), the curse Athene has attached to the gift of foresight: "Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much, / And speak the truth that no man may believe" (ll. 48–49).

The prophet's lament about his incapacity to influence his fellow citizens, and thus, his failure as the Jungian Wise Old Man, may also be seen as a comment on the position of the poet in Victorian society (Culler 89). In his essay on "Three Stages of Tennyson's 'Tiresias'," David F. Goslee observes that "The tale of this archetypal outcast could have appealed to him [Tennyson] only after he could no longer either respect society or influence its direction. As Tiresias' social hopes rest only on Menoeceus, Tennyson's in turn may rest on the poem itself" (164). He then points to a quotation concerning the poem in a letter that the poet's wife, Emily, wrote to Edward Lear, "Ally has come to think that the world will receive lessons thus when it discards them in modern garb" (164). It is therefore the mythical guise that is supposed to secure the poem's effectiveness.

It seems that it is the undoing of Athene's curse that is the motive force behind Tennyson's dramatic monologue. In her chapter on the genre, Cornelia D. J. Pearsall points out that the main objective of the dramatic monologue is persuasion and, consequently, the "anticipated production," "the alteration the monologue is laboring to perform or cause" (71). In Tennyson's dramatic monologue, this change may be effected by Menoeceus, the addressee of Tiresias's message, who is urged by the prophet to sacrifice his life in order to appease the wrath of Ares and save the city. As Culler rightly observes, Menoeceus, even though removed to the position of the silent auditor, still has a very important role to play: "For to him [Tiresias] Menoeceus is not only the means of the salvation of the city but also the means of the fulfillment of the prophet. [...] It is at this point that the figure of Tennyson's poems whom we have hitherto called the Auditor [...] adds to his role that of

Enactor" (88–89). Menoeceus is hence the one to turn Tiresias's vision into action and in this way "blunt the curse / Of Pallas" (ll. 149–150) by validating his words as truly prophetic.

Yet, Tiresias could not achieve his goal without a direct confrontation with Menoeceus. The seer's change in his attitude towards the prince with respect to Tennyson's classical source constitutes the third major alteration that has been introduced in the poem. In Euripides's *The Phoenissae*, the seer is reluctant to impart the content of his prophecy concerning the lot of the city to Creon in the presence of his son, Menoeceus. Conversely, in Tennyson's poem Tiresias's direct insisting on Menoeceus's suicide does seem rather harsh. The seer verbally pushes him to:

> [...] let thine own hand strike
> Thy youthful pulses into rest and quench
> The red God's anger, fearing not to plunge
> Thy torch of life in darkness (ll. 151–154)

These lines have invited various interpretations from the critics. In James Russell Kincaid's view, what he terms "the loud voice of heroism" (139) and "pious exhortations to Menoeceus to slaughter himself" (140) bear sure signs of underlying irony. He argues that Menoeceus's death will only be another bloody act amid the plagues, slaughter and confusion, the images of which Tiresias portrays earlier in the poem, and that this state cannot be improved by complying with the demand of the bloodthirsty god of war (140).

On the other hand, as in the case of "Tithonus," some critics have attempted to interpret Tiresias's message for Menoeceus within the context in which the poem was first written. In his headnote to the poem, Christopher Ricks relates the import of this dramatic monologue to the death of Arthur Hallam. He first points to the fact that Tiresias repeatedly addresses Menoeceus as "my son," which may be perceived as a foreshadowing of Christianity and which may thus provide a deeper meaning for Menoeceus's self-sacrifice: "Tenuously adumbrated here is the sacrifice of God and His Son." He then posits that Tennyson turned to the myth

in order to find consolation: "The poem's origins in 1833 suggest that T[ennyson], after Arthur Hallam's death, looked to a classical story for an insight into mortality" and that the poem's aim was to bring "strength and consolation in deliberate self-sacrifice" (Ricks in A. Tennyson 1969, 569), thus offering a straightforward reading of the poem's message.

Goslee traces an even more complex relation between Tennyson, Arthur Hallam, Tiresias, and Menoeceus. Again, he points out that the mythological frame may serve to provide the meaning for the meaningless death of Arthur Hallam. He states that Tiresias's "arguments for suicide are harsh only because they are after the fact — after the death they are attempting to rationalize," and he adds that "In this attempt the classical setting offers Tennyson some much-needed freedom" which allows him to give Hallam "a real social mission" (159). However, he also posits that the glory and heroism Tiresias sees in the act of self-sacrifice may stem from his own "interminable, lonely, meaningless existence" (160). This argument can be supported by Tiresias's exclamation "Fairer thy fate than mine, if life's best end / Be to end well!" (126–127), and by the final part of the monologue, in which the seer envisions his long-awaited rest among the illustrious ones in Elysium.

The sense of loneliness of the now solitary ancient poet-seer is even more painfully brought into focus against the final frame of the poem, namely, that of the death of yet another long-time friend of Tennyson, Edward Fitzgerald, to whom the poem is dedicated. Thus, the figure of Tiresias, who may be interpreted as an imaginary projection, an embodiment of the emotional state in which the young Tennyson found himself after the death of Arthur Hallam, in 1885 once again proved an appropriate *alter ego* for the Victorian Poet Laureate.

Thus, "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" may be seen as complementary to "Ulysses" both in terms of the narrative and the broader context of their composition. Culler remarks that all the three mythical characters are "an incongruous mixture of the human and the divine" (86). Yet, as opposed to Ulysses, both Tithonus and Tiresias have already achieved the objects of their respective quests. However, immortality and knowledge,

both gifts from Greek goddesses, ultimately prove disastrous in their long-term consequences, and turn out to be more a curse than a blessing. As a result, both figures are plagued with different kinds of impotence, and an acute sense of loneliness and isolation. Moreover, the two dramatic monologues may also be seen as counterparts to "Ulysses" in that together they provide a fuller insight into the spectrum of feelings that the poet must have experienced in the time of mourning after Arthur Hallam's death. But the negative emotions culminating in the explicit death wish in "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" might have influenced Tennyson's decision to initially withdraw them, and publish only "Ulysses," where its message of undertaking the struggle against the hardships of reality appears to be more in keeping with the Victorian values of manliness (cf. Redpath 126). It seems that, especially in the case of "Tiresias," the mask of an ancient sage in time grew more fitting to the Poet Laureate who aspired to the role of a national bard and, at the same time, felt increasingly ignored and alienated from his contemporaries.

The mythological figure of the famous Greek seer has also been appropriated as the speaker of the dramatic monologue in Swinburne's "Tiresias" from his *Songs before Sunrise*. The poem is based on the same version of the Theban myth as in Tennyson's case, but Swinburne has chosen a later episode, the suicide of Antigone, as the point of departure for the reflections of the seer.

In Swinburne's poem it is also the sense of alienation that seems to be the main theme of Tiresias's monologue. Yet, unlike in the case of Tennyson's seer, Swinburne's Tiresias exults in his prophetic power. His extraordinary position has been achieved through a series of seemingly paradoxical oppositions:

> I prophesy of life, who live with death;
> Of joy, being sad; of sunlight, who am blind;
> Of man, whose ways are alien from mankind
> And his lips are not parted with man's breath;
> I am a word out of the speechless years,
> The tongue of time, that no man sleeps who hears. (ll. 129–134)

This feeling of solitude and not belonging is magnified by the time at which the prophet delivers his monologue: "It is an hour before the hour of dawn" (l. 1). Just as Tiresias is "a soul outside of death and birth" (ll. 55), so he prophesies at the liminal moment which belongs neither to the night nor yet to the dawning day. While he does not partake in the lot of his fellow human beings, he is attuned to the rhythms of time, metaphorically presented as the seasonal rhythms of nature:

> I hear the low sound of the spring of time
> Still beating as the low live throb of blood,
> And where its waters gather head and flood
> I hear change moving on them, and the chime
> Across them of reverberate wings of hours
> Sounding, and feel the future air of flowers. (ll. 115–120)

His alienation from his fellow men has also been rendered by means of spatial distance. He lives "where men are not, / In the high starless air of fruitful night / On that serenest and obscurest height" (ll. 159–161), where he is granted the insight into higher knowledge about "dead and unborn things" as "one in thought" (ll. 162), and "whence the live unconquerable springs / Feed full of force the torrents of new things" (ll. 163–164). This sense of isolation from one's contemporaries, along with the exceptional insight and closeness to nature, may be seen as characteristics that have often been ascribed to the Romantic poet-visionary discussed above, such as the mysterious and awe-inspiring poet-prophet in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

An affinity with the Romantic tradition has also been established through the form of the poem. While the first part of Swinburne's "Tiresias" may resemble the Victorian dramatic monologue, with its mythological setting and speaker whose main task is that of persuading his fellow men to perform heroic feats of courage and daring, it still lacks one of the important features of the genre, the audience. In Swinburne's poem, the auditor remains obscure, or even absent, which is suggested by the words of the seer in the opening lines of the poem, "Set in mine

hand my staff and leave me here / Outside the hollow house that blind men fear" (ll. 2–3). On the other hand, the second part of "Tiresias" once again brings to mind Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Both poems use a similar two-part structure of related dream-visions, joined by the figure of the dreamer-poet.

