

# W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic Philosophy in his Earlier Works

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## ABSTRACT

### **W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic Philosophy in his Earlier Works**

This dissertation investigates the development of W.B. Yeats's aesthetic philosophy during his earlier career (1883 to 1907), particularly as it is presented in his prose writing and certain dramatic works of the period. Yeats is exposed to the folkloric tradition of Western Ireland from a young age while at the same time receiving a thorough education in the aesthetic philosophies of the Romantics, Pre-Raphaelites and French Symbolists. He finds the ideas regarding the ability of symbols to enlarge the imagination of the artist and his audience which these philosophies expound to be present in the folkloric tradition of Ireland. Yeats becomes involved with the nationalist cause of Ireland as a young man, and finds himself attracted to the prospect of contributing to Ireland's struggle for independence on a cultural front. He chooses to apply his Romantic principles to art which draws on the shared folkloric tradition of Ireland in an effort to inspire cultural, rather than purely political, rejuvenation amongst his Irish audience. Yeats holds that art which only aims to serve political or moral ends often compromises its aesthetic integrity and he chooses to distance himself from such art, instead promoting an aesthetic ideal which values art for its inherent ability to communicate with an audience through the traditional symbols it encompasses. The artist is placed in the role of the bard and functions as the mediator who exposes the ancient truths that have been embedded in symbols through their traditional use. The poet must be able to create freely and without the pressure of serving a practical cause if he is to be successful in his cultural duty, and this too demands art to be valued autonomously as a force that has the potential to culturally invigorate a disenfranchised colonial Ireland. These ideas are honed during time spent in nationalist, occult, literary and theatre societies where different ideas and principles are unified with his early Romantic ideals to form an aesthetic which has the communicative and enlarging capabilities of art at its centre. The theatre in particular becomes a platform through which Yeats explores and expresses his own aesthetic ideals. This dissertation takes a historical and literary philosophical approach to establish Yeats's aesthetic development from a traditional Romantic aesthetic to one that is thoroughly progressive and concerned with the autonomous value of Irish art.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, folklore, folk tradition, symbolism, romanticism, the occult, national identity, Irish nationalism, communication, tradition, autonomy.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **W.B Yeats se Estetiese Filosofie in sy Vroeë Werke**

Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die ontwikkeling van W.B. Yeats se estetiese filosofie in sy vroeë prosa, digkuns en dramas (gepubliseer tussen 1883 en 1907). Yeats is van 'n jong ouderdom af blootgestel aan die folkloristiese tradisies van Wes-Ierland en ontvang terselfdertyd 'n deeglike opleiding in die estetiese filosofie van Romantisme, Pre-Raphaelisme en Franse Simbolisme. Hy vind die idees aangaande die vermoë van simbole om die verbeelding van beide die kunstenaar en sy gehoor te vergroot teenwoordig in die volkstradisies van Ierland. Yeats raak hy betrokke by die nasionalistiese saak van Ierland en raak aangetrokke tot die vooruitsig om by te dra tot Ierland se struikeling tot afhanklikheid op 'n kulturele front. Hy kies om sy Romantiese beginsels toe te pas op kuns wat gebruik maak van Ierland se gemeenskaplike volkstradisies om kulturele eerder as slegs politieke vernuwings onder sy gehoor te inspireer. Yeats volstaan dat die estetiese integriteit van kuns wat slegs beoog om op 'n politiese of morele vlak te funksioneer dikwels gekompromitteer word, en hy kies om homself te distansieer van die tipe kuns. Hy bevorder eerder 'n estetika wat volkskuns waardeur vir die inherente vermoë om met 'n gehoor te kommunikeer deur die simbole wat daarvan deel vorm. Die kunstenaar word geplaas in die posisie van die barde en funksioneer as die bemiddelaar wat die eertydse waarhede, wat ingebed is in volkse simbole, deur hul tradisionele gebruik te ontbloot. Om suksesvol in sy kulturele plig te kan wees, moet die digter vrylik kan skep sonder enige druk om 'n praktiese nut te hê. Dit vereis ook dat kuns outonomies waardeur moet word as 'n trefkrag met die potensiaal om 'n onderdrukte Ierland kultureel te versterk. Hierdie idees word verfyn tydens die tyd wat hy in nasionalistiese, okkulte, literêre en teater organisasies spandeer, waar verskillende idees verenig word met sy vroeër Romantiese beginsels om 'n estetika te vorm wat die kommunikatiewe en vergrotings vermoë van kuns as fondasie het. Die teater word 'n besondere platform waardeur Yeats sy eie estetiese idees en ideale verken en uitbeeld. Hierdie verhandeling neem 'n historiese en literêre filosofiese nadering om die ontwikkeling van Yeats se estetiese filosofie van 'n tradisionele Romantiese estetika tot een van progressie wat die outonome waarde van Ierse kuns ter harte neem vas te stel.

**Sleutelwoorde:** estetika, folklore, volk tradisie, simbolisme, romantisme, okkult, nasionale identiteit, Ierse nasionalisme, kommunikasie, tradisie, outonomie.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALISATION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: YEATS'S INTRODUCTION TO FOLKLORE AND SYMBOLS.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1. The Distinction Between Folklore and Myth and Yeats's Introduction to Folklore .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.2. Yeats's Education .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.3. Yeats and Romanticism .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.3.1. Shelley's Influence on Yeats .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2.3.2. Blake's Influence on Yeats .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.4. Yeats and Pre-Raphaelitism, French Symbolism and the Occult .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>2.4.1. Yeats and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>2.4.2. Yeats and French Symbolism .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.4.3. Yeats and the Occult .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: YEATS AND IRISH NATIONALISM .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.1. Yeats, O'Leary, and Irish Nationalism .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.2. Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: YEATS AND THE THEATRE.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>4.1. Yeats and the Irish National Theatre .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>4.2. <i>The Countess Cathleen</i>.....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>4.3. <i>Cathleen Ni Houlihan</i>.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>4.4. <i>The King's Threshold</i>.....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>117</b>

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

William Butler Yeats was a prolific writer who is best known for his mature works that form a distinctive part of the modern literary canon. Along with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound he is considered one of the most influential modernist writers of the 20th century, whose works reflect many concerns of this period and provide unique perspectives on creativity, aesthetics and the role of the poet in society. His mature works are most prominently identified with his use of mystical symbolism that is derived from “contemporary occult schools: Rosicrucian, Cabalistic, Hermetic, or all together” (Ransom, 1939:315). These works include some of his most revered poems, such as “The Tower”, “Byzantium”, “Lapis Lazuli” and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, as well as his best known prose work, *A Vision* (1925), which serves as a manifesto of his intricate occult and aesthetic beliefs. The symbolic nature of these works is the result of a progressive aesthetic development that Yeats refined throughout his writing career, and is built on the foundation laid in his earlier works, which often draws on the Irish folk tradition Yeats admired: “The people of Ireland have created perhaps the most beautiful folk-lore<sup>1</sup> in the world, and have made wild music that is the wonder of all men” (Yeats, 1964:18).

Whereas his earliest poetry drew on folklore and the collective Irish folk imagination which contains spiritual images<sup>2</sup>, his work soon progressed to primarily incorporating the latter, using these images and symbols in his exploration of the mystical qualities which art can hold for both the artist and the audience. Long-standing criticisms that dismissed his earlier works as “youthful”, “mystical” and “escapist” are now being refuted, with critics and scholars of the past two decades realising the extent of the influence that Yeats’s early aesthetic had on his mature, aesthetically cohesive works (Pethica, 2010:211). Yeats never lost his reverence

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<sup>1</sup> Yeats regularly made use of the archaic form of words when writing on folklore, often referring to “folk-lore” and “faerie” in his prose writings.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats, as well as other Irish writers who wrote on folkloric subjects, believed that particular folkloric images and figures had a timeless dimension which rendered them recognisable and meaningful to generations of audiences.

for the Irish folk tradition, which contained the imaginative history of the Irish culture, and recognised the role it played in his aesthetic development throughout his career. In his dedication to Moina Mathers in *A Vision* he writes of the 1890s: “I look back to it as a time when we were full of phantasy that had been handed down for generations, and is now an interpretation, now an enlargement of the folk-lore of the villages” (qtd in Mattar, 2010:254).

Yeats is widely recognised as one of the twentieth century’s authors who emphasised the intrinsic aesthetic value that literature has as an art form which possesses formal and thematic beauty while also being integral to the development of a nation’s cultural sphere (Abrams, 2005:3-4). The early works (written between the 1880s and 1910s) that lie at the root of his poetic and aesthetic development form part of the Romantic poetic tradition of Blake and Shelley, both being poets whom Yeats greatly admired from a young age. Blake in particular inspired Yeats to pursue his interest in the Irish folk tradition and the autonomous value of art. Blake advocated the archetypal nature of art “rooted in metaphysics” (Blackstone, 1949:440), of which the Irish folk tradition, comprising the living memories and traditions of the “minds of the populace” (Yeats, qtd in Lenoski, 1979:28), served as an example. Yeats actively engaged with the metaphysical realm by interacting with the symbols he found in folk art, and this engagement served as a precursor to his later focus on occult and magical symbolism. While he shared Blake’s theoretical concerns regarding art, his works are set apart from Blake’s by the very Irishness of his subject matter in which he rooted his Romantic ideas regarding the role of the poet and his poetry. Yeats found the ultimate truths that he sought preserved in stories, traditions and legends rather than theories and dogmas (Foster, 2011:xvii), and this belief, centred more on the imaginative power of a communal artistic tradition than the individual, began to influence his personal aesthetic views. He continued to adhere to the Romantic principles of self-exploration and expression, and shared Blake’s, Arthur Symonds’s and the French Symbolists’ reverence for the use of symbols — rather than mere metaphors — to capture the spiritual beauty and truths found in the realm of the collective cultural artistic consciousness that had been shaped by tradition throughout the history of artistic expression.

During the 1880s and 1890s Yeats ultimately shared Blake’s thoroughly Romantic ideal that art is a manifestation of truth which is best expressed through symbols if any attempt is to be made at, in Blakean terms, “showing forth the secret things of God” (Blackstone, 1949:419). Blake promotes poetic writing that is anchored in the amoral energies of the imagination which are in turn symbolically expressed by nature, all the while being the metaphysical

truths that the artist discovers in his own mind and experiences (Symons, 1909:45-47). The artist's goal is thus ultimate self-expression and, through that, the discovery of truth. Yeats admires this symbolic approach, realising the possibility that new inspiration would arise from engagement with memories and tradition based on the supernatural rather than the material world. Yeats finds many of his inspirational symbols in the folk tradition of rural Ireland which has seemingly remained "untouched by the materialism and scientific investigations resulting from the Renaissance", and "still maintained contact with the mystery and imagination that existed before man fell slave to the external world" (O'Driscoll, 1975:19-20). The peasants who have preserved this folk tradition have passed down their artistic inspirations, which have been refined by generations of storytellers and bards, amongst their own communities. This notion of communication through a tradition greatly influences Yeats's aesthetic conceptions, and initiates his steady move away from a purely Romantic view of art in which self-expression is primary. Throughout this stage he shows a deep interest in the Irish folk tradition while also immersing himself in the Romantic philosophies of Blake and Shelley that serve as primary influences in the fin-de-siècle artistic movement that seeks to re-establish the potency of art.

Yeats re-considers his own notion of aesthetic value, and finds that a philosophy that combines the communicative principles of the Irish folk tradition with the introspective ideals of Romanticism gives him the creative scope which he desires to create accessible and meaningful art for his audience. In refining these ideas, he studies William Wordsworth, another prominent Romantic, who regards the voices of peasants as the most truthful way of communicating artistic ideals because of their historic refinement and simplicity (Symons, 1909:92). Wordsworth insists that all truth lies in nature, of which the imagination forms part, and that it can only be revealed through the emotional outpouring that results from an engagement with nature. For Yeats, such an approach would on the one hand be too self-reflexive, not communicating artistic ideals to an audience, and on the other not refined enough, since it does not require the metaphysical meditation which he believes to be revealing of truth. He becomes concerned that his art will have no value for those who engage with it and begins to strive towards art that creatively shows self-expression, while also preserving the communal folk traditions of Ireland. Yeats would become increasingly concerned with this engagement with his audience, and he begins to draw his influences from his Irish contemporaries (Ferguson, O'Leary and Allingham) who have the ability to proclaim their nationalistic ideals eloquently through their thoroughly Irish works (Thuente,

1980:17-19). He begins a project of promoting the advancement of Ireland's folk tradition which, according to folklorists Gearóid Ó Cruaí and Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, is "perceived as being part of the national heritage and underpinning which supports and in a sense legitimizes the existence" of an historically oppressed native Ireland (1988:68). In his early writing he "turned [...] to the legend and lore of his own country" (O'Driscoll, 1975:19) which he finds to be "in all its manifestation a living force" that should be used to "vitalize literature" since it contains the "potency and vitality of the visionary imagination of the folk" (Bramsäck, 1971:59) and could thus best speak to the Irish on both cultural and aesthetic levels – both aspects which are of equal importance to the progressive Romantic vision which Yeats comes to represent. This concern with the Irish folk tradition, itself an art form, would come to influence Yeats's development of an aesthetic philosophy which not only regards art as a way to communicate ideas, but also as autonomously valuable due to the particular qualities it has.

During the 1880s Yeats also becomes increasingly concerned with the growing nationalistic cause of Ireland. Politicians, scholars and artists of the country made it their project to obtain Home Rule for Ireland, which, at that time, was still part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland which had come into being under the Act of Union of 1800. Yeats saw the Irish folk tradition as the strongest common denominator shared by the Irish population who had long been politically divided over their loyalties to the Crown or to Irish independence. Yeats incorporated this tradition into his poetic and dramatic works as a means to inspire unity and a cultural nationalistic spirit. Anca Vlasopolos accurately terms his political project as aiming at "Unity of Culture", and identifies it as Yeats's most radical departure from the humanistic element in Romanticism since it depends "upon a system outside the psyche to sustain it" (1983:24). The Irish folk tradition, while consisting of a variety of autonomously valuable art works in different forms, comprises the collective imagination of the Irish people, and thus transcends mere self-expression. It involves all who form part of its historical, political and artistic heritage. Yeats employs such traditionally valued images in his creative works to appeal to his audience's heritage and encourage them to preserve their own cultural traditions. Poems such as "Who Goes with Fergus?" (1893), "The Hosting of the Sidhe" (1899) and "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland" (1904) make use of traditional Irish themes and heroic figures to encourage cultural nationalism.

Yeats's nationalistic concerns appear most prominently in his early plays, with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats's 1903 play (in which his long-time muse Maud Gonne played the title role),

causing concern amongst politicians of the day such as Stephen Gwynn<sup>3</sup>, due to its strong nationalistic theme (Kiberd, 1989:285). The play deals with the rising up of the Irish nation against foreign rule, with this action being inspired by a withered old hag who turns into a radiant young queen who leads the young men of Ireland to revolution. Although this play is often considered to blatantly aim at inspiring political action, Yeats maintains throughout this period of his career that what he wants to inspire with his writing is a cultural and spiritual revolution rather than an overtly political one. Yeats wants his “belief in nationality”, one of his “three interests”, to create, along with “a form of literature” and “a form of philosophy”, a “discrete expression of a single conviction” (Yeats, 1994a:34). Yeats continues to promote art that does not secure its value from its ability to act as a didactic tool – he remains convinced that, while art can inspire cultural nationalism its value must not solely depend thereon. He disagrees with individuals who hold that “literature must be the expression of conviction and be the garment of noble truth and not an end in itself” and argues that such opinions are based on an “utter indifference to art, the most dire carelessness, the most dreadful intermixture of the commonplace” (Yeats, 2000:259). Art for Yeats has truth and beauty that represent the collective consciousness of a nation. This cultural rather than political element of his nationalistic project can be attributed to his views on the aesthetic value of art.

Having been educated in the Romantic poetic tradition, Yeats is familiar with its aesthetic ideals in as far as the autonomy of art is concerned. The Romantic tradition holds that art has no utilitarian function beyond that of revealing truth and beauty of both nature and the imaginative realm<sup>4</sup>. Oscar Wilde, one of the great promoters of this idea, goes as far as to claim that life imitates art, since art represents all that is beautiful and true of man’s imaginative capabilities (Ransome, 1913:65). Wilde, while considered a late Romantic, is truly radical in his insistence that art is autonomously valuable, and need not have any socially ameliorative function, as earlier Romantics such as Shelley and Wordsworth do with their claim that poetry should aim to heighten individual sensibilities through self-exploration. Poets are expected to display the truest knowledge of themselves that is discovered through introspection, and they must be revered for their abilities to be visionary

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<sup>3</sup> Gwynn and Yeats were both of Anglo-Irish ancestry and often found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being recognised Irish figures while being denizens of England.

<sup>4</sup> For Wordsworth, one of the most prominent Romantics, this function of reflecting the truth in nature became so important that art, for him, was placed in the didactic role of teaching the artist and audience through the revelations of nature it provides.

through such self-discovery (Abrams, 2005:185-186). Yeats admires Wilde's radical idea and supports the notion that art should not need justification beyond its own existence, but here his view on aesthetic autonomy differs from Blake's. Yeats does not propagate a purely *l'art pour l'art* approach to aesthetic autonomy as Wilde does, but rather one that aims to preserve the beauty and sincerity of the imaginative and cultural realms which the Irish nation engages with. D.S. Savage describes Yeats's aesthetic idea of the nature and function of poetry as follows: "he regards it as having no commerce with the world of experience, its tasks being to conjure up enchanted states of mind in which the mind is made aware of some bodiless, timeless reality" (1945:122). This timeless reality, which includes the stories of the Irish folk tradition, reflects Plato's "ideal realm", having been refined by tradition, ridding itself of all that is "passing" and "trivial" (Yeats, 2003:139), encapsulating only that which speaks of truth and beauty in the collective imagination of the nation.

Yeats thus promoted an aesthetic autonomy that protected the communicative and imaginative abilities of art: art should not be made to have any purpose – particularly not a political one – beyond the truth and beauty that it encompasses. The Irish folk tradition led Yeats "under the wall of Paradise to the roots of the trees of knowledge and life" (Yeats, qtd in Kinahan, 1988:16) to discover the essence of art – its inherent autonomous value that can inspire the cultural imagination of a nation. What started as a fascination with Irish myths and folk tales grew into a primary shaping force behind Yeats's aesthetic ideals regarding writing as well as the role of the poet. Yeats found a justification for the protection of the artistic realm within Ireland's own cultural history, and he placed the poet in the role of the traditional Bard who keeps the artistic tradition of the nation alive, while constantly revitalizing the tradition by creating new, engaging and autonomously valuable artworks.

The nature of art and beauty and the role it plays in society have been debated for centuries, and theories regarding the way we perceive art, how beauty should be defined, and how it influences other aspects of our lives are abundant. "Aesthetics" is defined in a narrow sense by Pethica as "a term which arrived into English usage in the 1830s from Germany, where it had been coined from the Greek word *aesthetikos* – 'things perceptible by the senses' – to denominate the branch of metaphysics concerned with the philosophy of perception, the criteria of artistic judgements, and the theorization of what is beautiful" (Pethica, 2010:204). Such an understanding of "aesthetics" is focused on the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience, the specific properties of art involved in the aesthetic experience, and how we respond to them. Throughout this dissertation I have used the term in its broader sense, which

“generally means [...] something like Yeats’s artistic principles, preferences and/or his agenda” (Carroll, 1999:156-7). Yeats’s “aesthetic” thus refers to his personal philosophy of art: it points to his choice in artistic properties which are deemed aesthetically important, such as symbolism and imagery that can engage with the communal imagination of the Irish people; it describes what he understands as an “aesthetic experience”, i.e. engaging with the eternal truths that are presented through the symbolism in art; and it encompasses his understanding of the role of art and the artist within the wider social sphere. Yeats’s aesthetic considers art that is valued autonomously *as art* the most aesthetically valuable, as it serves only to engage with the audience’s imagination rather than serve any political or moral cause.

Based on the above contextualisation, the following questions arise. How does Yeats’s engagement with the Irish folk tradition, Romanticism and Irish nationalism during his early career contribute to the development of his early aesthetic regarding ideas surrounding the creation of art and the role of art and the artist in Irish society? How can this aesthetic be defined? And how does Yeats ultimately understand the value of the function of art during the first two decades of his career? I shall argue that W.B. Yeats’s engagement with Ireland’s folk tradition in his early works of poetry, drama and prose significantly influences his personal aesthetic. The Irish folk tradition provides him with suitable and recognisable symbols and images through which he and his audience can engage with the supernatural realm where universal truths and stores of communal memories reside. I shall argue that his early symbolist aesthetic is one that aims at rejuvenating the cultural memory of the Irish, which he believes to form part of the natural and imaginative heritage of the Irish people. His concern with the cultural state of Ireland is tied up with his aesthetic ideals which require art to be regarded as autonomously valuable, beyond any political or utilitarian value that it might have. Yeats hopes to facilitate a cultural revolution in Ireland through which Irish identity can be reclaimed after centuries of colonisation. The Irish folk tradition, being shared amongst all Irish people, is one of the most effective vehicles through which this revival can be achieved, and art which draws on this tradition needs to be created and regarded as valuable in itself if it is to engage with the collective cultural imagination of the Irish.

I thus aim to show that Yeats’s engagement with the Irish folk tradition in his early writings contributes to the development of his personal aesthetic ideas, in that he finds the collective imagination of Ireland to be a great source of creative material. Yeats is drawn to the elements of folklore which are spiritual, since he links them with the concepts of imagination and creativity which both originate in an eternal realm shaped by the collective cultural

memory of Ireland. The Irish folk tradition also enables the poet to join his quest for truth and beauty with the national heritage, thus providing him with a sense of identity linked to aesthetics. I shall show that the artist is thus placed in the role of the Bard, retelling and re-invigorating all tales that speak to the collective cultural memory of the Irish people. I shall delineate key aspects of his personalised aesthetics, i.e., his engagement with Symbolism, the nationalist cause and Ireland's dramatic movement, centring on their communicative potential as they are expounded in his early prose works and selected plays. I also aim to show that Yeats's personal aesthetic during his early career as a writer can be defined as thoroughly symbolic and concerned with the communicative value of imaginative literature, located in its autonomous nature. Up to the first decade of the twentieth century Yeats is still exploring and defining his own philosophical ideas regarding art, and these, expressed in numerous prose writings, often appear to be ambiguous when compared with the manner in which his ideas were received by the Irish public who regarded Yeats as one of their great Nationalist writers. However, all of Yeats's critical prose, poetry and drama share a philosophical and creative reflection on Romantic ideals that aims at some form of communication. He finds that symbols and images such as those found in the Irish folk tradition, which represent universal ideas and truths, are best suited to communicate ideas of cultural change and revolution. He insists throughout that art which incorporates such symbols cannot be made to function in any didactic manner, be it political or moral, since the very ability of symbolic art to engage with the cultural imagination of the Irish people rests on the principle that art is autonomous, and should be valued as such.

This dissertation will take a historical and literary philosophical approach to exploring Yeats's aesthetic development and will thus not attempt to analyse his poetic works. Instead, it will draw on representative examples from Yeats's early prose works which set out his ideas regarding the value of the Irish folk tradition, the role of art and the artist in society, and the necessity for autonomy in art. It shall also refer to the writings of authors who directly influenced him, such as Blake, Shelley and Arthur Symonds, in an effort to establish his developing aesthetic views, as well as the various historical events in Yeats's early career which influenced his thinking. I shall show that his personal aesthetic comprises the following ideas: that the traditional hierarchical society of ancient Ireland in which the heroic aristocratic figure, the peasant and the poetic bard lived in harmony should once again be reinstated in Irish society and that art should not be made to serve any moral or political functions but instead be valued autonomously if it is to inspire cultural rejuvenation. I shall

finally show how Yeats came to choose the theatre as the ideal platform to voice his aesthetic and how it is presented with varying success in three of his dramatic works, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) and *The King's Threshold* (1904).

## CHAPTER 2

### YEATS'S INTRODUCTION TO FOLKLORE AND SYMBOLS

#### **2.1. The Distinction between Folklore and Myth and Yeats's Introduction to Folklore**

Folklore plays a significant role in the development of W.B. Yeats's early aesthetic philosophy. Traces of the fairy and folktales of the Irish people permeate his creative and critical thinking throughout his career. Folklore serves as both material for his poems and plays as well as being a source of philosophical ideas that ultimately shape his views on the nature and role that art plays in the cultural sphere. Folklore, for Yeats, represents the cultural imagination of the Irish people – the cumulative truths and knowledge that have been discovered and passed on through storytelling for generations. It is in the tradition that honours and protects ancient Irish beliefs and legends that Yeats finds the symbols and material that express an aesthetic philosophy that is also influenced by a Romantic education, an involvement with the nationalist cause of Ireland, and an interest in the occult: the imagination of a community can inform knowledge of ultimate truths and beauty that enlarge our experience of reality. This occurs through the meaningful engagement of the community with art. It is important to note from the outset that Yeats's aesthetic development is tied to his exploration and use of folklore rather than only well-known myths and legends of the Irish Celts. Mary Helen Thuente addresses the difference between these two concepts, and clarifies why a distinction is necessary when studying Yeats and the influence folklore has on his philosophical ideas. In the preface to her book *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (1980) she states that:

“Folklore”, in this book, will refer to the broad range of oral traditions which belonged to the nineteenth-century Irish peasantry – narratives, songs, beliefs, customs – which Yeats studied so thoroughly in both oral and written form during the 1880s and 1890s. The terms ‘peasant’ and ‘peasantry’ will be used because, although they can evoke unpleasant images of the Irish sense of identity, no synonym – such as ‘countryman’ or ‘folk’ – will do as well. ‘Mythology’ will refer to the narratives about ancient Irish gods and heroes available primarily in written form in old manuscripts and in nineteenth-century translations. The subject matter of ancient Irish myth still survives in

nineteenth-century Irish oral tradition but generally in very fragmented and debased form. Myth is a kind of traditional literature and represents one genre of traditional folk narrative – the other two being legend and folktale. (Thuente, 1980:3)

This dissertation will apply Thuente's distinction, since an investigation of folkloric writings of the nineteenth-century (including those of Yeats) clearly shows that although myth forms a part of the folklore of the Irish peasantry, it does not define it. The folkloric tradition is an extension of the ancient bardic tradition in which peasants gather their experiences and spiritual beliefs, combining them with narratives from myth and legend. It is a tradition that continues to live and evolve throughout the nineteenth-century, and it is this dynamic and vitalizing aspect (Bramsbäck, 1971:59) that attracts Yeats most, especially during the 1890s when his aesthetic philosophy progresses from one anchored in Romanticism to one that views art as an autonomous social entity with the potential to contribute to the cultural imagination of Ireland. Yeats's early career can be defined as an incessant attempt to synthesize his initial and continual reverence for folklore, his interest in the methods of obtaining truth offered by occultism, and his nationalist politics, which came to play an increasingly important role in his aesthetic considerations (Regan, 2010:30).

