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## *Pindar and Yeats: The Mythopoeic Vision*

by ANN L. DERRICKSON

FROM THE Greece of Pindar to the Ireland of Yeats, 2,300 years came coursing down the riverbed of history, washing over the widening delta of poetry, leaving layers of political context and literary convention. Yet a shape emerges, despite the shifts of eras and of nations, a form fundamental to the lyric. Thinking about the two poets together, then, helps produce an understanding of what is basic to and defines the genre of lyric poetry. Its nature is not specifically a matter of theme but a relationship of reference; action serves to describe spirit. As in Yeats's phrase from "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the prime concern is "Character isolated by a deed."

Because it is on this plane of human spirit that meaning distills from the works of Pindar and Yeats, their writing shares the label "lyric." For both poets the vital creative tension exists between a given occasion and its associated images, rather than between concepts of present and past or fact and fantasy. As a major term in both of their vocabularies, myth becomes a symbol whose appeal is intellectual, removed from the accidents of external reality. Each of them draws on the prehistoric lore of his country for means of connecting individual and universal myths in a timeless, spiritual sphere. The heroes of legend embody a felt presence, not an allegorical concept, and thus command the emotion that binds personal, national, and natural worlds.<sup>1</sup> It would be false to the soul of these mythopoeic creations to set up nice distinctions between pure myth and forms entangled with legend or folktale. Within these poems the similar function of such imaginative stories blurs such categories. Even contemporaneous political events merge with fictional elements, for all are equally real as expressions of spiritual identities.

Although both Pindar and Yeats gaze through myth at man under the aspect of eternity, their differing world views give individual color to what they see. Yeats is much more aware than his Greek counterpart of his own role in creating his universe, so much so that midway in his poetic career, with the aid of his wife's automatic writing, he purposefully worked out a statement of his private system called *A Vision*. An analysis of Pindar's narration of myth makes it apparent that he consciously uses demigods as

1. Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 24.

symbols, yet he seems to sense a cosmos whose existence is independent of his poetry. It is possible that he himself composed some of the myths he uses, as in O.8, where the scholiasts suggest that the story of Aeacus helping Apollo and Poseidon build the Trojan wall is original with him. But the general system of relating men, heroes, and gods permeated Greek thought of the time. The elevation of mortals to semidivine status was a real and present concept, not a phenomenon of a distant heroic age: Pindar's contemporaries immediately heroized those who fell at Marathon (490) and Plataea (479).

To grasp the sense of a poet's oeuvre one must recognize the structure of his universe. As Valéry wrote, cosmology is one of the oldest of the *literary* arts. Both Pindar and Yeats seek a principle of unity, often expressed through a continuity or harmony of the human and the divine. Pindar suggests this relationship in the opening lines of N.6:

Ἄνδρῶν,  
ἐν θεῶν γένος· ἐκ μιᾶς δὲ πνέομεν  
ματρὸς ἀμφοτέρωι . . .

("One is the race of men, one is the race of gods; and from one mother do we both derive our breath. . .")

The ode continues to say men are similar to gods in mind or at least in nature but grants the distinction between human ignorance and divine knowledge of destiny. It is this difference that often troubles Yeats when he contemplates the coexistence of mortal and immortal. "Leda and the Swan" ends with this question about the woman's experience of union with a god incarnated as bird: "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" In a more expository manner, in "The Blood and the Moon," he restates his view that power and knowledge cannot exist together:

For wisdom is the property of the dead,  
A something incompatible with life; and power,  
Like everything that has the stain of blood,  
A property of the living.

