The Shaping of Yeats' *The Death of Cuchulain*

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"... Too much excitement at finishing my play [*The Death of Cuchulain*] and reading it out...,"[1] W. B. Yeats wrote, in a letter addressed to Edith Shakleton Heald on New Year's Day, 1939, twenty-six days before his death. He also mentioned that it was "the most moving" he had "written for some years."[2] These remarks reveal his joy not only for completing the plays of the Cuchulain cycle but also for the unexpected result. In the same letter, he appropriated the word "strange" to this play and valued it as "something new". A corrected version of *A Vision* had already been issued in 1937, in which all the metaphors for his poetry were systematized. Thus having stabilized the ground on which he stood, Yeats amalgamated his major themes in *The Death of Cuchulain*. Its style and structure may have been "strange" and "something new" but these words reveal Yeats' confidence and pride toward a work which reflected the effort of a life time.

In the preface to the first edition of the collection of his plays, he specifies that his plays are meant for "hearers" and "readers".[3] Although this preface is dated 1934, it would also apply to *The Death of Cuchulain*. He would leave it "strange" rather than sacrifice it to an audience of the theatre incapable of hearing and reading the voices of the mind.

This play is constructed on such an adamantine attitude. At the opening, there is a prologue where the Old Man addresses the audience as a direct mouthpiece of Yeats. He specifies the type of audience he requires. Educated or not educated, rich or poor, the audience must be the kind who "have libraries of their own".[4]

Furthermore, "they must know the old epics and Mr. Yeats' plays about them" (pp. 693–694). Experiences in the theatre had made the poet Yeats limit his audience not only in quality as mentioned but in number also: "not . . . more in number than those who listened to the first performance of Milton's *Comus*" (p. 693) which numbered less than a hundred. He warns his audience in this way of its strangeness because of its newness. He was well aware by this time that his intentions for the theatre could not be accepted by the very people for whom he had devoted his theatrical activities. Instead of ceasing to write, he turned to exerting all his energies to scripting all he had to say and demonstrate. It seemed that he was now given the license to do whatever he wished having rid himself of the duty of catering to the general public. He was determined to select his own audience to enable himself to exhaust his self-probings in the figure of the dying Cuchulain. His fervour for demonstrating a national hero to the people of Ireland had not dwindled but Cuchulain remained essentially a hero of Yeats' private leanings. Yeats would have his theatre occupied by a few who understands than have it occupied and polluted by "people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches" (p. 694). His stance was firm.

The Old Man says he will teach "Homer's music" to the musicians picked up from the streets. This must be interpreted widely from the point of view of various artistic devices adapted. The Old Man is presumed to be in disagreement with realism, the then fashion of the theatre. "I spit three times. I spit upon the dancers painted by Degas" (p 694). He has been selected to produce this play because, he says, he is out of fashion and because he is like "the antiquated romantic stuff the thing [the play] is made of" (p. 693). The audience is supposed to be taken back to the ancient theatres where mythological personages occupied the stage. The "old epics" tell the tale of universal man, Homer's tale, which can be told only by poetic diction, "Homer's music." Yeats quotes Blake

who says, "all art is a labour to bring again the Golden Age, and all culture is certainly a labour to bring again the simplicity of the first ages."[5] Yeats felt that Ireland is still receptive to such art. Ireland is yet "a young country," he says,

> and still care, I think, for the high thoughts and high feelings of poetry, if in a somewhat uncultivated fashion. We [the Irish] love the dramatic side of events and have too much imagination to think plays which advertise "a real locomotive engine" or "a real fire engine" as the chief attraction to be a better form of drama than the heroic passions and noble diction of the great ages of the theatre.[6]

He found in the old Celtic sagas, the subjects and themes he so valued and thought that the Irish people had the capacity to appreciate those values. The ultimate reason for the Old Man's eagerness to teach the wayfarers "Homer's music", then, is that it sings of personages of great art who are "metaphors in that divine argument which is carried on from age to age, and perhaps from world to world, about the ultimate truth of existence."[7]