Yeats was introduced to folklore at an early, "impressionable" age (Welch, 1993: xxi). He spent his summers with his mother's family, the Pollexfens and Middletons, in Sligo on the West Coast of Ireland where he "got [his] interest in country stories, and certainly the first faery-stories that [he] heard were in the cottages about their houses" (Yeats, 1955:16). The Pollexfens differed greatly from the Yeatses in their nature, being brooding and silent, while having a hidden poetical and mystical spirit that the young Yeats would come to appreciate and assimilate (Murphy, 1970:36). His mother, Susan Pollexfen, a quiet and introverted woman, always regarded Sligo as her home and emotional base, and shared the stories and folk tales of the area with her children, always emphasising the beauty of the countryside over the features of industrial London which she had come to associate with the social frivolity of the "artistic life" that characterised her husband's failing artistic career (Foster, 1997:8). Yeats would later acknowledge the influence that his mother's preference for the "tales of the cottages and fishermen's wives" (Malins & Purkis, 1994:14) of Sligo had on his own artistic development, calling her "the right kind of mother for a poet and dreamer" (Yeats, qtd in Malins & Purkis, 1994:14). He also spent a considerable amount of time exploring the area surrounding his grandparents' large home, "Merville", where he had

frequent encounters with the local peasants who shared the legends surrounding the nearby Knocknarea mountain where Maeve, queen of the western Sidhe,<sup>5</sup> is said to be buried, as well as their supernatural beliefs in the fairy changelings and the powers they have over the lives of the country-folk (Hone, 1962:15).

Yeats admits that his childhood was never a happy one, filled with fear, guilt and a general sense of melancholy (Yeats, 1955:6). Sligo and the folktales of the area, however, came to represent an emotional and physical safe haven where the young, creative Yeats was able to explore ideas regarding the nature of storytelling and the supernatural, both interests that would remain central to his poetic career. Malins & Purkis describe how these outdoor explorations of the Sligo countryside and his engagement with the landscape and its people contribute to his development as a poet:

He went fishing for trout in the loughs with Jim Healy, the stable boy, climbing Knocknarea and Ben Bulbin, and riding his “red” (chestnut?) pony past his great-grandfather’s rectory at Drumcliffe, past the waterfall thrown back by the wind at Glencar, past the Holy Well of St Patrick and the monastery of St Columba – through a countryside filled with Christian pilgrimage and pagan myth, the very blood of his poetic inspiration. (Malins & Purkis, 1994:17-18)

Whenever he was forced to live in dreary London he would long “for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand” (Yeats, 1955:31). His mother’s tales of supernatural events that occurred around her girlhood home sustained him during these times. He came to regard the fairies and their powers as a reality, superior to the one he found in London – such was the conviction he found in the voices of his mother and the country folk who shared their stories with him. In his “Reveries over Childhood and Youth” he relates how his *belief* in the power of the fairies came about:

One day someone spoke to me of the voice of the conscience, and as I brooded over the phrase I came to think that my soul, because I did not hear an articulate voice, was lost. I had some wretched days until being alone with one of my aunts I heard a whisper in my ear, “What a tease you are!” [...] From that day the voice has come to me in

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<sup>5</sup> The Sidhe are fairy folk who reside in the sacred mounds of Ireland (Smyth, 1996:11).

moments of crisis [...] It does not tell me what to do but often reproves me [...] I must have heard the servants talking of the fairies, for I concluded that [...] one had whispered in my ear. (Yeats, 1955:12)

Yeats's seemingly naive conviction of the existence of fairies is one that stems from several major influences during his formative years. There is, as mentioned, the frequent exposure to the stories, folk legends and beliefs of the country people of Sligo. His mother, her family and their servants also seemed to be, like many other mid-Victorian households, preoccupied with the supernatural. His mother claimed to have heard the cry of the banshee, an omen of death, the night Yeats's younger brother Robert died, while his cousin Lucy Middleton is believed to have had special powers (Foster, 1997:21). His uncle, George Pollexfen, had an interest in astrology and the occult and became one of the most significant and influential figures in the poet's life (Murphy, 1970:40). George Pollexfen's servant, Mary Battle, a country woman who "had the second sight" and a mind "rammed with every sort of old history and strange belief" (Yeats, 1955:70-71) is perhaps one of the most significant figures of Yeats's childhood. It is her "daily speech" (Yeats, 1955:71) and beliefs that stayed with Yeats well into adulthood, eventually making their way into his creative folkloric composition, *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). Yeats' father, John Butler Yeats (hereafter "JBY"), ultimately also contributed to his interest in folklore as a child, although in a much less obvious manner. JBY constructed an intricate aesthetic philosophy of his own that comprises elements of Romanticism, Pre-Raphaelitism, Utilitarian principles and Symbolism. At the heart of this philosophy is the claim that art has the ability to free thought and engage with higher truths; he summarised his personal aesthetic in a letter to his son:

Art achieves its triumphs great and small by involving the universality of the feelings – love by itself is lust, that is primitive animalism, and anger what is it but homicide? Art lifts us out of the sphere of mere bestiality, art is a musician and touches every chord in the human harp – in other words a single feeling becomes a mood, and the artist is a man with a natural tendency to thus convert every single feeling into a mood. (J.B. Yeats, qtd in Archibald, 1974:498)

He found symbols which enabled such an engagement in the countryside of Sligo, which he viewed as a landscape where honour and truth amongst a traditional aristocratic society still prevailed. These concerns stemmed from JBY's position as a member of the declining Irish

Ascendancy – he rebelled against Victorian Puritanism and systematic education, preferring an ideal society of poor gentlemen to one that promotes material success (Archibald, 2010:110).

His father's recognition that the countryside with its folk stories and supernatural beliefs held some type of artistic value perhaps justified the study of JBY's aesthetic principles for the young Yeats who had come to consider folklore an important part of his own life. The education provided by his father, which will be discussed in the next section, largely centred on JBY's own scepticism towards moral and systematic philosophies, and this sceptical nature was inherited by his son. JBY's recognition that folklore is valuable for the formation of artistic thought and the discovery of aesthetic truths would thus have instilled a sense of confidence in the young Yeats, who had come to regard the stories of the Sligo country-folk as a legitimate and valuable art form, reflective of traditional and mythical truths, without being moralistic or didactic. It further introduced Yeats to other imaginative literary traditions, all of which influenced his own aesthetic philosophy, which valued literary artistic autonomy. In the sections that follow, I shall discuss Yeats's introduction to the Romantic and Symbolist literary movements, which formed the foundation of the educational syllabus provided by JBY.

## **2.2 Yeats's Education**

The influence that JBY had on his eldest son's developing aesthetic philosophy was significant. JBY took upon himself the responsibility of educating the young Yeats, particularly in matters pertaining to art. He also taught his son, who had had immense trouble with literacy throughout his youth, to read. On a Sunday during which the young Yeats refused to go to church, his father, rather than insisting on his son's attendance (being agnostic himself), decided that he must learn to read instead (Jeffares, 1962:12), believing an induction into literature to be of greater value for Yeats's future artistic development than church attendance. JBY's influence over his son's development is, however, primarily intellectual rather than artistic in the formal sense – his father introduced him to the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite philosophies which would ultimately result in his aesthetic declaration that “the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not” (Yeats, 2007:51) and that art has value beyond its speculative elements when appreciated as “words

that have gathered up the heart's desire of the world" (Yeats, 2007:51). Although their relationship was throughout a complex one, Yeats came to recognise the lasting effect that his father's aesthetic philosophy made to his development when reminiscing about his high school years, admitting that during these years "My father's influence upon my thoughts was at its height" (Yeats, 1955:64). In the end the poet saw JBY as "an image, mythic, a member of all the heroic company [...] an emblem of domestic concern, artistic integrity, Anglo-Irish identity, and other beautiful lofty things" (Archibald, 2010:117), and his appearance as a mythical figure in the mature poetic work "Beautiful Lofty Things" (1938) particularly illustrates Yeats's admiration for his father's own passionate adherence to an aesthetic philosophy which regarded autonomous art as valuable.

JBY can in no way be characterised as a traditional Victorian father. In his study on the relationship between father and son, Douglas N. Archibald describes him as "always hostile to Puritanism, indifferent to organised religion, and sceptical about systematic education" (1974:483). He abandoned his law career to pursue a course that would have lasting financial and interpersonal implications for the extended family, and became a disciple of the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement and the social and political philosophies of John Stuart Mill. While his admiration of the Pre-Raphaelite's symbolism influenced Yeats, the English philosopher's individualism and utilitarianism which JBY came to revere caused friction between him and his more temperamental son. Yeats incorporated some of the intellectual aspects of his father's philosophy, such as his scepticism, into his own thought while rejecting other elements, such as his father's insistence that true art can only ever be created through dedicated introspection – poets "have to live in the hermitage of their own minds" (J.B. Yeats, qtd in Ellmann, 1979:17). Yeats, through his personal study of the English Romantics who adhered to such isolation, as well as through his increasing involvement with the nationalist politics of Ireland, came to realise the dangers of poetic hermitage, and established a communicative role for poetry. The most influential aspect of his father's legacy is thus his ideas regarding the value of poetry and the artistic integrity and independence needed to create such poetry. While being plagued by debts and failure, JBY refused to deviate from his artistic principles and insisted on keeping "intellect in its place", maintaining that "creations of intellect alone, like law or institutional religion, [are] pernicious because they obstruct harmony" (Ellmann, 1979:16). This tenacity and purposeful defence of his aesthetic beliefs was passed on to his son who, in the face of mounting

pressure from contemporary authors who demanded a political agenda in art, continued to promote the autonomous value of literature.

While attending high school in Dublin Yeats had trouble succeeding academically. He did however make an impression on his class mates by establishing himself as both an intellectual and an artist, writing poems which emulated Shelley and the Pre-Raphaelites his father had introduced him to during the sessions they spent discussing art in the Stephen's Green Studio JBY rented in Dublin. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats describes these earliest attempts at creative writing: "I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and Edmund Spenser, play after play – for my father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds – and I invented fantastic and incoherent plots" (Yeats, 1955:66-67). JBY's insistence on his son's engagement with dramatic poetry over poetry that moralises or systematises the imaginative process was anchored in his dislike of the "Victorian poetry of ideas" and "the formal beauty of Raphael" which he associated with a hypocritical "love of pleasure and self-indulgence" (Yeats, 1955:66). He preferred an old Ireland which he associated with the Pre-Raphaelite age, an Ireland where the old aristocracy still rules, consisting of true gentleman and honourable servants, where conversation, idleness and the "soul of romance and laughter" (J.B. Yeats, qtd in Ellmann, 1979:16) are held in higher esteem than material and intellectual progress. JBY saw the Irish peasantry as emblematic of such a life-style in Ireland. Yeats, with his naturally artistic temperament and love for the imaginary history of Ireland that his mother had introduced him to, infused these folk tales with the Romantic principles JBY exposed him to. He also shared his father's anti-Victorianism from a young age, and made it his prerogative throughout his career to re-establish Romantic artistic values which aim at enlarging the imagination and avoiding didactic philosophy.

In his 1917 essay, "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (part of *Mythologies*), Yeats's aesthetic philosophy has developed significantly, in many ways beyond that of his father, yet the initial influence remains apparent – here he pens the phrase which has established him in many minds as the "last Romantic": "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (Yeats, 2003:331). This phrase echoes his father's own dismissal of rhetoric and practicality in art. JBY's influence on this Romanticism becomes even more definitive if we consider that this statement is made by Yeats only a few years after his father wrote him a letter in which he asserts a similar aesthetic idea: "art embodies not this or that feeling, but the whole totality [...] when everything within us is expressed

there is peace and what is called beauty – this totality is personality [...] rhetoric expresses other people's feelings, poetry one's own" (J.B. Yeats, qtd in Archibald, 1974:494). Richard Fallis identifies Yeats's association with the Romantic tradition and his insistence of its importance for the continuation of the poetic tradition as his primary contribution to the twentieth century aesthetic debate – a return to Romantic ideals is something "we now tend to see as essential" (1976:89). Yeats's early career is characterised by his combination of such Romanticism with elements from imaginatively rich Irish folklore. This is further fused with a use of Symbolism and an engagement with the occult, both aspects of his early aesthetic views that will be addressed at a later point in this chapter.

Yeats's school friends recognised the immense role their friend's father played in his life. Charles Johnston, a classmate, writes:

Mr. Yeats was, and happily I can say, is, a rare idealist, a pure worshipper of beauty; full of enthusiasm, full of generous unworldliness, gifted with great artistic power and insight. (Johnston, 1977:9)

This insight would have been shared by Yeats at school where he, while perhaps not convinced of his father's philosophical ideals but impressed by his conviction, proclaimed himself an evolutionist, discussed the findings of Darwin and Huxley, and declared the rationalist Herbert Spencer and Matthew Arnold the greatest essay writers of their time (Foster, 1997:32). These arguments would, however, have only served to develop Yeats's intellectual skills, not his own view of life and art, as he soon turned from them to esoteric philosophies that had a place for his Romantic ideals and the supernatural elements found in his beloved folklore stories. This interest in the occult would further develop and come to play a greater role in his aesthetic considerations once he started his education at the Metropolitan Art School where he met his friend and fellow mystic, George Russell (known as "AE").

The sceptical JBY did not approve of his son's occult interests, which he equated with religious speculation and, ultimately, radical nationalism. He states that the only goal of a poet should be "the birth, the growth, and expansion of everliving personalities, and these personalities are their works of art" (JBY, qtd in Ellmann, 1979:19). The folk tales filled with supernatural spirits and divine beings that relate to an ancient, pagan religious tradition which

Yeats had come to internalise, however, inspired a need in the young poet to have a spiritual outlet towards which his creative impulses could be directed. At a young age he experienced a sense of mystery in the natural world, wondering at the designs he saw around him, and concluded that there are mysterious elements in the world that only God can know. Ellmann identifies this as "the first signs of the rebellion against the father's scepticism which was to carry him in such strange directions" (1979:25).

Yeats did not follow any traditionally Christian religious doctrine, although he associated himself historically with the Anglo-Irish Protestants of Ireland, while using Catholic and Rosicrucian symbolism throughout his poetry. He also continuously opposed "the unimaginative quiescence enjoyed by conventional religion and its blindness to the existence of parallel supernatural worlds" (Foster, 1997:35) as his famous narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisín"<sup>6</sup>, with its admonishment of St Patrick by the Celtic hero, and an earlier uncollected poem, "The Priest and the Fairy", clearly illustrate. His desire for a personal religion is tied to his desire for an aesthetic that encompasses all aspects of life – physical and spiritual. He describes the religious system he devises in his *Autobiographies*:

I am unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I have made a new 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 [...] I had even created a dogma: "Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth". (Yeats, 1955:115-6)

Realising that he was not destined for university but the artistic life, Yeats began to form organisations with like-minded students at school whom he could influence and with whom

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<sup>6</sup> Oisín or Oisín (meaning 'little dear' or 'little seal') is the great poet of the Fenian Cycle of Irish tales (sometimes referred to as the Ossianic cycles). In the most famous tale in which he features, Oisín travels to Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth, with the princess Niamh of the Golden Hair. After three-hundred years he returns to Ireland on a white steed, having been warned by Niamh not to dismount as it would instantly age him. Oisín falls off his horse and becomes an old withered man, at which point he meets St Patrick, with whom he debates the effects of Christianity on Irish culture (Smyth, 1996:138-149).

he could share ideas regarding the value of symbols and art. Roy Foster identifies this youthful systemisation of opinions and ideas as “a quality which would remain dominant: the need to form organisations and assert his authority within them” (1997:33). Yeats would become known for his constant desire for unity, and organised his philosophical systems accordingly, finding in his mind a place for art and symbols, spirituality, the occult, and his nationalistic concerns. His personal aesthetic thus began to diverge from his father’s rational philosophy at a young age, resulting in a complex relationship that would at times become strained, although father and son would remain intellectual companions<sup>7</sup>.

JBY’s greatest legacy remains, however, the value he sees in art and the artist. Davis poignantly states that his father was undoubtedly a “forcing-bed of his aesthetic consciousness” (Davis, 1961:5). Both shared a reverence for the imagination and a regard for the autonomous value of art that results from the artist who keeps his integrity and pursues his aesthetic ideals regardless of societal pressure. Archibald states that, accordingly, Yeats was indebted to his father for several of the central ideas that became incorporated into his aesthetic: “[JBY’s influence] suggests a pattern of incorporation, the ways in which the increasingly confident WBY absorbs his father’s ideas (‘personality’), language (‘the tongue of the sea cliffs’) or roles [...] and transforms them” (Archibald, 2010:115-116). He further suggests that JBY’s constant determination to educate his son in his artistic philosophy influenced the “visual, myth-making qualities of his imagination” (Archibald, 2010:115) that contributed to much of the folkloric charm of his earlier work. Later in life he admitted this to his father, writing to him: “It [writing a lecture] has made me realize with some surprise how fully my philosophy of life has been inherited from you in all but its details and applications” (Yeats, 1955:549).

### **2.3. Yeats and Romanticism**

The next step in Yeats’s aesthetic development was an attempt at *integrating* the philosophical principles he had been introduced to through his education with the imaginative

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<sup>7</sup> Although Yeats would continue to defy his father’s objections to his esoteric studies, JBY’s scepticism managed to find a place in Yeats’s belief system. Yeats admits to his belief in magic, but an uncertainty over the actual physical consequences thereof remains with him throughout his theosophical studies (Archibald, 2010:115).

poetic quality of folklore. It is in the aesthetic philosophies of Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake that Yeats found the necessary unity he demanded from artistic systems. Merritt argues that Yeats “saw frequent parallels between their lives and his own; in their work he saw poetic and philosophic systems with which he agreed, even though his agreement occasionally required a great deal of conjecture” (1971:175). Yeats’s conditional use of philosophical arguments that support his own ideals would come to mark his earlier, often ambiguous, aesthetic principles regarding the relationship between the role of art and the social sphere, although a direct influence from Shelley and Blake can be seen to be integrated into his aesthetic postulations of this period. The youthful Yeats was particularly attracted to Shelley’s “faith that poets are the true legislators of the world” who “offer hope to activists intent on bringing on a glorious future” (Merritt, 1971:175). In his essay on Shelley written in 1900, Yeats quotes the following passage from Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, admiring the poet’s ability to see the “regeneration” that the “vision of the divine order” of poets can have on society:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. 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 gems of the flower and the fruit of latest time. (Shelley, 1972:27)

Yeats saw the traditional Irish bard in the same light: “a spokesman for the consciousness of the nation” who should be placed in an exalted position from which he could perform his indispensable duty (Mong, 1994:93). While Shelley affirms Yeats’s belief in the importance of poetry and the poet, Blake gives him the philosophical premise that the symbols found in art can be viewed as particular representations of universal truths and values (Sundmark, 2006:106). Here again the value of art is established – universal truths are contained in the beauty that, according to Blake, can best be accessed through a full imaginative engagement with symbols, since “Vision or imagination”, which Yeats equates with symbolism, “is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably” (Blake, qtd in Yeats, 2007:108). Yeats finds a Divine Essence, and absolute truths, to be imbedded in symbols that form a part of art that strives towards the enlargement of the imagination and perception of

reality. In his essay “Symbolism in Painting” (1898) these Blakean ideals reveal themselves when he states:

All Art that is not mere story-telling, or portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which medieval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence [...] Religious and visionary people, monks and nuns, and medicine-men and opium-eaters, see symbols in their trances; for religious and visionary thought is thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection. (Yeats, 2007:109-110)

Both Shelley and Blake place the individual poet and his imagination at the centre of their aesthetic philosophies, and this too appeals to Yeats who, through the influence of his father, had come to find introspection and individualism to be important aspects of the creative process. The poets that form part of the Romantic Revival in Irish literature, and this includes (by way of their influence) Shelley and Blake, created poetry which made a deliberate attempt “to dissociate itself from the realm of collective values and to centre itself upon the personal life of the individual” (Savage, 1945:118). Yeats’s personal views on subjective art that is only concerned with the overflow of personal emotions would later change drastically as he would come to see the value of communicative art<sup>8</sup>. His early aesthetic is, however, still marked by a reverence for the individual to an extent, along with the power that individual imagination has when it comes to extracting the universal meanings and truths imbedded in symbols – for these aesthetic ideas Yeats is most indebted to Shelley and Blake.

A final, and perhaps decisive motivation behind his attraction to their Romantic philosophies, lies, again, in his personal regard for folklore and art that incorporates folkloric themes. Yeats found the powerful, lasting, imaginative symbols which these two poets promote imbedded in

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<sup>88</sup> “Subjective art” here refers to art that results from the personal meditations of the individual artist, and is concerned only with representing the emotions of the artist. It does not aim or care to be understood as aesthetically or intellectually valuable to the audience, since the individual artist is central to the creation of the work. “Communicative art”, on the other hand, aims at communicating those truths and ideas that the artist had discovered through either introspection or observation of his subject. This type of art, which, for Yeats, encompassed Irish folk art, aims at enlarging the imaginative tradition of a community through its images and messages rather than just the imagination of the individual artist.

folk art, and states that “All folk literature, and all literature that keeps the folk tradition, delights in unbounded and immortal things” (Yeats, 2007:132). He was motivated to contribute to this tradition, and create mythical symbols that would become as sacred and influential as those he found in the works of Shelley and Blake, and that would contribute to the Irish literary tradition by “[making] love of the unseen more unshakable, more ready to plunge deep into the abyss and they would make love of country more fruitful in the mind” (Yeats, 2007:154-155). A discussion of their individual philosophical influences and the ties Yeats forms between these ideas and the Irish folk tradition will now follow.

### 2.3.1. Shelley’s Influence on Yeats

Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* has a particular effect on Yeats – he considers it “among the sacred books of the world” (Yeats, 2007:51), and associates this work with a type of mystical truth, similar to that which he finds in Irish folklore:

[...] we find him brooding over *Prometheus Unbound* in the woods of Drim-ná-Rod, looking towards Slieve na nog – a highly complementary setting – and saying, “I think this mysterious song utters a faith as simple and as ancient as the faith of those [Irish] country people, in a form suited to a new age, that will understand with Blake that the Holy Spirit is ‘an intellectual fountain’, and that ‘the kinds and degrees of beauty are the images of its authority’”. (Merritt, 1971:175-176)

He further admits in his *Autobiography* that he would consider the poetical religion he devises for himself successful if he could emulate the effect that Shelley’s work has on him: “Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisín or Finn, in Prometheus’s stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulbin?” (Yeats, 1955:194). Yeats finds Shelley’s philosophy of art with regard to poetry and its effects to be powerful in that it is able to transcend mere temporality, particularly through the images it employs, thus making imaginative art valuable within the intellectual history of a culture (Merritt, 1971:176)<sup>9</sup>. The supernatural world already contains all truths that we discover in symbols and images, affirming the validity of a notion of a

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<sup>9</sup> In Ireland, this includes the legends, myths and places associated with them.

universal memory where truth and beauty live eternally. In his essay on Shelley Yeats explains:

This beauty, this divine order, whereof all things shall become a part in a kind of resurrection of the body, is already visible to the dead and to souls in ecstasy, for ecstasy is a kind of death. (Yeats, 2007:55)

Yeats equates this “ecstasy” with beauty and the eternal Platonic truth that he finds in it – symbols represent the ideal forms, the ideal beauty that forms a part of the realm of universals. Shelley achieves poetry that has such imaginative power by reacting to every creative impulse and mastering that impulse in his poetry (Symons, 1909:273). He describes poetry as the very expression of such imaginative impulses (Shelley, 1972:23), and he does so by “filling mortal things with unearthly essences or veiling them with unearthly raiment” (Symons, 1909:275). It becomes clear why Yeats, with his own early attraction to the supernatural realm through his engagement with folklore, would thus be so attracted to and convinced by Shelley’s aesthetic ideas. The influence becomes particularly apparent when Yeats’s debt to Shelley’s use of particular symbols is explored.

Merritt identifies five recurring images in Shelley’s poetry that have significance for Yeats, “each important for a proper understanding of his work”:

(1) a river or fountain, and a cave, (2) a tower, (3) the morning and evening star, (4) the moon, and (5) the sun. Each of these had a particular function in Shelley’s works. The river and cave, strongly reminiscent of Plato’s cave, symbolized the imagination, its possibilities and limitations. The tower, to Yeats, represents the human mind looking out on the world in thought. The morning and evening star, far above both caves and towers, symbolizes the principle of good warring against evil, and, in Yeats’s view, was “the throne of his genius”. The moon, beneath the stars, signifies change, trouble and wariness, while the sun, its opposite, was emblematic of all that was constant and life-giving. (Merritt: 1971:177)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that a detailed discussion of Yeats’s symbols and his inspiration for using them lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Yeats's initial identification of these symbols and the meanings he attributes to them form a part of his understanding that Shelley had mystical experiences through his engagement with symbols, perhaps realising the place they have in a universal cultural memory (Campbell, 2010:316). This notion of a "memory of nature" (Yeats, 2007:25), as Yeats would call it, would come to play an essential part in Yeats's own aesthetic philosophy, as it would form part of his attempt to find Unity in art. He recognises the role that his reading of Shelley plays in his understanding of the eternal value of beauty that makes up the "great memory", holding that his precursor had

[...] the sudden conviction that our little memories are but a part of some great memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep but a little foam upon the deep. Shelley understood this as is proved by what he says of the eternity of beautiful things and of the influence of the dead, but whether he understood that the great memory is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell. He had certainly experience of all but the most profound of the mystical states, and known that union with created things which assuredly must precede the soul's union with the uncreated spirit. (Yeats, 2007:61)

Yeats draws on Shelley's view of beauty to shape his own mystical representation of heroic Irish figures which form part of his country's great memory and chooses to ignore the obvious moral element in his aesthetic (Symons, 1909:279). In his *Autobiographies* Yeats describes how he models his heroic figures on Shelley's dream of a young man, and he quotes a passage from Shelley's "Hellas" which inspires him particularly, and he recognises the symbolic influence on his own folkloric figures that the poem has: he strives to create similar figures which are able to be "master of all human knowledge, hidden from human sight" (Yeats, 1955:171-3).

### **2.3.2. Blake's Influence on Yeats**

The second prominent Romantic poet who influenced Yeats's developing aesthetic was William Blake. One of Yeats's first major literary labours is the 1893 *The Works of William Blake*, co-edited with Edwin Ellis. JBY instilled an enthusiasm for Blake in his son through

the informal artistic education he provided him, and soon Yeats came to “privilege imagination as the essential source of spiritual truth” (Pethica, 2010:203) in the same way as Blake, and to an extent Shelley, do. This enthusiasm, along with his thorough engagement with Blake’s work throughout the editing process, resulted in a typical Yeatsian conjecture when the poet established a false Irish pedigree for Blake, making it easier for him to associate himself on an artistic and aesthetic level with the Romantic poet. Matthew Campbell summarises the confusing Irish ancestry of Blake that Ellis provided an eager Yeats with:

Apparently Blake’s grandfather was a Dubliner by the name of John O’Neil who took his wife Ellen Blake’s name in order to escape financial and political difficulty. A son by a previous union, James, was given the name Blake and settled in London; his second son William was born in 1757. The source for the story was a scion of O’Neil’s second family, authority enough to sow scholarly confusion just when he and Ellis might have been seeking to establish the sort of credentials needed for the restoration of Blake’s famously obscure texts. (Campbell, 2010:310)

This ancestry of Blake can in no way be verified, but this does not seem to be of any importance to Yeats. This possible connection between himself and his poetic idol upon whom he would model himself aesthetically justifies Yeats’s own poetical agenda – he attempted to make Blake as much like himself “as possible” (Rudd, 1953:60), as shown in the following extract from Yeats’s essay, “William Blake and the Imagination” (1897), in which Yeats situates him within the company of other great symbolic writers; here Yeats claims that Blake would have found the symbols of the Irish literary imagination divine and beneficial to his own creative process:

Had he been a Catholic of Dante’s time he would have well been content with Mary and the angels; or had he been a scholar of our time he would have taken his symbols where Wagner took his, from Norse mythology; or have followed, with the help of Professor Rhys, that pathway into Welsh mythology which he found in *Jerusalem*; or have gone to Ireland and chosen his symbols from the sacred mountains, along whose side the peasant still sees enchanted fires, and the divinities which have not faded from the belief, if they have faded from the prayers of simple hearts; and have spoken without mixed incongruous things because he spoke of things that had been long

steeped in emotion; and have been less obscure because a traditional mythology stood on the threshold of his meaning and on the margin of his sacred darkness. (Yeats, 2007:86)

Campbell argues that Yeats's entire effort to establish Blake as a legitimate part of the Irish literary tradition is ultimately aimed at legitimising his own developing aesthetic ideas. By adding Blake to "the mystical family tree", Yeats is able to "bolster two of his greatest preoccupations, magic and politics" (Campbell, 2010:310), both topics that are still to be addressed in this dissertation.