As the first stanza of Part 2 of Swinburne's poem reveals, the Greek blind seer musing over Antigone's fate appears in a dream-vision of the lyrical 'I.' As the vision flickers and changes, the reader is presented with a greyish landscape at twilight, made desolate with the wailing wind, and "One like a prophet" (l. 266) leans over "A pale and living body full of grace / There lying" (ll. 274–275). What follows is a sequence of visions in which the subsequent mysterious prophet-figures attempt to resurrect Antigone, who has now turned into the personification of dormant Italy. Ultimately, the third prophet is successful in breathing "love upon her sealed and breathless mouth" (l. 362), and the poem ends on a positive note, as she is brought back to life at the break of a new day. This has apparently been foreshadowed in Part 1, where Swinburne's Tiresias already prophesies the coming of freedom, truth and "death cast out and life devouring death" (l. 142).

Thus, the second part of Swinburne's poem is important in that it both illuminates the use of Greek mythology in the first part and reveals the purport of the whole poem as related to the spirit of revolution in nineteenth-century Europe. Robert A. Greenberg comments that "classical myth proves to be of limited use, and he [Swinburne] must advance beyond it — somehow violate its accepted bounds — to establish its modern viability" (181). He then quotes Swinburne from a letter to William Michael Rossetti in which the poet speaks of "a poem on Tiresias at the grave of Antigone," with Antigone symbolising "liberty in the abstract (or more especially as incarnate in Italy…)" and the prophet standing for "any prophet, patriot or freethinker you will from Dante to Mazzini" (183). Swinburne turns the figure of the mythical prophet Tiresias of the first part of the poem into the prophet as an archetype, in this way making it possible to embrace such diverse figures as Dante

and his contemporary hero Mazzini. Finally, the lyrical 'I' himself can also be counted as yet another one in the line of prophets, with the poem as his own prophetic vision.

All the three poems discussed in this part exemplify the ways in which mythological characters provide the Victorian poets with an *alter ego*, a mask which allows them to add a universal dimension to their personal feelings and reflections. While "Tithonus" may be interpreted as a tale of the fate of a visionary poet, the two "Tiresias" poems touch upon the question of the visionary as one who aspires to the public role of the prophet. Both Tennyson and Swinburne apparently use the persona of the Greek blind seer as their mouthpiece. In this way, they reflect the Romantic notion of the poet as both prophet and outcast, endowed with a greater insight into the nature of things, but at the same time exiled to the margin of society. Still, the two "Tiresias" poems function in different ways. Despite some modifications, Tennyson's dramatic monologue is grounded in a particular mythical situation and the main goal of Tiresias's speech is to persuade Menoeceus to follow his advice and thus to break Athene's curse of incredulity. The prevailing mood of the poem is that of acute isolation and loneliness of the seer, which may be seen as reflecting the mood of Tennyson himself at the time of writing it. On the other hand, in Swinburne's monologue, Antigone's deed and subsequent death only provide a starting point for a reflection of a more universal nature, which is in turn linked to a particular historical situation of the nineteenth-century fight for Italian independence. The poet has used the figure of the Greek seer in a truly Romantic fashion to prophesy the forthcoming freedom of the Italian nation embodied in the figure of the waking Antigone.

The Mood of Restlessness

It seems that, next to the sense of stagnation, the nineteenth-century poet's isolation could also be expressed through the sense of restlessness. The persona of the artist, unable to fit in with the place and people surrounding him, embarks on a quest for his true identity and a deeper meaning in his life. His way to find it often leads him to the realm of the supernatural. Thus, the legends examined in this part combine the motif of the poet's alienation with the other two already analysed in the previous chapters — the quest and the otherworlds. This combination of motifs will be discussed in the Victorian renderings of the Tannhäuser legend in the poems by Swinburne and Morris, as well as Morris's treatment of a northern medieval tale in his "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" from *The Earthly Paradise*. Finally, restlessness caused by the intimations of the Otherworld will also reappear as the main theme in Yeats's "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" based on Celtic folk beliefs.

The Tannhäuser legend, a late medieval story of a Christian knight infatuated with the pagan goddess Venus, enjoyed a renewal of popularity throughout the nineteenth century both in Germany[79] and in England, where it inspired not only Swinburne and Morris, but its various treatments also included a paraphrase of the medieval poem by Richard Monckton Milnes, Aubrey Beardsley's unfinished novel, and Edward Burne-Jones's painting. "The Mountain of Venus" is also one of the tropes discussed in Sabine Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*. According to the legend, Tannhäuser — a famous minnesinger and crusader — grows weary of the world he knows and decides to search for true love in the fabled Mountain of Venus. Yet, the happiness he finds beside the goddess of love proves to be illusory, and so he leaves the Venusberg in order to seek absolution for his sin from the Pope in

79 In the works of German Romantics such as Heine, Tieck, Brentano, and most notably, Wagner. A review of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* by Baudelaire is referenced in Swinburne's *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in relation to the legend.

Rome. But the Pope refuses and declares his sin too great to be pardoned — at least not until the papal staff comes into blossom as a sign of God's forgiveness. Forlorn and disconsolate, Tannhäuser returns to his mistress in the Otherworld, and when the miracle actually happens, the knight is nowhere to be found.

Interestingly, the role of Venus in the story testifies to an earlier, medieval transformation of her status from the ancient Greek goddess of love into a demonic seductress, effected by the advent of Christianity. Milnes attempts to trace this change in the introduction to his poem:

> [...] in the early Christian imagination, the goddess Venus stood out as the very queen of devildom. Chastity being once proclaimed, not a high and peculiar virtue, but an essential, indispensable, requisite of the Christian character, the antagonist appetite became a terrible evil, and the patroness and representative of it in the popular mind the worst of demons. The gods of Power would soon find themselves overcome: One had come into the world greater than they, and they must bend and pass away before him; but unconverted man owned, and would ever own, the reign of Venus; and she was there even attempting to seduce the very holiest. She might be subdued and driven from the world at last, but not as long as vice was in the breast of man, open to her voice and ready for her rule. No wonder, then, that Venus is the great bond between Pagan and Christian tradition. (124)

What is more, she no longer inhabits her Olympian abode but has been forced into the secrecy of her subterranean kingdom of the Venusberg, which is not unlike the Otherworlds known from Celtic legends and folklore. In this way, Venus has apparently shared the fate of the Celtic *sídhe* in St. Patrick's Ireland.

It appears that it is precisely this pagan-Christian dichotomy that lies at the heart of Tannhäuser's conflict of loyalties. It is also the essence and pivot of Swinburne's poem, "Laus Veneris." He explains that "[t]he tragic touch of the story is this: that the knight who has renounced Christ believes in him; the lover who has embraced Venus disbelieves in her" (1866, 16). Once again, it seems that this inner conflict may be best explored through the use of the dramatic monologue. Such a choice of the literary form proves to be of great importance to the way Swinburne reshapes

the legend — from the subjective perspective of its protagonist whose viewpoint is strongly influenced by his Christian mindset. The knight tells his story after his hopes for absolution have been shattered and he has reluctantly chosen the lesser evil — the return to his pagan lover. He is thus left to "[t]he immortal agony of a man lost after all repentance," one that is "desirous of penitential pain, and damned to joyless pleasure" (1866, 16).

His acute sense of guilt is projected onto the way he perceives the Horsel with its oppressive, hot-house atmosphere:

> Inside the Horsel here the air is hot;
> Right little peace one hath for it, God wot;
> The scented dusty daylight burns the air,
> And my heart chokes me till I hear it not. (ll. 25–28)

Neither does the nightfall bring any respite, and instead, the knight is forever doomed to insomnia:

> Night falls like fire; the heavy lights run low,
> And as they drop, my blood and body so
> Shake as the flame shakes, full of days and hours
> That sleep not neither weep they as they go. (ll. 49–52)

This supposedly paradisiacal abode of Venus in Tannhäuser's eyes becomes "sad hell where all sweet love hath end" (l. 179), but the suffering never ceases. It is peopled by the great lords and ladies of the past who have also fallen victim to the ruthless goddess of love, and who are now "trodden as grapes in the wine-press of lust" (l. 191). Grey and sad, they inevitably bring to mind the ghosts of captive kings and princes in John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Even when viewed from the outside, the Venusberg ominously presents itself as "White cursed hills, like outer skirts of hell" (l. 342).

The knight's suffering seems to result from his present condition; he is a mortal deprived of his natural environment of mutability and arrested in a supernatural realm where there is "no change of cheer" (l. 153).