The human-divine distinction does not disturb Pindar because he sees no conflict between the two. Whereas Yeats's *Weltanschauung* focuses on stages of becoming, Pindar's recognizes pure being, permitting absolute coexistence of opposing principles. He captures this vision in the clear, bright image of Iamus, the son of Apollo and Euadne, lying in the golden and deep purple light of pansies (O.6.55). Here divine and human harmoniously blend in the creation of a child and the very colors of his bed. As a mortal, Euadne cannot stand in constant direct relation to the immortal, but the demigod mediates between the realms. Because this link through the heroic is always accessible, the Greek scheme of things achieves permanence. Pindar avails himself of this connection in N.8, written for Aegina, the city of the Aeacidae; the presentation of the ode,

part of the ceremony of crowning the athletic victor, is figured here by the image of the poet on his knees before Aeacus, offering him a fillet decked with song. The world view of a mind that effortlessly imagines itself in the presence of a figure from prehistory must be one of clarity and stability.

Yeats's contact with the past seems much less sure, more theoretical. In *A Vision* he writes that spirits spoke to him directly, instructing him when he was awake, and that others when he was asleep worked out the complexities of their former lives in his dreaming mind. It is difficult, however, to determine the sense in which Yeats intends the assertions in the book he termed his personal mythology; in his poetry it is perhaps in "The Tower" that we see him in his closest communication with the past, but even here it is clearly an imaginative, not a physical contact:

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,  
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,  
Whether in public or in secret rage  
As I do now against old age?  
But I have found an answer in those eyes  
That are impatient to be gone;  
Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,  
For I need all his mighty memories.

He has dismissed all the ghosts of former inhabitants but retained the company of Hanrahan, a character of his own invention. Always for Yeats the important reality is the consciousness of reality, and that awareness comes most surely to a creator. Considering his belief that power and knowledge cannot coexist in the human realm, it is not surprising that a large number of his poems conceal the personal relationship to an expressed philosophy, either through irony in his own voice or through the masks of dramatic voices. When not propounding a general theory or the viewpoint of a single phase of becoming (as in the "Crazy Jane" poems, "The Phases of the Moon," "The Saint and the Hunchback," or "The Man and the Echo"), these voices frequently form a dialogue between abstract antinomies (e.g., Hic and Ille in "Ego Dominus Tuus," the hawk of the mind and its summoner in "The Hawk," or "A Dialogue of Self and Soul").

Since Pindar's poetry attests to his sense of responsibility not only to Thebes but to the whole Hellenic world, when his own city-state adopted a medizing policy and thus set itself off from the majority of Greece, it created an apparent conflict in the poet's loyalties. As an aristocrat, he favored Medism, since the alternative was a union, a popular uprising that would be more threatening to the power of the elite than the Persian invaders themselves. Thebes, Thessaly, and Aegina were the only cities then controlled by an aristocracy and therefore leaning toward Medism, but even Aegina switched to the Greek side in the battles of Salamis and Plataea.<sup>2</sup> To oppose his own city would have created internal strife in Pin-

2. J. Allen DeCou, *The Political Attitude of the Poet Pindar During the Persian Wars*, p. 12

dar's world, which he considered worse than submission to the Persians. This sentiment colors his famous metaphor in I.8 referring to the Persian threat to Hellas as the stone hanging over Tantalus' head. Written after the defeat of the invaders, this ode expresses relief that the city-states are no longer divided, for Pindar's concern lies not with the particular politics of the situation but with the very fact of discord. This seems to be his most significant reaction to the invasions, since his surviving writings contain no more explicit statement of his position. When Alexander destroyed Thebes in 335, he spared Pindar's house, respecting the memory of a man he considered a patriot.<sup>3</sup>

Like Pindar, Yeats maintains a personal independence from which to extrapolate principles of unity with other families, nations, and myth cycles. One of Yeats's major ways of establishing his identity as an individual is through contemplation of his Anglo-Irish origins. For him the feeling of roots enhances even mental processes:

How much of my reading is to discover the English and Irish originals of my thought, its language, and, where no such originals exist, its relation to what original did. I seek more than idioms, for thoughts become more vivid when I find they were thought out in historical circumstances which affect those in which I live, or, which is perhaps the same thing, were thought first by men my ancestors may have known.<sup>4</sup>

Thoor Ballylee, an old Norman castle that he bought in 1917,<sup>5</sup> gratified his aristocratic leanings by providing him with a tangible identification with the landowning class. The pride of possession fills his "Ancestral Houses," the first section of the poem entitled "Meditations in Time of Civil War." This sort of sympathy for ruling classes drew him toward fascism at one point, though he later denied that politics concerned him. This episode suggests, however, a rough parallel with Pindar's Medism.

