

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEFEAT IN
W. B. YEATS'S CUCHULAIN PLAYS

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AN ABSTRACT OF
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A double vision of life pervades the mood of Yeats's work; in victory one is always aware of the inherent defeat of man, of his inevitable death. Yet, for Yeats, the defeat of death is not merely a frustration of man's efforts; it is a means whereby man can come to know a greater victory. The development of Yeats's tragic hero Cuchulain can be seen as a pattern leading from victory to disaster to acceptance; in acceptance is the ultimate return to victory. Out of his tragedy, Cuchulain gains wisdom and a vision of life and death as a universal pattern. In this vision, at the moment of his death, Cuchulain achieves the final victory of tragic ecstasy.

To achieve this final vision, Cuchulain must undergo a "journey" that will lead him from blindness into vision. The five Cuchulain plays, when arranged in the order of the events of Cuchulain's life, form the pattern of Cuchulain's journey.

Chapter I is introductory, discussing Yeats's use of the legend of Cuchulain. At significant points in his life, Yeats added additional chapters to the legend. For Yeats, the conflicts of Cuchulain were the projections of his own internal conflicts.

Yeats's "vision" of defeat and victory, and his concept of the tragic hero are seen to be untraditional. As Cuchulain moves from victory to defeat and back to victory, the lesser defeats of the minor

characters can be seen as commentaries on Cuchulain's defeat.

In At the Hawk's Well, Cuchulain is presented with a choice of either a life of action or a life of settled domesticity. He sees victory and defeat only in terms of the winning or losing of a battle, and because he wants to be a hero, he chooses the life of action. However, in making the choice, he challenges the gods by daring to look into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well. The Guardian accepts his challenge, committing Cuchulain to be led through tragedy to an understanding of the true meaning of defeat and victory. However, at this point, Cuchulain is unaware of the implications of his choice.

By the time of The Green Helmet, Cuchulain has achieved the status of hero, as he understands it. He has defied the supernatural (Bricriu) and has won the Championship of Ulster. As far as he knows, he has achieved all that he originally wanted at the Hawk's Well. However, before he can become worthy of true heroism (in Yeats's terms), he must be raised to the heights of great success and then be brought down to the depths of great defeat.

Cuchulain's wife, Emer, must undergo a lesser, but similar pattern. In The Green Helmet, she, too, is at the height of success as First Lady of Ulster. In her husband's love she has found identity and fulfilment. However, Emer must ultimately find fulfilment in herself, as she unselfishly redeems Cuchulain from the Sidhe in The Only Jealousy of Emer, and loses Cuchulain's love forever.

In On Baile's Strand, Cuchulain is forced by the High King, Conchubar, to take an oath of obedience. Although Cuchulain's instincts

are for adventure and daring, he sees that he is growing old, and submits. As he takes the oath, tragedy enters in the form of the Young Man, Cuchulain's son by Aoife. The curse prophesied by the Old Man at the Hawk's Well, is realized as Cuchulain is forced to fight and kill the Young Man, who, he later learns, is his son. In the midst of this overwhelming tragedy Cuchulain comes to know the meaninglessness of victories in battle and the vanity of man's attempts to defeat the gods and fate.

Having been overcome by the enormity of his tragedy, Cuchulain "retreats" from life and moves into a death-like trance, in The Only Jealousy of Emer. The play is based on a psychological analysis of Cuchulain's projections of his experiences as he "dreams" of the women in his life and as he begins to see his life as a pattern. He begins to come to terms with his experiences and relationships, purging his guilt and emerging a "purified" man. He is now prepared to see his life as one small cycle in the universal pattern.

At this point Emer suffers both tragedy and fulfilment. She forfeits Cuchulain's love forever, to save him from Fand and to bring him back to life (and to Eithne Inguba, his mistress). As tragic as her sacrifice is, she triumphs in the knowledge that it is she, alone, who is capable of saving him.

Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe, also suffers defeat as she loses Cuchulain, her battle with Bricriu and the opportunity to be freed from the cycles of rebirth. The gods, like man, are subject to the universal pattern.

Eithne Inguba maintains Cuchulain's love in this play, only to become a victim of his indifference in The Death of Cuchulain. As Cuchulain prepares to die, he gives away all his worldly pleasures, including Eithne.

In The Death of Cuchulain, Cuchulain moves willingly into death. Having begun to see his own life as a pattern, he is prepared to see the final vision of the universal pattern of life and death, as he dies. The review of his life culminates in the appearance of Aoife. With her appearance the pattern is complete. As he is about to die, he sees the image of his soul singing after death, and cries out in tragic ecstasy: "I say it is about to sing." This final vision is Cuchulain's supreme victory.

As Aoife appears, we are reminded that she, too, has suffered. Cuchulain has been the only man to overcome her in battle and in love. He has killed her only son, and when she finally claims his death, she loses that satisfaction, as well. She will never know that it was she, above all women, whom Cuchulain desired and admired the most.

For Yeats, the significance of Cuchulain's victory amid the defeat of death extends beyond the context of the plays. The final song of the Street-Singer presents Cuchulain as the guiding spirit of the Easter Rising in 1916. The implication is that Cuchulain's memory and spirit should be inspirational to the Irish for all times.

The Conclusion reviews the events of the plays, outlining the pattern of Cuchulain's development. Through the dramatization of the life and death of Cuchulain, Yeats has shown us that there can be true

victory in the retention of dignity and honour in the midst of defeat, and that out of tragedy can come insight and vision. It is also seen that throughout his poetry, from the early years to his death, Yeats was concerned with the paradox of victory in defeat and the search for a total vision. It was not until he, himself, approached death that Yeats found a full answer to the problem of life and death. Having come to an acceptance of his own life and death, Yeats could project this acceptance into the last Cuchulain play, completing the cycle of Cuchulain's life and death.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The life of W. B. Yeats was full and varied. Although never wealthy, he eventually saw himself respected and appreciated for the artist and the statesman that he was. In 1922 he was appointed to the Irish Senate, and in 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was also offered a knighthood, which he declined.

Yet despite Yeats's obvious success as both poet and statesman, his art is rarely simply jubilant or totally triumphant. A double vision of life pervades the mood of Yeats's work so that in victory one is always aware of the inherent defeat of man, of his inevitable death. For Yeats, this final defeat of man has a poignant beauty. In his poem to Lady Gregory, entitled "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing," written after the failure of the attempt to establish the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Yeats emphasizes the paradoxical nature of defeat:

Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take
 defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred,
 with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were neither shamed in
 his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,

Because of all things
known
That is most difficult.
(Poems, 122)¹

In Yeats's life, it was in the moments in which he most strongly felt this double nature of defeat that he wrote the Cuchulain plays. In his personal defeats Yeats found dignity, honour and tragic beauty. In his victories success was bittersweet. Yeats's "vision" of defeat and victory can be seen in the Cuchulain plays. The foreshadowing of defeat is always a part of Cuchulain's victories, while his defeats are so poignantly sad that they attain triumphant ecstasy.

As Yeats grew older he saw his life in terms of universal cycles and his death as the inevitable and natural fulfilment of life. He expressed this feeling in a letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, dated January 4, 1939:

When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life. (Letters, 922)

Although the Cuchulain plays were not written in the chronological order of the events of Cuchulain's life, a retrospective look at the cycle of Cuchulain's life and death shows that in the completion of his

¹ Parenthetical references within the text are to the following publications: Man and Masks = Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1948); Poems = W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1967); Plays = W. B. Yeats, Collected Plays (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1966); Essays = W. B. Yeats, Essays (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1924); Letters = W. B. Yeats, The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954); Vision = W. B. Yeats, A Vision (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1962).

Although W. B. Yeats, the Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966) has been consulted, this thesis deals with Yeats's plays in their final forms, as found in Plays.

life there is significance. A total view of the five Cuchulain plays as a play-cycle lends added significance in the retrospective light of Yeats's life as a completed pattern. As we study the patterns and events of the lives of Yeats and Cuchulain we can see that both the poet and the hero are "Bred to a harder thing/Than Triumph." We can also see that out of the defeats of both men comes ultimate victory.

Because it is the total pattern of Cuchulain's life and death that has significance the plays will be discussed not in the order in which they were written, but in the order of the events of Cuchulain's life.

Yeats's idea of a tragic hero is not at all that of the traditional tragic hero, such as Macbeth. Whereas Macbeth brings tragedy on himself because of his greed and arrogance, Yeats's hero, Cuchulain, becomes cursed only because he aspires to heroism, because he chooses to live life to the full. The traditional tragic hero suffers because he chooses evil; Cuchulain suffers because he chooses life.

