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Dele Layiwola

"That Ancient Sect": W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a National Theater

The Irish historian J. J. Lee once observed, with surgical precision, that "Irish history stokes the sense of grievance that features so prominently in the Irish psyche, just as English history stokes the sense of superiority towards foreigners that still flavours the rhetoric of a Thatcher or a Portillo, however much historical circumstances have changed since the psyches were shaped in the first place."[1] As Lee suggests, a meaningful study of national psyches is not possible without contextualization and comparison. In dealing with the canon of postcolonial literatures or with postcolonial states, we must be prepared to contextualize sensibilities so as to help us to understand what goes on within political and social institutions as they annex the production, assimilation, and exchange of knowledge.

To thus contextualize W. B. Yeats's idea of a national theater, I hope first to identify the three main critical approaches to selected works of W. B. Yeats. More importantly, and second, colonialism, the loss of an indigenous language, and the existence of a mainstream tradition of English literature triggered, by way of reaction or rivalry, a new body of Anglo-Irish literature and culture that invokes the history, mythology, legends and anecdotes of the Irish past, and compels the pursuit of a new literary and linguistic style for its adequate and legitimate expression. This has been responsible for the emergence from the relatively small population of the island of Ireland of four Nobel laureates for literature—Yeats, Shaw, Beckett, Heaney—and a number of outstanding literary figures in less than a century. Third, in his heroic plays of the Cuchulain cycle, this sheer creative vigor has led Yeats to propose a unique way of viewing and quantifying history. In Yeats's writing, history tends to recur in cycles and spheres rather than as an empirical sequence of dates. In some ways, this recalls Aristotle's preference of the poet to the historian because, in his view, the former gives hope by projecting the possibilities of what might be, while the latter

1. Joseph Lee, "The Irish Psyche: An Historical Perspective," *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 15, 2–3 (1994), 247. An extended version of this essay was first delivered at a faculty seminar, May 1, 1996, at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland. I owe immense gratitude to Mr. David Martin and Professor Robert Welch.

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busies himself, principally, with the events of the past. Finally, there is a justification, given the three previous points, for reinterpreting history as a culture-specific phenomenon in the way that Yeats has done.

What need have we to excavate an Irish psyche in Yeats's plays of the Cuchulain cycle? The answer is straightforward: it is an attempt to contextualize one instance of efflorescent genius within the corpus of a unique culture. Often, when people feel that their group or cultural identity is under strain or pressure, they tend to "invoke history" in any of its forms—in Ireland's instance as legend, folklore, mythology, and mnemonic anecdotes that constitute a part of their history as they know it. A cardinal loss of identity in this case is the loss of an indigenous language. With this in mind, it is clear that the effort to discover a voice, a poetry, a language, an art, and consequently an identity has given phenomenal boost to the corpus of Anglo-Irish literature in the twentieth century. Further, colonial power has provided the challenge for Anglo-Irish literature to rediscover and transcend its own history in a new language and a new creativity. In this respect, creativity is crucial to the development of an authentic voice, and this is absolutely necessary for self-esteem and overall spiritual development.[2] As in much of the postcolonial world, English or the dominant language fuses with an indigenous sensibility to create a new language of imaginative expression. In his psychological discussion of Irish national identity, Ciarán Benson brings an interesting perspective to the matter by arguing, after semioticians like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, that art in fact constitutes a form of language, a closed system that not only reflects reality but also makes new meanings out of it.[3] Even more relevant is the fact that, being a creative endeavor, art invents new images and recreates old ones. In the process of invention, it may create new identities or subvert existing ones.

Seamus Deane and Edward Said have asserted unequivocally in two well-known studies that, in his reaction to colonialism, Yeats succeeds in inventing a new Ireland and a new culture, yet his poetic imagination subverts a true vision of decolonization.[4] In his 1988 Field Day pamphlet on Yeats and decolonization, Said proposes that

2. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

3. Ciarán Benson, "A Psychological Perspective on Art and National Identity," *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 15, 2–3 (1994), 321–22. See: Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers, Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

4. See Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

> With the new territoriality there comes 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 origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths and religions, these too are enabled by the land. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical re-development of the native language. Yeats is especially interesting here. He shares with Caribbean and some African writers the predicament of a common language with the colonial overlord, and of course he belongs in many important ways to the Protestant Ascendency whose Irish loyalties, to put it mildly, were confused. . . . For Yeats the overlappings he knew existed between his Irish nationalism and the English cultural heritage that both dominated and empowered him as a writer was bound to cause an overheated tension, and it is the pressure of this urgently political and secular tension that one may speculate caused him to try to resolve it on a "higher," that is, non-political level.[5]

Three years earlier, Seamus Deane voiced the same sentiments, saying that Yeats's poetic and occult representation of reality did not match Ireland's historical reality.