When the Old Man spits on the dancers painted by Degas, he is condemning the over-crowded stage of the realistic theatre. Yeats always wanted his audience to be guided to a spiritual richness by encouraging them to use their imagination. Thus he tried to establish a dramatic method which could enhance this. He discarded decorative words for the simple and the vivid. He discarded all "needless movement"[8] for the purpose of "stilling and slowing which turns the imagination in upon itself."[9] Music that only taps and blows the simple notes of the wind and the reeds as if to conjure up the subterranean elements: "Homer's music". A dance danced by a tragi-comic dancer who dances love and loathing at the same time work magic on those around luring them to join the spiral movements into a trance in depth where all opposites meet: Homer's dance. When words fail dance and music take over because rather than mar the workings of the imagination by the use of arbitrary

words, such expressive methods that come directly from the depth do a far better job. The Old Man says cynically, "when there are no words there is less to spoil" (p. 694). His somewhat arrogant preferences on certain theatrical conditions are dramatic creeds which Yeats acquired and established through his stormy experiences in the theatre.

As a part of a dramatic device to create "stilling and slowing" and as a part of a device to sing of "Homer's music," Yeats stresses the necessity of a bare stage. Although Yeats constantly used this device in other plays, in *The Death of Cuchulain*, he reiterates it at every change of scene, so vital is this condition in producing the right effect. If ever there were a need of a bare stage to play up the "high feelings of poetry", it indeed was this last of the series of the Cuchulain cycle. A bare stage will allow imagination complete freedom and give life to the poetry of the spoken word, the music and the dance. Yeats naturally adapted the bareness of the Noh stage as part and parcel of that theatre.[10] With the Japanese artists, there has never been a question as to the bareness of their stage. It was always simply a divine area for dancing, conventionalized and formalized; whereas Yeats has never specified its structure, for his notion of a bare stage is nothing but to rid the irrelevant which mars the imagination.

The Old Man's address to the audience sums up Yeats' ideas on drama, and at the same time prepares us for what is to come. After the Old Man's cynical condemnation of Degas' dancers, there is darkness and the curtain falls; then there is music and the curtain rises and the play proper begins.

The play's structure is puzzling. There is an outer structure which conveniences Cuchulain's encounter with various women of his past. The inner structure follows Cuchulain's different stages before his death.

In the first half of the outer structure, there are two sections in parallel structure where Cuchulain confronts characters who were

closest to him. In the first section, Eithne, his mistress, is hypnotized by Morrigu, goddess of war and death, and urges him to go to war, where he will receive fatal wounds. Counter-attacking Morrigu, Emer, Cuchulain's wife, places a letter in Eithne's hand by magic which reads that he must not go. Whatever way the women pull, he is determined to go. Cuchulain thinks that Eithne has tired of him because she bids him to go and fight. He generously tells her to find another young man. Here she senses that the once violent warrior has become milder which is a sign of his nearing death. She laments greatly because she feels she cannot do anything but to let him go to war, accepting what is to come. During their confrontation, often times, episodes of the past are recalled (episodes included in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* or *On Baile's Strand*), especially of how goddesses and women vied to lure him by their magic power into light or darkness. Eithne herself, Emer, Maeve and Morrigu.

At the opening of the next section after a blackout and sound of pipe and drum, we can presume that Cuchulain went to war and has received mortal wounds because we see him trying to tie himself to a stone to be able to die erect as a hero should. Aoife enters to take her revenge on him. At first she helps him to tie himself. Cuchulain recognizes her to be the woman he met at the well (*At the Hawk's Well*), the woman of Sidhe whom he fought against and loved, the woman who begot his son, and the woman who taught that very son to kill his father for the hatred she bore him. Cuchulain magnanimously tells her how valiantly their son had fought him, how it was too late when he knew that it was his son that he had killed (*On Baile's Strand*). Aoife has come to take revenge but the violent hatred she bore him has faded. She has white hair now. Cuchulain is too calm and admits that she has the right to kill him. However, they are interrupted by a Blind Man who has come in search of the hero's head for a reward of twelve pennies. He reminds Cuchulain that he "stood between a Fool and

the sea at Baile's Strand" (p. 701). As the Blind Man's fingers touch his neck Cuchulain sees a soft feathery shape floating up which he recognizes as the shape he is to take after death. His death is at hand when he murmurs "I say it [the feathery shape] is about to sing" (p. 703).