As we watch the development of Macbeth's tragedy we can see the gradual decline of the hero as he moves from victory to uncertainty, to panic, and finally to an inglorious death. In the total cycle of Cuchulain's life, however, the development is from victory to disaster, to acceptance. In the acceptance is the ultimate return to victory. While Macbeth becomes a less heroic, smaller man as he is about to die, Cuchulain grows in stature and achieves universality. For Macbeth, death means defeat. For Cuchulain, death means victory.

In the Cuchulain plays the lesser defeats of the other characters can be seen as commentaries on the defeat of Cuchulain. Cuchulain

does not suffer because he becomes involved with other people, but perhaps because he does not allow himself to be tied down to anyone. In contrast, the women of the plays suffer because they become totally involved with Cuchulain.

For Emer, Cuchulain's wife, tragedy comes because she has given herself completely to Cuchulain and because he refuses to accept her love. It is not so much his faithlessness or his continual absences that cause the anguish in Emer's heart, but the knowledge that he has become totally indifferent to her. Her only victory is in her understanding that it is she alone who can redeem him from the supernatural, although he is saved only to go to his death.

Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's mistress, also suffers as a result of her love for him, but her suffering involves less heroism and less dignity than that of Emer. Eithne's relationship with Cuchulain can only be, at best, precarious, depending on his whim or mood. Eithne has neither the security of being his wife nor the strength to accept his indifference. As he rejects her, instructing his servant to give her to Conall, Eithne becomes almost hysterical, threatening suicide. Unfortunately, Cuchulain loses passion as he approaches death and cares for her only because she once meant something to him. But in the end, she is merely a possession that he has outgrown.

For Aoife, Cuchulain has meant nothing but tragedy. He has conquered her as a warrior, being the only man to have overcome her in battle, and as a woman, being the only man to whom she has given herself. He kills her only son, and at the end, when he acknowledges her right to kill him, she is denied that satisfaction. She is left with

nothing and can never know that it was she, above all other women, whom Cuchulain desired the most.

It is the Sidhe, the Shape-Changers, who are finally victorious. They appear at every significant point in Cuchulain's life, guiding him and taunting him to follow them, to turn away from the comforts of life. He becomes a pawn in a game between Fand and Bricriu, and because he chooses the life of adventure at the Hawk's Well, he is at their mercy. In effect, by selling himself to the Sidhe, Cuchulain initiates the series of events that bring upon him his ultimate disaster. In The Only Jealousy of Emer Bricriu, the God of Discord, wins his last battle and no longer needs Cuchulain, having won the prize of Emer's sacrifice. In The Death of Cuchulain, the Morrighu, the Goddess of War, is triumphant, and Cuchulain loses his life.

Yet, in spite of the tragedy of Cuchulain's life and death, the plays are the dramatization of the victory of defeat. Exultation comes not from individual victories, but from a total vision of life.

Yeats's choice of Cuchulain as the hero of five plays was by no means indiscriminate. He firmly believed in the necessity of developing a tradition of Irish literature. In 1892, with John O'Leary's help he founded the National Literary Society. The purpose was "to publicize the literature, folklore, and legends of Ireland" (Man and Masks, 104). In 1899 he founded the Irish Literary Theatre and in 1902 the Irish National Theatre Society. In "Ireland and the Arts," in Ideas of Good and Evil, he wrote (in 1901):

The Greeks looked within their borders, and we, like them, have a history fuller than any modern history of imaginative events; and legends which surpass, as I think, all legends but theirs in wild

beauty. . . . I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends. . . .
(Essays, 253-54)²

In Cuchulain, Yeats could envision a national symbol. By reviving the legends of Cuchulain, Conchubar, Deirdre, Oisín and the others, Yeats hoped to establish an art of the people. In "The Theatre," in Ideas of Good and Evil, he wrote (in 1899):

[Drama] has one day when the emotions of cities still remember the emotions of sailors and husbandmen and shepherds and users of the spear and bow; . . . and it has another day, now beginning, when thought and scholarship discover their desire. In the first day, it is the Art of the people; and in the second day, like the dramas acted of old times in the hidden places of temples, it is the preparation of a Priesthood. It may be . . . that this Priesthood will spread their Religion everywhere, and make their Art the Art of the people. (Essays, 206-07)

The rituals and ritualistic nature of Cuchulain's rise and fall, fulfilled Yeats's need for a true theatre of art. In "The Theatre," he wrote:

The theatre of Art . . . must therefore discover grave and decorative gestures . . . and grave and decorative scenery. . . . The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty. (Essays, 209)

But Cuchulain became more than a symbol of the Irish hero for Yeats. Having been defeated in love, with Maud Gonne's marriage to Major John MacBride, in 1903, Yeats rebuked himself for being a passive poet rather than an active soldier (as was MacBride). Yeats believed that the hero was his ideal opposite--in his terms, his Mask--and projected this Mask into his greatest hero, Cuchulain. As much as he wanted to be a violent, heroic man, Yeats could never actually become such a man.

²Ideas of Good and Evil was originally published as a book by Lawrence and Bullen in 1903.

He prided himself on being a member of the intellectual aristocracy but realized that intellectuality would never win Maud Gonne.³ Yeats projected his conflict into Cuchulain, creating his opposite who could never reconcile himself to domesticity.

The five Cuchulain plays were written at significant points in Yeats's life. The first play written--On Baile's Strand (1903-04)--contains the two basic conflicts of Cuchulain and Conchubar and of Cuchulain and his son Conlaech. Richard Ellmann (Man and Masks, p. 166) suggests that the latter conflict was influenced by Yeats's own troubles with his father. Ellmann seems to agree, however, with the majority of critics regarding the former conflict. Conchubar represents the politician and man of peace that Yeats was, while Cuchulain represents the man of action that Yeats longed to be. For much of his life Yeats was the settled poet and theatre administrator. In 1922 he actually became an Irish senator. Even in his love for Maud Gonne he saw himself not as a conqueror of this fierce woman, but as her domesticated husband. Yeats wrote in "Anima Hominis" (1917): "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry . . . we sing amid our uncertainties."⁴ In his uncertainty as to where lay his fulfilment, Yeats dramatized his quarrel with himself through the quarrel of

³ See Man and Masks, p. 166.

⁴ W. B. Yeats, Mythologies (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1959), p. 331. In a letter to J. B. Yeats, dated May 12, 1917, Yeats wrote that he had just finished a little philosophical book called An Alphabet, in two parts: "Anima Hominis" and "Anima Mundi," as a kind of prose backing to his poetry. An Alphabet was later retitled Per Amica Silentia Lunae and was published by Macmillan in January, 1918.

Cuchulain and Conchubar.

Ellmann's contention that the battle of Cuchulain and Conlaech was based on Yeats's conflict with his father may be entirely correct, but the character of the Son represents more than just a portrait of young W. B. Yeats opposing J. B. Yeats. The son carries the potential of becoming either a man of action or a man of peace. He enters as a young challenger, but is willing to accept friendship. He is the embryonic Cuchulain--Conchubar and represents the Unity of Being (Vision, 88-9; Man and Masks, 236-38, 264). But because Unity of Being cannot be sustained in life, the son must die. Conlaech represents the young Yeats before he was forced to make a choice, and as Yeats often shows us, man must choose. Finally, Conlaech is the son that Yeats did not have but, like Cuchulain, later came to want.

The Green Helmet was first written in prose (1908) and later revised in poetic form (1910). Its mood of triumph came out of a Yeats who had been forced to assume his Mask and who was feeling the effects and intoxication of power. John Millington Synge's The Playboy of the Western World had become the target of every Irish nationalist who felt that the play was insulting to Irish womanhood and to Ireland itself. Yeats, in aristocratic indignation, took up the role of hero in defense of Synge, The Playboy, the Abbey Theatre and the rights of artists. Reminding the mob that rioted at the first performance of The Playboy (January, 1907) that he, Yeats, was the author of the intensely nationalistic Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), Yeats alone managed to subdue them. In this spirit of personal power and superiority in the face of the uncultured, hysterical masses, Yeats created a triumphant and superior

Cuchulain, with whom he could, for a time, identify.

The Green Helmet is the only play of the five that is not overwhelmed with an atmosphere of heavy, foreshadowing doom. Yeats called this play "An Heroic Farce" and quite probably aimed the humour as much at the image of himself as a hero as at the Irish mob. The including of a farce in what is, otherwise, a tragic group of plays, can be accounted for, perhaps, by Yeats's remarks in "The Tragic Theatre" (in 1910): ". . . it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined . . . tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and . . . it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house" (Essays, 297-98).⁵ Thus Yeats has shown us Cuchulain as a distinct, limited human being, whereas in the other four plays his character becomes more archetypal and universal. Yeats, having become the heroic champion of the Abbey Theatre did not, at that time, need to "break the dykes that separate man from man." He was quite happy to remain the aloof hero-artist.