The views of these two critics are as impressive as they are overstated. They continue a certain tradition of polemic that Yeats's writings have always evoked. Lacking a predilection for class analysis, Yeats always believed in the peasantry and the country as projections of the most authentic in society. Likewise, he believes that truth in art and in folklife lies in the untainted narration and dialect of the country folk as well as the uncorrupted landscapes of the country itself. Richard Loftus describes this preoccupation as naive: Yeats's attempts to sell a peasant culture to the middle classes of his day is stilted and unconvincing.[6] In like manner, Brian Farrington's class analysis of Yeats's works agrees with Loftus: Yeats merely romanticizes the peasants rather than giving them a political voice.[7] Such ideological or political criticism of Yeats's works constitutes one form of critical sensibility. Other critics take on Yeats over what they consider to be his failure of craft. Others steer the middle course and identify the artistic proclivity of the Anglo-Irish with a sense of their unease with the real, modernizing world.

5. Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, Field Day Pamphlet 15 (Derry: Field Day, 1988), 13.

6. See Richard Loftus, *Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

7. See Brian Farrington, *Malachi Stilt-Jack: A Study of W. B. Yeats and His Work* (London: Connolly Publications, 1965).

Yeats's heroic plays, including those of the Cuchulain cycle, always portray complex human beings in heroic roles battling to resolve historical issues larger than the individual, overwhelming to the community, about which the Yeatsian hero has to make an objective or a subjective choice. Given the sheer stature and vision of Yeats's heroes, however, it is always necessary for them to resolve these objective situations by seeking recourse to the idealist nature of their personalities. It is often difficult to state categorically to what extent the vision of Yeats's hero or heroine tallies with those of his or her nation, on the one hand, and those of the author or narrator on the other. Consequently, the resolution or personal conflict may strain objectivity in its attempts to convince the reader or audience. This mode of representation may have resulted from Yeats's attempt to grapple with reality at multiple levels and may be responsible for the seeming confusion of his character portraits. One is bound to suspect that these are the problems to which Eric Bentley refers when he gently complained that Yeats's theater does not always submit itself to the rigor and discipline of the stage.[8] The views of these critics of the theater—and they have many followers—are difficult to fault, for Yeats grapples with plot and character development at various complex levels, and his vision of characterization is always poetic and mythic rather than empirical or naturalistic, in contrast with the more realistic character portraits drawn by his countryman, G. B. Shaw.

There exists a third, rather more balanced, perception of the dilemma characteristic of Yeats's dramaturgy, and this view contends that the ambivalence of Yeats's art is explained by a certain outlook discernible in Irish consciousness and folklore. For instance, in his introduction to Yeats's *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, Robert Welch contextualizes Yeats's sensibilities thus:

> In his boyhood Yeats, like many others of his class throughout Ireland, spent a great deal of time wandering about the countryside—the names are well known, Rosses Point, Ballisodaire, Ben Bulben, Knocknarea—talking to the country people, listening to their stories. Douglas Hyde was finding out about the language in Co. Roscommon, in a similar way; in Co. Donegal Joyce Cary, on his summer holidays near Quigly's point, was listening to fierce tales of agrarian outrage; and Edith Sommerville in Cork was taking in the linguistic energy and inventiveness of Castletownshend. For a variety of reasons, including political ones, the Anglo-Irish were intrigued by the supernatural, fairies and afterlife. Up to a point this interest sprang from a curiosity about the imaginative life of a subject class growing less disadvantaged with increasing modernisation; but tales of ghosts, hauntings and fairies provided the Anglo-Irish with an imagery that reflected their own sense of insecurity and baffled unease.[9]

8. See T. R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower* (London: Methuen, 1965).

9. Robert Welch, Introduction, W. B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. Robert Welch (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. xix–xx.