There is a break similar to the one after the prologue followed by the latter half of the play which is constructed of a tableau and a dance. In the tableau, Morrigu holds the head of Cuchulain and explains that the six heads that surround her (in the form of parallelograms) are those of the warriors who gave six mortal wounds to Cuchulain. Then, she declares that she has also arranged the dance. Emer enters and dances around the six heads as if in rage. She then is about to pay homage to Cuchulain's head when she stops to listen to a faint cry of a bird. The stage darkens into a moment of stillness and silence.

There is a sudden burst of music, a kind of noisy tune played at modern fairs. Three musicians dressed in ragged modern clothes appear, one to sing and the others to play the pipe and drum. The song is about what the harlot sang to the beggar-man. The harlot is a personification of Ireland. Conall and Cuchulain, heroes of old were physically superb but there are also such men living today and the harlot adores these men and loathes them at the same time. These heroes of today also devote themselves to something they adore and loathe at once. Cuchulain was too such a man; Pearse and Connally were so and fell at the Post Office. The song ends and music is heard to close the play.

Throughout the play, the diction is controlled, simple, direct and often highly poetic, but it often fails to convey meaning clearly at crucial moments. At such times Yeats taxes the audience too much. Simplicity and directness applied for the purpose of austerity, concentration and subtle implication have been practiced to such an extent in this play that they give a contrary effect of complexity. A work of art may talk in riddles but at least obvious answers must

be discernible without too much effort. It should be so especially for a performance where directness of appeal is of vital necessity. Yeats has warned the audience to preside with the knowledge of the old Celtic saga and his plays of Cuchulain, but what he meant was to come with an understanding of his private philosophy embodied in those plays. Yeats has coined very many different rites and occults of different periods and cultures and arranged them in such a way as to suit his vision of life. Excessive detailing of his vision has produced ambiguity rather than clarity to his Cuchulain plays. But Yeats' tale of Cuchulain is precisely the tale of the implicate system of his vision. Therefore what actually shapes the play is the telling of the tale of this system. This system then constitutes the inner structure, the trunk to the branches and the leaves, so to say.

Two actions can be accounted for in this inner structure. One is based on Yeats' idea of the Great Wheel of the Lunar system which covers six stages or phases, and the other is based on the action of opposite forces pulling at each other also contained in the movement of the Great Wheel.

The six stages which Cuchulain follows until his consummation is equivalent to phases 23 to 28 in the moon's cyclical action of the Great Wheel. These states exist in what Yeats calls the six stages "between lives". In phase 23, we see the first sign of death where there is the breaking of strength and a recognition of moral life, and in the last phase the soul is ready to accept supersensual objectivity. These six stages do not necessarily parallel the sequential order of the outer structure.

The first stage shows the hero preparing himself. "You have told me nothing. I am already armed," "I am for the fight" (pp. 695–696). Cuchulain does not have to be persuaded to take arms by Morrigu through the mouth of Eithne, nor would he listen to Emer stopping him. He now acts independently and is able to look at things in their real state rather than in their imaginative relations. In the second stage, the spirit dwells over events that moved it most