The relationship that Blake established between the use of symbols and the individual imagination was striking to Yeats. His reading of Blake leads him to establish a preference in Blake for symbol over allegory, and he is convinced by Blake's argument that symbolism is a component of great art:

William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol. There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but the symbolic imagination, or, as Blake preferred to call it, "vision", is not an allegory, being a "representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably". A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not the imagination: the one is revelation, the other an amusement. (Yeats, 2007:88)

Blake established a lasting worth in symbols, and furthermore taught Yeats that symbols stand prior to and continue to function long after the poet and the poem - the aim of poetry should be to constantly return to such symbols and understand the conscious unfolding meaning imbedded in them.

Yeats's understanding of Blake dictates that the artist must allow his imagination to be affected by these symbols in nature that precede interpretation, having lasting beauty and meaning. Only then can it become a fuller part of the universal imagination of which each individual imagination forms but a fragment (Yeats, 2007:103). Margaret Rudd, in her intricate study of the relationship between the aesthetic philosophies of Blake and Yeats,

argues that Yeats believes Blake to be a true mystic since he believes in the pantheistic memory that includes the imaginative and religious images of all past cultures (1953:59). She identifies the following passage from Yeats's essay "Magic" (1901) as proof of this claim:

Blake had not such mastery over figure and drapery as Botticelli, but he could sympathize with the persons and delight in the scenery of the "Inferno" and the "Purgatorio" as Botticelli could not, and fill them with a mysterious and spiritual significance born perhaps of mystical pantheism. (Yeats, 2007:106)

She identifies another passage from "William Blake and His Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*" as proof of the same:

Mystics of many countries and many centuries, have spoken of this memory; and the honest men and charlatans who keep the magical traditions which will someday be studied as a part of folk-lore, base most that is of importance in their claims upon this memory [...] I have found it in the prophetic books of William Blake, who calls its images "the bright sculpture of Los's Halls" [...] [A]t whatever risk we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the works according to the impulses and the patterns in the great Memory. Can there be anything so important as to cry out that what we call romance, poetry, and intellectual beauty is the only signal that the supreme Enchanter, or someone in His Councils, is speaking of what has been, and shall be again, in the consummation of time? (Yeats, 2007: 37-41)

Yeats thus sees Blake as a poet who fully engages with story-telling traditions, the great memory of humanity, finding mystical value in them that allows for true knowledge of the past and the future. He sees a reflection of his admiration for a historic literary tradition in Blake's own use of symbols:

Blake represented the shapes of beauty haunting our moments of inspiration: shapes held by most for the frailest of ephemera, but by him for a people older than the world, citizens of eternity, appearing and reappearing in the minds of artists and poets, creating all we touch and see by casting distorted images of themselves upon "the vegetable glass of nature"; and because beings, none the less symbols, blossoms, as it

were, growing from invisible immortal roots, hands, as it were, pointing the way into some divine labyrinth. (Yeats, 2007:89)

Yeats further understands Blake's philosophy to regard imaginative art that draws on the great memory to be superior to art that is intellectualised:

If the "world of imagination" was "the world of eternity", as this doctrine implies, it was of less importance to know men and nature than to distinguish the beings and substances of imagination from those of a more perishable kind, created by phantasy, in uninspired moments, out of memory and whim. (Yeats, 2007:89)

The sheer number of passages that can be quoted here to prove the extent to which Yeats admired and incorporated Blakean aesthetic philosophy indicates the extent to which Yeats submerges himself in the study of his Romantic idol. It is interesting that Yeats's affiliation with Blake is primarily concerned with the *power* of symbol and imagination, whereas he considers Shelley's philosophy to be indicative of the importance of the artist having an intellectual and guiding role in society. Shelley is more closely associated with the poetic tradition of Yeats's own time and he sees the limits of the senses and human perception expressed through Shelley's symbols as a necessary warning – complete mystical engagement with imaginative eternity and the symbolic expression thereof carries the threat of isolating the artist and preventing him or her from being understood. This theme of isolation from real and passionate experiences that resides in a constant exploration of things that are only ever imagined is explored in "The Wanderings of Oisín". In an analysis of the theme of isolation in this poem, Liebrechts identifies the passage where Oisín watches the fairy dancers mock "Time and Fate and Change" (Yeats, 1950:42) in a passionless manner as illustrative of the fact "that joy cannot be fully appreciated in the absence of its opposite as immortality lacks the passionate intensity of life in the face of impending death" (Liebrechts, 1993:42). Yeats's continual engagement with folkloric material keeps him from being able to give in to the complete subjectivity that Blake would demand from artists, and instead he only incorporates those elements of Blake's philosophy which further give credence to his claim that artistic forms such as folklore serve, to use Mattar's term, as a "collaborative Ur-text of spiritual and imaginative faith" (2010:247).

It is from Blake that Yeats gathers that the Irish folk tradition can serve as an appropriate source of imaginative symbols since it comprises persistent, lasting, and continuously

functioning images in the folk imagination. He writes of this lasting value in “Bardic Ireland”:

There behind the Ireland of to-day, lost in the ages, this chaos murmurs like the dark and stormy sea full of sounds of lamentation. And through all these throbs one impulse – the persistence of Celtic passion: a man loves or hates until he falls into the grave. (Yeats, 1993:53)

Yeats came to view such persistent folklore as a power that should be used to vitalize the intellectualised English literature that had resulted from Victorian rationalism (Brämsback, 1971:59), and pleads for Irish poets to again turn to their literary heritage for renewal and inspiration in “The Message to the Folk-lorist” (1893) :

No conscious invention can take the place of tradition, for he who would write a folk tale, and thereby bring a new life into literature, must have the fatigue of the spade in his hands and the stupor of the fields in his heart. Let us listen humbly to the old people telling their stories, and perhaps God will send the primitive excellent imagination into the midst of us again. (Yeats, 2000:263)

This attribution of a re-energising ability to folklore and its symbols is again drawn from Blakean aesthetics. Philip L. Marcus argues that Blake’s reinterpretation of great British heroes such as Nelson and Pitt is particularly appealing to Yeats, especially as he becomes increasingly involved with nationalist figures such as John O’Leary who appeals to ancient Irish heroes as models for the cultural revolution in Ireland. Marcus states that Blake’s reverence for “antiquities” is incorporated into Yeats’s own aesthetic, particularly because of their “past greatness and the profound effect they might have on the future” (Marcus, 1992:32), and so he strives to re-introduce heroes such as Oisín and Cúchulainn into contemporary Irish literature.

Yeats’s admiration for Blake increases when he discovers that Blake supports his view of autonomy in art. JBY partly initiates this insistence that art should be valued autonomously as it lies outside of history. JBY’s preference for an artistic education over a formal, intellectual one can also be found in Blake and perhaps serves to explain how the young Yeats comes to accept this element of the unorthodox education his father provides him with. Symons

explains Blake's views on the negative, moralising effects that education has on imaginative poetry:

“There is no good in education,” he said. “I hold it to be wrong. It is the great sin. It is eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil [...] Everything is good in God's eyes” [...] in his poetry, there is no moral tendency, nothing that might not be poison as well as antidote; nothing indeed but the absolute affirmation of that energy which is eternal delight. He worshipped energy as the well-head or parent fire of life; and to him there was no evil, only a weakness, a negation of energy, the ignominy of wings that droop and are contented in the dust. (Symons, 1909:45)

Yeats saw folklore in particular as similarly part of this universal energy that does not deal with moral issues, but instead with truth, beauty and knowledge:

These little stories [...] have no moral, and yet, perhaps, they and their like are the only things really immortal, for they were told in some shape or other, by old men at the fire before Nebuchadnezzar ate grass, and they will still linger in some odd crannie or crevice of the world when the pyramids have crumbled to sand. (Yeats, 1993:136)<sup>11</sup>

During the 1890s all of his ideas which are rooted in Blakean and Romantic aesthetic philosophies culminate in the notion of aesthetic moods, which he explains as following:

Literature differs from explanatory and scientific writing in being wrought about a mood, or a community of moods, as the body is wrought about an invisible soul [...] These moods are the labourers and messengers of the Ruler of All, the gods of ancient days still dwelling on their secret Olympus, the angels of more modern days ascending and descending upon their shining ladder. (Yeats, 1961:195)

For Yeats, aesthetic moods are the primary force of art which lends it inherent, autonomous value which does not depend on art having a political or functional role in society. These moods encompass universal truths and beauty which does more to enlarge the imagination of

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<sup>11</sup> Yeats's regard for the autonomous value of art will further develop as his interest in nationalism and the occult increases, and will come to play an important role in his defence of his dramatic works against utilitarianism.

either the artist or the audience than any formally attributed function of art could. These moods, which Yeats would have expressed in all art, do not explain perceived truths in a didactic manner as “explanatory” or “scientific” literature does, but rather appeals to the imagination of the individual which is linked to the great memory of his or her community.

This preoccupation with autonomy is intricately tied up with the communicative and enlarging potential that symbols hold, and it is in this capacity that Blake and Shelley’s philosophies regarding the role and power of symbol and imagination will also continue to play a part in his own development as he seeks to legitimise his own aesthetic ideas.

## **2.4. Yeats and Pre-Raphaelitism, French Symbolism and the Occult**

Though the Romantics provided Yeats with a philosophical argument for the important place that the imagination and creativity held within the cultural sphere, enabling readers to access universal truths, he also looked to other artistic schools for ideas on aesthetics and form. Two in particular, the Pre-Raphaelite movement and French Symbolism, introduced him to the aesthetic value of symbols *in literature*. He also explores the philosophical principles of the occult movement in England and Ireland where he finds the same value in the supernatural which he has encountered in his folkloric readings.

I shall first consider the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on the young Yeats, since there is a direct link between Yeats’s early education, his father’s personal aesthetic, his reading of Blake and his reverence for this artistic movement.

### **2.4.1. Yeats and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement**

During Yeats’s youth, JBY dedicated himself to the study of the work and philosophy of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. He shared these literary principles with his son, particularly those of Morris and Rossetti, finding them to contain the dramatic quality that he demanded instead of “speculative poetry, generalisations and abstractions” (Jeffares, 1949:22). According to Yeats, his father believed the speculative, intellectual quality of Victorian thought that so degraded formal artistic beauty was initiated by Raphael, who was self-indulgent rather than dedicated to ordering passion in an aesthetically significant fashion (Yeats, 1961:66). After

finishing his school education Yeats dedicated himself to the fine arts, as his father did, before turning to poetry, a decision greatly motivated by his own reverence for Pre-Raphaelite art and ideas (Yeats, 1961:81).

The Pre-Raphaelites are described by Laurence Des Cars as a “group of artists, all of whom had strong personalities, [who] shared a common resolve to revitalize English painting and an enthusiasm for medieval art” (Des Cars, 2000:22). Their place in the history of aesthetic philosophy is rather more interesting though – these artists, initially primarily dedicated to painting, and later to literature as well, expound aesthetic principles that are to a large extent reactionary, returning to Romantic aesthetic principles of finding beauty in nature, as the following statement by John Ruskin on the purpose of the movement illustrates:

Go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth. (Ruskin, qtd in Des Cars, 2000:11)

Disillusioned by the realism, superfluous detail and sentimentality that characterised Victorian art, the Pre-Raphaelites made an influential, albeit rather brief, stand for art that again strives to affirm the value that beauty, particularly beauty found in nature, has for the social sphere. These artists chose to turn to the middle ages for inspiration, finding the primitive cultural values, untouched and spiritually present in medieval art, to have more aesthetic worth and social value than the moralising realistic art of Victorian England. Yeats, in his choice to advocate the continual value of Irish folklore and myth, essentially drawing on the spirit of a similar “medievalism”, displays an affinity with these artists. He too expounds the aesthetic and social value of art by arguing for the “preserved remnants of ancient secret doctrines” which were “desperately needed by a materialistic modern world” (Thuente, 1980:43). His choice to turn to the spirit of medievalism as practised by the Pre-Raphaelites becomes understandable when their aesthetic doctrine is considered.

John Everett Millais (1829-96), William Holman Hunt (1828-1910) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) founded the “Pre-Raphaelite Brethren” in 1848. Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, William Morris and Algernon Swinburne, all members who shared interests in

literature, particularly influenced Yeats. “The Blessèd Damozel” (1850) by Rossetti, arguably the best known Pre-Raphaelite poem, illustrates the aesthetic aims of pre-Raphaelitism: it is typically medieval, displays pictorial realism with symbolic overtones, and incorporates the union of spirit and flesh, and sensuousness and religiousness (Abrams, 2005:252-253). Rossetti in particular was a major influence on Yeats, who viewed him in the same light as Blake – as a visionary artist. Whereas Blake’s work influences Yeats on many theoretical levels, most significantly regarding the power and role of imaginary art, he finds in Rossetti a philosophy of style and symbols that values ancient yet living oral and literary traditions. Rossetti finds an expression for the all-important *feeling* in art by drawing on medieval aesthetic principles and sources. “Feeling” here refers to a pure, serene image which is familiar to the audience and manages to enlarge its imagination. Fennell equates it with the type of ultimate truths that Blake finds in the Universal Memory (a concept similar to that of Yeats’s “great memory”) (Fennell, 2001:313). Yeats thus finds the justification he needs to situate these truths in ancient, pagan symbols of Ireland, just as Rossetti does in medieval figures and stories.

Yeats also shares the Pre-Raphaelite disdain for deliberately moralising art which it objects to on the fundamental notion that art should not serve any purpose beyond its own aesthetic expression. This is one of the reasons why there is a return to medievalism – here, in a world where materialism and intellectualism have not yet soured natural beauty, there is still artistic freedom and a consideration for the value of beauty (Des Cars, 2000:15). Yeats finds that the same type of authentic inspiration can be identified in the symbols of traditional Irish stories, since an imaginative observation of a mythical and spiritual past will lead to the discovery of truths. This, of course, depends greatly on the value that is placed on the beauty and expressiveness of such symbols. The Pre-Raphaelites did not value art for its utilitarian purposes, but rather for its ability to interact with itself and its surroundings to promote imaginative growth, something that carries much more weight for a society than moralising edicts which merely restrict the possibility of discovering truth in all forms of beauty.

It is in his turn from practicality to a focus on the way in which truth can be revealed through interdisciplinary means that Rossetti appeals to Yeats. Rossetti’s early work often drew on literary figures that have become canonized or have been well established in the cultural imagination. His “literary work” thus has a strong impact on Yeats, who places so much value on Irish cultural figures, and even the “vagueness” that characterises much of Rossetti’s

early work is accordingly valued since the cultural figures displayed already carry imaginative weight:

Rossetti, like Giotto, can afford to be less realistic in technique precisely because the “reality” of his characters and events is already established; they exist not only as names and places in particular texts, but as emotional histories in the viewer’s imagination. Freed from the restrictions of representationalism, he can then create, through symbolic use of colour, decoration, and composition, those formal (or “artificial” and as such unavailable to the painter of the modern age) ideas which again formulate rather than express the emotional meaning of the work, which is dependent upon the viewer for completion. (Pistorius, qtd in Lundgaard, 1980:139-140)

Pistorius here argues that Rossetti uses established imaginative figures and forms that allow for free aesthetic interpretation by all who engage with these imaginative, traditional symbols. Symbolism that draws on an imaginative history can have a multitude of meanings, all dependent on the particular context and perspective of the reader. What they all have in common is that their historical and imaginative positions have definitive value – often the meanings attributed to particular symbols are so imbedded in cultural memory that they remain the same over ages, and at other times they take on new significance. They do, however, continue to form part of an imaginative and artistic history, even when symbols and images are used in different artistic disciplines. This allows for symbols to become richer and more meaningful, promoting new types of relations between aesthetic and intellectual ideas. Yeats views Irish folklore and the symbols it encompasses as an example of such artistic interdisciplinarity, thus finding support for its value and artistic symbolic merit in the Pre-Raphaelite penchant to promote the crossing of images and ideas between artistic mediums. Irish folklore primarily consists of an oral storytelling tradition, although it also encompasses musical, visual and literary components, particularly in the Bardic tradition, which is responsible for the continuation of folklore. Folklore is fundamentally and organically a unified cultural entity that combines the historic and social aesthetic principles of a *people*, being equally divided between “old songs” and “old stories” (Thuente, 1980:153). For the young Yeats who declares himself to be interested in “all things Pre-Raphaelite” (Yeats, 1961:114), this type of interdisciplinarity which enables him to view all imaginative art in a unified fashion, has special appeal, since he is very much concerned at this point (as he

continues to be throughout his career) with being part of the great Irish literary tradition which he believes to be “a repository of idealism and imagination” (Thunert, 1980:8).

Yeats recognises a particular sense of unity in folklore that is able to invoke images of Blakean ideal truths through the interactions of the different aesthetic parts. He describes his own understanding of the interaction between artistic principles and the resultant unity that leads to an enlarged imagination:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our heart we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is not emotion [...] With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we should cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty. (Yeats, 2007:115-120)

Yeats's insistence that formal structures such as rhythm in poetry serve a greater aesthetic purpose thus coincides with Rossetti's insistence that a meditation on the formal components of poetry, along with a return to imaginative art that does not confine itself to rationalist intellectual boundaries, will again bring about an appreciation of beauty as it is found in both reality and the imagination.

Yeats's own thought does progress beyond that of Rossetti's influence – he identifies an ideal type of return to imagination, and an ideal philosophical foundation on which this return can be based: a Blakean evocation of imaginative truths. His early scientific endeavours and fear of artistic isolation serve as the motivation to establish a firm aesthetic “route” that poets should follow if they are to be a part of the reaffirmation of the value of imaginative

literature. Rossetti, however, faces the same philosophical crises as Shelley: he becomes over-zealous and intense in his desire for aesthetic freedom and symbolic enlargement. He is never satisfied with the knowledge that he is able to gather from symbols through the imaginative process, and always strives towards some ideal that threatens to remove his work from the temporal realm entirely (Yeats, 2007:40). Yeats looked further for figures to enrich and support his developing aesthetic ideas, and found another Pre-Raphaelite, William Morris, to be an excellent literary example.

Morris's influence on Yeats is arguably strengthened by the fact that the two poets knew one another personally. He was one of JBY's most successful acquaintances, and the young Yeats often listened to him explain his philosophical views on poetry. These impacted greatly on Yeats's view of the creative process involved in writing poetry, and he would come to dub Morris "the happiest of poets" (Yeats, 2007:42). It is Morris's philosophy of *joy* found in the very process of creation that has a lasting effect on Yeats's own early aesthetic. He values the honesty and simplicity of Morris's process, which, unlike the intellectualisation of Tennyson or the idealisation of Rossetti and Shelley, maintains a sense of truth and accessibility. Richard Fallis claims that Yeats finds the unifying element in Morris's poetry to stem from this very belief in the happiness that springs forth from experiencing the beauty of natural abundance (Fallis, 1976:99). In his essay on Morris Yeats confirms this claim:

I am certain that he understood thoroughly [...] that the important things, the things we must believe in or perish, are beyond argument [...] His vision is true because it is poetical, because we are all a little happier when we are looking at it [...] His art was not more essentially religious than Rossetti's art, but it was different, for Rossetti, drunken with natural beauty, saw the supernatural beauty, the impossible beauty, in his frenzy, while he being less intense and more tranquil would show us a beauty that would wither if it did not set us at peace with natural things, and if we did not believe that it existed always a little, and would someday exist in its fullness. He may not have been, and indeed he was not, among the very greatest of poets, but he was among the greatest of those who prepare the last reconciliation when the Cross shall blossom with roses. (Yeats, 2007:49-50)

Yeats finds a similar natural joy in the process involved in the creation of folklore – nature, and the emotional communion that the ancient pagan Irish tribes had with her, form part of

the very fabric of the Irish folk tradition. Yeats quotes Ernest Renan's assertion about the relationship between the Celts and nature and its effect on those involved:

“No race communed so intimately as the Celtic race with the lower creation, or believed it to have so big a share of moral life.” The Celtic race had “a realistic naturalism,” “a love of nature for herself, a vivid feeling for her magic, commingled with the melancholy a man knows when he is face to face with her, and thinks he hears her communing with him about his origin and his destiny.” (Renan, qtd in Yeats, 2007:128)

Yeats sees in Morris what is lacking in Rossetti – a love for the natural world which does not wholly depend on “the impossible beauty”. Nature is bound to the supernatural, and truth and beauty move freely amongst these bonds.

By now it has been made apparent that symbols and Symbolism as a literary movement played a fundamental role in Yeats's aesthetic philosophy. The next section will pay attention to a very specific branch of Symbolism that Yeats was introduced to early on in his career – French Symbolism.

#### **2.4.2. Yeats and French Symbolism**

Yeats does not write essays and personal criticism about the French Symbolists to the extent that he does on the Young Irelanders, the Irish Dramatic movement or any of his Romantic influences, yet he often mentions these French poets and artists when writing about symbolism in particular, indicating that their philosophical ideas have some impact on his thought. It is interesting to note that Yeats later in his life denied any significant influence from French Symbolism (O'Driscoll, 1975:9), writing to Ernest Boyd in 1915: “My chief mystical authorities have been Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg. Of the French Symbolists I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge” (Yeats, 1954:592). In “The Celtic Element in Literature” (1887), however, he mentions several French Symbolists as distinguished members of the group of poets in Europe who are attempting to return value to imaginative literature in a struggle against materialism. Yeats, who could be argued to be symbolist, thus admires the role that the French Symbolists play in his own aesthetic project:

The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century, and the symbolic movement, which has come to perfection in Germany in Wagner, in England in the Pre-Raphaelites, and in France in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck, and has stirred the imagination of Ibsen and D'Annunzio, is certainly the only movement that is saying new things. (Yeats, 2007:138; my emphasis)

These types of ambiguities in Yeats's own descriptions often occur – he possibly plays down the influence of the French Symbolists on his early thought later on due to his desire to form a new, unified, occult aesthetic that does not necessarily draw on any mainstream European literary tendencies.

Yeats's primary source of information on the French Symbolists was English poet and critic Arthur Symons, author of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Yeats possibly read some of the primary works himself, but since he had little French, Symons's secondary criticism and personal views on these Symbolists would have served as his main source regarding their aesthetic philosophies.

In the introduction of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* Symons declares the importance and necessity of literary symbols, a message that would have struck Yeats:

Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed, not even language. What are words themselves but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing or before them, in heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what symbolism in literature really is: a form of expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. It is sometimes permitted to us to hope that our convention is indeed the reflection rather than merely the sign of that unseen reality. We have done much if we have found a recognisable sign. (Symons, 1919:1-2)

Symons identifies two striking elements in symbolism: firstly, that it is not merely a literary phenomenon, but that it encompasses all language, and consequently the relationship and perceptions we form between what we observe and how we express it. Secondly, that there exists a Blakean universal memory to which all individuals have access through an engagement with symbols that have obtained significant meaning through continuous use. Frank Kermode identifies this as the main psychological assumption of symbolism, claiming it to be “essentially that of an early Romantic aesthetic: that the human mind is so constituted as to be able to recognise images of which it can have no perceived knowledge – the magic assumption, or the assumption that makes so much of dreams” (Kermode, 2002:130). This early Romantic aesthetic is of course most prominently presented in Blake’s aesthetic, which played such an important role in the development of the Symbolist literary philosophy. Like Blake, later Symbolists felt that they were rediscovering lost knowledge through their engagement with symbols, and his proclamation that “The world of imagination is infinite and eternal” (Blake, qtd in Kermode, 2002:128) was of “high importance” to them (Kermode, 2002:128). Yeats, another adherent of Blakean imaginative philosophy, would thus have found many coinciding ideas between his own symbolic aesthetic and those developed by the French Symbolists. In fact, his own definition of “emotion”, a term he used alternately with “symbol” to describe reflections and expressions of thought and imaginative ideas, mirrors many of the descriptions of Symons’s own understanding of the Symbolist philosophy (King, 1965:129).

A clearer definition of the term *French Symbolism* is provided by Symons and further indicates the attraction that this literary movement holds for the young Yeats. Symons claims that the “Symbolism of our day”, that is, Symbolism as practised by the French poets and artist of the late 19th century, differs from Romantic and other forms of past Symbolism in that “it has now become conscious of itself” (Symons, 1919:3). French Symbolism has thus become intensely aware of the potential and power in symbols, and attempts to use them in a way that not only speaks of abstract associations with infinite ideas and knowledge, as Romanticism often tends to do, but of truths and concrete knowledge that impact on the social and artistic realms. Yeats finds this self-consciousness in the movement appealing – when an awareness exists of the possible truths that symbols can enlarge upon, they are more forceful and can be better explored and understood. Yeats firmly believes that symbols and their meanings are historically and imaginatively intertwined, however arbitrary the symbol assigned to a particular meaning might seem, and that conscious knowledge of the one leads

to better apprehension of the other: “It is not possible to separate an emotion or spiritual state from the image that calls it up and gives it expression [...] that is why no mind is more valuable than the images it contains” (Yeats, 2007:208). Yeats, of course, finds such symbols to be particularly powerful within the Irish literary tradition since it is a continuous, living tradition where the association between symbols and meanings still exists within the imaginative memory of the Irish people. They form part of stories that include true human drama and emotion, and can thus be appreciated and understood by all people who share in the universal imaginative tradition. Edmund Wilson suggests that folkloric symbols are in fact more powerful and accessible than the images used by the French Symbolists *because* they are part of a living tradition, and thus *seem* more real and plausible even if they are not:

The Danaan children, the Shadowy Horses and Fergus with his brazen cars – those mysterious and magical beings who play so large a part in Yeats’s verse – have little more objective reality than the images of Mallarmé: they are the elements and the moods of Yeats’s complex sensibility. But they have a more satisfactory character than such a French Symbolist mythology as Mallarmé’s – though Mallarmé does occasionally draw on the Old Testament or the classics for a Salome or a faun – because they constitute a world of which one can to some extent get the hang, where one can at least partly find one’s way about. (Wilson, 1961:30)

The French Symbolists’s images, although perhaps not as powerful as those found in the Celtic folklore tradition, still manage to have a strong impact on all types of imaginative literary traditions through their strong opposition to materialism, perhaps one of the most appealing factors of the movement to Yeats. Like the Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the French Symbolists revolt against the intellectualising of creativity. Symons attributes this reaction to the sense of disillusionment with rationalism felt throughout artistic circles in the Western world, including those of Yeats and his contemporaries. He writes:

[...] with the change of men’s thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and its outward form: after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and re-arrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes [...] a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream. (Symons, 1919:4)

O'Driscoll quotes Yeats's own views on materialism and Symbolism as posited by the poet in *The Works of William Blake* – the similarity between the ideas of the French Symbolists and Yeats again speaks of their possible influence on his mind:

The perception of the senses apart from symbol, limits us down to the narrow circle of personal experience, while associations of ideas is essentially “spectral”, coming as it does, not from perception of something apart from ourselves, but from the memory of sensations which get their particular value from being connected with our personal and “spectral” life. By symbolism we enter the universality of God, by sensation and the memory of sensation, we enter the world of Satan, which is “all nothing”. (Yeats, qtd in O'Driscoll, 1975:12)

Kermode recognises a “spiritual” essence in French anti-materialism and intellectualism – symbols, with their divine ability to illumine knowledge that has become part of the general universal pool of wisdom, are superior to allegories since they do not depend on physical equivalents that exist in the “real world” (Kermode, 2002:133). Here again we find the Blakean influence in French Symbolism. Yeats describes his own similar preference for symbols over allegory in a passage that I have previously quoted:

There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but symbolic imagination, or, as Blake preferred to call it, “vision,” is not allegory, being “a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably.” A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not imagination: the one is revelation, the other amusement. (Yeats, 2007:88)

Of all of Blake's aesthetic principles that the French Symbolists take to heart, this notion of symbols as “invisible essences” is perhaps central. Baudelaire in particular, one of the leading voices of this movement, finds symbols to be of great spiritual and even esoteric importance, claiming symbols to be “images with this essential magical power” that is able to give the reader and artist access to the universal memory (Kermode, 2002:133). Again, this spiritual element in French Symbolism that allows a place for magic, the supernatural and spiritual forces, appeals to Yeats.