This pain is so unbearable that he envies his fellow human beings, other lovers, who can cherish their relationship for a time and then find peace in the oblivion of death. Not only does he yearn to be released back into the natural world with its fresh breeze, the sea, and changing seasons, but he craves to literally become one with nature:

> Ah yet would God this flesh of mine might be
> Where air might wash and long leaves cover me (ll. 53–54)
>
> Ah yet would God that stems and roots were bred
> Out of my weary body and my head (ll. 57–58)
>
> Would God my blood were dew to feed the grass,
> Mine ears made deaf and mine eyes blind as glass (ll. 61–62)

Swinburne returns to this theme later in the poem when the knight muses on the Pope's words about the blossoming of his staff as the sign of absolution. Obviously, these words were meant to stress the gravity of the knight's sin beyond repentance, and Tannhäuser never learns of them being fulfilled. But to him they are impossible in yet another sense. In his mind, he himself turns into a "dead stem, / This waste wan body and shaken soul of me" (ll. 379–380) that will never come into leaves (cf. Binias 165). His imagination torments him with images of riding knights, which remind him of the active life of glorious fight in God's service that used to be his own. But now, from behind "the gold bars of the gates" (l. 82), reminiscent of those in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel," he is constantly teased and haunted by the shadows, sounds and scents from the world outside.

Such emphasis on the knight's psyche at this particular point in Swinburne's rendition of the legend, as well as the above-mentioned sense of inertia and changelessness he experiences, suggests strong resemblances to Tithonus's situation in Tennyson's poem.[80] This is further underlined

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80 Cf. A comparison of the two dramatic monologues in McSweeney's "Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* 1866" (682).

by close parallels between the two dramatic monologues when both speakers complain about their lot and compare it to that of other mortals:

> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
> The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
> And after many a summer dies the swan.
> Me only cruel immortality
> Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
> Here at the quiet limit of the world,
> A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
> The ever-silent spaces of the East,
> Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.
> (Tennyson, "Tithonus," ll. 1–10)

> Behold now, surely somewhere there is death:
> For each man hath some space of years, he saith,
> A little space of time ere time expire,
> A little day, a little way of breath.
>
> And lo, between the sundawn and the sun,
> His day's work and his night's work are undone;
> And lo, between the nightfall and the light,
> He is not, and none knoweth of such an one.
>
> Ah God, that I were as all souls that be,
> As any herb or leaf of any tree,
> As men that toil through hours of labouring night,
> As bones of men under the deep sharp sea.
> (Swinburne, "Laus Veneris," ll. 69–80)

The two figures, both of them mortals in a relationship with a goddess, see death as the only way out of their present unnatural situation, and in both poems the predominant mood is that of hopelessness and despair. However, on closer inspection, this similarity proves to be delusory and misleading. For all its apparent affinities with Tithonus's entrapment, Tannhäuser's imprisonment is in fact self-imposed; it is the result of his own choice. If he is a prisoner at all, it is of his own conscience, with its

deeply ingrained Christian morality which turns his love for Venus into a mortal sin. Still, in Swinburne's poem, the knight's religiosity also appears to be rather half-hearted. What he misses the most is the vividly-depicted scenes of carnage on the battlefield. Barbara Fass Leavy even remarks that "there is nothing save the ennui and hopelessness of Tannhäuser to weigh the decision in favor of Christ" (186).

His reliability as a narrator is further undermined not only by his portrayal of the goddess as a blood-thirsty *femme fatale* while Venus herself is sleeping peacefully by his side.[81] His final resolution to stay with her forever and his sudden glorification of their timeless love also sound unconvincing in the light of what the knight has said before. McSweeney posits that, in the end, Tannhäuser is fully resigned to his fate as he "realises that what he possesses inside the Horsel is enough to sustain him and preferable to a 'barren heaven' beyond" (1981, 132); and Binias argues that "in a psychologically plausible attempt to rationalise the moral splits he is forced to make, he is now driven to perform as the devil's advocate and idealises his time with the goddess in a last effort to reconcile his conflict, neutralise his loss and assuage his guilty feelings" (169). Yet, as Binias goes on to point out, it is rather an act of self-deception on the knight's part.

On the whole, while the original moral conflict from the medieval legend in Swinburne's rendition proves to be strangely diluted if not implausible, perhaps the real underlying dilemma in the poem lies in the bard's choice between his commitment to the world of imagination as opposed to his moral and social obligations in the real world. The poet's inner strife may thus result from the fact that neither of these worlds turns out to be fully satisfying, and ultimately both make him feel like an outcast. Leavy observes that "[t]he cycle of escape, return, and disillusionment could symbolize for the romantic artist his alienation from a world from which subjectivist theories of art and an increasingly

81 For a detailed analysis of the transformation of Venus into a demon in the knight's mind see Binias 150–157.

Philistine reading public helped sever his ties, forcing him to live an imaginative if sometimes guilt-ridden existence" (39). At the same time, though, Tannhäuser's resignation and inertia, along with his apparent propensity for revelling in the depictions of cruelty and violence give him away as a decadent *poète maudit*.

Interestingly enough, Swinburne himself seems to be conflicted as to the way he wishes his dramatic monologue to be received by the public. On the one hand, he declares that his intention was "to rehandle the old story in a new fashion"; on the other, he later qualifies this statement by stressing that "[o]nce accept or admit the least admixture of pagan worship, or of modern thought, and the whole story collapses into froth and smoke" (1866, 16). He thus carefully distances himself from the poem by prefixing it with a quotation from a fabricated source in mock Renaissance French supposedly written by one Maistre Antoine Gaget in 1530.

Even though written about the same time as Swinburne's "Laus Veneris," Morris's "The Hill of Venus" significantly differs from Swinburne's poem in its treatment of the legend. This difference mainly originates in the form that Morris adopts for his work. While he also employs frames as a distancing device, these frames should firstly be considered within a larger scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole. With its motif of reaching the Venusberg, the tale may be seen as yet another foil for the main narrative theme — the quest for the fabled earthly paradise in "Prologue: The Wanderers." However, while the realistic convention of the "Prologue…" makes it impossible for the three companions to reach their destination, the knight in "The Hill of Venus" happens to stumble upon the cave which is the entrance to Venus's otherworldly realm quite by chance, as he is absent-mindedly wandering on horseback through the woods. What is more, the positioning of this tale as the final one in the whole cycle seems to further stress the conclusion reached by the worn-out and forlorn Wanderers; it only shows the futility and final disappointment of their endeavour when it is undertaken by mortals.

The second frame has been established through the person of the diegetic storyteller — the Swabian priest and scholar, Laurence, who, in

turn, relates a story he once heard from "an old forester with thin white hair" (l. 32) when they were both sitting on a felled tree right beside the fabled cavern leading to the Horselberg. This second frame apparently has a similar function to Swinburne's prose summary of the story; but while Swinburne pretends to provide a literary source for his poem, Morris goes a step further in that he gives his tale a sense of immediacy inherent in the tradition of storytelling. Just as he once had it directly from an ancient man well-acquainted with the local folklore, a figure that may bring to mind Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, the Swabian priest is now to retell the legend to the Greek folk assembled in their meeting place on that late February day.

The choice of the third-person narrative as the form of the poem has influenced the pace of the narration, the mood, and the ordering of events in the story. Unlike Swinburne's dramatic persona, Morris's omniscient narrator creates the sense of greater objectivity, and provides a more detailed and leisurely retelling of the whole legend, including its final events taking place after the knight has returned to the Venusberg. Most importantly, however, this choice also influences the portrayal of the knight, allowing more space to explore the feelings of hopelessness and alienation as the driving force behind his quest.

Rather unusually for the third-person narration, the reader is often allowed insight into the knight's musings and dilemmas. While Swinburne's character seems to be driven by external events, Walter's actions in Morris's "The Hill of Venus" are the result of his ponderings at a given point in the story. To begin with, the knight's decision to enter the cave leading to the enchanted realm of Venus is dictated by the overpowering sense of ennui. He is weary of his usual knightly diversions, and his love affairs never last very long. As he finds himself on a plain in the middle of an ancient forest, which used to be considered holy "before the coming of the Rood" (l. 10), he is inclined to believe in the old tales about the Hill of Venus associated with the place, and the legendary love stories seem much truer than his own past loves:

> Some lack, some coldness, cursed them all, and none
> The void within his straining heart might fill;
> For evermore, as if against his will,
> Words of old stories, turned to images
> Of lovelier things, would blur the sight of these. (ll. 108–112)

This yearning for love emboldens him to take the risk and enter the mouth of a cavern promising "unheard-of bliss" (l. 80), even if it is to be followed by "earthly evil, or no doubtful hell" (l. 82). The sense of the supernatural permeating this scene of crossing the threshold into the Otherworld[82] has been heightened through the accompanying change in the weather:

> Grim on that day it was, when the sun shone
> Clear through the thinner boughs, and yet its light
> Seemed threatening; such great stillness lay upon
> The wide-head oaks, such terror as of night
> Waylaying day, made the sward yet more bright,
> As, blotting out the far-away blue sky,
> The hard and close-packed clouds spread silently. (ll. 15–21)

The ominous silence enveloping the place anticipates the coming of the storm which is already looming on the horizon. As the storm breaks, the knight makes the final step, also marked by throwing away his sword, the symbol of his rank in the world he leaves behind.