in life, and in reliving them, the emotions of pain and joy once felt become less intense and a state of detachment arises. "I knew your name,/ Aoife, the mother of my son" (p. 699). He has lost the intense passion of love and hatred he felt for Aoife in his youth and is able to say this in cool detachment. He tells her how valiantly his son had confronted him in battle, and the pain he felt at having killed his own son can now be reminisced objectively. In the thrid stage, Cuchulain undergoes a shifting. This is to acquire an understanding for a capacity which one did not possess in life time. He must rid himself of moral arrogance to accept some social order, some condition of life, and he must eliminate all that is personal from belief to purify his own intellect to suffer persecution.[11] When Aoife is recounting so vividly their love-hate relationship in the past, Cuchulain cannot share the excitement. He feels that a change is taking place within him. He murmurs that he cannot understand the situation but Aoife sees and immediately supplies him with an answer: "Because about to die" (p. 701). The shifting has certainly taken place when Cuchulain recognizes the Blind Man's personality: "I think that you know everything, Blind Man./ My mother and my nurse said that the blind know everything" (p. 702). In the fourth stage, the spirit is freed of its prejudices and obsessive concern with the past. It breaks away from all complexity, and being purified it now only has to wait for revelation. Cuchulain behaves innocently and condescendingly to the Blind Man, and is able to talk impersonally of his own head being at stake for twelve pennies: "Twelve pennies! What better reason for killing a man?" (p. 702). He even encourages the Blind Man: "You have a knife, but have you sharpened it?" (p. 702).

The fifth stage shows Cuchulain watching his own re-shaping:

> There floats out there
> The shape that I shall take when I am dead,
> My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape,

And is not that a strange shape for the soul
Of a great fighting-man? (p. 702)

This transformation into a bird is the spirit's first seeking to imitate the Ideal Form. Then as the Blind Man is ready to kill, Cuchulain blissfully declares: "I say it [the feathery shape] is about to sing" (p. 703). The bird in the act of singing shows the spirit in touch with the Anima Mundi. There is yet another and last stage. A test is necessary before the spirit sets out to be reincarnated. The act of complete acceptance and acknowledgement of past existence must be tested for there is a temptation of denying it for lassitude and fear. Vendler says that the six heads presented by Morrigu in the tableau is testing Cuchulain to accept what he was and what he has undergone in the past.[12]

Then there is the final triumph of life in death. Morrigu brings death to Cuchulain but she also helps his reincarnation by arranging a dance. Emer is made to dance. She becomes the instrument of creation. She dances and becomes her own Muse because the dance in action is the act of creating. As goddess of death and life, Morrigu presides over this magic ritual of the tableau and the dance, the ritual of death and resurrection. When Emer raises Cuchulain's head high above the others, she has given a symbolical gesture of his spirit's final meeting with the Anima Mundi. This is the moment of sublimity in complete objectivity. She stops dancing as she hears "a few faint bird notes" (p. 704). Cuchulain is reincarnated. Thus is the action of the six stages "between lives" that constitutes the basic structure of the play.

All of the plays in this group, along with *The Death of Cuchulain,* have mythological subject matter for the obvious reason that Yeats believed that the age of myth was a subjective age and also that at such a time natural and supernatural were closer together; thus, the meeting of the two orders, necessary for completion of being, was an immediate possibility. *The Death of Cuchulain* marks the end of the age of myth; as such,

the play provides a convenient bridge between the subjective and the objective tragedies.[13]

The other action is the action of the opposites which furthers the play by counterbalance and which creates dramatic irony. The action of opposites is not just a dramatic device but being an important part of the system of the Great Wheel, it is a theme as well, as was the previous action of the six stages. Yeats' idea of the law of antinomy is clarified mostly in his consideration of the Will and the Mask, and Creative Mind and Body of Fate. What keeps the Great Wheel turning is the fact that man always seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition. "To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness."[14] This law sets life, thought and experience moving. As theme, it appears in this play as Cuchulain's nearing the state of objectivity. A hero constantly desires participation in the fulfilment of the Unity of Being, but he is fated to failure by the fact that he is fragmented in antinomy of subject and object. But as he nears death in old age he reaches a state of passivity where he is able to subject himself to sublime objectivity.

As a device for dramatic structure, this law of opposites gives occasion for parallel structure, contrast and balance. The two sections, one of Eithne and the other of Aoife, are similar in structure and balance each other. They both begin with a lyrical and serious tone, then is interrupted by a comic character and ends in a heightened tone of poetic frenzy.