Particular French artists who endow symbols with aesthetic and imaginative value are identified by Symons, and two in particular interested Yeats: Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. An in-depth discussion of their influences on Yeats lies beyond the scope of this section, which aims to give only an overview of the influence of this movement on the poet; therefore I shall very briefly summarise the effects these two Symbolists had on the *philosophically* attuned aesthetic ideas of Yeats.

Mallarmé placed a lot of emphasis on the *essences* that form part of the universal memory that can only ever be presented by symbols that have, over time, come to be associated intrinsically with those essences (just as Yeats does, as indicated by an earlier quote in this section – “A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence” (Yeats, 2007:88)):

Abolished, the pretension, aesthetically an error, despite its dominion over almost all the masterpieces, to enclose within the subtle paper other than, for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees [...] The pure work [...] implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields a place to the words, immobilised by the shock of their inequality; they take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase. (Mallarmé, qtd in Symons, 1919:199-200)

Symons's translation of Mallarmé appears to be somewhat convoluted, but the argument stands – Mallarmé detects an intrinsic connection between symbols and that which they represent, claiming this relationship to transcend the will of poets who perhaps want to assign significance to them. Tradition and convention greatly influence our understanding and use of symbolism – that is where symbols derive their power. Yeats agrees with Mallarmé on this point as is apparent in his own claims regarding the spiritual and historical nature of symbols in his essay “Symbolism in Painting”:

All Art that is not merely story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which medieval magicians made with complex colour and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily. And guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence

[...] symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection.  
(Yeats, 2007:109-110)

Yeats's reading of Symons's views on these French artists is perhaps not as directly influential on his own thought as the ideas of Blake and Shelley had been, but their aesthetic principles resonate with him, and further justify the opinions he had formed for himself.

The other Symbolist whose aesthetic approach appealed to Yeats by arguing for the eternal value in symbols is Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. De l'Isle-Adam found time, and thus temporal limits to the value of particular images and traditions, to be but "metaphysical abstraction" (Symons, 1919:135), and declared the goal of poetry to be the creation of an imaginative world that lies beyond material constraints, where the mind can be free to engage with the true reality – that of the ideal world where ideas and cultural truths reside (Symons, 1919:141). Yeats, a great admirer of this aesthetic premise of de L'Isle-Adam, believes Ireland to embody the symbolic goal of the French Symbolists, and would have Irish poets "begin to dig in Ireland the garden of the future, understanding that here in Ireland the spirit of man may be about to wed the soil of the world" (Yeats, 2007:154). This wedding between man and nature, and the power found in the symbolic union, is further explored by Yeats through his occult and esoteric interests, which place even more emphasis on the enlarging abilities of symbols. The next section of this chapter will discuss Yeats's own occult interests as far as they contribute to his aesthetic development.

### **2.4.3. Yeats and the Occult**

Yeats's involvement with the occult is diverse and complex and it is important to note from the outset what his understanding of "occult" entailed. The term is often ambiguously used to describe certain magical, ritualistic, spiritual and religious activities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as follows: "Of or relating to magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy, or other practical arts held to involve agencies of a secret or mysterious nature; of the nature of such an art; dealing with or versed in such matters; magical" (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2013). Brian Arkins states that, according to this accepted definition, "The label 'occult' is [...] not appropriate for philosophical movements like Neo-Platonism or religions such as Hinduism" (Arkins, 2010:41). Arkins limits his own study of Yeats's occult

interests accordingly, and only discusses Theosophy, the Order of the Golden Dawn, spiritualism and folklore as occult activities (2010:41). This section opposes Arkins by showing how Yeats's constant search for a unified aesthetic theory relies on congruency between his different interests. Elements of Romantic, Neo-Platonic and religious thought play a role in his occult activities and the orders through which he engages with them, since he aims to establish a unified theory of art that incorporates all schools of esoteric and artistic thought, lending it credibility and ultimately empowering the whole practice of artistic creation.

Having been raised in a non-religious household, Yeats felt deprived of a spiritual education, and experienced an intense need for a spiritual system that could incorporate his aesthetic ideals. Thus his own artistic interest was moulded by his reading of Blake, Shelley, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists, all artists and thinkers who react against the materialist paradigms of their times and recognise some reality beyond the material world; for some, like Blake, this reality has a religious component, whereas for others, like the Symbolists, it is an ideal realm where reside the true forms which the symbols in art represent.

Having spent many of his formative years amongst the peasants of Western Ireland, Yeats had intimate knowledge of the ancient beliefs of Irish heroes and folk legends that are preserved in the tales of the peasantry and continue to be observed as part of a living tradition. The continuation of this tradition lent much credibility to the reality of the supernatural beliefs it contained, and Yeats came to share in the beliefs, finding the continuation of an imaginative tradition which preserves the cultural history of a people more convincing than that which has been academically recorded. Yeats states his own affiliation with the peasants and their preference for spiritual beliefs:

Our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven. The historian should remember, should he not? angels and devils not less than kings and soldiers, plotters and thinkers. What matter if the angel or devil, as indeed certain old writers believe, first wrapped itself with an organized shape in some man's imagination? what matter "if God himself only acts or is in the existing beings of men", as Blake believed? we must none the less admit that invisible beings, far wandering influences, shapes that may have floated from a hermit of the wilderness, brood over council-chambers and studies and battle-fields. We should never be certain that it was

not some woman treading in the wine-press who began that subtle change in men's minds, that powerful movement of thought and imagination about which so many Germans have written; or that the passion, because of which so many countries were given to the sword, did not begin in the mind of some shepherd boy, lighting up his eyes for a moment before it ran upon its way. (Yeats, 2007:33-34)

Yeats writes how his emotional belief in the stories of his country folk overpowered his intellectual disbelief that "you could be carried away body and soul", and how, while wandering through the Sligo countryside as a child this emotional belief allowed him to experience supernatural events himself (Yeats, 1961:78). It is from these experiences that he was able to understand the value and truth of folktales that speak of such events, since they recount the true spiritual experiences of people: "one should believe what ever had been believed in all countries and periods, and only reject any part of it after much evidence, instead of starting all over afresh and only believing what one could prove" (Yeats, 1961:78).

Both Catherine Flannery and Roy Foster suggest that Yeats's affiliation with the country people and their beliefs is further tied to his own place in Irish society. Flannery (1977:11) argues that Yeats's considering himself to be thoroughly Irish despite his Anglo-Irish ancestry, places him within the historical imaginative tradition of the Irish people: his beliefs are "something I have received from the generations, part of that compact with my fellow-men made in my name before I was born; I cannot break from it without breaking from some part of my own nature" (Yeats, 1994:218). He thus associates with the generations of Irish people before him who held their myths and folktales to be not only true, but valuable. Foster further claims that it is Yeats's very position as a marginalised Anglo-Irish Protestant in a predominantly Catholic country that, along with many others in the same position (Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, Bram Stoker, Elizabeth Bowen), results in a tendency to move towards spiritualism and occult activities that enable him to identify with the spirituality of his countrymen:

[these writers were] marginalised Irish Protestants all, often living in England but regretting Ireland, stemming from families with strong clerical and professional colorations, whose occult preoccupations surely mirror a sense of displacement, a loss of social and psychological integration, and an escapism motivated by the threat of a takeover by the Catholic middle classes [...] (Foster, 1993:220)

All these influences motivated Yeats to pursue an interest in the occult that resulted in a belief in supernatural phenomena. His father's embedded scepticism towards psychical demonstrations and incarnations of magic would remain with Yeats throughout his life, but he came to regard the existence of a realm of ideas and memories beyond the physical world as undeniably true. This realm, which is embedded within the age-old wisdom of all who have believed in it, can be accessed through an engagement with the symbols and rituals that represent it in the material world. This occult interest would become central to Yeats's thought and aesthetic philosophy, particularly during the early half of the 1890s, as is made clear by this extract from a letter to John O'Leary: "The mystical life is the centre of all that I think and that I write [...] I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect" (Yeats, 1955:211). The opening paragraph of his essay "Magic" (1891), which was written not long before this letter, serves as a manifesto of the principles that came to underlie his Occult beliefs:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are –

- (1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That the great mind and memory can be evoked by symbols. (Yeats, 2007:25)

The first practising occultist whom Yeats encountered was Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian mystic and founder of the Theosophical movement in the West. Theosophy originated in India, and was the study of "the divine essence as expounded in mystical revelations from Mahatmas in India and gurus in Tibet" (Malins & Purkis, 1994: 46). Blavatsky, having learnt these secret doctrines during her extensive travels in the East, wished to make them available to all through an established society. The aims of the Theosophical Society (generally known as the "TS") are summarised by Malins & Purkis:

[...] to found a universal brotherhood, irrespective of race, creed, colour or caste; to study comparative religion, philosophy and science from sacred books; and to investigate certain unexplained laws of nature (psychic phenomena) and latent powers in man, such as the spiritual body taking control of the physical body [...] The goal was Nirvana, in which the lower Self is dead. (Malins and Purkis, 1994:46)

Malins & Purkis claim commonality between Theosophy and other mystic and religious traditions such as Buddhism, the Kabbalah, the traditions of the Upanishads and the Yoga system of the Hindu religion (1994:46). Arkins's claim that Yeats's occultism had no religious affiliations is thus already shown to be wrong, since the spirituality of man is central to these doctrines and philosophies. Yeats became intrigued by Blavatsky's teachings and the symbolic and philosophical possibilities they held for his own aesthetic project. His reading during this time includes Blavatsky's own *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and fellow-Irishman A.P. Sinnet's *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). In 1885 he co-founded the Dublin Hermetic Society, which studied oriental religions and philosophies, including Theosophy. He also met Mohini Chatterjee in Dublin in 1885. Chatterjee was an Indian Brahmin who held to a philosophy that time and history are cyclical, and that reincarnation is a reality. This idea, which features in Neo-Platonic philosophy as well as Irish folklore, would become an intrinsic part of Yeats's own spirituality and symbolism<sup>12</sup>.

That Yeats should found a philosophical system built on ideas of the resurrection of spirits, historical cyclicity and the ability to communicate with figures from the past is not surprising, since many of these ideas can be located in the Irish folk and Bardic story-telling traditions, while other principles (such as the existence of a world that transcends temporal reality) form part of the Romantic tradition. Yeats thus easily assimilated Chatterjee's ideas into his aesthetic system as there are many similarities between Chatterjee's Vedantism and certain elements in Blake and Shelley's philosophies (Yeats, 2007:291). Chatterjee's Vedantism centres on a particular conception of reincarnation: he proclaims the "permanence of the soul in the eternal essence amidst all the transient forms through which it passes" (Frag, 1965:40). Yeats sees this as a validation of his own belief that the soul and spiritual experiences are of great value since they transcend time and continue to influence the social

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<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee's influence on Yeats remains significant throughout his life, as is illustrated by his mature poem "Mohini Chatterjee" (1933), which discusses this issue of the eternal nature of the human spirit and its resurrection.

and artistic spheres through their many symbolic reincarnations, becoming a part of the “great memory” of humanity. Yeats discusses his own belief and experience of the recurring nature of symbols that represent ancient truths and wisdom, and claims that the ancient folk of Ireland who formed part of the bardic tradition understood the mystical powers and eternal value that such symbols held:

Almost everyone who has ever busied himself with such matters [symbols and visions] has come, in trance or dream, upon some new and strange symbol or event, which he has afterwards found in some strange work he had never read or heard of. Examples like this are as yet too little classified, too little analysed, to convince the stranger, but some of them are proof enough for those they have happened to, proof that there is a memory of nature that reveals events and symbols of distant centuries. Mystics of many countries and many centuries have spoken of this memory; and the honest men and charlatans, who keep the magical traditions which will someday be studied as a part of folk-lore, base most that is of importance in their claims upon this memory. (Yeats, 2007:37)

This belief stays with him throughout his life, as illustrated in his late poem “Under Ben Bulbin” (1939): “Many times man lives and dies / Between his two eternities/ That of race and that of soul / And ancient Ireland knew it all” (Yeats, 1950:398).

While involved with Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society and absorbing the teachings of Chatterjee, Yeats is introduced to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a Rosicrucian organisation, which he finds even more appealing than the Theosophical society, since it incorporates artistic principles, which Yeats has up to this point assimilated into Blavatsky and Chatterjee’s philosophies on his own. Here Yeats finds the particular symbols and rituals which affirm his belief in the eternal value of *beauty* and *ideas* along with the soul as well as the methods through which they can be “resurrected” or “reincarnated”. Through a particular type of aesthetic interaction with symbols, the artist is granted access to the great memory, which contains the beauty, truth and soul of humanity. Malins & Purkis identify the interests of the leader of the Order, MacGregor Mathers, as twofold, both aimed at an ultimate union with the divine: “he sought to attain psychic phenomena or visions as a result of meditation on certain chosen symbols; and he practised ancient magical rituals which he had discovered” (Malins & Purkis, 1994:47). Furthermore, the members of the Order saw themselves as part of a “long tradition of priesthoods of inquiry, where hermetic adepts worked upwards through

levels of magical study, emphasizing correspondences between colours, abstract qualities, mathematical numbers [...] according to cabbalistic subdivisions” (Foster, 1997:105). The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn thus propagates many principles that appeal to Yeats’s own aesthetic: it aims to obtain knowledge through a ritualistic engagement with symbols, it reveres traditions that hold a belief in the magical powers that symbols possess, it aims to achieve enlightenment in a systematic way, and it ultimately aims at achieving the unity between the human and the universal “soul” that had been recognised by ancient, spiritually orientated cultures. Yeats emphasises this belief that pre-industrialised peoples had greater access to the great memory due to the role that symbols played in their belief system:

We cannot doubt that barbaric people receive such influences more visibly and obviously, and in all likelihood more easily and fully than we do, for our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our soul less sensitive [...]

Men who are imaginative writers to-day may well have preferred to influence the imagination of others more directly in past times. Instead of learning their craft with paper and pen they may have sat for hours imagining themselves to be stocks and stones and beasts of the wood, till the images were so vivid that the passers-by became but a part of the imagination of the dreamer, and wept or laughed or ran away as he would have them. (Yeats, 2007:34-35)

These passages make it clear that Yeats found the ancient bardic tradition and its symbolism extremely powerful. In his own time, he experiences the same intense symbolic evocation only through occult rituals. It is this ability of the Rosicrucian doctrines to enable him to become a part of the unfolding process of symbolic evocation that draws him to it (Yeats, 1961:576). In the same essay Yeats describes his growing belief in the power of symbolism as it develops along with his interest in magic:

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist. At first I tried to distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little or nothing. Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe,

because the great memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils. (Yeats, 2007:39)

Symbols, whether religious, artistic or seemingly arbitrary, are thus the most powerful tools through which past emotions and images can be evoked and these can form the foundation of a cultural identity.

Through his Theosophical studies Yeats encounters another set of ideas that contributes to this unification effort, that of the classical Neo-Platonist school. Neo-Platonism lends a sense of legitimate authority to the esoteric studies of these nineteenth century mystics, consisting of a combination of Plato's philosophical principles and Eastern mysticism (Malins & Purkis, 1994:49). Neo-Platonism also draws on fixed symbolic systems, often found in mythology, claiming that the cultural history of the world clearly shows how the same symbols recur through time, carrying a certain significance with them for all generations of humanity, being part of the great memory or *anima mundi* (Malins & Purkis, 1994:50). F.A.C. Wilson concisely describes the Neo-Platonic symbolic system, its relation to Romanticism and how it influenced Yeats:

The symbolic system of Neo-Platonism was fixed and one might even say rigid: the sea, for example, symbolized always "the waters of emotion and passion", or more simply life; man was constantly thought of as the beggar, dressed in the rags of mortality; the tomb and the cave were all symbols of the material world; after death, the soul, often accompanied by a mystic escort of dolphins, crossed the sea to heaven, the Isles of the Blessed. Yeats knew this system of symbolism from several sources: from Madame Blavatsky, in his formative years; then from Taylor's translation of the commentators on Plato, and especially from Porphyry's essay on "The Cave of the Nymphs"; also from Plato himself, Plotinus [...] and the other Platonic philosophers he had read. He took it over into his verse in the confidence that it would prevent his own symbolism from being arbitrary and unintelligible; it was traditional, for it had persisted throughout the Middle Ages, where it influenced among others Dante, and, later, Spenser; and, as the symbolism of a religious system which he himself was largely able to accept, it is clear that he thought of it as profound. In using it, again, he

had precedent in the work of two English poets he particularly admired: Blake and [...] Shelley. (Wilson, 1958:199)

The fixed Neo-Platonic system of symbols which is anchored in a tradition of usage by poets throughout the ages appeals to Yeats. His own *Anima Mundi* is a similar system which does thus not only transcend time, but also space and individual histories. Yeats's attraction to this idea would become so profound that he would entitle an entire section of his well-known spiritualistic prose work *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* after it. *Per Amica* can be seen as a precursor to his best-known prose work, *A Vision*, which systematically sets out his entire esoteric philosophical belief system. In *Anima Mundi* he relates how a personal merger with the great memory has become an aesthetic goal:

I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets, old women in Connacht, mediums in Soho, lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some medieval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity; to immerse it in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable from what we have begun to call "the subconscious"; to liberate it from all that comes of councils and committees, from the world as it is seen from universities or from populous towns; and that I might so believe I have murmured evocations and frequented mediums, delighted in all that displaced great problems through sensuous images or exciting phrases, accepting from abstract schools but a few technical words that are so old they seem but broken architraves fallen amid bramble and grass, and have put myself to school where all things are seen: *A Tenedo Tacitae per Amica Silentia Lunae*<sup>13</sup>. (Yeats, 2004:343)

Matterer argues that Yeats would come to regard the rituals and ceremonies of the Golden Dawn as crucial to his development as a mystical initiate and, more importantly, a poet who would be able to gain entry to the *Anima Mundi* (Matterer, 2010:240). His experience of such visions and symbols is described in "Magic":

I find in my diary of magical events for 1899 that I awoke at 3 a.m. out of a nightmare, and imagined one symbol to prevent its recurrence, and imagined another, a simple geometrical form, which calls up dreams of luxuriant vegetable life, that I might have

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<sup>13</sup> Yeats takes this phrase from Virgil's *Aeneid*. It translates as "from Tenedos, through the friendly silences of the moon", referring to the initial stages of Aeneas's travels to his new home.

pleasant dreams. I imagined it faintly, being very sleepy, and went to sleep. I had confused dreams which seemed to have no relation with the symbol. Presently I dozed off again and began half to dream and half to see, as one does between sleep and waking, enormous flowers and grapes. I awoke and recognised that what I had dreamed or seen was the kind of thing appropriate to the symbol before I remembered having used it [...]

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist. (Yeats, 2007:38-39)

Ultimately, the occult serves Yeats's aesthetic in that it confirms the validity of many of the supernatural elements he finds in the Romantic and Irish folk traditions. Mythical heroes, fairies, and particular supernatural motifs such as that of the "Changeling"<sup>14</sup>, are all symbolically significant for the imaginative Irish artist and also make their way into the occult activities of these Irish societies. They all speak of the possibilities of souls and histories existing in several realms, crossing temporal boundaries, being resurrected through an engagement with their symbolic representations. These concepts are paralleled in the occult where similar reincarnations are possible through magic rituals that form part of esoteric doctrines that aim at unification with the Divine. Mystics, priests and other practitioners of these rituals are seen as the privileged ones within the realm of the occult – through dedication they are allowed to engage with the divine and divulge the knowledge it contains to others. In ancient traditional Irish society, the Bardic order plays the same role:

Yeats, who [...] referred to the entire early literary tradition as "bardic", had become aware of that tradition quite early in his career, undoubtedly aided in recognising certain aspects of it by his own occult studies and pursuits, and saw in it a paradigm of the visionary Irish artist that offered coherence for his own complex poetical identity [...] As seers, the bards had direct access to ideal images. Viewed historically, those images were to be found in the past, closer in tone to the Edenic or pre-lapsarian state,

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<sup>14</sup> The "Changeling" motif is prominent throughout Irish folklore, and provides an interesting perspective on the association the Irish draw between the realms of the known and unknown. In "Changeling" stories, human children or young brides are kidnapped by fairies and one of their own is given to the human family to raise. The families experience these fairies who attempt to imitate the kidnapped person as being "away", not with them, and somewhat otherworldly. Two worlds are thus forced to interact, the real and the supernatural – this interaction is also found in many occult studies, where it is believed that death (the "other world") is as important as life, holding the key to certain mysteries that transcend the temporal world (Arkins, 2010:46).

and in sacred texts where they had been embodied by bardic predecessors and preserved through a tenaciously conservative tradition. This tradition also incorporated stories of the deeds of earlier heroes and kings, which might themselves serve as vehicles for esoteric wisdom. (Marcus, 1992:8)

The history of the Bards, as a part of the Celtic poetic tradition, is rich and complex, with the distinction between the druidic and bardic traditions often falling away. Yeats simplified this history for himself, considering all of Irish imaginative history a part of the bardic tradition, and had immense respect for the bards since they are the figures who have managed to preserve the Irish myths and folk tales through their dedication to the oral story-telling tradition. Thanks to the ancient Bards, the Irish imaginative tradition continues to be a vital part of Irish culture, particularly amongst the country folk. Yeats would have Irish artists model themselves on the bardic traditions of the world, emulating them so that they too can contribute to the preservation of Irish identity as well as provide traditional guidance within the social sphere (in accordance with Shelley's declaration that poets should serve as legislators and prophets):

We who care deeply about the arts must find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and fervour of a priesthood. We must be half humble and half proud. We see the perfect more than others, it may be, but we must find the passions among the people. We must baptize as well as preach [...] I would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood in Judea, in India, in Scandinavia, in Greece and Rome, in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not only a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business [...] I would have some of them leave that work of theirs which will never lack hands, and begin to dig in Ireland the garden of the future, understanding that here in Ireland the spirit of man may be about to wed the soil of the world. Art and scholarship like these I have described would give Ireland more than they received from her, and they would make love of the unseen more unshakable, more ready to plunge deep into the abyss, and they would make love of country more fruitful in the mind, more part of daily life. (Yeats, 2007: 150-155)

The ancient Irish bards embody all of the qualities that Yeats would have in modern poets. Within Celtic societies, bards held a particularly privileged position, being part of an

aristocratic order where a king and his chosen advisors would be responsible for the well-being of their people. Throughout Yeats's critical writings it is made clear that he prefers such an aristocratic society over a democratic one, since it holds a particular reverence for the beauty of the beliefs of the peasants which are a continuation of ancient Ireland. He declares this preference in his essay "Poetry and Tradition":

Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. (Yeats, 2007:183)

Within the Celtic tradition, this position placed artists amongst the *áes dána*, "which included not only artist-craftsmen, but also poets, historians, lawyers and doctors" who "enjoyed a status and privilege close to that of the warrior-aristocracy" (Rutherford, 1995:26). The bards were associated with the druids to a large extent, being considered their counterparts – whereas druids had magical abilities that could influence the physical world, bards were considered the "druids of knowledge" since they had access to the supernatural realms through their knowledge of stories which contained truths about those realms. This ability of poets of the past to engage with the supernatural is attributed to their being "more receptive to spiritual values because their lives were nourished by dreams and faith" (Mong, 1994:91) rather than intellectualised morality and scientific enquiry. Furthermore, the supernatural formed a part of a very strong belief system, resembling that of a religion, which considered the existence of the soul and the powers of nature to be very real. Bards were able to provide an objective view of their society, being removed from the practicality of everyday life through their aristocratic position, and were responsible for the creation of music and stories that captured the beliefs and histories of their people – they believed that their traditions were valuable within the greater historical scheme, and needed to be preserved (Rutherford, 1995:32-33). The Bards, ultimately being a story-telling "priesthood", had access to the realm of symbols that represent the mystical heroes in their stories, since they both recognised and dedicated their lives to the preservation of these symbols. These heroes, as well as the knowledge they held, came to be viewed, especially by Yeats, as the embodiments of the energy of ancient Ireland and her powerful beliefs. The occult influence on Yeats's high regard for the bardic tradition again becomes clear – Yeats regards the greatest parallel

between Irish folklore and the occult to be this very ability to access the “divine mind” (Reynolds, 1934:43).

The occult reinforces the value of symbols for Yeats. It is in the Irish bardic tradition that he finds the specific values that specific symbols hold for his country (Mong, 1994:89). Yeats desires this tradition to again rise to prominence, for Ireland to revere the magnificent, magical images of its past, and he looks toward the bardic tradition to provide him with guidance. Yeats would turn to other prominent writers of his time for further aesthetic guidance, particularly as his concerns with Ireland grew from being focussed on its aesthetic past and future, to the very identity of the Irish people and their political position. The next chapter will discuss the influence that Yeats’s growing nationalism has on his aesthetic development.

## CHAPTER 3

### YEATS AND IRISH NATIONALISM

#### 3.1. Yeats, O’Leary and Irish nationalism

Yeats’s mature works are better known for delivering more deliberate political commentary than his early works, although it is during his early career that he is most involved in the political sphere. His engagement with Irish nationalism and politically conscious writers affected his personal aesthetic development, particularly with regards to the effect that art and artist can have within a nation that is fighting for its own cultural identity.