The points made here are evidenced in greater detail in Yeats's *Autobiographies* (1926), and it is well worth seeing them, as Welch does, in the context of the intellectual temper of the time. Welch also stresses the point that it is important to remember that Yeats consciously sets out to create an imaginative process that actualises forms beyond the categories of space, time and personality, and this is James Flannery's contention in *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (1976) as well.[10]

Accusing Yeats of insufficiently addressing the colonial issue, Declan Kiberd writes that Yeats, among other Irish writers, internalized the Irish landscape; and turned to the geography of the land and painted it as a substitutive tendency for patriotism. As Kiberd has observed, this tendency to turn to geography and the landscape is a form of mental escapism that has its roots in the imagination of Gaelic poets:

> The Gaelic poets usually imagined their monarch wedded to the land, and was emblematized by a beautiful woman: if she was happy and fertile, his rule was righteous, but if she grew sad and sorrowful, that must have been because of some unworthiness in the ruler. The artist was the fittest interpreter of the state of this relationship.[11]

In *The Celtic Realms,* Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick have documented in detail the fascination of the early Celts with nature, with land divinities, with giving life to every phenomenon and mythifying them.[12] This sensibility, fairly common in African literature as well, often reveals that the sharp contrasts and demarcation of topographies in the landscapes become a preoccupation, even an obsession in the imagination of young, sensitive persons, and of the artist. This point comes out of Yeats's *Autobiographies* and is much underscored in his letters of 1887 written to Katherine Tynan describing Ben Bulben and Drumcliff to her:

> Have been making search for people to tell me fairy stories and found one or two. . . . It is a wonderfully beautiful day. The air is full of trembling light. The very feel of the familiar Sligo earth puts me in good spirits. I should like to live here always, not so much out of liking for the people as for the earth and the sky here, though I like the people too.[13]

10. See James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (London: Yale University Press, 1976).

11. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 18.

12. See Myles Dillon, Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* (New York: New American Library, 1967).

13. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 1, 1865–1895, ed. John Kelly, Eric Domville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 33; hereater cited parenthetically, thus: (*CL* I: 33).

Another letter written later that autumn reads:

> I went last Wednesday up Ben Bulben to see the place where Dermot died, a dark pool, fabulously deep and still haunted—1732 feet above sea line, open to all winds. . . . All peasants at the foot of the mountain know the legend, and know that Dermot still haunts the pool, and fear it. Every hill and stream is some way or other connected with the story. (*CL* I: 37)

In his imagination, Yeats constantly pieced together an ideal of a land or language that can only be retrieved by correlating material landscapes with perceived phenomena. This is partly responsible for his view of the land as inseparable from the peasants who work it, as Kathleen Raine pointed out in her introduction to the 1981 edition of Yeats's *The Celtic Twilight:*

> On everyday level supernatural events, "the little stitches that join this world or the other", are the experiences of the country-people themselves, for whom the earth is by no means the lifeless material object of scientific knowledge, but populous with lives of many kinds, visible and invisible, beautiful and terrible. A girl in a field close to her home finds herself "astray" out of normal time, in the faery world where a year is only a moment, or a moment a year.[14]

The outstanding example of such a "joining" is Yeats's ritual dramatization of the patriotic rising of 1798, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902),[15] in which Ireland is personified as a troubled old woman seeking help to recover her land.[16] In the play, the old woman typifies troubled Ireland and she takes time to recall the beauty of the land. The sanctity of both the matriarch and her land have been violated and she seeks self-sacrificing patriots to regain her inheritance. This is a historical fact transmuted into legend. The mythic imagination tends to invest events with meanings, creating and recasting forms and reinterpreting them through what is generally referred to as "popular memory." It describes categories in place of events and archetypes in place of historical personages.[17] In such overwhelming historical situations as Ireland's, the memory of collectivity is always steeped in the ironic and the fabulous. This is why the creative genius, the artist who assumes the elaboration of an epic, is always a deeply tragic imagination. Yeats himself pondered in "The Trembling of the Veil": "What por-

14. Kathleen Raine, Introduction, W. B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, ed. Kathleen Raine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1981), p. 10.

15. W. B. Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 214–35; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*VP* 214–35).

