

## USES OF GREEK AND ROMAN MYTH

In my reading of the Greek and Roman myths, initially through the work of Edith Hamilton,<sup>1</sup> I came into contact with a ‘mythos’ I could empathise with more fundamentally than the Judaeo-Christian one. For instance, the Grecian interpretation of Fatherhood in Zeus I found more acceptable than the merciless genocide-bearing figure in the Old Testament as witnessed in the destruction of Edom and Chanaan, where the Inspired End (The Establishment of the Kingdom of Israel) justified the particular barbarity of the Means, given that the same figure was One with the Lamb of the New Testament, and all the ‘Exploits’ the inspired Word demanding Belief.

As Edith Hamilton notes, the *Odyssey* speaks of the ‘divine for which all men long’, and hundreds of years later Aristotle wrote, ‘Excellence, much laboured for by the race of mortals.’ The Greeks from the earliest storytellers and writers had a vision of the divine and the excellent. Their desire for them was overwhelming. They never give up the struggle to see them clearly. One day the thunder and lightning were changed into the Universal Father.<sup>2</sup>

Most of my Grecian and Roman references come in my early work. Thus, in an evolving Zeus, ‘God was approachable’.<sup>3</sup> It was possible to conceive of that new start hinted at in Lowell’s

‘Far off that time of gentleness,  
when man, still licensed to increase,  
unfallen and unmated, heard  
only the uncreated Word,  
when God the Logos still had wit

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Ennis, ‘Miserere’, *Night on Hibernia*, p.27.

to hide his bloody hands, and sit  
in silence, while his peace was sung.  
Then the universe was young'.<sup>4</sup>

The 'mythos' of the Greek world had more to recommend in it, humanly speaking, for me, than that of other European or world mythologies apart from certain core elements of Irish mythology. From my perspective, Greek mythology and the figures in it represented a humanised world, where people were essentially free 'from the paralysing fear of an omnipotent unknown'.<sup>5</sup>

For me, the essential rationality of the Green Pantheon came as a relief after an early bondage to the totalitarian Judaeo-Christian nexus. Individual Grecian myths and figures with their associated images have occurred in my published work as follows:

<i>Grecian/Roman Figure(s)</i>	<i>Published Work</i>
Orpheus	- 'Orpheus' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ); 'Orpheus Dismembered', 'Giving a lift to Orpheus' ( <i>Helicon Sonnets</i> ).
Eurydice	- 'Orpheus' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ).
Daphne	- Alice Figure, 'Alice of Daphne' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ).
Calliope	- 'Orpheus' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ).
Muses	- 'Muse 1', 'Muse 2', 'Muse 3' ( <i>Helicon Sonnets</i> ).
Europa	- 'The Spirit of Thomas Mann Considers Europa'

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<sup>4</sup> R. Lowell, 'Fourth of July in Maine', *Near the Ocean*, p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p.17.

	( <i>Helicon Sonnets</i> ).
Aphrodite	- Molly Image, 'Fair City'  ( <i>In a Green Shade</i> ); Venus reference in  'Birth at Airmount' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ).
Leda	- 'Girl, Bar, Swan' ( <i>Night on Hibernia</i> ).
Sirens	- 'Esparto Man' ( <i>Telling the Bees</i> ).
Demeter	- 'Ultimata' ( <i>Telling the Bees</i> );  - Mother-Image in  'Nirvana' ( <i>Telling the Bees</i> ).
Prometheus	- Unnamed twin stealing the combined 'fire' of  filidh, breitheamh and cleric in <i>Letter to Connla</i> .  - Also 'Bianconi' figure, 'This Other Umbria'  ( <i>Telling the Bees</i> ).
Pluto	- Hades Section, 'Orpheus' ( <i>Dolmen Hill</i> ).
Phoebus Apollo	- the beautiful sun-god, (also Musician, 'God' of  Truth) in Ray Daly of <i>The Burren Days</i> :  Apollo of Grecian mythology here combines with  the Irish Diarmuid, the ideal lover combining  valiance with beauty and musical voice.
Hephaestus	- Forgeman in 'Dorothea Claire'  ( <i>Night on Hibernia</i> ).
Hermes	- 'Skepticos' ( <i>Helicon Sonnets</i> ).
Aeneas ('Beginnings' in  Fall of Troy)	- Associated persona of speaker in 'Anchises'  poems - 'Out of the Ruins', 'Wheelchair Ride for

Anchises' (*Night on Hibernia*); 'Listening to Mahler's Resurrection', Part 1, Funeral Rites, associated image of phoenix (*A Drink of Spring*).

- Odysseus - 'Esparto Man' (*Telling the Bees*).
- Hymen - 'Orpheus' (*Dolmen Hill*).
- Jason - 'Orpheus' (*Dolmen Hill*).
- Maenads - 'Orpheus' (*Dolmen Hill*).
- Aristaeus - 'Orpheus' (*Dolmen Hill*).

Thus, the world of Greek and Roman myth has served me well; it has occupied my mind alongside the 'mythos' of Celtic Legend. In Irish poetry with the notable exceptions of Yeats, Clarke, Kinsella and Muldoon not that many well-known Irish poets have used a 'native' mythology. In Greece, on the other hand, poets as diverse as Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis and Gatsos have drawn freely on a 'native' mythology for their work.