It must first be noted that Yeats’s brand of nationalism originated from his own marginalised position as a member of the dwindling Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, a small group of Protestant Irish with historical ties to England and its occupancy of Ireland. Yeats, along with many other members of this class, chose to be actively involved with the nationalist cause of Ireland – which demanded self-governance and the recognition of Irish culture and values. Their contributions, however, were often met with suspicion, particularly since these poets were both Protestant and wrote about Ireland in the English language. Yeats’s choice of esoteric symbols and folklore to imaginatively motivate the nationalist cause was further met with some resistance, since the occult element of his works (his mystical and political activities overlap to a great extent) often seemed strange and obscure to readers who favoured poetry that made outright political claims, being unaware of the aesthetic consequences that such blatant patriotism often had for artistic quality (Kain, 1965:56). By the time he became interested and active in Irish politics Yeats had already formulated an ideal relationship that should exist between art and ideas, based on his reading and exploration of the Romantic aesthetic embodied especially in the work of Blake and Shelley.

Recent criticism has started to pay more attention to the political element of Yeats’s early work, recognising it as contributory to his aesthetic development. Postcolonial theory in particular has taken an interest in these works, celebrating Yeats as one of the most successful poets of decolonisation, sharing Oliver St John Gogarty’s exaggerated sentiment that “without the poetry of W.B. Yeats, he and his colleagues would not be representatives of

an independent state” (Kiberd, 1989:275). Critics such as Edward Said claim Yeats to be a revolutionary poet, placing him with “the great nationalist artists of decolonisation and revolutionary nationalism, like Tagore, Senghor, Neruda, Vallejo, Césaire, Faiz and Darwish” (Said, 1988:8). He identifies particular early poems such as “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” as libertarian and utopian in essence; this poem speaks of the poet’s imaginative recovery of land from the occupier:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and re-inhabit the land. And with that came a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications, all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths and religions – these too are made possible by a sense of land re-appropriated by its people. (Said, 1994:273)

In his analysis of the poem, Said identifies what Regan terms the “geographic and cartographic impulse” (Regan, 2006:90) that he associates with the first stage of decolonisation, taking into account the biographical origin of the poem<sup>15</sup> as well as the changing of the original name of the isle, “Inis Fraoig”, to the anglicised version, “Innisfree” – these elements of the poem indicate to Said that Yeats longed for a geographical and personal reclamation of Ireland, finding a place for his own Anglo-Irish identity therein. The last stanza in particular seems to support Said’s claim – Yeats continually refers to a return to an Irish landscape that he is tied to, hearing its call in the “deep heart’s core”:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavement grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (Yeats, 1950:44)

Stephan Regan asserts that Said places too much emphasis on this geographical decolonisation in Yeats: although Said’s reading “encourages us to think again about the

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<sup>15</sup> In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats remembers how the inspiration of the poem came after he spent yet another dreary day walking through London and seeing a fountain in a shop window that reminded him of Lough Gill in the West of Ireland (Yeats, 1955:153).

function of imagination in relation to geography” (Regan, 2006:91), particularly within the context of a colonised nation, the poem’s appeal is rather aesthetic, speaking of Yeats’s developing rhythm and music<sup>16</sup> that will enable his audience to *imaginatively* rather than politically redefine their place in Ireland. Declan Kiberd supports Regan’s claim, recognising Yeats as a postcolonial poet in as far as his imaginative project aimed at creating a cultural revolution amongst the Irish:

Art in this context might be seen as a man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him: against the ability to imagine things as they are, it counterpoises the capacity to imagine things as they might be. Fictions, though they treat of the non-existent, by that very virtue help people to make sense of the world around them. (Kiberd, 1996:118)

Regan further suggests that Yeats’s early work is indeed enlightening when we consider his nationalism, since politics formed an intricate part of his project to achieve a unity of culture through his works. His politics were more moderate and inclusive than Said proposes, playing a role in a wider aesthetic rather than determining it. His goal was to create a new Ireland without sectarian divisions (which he often found resulted from the constant opposition between the different religious and political stances amongst the Irish), one which rather reflects on the heroism of the past. He found the folk tradition of the Irish people to be an appropriate vehicle through which to achieve Unity of Being and Culture, since it arouses the “whole nature of man” and is “the true ‘poetry of action’; it *changes* rather than teaches, serving the national cause by *making character*. From Unity of Being multiplied would come, presumably, Unity of Culture – an indomitable Irishry” (Marcus, 1992:17). For this project to succeed, Yeats first had to successfully establish himself as a part of the Irish nationalist cause, as a true voice of Ireland. His initial political engagement is thus very much tied to his own effort to define his identity as an Irishman from a historically isolated Anglo-Irish background. Regan explains the relationship between these two aspects:

The nationalism that Yeats espouses in the 1890s, far from being “revolutionary”, is the product of a complex set of allegiances and identities. It emerges from a deep sense of

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<sup>16</sup> Yeats says of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”: “[it was] my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music” (Yeats, 1955:153).

colonial insecurity and the deep sense of anxiety about his own embattled social class. Yeats's concern about the dislocation of the Protestant community and the diminishment of the once-powerful Anglo-Irish Ascendancy provides the physiological impulse behind such striking early titles as "The Crucifixion of the Outcast" and "The Wanderings of Oisín". (Regan, 2006:96)

Hutchinson & Aberbach propose that this crisis of national identity, his earlier unhappiness in childhood, and religious scepticism all contribute to poetry that aims to identify with a similarly unhappy national community, the majority of which were Catholic peasants being undermined by English exploitation (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:507). Yeats's Romantic aesthetic compelled him, however, to address this issue from an imaginative perspective rather than an overtly political one. His passion for the protection of artistic autonomy over political utility only grew as his political involvement did – in 1893 he states in the *United Irishman*:

I did not say the man of letters should keep out of politics [...] but only that he should, no matter how strong be his political instincts, endeavour to become a master of his craft, and be ever careful to keep rhetoric, or the tendency to think of his audience rather than of the Perfect and the True, out of his writing. (Yeats, qtd in Jeffares, 1970:56)

He appeals to the folk tales and mystical spiritualism that form such an important part of the Irish imaginative tradition in this regard, thus establishing himself as a part of the imaginative tradition rather than the political – until the end of his career he would ask of the Irish to "Cast your mind on other days" (Yeats, 1950:400).

In an article comparing Yeats and Chaim Nachman Bialik, Hutchinson & Aberbach establish the place the two artists create for themselves within their respective nationalisms, and the influential role they play artistically in the development of these politics:

Yeats and Bialik were the outstanding poets of literary movements integral to national revivals. Each spoke for a subject people with glorious and violent ethno-religious memories, now struggling for survival in an imperial state with an attractive dominant culture. In common with other romantic cultural nationalists, they set the artist above

the cleric as custodian of the national culture. Breaking with failed traditionalism, they aimed to regenerate their nation morally, creating a humanist universalist culture by evoking the golden age of a collective national memory. They galvanized this vision through artistic innovation and virtuosity, marrying European modernism to indigenous forms and themes. Their poetry belongs to the best in their cultures. (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:502)

“To Ireland in the Coming Times”, arguably Yeats’s best known early “political” poem, serves as an apt example to illustrate the relationship between nationalism, art and folklore in Yeats’s aesthetic development. The poem speaks of Yeats’s own difficulty in finding a way in which he can serve his nation through his art, while not compromising the mystic and symbolic elements he finds to be so integral therein. He wishes to be regarded amongst the great nationalist poets of Ireland as a contributing force behind the Irish literary revival, but also wishes to defend the symbolic and spiritual elements that he draws from folklore, finding them to be fundamentally important for a cultural revival (Marcus, 1970:22). The second stanza of the poem incorporates this key argument:

*Nor may I less be counted one  
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,  
Because to him who ponders well,  
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell  
Of things discovered in the deep  
Where only body’s laid asleep.  
For the eternal creatures go  
About my table to and fro,  
That hurry from unmeasured mind  
To rant and rage in flood and wind;  
Yet he who treads in measured ways  
May surely barter gaze for gaze.  
Man ever journeys on with them  
After the red-rose-bordered hem.  
Ah faeries, dancing under the moon,  
A Druid land, a Druid tune! (Yeats, 1950:57)*

He makes use of specific symbols, like the Rose<sup>17</sup>, which has both cultural and spiritual meanings, spanning the divide between the political and mystical realms, showing their intimate connection. Yeats would see himself among those artist whom he believes to have done the most to preserve Irish national identity through imaginative art, such as Davis, Mangan and Ferguson, rather than through overt political means. The poem ultimately speaks of Yeats's attempt to merge political consciousness with artistic revival, all in an effort to achieve unity of culture.

Before discussing the specific figures and schools of thought that influenced Yeats's decision to turn towards the Irish folk tradition to serve as the foundation of his cultural nationalist political involvement, a short summary of the political situation as experienced by Yeats and his contemporaries is in order. Hutchinson & Aberbach provide a concise overview that relates directly to Yeats's own aesthetic project:

Yeats [...] was part of an extensive cultural nationalist movement. This movement, which lasted from the 1870s to 1914, sought to revive Ireland's pre-conquest Gaelic culture and combat the increasing assimilation of Irish society into industrial Britain. At the same time, there was a large-scale constitutional nationalist drive, led by Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91), to achieve a Home Rule parliament with limited political autonomy from Britain. A catalyst of Irish nationalism was the agrarian crisis of the late 1870s which evoked fears of another famine and led to a land war between the Catholic peasantry and Protestant landlords. However, Irish political nationalism was stimulated by British democratising reforms. These expanded educational opportunities, opened up the civil service and the professions, and devolved local government to the Catholic majority. The result was a native middle class, strongly acculturated to British secular liberal ideals, which saw themselves as the natural leaders of Irish society. This class, driven to nationalism by the continued ascendancy of the Protestant minority protected by the British state, allied with the conservative Catholic Church to demand a parliament for the Catholic majority.

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase "red-rose-bordered hem" is used three times in the poem. It carries diverse meanings, one of which is the mystical element, the rose, attached to all earthly and temporal things, the hem. It is the mystical symbols in the world that tempt us to explore ideas, to follow them, and enlarge our imaginations.

After the scandal broke which ended Parnell's career in 1891, a prolonged conflict broke out between secular liberals and clerical nationalists. Out of this "civil war", an alternative cultural nationalism crystallised. Both sought to reconcile the warring factions by creating national identity based not on secular statist British norms but on the rediscovery of pre-conquest communitarian values. The organisations which supported Irish cultural nationalism were much smaller than the Home Rule movement. (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:506-7)

Yeats's own induction into this political world began properly in 1885 when he met John O'Leary, a devoted Fenian who had been jailed in Britain and exiled in France for his political activities, and who was a member of the Young Ireland movement<sup>18</sup>. Their relationship would fade towards the time of O'Leary's death in 1907, but a mutual respect between the two men prevailed throughout their lives. The youthful Yeats respected O'Leary's stoic demeanour and resilient political conviction despite his incarceration, finding him to be "old" and "ancient" (Foster, 1997:43), descriptors which indicate respect from a young man dedicated to reviving ancient Irish values. On Yeats's return to Dublin the poet was present at O'Leary's first meeting of The Young Ireland movement and heard him declare: "I have come back from exile with the same opinions and feelings I carried with me into prison" (O'Leary, qtd in Ross, 2001:27). After O'Leary's death, Yeats described him as a nationalist literary figure of importance:

He belonged [...] to the romantic conception of Irish Nationality on which Lionel Johnson and myself founded, as far as it was founded on anything but literature, our Art and our Irish criticism [...] They [O'Leary and Taylor] were the last to speak an understanding of life and Nationality, built up by the generation of Grattan, which read Homer, Virgil, and by the generation of Davis, which had been pierced through by the idealism of Mazzini, and of the European revolutionists of the mid-century. (Yeats, 2007:180)

O'Leary reciprocally praised Yeats's poetic gifts, serving as a type of father figure to the ambitious young poet. He praised Yeats's work above his own *Recollections of Fenianism*,

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<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the Young Ireland movement, established by Davis in the 1840s, was the "formation of young men as nationalist subjects" (Lloyd, 2010:185).

stating that, although some might find his work more interesting than Yeats's poems, "that will not hinder my being at best a man of mere talent, while he is, I firmly believe, a man of genius" (O'Leary, qtd in Tulloch, 1910:157).

The Fenianism which O'Leary propagated during his later years, when he befriended Yeats, was viewed in a very different light from when the movement first became active in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly by Anglo-Irish Protestants – Fenianism was no longer viewed as atavistic and conspiring, but rather, as it became dormant, as having an aura of romance, nobility and selflessness (Foster, 1997:42). O'Leary embodies this Romanticism which corresponded with Yeats's own ideas regarding the superiority of heroic, Romantic poetry over political propaganda which attracted the young poet. Terence Brown identifies O'Leary's specific qualities, as a fellow Anglo-Irishman, which placed him in the position of an inspirational father figure for Yeats, an antithesis to his own hard-edged father who often disapproved of his creative impulses. These qualities would remain inspiring to Yeats throughout his life:

He was anti-clerical, suspicious of Parnell, and as a landlord himself, his attitude toward tenant rights was decidedly cool. O'Leary believed that ultimately "a people who are not prepared to fight in the last resort rather than remain slaves will never be made free by any sort of Parliamentary legerdemain whatsoever". But he combined this with a conviction that a country must be worth fighting for. It must, accordingly, have a cultural life of its own and its citizens must be the epitome of moral virtues. There was something Robespierre-like in O'Leary's sense of the revolutionary as a just man, and his *obiter dicta*, brief and stoical, in a country of garrulous overstatement, impressed Yeats enormously [...] Late in life [Yeats] reflected in valedictory self-assessment that he was "a nationalist of the school of John O'Leary", as if to remind himself that he had never abandoned the curious blend of public spirit with individual hauteur in the service of a revolutionary elitism, which O'Leary had preached verbally and represented in what Yeats had regarded as his dignified person (O'Leary's "noble head" in "Beautiful Lofty Things"). (Brown, 1999:29)

Furthermore, O'Leary presented Yeats with the possibility of aesthetic and political unity, the type that Yeats craved not only for his own creative projects to succeed, but which could also allow him and his family to identify themselves with the Irish nationalist tradition which

belonged, historically, to the Catholic peasantry. Roy Foster claims that “he indicated ways in which father and son could ‘belong’ to the new Ireland: a world where like-minded people of both religious traditions could share a pride in an ancient culture, rather than remember the conflicts and dispositions of the past” (Foster, 1997:43).

O’Leary made Yeats aware that he needed to communicate with his audience in a manner which united their literary traditions and folk imaginations with their contemporary political situation; that is, he should not only write poetry based on heroic fairytales, he had to make use of his poetic abilities and transform these tales so that they spoke to his contemporary audiences’ cultural imagination, tied to their inherent Irishness. Thus, when drawing on folklore for creative and symbolic material, he had to choose those Irish legends and heroes that could inspire cultural revolution. Reynolds establishes O’Leary’s role in this realisation by stating that he “turned Yeats’s imagination away from the Swedish princesses, Greek islands, Moorish magicians [...] in which Yeats’s love of the far-away found expression, to Ireland’s *national* legend and folk-lore” (Reynolds, 1934:11; my emphasis). Yeats adopted O’Leary’s maxim that “great literature must be national literature” (qtd in Marcus, 1970:14) and moved progressively from drawing on folklore for its imaginative enlargement and ability to spiritually connect poet and audience with the realm of ideas to doing so within the national, cultural context: folkloric images should inspire defiance and change, not only enlarge thought, if they are to be socially valuable within the Irish cultural revival.

O’Leary introduced Yeats to the work of the first generation of Young Ireland poets – Davis, Mangan and Mitchell – which led him to “reconsider the canons of national literature, as well as the acceptability of a nationalist stance” (Foster, 1997:44). Together they discussed poetic works and identified the virtues and faults that they had. Yeats made a principal discovery when he realised that, although these poems serve the nationalist cause through their imaginative representations of resistance and ideals, their quality as artistic works often left much to be desired. Their tendency to incorporate political propaganda took away from their aesthetic value, with both content and style having “no richness and complexity of thought” (Marcus, 1970:9). Yeats would take from these poets the idea that sincerity and style in poetry could not be sacrificed to politics, since it only impoverished the whole artistic experience of the audience – mere rhetoric did not allow the poet or audience to fully engage with the subject matter (Lloyd, 2010: 180). Yeats would continue to recognise the importance of these poets, stating that, despite their stylistic weaknesses, they remained “the one

powerful literary influence in Ireland” (Yeats, 1975:33). Rather than imitate the Young Irishmen, Yeats hoped to continue and improve the tradition into one that would inspire a new literary revival: “I believed in those days that a new intellectual life would begin, like that of Young Ireland, but more profound and personal and that could we get but a few principles accepted, new poets and writers would make immortal music” (Yeats, 2007:188).

Yeats met many other important thinkers at O’Leary’s many literary gatherings; one of these, John F. Taylor, taught Yeats the importance of rhetoric and would always “seem to me the greatest orator I’ve ever heard” (Yeats, 2007:180). Despite the fact that many of these men whom Yeats met through O’Leary were political thinkers and critics rather than artists, Yeats respected the value they held for the literary enterprise: “Neither man [Taylor or O’Leary] had an understanding of style or literature in the right sense of the word, though both were great readers, but because their imaginations could come to rest no place short of greatness, they hoped, John O’Leary especially, for an Irish literature of the greatest kind” (Yeats, 2007:181). They contributed to Yeats’s aesthetic development by both inspiring him to write culturally significant poetry and motivating him to become involved in his country’s political history.

Of the great Irish writers of the nineteenth century, Yeats preferred the work of Ferguson, Mangan and Allingham, particularly since their poetry was considered by many to be “non-political” (Marcus, 1970:4)<sup>19</sup>, and they consciously attempted to recreate the ancient bardic tradition of the country (Marcus, 2010:302). Along with the work of Thomas Davis<sup>20</sup> and O’Grady<sup>21</sup>, both of whom Yeats recommended to students of Irish culture (1934:107), these poets were regarded as the “pioneers rather than great masters” (Ross, 2001:33) of Irish literature since they initiated the artists’ engagement with the folk, although later writers, such as Yeats himself, would perfect this project. Ferguson’s rewriting of the Irish myth cycles in particular inspired Yeats to want to be part of a contemporary national literary movement that included the peasant imagination and ancient Irish heroic ideals: “His dream was of ‘a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory, and yet freed from

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<sup>19</sup> The first two were so highly regarded by Yeats that they are named as some of the poets whom Yeats wished to be recognised with within the Irish literary tradition in “To Ireland in the Coming Times’.

<sup>20</sup> Yeats criticised him as being only ever politically motivated, to the extent that he lost the respect the creative process demanded (Marcus, 2010: 302).

<sup>21</sup> Yeats would have him be read for the value of his historical writing (Marcus, 1992:24).

provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European prose” (Yeats, qtd in Ross, 2001:33). This declaration reflects Ferguson’s own ideal of a national literature: “We will have to make a literature for the country whatever be the fate of this or that policy. It must be lofty, moral and distinctively Irish” (Ferguson, qtd in Marcus, 1970:5). The manner and extent to which Ferguson used folklore served as another confirmation for Yeats that his own preference for country stories and mystical folkloric experiences was valid and valuable for his poetic project. Yeats’s own words best illustrate the extent to which he revered the man he regarded as Ireland’s greatest poet:

[He] went back to the Irish cycle [of legends], finding it, in truth, a fountain that, in the passage of centuries, was overgrown with weeds and grass so that the very way to it was forgotten of the poets; but now that his feet have worn the pathway, many others will follow, and bring thence living waters for the healing of our nation, helping us to live the larger life of the Spirit, and lifting our souls away from their selfish joys and sorrows to be companions of those who lived greatly among the woods and hills when the world was young. (Yeats, 1975:82)

Yeats did attempt to write a few poems that emulated the Young Ireland style during his early career, but, having read more of the more inspiring work of Ferguson and Allingham, soon realised that they clashed with his own aesthetic ideals (Marcus, 2010:303). Yeats hoped for poetry that had the ability to form a new identity for the Irish, “to forge in Ireland a new sword from our old traditional anvil” (Yeats, 2007:182), and he soon realised that a communicative element in poetry is necessary for this. He received the necessary training in rhetoric and political discourse at two particular social institutions that aimed at cultural revival amongst the Irish.

The first of these was the Contemporary Club, which counted O’Leary, Oldham and Taylor amongst its members. The latter two in particular provided Yeats with an education in handling criticism (Macken, 1939:138), and Yeats, despite his usual shyness and haughtiness, was soon able to successfully stand up for his own beliefs (Ross, 2001:31). The Contemporary Club provided Yeats with a platform on which he could practice his skills in public debate and rhetoric and from the experience he obtained at the Club “he was preternaturally conscious of the need to impose shape on his life, and able to anticipate the way it would look in retrospect” (Foster, 1997:45).

The second social institution which helped shape Yeats's nationalist and artistic development was the Rhymers' Club which he helped found in the same year that he was admitted into the Order of the Golden Dawn, 1890 (Ross, 2001:180). The Club was situated in London, and through it Yeats hoped to get to know other poets who, like him, felt isolated in the British capital<sup>22</sup>, and instead of rivalry promote comradeship by listening and commenting on one another's poetry (Brown 1999:62). He described the nature of the Club as not that of a group of scholars like the French, or individuals like the English, but rather a community who all aimed to look at Irish literature again in earnest since Irish literature, in comparison with that of the English, "is still young, and on all sides of this road is Celtic tradition and Celtic passion crying for singers to give them voice. England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables" (Yeats, 1934:143-8).

Yeats's growing nationalism, culturally orientated rather than purely political, did not always resonate well with his readers, who demanded more political themes, or with his fellow Rhymers' Club members whose aesthetic principles leaned towards those of the Decadents rather than aiming at communicating cultural ideals (Brown, 1999:62). However, with the growing Celticism in London, Yeats steadily found an audience, particularly amongst those who formed part of the early Southwark Irish Literary Society which would later become the Irish Literary Society in London, and the National Literary Society in Dublin. Although the latter society did not accommodate many of Yeats's philosophic principles, for a time it served as a space where Yeats could explore his nationalist ideas fully and find the heroic images he sought for Ireland.

### **3.2. Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival**

During the 1880s and 1890s Yeats became actively involved in what is considered one of Ireland's greatest efforts at cultural revolution – the Irish Literary Revival. This movement was primarily driven by a small group of poets, artists and scholars who wished to establish Irish culture as rich, dynamic and distinct from English culture. Yeats took part through his

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<sup>22</sup> The most prominent of these poets were Rhys, Dowden and Johnson who, with Yeats, experienced the same isolation that the earlier Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in London had (Brown, 1999:61).

involvement in two literary societies, the Irish Literary Society of London and the National Literary Society of Dublin. It is important to note that his activities within these societies overlap with his increasing involvement with the occult and Symbolist studies. These activities factored into his experiences and ideas formed during his “Literary Society years”, and contributed to the many disagreements about the ideological principles of these societies that Yeats had with other members. Even after his initiation into the realm of nationalist politics by O’Leary, Yeats remained faithful to art, which was always his primary interest. David Lloyd claims that Yeats’s politics and aesthetics are inseparable throughout his career, even when his political views and the relationship he establishes between art and politics drastically change:

[...] the political questions raised by Yeats’s later poetry are inseparable from aesthetic questions, just as, in his earlier writings, a symbolist aesthetic is inseparable from the politics of cultural nationalism [...] the earlier writings are devoted to the project of founding and forging a nation, the later writings, in the wake of the Irish Free State’s foundation, subject all acts of foundation to the most rigorous examination within a set of aesthetic terms which are profoundly antithetical to any tradition of symbolism. (Lloyd, 1993:60)

This section will argue in favour of Lloyd’s claim, focusing on the particular manner in which Yeats established himself as a national poet while simultaneously developing a personal aesthetic which utilises the Irish folklore tradition and which will come to favour artistic autonomy above political effect.

The aim of these literary societies (at the times of their formation, at least) was, as stated, to establish a national literature for Ireland that could be considered independent and distinguishable from the literary tradition of the English who, members felt, had through their colonisation of Ireland threatened and suppressed the uniquely Irish literary tradition. Kathryn Tynan, a close friend of Yeats and literary activist, gave the following definition of what such a national literature with a uniquely “Irish note” should entail:

By the Irish note I mean that distinctive quality in Celtic poetry the charm of which is so much easier to feel than to explain [...] Some of the parts which go up to make its whole are a simplicity which is *naïve* – a freshness, an archness, a light touching of the

chords as with fairy-finger tips; a shade of underlying melancholy as delicately evanescent as a breath upon glass, which yet gives its undertone and shadow to all; fatalism side by side with buoyant hopefulness; laughter with tears; love with hatred; a rainbow of all colours where none conflict; a gamut of all notes which join to make perfect harmony. (Tynan, qtd in Marcus, 1970:2)

Marcus argues that this definition, as well as others made by Irish writers, failed to define a particular “Irish literature”, relying on poetical phrasing that fails to clearly identify the source of this unique Irish element or to delineate the extent to which national poetry should be nationalistic. Yeats considered these issues as well and thought it best to situate a national literature in the nation’s own literary tradition – its folk tradition of myths and stories.

Through his involvement with O’Leary he was exposed to literature that had sacrificed its aesthetic integrity so that it might be used as political propaganda, and he came to realise that his work should rather aim at establishing a national literature in an imaginative sense – it should aim to enlarge the cultural tradition of Ireland and so involve all of the people who form a part of it. Even during his “political” activities, with this idea, residual of his earliest Romanticism, he “never fell into the error, so common among his countrymen, of insularity” (Marcus, 1970:16). Many of these countrymen were fellow members of the Literary Society who wrote for periodicals such as *The Nation*<sup>23</sup>, established by the Young Ireland leader Thomas Davis, an influential newspaper that aimed to promote nationalist ideas through blatant propaganda. Yeats was concerned about the influence of this paper on his contemporaries, particularly on the quality of their work. Saddlemyer argues that by the 1890s *The Nation* “truly became the voice of Ireland, but the sacrifice of quality to quantity built up an idealistic concept of Ireland which became so mingled with patriotism that criticism automatically implied a denial of national values as well” (Saddlemyer, 1965:27). Yeats faced opposition from his fellow Society members over his objection to such literary propaganda – he was not willing to sacrifice artistic integrity for patriotism, and was criticised when he said so. Unlike many other artists who had become involved with both the Irish Literary Revival and nationalist politics, Yeats had quickly abandoned radical involvement with the latter in favour of a more enduring aesthetic project that values cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Yeats wrote articles for the nationalist *The Nation* and *The United Irishman* as well as the conservative *Scots Observer*, never allowing his own political stance to interfere with his personal artistic interests.

development. In as far as personal development is concerned Yeats was perhaps not always exemplary in his choices, but this progressive stance that favours an imaginative tradition that aids rather than serves a political cause speaks of philosophical and artistic maturity.