The comic element in both sections makes for a sharp contrast with the lyricism creating dramatic irony. In the scene with Eithne, the servant can only be singled out by his very short but pert remark "What if I make her swallow poppy-juice?" (p. 698). It seems that these words were ordered by some obscure fantasy, echoing very much the Fool who appeared in *On Baile's Strand* as Cuchulain's shadow symbolizing his intuitive intelligence. His opposite exists in the Blind Man who definitely reflects that one who

appeared in the same play as Cuchulain's other shadow symbolizing his practical reason. Here, in this section, the Fool-servant, in contrast to the high poetic tone, creates for a moment an absurdity in oblivion foreshadowing the aimless reverie that Cuchulain is to experience before consummation. In the scene with Aoife, the Blind Man is given more chance to display his comic absurdity than the Fool-servant. He, as in *On Baile's Strand,* is spiritually blind but has practical intelligence: "How could I have got twelve pennies for your head/ If I had not good sense?" (p. 712). This "good sense" makes him the ideal thief who steals Cuchulain's head and carries it off in a bag which he uses to throw in scraps of stolen food. As he enters abruptly at the height of a scene of ecstasy, the contrast is sharp and the dramatic irony severe.

Contrast and balance are established between Morrigu's tableau and Emer's dance. Morrigu is transfixed, Emer moves in variegated rhythms; Morrigu chants death of Cuchulain and the six warriors, Emer is mute but is expressibe by guesture—she dances for reincarnation.

A strange but striking contrast is established between the main body of the play which lures us to mythic reverie and the epilogue which suddenly throws us back into the down-town music-hall atmosphere.

Women and goddesses are counterbalanced. Strangely, Morrigu is the goddess of death, but at the same time of both death and incarnation, the two opposites, for she brings death to Cuchulain through Eithne but she also brings life by commanding Emer to dance the dance of reincarnation. Aoife, the valiant woman of Sidhe, begot Cuchulain's son betwixt love and hate, the two opposite passions that become the energy for progeniture and creation. Aoife, later symbolizing hatred, becomes the "woman lost", whereas Emer, symbolizing love and the womb, becomes the "woman won".[15] Cuchulain is related to both these women and they stand for the two opposites of the hero's inner self.

The Death of Cuchulain is a product of a poet and not of a dramatist. The nature of the outer structure is evidence to that fact. Most probably, a dramatist would play up the six stages of Cuchulain's "between lives" and make it the basis of a clear dramatic development. The application of the law of antinomy is effectively manipulated but the ideas behind it are too particular even for a well versed spectator.

This play is the summary of the poet's life-work and if it lacks lucidity and unity, it is because Yeats seemed too intent on saying all. Nathan says, "It is almost as if, in trying too much, Yeats vitiated that effect of concentration.... [He was] attempting to crowd too much into the form."[16] This was not only because Yeats felt his days ending but because in old age, he felt his poetic urge increasing.

> What shall I do with this absurdity—
> O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
> Decrepit age that has been tied to me
> As to a dog's tail?
> Never had I more
> Excited, passionate, fantastical
> Imagination....[17]

Lynch, in analyzing Yeats' later period, says, "the mind's excitement has begun to threaten its integrity."[18] Every word, every line and even the stage-direction were directed to some such meaning of his private philosophy and often these were merely thrown in unrelated to the context of the play.

He tried to include all, so that the play appeared to look many layered and interlocking. The tale of Cuchulain is the tale of the Irish Revolutionary hero; it is also Yeats' idea of man's life and his fate; it is the tale of the poet's creativity; it is the tale of the history of world culture. And in the end it is the tale of Yeats' own selfmaking.