At the Hawk's Well (1916-1917) was Yeats's first attempt in drama of the Japanese Nō style. For Yeats, who looked for tragedy and ritual in the theatre, the Nō was the perfect model. Yeats, at the age of fifty, again created two images of himself in the characters of the Old Man and the Young Man. This is, perhaps, an adaptation of the Cuchulain--Young Man idea of On Baile's Strand. The Young Man, as he enters, shows

⁵In a letter to Miss E. M. Lister, dated July 28, 1911, Yeats discusses putting out a volume of essays containing (1) "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time . . ." (2) "Discoveries" (3) "Literature and Tradition" (4) "Essay from the Mask" (5) "Edmund Spenser." This would be The Cutting of an Agate, which also included "The Tragic Theatre."

the same potential as does Conlaech, but here he makes his own choice to commit himself to the hero's life. The Old Man (the Conchubar of At the Hawk's Well) had also come to the well of immortality and wisdom, but unlike Cuchulain, had not the courage to commit himself. He is afraid to look into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well. He has never drunk of the waters of wisdom and is, therefore, neither hero nor poet. The Old Man represents sterility and resents the intrusion of youth and courage to remind him of the futility of his existence.

Yeats himself expressed a sense of futility, as he wrote in 1914 in Reveries Over Childhood and Youth: ". . . all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens."⁶ For Yeats, this was a time of indecision and uncertainty, underlined by the political events that culminated in the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and by the discomfort of bachelorhood.

Although Yeats finally married in 1917 and found happiness with Georgie Hyde-Lees, he experienced a deep sense of guilt because of three women, the portraits of whom are in the fourth Cuchulain play, The Only Jealousy of Emer (1917-1919).⁷ He expresses this feeling of guilt in part in a letter to Lady Gregory, dated October 29, 1917: "Two days ago I was in great gloom, (of which I hope, and believe, George knew nothing). I was saying to myself 'I have betrayed three people'" (Letters, 633).

⁶W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1966), p. 106. Reveries Over Childhood and Youth was first published by the Cuala Press in 1915 and was later included in Autobiographies, 1926.

⁷Reginald R. Skene, "The Unity of the Cuchulain Cycle of Plays of W. B. Yeats" An unpublished M. A. thesis in English, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1967, p. 59.

Yeats had proposed not only to Maud Gonne, but also to her adopted niece Iseult Gonne (Man and Masks, 219). Refused by both, he finally turned to Georgie Hyde-Lees, but subsequently felt that he had wronged all three women. Perhaps in portraying a Cuchulain whose soul had left his body, Yeats was projecting his feeling of emptiness at his guilt. And in portraying Cuchulain's preference of Fand and Eithne Inguba over Emer, Yeats may have been projecting his "betrayal" of Georgie for Maud and Iseult. Emer's redemption of Cuchulain is thus comparable to Mrs. Yeats's unselfish love for Yeats.

The final play, The Death of Cuchulain (1938-1939), anticipated Yeats's own death in 1939. Even at the end of his life Yeats felt the conflict between the poet and the hero. The Old Man, whose speech is something of an introduction to the play, is usually taken to be Yeats himself. If this is the case, we see a man close to death who will make his last exit in bitterness and rage: "I spit! I spit! I spit!" (Plays, 694). Cuchulain, on the other hand, as he approaches death, moves from indifference to passivity, passing through the final phases of the twenty-eight phases of the moon (Skene, p. 126). At the end, in Phase Twenty-Eight (the Fool) "He is but a straw blown by the wind, with no mind but the wind and no act but a nameless drifting and turning . . . his thoughts are an aimless reverie" (Vision, 182). Yet for Yeats, the realization that Cuchulain was his opposite held meaning.

In a letter to Ethel Mannin, dated October 20, 1938, Yeats wrote:

I am writing a play on the death of Cuchulain. . . . My private philosophy is there but there must be no sign of it. . . . To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. (Letters, 917-18)

For Yeats, the creation of Cuchulain, his opposite, was the externalization and the projection of one of his states of consciousness. He believed that the basis of all life is conflict and found that his most intense and most meaningful conflicts were those he waged with his anti-self, his opposite, his Mask. The fact that the Cuchulain episodes were written at the most significant periods of Yeats's life is no coincidence. He tested the events of his own life against those of his Mask, and the result was, as he wrote, ". . . out of the quarrel with [himself], poetry."

Just as Yeats realized that he would "embody [truth] in the completion of [his] life," so does the completion of Cuchulain's life embody truth. Cuchulain, like Yeats, suffers defeats and knows tragedy, but also like Yeats, he is a man of integrity, honour, and courage. Because he has faced life without fear, he can face death without fear and can accept death as the natural fulfilment of life. Out of his tragedy Cuchulain gains the wisdom and acceptance that culminate just as he is about to die. As he seems to see a vision of the universal he sees the image of his soul and, in ecstasy, says: "I say it is about to sing" (Plays, 703). In this final vision, as he is about to be killed by the Blind Man, Cuchulain experiences his most perfect victory.

In Yeats's work, defeat is not merely a frustration of man's efforts. Defeat is a means whereby man comes to know a greater victory. But this victory can be understood only in terms of a universal pattern. The development of Cuchulain's life and death can be seen as one cycle in the universal pattern, leading him from the defeats of life to the exultation of death.

CHAPTER II

AT THE HAWK'S WELL (1917)

As he approached the age of fifty in 1915, Yeats saw himself as a lonely man. He was very much concerned about his state of bachelorhood and sensitive to the fact that he had no son to follow him. John Butler Yeats's self-exile to the United States in 1908 further emphasized Yeats's loneliness, for Yeats missed the presence of his father, who had so influenced his life and art. The emptiness of his own life seemed to be reflected in the politics of Ireland as the Irish heroes fought vainly and fatally in the Easter Rising of 1916. For Yeats, this was a period of introspection. Weighing his contribution to Ireland as a poet against the blood sacrifices of "MacDonagh and MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse" ("Easter 1916," Poems, 205) Yeats was forced to examine the commitment to the search for wisdom and truth as opposed to the commitment to the life of action. The themes of sterility and choice are the basic threads of At the Hawk's Well.

While this may have been a disillusioning period for Yeats, it was, at the same time, the dawn of a new life in his art. The entrance of Ezra Pound into Yeats's world in 1908 marked the beginning of Yeats's experiments with the Japanese Nō style of theatre. Yeats, who had written in his essay "The Theatre" (1899): "The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty" (Essays, 209), found in the Nō the highly stylized ritual for which he had been searching.¹

¹See Kathryn Unruh, "The Influence of the Noh Plays of Japan on the Dramatic Art of W. B. Yeats," An unpublished M.A. thesis in English, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1968, pp. 1-9.

Further, in the Nō, individual characterization disappears, to be replaced by archetypal figures and masks. Again, this is a theatrical style that Yeats had been seeking, as he expressed in "The Tragic Theatre" (1910): ". . . in mainly tragic art one distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character, to diminish the power of that daily mood" (Essays, 300-01). Finally, Yeats responded to the mysticism and occultism that are basic to the Nō.

At the Hawk's Well is a play produced out of the double vision of life that was basic to Yeats's personality. The content of the play came from his defeat in love and his frustrations with politics. The discovery of the Nō form was an artistic victory for Yeats, as he had been searching for a new style of theatre.

The Old Man and the Young Man (Cuchulain) represent the two extremes of choice that man can make. The Old Man has chosen a life of passivity. He has searched for the well of wisdom and immortality, but, having found it, he does not have the courage to oppose the Guardian of the Well by drinking the water. (The same basic character reappears in naturalistic form as Conchubar in On Baile's Strand.) Cuchulain is the hero who forsakes long life and domestic contentment for heroism and action. But, as Leonard Nathan suggests, in The Tragic Drama of Yeats: "The consequences of this heroic effort . . . partake of tragedy: the hero becomes the victim of his own mortal limits."²

Images of sterility dominate the play as Yeats presents the barrenness inherent in both the Old Man (sterility of soul) and in

²Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of W. B. Yeats: Figures in a Dance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 14.

Cuchulain (implied sterility of body in that he is thought not to have a son, as dramatized in On Baile's Strand). The Well is "long choked up and dry," and the boughs of the tree are "long stripped by the wind" (Plays, 208). The Guardian herself is the picture of untouched objectivity (in the Yeatsian sense) (Vision, 70-71, 80-89; Man and Masks, 223, 226-29) with the "Pallor of an ivory face/Its lofty dissolute air" (Plays, 208).³ The scene is "a place/The salt sea wind has swept bare" (Plays, 208).