As an ancient castle, Thoor Ballylee evokes the sense of tradition that he considers the source of Irish civilization. It embodies not only the artistic and aristocratic pose but also specific Yeatsian images. One construct, more fully explained in *A Vision*, consists of a 28-phase cycle of double-gyre rotation representing types of human personality or historical periods that Yeats characterizes as primary or antithetical, objective or subjective, self-denying or self-realizing. When one gyre reaches its fullest expansion, it collapses into the apex of the antinomic gyre whirling within it. Ballylee's "winding stair," then, symbolizes this spiralling motion. Because of Yeats's sense of an impending shift in Ireland's historical phase (the collapse of the subjective gyre), it seems appropriate that Ballylee is falling into ruin. The long climb to its top also suggests the difficulty of achieving a poetic vision and (in the context of "The Tower") Yeats's effort to reconcile himself to thoughts of death. The tower itself recalls Yeats's Thirteenth Cone, a sphere that approximates divine stasis

3. Ibid., p. 30.

4. W. B. Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 293.

5. Mary Hanley, *Thoor Ballylee*, p. 9.

and is the abode of instructing spirits. Standing in sympathetic relation to a specific locale, Yeats finds it important to ground his system of thought in something external and meaningful to others. In a personal letter he explains this feeling:

I like to think of that building as a permanent symbol of my work plainly visible to the passerby. As you know, all my art theories depend on just this—rooting of mythology in the earth.<sup>6</sup>

If Ballylee is for Yeats what Thebes is for Pindar, it is evident that the two poets choose different methods of working from private symbol to wider allegiances. Pindar perceives cities as presences in their own right and thus speaks to them directly, as in the beginning of I.1, where he addresses Thebes and Delos: “τί φίλτερον κεδνῶν τοκέων ἀγαθοῖς;” (“What is dearer to the good than noble parents?”). A connection between the homelands of the laudator and laudandus often serves as a significant link between poet and victor, for the vital tension of the epinician genre depends on setting up a balanced relationship between the two. Thus N.3, for an Aeginetan athlete, begins with a mythological reference that establishes the common origin of Aegina and Thebes: both were named for daughters of the Boeotian river-god Asopus. Poet and victor appear as equals when their cities do, for the identification of individual and homeland is powerful. Pindar often refers to Thebes as his mother and even to Metope, the nymph who bore Thebes, as his “ματρομάτωρ” (O.6.84), “mother’s mother.”

The unity of the Pindaric vision grows clearer when we note the similar relationship between a city and its indigenous heroes. Because the demigod, like the victor receiving the ode, has led a physical existence in a specific place, his spirit mediates between the local and the universal. It is appropriate, then, for the epinician to draw on the body of heroic stories that constitutes a city’s history. Pindar always defines Aegina, for example, by a myth about one of the sons of Aeacus. Addressing his own city at the beginning of I.7, the poet asks:

Τίνι τῶν πάρος, ὦ μάκαιρα Θήβα,  
καλῶν ἐπιχωρίων μάλιστα θυμὸν τεὸν  
εὐφρανᾶς;

(“O happy Thebes, tell me over which of the olden glories of thy land thou hast chiefly gladdened thy heart?”)

The next thirteen lines form a catalogue of Theban myths, an effective variation on the convention of initial mention of a single hero.