The way the knight's sojourn inside the Hill of Venus is presented in the two poems constitutes one of the most striking differences between Swinburne's and Morris's accounts of the legend. In the former, as has been noted above, the knight seems to be burning in hell along with his fellow sufferers — the legendary lovers from the past. The hell in the latter rendition is only created in Walter's mind as opposed to the pastoral descriptions of Venus's garden of love and its happy inhabitants. However, as was the case with the Otherworlds discussed in the previous

82 In order to reach the cave, Morris's knight first has to cross a stream. Passing through a body of water is also a common motif in Celtic folklore about journeys into the Otherworlds.

chapter, this earthly paradise also seems to be unreal and lacking in substance, resembling the languorous and dreamy scenes in paintings by Edward Burne-Jones, as in this image of the singers:

> A while, indeed, the wood might seem more sweet,
> That there had been the passionate eyes of them
> Wandering from tree to tree loved eyes to meet;
> That o'erblown flower, or heavy-laden stem
> Lay scattered, languid 'neath the delicate hem
> That kissed the feet moving with love's unrest,
> Though love was nigh them, to some dreamed-of best. (ll. 350–356)

While Morris's knight is enjoying his stay with the beautiful goddess, he is increasingly tormented by questions which are met with silence. He cannot believe he has been destined to be Venus's only lover, he is worried this perfect love may one day prove to be a sinful, "vile dream" (l. 634), and he is also troubled by some strange unrest and longing for his own "earth's sorrowing folk" (l. 649). Thus, " 'Twixt lessening joy and gathering fear, grew thin / That lovely dream, and glimmered now through it / Gleams of the world cleft from him by his sin" (ll. 616–618). As he is finally rushing back to the mouth of the cavern, driven by the feelings of fear and despair, the once lovely bower appears to him as "That lonely hell the grey moon yet made bright" (l. 682).

The knight's experiences after his re-emergence onto the earth complete his portrayal as an outcast. Walter himself now looks like some otherworldly creature[83] with "a strange-wrought golden crown, / Mingled with roses, faded now and brown" (ll. 789–790) and a "glittering, gauzy, strange array" (l. 862), which is "frail as is the dragon-fly's fair wing" (l. 796), holding in his hand his old rusty sword he has found in the grass, all tangled in the weeds. This outlandish appearance, along

83 That he is well aware of this fact is shown in the scene where he decides to rob a peasant cottage of some clothes, a spear and money, leaving in return his withered fairy garb. As he does so, he wonders whether the fairy jewels will bring a curse upon the folk, "As in the tales he once deemed vainly made / Of elves and such-like" (ll. 913–914).

with his haggard face and a hopeless stare, scares the people he meets on the way so that they run away in fear. This leads to a painful realisation that he no longer belongs here, either, and that he "was come back again / Unto a lost world fresh fulfilled of pain" (ll. 803–804). As in the case of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and Yeats's Oisín, the knight's supernatural experiences have forever separated him from his fellow men. Unlike Oisín, however, he is hopeful of finding redemption in Christian faith, and thus embarks on a pilgrimage to Rome. In Morris's "The Hill of Venus," this is not a solitary journey of the main character, but a concerted endeavour of common folk seized by the fear of the impending Last Judgement, which Morris achieves by setting the story at the turn of the millennium.

Ever since the knight leaves the Venusberg, everything seems to him to be but a day-dream. Not only does he appear as a "weary ghost" (l. 987) to the poor folk that he meets, but in turn, to Walter, the world seems ghostly and unreal. Even Rome, the place where he hopes to be granted absolution and saved from despair, proves disappointing:

> [...] like a town of ghosts it seemed
> To Walter, a beleaguered town of ghosts;
> And he felt of them, little though he dreamed
> Amid his pain of all the marshalled hosts
> That lay there buried mid forgotten boasts;
> But dead he seemed as those his pleasures were,
> Dead in a prison vast and void and drear. (ll. 1197–1203)

Moreover, when he is finally admitted before the Pope, instead of feeling piety and joy at the sight of holy pictures, he is suddenly seized with the vision of his beloved Venus. Whether the vision is real or just a projection of Walter's longing so far suppressed in his unconscious, its appearance plays an important part in the resolution of the story. It triggers a series of questions, which, even though again remain unanswered, allow Walter to realise his true feelings and finally make up his mind. Urged by the Pope, the knight makes out a powerful case for his love to a pagan goddess; while he acknowledges the evil nature of his beloved, he yet

openly states that her realm is where he truly belongs. He has thus passed judgement upon himself — by calling himself an outcast — even before he reveals his story to the Pope. Yet, Walter also bitterly questions the Pontiff if all the folk who worshipped pagan gods should be uniformly condemned as sinners beyond redemption. In this way, Morris may be alluding to the very transformation the status of Venus underwent from the ancient times unto the Christian Middle Ages, when the former goddess of love was vilified as a lecherous demon. Walter's words that he is going to return to the hellish Venusberg are also reminiscent of Oisín's assertion at the end of Yeats's poem, where the Celtic warrior-bard passionately declares that he would gladly follow his Fenian companions into hell rather than stay and live in St. Patrick's Ireland.

Critics have read Walter's declaration as Morris's statement about his own faith. Jessie Kocmanová observes that "Morris is in no sense identifying himself with Christian belief; in fact, his version of the tale is directly in contradiction to this, for Walter finally affirms, instead of denying his love" (113). Charlotte H. Oberg also shares this view in her comparison of Swinburne's and Morris's renditions of the Tannhäuser legend:

> Morris's poem is quite different from Swinburne's treatment of the legend, "Laus Veneris," which drips with the consciousness of sinful sensuality secretly and guiltily to be indulged in defiance of God until the final trump shall sound. Morris, in short, is much more the pagan than is Swinburne. In "The Hill of Venus" the here and now of paganism triumphs over the hereafter of Christianity. (62)

In fact, when these two poems are compared, it seems that it is Morris's development of the story that renders the knight's final avowal of love for Venus much more plausible than is the case with Swinburne's dramatic monologue, where the same conclusion may ring somewhat false in the context of the knight's previous reflections on his situation in the Horselberg.

Moreover, critics have apparently overlooked one important change resulting from such a reworking of this scene. In Morris's version of the legend, the denial of absolution on the Pope's side is not a response to

the knight's sin, but to his firm refusal to repent for his sojourn with Venus. The Pope's words, "Yea, dwell there evermore!" (l. 1460) seem but an echo of Walter's own resolution. In accordance with the story's medieval sources, the Pope then adds, "just so much hope I have of thee / As on this dry staff fruit and flowers to see!" (ll. 1461–1462). Yet, Morris devotes the last scene of the poem to the insight into the Pope's doubts about his harsh judgement upon the knight, and his joy at the miraculous sign of God's grace — the blossoming of his staff, the final sight before he passes away in peace. In this way, Morris seems to have exonerated the unsympathetic figure of the Pope from the medieval account of the legend, whose negative portrayal has been considered as proof of the legend's German Protestant background.[84]

All in all, the Tannhäuser legend tells the story of a flight from the state of spiritual stagnation. Both the supernatural and natural worlds lure the knight with the hope of a better life, and in the end, both prove to be inadequate and disappointing. Yet, the knight's journey between the two worlds finally allows him to realise his true feelings. As Leavy aptly concludes, it is not the finding of the earthly paradise that in the end proves the ultimate source of happiness, since "Man must do more than achieve immortality and everlasting bliss, or find an antidote for human misery; he must achieve some understanding of that which from within or without governs his destiny" (208). While very much emphasised in Morris's version, this understanding has not been gained in the case of Swinburne's dramatic persona, who seems to be resigned to his stay in the Horselberg as only a slightly better alternative to the stigma of being beyond redemption in the Christian world.

The condition of life-in-death and the dichotomy of dream versus reality are also important themes in one of the longest and most elaborate tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon." This medieval story for September is also one of the most

84 "It is certain then that the figure of the unforgiving pope owes its existence to sentiment bitterly hostile to the papacy, and such sentiment is to be looked for on German, rather than on Italian soil" (Remy 66).

interesting examples of Morris's creative approach to his sources. It has been inspired by a northern fairy tale, "The Beautiful Palace East of the Sun and North of the Earth," included in Benjamin Thorpe's *Yuletide Stories*, but Morris also draws on *Lai de Lanval* by Marie de France, and the *Arabian Nights* (Boos in Morris 2002, 2: 32; Mackail 1: 205). As John William Mackail points out, "the remarkable framework of the story, an involution of dream within dream through shadowy transmigrations of personality, is wholly the poet's own" (1: 205).

The story follows a pattern which is already familiar from Morris's "Ogier the Dane," the Tannhäuser legend, and Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín." John, a misfit and the youngest son of a farmer, wins a fairy love, one of the seven swan-maidens, and is subsequently taken to live with her in the Otherworld, but after three years, he is compelled to return to his own world. The mysterious tidings about some trouble in his land are never fully explained, so that sending her lover away seems to be more of a task that the lady sets to test his patience and loyalty. John is told to remain in his father's hall and each night visit the place of their first meeting, awaiting a sign from the fairy; but he is strictly forbidden to summon her himself. However, at Yuletide, John's overwhelming longing for his beloved makes him break the taboo and call out to her, which, after a brief reunion, leads to their separation. Before the break of dawn, the lady steals out of their chamber and disappears into the moonlit winter night, while the only indication of her whereabouts is what she whispers to her sleeping lover before parting:

> Ah, that my hope thy dream might pierce!
> That mid the dreadful grief and tears,
> Which presently shall rend thine heart,
> This word the cloud might draw apart:
> My feet, lost Love, shall wander soon
> East of the Sun, West of the Moon! (ll. 2025–2030)

The remaining part of the story tells of John's long quest to find the fabled land and regain his fairy love.