The First Musician sings: "What were his life soon done!" (Plays, 208), foretelling Cuchulain's early death. "Would he lose by that or win?" (Plays, 208) asks a question central to the play. That is, what is the true nature of heroic victory? Can victory be found in defeat? The answer seems to be in the following lines:

A mother that saw her son
Doubled over a speckled shin,
Cross-grained with ninety years,
Would cry, 'How little worth
Were all my hopes and fears
And the hard pain of his birth!'
(Plays, 208)

It would seem that life is futile. A man lives and dies, to be reborn into another cycle. His fate is to move on and on through the cycles of life, and what he achieves seems to be of little importance in the constant whirling of the universal gyres. Life is nothing more than a conflict: "The heart would be always awake,/The heart would turn to its rest" (Plays, 209).

As "The sun goes down in the west" and "Night falls" (Plays, 209),

³F. A. C. Wilson states, in Yeats' Iconography (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1960), p. 61, that the quoted lines describe Cuchulain. I believe that they refer to the Guardian of the Well.

the influence of the dark of the moon becomes stronger. The imagery suggests dying as "The withered leaves of the hazel/Half choke the dry bed of the well" (Plays, 209). The Guardian is "Worn out" (Plays, 209). The heaped-up leaves at her side "rustle and diminish" (Plays, 209). The ritual that accompanies this imagery is that of the death of the old (Old Man) and the birth of the new (Cuchulain).⁴ The Old Man, knowing that he has lived out his life and must now be replaced, resents the young Cuchulain who approaches the Well. In fear of the oncoming winter of his life, the Old Man tries to rekindle the flame of his soul as he lights a fire, but the Musicians sing of his coming death:

'. . . it is time to sleep;
Why wander and nothing to find?
Better grow old and sleep.'

(Plays, 210)

He turns to the Guardian but is met with a blank stare. She will no longer offer the Old Man the choice of gazing into her eyes, for he is about to be displaced by the young Cuchulain.

In his first lines Cuchulain reveals the problem of his life: "I cannot find what I am looking for" (Plays, 211). Like the Old Man, he has come to the Well on a quest, with the same determination: "For youth is not more patient than old age" (Plays, 211). In the waters of the Well Cuchulain seeks immortal life. But the life he is after is one of heroic action and therefore does not allow for immortality. Cuchulain is not yet aware of the tragedy that accompanies heroism. He feels that fate has brought him to the Well, for a "lucky wind" carried

⁴The ritual of the killing of the divine king is discussed by J. G. Frazer in The Golden Bough, abridged edition (London and Toronto: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1967), pp. 348-373. The discussion illuminates Yeats's use of the ritual.

him over "waves that have seemed charmed" (Plays, 212) to find this shore.

The Old Man, in impatience and resentment at Cuchulain's youth, and at the possibility that Cuchulain will drink the water of the Well, bitterly remarks:

O, folly of youth,
Why should that hollow place
fill up for you,
That will not fill for me?
(Plays, 212-13)

Cuchulain replies: "Why should the luck/Of Sualtim's son desert him now?" (Plays, 213).

The Old Man warns Cuchulain: "Go from this accursed place!" (Plays, 213) but Cuchulain is determined to drink the water: "My luck is strong,/It will not leave me waiting" (Plays, 214). But as he talks of the hawk that attacked him as he came to the Well, foreshadowing is evident:

It flew
As though it would have torn me
with its beak,
Or blinded me, smiting with
that great wing.
(Plays, 214)

The Old Man explains that the hawk is the Woman of the Sidhe who has appeared "To allure or to destroy" (Plays, 215) Cuchulain. It is in her allure that she ultimately destroys him, for she seduces him away from the water of the Well.

The Old Man explains further: "There falls a curse/On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes" (Plays, 215) and prophesies the curse that will come upon Cuchulain:

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 kill them
 With your own hand.

(Plays, 215)

Cuchulain, however, ignores the warnings of the Old Man.

The Guardian begins to show life, the sign that the Well will soon fill with water. She turns her gaze on the Old Man and Cuchulain. The Old Man, in terror, cannot bear to look at her, but Cuchulain accepts the challenge and his fate is sealed. As Cuchulain and the Guardian move towards each other in a dance, the Musicians cry out the danger of the Hawk:

O God, protect me
 From a horrible deathless body
 Sliding through the veins of a sudden.

(Plays, 217)

Cuchulain, now committed to the life of a hero, chases after the Hawk, leaving the flowing water. He has chosen heroism and has forsaken immortality. The Hawk does not allow herself to be captured, and Cuchulain returns to the Well, to find that the water has stopped flowing. As the Musicians cry out the name "Aoife," the name that will ultimately mean tragedy for Cuchulain, he sets out on a life of action.

The Musicians' closing song laments Cuchulain's choice and praises the man who

'Lives all his days
 Where a hand on the bell
 Can call the milch cows
 To the comfortable door of his house.

(Plays, 219)

Such a man is later seen to be Cuchulain's opponent, Conchubar, in On

Baile's Strand. Cuchulain, however, has chosen to deal with the supernatural ("hateful eyes/. . ./Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes" (Plays, 219) and subsequently will "live a bitter life" (Plays, 219)).

At the Hawk's Well is the introductory play in terms of the five Cuchulain plays as a play-cycle. Cuchulain is offered the choice of domesticity or of action and chooses the latter. For Yeats, the fact that man must choose is the tragedy of life. He believed that man must always suffer through the conflict of choice, never being able to submit completely to any extreme. As he writes in "Vacillation": "Between extremities/Man runs his course" (Poems, 282). Yeats's understanding of the nature of the conflict is the source of both despair and joy for him. He despairs at man's inability to overcome the limits of his mortality but exults in the knowledge of the cycles of life, of the universal pattern.

At this point in Cuchulain's life, the hero is blind and reckless. He is prepared to test his courage and virility in battle, and to win glory and fame. He sees victory and defeat only in terms of winning or losing a battle. But because he has made a commitment, he must be led through tragedy, to an understanding of the true meanings of victory and defeat. He must be made to see himself, not as the future Champion of Ulster, but as a small part of the universal pattern. His victories in battle will become meaningless when compared to his final victory of clear vision as he is about to die. The events of his life become steps in the process of his enlightenment.

CHAPTER III

THE GREEN HELMET (1910)

By the time of the writing of The Green Helmet (written in prose in 1908 as The Golden Helmet and revised in poetic form in 1910 as The Green Helmet), Yeats had suffered the emotional strain of various events. He had lived through the Playboy Riots (1907), the departure of the Fays from the Abbey Theatre (1907), the death of John Millington Synge (1909), disappointment at the failure of Hugh Lane's attempts to establish a Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin,¹ and the realization that the Abbey had failed to encourage the production of plays not for the theatre of commerce.

But throughout these disillusioning events Yeats maintained his love for his country. In January, 1908, Miss Annie Horniman, the financial supporter of the Abbey, offered Yeats the opportunity to produce his plays in England. In Yeats's reply the voice of triumph amid defeat can be clearly heard:

I understand my own race and in all my work, lyric or dramatic, I have thought of it. If the theatre fails, I may or may not write plays--but I shall write for my own people--whether in love or hate of them matters little--probably I shall not know which it is.

(Letters, 501)

As The Green Helmet opens we are introduced to Conall and Laegaire, older but less courageous heroes than Cuchulain. Despite the lyrical rhyming, the atmosphere is tense, expectant and heavily charged with the presence of the supernatural.

¹See John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats (New York: The Noonday Press, 1968), pp. 117-120.

The opening lines of Conall and Laegaire immediately set the scene as being larger-than-life, and somewhat removed from reality. Laegaire talks of having seen "A cat-headed man" (Plays, 224). Conall says: "You have dreamed it" (Plays, 224), recalling the opening lines of the Musicians in At the Hawk's Well: "I call to the eye of the mind" (Plays, 208). Conall goes on to boast of his great deeds:

I cut off a hundred heads with
a single stroke of my
sword,
And then I danced on their
graves and carried away
their hoard.

(Plays, 224)

The trouble in Ireland is discussed:

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.

(Plays, 225)

Even in the home there can be no peace when Emer flaunts herself in front of the other queens, claiming superiority, while Cuchulain, her husband, stays with Queen Aoife in Scotland: "he has all that he could need/In that high windy Scotland" (Plays, 224).

The ominous atmosphere of this opening scene builds up to the suspense and climax of Cuchulain's entrance:

A man in a long green cloak
that covers him up
to the chin
Comes down through the rocks
and hazels.