16. Richard Taylor, *A Reader's Guide to the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 34–35.

17. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 43.

tion in the world can the artist have, / Who has awakened from the common dream, / But dissipation and dispair."[18]

Yeats was hardly an ahistorical author and thinker, for there is none such; rather, his works show the degree to which a dispossessed culture might urge one who would be its guardian. Hence, it is unfair to isolate Yeats as outside concrete historical consciousness, as some critics have tended to do, and Yeats is not alone in peddling the peculiarities of folklore. Earlier, the Rumanian folklorist Constantin Brailoiu recorded an enchanting ballad in the village of Maramures. It had to do with a tragedy of love: a young suitor, just a few days before his marriage, had driven a mountain fairy—what Yeats would call a person of the *Sidhe*—to envy. The fairy caused the dashing suitor to fall from a cliff to his death. Shepherds found his body and carried it back to the village, whereupon the sullen bride, sighting her dead lover, intoned a funeral lament full of mythological allusions and rustic beauty.[19] In recording the variants of the story, Brailoiu was told that the event happened "long ago." It was timeless. On further enquiry however, Brailoiu found out that the event actually had occurred barely four decades earlier and that the unlucky heroine was still alive. Her version of the story recalled the tragic incident without a single reference to the mountain fairy. In like manner, Yeats romanticizes the country folk who had been overawed by their losses to a conquering power and the destabilizing effect of rapid modernization, and he followed their habits of creating archetypes and transmuting historical facts into legends.

Yeats had always held that the traditions of a colonial power could be matched if the subject nation first created a new culture and an integral imagination. This, for Yeats, is the unity of being and the unity of culture (*A* 359–60). Unity of being and of culture necessitated Yeats's fabrication of a system, or a theory, which could validate the idea and make the system a scientific one. A pupil or an initiate of two or three mystical and religious orders, Yeats also assimilated much of Western and Oriental philosophies. In his complex system coexist bits and pieces of astrology, tantrism, and magic—in short, a potpourri of ideas from Plato, Pythagoras, Blake, Mendel, Swedenborg, Boehme, Mme. Blavatsky, and Macgregor Mathers. It would not be too far from the truth to say that the mystical order Yeats planned for Lough Key failed largely because of the incomprehensibility of the newfangled philosophical system (*A* 304–5). It was difficult to articulate that system into a complete worldview. It amounted to a grand ambition, as Yeats himself proposed: "This philosophy will find its manual of devotion in all imaginative literature" (*A* 314).

18. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood and Youth and The Trembling of the Veil* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 340; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*A* 340).

19. Eliade, pp. 44–45.

Yeats's interest in religion, animism and magic was founded on a particular incident early in his life. Once, as a boy in Dublin, he visited the Royal Irish Academy where he found a pamphlet on Japanese art on a table. In it Yeats read of an animal painter so remarkable that the horses he had painted upon a temple wall had slipped down after dark and trampled a neighboring rice field. Someone who had arrived at the temple very early in the morning was startled by the shower of waterdrops all over the floor and around the walls. He had looked up and had seen painted horses still wet from the dew-covered fields but just then "trembling into stillness" (*A* 230–31). This paved the way for Yeats's interest in Japanese and other oriental art and philosophies. Yeats was also drawn to Macgregor Mathers who had copied many manuscripts on magical ceremonies and ritual doctrines in the British Museum as well as other Continental libraries, and who gave him early lessons in magical séances and initiated him, in June, 1887, into the hermetic Student's Society (*A* 227).

Yeats's works should be read in the context both of his mythologies and of his peculiar understanding of the land and of the peasantry, especially as these have been of some concern to Deane and Said. Yeats had tried to elaborate a numerical and historical system similar to that in astrology whereby a certain arrangement of numbers in relation to the movement of heavenly bodies are placed side-by-side with historical dates and periods and used to judge the state of human development, or of history and civilization. In the first figure of *A Vision* (1925), two cones charted with numbers dovetail and the symmetrical permutation of numbers on both cones and along their gyres correspond with particular historical periods from about 120 A.D. to about 1927 A.D. A proper reading of this chart indicates what general temper had influenced the lives of men at that historical period. The two spherical cones describe geometrical patterns as representative of the opposition and tension in nature, man and history. Movements between the narrowing or the widening edges of the gyres represent opposing forces in nature: concord and discord; objectivity and subjectivity; creative mind and will as opposed to mask and the body of fate. In other words, the world, history and the fate of man may be understood in terms of antithesis in life and nature.