This northern folk tale, which in Thorpe's collection is a straightforward quest for a fairy bride imprisoned in her palace in the Otherworld, has been reshaped by Morris so that its main focus is on the psychological insight into the sense of alienation experienced by the main character. This has been shown as his almost continuous sensation of living in a dream. From the very onset, John is presented as a misfit, a moonstruck loiterer, who seems to be predestined to witness some extraordinary happening. Yet, this is also why he is able to watch his father's field all night without falling asleep, and see the intruders, the task that his more practical-minded and hard-working brothers could not complete. The sight of swan-maidens dancing on the meadow resembles a dream and it is in a state of dreaming that he is carried away to the Otherworld and back:

> [...], till rest,
> As deep as death as soft as sleep,
> Across his troubled heart did creep;
> And then a long time seemed gone by
> And 'mid soft herbage did he lie
> With shut eyes, half awake, and seemed
> Some dream forgotten to have dreamed,
> So sweet, he fain would dream again;
> Then came back memory with a pain,
> Like death first heard of; with a cry
> And fear swift born of memory
> He oped his eyes, that dazed with light
> Long kept from them, saw nought aright; (ll. 824–836)

The scene of John's passage from his own world into the fairyland is reminiscent of the dreamer's experience in Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. In a similar fashion, the protagonist falls in a deep trance and is transported into another world where he is granted a deeper understanding of human emotions. However, while in Keats's epic, the dreamer's poetic schooling, guided by Moneta, comes through pain and suffering, in Morris's tale, John is brought into "the place / Where

love may still be happiness / Unmixed with change and ill distress" (ll. 736–738). Once he is back in his own world, the dissonance between reality and his perception of it widens even further. A detailed and precise depiction of the familiar places is contrasted with John's increasing sense of not belonging and a tendency for day-dreaming about his beloved; yet, at some point, even his past life with his fairy wife also starts to blur.

After the fairy's abrupt leaving, John wakes to a new reality, which paradoxically appears to him more real than before. His despair turns into a fierce determination to embark on a quest in search of his beloved. He is directed by some vague memory that he is trying to recover from his unconscious:

> Then as he wandered on forlorn,
> From out his unrest was there born
> Some faint half-memory, that did seem
> To be the remnant of a dream; (ll. 2267–2270)

> ...still the memory
> Of some faint, dreamlike thing gone by
> Perplexed his heart, and still he strove,
> Amid the anguish of his love,
> To speak that half-remembered word,
> Amidst a dream, belike, once heard. (ll. 2329–2334)

The final part of Morris's poem devoted to the quest brings to mind the journey of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The ship moves as if in a dream, "The helmsman steered as though he dreamed / Of seafolk's marvels vaguely told / By firesides in the days of old" (ll. 2366–2368). John passes the whole journey in a state between life and death, uncertain if it is reward or punishment that he seeks:

> And 'midst it all John scarcely knew
> Whether he lived still, or was dead:
> Well-nigh it came into his head,
> That he by ghosts of men was borne

From out his wasted life forlorn
O'er a strange sea to some strange place
Of unknown punishment or grace. (ll. 2372–2378)

His troubled memory is finally relieved by a sudden revelation at the magical moment at sunrise when a pale moon is still visible in the sky, as if creating a real-life emblem of the Land East of the Sun, West of the Moon. Yet, soon, his quest turns into pointless wanderings in search of some information about this vaguely recalled name of the land, and his own story changes into a tale, while he grows old before his time and is arrested in a state of emotional paralysis, with nothing to stir him. In the end, even his fellow seafarers fear his strange indifference and equanimity with which he faces the vicissitudes of the arduous journey. When he finally reaches his destination, this is anticipated by another transient moment in between day and night:

[...] the western sky
Was bright and clear as night drew nigh
Beyond all words to tell; at last
He shivered; to the tall white mast
He raised his eyes just as the sun
Blazed at his lowest: day was done,
But yet night lingered, as o'erhead,
With a new-kindled hope and dread,
The thin-curved moon, all white and cold,
'Twixt day and night did he behold. (ll. 2609–2618)

The sight brings him peaceful sleep and a dream-vision of his love, while the ship is caught in a violent storm. As if mirroring John's emotional lethargy, the inhabitants of the eponymous Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon also appear to be sad, lifeless marionettes, mechanically going after their daily duties. The spell breaks only when John holds the hands of his beloved and tells her the story of their love. Thus, this Otherworld is literally afflicted by the lack of human touch, which is the only way in which the inhabitants of that seemingly happy valley

may be released from their torpor. Such a solution connects this land with other supernatural worlds where the endless merriment appears to be superficial, and it is the mortal with his human joy and sadness that constitutes the only real element, often posing threat to the illusory gaiety of the fairy folk.

The theme of dreaming finds its parallel in the intricate three-part narrative framework of the tale. The story of John the day-dreamer itself appears in a dream vision of one Gregory the Star-gazer. He lives in Norway in the times of King Magnus, and people respect and fear him a little not only because he is a warrior, "stout of heart" (l. 8), but for his demeanour:

> [...] and his black eyes
> Folk deemed were somewhat overwise.
> For of the stars full well he knew,
> And whither lives of men they drew. (ll. 9–12)

Later, as he finally wakes up from his dream, the daylight of the new day seems to him harsh and glaring, and he is still deeply engrossed in sad thoughts on how the world is "a rude and friendless place" (l. 3319):

> He stood by as they launched the boat,
> And little did their labour note,
> And set no hand thereto at all;
> Until an awe on these did fall;
> They muttered: Ah, the Star-gazer
> Beholdeth strange things drawing near! (ll. 3333–3338)

He may thus recall the awe-inspiring poet-prophet of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," who mesmerises his audience with the retelling of his dream vision. Another similarity between the two figures lies in the fact that Gregory's dream is also interrupted. But unlike in the case of Coleridge's poet, whose vision is irrevocably lost, each time Gregory falls asleep again, his relationship with the narrator of the tale becomes closer. First, he listens to a wondrous story told by a richly-clad stranger in the

great hall of King Magnus at Christmas festivities.[85] As their eyes meet, this unexpected visitor seems to be Gregory's double:

> Then Gregory dreamed he turned his head
> Unto the stranger, and their eyes
> Met therewith, and a great surprise
> Shot through his heart, because indeed
> That strange man in the royal weed
> Seemed as his other self to be
> As he began his history. (ll. 98–104)

This uncanny sensation deepens in the second part of the dream, as Gregory now realises that he is the storyteller himself. Finally, in the third part, he is one with John, and hence, he is dreaming his own story about the quest for his love into the Otherworld.

On the other hand, within the dream, John also becomes the narrator of the story of his life, yet he presents it as some fantastic tale that he keeps telling over and over again during his wanderings in England, another trait he shares with the Ancient Mariner. Once, he even attracts the attention of a monk at the Abbey of St. Albans, who is an avid collector of legends. Kocmanová observes that "by introducing the old monkish chronicler as a concrete character [Morris] both reminds us of the way in which such tales have been preserved, and also, even at the moment when John is most out of contact with the real world, emphasises the existence

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85 The stranger's entry in the hall at Christmas apparently mirrors a similar scene within the story when John crosses the threshold of his father's hall after his return from the fairyland, and is also greeted as a stranger:

> And pushed the door; then like a sun
> New come to a dull world he stood,
> Gleaming with gold from shoes to hood,
> In the dusk doorway of the place,
> Whence toward him now turned every face. (ll. 1228–1232)

His outlandish appearance also evokes Walter's apparel on his re-emergence from the Hill of Venus.

of that world" (64). Moreover, later on, John even starts inventing possible endings to his tale, a pastime which brings him temporary consolation in his misery. Similarly, in the end, Gregory also decides to weave his dream "into verses smooth" (l. 3356) and in this way comfort his weary heart. Thus, Morris's tale about "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" may be read as a metanarrative on the therapeutic function of storytelling, which proves to be some cure for the sense of alienation and disappointment with the mundanity of everyday life — to John the day-dreamer, Gregory the Star-gazer and also to the Wanderers, the narrators of the tale (cf. MacCarthy 240). In the final analysis, finding solace in the shared experience of storytelling is the main purpose of Morris's work, as has been proposed in the "Apology" opening *The Earthly Paradise*, even if the tales are but some idle dreams.

The final poem I would like to discuss in this chapter is Yeats's "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" (1891). The poem differs significantly from all the ones examined above in that it is not based on any particular myth or legend, but on Irish folklore, and yet, in a way, it also includes all the three major motifs — the quest, the otherworlds, and the alienation of its character. In fact, the poem consists of sketches of four intense moments, in which the man, apparently some nameless Irish peasant, is arrested in his daily pursuits by a glimpse of the fairyland. In each case, he seems to have just achieved fulfilment in his quests — for love, prosperity, vengeance, and final peace in his grave; and each time, this sense of contentment is belittled and ruined by the comparison with the seemingly much more profound emotions experienced by the *sídhe*.