(Plays, 225)

Conall and Laegaire refuse to allow him to enter. Having lost a "game" with Bricriu, Maker of Discord, they want to hide the shame that will be theirs when they refuse to give Bricriu the prize that he has demanded, that is, their heads.

Cuchulain pushes Conall aside and enters. Conall, to justify his being knocked over, states "heroically":

I thought no living man
 could have pushed
 me from the door,
 Nor could any living man
 do it but for the dip
 in the floor;
 And had I been rightly ready
 there's no man living
 could do it,
 Dip or no dip.

(Plays, 226)

Cuchulain, of course, is not merely a "living man." He is a hero.

Cuchulain, becoming impatient with Conall's and Laegaire's attempts to get rid of him, asserts his authority in a resounding speech. He suspects them of concealing some exciting adventure, but reminds them that, like it or not, he will go with them. It is the speech of a fearless and aggressive hero, very much suited to Cuchulain's present situation. Again, as in At the Hawk's Well, Cuchulain boldly accepts the challenge of the unknown with heroic recklessness:

I am losing patience, Conall--
 I find you stuffed
 with pride,
 The flagon full to the brim,
 the front door standing
 wide;
 You'd put me off with words,
 but the whole thing's
 plain enough,
 You are waiting for some
 message to bring you
 to war or love

In that old secret country
 beyond the wool-
 white waves,
 Or it may be down beneath
 them in foam-
 bewildered caves
 Where nine forsaken sea-
 queens fling shuttles
 to and fro;
 But beyond them, or beneath
 them, whether you
 will or no,
 I am going too.

(Plays, 227-28)

Laegaire and Conall, accepting Cuchulain's immovable will, decide that perhaps his never-failing good luck will save their lives. They tell Cuchulain the story of Bricriu's "game" and of his threat to return to claim his prize: "'A head for a head,' he said, 'that is the game that I play'" (Plays, 229). Cuchulain, at first, is unbelieving: "I have imagined as good when I've been as deep in the cup" (Plays, 229). Conall, whose main topic of conversation has been himself and his heroism, now rebukes Cuchulain for boasting:

Cuchulain, when will
 you stop
 Boasting of your great deeds
 and weighing yourself
 with us two,
 And crying out to the world,
 whatever we say or do,
 That you've said or done a
 better?

(Plays, 229-30)

Cuchulain accepts their tale and looks forward to the oncoming battle with Bricriu, leaving Conall and Laegaire to their fears.

At Bricriu's entrance, Cuchulain defiantly challenges him:

If there's no sword can harm
 you, I've an older trick
 to play,

An old five-fingered trick
 to tumble you out of
 the place;
 I am Sualtim's son, Cuchulain
 --What, do you laugh
 in my face?

(Plays, 232)

But Bricriu changes tactics. He has given up the game of "A head for a head." Claiming his desire for amity he lays a helmet on the ground to be given to the Champion of Ulster: "Let the bravest take it up" (Plays, 233).

Bricriu, of course, is the Maker of Discord and has come to cause chaos among the people. Forgetting their common battle against Bricriu, Laegaire and Conall both grab for the helmet, but Cuchulain takes it for "all of us three" (Plays, 233). Realizing Bricriu's intentions, Cuchulain is determined that peace shall be maintained and that Bricriu's plans should be thwarted:

 we will pass it to
 and fro,
 And time and time about,
 drink out of it and
 so
 Stroke into peace this cat that
 has come to take our
 lives.

(Plays, 233)

As he fills the helmet with ale and takes the first drink, the servants enter fighting among themselves. Bricriu has been the instigator of their battle. As Laeg, Cuchulain's chariot-driver, explains:

A high, wide, foxy man came
 where we sat in the
 hall,
 Getting our supper ready, with
 a great voice like the
 wind,
 And cried that there was a

helmet, or something
 of the kind,
 That was for the foremost
 man upon the ridge
 of the earth.
 So I cried your name through
 the hall, but they
 denied its worth,
 Preferring Laegaire or Conall.
 (Plays, 235-36)

Cuchulain manages to establish order, but again the sound of shouting is heard. The three wives of Cuchulain, Laegaire and Conall have also been caught by Bricriu, each trying to prove that she is the First Lady of Ulster by being the first to enter the house. Cuchulain orders the men to break down the walls so that the women can enter together. As each woman waits to enter, Emer asserts herself, singing of her great fortune in being Cuchulain's wife:

women-kind,
 When their eyes have met
 mine,
 Grow cold and grow hot,
 Troubled as with wine
 By a secret thought,
 Preyed upon, fed upon
 By jealousy and desire, . . .
 (Plays, 239)

As Emer starts up the quarreling again, the lights are extinguished and there is total blackness. A light from the sea slowly moves into the house, and in the shadows Bricriu can be seen. He has come to claim his original prize: "Let some man kneel down there/That I may cut his head off, or all shall go to wrack" (Plays, 242). Cuchulain is the only one willing to pay the debt, a debt that he did not, himself, owe. As he prepares to die, he consoles Emer, telling her that she will always live in the memory of his fame, and warns her not to try to stop him:

Would you stay the great
 barnacle-goose
 When its eyes are turned
 to the sea and its
 beak to the salt
 of the air?
 (Plays, 242)

Heroically, Emer offers to kill herself: "I, too, on the grey wing's path!" (Plays, 242). But Cuchulain will not allow her her martyrdom. He must keep this moment of heroism and sacrifice for himself:

Do you dare, do you dare, do
 you dare?
 Bear children and sweep the
 house. Wail, but
 keep from the road.
 (Plays, 242-43)

Emer's moment has yet to come.

But Cuchulain's end is not here yet, either. He has not yet fulfilled the obligations and the destiny he had chosen at the Hawk's Well. Because he displays heroism so bravely, laughing in the face of death, Bricriu spares Cuchulain as "The man who hits my fancy" (Plays, 243). Bricriu's closing speech expresses the theme of the play:

 And I choose the
 laughing lip
 That shall not turn from
 laughing, whatever
 rise or fall;
 The heart that grows no
 bitterer although
 betrayed by all; . . .
 (Plays, 243)

From the time of At the Hawk's Well to the time of The Green Helmet, Cuchulain has successfully established himself as a warrior-king. He has all the daring and recklessness of a hero and seems to live not under a curse, but under a charm. Cuchulain, the lone figure

of reason and order among the crowd of jealous, argumentative heroes, queens and servants, takes control of the situation by sheer force and boldness. As S. B. Bushrui says, in Yeats' Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 207: "Cuchulain's 'heroic act'. . . is lonely and exultant; it brings out his superiority to the 'crowd' that surrounds him."

Cuchulain's wife, Emer, shares his vitality and lust for life. She is a brave and persistent champion of her husband, determined to share in his heroic glory. The picture of her, dagger drawn, as she challenges anyone who would oppose Cuchulain, is a preparation for her future commitment to heroism and tragedy in The Only Jealousy of Emer. But here, like Cuchulain, she is triumphant. They are both presented at the height of their youth and success.

The Red Man--Bricriu--is Cuchulain's supernatural challenger in much the same way as was the Guardian of the Well in At the Hawk's Well. Both the Guardian and Bricriu tantalize Cuchulain with their offers, concealing their treachery. We are reminded that Cuchulain's fate has been planned by the gods, and that no matter how victorious he may appear to be, his doom is sealed. Although Bricriu favours Cuchulain for his courage, the presentation of the helmet is merely a reprieve.

This second play of the cycle serves as a measure against which Cuchulain's coming tragedy will be contrasted. At this point in his life Cuchulain has attained the ultimate of worldly desires. He has a proud and fiery wife, he is a hero in battle, and he has won the title of Champion of Ulster. But he is as yet unaware that this life of superficial victories is not the choice he made at the Hawk's Well.

Before he can become worthy of the insight and vision that are his as he dies, he must be raised to the extreme heights of The Green Helmet and brought down to the extreme depths of On Baile's Strand.

CHAPTER IV

ON BAILE'S STRAND (1904)

The years 1903-1904 marked important events in Yeats's life. In 1903 came the shock of Maud Gonne's marriage to Major John MacBride. Yeats had come to accept Maud's assertion that she would never marry and had decided to be content with her promises of affection for him. Her marriage forced him to reassess not only her character (for he had idealized her as his heroic goddess), but his own as well. Seeing himself now as a passive, unheroic poet, he berated himself for not going after what he wanted. Blaming his timidity, he had to accept the fact that Maud preferred the "dashing major of the Irish Transvaal Brigade in the Boer War" (Man and Masks, 166), a man Yeats had always considered to be an uncultured, unintellectual boor. The subsequent internal conflict that Yeats suffered is the basis of the conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar in On Baile's Strand.