The second figure of *A Vision* shows the symbol of wheel or cycle proves more complex because it overtly incorporates astrology and the phases of the moon without discarding the contrarieties in life and in nature as Yeats described them in *A Vision*'s first figure. The circular disc is divided into twenty-eight parts like the diurnal movement of the moon: the new moon being contrasted with the full moon; unity of being contrasts with passivity; breaking of strength contrasts with the discovery of strength; periods of intense creativity and historical change matched with those of twilight, freezing point, and tran-

sition. The balance in nature or history is compared with "a perfectly proportioned human body."[20] Complicated and confusing as the symbols may appear, they have their basis in a closed system formulated and understood by the adepts and mystagogues of some occult orders, who are probably the "Gate-Keepers" Yeats refers to here:

> There are, indeed, personifying spirits that we had best call but Gates and Gate-Keepers, because through their dramatic power they bring our souls to crisis, to mask and image, caring not a straw whether we be Juliet going to her wedding, or Cleopatra to her death; for in their eyes nothing has weight but passion. (*A* 330)

Yeats continued to rely for inspiration on ancient traditions that could lead him consistently from the point he reckoned to be the beginning of time. Such systems may be convoluted and closed, but they afforded him and the new Irish nation a new birth because, according to him, his country "has not been born" and Ireland's beginning will certainly be found in a historical link to and passage from a quasi-pagan past to a contemporary Christian age. The logical genre or mode that might convey that reality in the arts would be drama, for its origin derives from religion and ritual. Yeats, therefore, set out to actualize his plans on Lough Key where he would establish a mystical order with mysteries similar to those of ancient Eleusis and Samothrace. There would also be a philosophy and a ritual for that order. He hoped that invisible gates would open for the hierophants, as they did for Blake, Swedenborg, and Boehme. The order would have a manual of devotion synthesized from all imaginative literature, and would

> set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols. I did not think this philosophy would be altogether pagan, for it was plain that its symbols must be selected from all those things that had moved men most during many, mainly Christian centuries (*A* 337)

For Yeats, this represents the birth or reinvention of his home country. Even during his last days, he drew an Irish genealogy from ancient civilizations including the Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Jewish, and Buddhist. Such poems as "The Statues," "News for the Delphic Oracle," "A Bronze Head," or "Long-legged Fly" testify to this and nowhere more plainly than in "The Statues":

20. See W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1962). Peter Allt, Russell K. Alspach, "Notes on Yeats," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt, Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 823–25; *A Reader's Guide to the Plays*, pp. 7–16.

> When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
> What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
> What calculation, number, measurement, replied?
> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.[21]

Yeats's invention of a mythology and a "sect" helps us see his cycle of Cuchulain plays as the conscious pursuit of a new style in the theater and, consequently, a new identity. *On Baile's Strand; The Green Helmet; At the Hawks Well; The Only Jealousy of Emer;* and *The Death of Cuchulain* do not necessarily follow in thematic sequence, but they are a Pentateuch and relate conceptually. Yeats oscillates between the characters and preoccupations of these plays and links between the five as a complete whole and a symbolic system. In advocating the genius of Yeats's dramaturgy, Richard Taylor argues that Yeats was a symbolist committed to the metaphysical implications of the human condition rather than to the empirical aspects of human relationships. Taylor argues further that T. R. Henn and Eric Bentley,[22] who chide Yeats for flawed character and plot development, have a different dramatic model in mind. Yeats had set out to match the lyrical, chanted or incantatory effect of poetry with stage picture and stage graph, Taylor rightly classifies Yeats's drama as ritual drama:

> Ritual drama is distinguishable from other kinds of theatre in that it directs the attention of the audience towards the inevitability and representative meaning of the action rather than towards the inner conflict of tragedy or the reassertion of outward order after a comic inversion or intervention. Ritual drama is a direct presentation of inevitability, an affirmation or celebration of its necessity and rightness . . . where characterisation and action are limited in development so that attention may centre on the working out of an inescapable conclusion. . . . Rather than imitate established dramatic structures, Yeats looked for a new and non-narrative form.[23]

The five plays of Yeats's Cuchulain cycle represent an odyssey, a journey on a path of spiritual initiation. *On Baile's Strand* (1904)[24] is set on a strand, where land and sea meet. It dramatizes a situation where the torment of reason, as con-

21. *The Variorum Poems* (1966), p. 611.
22. See Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960).
23. Taylor, pp. 4–5.
24. W. B. Yeats, *On Baile's Strand* (1910) in *The Variorum Plays*, pp. 436–527.

ceived in Conchubar, summons the body of intuition, as seen in Cuchulain, to an "oath" of service, a path to initiation. There is an imposing chorus of vestals who keep the fire burning, as in religious ceremonies. Both for the purposes of stagecraft as well as for ritual conceptualization, the Fool and the Blindman, who know the secret of the story about to be enacted, wear masks and come to the stage through "the back door." We must not overlook the statement which opens the play when Yeats's Fool refers to the Blindman as cleverer than sighted men (*VP* 459). The same Blindman subsequently tells the Fool and the audience the secrets embedded in the play. Cuchulain's odyssey begins with the conquest, in a ritual battle, of his alter ego represented as his son. This dramatic irony comically reveals a hero trying hard to regain immortality as he declaims:

> For I would need a weightier argument
> Than one that marred me in copying.
> As I have that clean hawk out of the air
> That, as men say, begot this body of mine
> Upon a mortal woman. (*VP* 483, 485)

The religious ceremony that follows reveals that Conchubar, the king and spiritual head of the Ulster cycle, binds Cuchulain in an oath to go to battle against his own son. Because action in the play is ritualized, this battle is accomplished in a state of trance. The obvious political interpretation is that one gains a frontier at the cost of a dear possession and that the hero must always deny himself for the common good. The textual insinuation of witchcraft and enchantment is a deliberate dramatic contrivance in this context because a religious ritual is almost always concerned with the inevitable. Ritual here allows an easy resolution, by supernatural means, of a natural situation gone out of control. The return of the Blindman and the Fool, narrators of Yeats's story, is theatrically effective. These two serve as foil to Cuchulain and to Conchubar and juxtapose the profoundly tragic and the eminently ridiculous.

Though Yeats described *The Green Helmet* (1910)[25] as a heroic farce, it is actually a chivalric romance and not an epic quest, in the rest of the plays of the Cuchulain cycle. Though written six years after *On Baile's Strand*, Yeats meant it as an introduction to the former play and based it on the legendary *Fled Bricrenn*.[26] This play is preoccupied with the restoration of integrity as a sine qua non for national honor and heroism as well as for the evolution of a

25. W. B. Yeats, *The Green Helmet* (1910) in *The Variorum Plays*, pp. 429–55.

26. See Lady I. A. Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (London: John Murray, 1902); *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

national culture. Three warriors—Laegaire, Conall, and Cuchulain—are presented with a moral quest to purge greed and selfishness. The crown, here presented as the "green helmet," is the prize to be won by the courageous and the honorable. The details of the color scheme adopted in the play do not stand for any particular code; on the contrary, the matching of green, black, orange and dark purple are too sombre and too riotous to suit the glory of the occasion. While Yeats has a penchant for deep colors, he leaves no doubt that his play's project is to inscribe on the national psyche that morality and selfless service are the main criteria for leadership, and that the aspiring hero must pursue this with all vigor.

Apart from the domestic sentiments exhibited by wives and servants as to the most superior of the three leaders, the real point of *The Green Helmet* is to establish that the integrity of a new nation and that of its heroes is a paramount aspiration. Having demonstrated magnanimity, Cuchulain is acknowledged the winner of what appears to be a "grail cup" from which the three leaders now drink. The end of the play abolishes conflict between various factions and feelings. This reassures Conall, who had earlier expressed his disgust for the nation:

> Here neighbour wars on neighbour, and why there
> is no man knows,
> And if a man is lucky all wish his luck away,
> And take his good name from him between a day
> and a day. (*VP* 423)

The whole of Ireland, therefore, assembles again in a communion, and with one sense of cultural, heroic identity.

At the Hawk's Well (1917),[27] like *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939),[28] is an occult parable of initiation. All the players are either masked or have facial decorations like masks. The three musicians who are witnesses to the test about to take place have only to be decorated as if they wear masks but the actual questers—the Old Man and the youthful Cuchulain—wear masks. The young personage who arrives fifty years after the older man is an outward image for the younger soul of Cuchulain as he seeks to drink from the well of life. The hawk or keeper of the well, a figure of the *Sidhe*, is disguised as Aoife. That initiation rite miscarries because the neophyte allows himself to be distracted by selfish rather than selfless love. Being the victim of an old habit, he would possess Aoife rather than watch for the elusive flow of water from the mystic well. The Old Man, a more experienced quester, warns Cuchulain, the exuberant quester, against the shadowy mystagogue at the well:

27. W. B. Yeats, *At the Hawk's Well* (1917) in *The Variorum Plays*, pp. 398–419.
28. W. B. Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) in *The Variorum Plays*, pp. 1051–63.