Again creating an impression of rich tradition in N.10, Pindar mentions nine legendary Argives within the first triad. The central myth of the ode calls up yet two more figures, Castor and Pollux. Gnostic transitions between sections of an epinician are always significant as expressions of

6. Ursula Bridge, ed., *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Correspondence 1901–37*, p. 109.

the relationship of images in the poet's mind, and here the connection builds on the tradition of *ξενία*, "a guest's gifts." It is suggested that the victor has been aided by the blessing of the Dioscuri because his ancestors once hospitably entertained them. This concept of guestship is crucial to the work of the epinician poet, whose praise becomes valuable because of his honored position as a guest, a representative of the larger national concerns, confirming the wider ties newly created by the native athlete's victory at a Panhellenic game. Thus a principle that governs divine actions in the Greek scheme extends its influence even to Pindar's position as a poet.

Whereas the microcosm-macrocosm correspondence in the Hellenic world builds on certain stabilities and relationships confirmed by myth, Yeats's world is more subject to vicissitude. Using the system of *A Vision*, Yeats succeeds in relating personal symbols to larger bodies of thought, but he does it by examining cross sections of his interpenetrating gyres. He must imagine them arrested in time, whereas Pindar's world is already fixed, affording easy communication between its parts. Yeats also uses places as symbols, but he is estranged by time from the ones he takes as examples of the ideal: Byzantium of the 6th or 11th century, classical Greece, and Renaissance Italy. These countries represent, in his terminology, civilization at the full moon, or Fifteenth Phase, as purely subjective or self-realized as human society can be. Pindar, on the other hand, chooses Aegina to stand for his ideal, but his separation, a matter of space, is easily and frequently resolved.

Just as Pindar consciously works the parallels between his own city-state and the rest of Greece, Yeats expands his private mythology by seeking correspondences with other systems. His early involvement with Rosicrucian and Golden Dawn theories provided him with a useful associative apparatus,<sup>7</sup> which is perhaps at work in "The Statues," a poem that surveys European culture through a comparison of the sculpture of West and East. Similarly, Hermetic tradition developed a memory wheel composed of images or statues to summarize world culture. Analyzing the statues of Greece, Yeats makes Pythagoras represent any creator of an abstract system, in this case the notion of number, which parallels the geometric figures of *A Vision*. Phidias, then, stands for the creative worker who makes the system meaningful by bringing it to fruition in art. The Western conquest of the East depended, Yeats suggests, not on military exploits regulating Asiatic disorder ("the banks of oars that swam upon / The many-headed foam at Salamis") but on real images giving body to Eastern formlessness. The image here ("Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness") again recalls the Hermetic interest in magic and familiars that take on the shapes of others. The cultural overview comes to focus in a single piece of art: the statue of Cuchulain outside the Dublin

7. Northrop Frye, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of *A Vision*" in Denis Donoghue, ed., *An Honoured Guest*, p. 8.

Post Office commemorating the Easter Rising of 1916. Yeats has closed the circle, then, setting Ireland in the same continuum with European art, mythology, philosophy, and history.

Study of comparative mythology created other associative patterns in Yeats's mind. From reading Sir John Rhys and Alfred Nutt, he concluded that Celtic heliolatry and Orphism developed from a common origin.<sup>8</sup> His study of these mythologists' theories helped him see in Irish lore correspondences not only with all other cultures but with his personal system as well. Reinforcing Yeats's belief in transmigration, Nutt's *The Voyage of Bran* interprets the circular journeys of Red Branch or Fenian heroes as symbols of the soul's travels between life and death. Rhys's analysis of the legendary Tuatha battles, which suggests they represent sets of opposites, helped confirm Yeats in his theory of irresolvable antinomies. Another branch of Irish tales deals with the Sidhe, which is a name for fairies and demons of the atmosphere but which Yeats suggested as a cognate for a Sanskrit word in an effort to relate this myth cycle to a Hindu one.