With the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904 Yeats became a man of the theatre. He was free to experiment with his dramatic ideas in his own theatre, but the price of artistic freedom was the responsibility of the management of the Abbey. The internal conflict of freedom versus responsibility is also projected into the conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar.

The opening scene between the Fool and the Blind Man informs the audience of the present political situation of the country, of the rule of the High King Conchubar and of Cuchulain's development since the time of The Green Helmet. Aoife's relationship with Cuchulain becomes

clearer and more obviously relevant. Her introduction in this scene, by the Blind Man, prepares us for Cuchulain's and Conchubar's later discussion of her. The distinction between the Fool and the Blind Man provides an amusing and ironic commentary on the conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar. Although the Fool and the Blind Man are totally antithetical, they are mutually dependent. The same can be said of Cuchulain and Conchubar.

The supernatural is again present, as it is in At the Hawk's Well and The Green Helmet. The Fool, like Cuchulain, chases the Shape-Changeers. The Fool's words: ". . . I can go out and run races with the witches at the edge of the waves. . ." (Plays, 248) is a preview of Cuchulain's fight with the waves at the end of the play. As the Guardian of the Well (identified with Fand as the Woman of the Sidhe) seductively danced with Cuchulain, so the Fool claims that Fand chases him:

There are some that follow me. Boann herself out of the river and Fand out of the deep sea. Witches they are, and they come by in the wind, and they cry, 'Give a kiss, Fool, give a kiss', that's what they cry. (Plays, 248)

The day has come when Cuchulain will be forced to take an oath of obedience to Conchubar, an oath that will bind him with responsibility. His heroic recklessness, seen in The Green Helmet, has exceeded its bounds:

. . . he ran too wild, and Conchubar is coming to-day to put an oath upon him that will stop his rambling and make him as biddable as a house-dog and keep him always at his hand. (Plays, 249)

While Cuchulain has been out chasing through the country, a young prince from Aoife's court has landed on the unguarded shore. The young man is Aoife's son, trained by her to kill Cuchulain, the only

man who overcame her in battle:

There was a boy in her house that had her own red colour on him,
and everybody said he was to be brought up to kill Cuchulain, that
she hated Cuchulain. (Plays, 252)

Cuchulain and Conchubar enter in the midst of a heated argument
that sets responsibility (Conchubar) against irresponsibility (Cuchulain).

Cuchulain resents the attempt to inhibit his actions:

Because I have killed men
without your bidding
And have rewarded others
at my own pleasure,
Because of half a score of
trifling things,
You'd lay this oath upon me,
(Plays, 254)

The basis of Conchubar's wish that Cuchulain be bound to him is
his concern for the inheritance and future rights of his children, for
their sake and for the safety of the land:

I would leave
A strong and settled country
to my children.
.....
But every day my children
come and say:
'This man is growing harder
to endure.
How can we be at safety
with this man
That nobody can buy or bid
or bind?'
(Plays, 255)

Cuchulain, with no children of his own, has no concern for such
matters. He claims to want only freedom and argues against having
children:

I think myself most lucky
that I leave
No pallid ghost or mockery
of a man

To drift and mutter in the
 corridors
 Where I have laughed and
 sung.

(Plays, 256)

But the irony of his arguments is evident. Conchubar knows that
 Cuchulain's one wish is for a son:

You play with arguments as
 lawyers do,
 And put no heart in them. . . .

I have heard you cry, aye,
 in your very sleep,
 'I have no son', and with
 such bitterness
 That I have gone upon my
 knees and prayed
 That it might be amended.

(Plays, 257)

Cuchulain adds to the irony:

 I would leave
 My house and name to none
 that would not face
 Even myself in battle.

(Plays, 258)

Conchubar speaks of Cuchulain's tie to Aoife, and at the mention
 of her, Cuchulain's sense of irresponsibility is revived. He compares
 her proud glory to the dullness of the women of Conchubar's court:

 Ah! Conchubar, had
 you seen her
 With that high, laughing,
 turbulent head of
 hers
 Thrown backward, . . .

.

Or when love ran through
 all the lineaments
 Of her wild body--although
 she had no child,
 None other had all beauty,
 queen or lover,

Or was so fitted to give
 birth to kings.
 (Plays, 258-59)

For Cuchulain, Aoife is the only woman worthy of the love that is "A brief forgiveness between opposites" (Plays, 259).

Conchubar reminds Cuchulain that Aoife is making war against them and that they need each other:

You are but half a king and I
 but half;
 I need your might of hand and
 burning heart,
 And you my wisdom.
 (Plays, 260)

Cuchulain turns to the other kings and calls to them to come with him in search of adventure. But they have all become settled men. Seeing that he is alone and that he has outgrown the boldness and rashness of youth, Cuchulain takes Conchubar's oath and abandons the instincts of his soul to follow the Shape-Changers and the Sidhe. Cuchulain swears "to be obedient in all things/To Conchubar, and to uphold his children" (Plays, 263).

As Cuchulain gives up his life of irresponsibility, his destiny enters in the form of the Young Man, who would test his sword against Cuchulain's, but who is bound to Aoife not to reveal his name. Cuchulain rushes to the challenge of combat, but as he looks more closely at the Young Man he sees in him the look of Aoife, and at her memory, he decides not to fight:

 He has got her fierceness,
 And nobody is as fierce as those
 pale women.
 But I will keep him with me,
 Conchubar,
 That he may set my memory

upon her
 When the day's fading.
 (Plays, 266)

The other Kings, angry at Cuchulain's refusal to accept the challenge made in Aoife's name, claim the fight. Cuchulain responds paternally, defending the Young Man against their swords:

Whatever man
 Would fight with you shall
 fight it out with me.

 Boy, I would meet
 them all in arms
 If I'd a son like you.
 (Plays, 269)

But in this moment of the fulfilment of his paternal longings, Cuchulain prophesies the tragic outcome:

If I had fought my father, he'd
 have killed me,
 As certainly as if I had a son
 And fought with him, I should
 be deadly to him
 (Plays, 270)

Conchubar refuses to allow this friendship and Cuchulain attacks him. The Kings shout cries of witchcraft, persuading Cuchulain that witchcraft has caused the Young Man to appear to look like Aoife. As Cuchulain turns against the Young Man, forcing him to fight, the Singing Women announce Cuchulain's doom: "I have seen Cuchulain's roof-tree/ Leap into fire, and the walls split and blacken" (Plays, 271).

The Fool and the Blind Man enter, and in their dialogue we can recognize the relationship between Cuchulain and Conchubar. The Fool scolds the Blind Man: "You stay safe, and send me into every kind of danger" (Plays, 272). So Cuchulain accepts danger while Conchubar sits in settled domesticity. The Blind Man replies, in the logic of Conchubar:

Think of the care I have taken of you. I have brought you to many a warm hearth, where there was a good welcome for you, but you would not stay there; you were always wandering about. (Plays, 273)

So Conchubar has tried to enforce responsibility on the roving Cuchulain. Just as the Blind Man has stolen the chicken from the Fool, leaving him only the feathers, so Conchubar, in setting Cuchulain against the Young Man, has stolen Cuchulain's son from him. Cuchulain, too, is left with only the feathers to wipe his son's blood from his sword.

The Fool tells Cuchulain that Aoife is the Young Man's mother and Cuchulain presses to find out who his father is. The Fool says that the Blind Man had "heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had overcome her in battle" (Plays, 276). As the realization sinks into Cuchulain that he, himself, is the Young Man's father, the Blind Man says: "It is his own son he has slain" (Plays, 276). In an insane rage Cuchulain rushes out to kill Conchubar, the man who set him against his only son. In a trance he dashes into the sea and strikes at the waves, for "He sees King Conchubar's crown on every one of them" (Plays, 277).

In this play the curse prophesied at the Hawk's Well is realized. At the age of "about 40" (Letters, 425), Cuchulain can no longer be the young hero of The Green Helmet. In his choice of a life of action he has ignored the demands of society, setting his own desires and whims above all else. The forfeit of his only son is the debt he must pay for his devil-may-care life. The tragedy is accentuated by the fact that Cuchulain is only too willing to make peace with the Young Man. But because he has gone against his deepest instincts by taking Conchubar's oath, he is forced to fight and kill his son. As Yeats wrote, in a

letter to Frank Fay, dated January 20, 1904: ". . . perhaps this young man's affection is what he had most need of. Without this thought the play had not had any deep tragedy" (Letters, 425).