The woman of the Sidhe herself,
The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow.
She is always flitting upon this mountain-side,
To allure or to destroy. When she has shown
Herself to the fierce women of the hills
Under that shape they offer sacrifice
And Arm for battle. There falls a curse
On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes;
So get you gone why you have that proud step
And confident voice, for not a man alive
Has so much luck that he can play with it.
Those that have long to live should fear her most,
The old are cursed already. That curse may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you will kill them
With your own hand. (*VP* 407–8)

Certainly, *At the Hawk's Well* belongs to an earlier stage in the Cuchulain saga at least conceptually, because Cuchulain appears younger and the filicide predicted here befalls him later in his life. The legend of *At the Hawk's Well* appears to be a synthesis of various sources. Yeats wrote the play at least four years after Ezra Pound introduced him to Noh theater, so the masks, the drum, gong, and zither are likely beneficiaries of that influence, as Noh music uses exactly the same set of instruments. Jeffares and Knowland,[29] among others, have suggested possible sources for the legend: one is the legend of Niall and his brothers wherein Niall copulates with the haggish guardian of the well; the other is William Morris's prose romance *The Well at the World's End.*

More important than the play's sources, however, is the fact that in it Yeats accomplishes the concept that he had outlined in "The Tragic Theatre,"[30] where he demonstrates that a new imagination should emerge in non-naturalist theater. In his new form of theater, dance, and images, rhythm, and color interact much more than characterization and dialogue. In this symbolist drama, the hero grows beyond a certain idea so that the audience identifies with him as representing a certain phase of humanity. This new style compels a new form of language and a new set of performance idioms. It is in this respect that Yeats's

29. A. N. Jeffares, A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 87–88.

30. W. B. Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre" in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 238–45.

admiration for the theater director and designer Gordon Craig, whom he met in 1902, is very significant, for Craig, consistently attacked realism and naturalism in the theatre and called for the use of masks and marionettes.[31]

Yeats's pursuit of style is thus consummated in *At the Hawk's Well.* A bare stage; straight abstract presentation of images evoked from the subconscious; stylized movement and costume; the use of incantatory verse—all these form the cornerstone of his stagecraft. This approach has long been the hallmark of folk and ritual theatre in Africa, Asia, and the Far East, and Yeats's use of it returns theater to its original model and closer to liturgy, to religion. Enacted as a communion that draws both actor and performance space together within a unity of being, such ritual theater emphasizes the centrality of a ritual hero who reflects the general aspiration of society. Though successful in *At the Hawk's Well,* Yeats's dramaturgy, however, can lead to flawed characterization and a faulty portraiture.

Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919)[32] seems to continue the spiritual quest and initiation presented in the previous two plays. Here, Cuchulain fragments into two selves as he goes into a stupor. The amorous relationships of his physical life are then paraded before him, as if to purge him of them. Like all hierophants, Cuchulain must renounce that which he loves most to give way for spiritual rebirth. This happens when Emer agrees to renounce her love for him, and only that conscious self-denial rouses Cuchulain from his stupor. The drama's action and motivations are often covert or cryptic, and its style is rather elliptic and communicates by metaphorical "jumps." Taylor gives a probable and convincing source for the play's story as the Noh play *Aoi no Ue.*[33] In the Noh play, Prince Genji's wife lay unconscious on her sick bed where she suffered the incarnated jealousy of Lady Rokujo, her husband's lover. Apart from this source, it is difficult to place the text of the play, and its abrupt ending gives it the least accessible structure of all Yeats's Cuchulain plays.

The Death of Cuchulain (1939) presents us with another landmark in Yeats's experimentation with ritual dramatization. The play is relived as a story by an ancient man—the Singer—whose concept of time and events is synecdochic and cyclical. He forgets his particular identity but relocates it in space as contemporaneous with those of Virgil and Homer. His voice is hijacked by that of the author, who then declares his preference for a drama that is privately enacted for a select few; that is, those with a certain preference for "epics," for symbolic rather than naturalistic drama:

31. See Gordon Craig, "The Artist of the Theatre" in *Directors on Directing: A Sourcebook of the Modern Theatre,* ed. Toby Cole, Helen Krich Chinoy (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1968).

32. W. B. Yeats, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919) in *The Variorum PLays,* pp. 528–75.

33. Taylor, pp. 86–87.

> I promise a dance. I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil. Emer must dance, there must be severed heads—severed heads for her to dance before. I had thought to have had those heads carved, but no, if the dancer can dance properly no wood-carving can look as well as a parallelogram of painted wood. (*VP* 1052)

At the end of *Death of Cuchulain,* the author again interrupts the voice of the Singer to drop historical and legendary hints. Here Yeats's consummate style raises art and events above history and interprets history in recurrent cyclical terms rather than in linear, empirical terms.