Believing that the self was the sole source of reality, Yeats

started at the "rag-and-bone shop of [his] heart"[19] to connect it in the end to the motives of tragedy. Observing his inner self, creating poetry, and remaking himself were one and the same thing. He was the artifice of his own art. The tale of Cuchulain is then essentially the tragedy of the self who suffers from "his irremediable defeat" but who can also rejoice at "his capacity to rise above defeat to a 'reverie' in which individual suffering is contemplated under the aspect of spiritual reality, the anima mundi."[20]

In the same letter to Ethel Mannin quoted previously, Yeats writes of the play, "there must be no sign of it [private philosophy]; all must be like an old faery tale".[21] But it could not be so. Yeats took the events from Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and rearranged and revised them to suit his philosophy. In *The Death of Cuchulain,* the supposed tale of the hero's death is even more submerged under the load of massive private utterances.

The general comment on a lyric approach to drama is such:

> Personal utterance is, of course, rarely successful in the theatre, being more conducive to the one-to-one communication in solitude of lyric poetry. Effective drama, moreover, must be imbued with a feeling for the flesh-and-blood realities of life in order that it may evoke responses from a heterogeneous audience on a primary human level.[22]

Yeats had a different idea:

> Yet when we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears, and there is much lyric feeling, and at times a lyric measure will be wrought into the dialogue, a flowing measure that had well befitted music, or that more lumbering one of that sonnet.[23]

As Yeats points out, lyric poetry has been proved to be a vital ingredient of a play of superb quality. However, lyricism can add to the excellency of a play only after a sound dramatic basis has been estabished. Yeats in *The Death of Cuchulain* was unable to

establish this dramatic basis adequately beforehand.

However, was it his intention to create a drama of a conventional kind? To him, what mattered was to be true to himself fettered by no convention. The result was "something new". T. S. Eliot praises the "integrity of his passion for his art and his craft."[24] Webb says that Yeats "pursued his goal through the practice of poetry in the spirit of a religious vocation, a complete dedication of his personal powers to the sacred calling through his work."[25] Indeed his artistic integrity makes Yeats the most formidable artist, an artist of self-making in the act of creating. This attitude makes him the Protean shape-changer. When he was creating *The Death of Cuchulain*, as we may see from the Old Man in the prologue, Yeats was determined to create a play as his passion and imagination led him. Even if it is not drama, it claims to be a work of art. It is a performance art, having amalgamated the instruments and crafts of the theatre to produce the desired effect—deeply, a theatre of the self.

If it is not convincing, if it is complex and ambiguous, it is so because Yeats, in his "decrepit age", could not control his "Excited, passionate, fantastical/ Imagination."[26]

NOTES

1) W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 921.
2) Ibid., p. 922.
3) W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. v.
4) W. B. Yeats, "The Death of Cuchulain" (1939), *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, p. 694. Henceforth all quotations from "The Death of Cuchulain" are from this edition, and the reference will appear in the text.
5) W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 167.
6) W. B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose 1*, ed. John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 193.

7) Ibid., p. 325.
8) *Essays and Introductions*, p. 528.
9) Ibid., p. 529.
10) Leonard E. Nathan says that Yeats had no time before his death for revisions to include the use of masks. Leonard E. Nathan, *The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 196.
11) W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 172–174.
12) Helen H. Vendler, *Yeats' "Vision" and the Later Plays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 75–85.
13) Leonard E. Nathan, p. 196.
14) A. Norman Jeffares and A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (1975), p. 691. Quoted, Yeats' letter to Ethel Mannin, 20th October 1938.
15) David Lynch, *Yeats: The Poetics of the Self* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 1–91.
16) Leonard E. Nathan, p. 201.
17) W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 105. From "The Tower".
18) David Lynch, p. 11.
19) *Selected Poetry*, p. 202. From "The Circus Animal's Desertion".
20) Leonard E. Nathan, pp. 156–157.
21) Jeffares and Knowland, p. 691. Yeats' letter quoted.
22) James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 281.
23) *Essays and Introductions*, p. 240.
24) T. S. Eliot, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats" *The Permanence of Yeats: Selected Criticism*, eds. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 331.
25) Eugene Webb, *The Dark Dove* (London: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 106.
26) Refer to footnote 17.