While still in his 20s, Yeats had already decided that he wanted “nationalism to act as the stalking horse of literature” and not the other way round as Davis would have had it (Boyce, 1991:241), and in 1891, with the establishment of the Irish Literary Society of London (previously the Southwark Literary Club) he had distanced himself from radical political involvement and came to be viewed as a rather ambiguous figure by his fellow Club members, who expressed mistrust in his “neo-Fenian rhetoric and high literary art” (Foster, 1997:119). Yeats remained firm in his position that a national literature that would have any significant bearing in Ireland needs to be one that works *with* the nationalist agenda, not *for* it, and if it is to have a significant impact on the cultural development of the whole of Ireland it needs to draw on a source that all have access to in an imaginative capacity, that can offer a national literature “both stability and variation” (Thuente, 1980:244). That source could be Ireland’s folk tradition:

All that is great in literature is based upon legend – upon those tales which are made by no man, but by the nation itself through a slow process of modification and adaption, to express its loves and hates, its likes and dislikes. (Yeats, 1970:273)

A short historical introduction to the literary societies in question here is necessary at this point. The Irish Literary Society was established in London in 1891 under the presidency of Gavan Duffy and aimed to serve as a “branch of The Young Ireland League” in London (Yeats, 1986:277). The National Literary Society was established by a member of the Irish Literary Society, John T. Kelly, on 9 June 1891 in Dublin and had the initial objective of making the national heroes and legends better known to a larger audience (Foster, 1997:118-120). The establishment of these societies formed part of a wider revival of interest in all things “Celt”:

The Celticism of the Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to which Yeats contributed was a movement in the main of Anglo-Irish artists, intellectuals and antiquarians (as earlier revivals had been) who translated the

Gaelic texts anew, or wrote books based on those texts, or studied the life of the people living in the Irish countryside. (Bradley, 2011:7)

Yeats gives a description of the specifically literary element of this revival in an 1893 review of William Larminie's *West Irish Folk-Tales*:

The recent revival of Irish literature has been very largely a folk-lore revival, and awakening of interest in the wisdom and ways of the poor, and the poems and legends handed down among the cabins. Past Irish literary movements were given overmuch to argument and oratory; their poems, with beautiful exceptions, were noisy and rhetorical, and their prose, their stories even, ever too ready to flare out in expostulation and exposition. So manifest were these things that many had come to think the Irish nation essentially theoretical and unpoetical, essentially a nation of public speakers and journalists, for only the careful student could separate the real voice of Ireland, the song which has never been hushed since history began, from all this din and bombast. But now that din and bombast are passing away, or, at any rate, no longer mistaken for serious literature, and life is being studied and passion sung not for what can be proved or disproved, not for what men can be made to do or not do, but for the sake of Beauty "and Time's old daughter Truth"<sup>24</sup>. (Yeats, 2004:238)

Yeats showed preference for the National Literary Society for the following reasons: firstly, the establishment of the society in Dublin was an attempt to move the centre of Irish culture back to Ireland from London where many Irish artists had relocated. Declan Kiberd identifies this re-establishment of Dublin as a centre for Irish creativity and consciousness, a fact that has by now been shown to be key to Yeats's own philosophical ideas, as one central to the entire Irish Cultural Revival movement:

That enterprise achieved nothing less than a renovation of Irish consciousness and a new understanding of politics, economics, sport, language and culture in its widest

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<sup>24</sup> This passage essentially contains all of Yeats's thoughts on a national literature as it is elaborated on in his essay "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature"— he critiques the previous rhetorical approach to a literary revival that the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s had attempted, he markedly states his opposition to rationalism and materialism, and expresses his hope and positive expectation for a national literature that is based on a folk tradition that makes the inherent passion therein available to all.

sense. It was the grand destiny of Yeats's generation to make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish, after centuries of enforced provincialism following the collapse of the Gaelic Order in 1601. No generation before or since lived with such conscious national intensity or left such an inspiring (and, in some ways, intimidating) legacy. (Kiberd, 1996:3)

Secondly, Yeats was involved with the Library of Ireland project that the Society had initiated. This project would consist of old and newly written Irish books that drew on Irish folk legends and culture in an effort to promote cultural nationalism and would then be made available to scholars and the public in the form of a mobile library. This issue of accessibility to literary material was one of great importance to Yeats who had already written about the necessity for the material that forms part of a national literature to be made available and not locked away in closed libraries in his 1889 essay "Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland":

For a popular ballad literature to arise, firstly are needful national traditions not hidden away in libraries, but living in the mind of the populace. These Ireland has. Every ivy-matted tower carries its legend of stormy feud or love-lorn lady; every little round rath earth-piled its story of leprechaun and pooka; and over all broods the one great dominant thought, love of country, while around that thought gather the long-remembered names of exiles. (Yeats, 2004:94)

Although potentially valuable, a further historical examination of the social and political dynamics of these societies will not be made as it lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. The issue will be referred to only in as far as it plays a role in Yeats's personal development as Ireland's national poet and his specific aesthetic approach.

Although eager to take part in the establishment of a national literature for Ireland, Yeats often experienced frustration during his involvement with the literary societies on both political and artistic levels. Introducing Yeats's essay "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature" (1892) Frayne & Marchaterre claim that,

He tried to combine the best of both cities [London and Dublin] and thus pleased neither. His London literary friends thought that he was wasting his poetic gifts on Irish

literary politics. In Dublin his view of life was considered too remote and delicate for nationalistic struggles. (Frayne & Marchaterre, in Yeats, 2004:185)

Foster suggests that this frustration with the unsatisfied views of his personal poetic method contributed to his writing of “To Ireland in the Coming Times” in which he defends his use of the Irish folk tradition and mysticism to enlarge the Irish imagination, a project he deems valuable in the struggle for Irish political and, more importantly, cultural revolution (Foster, 1997:122). Hutchinson & Aberbach argue that Yeats conceived his own brand of literary nationalism to be *necessary* since an Irish national literature, one situated in the theatre in particular, would bring about the “arousal of nationalism among a new generation of native English-speaking Catholics” (1999:511), the majority of the Irish population whom politicians would need to back their cause. Yeats also differed from his fellow society members in as far as literary style and quality are concerned. Yeats believed that literary value and style are intrinsically connected, and that Irish artists should not be afraid to learn from other cultures with developed literary traditions – this knowledge should be used to shape a new Irish literary tradition with its own unique stylistic quality that best allows an audience to access the truths that are tied to the legends and stories that form part of Ireland’s glorious imaginary past. Kiberd emphasises the role Yeats attributes to style:

[...] style was the thing to be seized, the zone in which the battle of two civilizations would be fought out; and Yeats hoped that from his style a full man might eventually be inferred and, in due course – such was the enormity of his ambition – a nation. (Kiberd, 1996:117)

This commitment to style can be seen in his most famous folklore anthology, *The Celtic Twilight*, indicating the importance he attaches to all modes of writing, not only poetry and drama – even during the collection, translation and retelling of old folk stories, style is needed in the written medium to bridge the gap between the “Irish poor and their communal imagination” (Wenzell, 2007:22) so that readers might have the same imaginative experience as those who lived in the days of the Gaelic oral tradition.

Other members of the Irish and National Literary Societies were not receptive to Yeats’s stylistic ideas that would make Irish legends popular through good Irish prose, and chose to rather promote literary works that encouraged political nationalism through their content,

even if they had little or no stylistic merit. Clearly identifiable Irish images such as Kathleen ni Houlihan and Cuchulain were used in overtly political works. The use of Kathleen ni Houlihan ranged from a symbol of the power and fertility of the Irish imagination to the embodiment of the Irish nationalistic cause, while Cuchulain, one of the greatest mythical heroes found in Celtic mythology, becomes the warrior model for all “true” nationalists (Kiberd, 1996:25). Yeats was very much aware that this type of political dedication often led to literature that did little to inspire the imagination of the audience. He specifically chose to never write in Hiberno-English precisely because he feared this type of stylistic degeneration which resulted when literature was used as political propaganda. Doggett explores this idea and concludes that, instead of relying on Hiberno-English idioms, Yeats’s poems

[...] respond to the “fallen” state of language in Irish modernity, the notion that language, as a vehicle of imperialistic knowledge/power and nationalist knowledge/resistance, cannot be purified of the political, by consciously meditating upon that which nationalist poetry must tirelessly strive to achieve and can never achieve: the articulation of the ideal, unified nation, the final speech act that is the coming-into-being of the imagined community. (Doggett, 2006:130)

Yeats found a singular political agenda that does not look at all aspects of cultural national building to be reductive of the potential that Irish literature holds: “for too many among us grow prosaic and commonplace, but she [Biddy Hart]<sup>25</sup> keeps a heart full of music” (Yeats, 1993:79). He ultimately condemns patriotic writers (and editors of the various nationalist periodicals) for preferring volume over quality, seeking “effectiveness rather than depth” (Yeats, 2004:187). It is this dedication to a style that allows literature to have a nationalistic effect, to participate in the “coming-into-being” of a modern Irish nation that is independent and self-determining, which ultimately makes Yeats Ireland’s national poet (Bradley, 2011:2). His opposition to overtly political writing did not drive Yeats towards an aesthetic philosophy that resembles that of the Decadence he had discovered in his studies of certain Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite artists. He knew that a communicative element in literature was necessary for it to have a cultural impact, and states in “Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature” his disapproval of writing that is removed from the social sphere completely:

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<sup>25</sup> An old peasant woman whom Yeats identifies as the source of many of the folktales he collects in the West of Ireland. She comes to serve as an ideal peasant figure who still believes in the fairies and ghosts of Irish lore, and who has not been tainted by modernity and rationalism.

[for the Decadents] poetry is an end in itself; it has nothing to do with thought, nothing to do with philosophy, nothing to do with life, nothing to do with anything but the music of cadence, of beauty of phrase [...] To them literature has ceased to be the handmaiden of humanity, and become instead a terrible queen, in whose service the stars rose and set, and for whose pleasure life stumbles along in the darkness. (Yeats, 2004:186)

Furthermore he continued to oppose the rationalism and heterogeneity that had set into general English culture. His anti-materialism had been well established by the time he came to realise that art should not serve any overt political purposes, and he continued to remain oppositional to any materially based philosophy throughout his life. He writes:

When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred arises; in four or five or in less generations this hatred will have issued in violence and imposed some kind of rule of kindred. (Yeats, 1994a:215-16)

While Yeats experiences difficulty throughout the 1890s in establishing himself within the literary community as a valuable contributor to an Irish nationalist literature, he manages to form a unique aesthetic that avoids the pitfalls of Decadence or materialism while also avoiding overt literary propaganda: he manages to create a foundation for literature that is dynamic and uniquely Irish by focussing on the raw material of the Irish imagination, its legends and folklore. He states his literary philosophical approach as follows:

If we can but take that history of those legends and turn them into dramas, poems and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie, we may deliver that great new utterance for which the world is waiting [...] "Know thyself" is a true advice for all nations as well as for individuals. We must know and feel our national faults and limitations no less than our national virtues, and care for things Gaelic and Irish, not because we hold them better than

things Saxon and English, but because they belong to us, and because our lives are to be spent amongst them, whether they be good or evil. (Yeats, 2004:187-88)

Lloyd views this aesthetic project as a substantial part of Yeats's attempt to create a personal and communal Irish identity for the Anglo-Irish who found themselves in a marginalised position, somewhere between being English and Irish (Lloyd, 1993:69). Edward Larrissy elaborates on the tension that exists in Yeats's own conceptions of identity and art as reflected in his early works:

In Yeats's early thinking there is a homology between the position of the Anglo-Irish caste, with regard to Ireland and England, and that of the poet, with regard to the infinite and the finite. True poetry and the true poet are deemed to lie at the boundary between the infinite and this world: this boundary is marked by difference, but flames with a significance imparted by the touch of eternity. (Larrissy, 1994:9)

Yeats believed that a cultural nationalism that draws on a shared imaginative tradition<sup>26</sup> could transcend the pervading Anglo-Irish/Catholic divide that existed culturally as well as politically. Hutchinson & Aberbach eloquently point to his use of folklore in achieving this goal: "His reworking of Ireland's native Gaelic traditions in English and the revival of the legendary heroic pagan Ireland symbolically wedded Protestant 'colonist' and Catholic 'native'" (1999:504). Yeats's own feelings towards the Protestant Ascendancy were often conflicting<sup>27</sup>, but at this time in particular he chose to identify himself as a Celt, with all his creative energies being centred on revitalising the residual Celtic culture that continues to pervade the Irish language, music and imagination (Bradley, 2011:8). Yeats's conception of a unique national literature is thus intricately tied to his ideas on Irish identity, which ultimately constitutes part of his ideal of a "Unity of Culture" – "a nation consisting of individuals who, in giving their voice to their own hearts, paradoxically give voice to the collective mind" (Doggett, 2006:134).

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<sup>26</sup> Sources that deal with the history of Irish literature often suggest that the Catholic peasantry alone shaped the folklore traditions of Ireland, with the Anglo-Irish who showed an interest in using it to establish a common ground for Irishmen of "all political persuasions" being viewed as alien and colonialist (Boyce, 1991:228). It must be noted that a detailed discussion of the Anglo-Irish influences on Yeats's own collection and adaptation of Irish folklore lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>27</sup> He only chooses to actively identify with them after the establishment of the Irish Free State when he sees policies come into play that threaten to erase the legacy of the Protestant Ascendancy, on social, economic and creative levels, entirely.

The combined notions of an artistic philosophy and communal identity which seeks a national essence expressed in a national literature both resist the pressures of modernity and can be considered progressive in a re-appropriation of Ireland's past in an effort to secure its future cultural wellbeing. It is the resistance to fall under the yolk of utility that stands out, especially if we consider that Yeats wanted to be and was an intricate part of a community that supported nationalism through propagandist literature. Doggett emphasises Yeats's ability to create works that aimed for aesthetic autonomy in as far as value judgement and theme were concerned, and how he so managed to have an impact on nationalist ideals without ever losing touch with his contemporary situation:

They resist, as autonomous works rooted in contraries, by evoking the possibility of closure – the possibility of pure, self-contained art that might articulate an imagined Ireland in a language yet to be written, in a language other than Gaelic or English – only to undercut that very drive, steadfastly rejecting comfortable escapism. In short, Yeats's verse always returns to this history, to this language, for as both Yeats and Adorno recognize, art must be bound to the now. An yet, his poetry, though the product of an age "slouching toward" further oppression, holds forth the (im)possible dream of a new Ireland, beyond the myths of imperialism and conventional nationalism [...] (Doggett, 2006:129-30)

Yeats's ability to recognise the cultural affect that self-contained art can have on an imaginative level is deemed so progressive by Bradley that he claims it anticipates modern theories of nationalism as Yeats realizes the importance of creating a "model of the nation" which gives the audience "sensible images" rather than just rhetoric and propaganda (Bradley, 2011:12). This seems valid in light of the fact that Yeats was more opposed to cultural than political colonisation, and aimed at affecting change on the former front since it spoke of the identity of Ireland, not only its political status. Kain explains the struggles that ensue from cultural colonisation: "[a country] must re-evaluate its cultural heritage, and accept, modify, or reject elements which it cannot assimilate into its new condition" (Kain, 1965:54). In his introduction to Yeats's *Letters to the New Island* (1934) Reynolds states his firm belief that Yeats's critical and creative writing indicate his conviction that Ireland would be able to overcome cultural colonisation:

Yeats's nationalism was critical and positive. It was designed not to spit at the Saxon villain but to recover the folk-lore and legend, that rich repository of Irish nationalism which Irishmen had allowed to lie so long neglected. It was out of the seed of this folk-lore and legend that a new literature was to spring. (Reynolds, 1934:14-5)

A further issue of contention Yeats faced with certain other members of the Irish Literary Revival and literary societies, such as Douglas Hyde<sup>28</sup>, was the issue of language. Yeats, unable to speak Gaelic, opposed a national literature written in a language that was rapidly disappearing, only surviving in isolated regions in the west of the country. Yeats wanted all to be able to access a national literature, and thus claimed that it should be pursued in the language that all understood, particularly if they were to actively take part in it. He saw an insistence on Gaelic as disadvantaging English speakers who were passionate about Irish themes, and as promoting the idea of “nativistic hostility” (Doggett, 2006:130). In a letter to the editor of *The Leader*, Yeats elaborates on his choice of English for a national literature while maintaining support for the development of Gaelic:

Side by side with the spread of the Irish language, and with much writing in the Irish language, must go on much expression of Irish emotion and Irish thought, much writing about Irish things and people, in the English language, for no man can write except in the language he has been born and bred to, and no man, as I think, becomes perfectly cultivated except through the influence of that language; and this writing must for a long time come to be the chief influence in shaping the opinions and the emotions of the leisure classes in Ireland in so far as they are concerned with Irish things, and the more sincere it is, the more lofty it is, the more beautiful it is, the more will the general life of Ireland be sweetened by its influence, through its influence over a few governing minds. (Yeats, 1975:238)

A national literature in English would thus be more accessible to all those taking part in the cultural revival of Ireland. Yeats's concern with style is very closely tied to this issue of language, and he would further have authors that write in English refine their style by looking

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<sup>28</sup> Hyde's manifesto “The necessity for the de-Anglicisation of Ireland” states that all effort should be directed at re-establishing Irish Gaelic as the dominant language, and that all other English cultural customs should be discarded in favour of an authentic Irish lifestyle centred on the language, Gaelic sport and Gaelic culture (Hyde, 2006:139-149).

to foreign literary models<sup>29</sup> more advanced than those of the Irish who were “deprived of intelligent comment at home” and “desperately needed international criticism” (Marcus, 1970:20).

Jonathan Allison makes the interesting observation that Yeats tends to tie his nationalism to the Irish landscape, a *shared* space between the entire nation that is connected to the universal imagination in Irish folklore, rather than to language (2001:61). His poetry is permeated with spaces that are valued in the folk tradition and which represent the “spirit of the nation”, such as Sligo, Innisfree, Glencar and Knocknarea. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1893) reads as a longing for a return to a space where Irish culture and sentiment can flourish, unhindered by the material world:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (Yeats, 1950:44)

This poem clearly establishes the tranquillity and rootedness Yeats associates with the Irish landscape and Irish culture in comparison to the dreariness of industrial London. It is from this tradition which draws on a cultural history which looks to physical spaces that Yeats

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<sup>29</sup> Again, it should be noted that Yeats’s endeavours to contribute to a national Irish literature coincide with his exploration of French symbolism and the stylistic ideas of other European writers.

hopes to create a national literature which will inspire a communal Irish identity which does not rely on political propaganda to gain fulfilment.

Doggett suggests that Yeats, however much motivated by Ireland's imaginative tradition and personal nostalgia to establish a national poetry, does display some frustration with the whole endeavour in some of his creative works, particularly the poem "Fergus and the Druid". Here the poet associates himself with the mythological poet Fergus, and realises certain limitations he has as an individual who wishes to re-establish the tale of Ireland's ancient imagination in a culture consumed by politics (Doggett, 2006:136). The first five stanzas of the poem contain Fergus's (or Yeats's) own ideas concerning his role as an inspirational mythological king, as well as an admission that he struggles to live up to the role of being a powerful figure who enables concrete change in the lives of others. After being pressed by the Druid to further consider his position a revelation occurs on Fergus's part: the need to understand the past is itself an illusion which merely conceals the freedom which the subject himself is deprived of. This revelation occurs from stanza 7:

*Druid.* What would you, Fergus?

*Fergus.* Be no more a king,  
But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours.

*Druid.* Look on my thin grey hair and hollow cheeks  
And on these hands that may not lift the sword,  
This body trembling like a wind-blown reed.  
No woman's loved me, no man sought my help.

*Fergus.* A king is but a foolish labourer  
Who wastes his blood to be another's dream.

*Druid.* Take, if you must, this little bag of dreams;  
Unloose the cord, and they will wrap you round.

*Fergus.* 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 are 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! (Yeats, 1950:36-37)

Yeats realises that he cannot simply escape into the twilight world of the imagination, that he cannot abandon reality and the social dynamics of Ireland completely in the pursuit of imaginative art. Yet, he would have it that way, and be “no more a King” but rather a druid who is able to escape the material world of “slate-coloured things”. In his discussion of this poem, Wenzell appears to argue that Yeats, although displaying frustration with the possibility of a purely imaginative national literature in this poem, remained positive in his career, choosing to attempt at least an enlargement of a lingering moment that is that Romantic impulse of folklore: “The wavering rhythms of his early poems were intended to render a world caught in the zones between wakefulness and sleep, or between a known present and an unknown past” (Wenzell, 2007:22).

The ideal national poet would thus be both poet king and druid, a figure with access to the realm of imaginary truths who is able to communicate them in such a way that his audience can have access to them as well. Here, again, Yeats’s progressive aesthetic impulse is apparent – he is willing to accept the necessity of a communicative, grounded element in poetry that is contrary to the Romantic heroic principles that hold for him the key to an experience of Truth and Beauty. Yeats’s developing aesthetic, becoming gradually more centred on a concept of autonomy that allows for art to function within Ireland’s social sphere, often appears to be fraught with irony and ambivalence, particularly between his conception of the poet as an individual artist and the poet as a cultural figure. Hutchinson & Aberbach recognise this and elaborate on this issue of an aesthetic philosophy and personal identity which appear to be incompatible at times:

Fiercely individualistic, [he was] suspicious of the very nationalism which unleashed [his] creativity. A sense of national commitment [...] jostled with purely private

concerns, a source both of originality and guilt. Private trauma, though, mirrors national concerns up to a point ... Private obsession [in Yeats] might be viewed as the creative mainspring. (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:503)

Yeats's difficult position, both personal and public, as a potential national poet within the context of the establishment of the Literary Societies in both London and Dublin is explored by George Boyce who argues that there exist essentially two types of nationalism amongst members of the artistic community of the time – literary patriots and literary nationalists:

The literary patriots were anxious to save and preserve the heritage [of Irish culture], and to secure for Ireland a place in the European tradition. The literary nationalists wanted to preserve the heritage, not for primarily literary purposes, but because it might advance the cause of Irish nationality. The patriots were not necessarily nationalists; and the nationalists were not necessarily patriots, for they were interested only in promoting national, not literary, self-awareness. (Boyce, 1991:231)

From what has been argued, it can be deduced that Yeats, during the 1890s, resembled a literary patriot rather than a literary nationalist, particularly in his desire to foster Irish literature as an artistic form with a scholarly tradition, and in his desire to nurture taste and discernment about the sensibilities involved in art and the politics it comments on (Boyce, 1991:230). Yeats does however become involved in nationalist politics, and he does harbour nationalist political sentiments that would give Ireland the political freedom that would match the imaginative freedom achieved by a folkloric national poetry. He is thus situated between Boyce's two categories, seeing them as connected rather than opposite – a preservation of the cultural heritage of Ireland will inspire national sentiment while also allowing the heritage to remain centred on an imitative heroic past that is self-contained, energetic and self-aware, not merely a tool with which to accomplish nationalist projects.

Boyce argues that this polemic of Yeats was particularly important and controversial within an Ireland where literary societies were taking political stands, particularly after the fall of Parnell in 1890 with the Parliamentary split and subsequent division amongst nationalists a realisation occurred that a national literature would have to include both cultural and political

elements, while clearly distinguishing itself from English literature<sup>30</sup>. Certain questions had to be considered:

[...] the questions concerning the purpose of a national literature, the standards by which it should be judged, and, most difficult of all, the relationship between the Yeatsian idea of a national literature, choosing Irish themes (which Yeats did) and the idea that the only true national literature was that which found expression through the Irish language. (Boyce, 1991:235)

Members of the Irish Literary Revival were primarily concerned with the erosion of Irish identity and culture, and many associated this identity with a political stance that opposed all cultural influences that did not descend from the Gaelic tradition. They held an opposite view to Yeats regarding the nature of a national poetry and political freedom as a necessary precursor to a cultural revolution. Yeats, however, saw an imaginative element in political emancipation, and a national consciousness that has been nurtured by art as necessary for a peaceful political change to occur. This is made apparent in his preference for idealistic, imaginatively heroic political figures like Wolf Tone and Emmett of whom “ballads are sung, whose portraits hang on cottage walls, and who have become symbols of freedom to the Irish poor” (Malins & Purkis, 1994:36) rather than the politically pragmatic O’Connell. Yeats elaborates on the need for an imaginative power within the political struggle of Ireland, both when it considers its own past and its current situation, by discussing the failures of O’Connell:

I sometimes think that O’Connell was the contrary principle to Emmet. He taught the people to lay aside the pike and the musket, the song and the story, and to do their work now by wheedling and bullying. He won certain necessary laws for Ireland. He gave her a few laws, but he did not give her patriots. He was the successful politician, but it was the unsuccessful Emmet who has given her patriots. O’Connell was a great man, but there is too much of his spirit in the practical politics of Ireland. (Yeats, qtd in Malins & Purkis, 1994:36)

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<sup>30</sup> It was Parnell’s close association with English politics and culture that led him, many believed, astray, and which ultimately caused the break within the Irish nationalist movement of which the pro-Parnellites had begun to harbour political ideas which reflected the English influence (Boyce, 1991: 235).

Yeats would have poets that display the same energy and imitative heroism which Emmet<sup>31</sup> did, an energy he also sees in the adventurous criminal heroes and mythological figures of Irish folklore, believing that “The energy that filled them is still in our veins, but working now for public good” (Yeats, 2004:142). He would have these poets distance themselves from an overtly political agenda and rather be spiritual and imaginative in a manner that promotes, above all, Irish art:

I call them spiritual, not because they are religious in the dogmatic sense of the word, but because they touch the deepest and most delicate feelings, and I believe that a beauty, not a worldly beauty, lives in worldly things. (Yeats, 1975:71)

Yeats’s nationalism was ultimately little more than a means with which he could achieve great art, and he urged other Irish poets to aim to create great art as well rather than any overt political effect. He remained a Romantic throughout his life in his belief that art and its inherent value can never be surpassed: “If we look deep into Yeats’s mind, we see that for him nationalism was precious not so much because it serves Ireland as because it well served Art. Ireland came not before, but after, Art” (Reynolds, 1934:25). Ann Saddlemyer makes a similar claim when she considers the whole of Yeats’s oeuvre: “while in itself a strong emotional need, [nationalism] was in part a result of a much larger dream of art. Art must belong to all and come from all” (Saddlemyer, 1965:22).

For the mature poet, particularly after his disillusionment with the nationalistic movement, Saddlemyer’s may have rung true, but I rather think that during the 1890s, when Yeats became more aware of the effect that propaganda has on art, he was still involved in nationalistic affairs to a certain extent. Ireland and Art were very much intertwined in his mind, with Art being made available to all through the ties that it has with the nation. Pierce argues that it is important to remember how Yeats thought about the concept of a nation and how it relates to a creative tradition when we consider the role that nationalism plays in his aesthetic philosophy. He claims that Ernest Rhys’s definition of a nation encapsulates the way Yeats considered it – as a living, dynamic cultural phenomenon that is as much a product of its past as it is defined by its present:

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Emmet was a Protestant-born Irish nationalist who led an abortive rebellion against British rule in 1803 after which he was executed. His speeches and nationalist sentiments were often quoted by those who followed his political ideals, and he was regarded as a particularly heroic figure by Yeats.

A nation is a living soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute the soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, and the other is the present. One is the common possession of a rich heritage of memories, the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to preserve worthily the individual inheritance which has been handed down. Man does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of effort, and sacrifices, and devotion. (Rhys, qtd in Pierce, 2002:7)

If a nation is to consider its present situation, it must thus think about its past, and Ireland's past is, for Yeats, situated in its imaginative folk tradition which has absorbed the country's heroic spirit and drive to be fiercely individual. Thunete recognises the impact that this view has on Yeats's creative work: "Irish folklore, the language, the subject matter, the literary theory and the style of Yeats's writings enable him to be at once conservative and innovative" (Thunete, 1980:239).