In many of his poems Yeats seems to share Pindar's perception that the artist must buoy himself up on the real world even though he cannot immerse himself in it. He expresses this idea most aptly in the refrain of "Long-Legged Fly," which captures the fragility of the mood of creative genius in the image of a fly skimming over a stream. To break the surface tension would be to lose a generative vitality. In "Sailing to Byzantium," the poet seeks to leave the natural world behind. The transition between realms (that is, the reconciliation of youth and age, passion and intellect) is effected by "singing-masters" from "the holy fire," symbolic, supernatural representations of the wisdom of the inspired soul. In the last stanza the poet says he will take the form of an artificial golden bird and sing "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." Such toys contrast with the natural birds of the first stanza; they are at once superior in their golden perfection and inferior in their mechanized character. Whereas the living birds sing of the cycle of human life, the created ones tell of the cycle of history, yet they remain dependent on the nature they affect to spurn.

In "Byzantium," the companion piece to this poem, the sense of arrival in the sphere of eternal art is more complete. Here the viewpoint has changed to that of the initiate watching the uninitiated arrive. Appropriately, then, this poem recapitulates in reverse order the images of the first: golden bird, purgatorial flames, spirits crossing the sea. Here what was once a man appears in its elemental form, "Hades' bobbin," which has unwound its human incarnations and dreamed itself back to spirit purified of passion. It is this "dreaming back" process that spins off images of the real world, which is traversed by vehicles of soul and measured by hourly bells ("That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea").

8. M. I. Seiden, *The Poet as a Mythmaker*, p. 16.



A feeling of the impossibility of separating the spirit world from the incarnate permeates the works of Pindar and Yeats, for both believe there is constant communication between these realms. One theory of the origin of the Panhellenic games states that they expanded from merely local contests in honor of dead heroes to festivals maintained to foster the unity of Greece. Athletic competitions were traditional following funerals, not only as a distraction for the mourners but as a favor that the spirits actively received and repaid. Pindar recognizes this reciprocal relationship between the dead and the living in O.8.77-80:

ἔστι δὲ καί τι θανόντεσσιν μέρος  
κἄν νόμον ἐρδομένων·  
κατακρύπτει δ' οὐ κόνις  
συγγόνων κεδόναν χάριν.

("Even the dead have share in rites duly paid in their honor, and the noble grace of their kinsmen on earth is not buried in the dust.")

He clearly credits Heracles with responsibility for Sogenes' victory in N.7, since the boy's house sits between two temples dedicated to the hero.

Yeats seems similarly impressed with the strength of the genius of a place or the possibility of his communicating with the old Celtic heroes, though in his case the contact is at an intellectual remove. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," where he turns history into pageantry and friendship into art, he seems attuned to the informing spirit of Ireland, despite the suggestion of conscious literary technique:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.

His poems focusing on Thoor Ballylee feel most directly the benevolent presence of legendary figures, while those on Coole Park draw inspiration more specifically from the shaping aristocratic spirit of the estate's owner, Augusta Gregory.

Much of Yeats's mythologizing, in fact, centers on just such acquaintances as Lady Gregory, who serves often as a symbol of aristocratic Ireland or of the spirit fostering national culture. Of the public figures Yeats heroizes, Parnell is the most prominent. In "Parnell's Funeral" the patriot takes on the semblance of a fallen deity, like a nature god who must yearly die and be reborn through those who eat his heart and thus put on his strength. But his death symbolizes here the collapse of a subjective gyre of history. Because the succeeding gyre is opposed in nature, Parnell's spirit cannot be reborn, and the poem ends in a sorrowful parade of leaders who might have saved Ireland if they had "eaten Parnell's heart."