Now that Cuchulain has fallen from the heights of The Green Helmet to the depths of On Baile's Strand, he is worthy of being redeemed. Now that he has suffered tragedy, he can realize the meaninglessness of the victories in battle of which he had been so proud. His tragedy will become the means whereby he will come to know the greater victory of the vision of the universal pattern. In The Only Jealousy of Emer he will undergo the transitional stage between despair and enlightenment, and in The Death of Cuchulain he will achieve the final, total vision.

CHAPTER V

THE ONLY JEALOUSY OF EMER (1919)

In writing The Only Jealousy of Emer, Yeats used as models for the three women of the play the three prominent women in his life at that time. They were Maud Gonne (Fand), her adopted niece Iseult Gonne (Eithne Inguba), and Georgie Hyde-Lees (Emer). The story of the women of the play represents Yeats's complete infatuation with Maud, his interlude with Iseult, and his ultimate "salvation" in marrying Georgie (Man and Masks, 218-19).

By the time of the completion of The Only Jealousy of Emer, Yeats had formulated the basic elements of the philosophical system which was later published (in 1925) under the title of A Vision.¹ Yeats incorporated these elements into the play.

As the play opens we find Cuchulain, overcome by the fight with the waves (in On Baile's Strand), in a death-like trance. His body has been taken over by Bricriu while his soul is possessed by Fand. Fand appears not in the form of a hawk, as she had in At the Hawk's Well, but in the form of perfect beauty. She represents Phase Fifteen, the full of the moon, the phase of complete subjectivity (Poems, 185). Bricriu, her complete opposite (with regard to Yeats's phases of the moon and his philosophy of objectivity and subjectivity), has become grotesque and deformed, totally a creature of the dark of the moon. He represents Phase One, the phase of complete objectivity (Poems, 187-

¹A Vision was largely revised and rewritten, and reissued in 1937.

88).²

Bricriu uses the power of repulsion and Fand uses the power of appeal so that Cuchulain is caught between the pull of the dark of the moon and that of the full. Yeats again expresses the conflict of life between the two extremities. Whereas in On Baile's Strand, the antagonists were Cuchulain and Conchubar (or, the Fool and the Blind Man), they are now Fand and Bricriu, and their form is sheer spirit.

F. A. C. Wilson (Yeats' Iconography, pp. 99-102) has pointed out that the opening song of the First Musician is a simile for the spiritual birth and progress of the soul. It can also be seen as a commentary on the beauty of Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's mistress, the woman who keeps his love in this play (Man and Masks, 230). Yeats referred to Iseult Gonne as "the bird" (Letters, 633) and quite probably transferred the reference to Eithne: "A woman's beauty is like a white/Frail bird" (Plays, 281). As Ellmann notes (p. 230) Eithne is classified under Phase Fourteen, at which "the greatest human beauty becomes possible" (Vision, 131). In Phase Fourteen is "That loveliness" (Plays, 282) of which the Musician sings.

Again, as in At the Hawk's Well, the Musician establishes the dream-like quality of the scene: "I call before the eyes. . ." (Plays, 282). As the patient Emer watches over the lifeless body of Cuchulain, Eithne Inguba "comes on hesitating feet" (Plays, 283). That Emer has sent for her--"for I myself/Sent for you, Eithne Inguba" (Plays, 283)--is the first hint of Emer's forthcoming fate as a tragic heroine. Emer,

²See F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats' Iconography, pp. 110-112.

realizing that Cuchulain's love is for Eithne, hopes that Eithne can bring him back to life:

but if you cry aloud
With the sweet voice that is
so dear to him
He cannot help but listen.
(Plays, 285)

Eithne, however, knows that although Cuchulain loves her now,

in the end [he]
Will love the woman best
who loved him first
And loved him through the
years when love
seemed lost.
(Plays, 285)

Emer admits that this is her one wish:

I have that hope, the hope that
some day somewhere
We'll sit together at the hearth
again.
(Plays, 285)

It is with this, Emer's most vulnerable and sensitive point, that Bricriu tests her love for Cuchulain.

Throughout the first three plays, the water image has been associated with Cuchulain's troubles. In At the Hawk's Well Cuchulain has "Crossed waves that have seemed charmed" to seek the "miraculous water" (Plays, 212) of wisdom and immortality. In The Green Helmet the sea again is to be feared: "we have nothing to fear that has not come up from the tide" (Plays, 224), as Bricriu himself comes from the sea. In On Baile's Strand the Fool talks of the witches "out of the deep sea" (Plays, 248), the Young Man comes from across the sea, and Cuchulain is overcome by the waves.

Here again, in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the sea is "bitter"

(Plays, 283). Emer suspects that Cuchulain's soul has been taken over by the people of the sea:

It may be
An image has been put into his
place,
A sea-borne log bewitched into
his likeness,
Or some stark horseman grown
too old to ride
Among the troops of Manannan,
Son of the Sea.

(Plays, 284-85)

She covers up his face "to hide the sea" (Plays, 285) and makes a fire, for "all the enchantments of the dreaming foam/Dread the hearth-fire" (Plays, 286). Emer's enemies are both from the sea, Bricriu from Manannan's court and Fand from the "Country-under-Wave" (Plays, 290). Now Emer must add her rival, Eithne, to her forces to save Cuchulain: "We're but two women struggling with the sea" (Plays, 286).

As Emer forces Eithne to kiss the image of Cuchulain, the image stirs. Eithne realizes it is not Cuchulain, but some "evil thing" whose "arm is withered to the very socket" (Plays, 287). Bricriu's voice speaks, announcing himself as the "Maker of discord among gods and men" (Plays, 287). As he reveals his distorted face Eithne runs away: "I show my face, and everything he loves/Must fly away" (Plays, 288). Emer has no fear of Bricriu, for she is no longer loved by Cuchulain. But it is Emer who loves him most and who must sacrifice to save him. Bricriu says:

You spoke but now of the mere
 chance that some day
You'd be the apple of his eye again
When old and ailing, but renounce
 that chance
And he shall live again.

(Plays, 288)

When Emer refuses to relinquish her one hope, Bricriu reminds her that Cuchulain is truly in danger of being taken forever. He gives her second sight to see the ghost of her husband, "a phantom/That can neither touch, nor hear, nor see" (Plays, 289). He is undergoing the "dreaming back" that follows death and precedes rebirth (Vision, 225-31):

The dead move ever towards a
dreamless youth
And when they dream no more
return no more....
(Plays, 290)

As Emer watches Cuchulain, she sees the spirit of Fand who "Has hid herself in this disguise" (Plays, 290) of perfect beauty. Cuchulain's ghost sees this image of beauty:

Who is it stands before me there
Shedding such light from limb
and hair
As when the moon, complete at
last
With every labouring crescent past,
And lonely with extreme delight,
Flings out upon the fifteenth night?
(Plays, 291)

But because Fand represents the perfect beauty of Yeats's Phase Fifteen, she is only an image, "For there's no human life at the full or the dark" (Poems, 185).

In the process of Dreaming Back, "the Spirit is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it" (Vision, 226). Thus when Fand asks Cuchulain what it is that

pulled your hands about
your feet,
Pulled down your head upon
your knees,
And hid your face?
(Plays, 291)

Cuchulain implies that he is dreaming back and sees

Old memories:
A woman in her happy youth
Before her man had broken troth,
Dead men and women. Memories
Have pulled my head upon my
knees.

(Plays, 291)

For Cuchulain, it is the memory of Emer that is the most intense and most painful.

Fand tries to seduce Cuchulain into kissing her. As Wilson states (in Yeats' Iconography, p. 111), "Thus Fand tells Cuchulain that his kiss will bring her freedom from all the cycles of rebirth; without it, she would have to progress through the objective incarnations." Fand suggests to Cuchulain that she will have attained Unity of Being (Vision, 88-89):

When your mouth and my
mouth meet
All my rounds shall be complete
Imagining all its circles run; . . .
(Plays, 292-93)

But Cuchulain's memory of Emer is still strong:

O Emer, Emer, there we stand;
Side by side and hand in hand
Tread the threshold of the house
As when our parents married us.
(Plays, 293)

Fand reminds Cuchulain that he had been anything but faithful to Emer when he was alive, and that he was born to love the supernatural, not a woman "With flesh and blood" (Plays, 293). As she leads him out, Bricriu warns Emer that this is her last chance to take Cuchulain from Fand and to bring him back to life:

There is still a moment left; cry
out, cry out!

Renounce him, and her power
 is at an end.
 (Plays, 294)

Emer renounces Cuchulain's love for ever and redeems him.