Yeats understood the impact which an individual author can have on a culture's imagination, as Homer did, and wanted Ireland's poets to have such tremendous effect by drawing on what they shared with their culture, their imaginative history and country, since "such a poetry would go deeper into men's lives than any verses of the cities, no matter how full these be of the passion of intellectual attainment" (Yeats, 2004:97). This would be done by taking part in the imaginative tradition of Ireland, contributing to its storehouse of images by invoking the same folkloric symbols and landscapes that have represented the Irish cultural imagination for centuries:

There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action. (Yeats, 2007:158)

This imaginative action is the aim of Yeats and his fellow Anglo-Irish Celtic enthusiasts who re-appropriate Gaelic myths and folklore in an effort to show the pride, dignity, spirit and heroism of ancient Ireland which the Irish can again live up to (Bradley, 2011:13). The material world, which for Yeats would have included overtly political action, is only a means

through which the artist can achieve imaginative art that would allow his audience to reclaim this Irish cultural spirit. In an essay on Irish national literature Yeats makes this point explicit:

Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation. We hear much of his need for restraint of reason, but the only restraint he can obey is that mysterious instinct that has made him an artist, and that teaches him to discover immortal moods in mortal desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion. (Yeats, 2004:271)

Nationalism is thus a means to achieve an imaginative nation, and such nationalism must be inspired by the heroic figures of the tradition that belongs to the whole of Ireland – all that which forms part of the “Celtic phantasmagoria” (Yeats, 1993:76). Yeats’s artistic philosophy develops to be more and more concerned with the establishment of “a secular, activist high culture evoking historic and ‘authentic’ models of heroism in order to stir the young to action” (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:510). Chaudry goes further with this claim and argues that Yeats did not only call for imaginative action but, ultimately, complete reform through an association with Ireland’s heroic past:

Here was a man of letters attempting to revive the revolutionary patriotism of a bygone age by rebuking his countrymen for their mundane middle-class aspirations and exalting them to emulate their heroic ancestors by taking up arms against their oppressors. (Chaudry, 2001:3)

Yeats decided to make use of these heroic figures in his dramas in an effort to re-establish the Irish imaginative tradition that is based on a unity between the different aspects of Irish culture and the communities’ history of ideas which transcends religious and political divides since it preceded both the traditions of Christianity and English materialism. Hutchinson & Aberbach support this claim with their perception of Yeats’s position as national poet by the time that he decides to establish a National Theatre for Ireland in 1899:

By the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats had a clear idea of his task as a national poet: to give the political struggle a spiritual dimension in the overthrow of a corrupt cosmopolitanism and degenerate European industrial civilization (Hutchinson & Aberbach, 1999:508).

Through theatre, then, Yeats would aim to become the type of national poet which he envisions for Ireland – one who draws on a rich folk tradition which permeates the communal memory of the Irish people in an effort to inspire cultural identity without appealing to any overtly political ideas. Yeats's achievement of a progressive aesthetic as well as his choice to be involved with folklore through his creative re-appropriation of legends and collections of folklore stories in anthologies<sup>32</sup> managed to open up Irish literature to new possibilities and achievements:

By broadening the theoretical boundaries of Irish literature and freeing it of direct political propagandizing, Yeats's ideals concerning national literature supported and interacted with his other major ideals of the period: experimentally developing new subject-matter for Irish literature, increasing the general level of artistry, and finding more effective modes of expression. (Marcus, 1970:26)

This new subject-matter would be the stories and heroic figures of the Irish folk tradition, the desired level of artistry would be secured by the establishment of a National Theatre which would demand works which were artistically excellent and culturally significant, and the expression would occur through recognisable symbols which form part of the communal Irish imagination.

The next chapter will focus on Yeats's involvement with the Irish Dramatic movement, and how that continues his aesthetic project of freeing literature from utility and securing its autonomous value so that it may form part of the Irish imaginative tradition in a culturally significant way.

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<sup>32</sup> Yeats collected and published several volumes of folklore during the 1880s and 1890s, many of them alongside or through his friend and co-founder of the Irish National Theatre, Lady Augusta Gregory. He often translated Irish stories with the help of contemporary artists such as AE (George Russell) and Douglas Hyde. Many of the figures, such as Red Hanrahan, found their way into his creative writing.

## CHAPTER 4

### YEATS AND THE THEATRE

#### 4.1. Yeats and the Irish National Theatre

Yeats's attempt at a unifying literary nationalism presents itself most distinctly in three of his early plays which criticise art used for the purpose of political propaganda and place the enlargement of a communal imagination above utility. These plays effectively demonstrate his progressive movement from a literary philosophy concerned with the Irish nation and its socio-political situation to one that would have art be considered autonomous and free from any didactic duty. At the end of what is considered his "early career", i.e. 1907, in this dissertation, Yeats clearly states his position on the relationship between politics and art:

I am a nationalist [...] But if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obvious patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and early thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme. (Yeats, 1975: 116)

Yeats thus deliberately insists on a split between the concept of "political" and "national" when it comes to art; a separation was less notable amongst earlier significant cultural and literary groups such as Young Ireland who considered all things national to be political (Cusack, 2009:11). Other cultural movements were also pursuing cultural change and Yeats's engagement with them on both creative and practical levels undoubtedly influenced his ideas regarding the state of art in Ireland<sup>33</sup>. The three plays that will be discussed in this chapter incorporate these ideas and illustrate Yeats's aesthetic development as it is influenced by his involvement with the Irish National Theatre, itself a development in Irish culture which Thomas MacAnna deemed necessary and inevitable at the time, since "The spirit and urgings of the time demanded it" (MacAnna, 1971:89). The plays are *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) and *The King's Threshold* (1904). A short historical perspective

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<sup>33</sup> The most notable contributor to theatre practice outside of the Irish National Theatre Society was the Gaelic League who sponsored *feisianna* (festivals) and *ceílthe* (dances) throughout the country where the public could watch and take part in performances (Trotter, 2001:3).

on the development of the Irish National Theatre is necessary to contextualise these plays, since the very development of the establishment of the Irish National Theatre in itself is significant, as stated by Flannery:

The creation of the Irish National Theatre was of central importance for all of Yeats's personal and public concerns as man and artist. By plunging literature into social life through drama, he hoped to achieve a unity of those forces that warred within him: the struggle between self and anti-self; the disparate claims of mysticism, aestheticism and nationalism. (Flannery, 1976:100)

Ellis-Fermor's seminal *The Irish Dramatic Movement* will serve as the primary source for this overview, as it successfully incorporates the many historical records that the Irish National Theatre Society itself kept, stating that it was part of Ireland's cultural history, being involved with the activity of "nation-building" (Frazier, 1990:xxi). Before the existence of the Irish literary theatre nineteenth-century Irish theatre had been in the habit of copying Victorian English models. Plays were largely melodramatic, and thematically concerned "a conflict of good against evil, of victim against villain, of rebel against oppressor" with an heightened awareness of moral standards where the resolution of conflicts was concerned, insisting that "in a time of political, social, and artistic deprivation a nation should present on the stage life as it would want it to be rather than life as it was" (O'Driscoll, 1971:13).

Yeats wrote *The Countess Cathleen* in the early 1890s and continued to revise it throughout the decade until his acquaintance was made with Lady Augusta Gregory, a wealthy Anglo-Irish landowner, writer and folklorist who opened her home to Anglo-Irish intellectuals of the time, ultimately becoming one of Yeats's closest collaborators and stylistic influences (Trotter, 2001:8). Lady Gregory, herself an accomplished folklore collector, would aid Yeats in his understanding and interpretation of the folklore of Ireland's West, bringing him closer to the people and their imaginative wisdom (Saddlemyer, 1967:15). Her own works, which includes *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men*, (1904), both collections of Irish myths, provided Yeats with much of the folkloric source material he used in those of his plays which argue for aesthetic autonomy which does not require art or poets to be in the service of particular political ideologies.

The Irish Literary Theatre, which would become the vehicle for their artistic explorations, was founded on 16 January 1899 by Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore, with the first plays produced being Martyn's *Heather Field* and Yeats's own *The Countess Cathleen* (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:34). The founders, along with several other well-known members, lent intellectual legitimacy to the theatre and its political and cultural ideals, having all been successfully involved in the world of art before and sharing the common ideal of having a national theatre which enriched the Irish nation's imagination and spirit rather than only serving as a mouthpiece for politicians. During its three year existence, the plays of the Irish Literary Theatre were performed by English actors brought to Dublin, until a lasting and necessary relationship was established with William and Frank Fay, Irish theatre producers and actors who later established their own Irish acting company (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:40). It should be noted that during a time of political and, to an extent, economic oppression, the National Theatre set itself culturally apart, holding that the re-establishment of an independent national identity could take place through the act of performing Irish drama. This meant that the theatre preferred Irish themes and actors, and actively chose to distance itself from what it perceived to be a failing political attempt at Irish liberalism (particularly in the wake of Parnell's fall from grace, which divided the Irish Parliamentary Party, and in so doing the nation) and rather promoted cultural nationalism (Cusack, 2009:14). Members of this new theatre movement promoted themselves as mythmakers and identity shapers for a new, culturally liberated Ireland. Lady Gregory's statement of the goals and ideals of the Irish Literary Theatre clearly reflect such an artistic attempt at inspiring a literary nationalism situated in a communal identity:

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of

misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (Gregory, 1913:8-9)

In 1902 the Irish Literary Theatre Society ended its run and the new Irish National Theatre Society formed in Clarendon Street with Yeats as its president, A.E. as its vice-president and Lady Gregory as its third leader. The Society, which would later make the Abbey Theatre its home, staged A.E.'s *Deirdre* and Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as its opening productions. Until the Abbey Theatre's<sup>34</sup> official opening in 1904, the Society moved around, making use of different playhouses throughout Dublin, all the while adding more original plays to its growing repertoire of Irish drama, such as *The Pot of Broth* (1905) a collaborative effort by Yeats and Lady Gregory, Yeats's *The Hour-Glass* (1904) and Lady Gregory's *Twenty-Five* (1903) (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:41-2).

The challenges which the members of the new Irish National Theatre Society faced were plenty – not only were they under constant attack by more radical nationalist groups such as the Gaelic League who demanded an overtly political element in all national art, they also lacked sufficient historical models on which their drama could be based. Essentially, the old stories and legends that held imaginative value had to be remoulded and retold in ways that would have meaning for a contemporary Irish audience, one in a particularly fragile political situation. The fact that they succeeded (to an extent, at least) speaks of the determination and level of co-operation that occurred between the collaborators of the Society.

The members also struggled with controversy – Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) led to objections by clergy and layman alike that resulted in rioting, both being seen as offensive to Ireland, womanhood and the reputation of the "Clan-na-Gael" (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:48). The plays often represented mythical and folk heroes in contemporary settings, dealing with contemporary issues<sup>35</sup> which were alien to their audience, and they were created by members of the privileged class, no less, who were

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<sup>34</sup> The Abbey Theatre was Ireland's first National Theatre and owes its existence to its first patron, Miss Annie Horniman (who was a fellow member with Yeats of the Order of the Golden Dawn) who provided the theatre building, financial support and creative motivation which Yeats and his fellow Society members needed to make a success of the Irish National Theatre (Miller, 1977:106).

<sup>35</sup> *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, for instance, deals with the mythical figure of Kathleen, the embodiment of Ireland, selling her soul to save her tenants during the famine, a fairly recent and painful event in Irish history which had lasting consequences for Irish folk culture.

promulgating “heresy, sedition or insult” (Trotter, 2001:12). Still the Society did not waver in its objective – its vision remained firm and primary, and Yeats in particular refused to let any moral or political controversy stand in his way of creating a fully developed and functioning Irish National Theatre that would form part of the greater European dramatic tradition wherein folktales and their inherent truths play an important role in cultural life. For him, the Irish dramatic movement as a whole was a part of an aesthetic project that looked to establish Ireland as a cultural force, a project that many after him would continue to drive. Yeats realised that objections regarding the potential of the Society to overshadow similar unique, smaller groups needed to be taken seriously – Irish drama must speak to all classes of Irish society and aim to express, and not exploit, the country’s shared tradition of storytelling (Yeats, 1923:15). In return he expected the audience to be willing to accept the artistic value of the works presented to it, not demanding political propaganda but art that would benefit cultural development. He states this expectation in one of his many essays on the Irish Dramatic movement written during the early years of the Society’s existence:

[...] it will be necessary to create a household of living art in Dublin, with principles that have become habits, and a public that has learnt to care for a play because it is a play, and not because it is serviceable to some cause. (Yeats, 1923:73)

The three plays that have been chosen for discussion here demanded exactly such a regard for autonomous art if their inherent social and imaginative values were to be apparent to their audience. Yeats’s aim with this dramatic Society was, then, particularly during its early stages, to turn drama away from propaganda, materialism and utilitarianism and to again facilitate “that re-marriage of drama and poetry without which poetic faith is forgotten in the [...] theatre” (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:91). This dissertation will not provide a close reading of the plays but will rather discuss them in relation to the manner in which they present Yeats’s aesthetic ideals as well the response they evoked from their audiences. The first of the plays which incorporates such an aesthetically orientated literary nationalism is *The Countess Cathleen*.

#### **4.2. *The Countess Cathleen***

*The Countess Cathleen* was the first of Yeats's plays in which he attempted to unite the narrative tradition of folktales with dramatic form (McKenna, 2010:410) in an effort to produce a dramatic work which adhered to his own aesthetic philosophy of art being aimed at enlarging the imagination of the audience rather than being morally or politically didactic. The play is set in an ahistorical Irish town that has been struck by famine. A wealthy Countess living in the area makes it her duty to save her tenants from death at the hands of starvation. When the peasants are tempted by two demon merchants into selling their souls for food, the Countess sacrifices her own soul (worth much more than the souls of the peasants) so that her tenants might live. Her unselfish action saves her from the damnation that such a deed would normally guarantee, and she is allowed to enter heaven. The play portrays a naïve unity between the political and artistic realms, with the political sacrifice of the Countess and the folk belief in the supernatural world being merged. Frazier identifies it as the last play in which these two spheres are made to co-exist as a synthetic whole before Yeats shifts his attention to producing plays which comment on the aesthetic autonomy of art without engaging with the political sphere indirectly (Frazier, 1990:7).

The play is based on the story "The Countess Kathleen O'Shea" which was mistaken by Yeats for an indigenous West-of-Ireland tale when it was in fact a translation of Leo Lespés's "Les Matinées de Tomthée Trimm". The story had, however, become familiar amongst the Irish peasantry and had undergone content changes which reflected the sentiments and beliefs of the people of the West Country (Bramsbäck, 1984:15-16). According to Cusack, the play's plot resembles a traditional morality play and presents a distorted narrative of Irish history (2009:51), involving Romantic elements not uncommon in Yeats's earliest dramatic writings.

This act of sacrifice by an aristocratic figure who is then exalted above the realm of humanity caused controversy: Ireland's fiercely Catholic majority were offended by the apparent immorality of the peasants who were willing to sell their souls in the face of a famine. The actions resonated with the "souperism" which prevailed during the Famine years in which many peasants had to abandon their Catholic beliefs in order to obtain food from Protestant land owners and benevolence workers (Trotter, 2001:19). Yeats heard these objections, but did not accommodate the moral concerns of his audience through the many rewritings that the play would undergo throughout his career. Instead, he used it as a platform from which to

proclaim his belief that art should not be held to serve as a tool of morality, a point that he would deliberately drive home with his future plays by not setting them in any moral realm that could be used for didactic purposes<sup>36</sup>.

Critics also opposed the portrayal of the class system in the play – a landed aristocrat who serves as the only means of salvation for a Catholic peasantry was not a generally well received theme in nineteenth-century popular culture, and in an Ireland where working and middle-class people were becoming increasingly more politically aware and nationalistic in their thinking, this aspect of the play caused anger. Yeats's plot did, however, not intend to reinforce stereotypes regarding the relationship between the different classes in Ireland but rather illustrated his own obsession with what he perceived to be an ancient, symbiotic aristocrat/peasant relationship in which art serves a harmonising role of protecting the folk tradition of the peasantry while also providing heroic examples from Ireland's past that could serve as imaginative inspiration for the social sphere of the country (Flannery, 1976:74). In both *The Countess Cathleen* and *The King's Threshold* Yeats aims to show that a type of symbiosis between aristocratic heroes and peasants can exist. Such a relationship would, for him, be ideal, and allow for a social structure in which the imaginative enlargement of the Irish spirit – Unity of Culture – might be a real possibility. Seamus Deane ties this penchant to Yeats's lingering Romanticism:

The peasant and the aristocrat, kindred in spirit but not in class, united in the great Romantic battle against the industrial and utilitarian ethic. The energizing principle for Yeats in this late confection of Romantic notions was clearly that Ireland was the only place in Europe in which the aristocratic and peasant element had a fair chance of winning. (Deane, 1985:39)

To give this relationship a chance of again reasserting itself in a culturally significant way, Yeats knew that the speech patterns of the peasantry, which had preserved the cultural tradition that accompanied this relationship in Ireland, needed to be employed in the written

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<sup>36</sup> In an essay on the morality and immorality of plays he elaborates on his belief that all great art that has been under moral scrutiny eventually shows itself to be of aesthetic value beyond its educative content: "Every generation of men of letters has been called immoral by the pulpit or the newspaper, and it has been precisely when that generation has been illuminating some obscure corner of the conscience that the cry against it has been more confident" (Yeats, 1923:50).

plays and on stage. These peasants, through their stories, have their “great literature descend to them from men who spoke or sang their poems and did not write them down” (Yeats, quoted in O’Driscoll, 1971:72). The singing poet Aleel represents this bardic tradition in the play, relating tales of “Maevie the Queen of all the invisible host” who “sleeps high up on wintry Knocknarea in an old cairn of stones” (Yeats, 2001:39) to the Countess. It is Aleel who warns against the supernatural demon merchants who wish to trick the starving peasants into selling their souls for relief:

Shut to the door before the night has fallen,  
For who can say what walks, or in what shape  
Some devilish creature flies in the air; but now  
Two grey horned owls hooted over our heads. (Yeats, 2001:32)

The poet has the power in this tale to deliver commentary on the lives and future of the peasants, and can identify the significance of folkloric symbols like the grey owl which signifies the danger to come. Yeats established the importance of the poet and his knowledge of the folk traditions, and then further aestheticizes the relationship that exists between the countess and the peasants in an attempt to evoke the ancient relationship which existed between the bards, peasants and the heroic aristocratic class of Ireland’s folk tradition. This is done to a large extent by Yeats’s use of language.

Yeats’s poetry of the early 1890s, like the content of his dramatic works, often draws on folk stories and incorporates themes that relate to Ireland’s folk tradition. His poems make use of simple, lyrical language which echo the tone and rhythm of traditional Irish poetry and songs which celebrate ancient Ireland and its heroic legacy. An extract from “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time” (1893) serves as an example of Yeats’s ability to infuse language with symbolism which celebrates ancient Ireland and is capable of enlarging the imagination of his audience:

*But seek alone to hear the strange things said  
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,  
And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.  
Come near; I would, before my time go,  
Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:  
Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.* (Yeats, 1950:35)

Yeats presents his aesthetic ideal of ancient Ireland effectively in a simple, lyrical poetic form which his audience can recognise as it echoes the very tradition which Yeats aims to preserve. The same cannot be said for *The Countess Cathleen*. In an effort to historicise the play Yeats fails to produce a work which advocates his aesthetic philosophy while also being a refined aesthetic achievement. This periodization, which is aimed at creating an imagined ideal past where the aristocracy, artists and peasantry all co-existed peacefully and accepted their positions in society, is primarily achieved through Yeats's use of language. Whereas Yeats's poetry of this period manages to achieve his own aesthetic goals of inspiring the imagination of his audience through his use of images and symbols, this play fails to an extent as an artistic achievement, largely due to Yeats's decision to use a rather stiff tone which fails to convey an Ireland where a heroic aristocratic figure would sacrifice herself for her tenants out of a sense of duty to her ("my") "people" (Yeats, 2001:46). The following extract which describes Cathleen's death illustrates the seeming lack of authenticity in the relationship which exists between Cathleen and the peasants who appear to accept that Cathleen, the owner of the land, has a soul that is inherently more valuable than theirs and thus is able to save their own:

A PEASANT WOMAN: And will she give  
Enough to keep my children through the dearth?

ANOTHER PEASANT WOMAN: O, Queen of Heaven, and all you  
blessed saints,  
Let us and ours be lost so she be shriven.

CATHLEEN: Bend down your faces, Oona and Aleel;  
I gaze upon them as the swallow gazes  
Upon the nest under the eave, before  
She wanders the loud waters. Do not weep  
Too great a while for there is many a candle  
On the High Altar though one fall. Aleel,  
Who sang about the dancers of the woods  
That know not the hard burden of the world,  
Having but breath in their kind bodies, farewell!  
And farewell, Oona, you who played with me,

And bore me in your arms about the house  
When I was but a child and therefore happy,  
Therefore happy, even like those that dance.  
The storm is in my hair and I must go.

[*She dies.*

[...]

A PEASANT: She was the great white lily of the world.

ANOTHER PEASANT: She was more beautiful than the pale stars.  
(Yeats, 2001:61-2)

Cathleen's final, sentimental words which appear to be a last attempt to establish an intimate connection between her and her servants, Aleel and Oona, are sanctimonious rather than engaging, as are the responses of the peasants who do nothing but sing the praises of the aristocrat who owned the land which eventually succumbed to famine and their desperate situation. Yeats's description of Cathleen as "the great white lily of the world" seems exaggerated considering the historic milieu of the play – the Great Famine is known to have stirred hostilities between landowners and tenants. His choice of historic event undermines the aesthetic value the play might have due to the fact that the language and imagery employed do not enlarge the audience's imagination but instead cast doubt on Yeats's ability to artistically represent Ireland's history. It would appear that Yeats is so concerned with establishing an ideal order where an aristocratic class takes it upon itself to protect Ireland's cultural well-being that he fails to produce an artistic work which would convince an audience to accept such an order.

*The Countess Cathleen's* failure to engage with the audience as a convincing artistic work is not only the result of the play's awkward use of language and tone, but also of the thematic choices Yeats makes, particularly his choice to present the peasants as unrefined and desperate and the landowning Countess as a spiritual and cultural hero who saves the peasantry through her self-sacrifice. Although the historic setting of the play would normally justify the desperation of the peasants to sell their souls to stay alive (seeing as they believe that "There's nothing in the world [gold] cannot buy" (Yeats, 2001:52)), Yeats condemns

their decision by making them appear materialistic, superstitious and incapable of efficiently debating their own moral choices:

CATHLEEN: How can a heap of crowns pay for a soul?

Is the green grave so terrible a thing?

FIRST MERCHANT: Some sell because the money gleams, and some

Because they are in terror of the grave,

And some because their neighbours sold before,

And some because there is a kind of joy

In casting hope away, in losing joy,

In ceasing all resistance, in at last

Opening one's arms to the eternal flames,

In casting all sails out upon the wind;

To this – full of the gaiety of the lost –

Would all folk hurry if your gold were gone. (Yeats, 2001:49)

Here we find another instance where Yeats's desire to make a statement regarding his ideal social order where certain individuals with cultural insights be allowed to lead gets in the way of the potential artistic merit that the play might have. The peasants' choice to accept the offer for their souls is not considered as an act of desperation but rather framed in a way which makes the Countess's actions appear all the more heroic: when the Countess realises that her tenants have sold their souls she immediately assumes an unselfish position and insists on giving all of her worldly goods so that her tenants may regain their souls. She thus functions as the ideal aristocratic figure Yeats hopes to promote as a potential cultural leader of Ireland. The following dialogue between the Countess and her Steward indicates the extent to which Yeats attempts to establish her as a noble, worthy and completely selfless aristocratic figure:

CATHLEEN. Give twice and thrice and twenty times their money,

And get your souls again. I will pay all.

[...]

CATHLEEN [*to Aleel*]. Go call them here again, bring them by

force,

Beseech them, bribe, do anything you like;

*[Aleel goes.]*

And you too follow, add your prayers to his.

*[Oona, who has been praying, goes out.]*

Steward, you know the secrets of my house.

How much have I?

STEWARD. A hundred kegs of gold

CATHLEEN. How much have I in castles?

STEWARD. As much more.

CATHLEEN. How much have I in pasture?

STEWARD. As much more.

CATHLEEN. How much have I in forests?

STEWARD. As much more.

CATHLEEN. Keeping this house alone, see all I have,

Go barter where you please, but come again

With herds of cattle and with ships of meal.

[...]

CATHLEEN. Come, follow me, for the earth burns my feet

Till I have changed my house to such a refuge

That the old and ailing, and all weak of heart,

May escape from beak and claw; all, all, shall come

Till the walls burst and the roof fall on us.

From this day out I have nothing of my own

*[She goes. (Yeats, 2001:43-4)]*

The Countess comes to realise that her earthly possessions will not satisfy the demons who have taken the souls of her tenants and she acts even more heroically – she offers her own soul. The reaction of her peasants who claim that her soul is too valuable further illustrates Yeats's desire to represent an ideal, symbiotic relationship between the aristocracy and the peasantry:

CATHLEEN: I offer my own soul.

A PEASANT: Do not, do not, for souls the like of ours

Are not precious to God as your soul is.

O! What would heaven do without you, lady? (Yeats, 2001:58)

At no point does the Countess admonish her peasants for their supernatural beliefs or their foolishness for selling their souls – she believes in the supernatural realm as well, as she is willing to sacrifice her own soul to redeem theirs. Yeats thus presents an idealised functioning relationship between a fair, intellectual ruling class and a willing peasantry, both sharing in the bardic tradition of Ireland (although, as public reaction indicated, this was only ever an idealistic construction on Yeats's part).

This play introduces Yeats's aesthetic philosophy to his audience: it demands acknowledgment that certain members of society are more suitable to lead Ireland's cultural renewal, and that these individuals should be in positions of power, such as were the aristocratic hero figures of ancient Ireland who secured Irish identity. It cannot be said to have much aesthetic value in itself, seeing as it resulted in uproar and confusion amongst the audience (rather than wonder and contemplation) due to the central thematic flaw – the historic context and relationships of the play were not dealt with in a sensitive or realistic manner. Nor were the historic events or social relationships accurately represented through the symbols and language employed by Yeats. *The Countess Cathleen* was a strong philosophical statement on Yeats's part but failed to be a convincing work of art.

His next play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, goes even further in establishing the culturally revitalizing role that art can play if it keeps its distance from politics and if audiences would be willing to look beyond superficial political ideologies when they consider Ireland's national future.

### 4.3. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is Yeats's best known and most critiqued play. Yeats admitted to purposefully setting out to make a statement about "the perpetual struggle of the cause of Ireland and every other ideal cause against private hopes and dreams, against all that it means when we say the world" (Yeats, 2001:834), and it is thus not surprising that the play attracted commentary from artists and politicians alike.

The play originated in a vision-like dream which Yeats had described to Lady Gregory in a letter:

One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen Ni Houlihan for whom so many songs had been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake too many had gone to their deaths. (Yeats, 2001:683)

The play takes place during the unsuccessful 1798 rebellion in which Ireland rose up against English rule with the aid of the French military. The old woman, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, symbolises Ireland's call to young men such as Michael, the protagonist of the play. She manages to convince him to join the struggle, but also warns that his death will be almost certain, and his sacrifice is ultimately known by the audience to have been in vain since the rebellion did not succeed. The play serves as a complex exploration of the nature of sacrifice and patriotism – Yeats admits the sense of glory that accompanies the sacrifice of life, as it will become a part of a folk tradition, but questions the worth of this glory if it in no way enhances actual realities of those who must die while they are still alive. This particular armed rebellion fails, and the sacrifice made for Cathleen Ni Houlihan is thus ultimately in vain.