The most important figure Yeats mythologizes, however, is Maud Gonne, who becomes not only a human archetype but also a sort of

cosmic principle, the *Ewige-Weiblichkeit*. M. I. Seiden has compiled what he calls a partial list of the poems that concern her. Ranging in date from 1892 to 1939, they number one hundred. Like a prism, her image refracts different lights according to the moods and themes of his writing, so that her presence colors his vision of the physically and spiritually beautiful women of Phase Fourteen, the many types of problems they cause their lovers, the antinomies of political radicalism and aristocratic refinement, heroism and the drain of worthless causes, the idea of the transience of life and earthly beauty as opposed to the permanence of the soul and its attractions, and the theme of poetry's power to confer immortality. Maud Gonne is transfigured by myriad associations—among them, the moon, the mystical rose, Helen of Troy, St. Mary, Aoife, Emer, Leda, and all the heroines of statuary and painting.<sup>9</sup> Yeats's comparison of his lifelong love to all these figures seems true to the spirit of Pindar's symbolic and thematic use of mythology. In "Beautiful Lofty Things," in particular, his association of her with Pallas Athene creates an arresting, almost Greek image that halts the recital of trivial events. The chance impression of an instant, the sight of her "straight back and arrogant head," imparts a meaning to the self that the deliberate construction of a life cannot provide.

The legendary figures of Pindar's odes often take on a similar versatility through his selection of the parts of the myth relevant to his concern of the moment. The consciousness of Pindar's art grows apparent when one notices the variations rung on a single heroic subject. The ways in which he approaches the narration of Peleus' story, for instance, reflect the odes' differing thematic emphases. Peleus appears in O.2.77 simply as part of a catalogue of those inhabiting the Islands of the Blessed, which turns out to be as well a list of the many subjects available to the poet. This reference, though only a passing one, contains the characteristics essential to Pindar's purpose. Mention of him is again brief in P.3, where he is paired with Cadmus as another exemplum of the impossibility of unmixed prosperity. This ode passes quickly over his story on to that of Cadmus, since this Theban hero is more useful to Pindar's aim here of glorifying his own city-state in the eyes of the *laudandus*, Hieron.

Appropriately, the references to Peleus in N.3, N.4, N.5, I.6, and I.8 are fuller, since these odes address victors of the hero's city, Aegina. In the first of this set, he serves plainly as a symbol of valor and endurance. The allusion in N.4 is dense with detail yet elliptical, so that the lines seem to wrestle like the athlete himself. The focal point of this account of the myth is Peleus' escape from a treacherous plot provoked by slander, a story that emphasizes Pindar's warnings to the victor to fight against calumny. Yet the poet hurries through these admonitions to get to the reward of praise. The same myth, however, weaves itself out strand by

9. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

strand in N.5 in the guise of a report of what the Muses sang on Mount Pelion. This framework protects Pindar from any accusation of paranoia about conspiracies, although a mention of Peleus in the first triad, where the poet refuses to tell how Peleus and Telamon left Aegina, has already revealed the poet's hesitancy to speak openly of foul play. The myth account ends by attributing Peleus' escape from the plot to his not-yet-fulfilled destiny to be Achilles' father. The gnome, then, between the legendary material and the praise of the victor turns on the issue of natal stars. I.6 mentions Peleus' fame as proof of the glory of Aegina, recognized throughout the known world. The tale of the hero's marriage to a nymph preserves the delicate balance of mood in I.8, written after the battle of Salamis, where the laudandus's city-state sided against the laudator's. Paralleling the Hellenic strife in which Aegina emerged victorious, the conflict between Zeus and Poseidon over Thetis has a favorable outcome for the Aeginetan hero, for to wed an immortal is the greatest possible blessing. But just as the city mourns for those who fell fighting, Peleus sorrows for his short-lived son Achilles.

Mythology, then, illumines character in the works of Pindar and Yeats and becomes one of their most powerful symbols. Each uses other complexes of imagery as well, but legend serves as a major structural device. Through the associations of heroic tales, they connect personal loyalties with national and even universal allegiances, but whereas for Yeats these correspondences are intellectual constructs, they are the tough fibre of the Greek world view. Though conscious of myth as symbol, Pindar perceives a cosmos of a calm, interwoven stability that Yeats cannot find in his own world of independent, lapidary creation, where art must evoke "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread."

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