The poem is based on the Irish folk belief that the mortal world and the Irish fairyland exist side by side and the inhabitants of both worlds may at any time cross the often invisible boundary. This belief must have been known to Yeats from a very early age when he used to spend his holidays with his maternal grandparents in Sligo, and was later examined in greater detail in his extensive research for the two collections of Irish folklore and his original but folk-inspired stories of the *Celtic Twilight*. In each of the four stanzas, the vision is brought upon the man through

a song by a lowly creature of the natural world — a fish, a lug-worm, a knot of grass and the worms in the earth. In this respect, the poem may be compared to William Blake's *The Book of Thel*:

> What Yeats achieved in this poem is a demythologized version of Blake's beautiful epyllion *The Book of Thel*, where the visionary voices rising out of nature attempt to comfort Thel, yet teach her instead a lesson she declines to learn, the necessity of descent into Experience. Yeats's dreamer has spent his life descending, but vision vexes his dull dream of life to nightmare, and he fails each test he must endure, learning only discontent and never the wisdom his descent might have taught him. (Bloom 1972, 115)

While Bloom makes an interesting point, he appears to overlook the fact that Yeats's poem may be read as *The Book of Thel* in reverse. The man is the representative of Blake's world of Generation, who is disturbed by visions coming from the world of perfect happiness to which Thel belongs.

Unlike in "The Wanderings of Oisín," where the exploration of the three Islands of the Blessed is the major theme of the poem, in "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," the man is never granted a full vision of the Otherworld; there are only fleeting insights that appear to him in the moments of transcendence. The poem consists of regular, symmetrical stanzas, in which the first half, devoted to some event in the man's life, is counterbalanced by the otherworldly vision in the second half. This creates a pattern in which the folk theme, with its concrete place names and country life, is juxtaposed with the literary, tapestry-like depictions of the higher world. The weaving imagery is especially dominant in the first and third stanza:

> But when a man poured fish into a pile,
> It seemed they raised their little silver heads,
> And sang what gold morning or evening sheds
> Upon a *woven* world-forgotten isle
> Where people love beside the *ravelled* seas;
> That Time can never mar a lover's vows
> Under that *woven* changeless roof of boughs: (ll. 5–11, italics mine)

> But one small knot-grass growing by the pool
> Sang where — unnecessary cruel voice —
> Old silence bids its chosen race rejoice,
> Whatever *ravelled* waters rise and fall
> Or stormy silver fret the gold of day,
> And midnight there *enfold them like a fleece*
> And lover there by lover be at peace. (ll. 29–35, italics mine)

These weaving metaphors enhance the sense of changelessness and timelessness; but also, on the other hand, they make this Otherworld seem distant and unreal, as if belonging to another age. They may also betray the influence of Yeats's hero from his youth, William Morris.

The second group of images recurring throughout the poem is connected to the colours silver and gold, which may reflect Yeats's interest in alchemical symbolism.[86] In the first stanza, the fish have "silver heads" (l. 6) and sing of "gold morning and evening" (l. 7); in the second stanza, the colours of "the golden or the silver skies" (l. 21) are repeated in "the sun and the moon" (l. 23); in the third stanza, "stormy silver fret the gold of day" (l. 33); and in the fourth, they reappear in the image of the "glittering summer" (l. 44). This imagery may also be seen as reinforcing the sense of coldness and artificiality of the world of the *sídhe*, in the way it also functions in a much later poem by Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927).

Finally, the third significant image related to the Otherworld is the restless dancer. After a brief appearance in the second stanza, he returns in the final vision of the fairyland as "the dancer by the dreamless wave" (l. 45). Again, while the image of the dancer later evolved in Yeats's poetry to represent the perfection of movement, at this stage it seems to stand for endless activity which never ceases in the changeless Otherworld. In this final disturbing dream vision, the image of the dancer is

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86 Cf. Bloom (1972, 115); Jeffares explains in his note on the poem that "solar and lunar principles when fused are an alchemical emblem of perfection" (1971, 39). The same alchemical imagery later appeared in Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus," discussed in the first chapter.

accompanied by "the dreamless wave" and, in the following lines, by the dreamless lovers who have no need to dream in the land where all their wishes are fulfilled.

Thus, paradoxically, the glimpses into the existence of the dreamless *sídhe* lure the man out of his comfort of the mundane, and leave him dreaming of the world he will never be able to attain. As Peter Alderson Smith concludes, the man "has failed to achieve the supreme happiness of fairyland, but his very imagination of that land is sufficient to alienate him from this" (198). Hence, the resulting restlessness puts him in a similar position to that of all the other legendary characters discussed in this part.

It is perhaps interesting to observe how the persona of the dreamer was already interpreted by the contemporary critics as the *alter ego* of the poet. In his review of Yeats's *Poems*, which appeared in the *Academy* on 6 May 1899, Francis Thompson comments on the poem thus:

> On the whole, it is Mr. Yeats's best poem. And it should be; for he is himself 'the man that dreamed of fairyland'. All his poetry is one plaintive cry for a domain set apart from 'life's exceeding injocundity'. [...] And since every poet is best when he expresses his dominant love, Mr. Yeats is always at his best when he is dealing with the world of fays or spirits. At such times his lightness of touch is exquisite. It is hard to say where the fascination lies. It is as much in the music as the apparent words. (Jeffares 1977, 106–107)

Such a point of view is also endorsed by John Unterecker, who calls it "A prophetic poem, its stanzas could stand as epigraphs for the chapters of Yeats's biography" (82). If that be the case, the Otherworld in "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" could perhaps stand for the higher world of imagination, the source of the fleeting poetic vision.

The present chapter has been another attempt to address the question of the poet's place in society of the nineteenth century. Has the Romantic visionary singer become a modern-day prophet giving spiritual guidance to his fellow men, or a social misfit, an obsolete figure of the past, banished to the margin of society in the age of scientific progress and the Industrial Revolution? The choice of the mythical and legendary

alter egos discussed in this chapter would suggest that in both cases the poet is equally afflicted with the sense of alienation from the real world, so that his exceptional sensibility and imagination may ultimately turn out to be a curse rather than a blessing. In the poems under discussion, this state manifests itself in two ways, as apathy experienced by the mythical figures of Tithonus and Tiresias, and restlessness affecting the legendary medieval and folk characters of the second part, which, however, also turns into a gradual paralysis of will and a growing detachment from reality, so that the line between reality and dream becomes blurred in Morris's tales.

On the mythical/legendary level, this sense of alienation results from the character's previous contact with the supernatural; whether it is the divine gift of prophecy, a temporary sojourn in the Otherworlds with the fairy lover, or nothing more than glimpses into the Celtic fairy-land, they disrupt the character's life, and mark him off from other men. This supernatural touch may be seen as poetic inspiration which, when translated into Jungian terms, indicates the surfacing of the creative impulse from the unconscious, which overwhelms the artist with its images, and brings about the creation of a timeless work of art (Jung 1972, 73). As Jung further explains, this creative process is so demanding and absorbing that it takes up most of the regular store of a man's psychic energy, and hence, leaves the artist deficient, or even dysfunctional, in other areas of life. Moreover, as a direct consequence of such an energy drain, the artist may also experience apathy (1972, 102–103, 79). Ultimately, however, Jung observes that this alienation from society may yet prove beneficial for the artist, as his "relative lack of adaptation turns out to his advantage; it enables him to follow his own yearnings far from the beaten path, and to discover what it is that would meet the unconscious needs of his age" (1972, 83).

Conclusions

The aim of this book has been to explore the ways in which myths and legends were appropriated in new and creative ways in the poetry of Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris, and Yeats. In their works, the universal, mythical motifs may be seen as empty signifiers which are filled with new meanings (new signified) and in this way, reflect the poets' personal concerns as well as broader cultural and social contexts of their times. As I have intended to show in the analytical chapters, in each of the four poets, a similar motif may be employed for different purposes, and thus, is given a different treatment. On the other hand, it is also possible to trace common topics, even though they have been approached through the guise of diverse myths and legends.

In Tennyson's trilogy of "Ulysses," "Tithonus" and "Tiresias," as well as in Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, myth and legend serve a therapeutic function. In his dramatic monologues, all written in 1833, Tennyson translates his own feelings of grief, despair, and helplessness after the death of his friend Arthur Hallam into the sense of entrapment and spiritual paralysis experienced by all the three mythical characters. It is through their respective monologues that they all try to make their lives meaningful again. As the publication of the latter two poems was postponed, "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" took on still further meanings, giving voice to the stance of a now mature poet. While Tennyson seeks

consolation by reshaping well-known Greek myths and adding a personal subtext to the mythical situation explored in each poem, Morris focuses on the healing power of the very act of storytelling itself. As the local community regularly gathers to share the old heroic stories in "Prologue: the Wanderers," the "idle singer of an empty day" offers a timeless realm of myth and legend as a temporary refuge from the gloom and squalor of Industrial London also to his Victorian contemporaries. Such a treasury of myths and legends, compared in the poem to a book with dried petals pressed between its pages, is in fact characteristic of the nineteenth-century passion for collecting. As Linda K. Hughes aptly observes, *The Earthly Paradise* may be perceived as "the product of a self-consciously historical era that saw itself as heir to all preceding ages and cultures whose artifacts were increasingly stored in grand and systematized museums," and hence, as a kind of "compendium of culturally diverse stories preserved in a distinctly modern edifice" (2010, 101). In his later works, Morris's need to escape into other worlds evolved into a socialist utopia in *News from Nowhere* as well as his prose romances of the 1890s, which may be counted among the forerunners of the twentieth-century fantasy genre.