The figure of Cathleen is one that is appropriate for a play that considers patriotic sacrifice. Not only had the figure become deeply entrenched in both the folk and political rhetoric in Yeats's time (Merritt, 2001:646) but it was also a figure that was extremely popular amongst Irish artists and audiences alike. An entry from *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996) on the typical use of this figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish literature reads as follows:

The vehicle of this message is the female persona of Ireland, often called *spéirbhean* (“sky-woman”), and specifically named *Caitlin ní Uallacháin* by *Liam Dall ÓhlFeernàin* [...]. The poet wanders forth and meets a fairy woman of outstanding beauty, who is described in terms of traditional and conventional formulas; he engages in dialogue with her and asks her name, and she identifies herself as Ireland, forsaken by her legitimate spouse. (Welch, 1996:9)

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was, to Yeats’s regret, viewed as a propaganda play by much of its audience – the scorned *Cathleen*, beautiful but abandoned to suffer, represents an ancient Ireland which has been mistreated by her conquerors who claimed the land. England did not provide cultural freedoms or allow political independence for Ireland or her folk traditions (which Yeats emphasised) to the extent that a nationalist public desired. Popular figures like *Cathleen* came to represent an ancient but mistreated culture.

Cusack identifies two further reasons why the play came to be seen as a propaganda piece: firstly, the re-evaluation of the 1798 rebellion was extremely popular at the time as Ireland turned to its own unsuccessful history of self-determination in an effort to avoid past mistakes, and secondly, Yeats makes use of the peasant/cottage image which had become a symbol of resistance to Anglicization and the continuation of the living Irish culture. Thus, “Yeats and Gregory evoke two of the most crucial pillars of nationalism, the unbroken narrative of national history and the unique and living national culture” (Cusack, 2009:28). Yeats thus chose to make use of a myth that had weight within Ireland and that would be accepted by his audience. The play, with a recognisable symbolic figure at its centre, then aims to convince the Irish public of Yeats’s own belief that cultural renewal rather than political action is needed in Ireland, and that, ultimately, the autonomy of art needs to be valued for this to occur.

In an effort to retell the myth of *Cathleen*, traditionally an old woman who relies on young martyrs to fight for her, Yeats constructs his *Cathleen* as the combination of two traditional Irish figures – the young, beautiful Ireland who demands sacrifices from her followers and

the old, wise woman, usually represented as the Cailleach Bhéarra<sup>37</sup> (Merritt, 2001:648) who understand the pleas of the peasantry. His play, centred on this new dynamic “Cathleen”, is built on a further series of myths, images and stylistic features which are all part of the fabric of the Irish folk imagination: a peasant family suffering under foreign oppression must negotiate political loyalties while continuing with everyday activities such as the planning of a wedding; an old beggar appeals to their charity and brings an otherworldly message which could change their fate; a supernatural transformation from “old woman” to “beautiful young queen”, both images which symbolise Ireland in her oppressed and freed states respectively, takes place; and the wisdom of Cathleen is often sung rather than spoken, a marker of Ireland’s oral folk narratives which precede the meditated, written word. The Cathleen myth serves as the exact type of heroic myth which Yeats hopes to re-awaken. By reshaping the modern Irish imagination through retelling of this story he aims to question what cultural and political sacrifice means for a nation on both imaginative and practical fronts. When art is used as a political tool it demands actual sacrifice which does nothing to preserve a cultural tradition. Yeats would instead have the Irish nation engage with their past and represent their cultural ideals through art, a distinction which, in an Ireland where artistic expression and political action had for centuries been intimately linked, would be difficult to achieve.

The play ultimately serves as a critique of armed struggle for political freedom; Yeats would rather suggest that Ireland should claim her place in the Western world through the means of art that is concerned with the cultural rather than political well-being of the nation. Yeats, coming from an Anglo-Irish background and having been immersed in the world of art and philosophy from a young age, was perhaps rather naïve to think that the political and cultural realms could so easily be separated. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the play was first performed, the issue of Home Rule for Ireland was again being debated and the passions of audiences around the country were inflamed by discussions surrounding Ireland’s possible independence. Yeats’s primary concern at this time was to present an aesthetic philosophy which promotes autonomous art as culturally valuable to an audience who found it difficult to keep their own political convictions from influencing their value judgements. Yeats himself supports the idea that Ireland should be independent, but not that this should be achieved

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<sup>37</sup> Cailleach Bhéarra, or “The Old Woman of Beare”, is a popular folkloric figure in Ireland. She is an ancient nun who laments her lost youth and retains vestigial traces of the goddess of sovereignty (Merritt, 2001:648). Through her ties to the earth and her role as a leading figure in Irish society she very much resembles Yeats’s aristocratic Countess Cathleen.

through political means – his criticism of the armed struggle and his attempts to promote art as a means for cultural renewal and independence was thus well intentioned, but failed to account for the extent to which the political struggle for Irish independence had come to influence all aspects of Irish public life.

The play was extremely well received – it came to be seen as a major work of nationalist propaganda and a literary call to arms. The symbolic Cathleen, Ireland herself, popularised Yeats amongst the nationalist crowd, and appeared to prove his patriotism, something which they did not see in *The Countess Cathleen* (Merritt, 2001:650). The play was also well received for its artistic elements, with Maud Gonne's<sup>38</sup> representation of Cathleen being critically acclaimed and the aesthetic representation of Cathleen Ni Houlihan as a dynamic, living force being appreciated. Yeats would regret the popularity that the play enjoyed with extreme nationalists, and even, towards the end of his life, regretfully contemplated the role it may have played in motivating those nationalists who took part in the Easter 1916 uprising: "Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?" (Yeats, 1950:393). Ultimately, the reception of the play was complex and interesting – "*Cathleen* was both the purely aesthetic work that Yeats and Gregory intended it to be and the propaganda piece which the national audience took it to be" (Cusack, 2009:20). Yeats admitted to the intention of eliciting nationalist cultural sentiment, an activity separated from political arguments in his mind, and defends this position in a letter to Edward Plunkett:

I have never written a play to advocate any kind of opinion, and I think such a play would necessarily be bad art, or at any rate a very humble kind of art. At the same time, I felt that I have no right to exclude for myself or others, any passionate material of drama. (Yeats, 1994:623)

Yeats succeeded in utilising a popular myth to impassion the Irish nation, but while not aiming at promoting an overt political cause, the play did just that. Flannery also suggests that it is the manner in which this particular play was politicised by the nationalists that

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<sup>38</sup> Maud Gonne was Yeats's muse for most of his career – he was infatuated with her and proposed marriage several times. Gonne never accepted and married Major John MacBride, an Irish revolutionary and leader of the Transvaal Irish brigade during the Anglo-Boer war. Gonne, actively involved in the cause for Irish independence, personified the spirit of Irish freedom and incarnated the myth of the strong, beautiful Cathleen ní Houlihan for Yeats who wrote the play for her to star in.

“ultimately contributed to the dissolution of Yeats’s most cherished ambitions for the Irish dramatic movement” (Flannery, 1976:100). He was disappointed with Dublin’s nationalist audience, who were so eager for a cultural work that supported their revolutionary tendencies, that they perceived the play to support an armed uprising and missed its commentary regarding the power of art. Yeats perhaps underestimated the political passion of his audience, and was not able to convey to it that the particular Irishness of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* lies in its questioning of the way in which traditional symbols are interpreted, and in its consideration of the ties that exist between Ireland’s past and its future. Cathleen’s final dramatic dialogue<sup>39</sup> which manages to convince Michael to leave his fiancé and join the armed uprising, illustrates Yeats’s questioning of perceptions regarding symbols most poignantly:

OLD WOMAN: It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid. [*She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing.*

They shall be remembered forever,  
The shall be alive for ever,  
They shall be speaking forever,  
The people shall hear them forever.  
(Yeats, 2001:92)

Those who are willing to sacrifice themselves will become part of an everlasting heroic tradition, yet it comes at the sacrifice of their lives. When this play and this piece of dialogue in particular are considered alongside all Yeats’s other statements regarding the value of symbolic, imaginative art over political action, it seems fair to suggest that Cathleen, and thus

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<sup>39</sup> She uses speech that would be familiar to the peasantry of the countryside, and so evokes images of heroism that lie beyond Michael’s material or rational concerns. Cusack elaborates: “In the process, she fulfils the Gaelic nationalist desire for which the Irish peasantry was the imagined solution; the language of the peasantry became the language of the nation, which in turn becomes the language of revolution” (Cusack, 2009: 33).

Yeats, understands the heroic recognition that comes with sacrifice, but also the hardship and loss that form part of it.

Yeats, who advocated the importance of a *living* tradition with an active, participating audience, would have a cultural uprising take place rather than one that ends in bloodshed, since “the revolution taking place outside thus appears as a blood sacrifice rather than a realistic bid for political freedom” (Cusack, 2009:34), a statement which rings particularly true if we remember that Yeats deliberately makes use of a well-known *failed* armed revolution which devastated many lives and in no way secured Ireland more political freedom. Michael, who does not see Cathleen’s transition from an old woman to a beautiful young queen, will thus sacrifice himself not for a living tradition, but for an event that will become mere history; he will not share in the tradition he is dying for. His political action was ineffective, whereas a reestablishment of his people’s identity through methods of cultural expression might have succeeded in establishing Ireland as a functioning and heroic nation in her oppressor’s eyes. Cusack claims that this exploration of the limits of armed revolution versus cultural rejuvenation forms part of a thoroughly modernist aesthetic of conflict (Cusack, 2009:34). This aesthetic forms part of a larger epistemological crisis in which the realities of social change and armed revolution are questioned in the wake of the real destruction they can be seen to cause throughout Western civilization.

The play reads as a call for art rather than a call to arms by criticising political revolution and suggesting an idealised vision of an Ireland that is measured by ideas and not political actions.

The final play that will be considered, *The King’s Threshold*, deals with the role of storytellers in the establishment of these ideas, and also further discusses the function of art in Irish society.

#### **4.4 *The King’s Threshold***

In a note to the 1911 revision of the *The King’s Threshold* (1904), Yeats quite plainly states his philosophical purpose with the play: “It was written when our society was beginning the fight for the recognition of pure art in a community of which one half is buried in the

practical affairs of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism” (Yeats, 2001:686). The reception of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* had had a pronounced effect on Yeats’s aesthetic sensibilities, and he chose to construct *The King’s Threshold* in such a way that the poetic value of the work would present itself in a logical fashion out of the fundamental action which would only serve the end of being artistic imaginative expression (Yeats, 2001:845).

The play centres on King Guaire of Gort’s principle bard Seanchan the poet, who is thrown out of court by clerics and courtiers who fear his influence. In protest, Seanchan undertakes to starve himself at the palace gate<sup>40</sup> and publicly voice his belief that he has been wronged by the king. Seanchan believes that poets are essential to the rule of the kingdom, being the protectors of ancient knowledge and tradition. All attempts at deflecting Seanchan from his purpose fail, until finally the king offers his crown, which Seanchan accepts.

This play is an unapologetic statement of Yeats’s belief that art should be autonomous and that the artist should not be made to serve political causes. Ellis-Fermor claims that this belief had been revealed, although never to such a deliberate extent, in earlier prose works such as “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” and “Hodos Chameliontos”. In the present play Yeats’s aesthetic concerns are poetically expressed, and Seanchan does not allow any compromise or evasion:

This is no half-apologetic “defence of poetry”, no sweet and reasonable plea for its acceptance or deferential statement of its function. It is a flaming exaltation of that vision which is the symbol of all spiritual knowledge and the gift of the spirit beside which all other values are disvalued. Poetry is either the root of life or it is nothing. (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:92)

In his 1903 essay “Samhain” Yeats explicitly states that his interest at this point is not propaganda, only good art. The tale is thus told from the perspective of the true heroic figure, the poet, and not the king, as traditional tales would relate it (Yeats, 1923:40). Seanchan becomes an heroic figure who is almost anti-social in his idealism – he would rather die than allow the role of poetry and the poets to be undermined.

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<sup>40</sup> At this point the hunger-strike had not yet become a popular form of political protest amongst 20th century nationalists in Ireland as it later would.

Yeats further emphasises the *Irish* aspect of this concern by localising the play in a very specific way, setting it in Gort where the historical King Guaire, the ernstwhile ruler of the western province of Connacht, ruled. The play is filled with references to the Clare-Galway landscape and also incorporates other specifically Irish references into its dialogue, such as “hurley”, “salt-fishes”, “stony meadows” and “crooked thorn-trees” (Ure, 1963:33). The role of the *Irish* poet in *Irish* society is thus central to the whole development of the play. Not only does the locality of the play advance Yeats’s call for the autonomous value of the arts, but his incorporation of a hunger-strike into the action is deemed doubly effective by Cusack (2009:64). Hunger strikes had been used in early Irish society to shame a lord who mistreated his subjects. In the play the practice serves as a manifestation of the ideological dispute between the king and the poet regarding his position of giving guidance and the autonomous value of his work, while also associating the poet with the audience who would have been familiar with the significance of the political hunger strike and what it stands for, thus gaining the support of the people. Two cripples proclaim the power (both cultural and mystic) which poets have<sup>41</sup>, and serve as the voices of the populace who reinforce Seanchan’s claims:

FIRST CRIPPLE: It would serve the King right if Seanchan drove away his luck. What’s there about a king that’s in the world from birth to burial like another man, that he should change old customs that were in it as long as the world has been the world?

SECOND CRIPPLE: If I were the King I wouldn’t meddle with him; there is something queer about a man that makes rhymes. I knew a man that would be making rhymes year in year out under a thorn at the crossing of three roads, and he was no sooner dead than every thorn-tree from Inchy to Kiltartan withered, and he a ragged man like ourselves.

FIRST CRIPPLE: Those that make rhymes have a power from beyond the world.  
(Yeats, 2001:127)

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<sup>41</sup> It was a commonly held folk belief that powerful bards and poets had the ability to scathingly satirise and curse those who did them harm, while being able to elevate and bring good fortune to those they praised.

Seanchan himself claims that he, through his stories, can communicate with the heroic figures, with “Finn and Osgar”, of Ireland’s mythical past (Yeats, 2001:124). The king, however, is only concerned with his own material well-being and he comes to represent all that which Yeats despises about the modernising Ireland he finds himself in – rationalism, materialism, and a preference for utility over idealism. The King’s offer to “Promise a house with grass and tillage land, and annual payment, jewels and silken wear, or anything but that old right of poets” illustrates his desire for material well-being over ideas and the preservation of an artistic tradition, a desire which is shared by the court and others with political interests (Yeats, 2001:123).

Yeats holds to the Romantic notion that the poet can evoke the symbols that carry cultural meaning from the mythical and heroic tales of Ireland’s past (Miller, 1977:27). The entire play, then, affirms Yeats’s belief in the privileged position poets should have in the structure of Ireland’s cultural development, and it proclaims the necessary freedom that is required for art if such cultural development is to take place. This freedom is discussed between Seanchan and his students who form part of the bardic tradition in which knowledge is passed from a master poet to his apprentices. Seanchan portrays that role which Yeats envisions for himself – he is the advocate of poetry’s power and the position within the social sphere which it deserves; it exists beyond the realm of temporal decay. The one cultural form that has survived throughout Ireland’s turbulent history should be allowed to be expressed freely, for “If the arts should perish/ The world that lacked them would be like a woman/ That looking on the cloven lips of a hare/ Brings forth a hair-lipped child” (Yeats, 2001:125).

The theatre provided Yeats with a public platform through which he could communicate his aesthetic ideals. He realised that in an Ireland where the bardic voice no longer represented the views of the people, the ritual of the theatre would allow him to address the issues of art and its role in public life (Suess, 2003:xix). Along with his plays Yeats also made use of the Irish National Theatre’s periodical *Samhain* to appeal to his audience to grant him sufficient artistic freedom and tolerance so that he might engage with them publicly through his art (Yeats, 1923:64). T.S. Eliot, often critical of Yeats’s aesthetic prerogatives, recognised the debt that the Irish Theatre owed to Yeats exactly because he used theatre as a reaction against English realism in a way that had never been done before, and so managed to involve the public in a significant manner:

He cared, I think, more for the theatre as an organ of the expression of the consciousness of the people, than as a means to his fame and achievements, and I am convinced that it is only if you serve it in this spirit that you can hope to accomplish anything worth doing with it. (Eliot, quoted in Miller, 1977:12)

Yeats would have his own plays regarded as individual works of art which evoke a primary human and emotional response, which would be transformed into a communal mythology in which all Irishmen might share.

Yeats chose to create aesthetically valuable dramatic works which would not merely follow in the English tradition of “illogical thinking” and “insincere feeling” which make “the mind timid and the heart effeminate” (Yeats, 1923:51), but rather, through the ritualistic medium of theatre which spoke to the folk through its use of symbol, inspire a Blakean transcendence. Ellis-Fermor recognised this Romantic resonance and his anti-materialism as the key elements in Yeats’s re-establishment of a public, imaginative theatre which lies beyond the scope of realism and social utilitarianism:

[He led the age back] to a different reality, the underlying reality that reveals itself in poetic thought, in heroic and in romantic themes and that can open a world concerned not primarily with daily life, but with things apparently remote from that actual life, “those old stories of folk which were made by men who believed so much in the soul, and so little in anything else, that they were never entirely certain that the earth was solid under the foot-sole”. (Ellis-Fermor, 1954:95)

All of the actions of the mythical and heroic characters in these plays were aimed at exploiting the moment of imaginative enlargement as Yeats understood it. Moore elaborates: “Whatever physical action there is in his plays is symbolic – it points to a meaning outside itself for whose sake it exists” (Moore, 1965:157). Through meaningful retellings of symbol-filled myths, Yeats made it his goal to open up a way of expression that already existed within the Irish imagination and Irish people themselves. Flannery argues that Yeats wanted to create an Irish equivalent of the Greek theatre where myth and legends were relevant to the social lives and ideals of the audience. He defines the scope of Yeats’s theatre project accordingly:

[It must be] nothing less than the recreation of society and theatre in the image of the greatest society and theatre in the history of the Western civilization; nothing less than the creation of an Irish Athens, and an Irish Theatre of Dionysus where a Unity of Being and a Unity of Culture might be effected through Unity of Image. (Flannery, 1976:66)

For Yeats such Unity depends on simplicity – dramatic action must speak directly to the audience and not distract from the essence that is imaginative enlargement (Yeats, 1923:46-9). An example of this desired simplicity is found in the static nature of *The King's Threshold*: Seanchan does not move throughout. He defiantly maintains his position, with others having to move towards him, the venerated poet, to converse with him. Through this simple device the position of poetry and poets as fixed, continuous forces in social history is emphasised, and their stronghold in the imaginative tradition is made physical. Yeats views Seanchan's actions as exemplary for Irish poets – an order where the poet has sway within the social sphere is necessary for the arts to actively function within a community.

Cusack identifies two critical camps which consider from opposing views Yeats's positioning of the poet as a bardic figure. The first is led by Seamus Deane, who argues that Yeats is a nostalgic artist who mourns the lost peasant/aristocrat relationship and desires a return to Ireland's heroic past. The other is led by Edward Said, who claims that Yeats is thoroughly revolutionary in his artistic attempt to escape English subjugation, using transitional Irish images and figures to make both subtle and overt political statements. A dichotomy seems to exist between these two positions, which is expressed in the difference between *The Countess Cathleen* and *The King's Threshold* – in the first the position of the aristocrat is exalted whereas in the latter the poet and his ability to triumph over the unworthy king is celebrated. Yet, as Yeats's declaration of autonomy makes clear, he sees value in this conflict: Yeats sees the artist in a role which neither endorses the political status quo, nor seeks to replace it. Instead he advocates a resistance to all political agendas, thereby transcending any perception that he might be advocating an absolute return to an imagined past or that he is a political revolutionary who uses art in a way to subvert the reigning political system. Through this the artist provides a constant impetus for personal and national self-evaluation while preventing any one ideology from dominating his artistic thought (Cusack, 2009:43-4).

Yeats's aesthetic is unique at the same time that it manages to be recognisably national: since artistic expression predates politics, art can exist independently of it altogether, and the artist is thus free from the constraints of social duties that are associated with politics. Yeats thoroughly believes that the artist, and particularly the playwright, deserves to be able to create freely since it is his role to preserve the nation's cultural identity in an Ireland where "[their] poetry is still poetry of the people in the main, for it still deals with the tales and thoughts of the people" (Yeats, 1970:273).

In one of his essays on the Irish dramatic movement a cumulative argument by Yeats is based on the role that the theatre needs to play within a greater European aesthetic project which values art above all, and so is able to actively participate in Irish culture in a dynamic and effective way:

I would see, in every branch of our national propaganda, young men who would have the sincerity and the precision of those Russian revolutionists that Kropotkin and Stepniak tell us of, men who would never use an argument to convince others which would not convince themselves, who would not make a mob drunk with a passion they could not share, and who would above all seek for fine things for their own sake, and for precise knowledge for its own sake, and not for its momentary use. One can serve one's country alone out of the abundance of one's own heart, and it is labour enough to be certain one is in the right, without having to be certain that one's thought is expedient also. (Yeats, 1923:65)

The theatre, then, can be seen as the final platform of expression of Yeats's early developing aesthetic – here his ideals regarding the role of art, the poet and the necessity for it to function freely within Irish culture reached its apex. This idealism, however, will give way to disillusionment in his later career once Yeats experiences the inability of the Irish people to grasp his aesthetic ideals which emphasise the autonomous value of art, as opposed to its possible political value.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation has shown how W.B. Yeats's personal aesthetic which would come to regard art as autonomously valuable evolved over the course of his early career. His interest in folklore which developed during his youth interacted with a variety of other interests and artistic movements, ranging from the Romanticism of Blake and Shelley to the occult, Ireland's nationalist movement and the establishment of an Irish National Theatre. Through their reciprocal influences on each other, these ideas were unified into a cumulative aesthetic perspective which regards art, and particularly art based in folklore, as autonomously valuable.

Yeats's aesthetic philosophy is anchored in his early exposure to Ireland's folk traditions and the artistic philosophies of Blake, Shelley, the Pre-Raphaelites and the French Symbolists through the education provided by his father. Yeats's aesthetic would remain thoroughly Romantic throughout the period discussed in this dissertation (1883-1907), placing value on the enlargement of the imagination and on the revelation of historic cultural truths in symbols contained in art. But he did not merely follow in the footsteps of the Romantics – Yeats was able to supplement his aesthetic philosophy and have it progress into one that has the concerns of not only the individual artist at heart, but the entire imaginative tradition of a nation which so closely identifies with its own creative past. Isolation from the community through complete introspection, as Romanticism would have it, would be a failure to preserve and contribute to a tradition that has the ability to evoke a cultural revolution for a people who had too long been disenfranchised. Although admiring of the works of many Romantic artists, and supporting the notion that beautiful art should not need justification beyond its own expression, Yeats did hold that art could still somehow contribute to the cultural identity of a nation. For Yeats, the beauty found in traditional Irish art has the *potential* to awake the former greatness that had existed in pre-conquest Ireland. This greatness does not necessarily have a moral or political element, but rather inspires Irish people to have respect for their own culture and art, that which lies at the very heart of Irishness.

Yeats's own involvement in Ireland's nationalist movement and the various literary societies which somehow concerned themselves with Ireland's fight for political and cultural freedom

gave him intimate insight into the dangers of art which does not concern itself with stylistic or aesthetic integrity but only with political propaganda. He soon came to realise that political argument alone, even when it uses art to voice its concerns, is not enough to inspire a cultural revolution in an Ireland which had for so long been denied its own voice. He persisted in his Romantic preference for artistic renewal over social and political progress. Yeats faced resistance from his fellow Literary Society members and his audience, but never wavered in his stance in the support of art that serves the imaginative growth of Ireland. The principles, symbols and spiritual insights that Romanticism, Symbolism and the occult provided him with were unified as part of Yeats's own unique aesthetically orientated literary nationalism.

For Yeats, nationhood and art are intricately bound, and if one aims only to serve its own ends it does not serve the other. His understanding of aesthetic autonomy is one that is not concerned with art as *only* valuable for its own sake, but valuable as a psychically enlarging force: "literature must be the expression of conviction, and be the garment of noble emotion and not an end in itself" (Yeats, 1970:249). Art should be autonomously valued so that this communal enlargement can take place. He objects when art is expected to function as a tool with a political or moral agenda, and can no longer engage with that central element of culture: the folk imagination. He finds Ireland's folk tradition to be a common ground which transcends the differences that might arise in these social spheres (Trotter, 2001:xi):

Folk-art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. (Yeats, 2003:139)

Yeats recognises the importance of social progress within an Ireland which finds itself in a historical and cultural liminal space: not yet independent, but not integrated into Great Britain; no longer authentically Celtic but not yet culturally English; not entirely rural but not industrially competitive. Yet he maintains that progress can best be achieved through cultural growth which is facilitated by a meaningful engagement with an art to which the Irish people can relate.

The folklore tradition serves as an example for engaging communicative art – it does not dictate morals or ideologies, but revitalizes the cultural imagination through the ancient truths and symbols it has accumulated, continuously presenting them for interpretation through new narratives:

If people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, what change should one look for in the manner of our poetry? A return to the way of our fathers, a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over-scientific opinion that so often extinguishes the central flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things; or, in other words, we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, to the boughs waving outside the window. (Yeats, 2007:120)

Yeats found a public platform to express his aesthetic ideals and hopes for Ireland's cultural future in the National Theatre which he helped to create. Along with others who shared in his vision for a national poetry that would be directed at establishing Irish art as a cultural force, he found inspiration in Ireland's folk tradition and created dramas which combined themes of ancient heroism, the dangers of politically motivated art and the necessity that art should be valued autonomously if it is to contribute to the social wellbeing of Ireland. Three plays in particular, *The Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *The King's Threshold* can be identified as works which encompass Yeatsian ideals of aesthetic autonomy. In these plays he establishes a personal desire for a return to a cultural system where a fair ruling class, with poets as their advisors, live in a peaceful and symbiotic relationship with the country folk who preserve the imaginative tradition of Ireland through their stories and beliefs in the power that these legends hold. The role of the poet as the mediator through which symbols and the ancient truths that they embody is continuously insisted upon, illustrating Yeats's belief that an order based on the bardic system of ancient Ireland best serves the cultural needs of Ireland. All three of these plays argues that only when these relationships are appreciated and are symbolically revealed through engaging art can true cultural revolution occur.

The symbols and spiritual values that Yeats find embedded in the folk tradition of Ireland have the ability to give back to Ireland that great cultural voice which reigned in the island before the days of colonial oppression. It is a concern with this cultural voice which is always at the heart of his aesthetic project. The aesthetic value of art is located in its ability to express significant cultural ideas and truths, and any expectation that art bring about political or moral change would degrade its autonomous value:

[...] we must learn that beauty and truth are always justified of themselves. And that their creation is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the seeming service of a cause. We will, doubtless, come more easily to truth and beauty because we love some cause with but all our heart; but we must remember when truth and beauty open their mouths to speak, that all other mouths should be as silent as Finn bade the Son of Lugaidh be in the houses of the great. Truth and beauty judge and are above judgement. They justify and have no need for justification. (Yeats, 1923:45-6)

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