Given this ritualistic presentation, the main story of Cuchulain's death and its details are no longer so central to the play, as the overall experience of a ritual confrontation between Will and Fate as the fulfilment or realization of a historical cycle. In other words, it no longer matters whether Cuchulain is killed by Aoife or by the Blind Man. What does matter is that an inevitable ritual, an historical exigency, is about to commence whose end establishes a tradition, a heritage. This is why, in spite of the fact that his wife, Emer, counsels against going to war with the witch Calatin and her children, Cuchulain insists against purely rational reasons and goes to war to earn a deserved and glorious fate. Linear historicity or bland empiricism classify Cuchulain's decision as irrational, but the cultural context dictates otherwise.[34]

Likewise, when Cuchulain confronts Eithne Inguba, who was sent to seduce him and prevent his fatal encounter, he rationalizes Eithne's mistake and prefers to confront his fate. Ritual dance or drama is here presented as an urge toward the inevitable in which illusion displaces reality; and myth, religion, and faith displace history and empirical reasoning. In dismissing his own undoing, Cuchulain explains that every element under the sun is susceptible to change, and he absolves Eithne of her unwitting treachery:

> You thought that if you changed I'd kill you for it,
> when everything sublunary must change,
> And if I have not changed that goes to prove
> That I am monstrous. (*VP* 1055)

This reveals that, in such a dramatized ritual, the Yeatsian hero realizes his mission and must feel compelled to confront it.

In Yeats's earlier play of initiation, *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain ritually drank from the pool of life-giving water; here, at the battle presaging his death, he stoops again to drink from a pool of water. On both occasions, Aoife, by whom he bore a son, is present to make or mar him, but this last time as a death-

34. Dele Layiwola, "The Philosophy of Wole Soyinka's Art," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, X, 2 (Spring, 1996), 20–30.

dealing requiter. Aoife would help him drink from the pool; she would adorn him; but she would thereafter ask him to pay with his life.

> . . . Aoife, the mother of my son. We met
> At the Hawk's well under the withered trees. . . .
> You have a right to kill me. (*VP* 1057)

Again, the worthy hero admits the inevitable: he will give up his life most willingly when the need arises. Emer, the lasting and legitimate wife of Cuchulain, does a circular dance around the heads of the fallen warriors. This concluding scene is a ritual that recalls the dance done by Cuchulain's great horse, the grey Macha, which vaulted out of a pool after it was killed and circled its owner thrice before it leaped back. The dance, which the narrator describes at the closing of the play, is therefore a dance of transition, and this transition links the past of the Cuchulain legends to the eternal present:

> I met them face to face,
> Conall, Cuchulain, Usna's boys
> All the most ancient race; . . .
> Hear their great horses, then
> Recall what centuries have passed
> Since they were living men . . .
> Are those things that men adore and loathe
> Their sole reality?
> What stood in the post office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood?
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they stood? (*VP* 1062–63)

This passage from *The Death of Cuchulain* unifies both the ancient and the modern, and Yeats's poetry of the same period also alludes to Archimedes, Plotinus, and Pythagoras. History in Yeats's pattern ceases to be an empirical sequence of cold facts; rather, it becomes an imaginative program of events connected in space and concept. The practitioners of cyclical, symbolic history reach out at once to the past, the present, and the future, no matter how far apart these appear to be.[35] This is responsible for a poetic and dramatic style in which Yeats incorporates such seemingly unconnected or incongruous allusions as made by Aoife—that she bore a son between two blackthorn trees within a day of copulating with Cuchulain (*VP* 1059). It is responsible, better still, for the cyclical allusions that Yeats achieves in the use of recurrent characters and myths

35. Layiwola, 39.

straddling many plays to give imaginative connectedness. Even more complex is Yeats's representation of these cyclical allusions as scriptographs, as wheels and cones and gyres of varying forms. Yeats sees culture as a meaning or cognitive system in a collective memory.

Not only did Yeats want an Ireland where the middle classes and the peasantry might have dialogue, he also sought an imaginative system that would guarantee that the past and the present relate in continuous dialogue. Such experiments as Yeats carried out in the theater can be productively interpreted in respect to the aspiration for a new culture or a national ideal without necessarily calling him fascist or conservative. The creation of new modes of cultural relations and interaction have progressive reverberations for the understanding of history. We certainly cannot discount the fact that the existence of a colonial literary canon has generated the impetus for Irish writers of this century to pursue a new style, a new writing, both as an end in itself and as an enabling art.

John Speed, *Map of Ireland* (1610), bottom left corner. Reproduced by kind permission of The Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.