Swinburne and Yeats have both turned to myth and legend as a remedy to a crisis of yet another, spiritual kind. To Swinburne, an Anglo-Catholic turned agnostic, the pagan gods and goddesses personifying the elemental powers of nature seem to have become a much more congenial alternative to the Christian faith, the advent of which, in his "Hymn to Proserpine," replaces the joyous affirmation of life with sorrow and oppression, and which is the source of the knight's self-torment in "Laus Veneris." In Swinburne's myth-inspired poems, the ancient gods and goddesses are formidable figures, looming large as they are shown in their natural environment, often inspiring the speaker in the poem with a sense of primal awe. Described by some critics as "a nineteenth-century Hellene" (Rutland, Ribeyrol), and by yet another as "a wind-worshipper and a sea-worshipper whose poetry springs from sources more antique than words" (Rosenberg 145), Swinburne seems to

be the most successful, out the four poets discussed in this book, in apprehending and giving expression to the classical spirit in the Victorian epoch. This is perhaps best exemplified in "Thalassius," where the poet uses the elements of the mythical pattern of the hero's journey to create a new character, the son of a sea-nymph and Apollo, as his own *alter ego*, and in this way, claim his position in the ranks of the finest poets of all time. On the other hand, Yeats looked to the old Celtic beliefs of the country people, next to occult symbolism and the poetry of Blake and Shelley, to create his own system that would satisfy his spiritual needs after the traditional Christian faith was rendered void for him by the new scientific theories. This need to find a system that would give him insight into higher knowledge was a lifelong search which manifested itself in Yeats's membership in the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn, his attempts to combine his esoteric knowledge with Celtic beliefs in the rites he was trying to devise for his own mystical order throughout the late 1890s, in his studies in Swedenborg, Indian thought, and Neoplatonism, and finally in the system he explicated in *A Vision*. From early on, however, Yeats was aware that the actual granting of such insight to the uninitiated may lead to a still greater sense of dissatisfaction with reality or even, as is the case with Fergus in "Fergus and the Druid," to the annihilation of one's individual self. Interestingly enough, while neither Swinburne nor Yeats could find comfort in the traditional faith, they both still employed quasi-religious language to talk of the vocation of the poet.

But in Yeats's case, his interest in Celtic mythology and folk stories was not merely a private matter. He saw in them perfect source material and inspiration for creating truly national Irish literature. To Yeats, traditional Irish myths, legends, and folklore meant the living spirit of the nation, a uniting power waiting to be restored to its proper significance, and hence, he believed that Irish cultural revival should have its roots in the local beliefs of its people. Thus, in a sense, it may be posited that Yeats quite consciously intended to achieve what Jung describes as the role of the artist in society, namely, to recover mythical archetypes

from the collective unconscious and make them valid for the people in his own epoch. The poems discussed in the present study show his early attempts to combine Celtic myths and folk beliefs with occult symbolism and personal overtones. As he came to see Irish mythology as part of a greater storehouse of universal images, the *Anima Mundi*, it was also the meaning of his later works based on Celtic and Greek myths that acquired a more universal significance, one that was connected with the typology and historical patterns of *A Vision*.

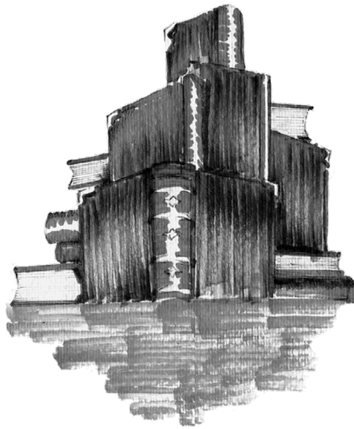
Ultimately, it appears that, in all the four poets, the poems based on myth and legend prove to be the most original and convincing when there is an affinity, a shared emotion, that allows the poet to identify himself with the mythical figure, and, secondly, when the poet does not feel inhibited to freely adapt and modify his sources to accommodate his personal message. Therefore, it is no wonder that such poems are those in which the mythical mask is used to speak of the poet's place in society. The nineteenth-century poet is presented as an heir of the Romantic poets, dedicated to a solitary pursuit of visionary experience; he is attracted by the otherworldly realms of art and imagination, but at the same time, pulled in the opposite direction by his social commitments which would allow him to share his vision with his audience. Yet, as he tries to find a resolution of these conflicting attitudes, he is left with a sense of not belonging to either the fleeting world of imagination or the real world of action.

It seems that this pattern may be traced especially in the course of the literary careers of Tennyson and Yeats. Both poets evolved from solitary visionaries inspired by their Romantic predecessors into socially and politically involved poetic voices, public figures, with the former becoming the Poet Laureate and the latter holding the position of a senator in the Irish Free State. In the final stage of their respective careers they both found themselves once again increasingly at odds with their audience, and hence, withdrew to explore universal spiritual and philosophical themes. This sense of division and alienation accompanied Yeats from his early years, as he often found himself in the position of an outsider.

An Irishman in England and a member of the Anglo-Irish Protestant community in predominantly Catholic Ireland, he made every effort to popularise old Celtic legends, yet, having no knowledge of the Irish language, he was forced to rely on other scholars' translations, and caused controversy by advocating national Irish literature in the English language. Artistically, he did not embrace the aesthetic view of art isolated from life, which was popular among his friends and acquaintances of the Rhymers' Club in the London of the 1890s, and he equally opposed the outright propaganda in the poetry of the nationalist Young Ireland movement. And in his private life, the need to overcome his natural shyness and project an image of himself as a confident man of action for his public endeavours led him to the concept of the mask, the antithetical self, which was later fully developed in *A Vision*, with each mask ascribed to one of the twenty-eight phases of the moon. Throughout his life, Yeats attempted to find a way to reconcile these opposites in what he later termed as "Unity of Being," the perfect harmony between the spiritual and the mortal world, the vision and reality.

However, the dichotomy between the solitary singer/outcast on the one hand and the activist/prophet on the other is also present in the biographies of the other two poets. The wistful and nostalgic tone of Morris's idle singer of *The Earthly Paradise*, if identified with the poet himself, sharply contrasts with his active nature manifesting itself in versatile artistic pursuits as craftsman, designer and lecturer on decorative arts, his active role in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings he founded in 1877, and his socialism of the 1880s. Yet, the daydreamer and the activist seem to have been two co-existing sides of Morris's personality, and so, to Yeats, Morris served as an epitome of an artist who succeeded in unifying his vision with his life. Finally, in Swinburne's case, this shift between the two roles occurred as this self-proclaimed rebel against Victorian morals and proponent of art for art's sake of the first *Poems and Ballads* (1866) changed into a poet-prophet figure of *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871), lending his voice to the Italian Risorgimento.

Thus, in the final analysis, this work has aimed to show how the mythological guise allowed the poets to objectify and universalize their individual experience. Questers for inspiration, seekers of higher knowledge, dreamers versed in ancient lore, born out of their time, escaping from their world into the fairyland, yet struggling to communicate their vision to their contemporaries, the mythological characters have provided the Victorian poets with the masks allowing them to make their message at the same time personal and universal, through the universal appeal of myth.



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A Summary

Literary Appropriations of Myth and Legend in the Poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Butler Yeats

Key Words: *Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne, Yeats, Victorian poetry, myth, legend, archetype, empty signifier, quest, otherworlds, outcast, prophet, escapism, art for art's sake*

The aim of the book is to examine the use of mythical and legendary themes in the selected poems by the four Post-romantic poets, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, William Morris and William Butler Yeats. It is based on two main premises. Firstly, world myths and legends are regional manifestations of the underlying universal patterns, and as such, lend themselves to a comparative study. Secondly, the specific realisations of these common themes are context-dependent, and thus, they may take on different shades as they are adapted and modified by the storyteller/poet retelling the myth.

The book consists of Preface, Introduction, three analytical chapters, and Conclusions. The purpose of the Preface is to delineate the modern theoretical concepts concerning literary myth criticism at the core of the present work, such as Jung's 'archetypes,' Frye's 'mythoi,' Lévi-Strauss's 'mythemes,' and Barthes's 'empty signifiers,' as well as theories taking into account the reception of myth in a given epoch. The Introduction

shows how these notions are rooted in the nineteenth-century theoretical and literary stances concerning the nature of myth — on the one hand, the comparative approach focusing on the universal aspects of myth represented by Müller, Lang, and Frazer, and on the other, the creative approach espoused by the nineteenth-century men of letters, with a special emphasis on the views of myth in Tennyson, Swinburne, Morris, and Yeats. These two complementary approaches to myth in literature as a realisation of a common motif through a literary appropriation serve as underlying concepts for the three main chapters, each of which focuses on the individual creative treatment of one motif in the works by all the four poets.

The first chapter concentrates on the *quest* motif, which in the poems of Tennyson, Yeats, and Swinburne has become a symbolical representation of the poet's search of inspiration and his poetic maturing. In Morris, on the other hand, the metaphorical journey into the realm of myth and legend gives the reader a chance to escape from the ugliness of nineteenth-century Industrial England.

This nineteenth-century escapism is especially visible in the poems based on myths about Greek and Celtic Otherworlds, which constitutes the main theme of the second chapter. Whereas in Swinburne's works, Proserpine's kingdom is presented as a place of peace and respite from the passions, in the poetry of the other three poets, this respite turns out to be illusory, and the life in the Otherworlds is shown as sterile and purposeless. Thus, paradoxically, this seemingly escapist theme may in fact be interpreted as a call to action in the real world.

The third and final motif, common to myths and legends coming from different cultural backgrounds, is the sense of alienation and internal conflict experienced by a mortal in touch with the higher reality. Both Tithonus and Tiresias in the poems by Tennyson and Swinburne suffer from emotional paralysis as they cannot find their place either among the immortals or their fellow men. In Yeats's early poem, glimpses from the world of the Celtic *sídhe* cause unease and dissatisfaction with the ordinary life in its protagonist. Finally, the works by Morris and

Swinburne based on medieval legends combine the theme of alienation with the other two motifs of the quest and the otherworlds, as their main characters turn away from the world they know and embark on the quest which leads them into the supernatural realms, bringing them even greater sense of isolation. These myths and legends appear to reflect the position of the visionary poet torn between his allegiance to the world of imagination and the demands and incomprehension from his community.

Hence, the book shows how the four poets use the mythical and legendary motifs in their poetry to comment on the issues concerning art, faith, politics, and the poet's place in society. For Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne, and Yeats, myths and legends were not just mere stories, but important sources of inspiration which provided them with a means to express their preoccupations and, perhaps inadvertently, the spirit of their times.

Streszczenie

Literackie reinterpretacje mitów i legend w poezji Alfreda Lorda Tennysona, Williama Morrisa, Algernona Charlesa Swinburne'a oraz Williama Butlera Yeatsa

Słowa kluczowe: *Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne, Yeats, poezja wiktoriańska, mit, legenda, archetyp, pusty element znaczący, podróż, zaświaty, wygnaniec, wieszcz, eskapizm, sztuka dla sztuki*

Celem pracy było prześledzenie sposobów wykorzystania mitów i legend w poezji czterech poetów postromantycznych: Alfreda Tennysona, Williama Morrisa, Algernona Charlesa Swinburne'a oraz Williama Butlera Yeatsa. Bazuje ona na dwóch głównych założeniach. Po pierwsze, mity i legendy pochodzące z różnych kultur są w rzeczywistości przejawami tych samych uniwersalnych archetypów, występujących w nieświadomości zbiorowej będącej częścią ludzkiej psychiki, i jako takie stają się przedmiotem badań w mitoznawstwie porównawczym. Po drugie, poszczególne konkretyzacje archetypów są poddawane modyfikacjom w zależności od kulturowych i osobistych uwarunkowań opowiadającego mit.

Książka składa się z przedmowy, wstępu, trzech rozdziałów analitycznych oraz konkluzji. Przedmowa poświęcona jest przedstawieniu najważniejszych terminów z zakresu mitokrytyki, takich jak 'archetyp' Junga, 'mythos' Frye'a, 'mitem' Lévi-Straussa i 'pusty element znaczący' Barthesa, ale też teorii dotyczącej recepcji mitu w danej epoce.

We wstępie opisuję, w jaki sposób terminy te są zakorzenione w dziewiętnastowiecznych studiach porównawczych nad mitem reprezentowanych przez Müllera, Langa i Frazera, jak również w ówczesnym podejściu do mitu jako nieustającego źródła nawiązań i przekształceń u wielu poetów i krytyków literackich romantyzmu oraz w epoce wiktoriańskiej. Wpływy te stają się szczególnie widoczne w twórczości Tennysona, Morrisa, Swinburne'a i Yeatsa, z których każdy na swój sposób nie tylko czerpie z dobrze znanych mitów klasycznych, ale też sięga po legendy celtyckie czy skandynawskie, które dopiero w dziewiętnastym wieku doczekały się pierwszych systematycznych opracowań.

Obydwa podejścia posłużyły mi za punkt początkowy analizy porównawczej trzech motywów mitologicznych w wierszach Tennysona, Morrisa, Swinburne'a i Yeatsa, pochodzących z różnych tradycji mitycznych. Jako pierwszy przedstawiony został motyw wędrówki (*quest*), która w poezji Tennysona, Swinburne'a i Yeatsa staje się symbolem poszukiwania inspiracji oraz rozwijania własnej tożsamości poetyckiej. Z kolei w utworze Morrisa podróż do krainy legend i mitów umożliwia odbiorcy ucieczkę przed odpychającą rzeczywistością dziewiętnastowiecznej, zdominowanej przez rewolucję przemysłową Anglii.

Owa próba ucieczki przed rzeczywistością stała się podstawą zarzutów o eskapizm — często stawianych poezji dziewiętnastowiecznej. Wydaje się, iż tendencja ta jest szczególnie wyraźna w utworach poruszających temat zaświatów, zarówno greckich jak i celtyckich, którym poświęcony został kolejny rozdział książki. Podczas gdy w twórczości Swinburne'a kraina Prozerpiny maluje się jako upragnione miejsce wytchnienia, w wierszach pozostałych trzech poetów wytchnienie to okazuje się krótkotrwałe i iluzoryczne, a życie, jakie bohaterowie wiodą w zaświatach, jest jałowe i pozbawione celu. Paradoksalnie zatem poezja eskapistyczna może być interpretowana jako wezwanie do podjęcia działania w świecie rzeczywistym.

Trzecim motywem wspólnym dla mitów i legend pochodzących z różnych kręgów kulturowych jest wewnętrzne rozdarcie i wyobcowanie śmiertelnika naznaczonego przez kontakt z siłami nadprzyrodzonymi.

Titonos albo Tejrezjasz z wierszy Tennysona i Swinburne'a, pierwszy obdarzony przez bogów nieśmiertelnością, drugi — darem proroczym, nigdy nie staną się równi bogom greckim, nie mogą jednak powrócić do życia, które wiedli jako śmiertelnicy. Podobny niepokój znajduje wyraz w poezji Yeatsa, w której świat irlandzkich *sídhe* cały czas krzyżuje się ze światem zwykłych ludzi. Z kolei utwory Swinburne'a i Morrisa, inspirowane średniowiecznymi legendami, stanowią dopełnienie zarówno ostatniego rozdziału, jak też poprzednich dwóch — dotyczących wędrówki i zaświatów. Ich bohaterowie, wyalienowane jednostki, które nie potrafią odnaleźć się w rzeczywistości, nawiązują kontakt z mieszkankami zaświatów, co jedynie pogłębia ich egzystencjalne rozterki i zapoczątkowuje wyprawę w poszukiwaniu tożsamości. Mitologiczne i legendarne narracje stają się odzwierciedleniem sytuacji poety-wizjonera, który z jednej strony czuje się naznaczony przez kontakt z nadnaturalnymi mocami, a z drugiej stara się odnaleźć swoje miejsce w społeczeństwie, często doświadczając braku posłuchu bądź całkowitego odrzucenia.

Niniejsza praca pokazuje, w jaki sposób czterej tytułowi poeci wykorzystują mity i legendy w swoich utworach, aby — pośrednio — wyrazić opinie na tematy dotyczące sztuki, wiary, polityki lub miejsca poety w społeczeństwie. Dla Tennysona, Morrisa, Swinburne'a oraz Yeatsa mity i legendy nie były jedynie opowieściami z dawnych czasów, lecz stanowiły bogate źródło inspiracji i wątków, poprzez które mogli wyrażać samych siebie, a także, być może nieświadomie, ducha epoki, w której żyli i tworzyli.

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Still have I left a little breath
To seek within the jaws of death
An entrance to that happy place,
To seek the unforgotten face.

WILLIAM MORRIS
"A GARDEN BY THE SEA"

IN MEMORIAM

Ewa Młynarczyk

EWA MŁYNARCZYK (1982–2022) studied English Philology at the Institute of English Studies of the University of Warsaw, graduating in 2008 with an MA thesis that explored Victorian aspects of a medieval theme: "The Arthurian Legend from the Victorian Perspective in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*," written under the supervision of Professor Grażyna Bystydzieńska. Ewa went on to become a PhD student in the Institute, and continued to explore the field of nineteenth-century literature with Professor Bystydzieńska. In the years 2010–2015 she published eight articles on the poetry of the Victorian epoch (the articles are available online: www.ewamlynarczyk.pl). Her main interests included Victorian and modern theories concerning the interpretation of myths as well as the transformations of mythological motifs in Post-Romantic and Victorian British poetry. While she was a PhD student, she worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language at the University of Warsaw.

The book is based on Ewa's doctoral dissertation, which had already been positively reviewed before her untimely death, although her last illness prevented her from taking her final doctoral examinations and receiving the degree of PhD.

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