As the image of Bricriu leaves Cuchulain's body, Eithne is free to return. Running to his side she claims that it is she who has saved him:

And it is I that won him
 from the sea,
 That brought him back to life.
 (Plays, 294)

Emer's love for Cuchulain has alienated him from her forever. She has resurrected him only to return him to the arms of his mistress:

Your arms, your arms! O Eithne Inguba,
 I have been in some strange place
 and am afraid.
 (Plays, 294)

In their closing song, the Musicians sing of the poignant irony that is both Emer's sacrifice and Eithne's reward:

O bitter reward
 Of many a tragic tomb!
 And we though astonished
 are dumb
 Or give but a sigh and a word,
 A passing word.
 (Plays, 295)

The verses tell of Cuchulain's infatuation with Fand, "A statue of solitude," of his return to Eithne: "He that has loved the best/May turn from a statue/His too human breast," and of his eventual withdrawal from Eithne (later, in The Death of Cuchulain): "When beauty is complete/Your own thought will have died" (Plays, 295-96).

The three women of the play share the defeats of love. Fand loses not only Cuchulain, but also the opportunity of escaping the

cycles of rebirth (Wilson, Yeats' Iconography, p. 111). She has also lost her battle with Bricriu. Emer has lost Cuchulain and has forfeited the chance that he might return to her. Because her act is unselfish she has attained heroic stature, but that is a reward that is bittersweet. Eithne's defeat lies in her seeming victory. Having maintained Cuchulain's love, she ultimately becomes the victim of this love in The Death of Cuchulain. The only victory in this play belongs to Bricriu, who now plunges Cuchulain back into the world of chaos and discord.

The action of The Only Jealousy of Emer is necessary as a transitional stage between On Baile's Strand and The Death of Cuchulain. The tragedy of having killed his only son is too much for Cuchulain and so he "withdraws" from life, to be able to come to terms with himself. The action of The Only Jealousy of Emer, although it is external to Cuchulain, is of an hallucinatory nature and could very well represent the thoughts of his troubled mind. He does not recover consciousness until he is saved by Emer. But it is uncertain whether even this external action is not a projection of Cuchulain's thoughts, his own attempts to resolve his inner conflict and redeem himself by renouncing Fand and by accepting Emer's act of love.

In the process of coming to accept the fact of his tragedy, Cuchulain has begun to gain insight into himself and to see his life in terms of a pattern, associating the image of Fand with the Guardian of the Well:

I know you now, for long ago
I met you on a cloudy hill
Beside old thorn-trees and a well.

A woman danced and a hawk flew,
I held out arms and hands;
 but you,
That now seem friendly, fled
 away,
Half woman and half bird of prey.
 (Plays, 292)

Having achieved this vision of his own life, he is now prepared to see his life as one cycle in the universal pattern. In The Death of Cuchulain he undergoes the process that leads him to the final victory of clear and complete vision as he is about to die.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATH OF CUCHULAIN (1939)

As Yeats became increasingly aware of the imminence of his own death, the gyres, the phases of the moon and the cycles of life took on new meaning as he related them to his own life and death. This new awareness is reflected in The Death of Cuchulain as Yeats makes Cuchulain's life and death meaningful to Cuchulain himself and to Ireland in the twentieth century.

Yeats again projects the conflict of life between extremities through the contrast of the Old Man who introduces the play and Cuchulain. Whereas the Old Man, nearing death, is bitter, cantankerous and sarcastic, Cuchulain has accepted the inevitability of death. Knowing that he is about to die, Cuchulain is the man who, as Yeats wrote in "Anima Hominis" (1917), "loves nothing but his destiny" (Yeats, Mythologies, p. 336).

In contrast to the two characters of At the Hawk's Well, the Old Man and young Cuchulain, the emotional states of these two, the Old Man and the older Cuchulain, have been reversed. In the first play it is the young Cuchulain who vibrates with energy and passion and the Old Man who is passive and indifferent to life. In this last play the Old Man is passionate with bitterness and rage while Cuchulain has become passive and indifferent to life.

As in The Only Jealousy of Emer, Emer again tries to use Eithne Inguba to save Cuchulain. On the eve of battle, as Cuchulain prepares to fight Queen Maeve, Emer has sent Eithne to Cuchulain with the message that he should wait until morning, when Conall would arrive

with a great army to help him. However, Maeve has put Eithne into a trance so that Eithne tells Cuchulain not to wait but to go out and fight, even to his death:

No matter what's the odds, no
 matter though
 Your death may come of it, ride
 out and fight.
 (Plays, 695)

Cuchulain, seeing Emer's letter in Eithne's hand, reads Emer's warning not to fight:

I am not to move
 Until to-morrow morning, for,
 if now,
 I must face odds no man can
 face and live.
 (Plays, 695)

Yet Cuchulain chooses to ignore the warning: "I am for the fight" (Plays, 696).

The Morrighu, the goddess of war, enters and stands between Cuchulain and Eithne Inguba. As she enters, Eithne becomes dazed and as she exits, Eithne moves out of her trance.

In the face of Eithne's seeming treachery, Cuchulain assumes that she has tired of him: "You need a younger man, a friendlier man," and that because she feared his violent passion if she left him, she has decided to send him to his death:

But fearing what my violence
 might do,
 Thought out these words to
 send me to
 my death, . . .
 (Plays, 696-97)

Eithne realizes that Cuchulain has changed: "You're not the man I loved" (Plays, 697). If he truly believed that she would betray him,

he would kill her. Because he allows her to live, he, himself, has become passive and indifferent. Caring no more for life, he seeks death. Eithne recognizes this and says:

If, thinking what you think,
 you can forgive,
It is because you are about
 to die.

(Plays, 697)

Eithne realizes that Cuchulain is doomed, that he has lost "the passion necessary to life" (Plays, 697). She swears that once he is dead she will kill herself to prove her love and loyalty to him:

So that my shade can stand
 among the shades
And greet your shade and
 prove it is no traitor.

(Plays, 698)

Cuchulain, however, still believes that she no longer loves him, but because he is no longer the man of passion he once was, forgives her and saves her from her own condemning words. He advises his servant:

 should I not return
Give her to Conall Caernach because
 the women
Have called him a good lover.

(Plays, 698)

It is at this point, as Cuchulain willingly gives her away, that Eithne suffers her tragic defeat.

Cuchulain goes out to fight and returns, mortally wounded. As he tries to fasten himself to a pillar-stone, so that he may die upon his feet, Aoife enters. Cuchulain sees that she, like himself, has changed: "Your hair is white" (Plays, 699). Cuchulain realizes that their fates were interwoven when he first chose the life of action:

"We met/At the Hawk's Well under the withered trees" (Plays, 699).

Because he has killed her son, Aoife can claim his life: "You have a right to kill me" (Plays, 699).

However, Aoife's revenge on Cuchulain is not only that of a mother, but also that of an abandoned, humiliated woman:

I searched the mountain for
 your sleeping-place
 And laid my virgin body at
 your side,
 And yet, because you had
 left me, hated you
 And thought I would kill
 you in your sleep.
 (Plays, 700-01)

But before she takes Cuchulain's life, the Blind Man approaches and she leaves.

The Blind Man tells Cuchulain that he has been promised twelve pennies for Cuchulain's head. Cuchulain, becoming less and less a passionate lover of life as he approaches death, asks: "What better reason for killing a man?" (Plays, 702). As Cuchulain is about to die he sees his soul after death, in Phase One of a rebirth:

 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?
 (Plays, 702)

In his final moment he achieves an ecstasy of clear vision as he says of his soul: "I say it is about to sing" (Plays, 703), and the Blind Man cuts off his head.

The Morrigu returns to introduce Emer's dance, a death ritual. In stating "I arranged the dance" (Plays, 703), the Morrigu suggests

her responsibility, as the goddess of War, for Cuchulain's death.

Emer's dance is that of the tragi-comedian dancer spoken of by the Old Man at the beginning of the play: "upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death" (Plays, 694). Emer dances until she hears "a few faint bird notes" (Plays, 704).

These bird notes are explained in Yeats's epilogue to the Cuchulain plays, his poem "Cuchulain Comforted." Just before he dies, Cuchulain says of his soul after death: "I say it is about to sing" (Plays, 703). In the poem, Cuchulain joins "bird-like things" (Poems, 395) that he meets after death and sings with them:

They sang, but had nor human
tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common
as before;

They had changed their throats
and had the throats
of birds.

(Poems, 396)

It is the song of Cuchulain's soul that Emer hears in the bird notes.

The final scene of the play brings the audience sharply back to the world of the twentieth century, reminding us that it is not so much Cuchulain's importance as a Celtic hero that matters, but his significance for modern Ireland. It is the strong, fiery spirit of

Conall, Cuchulain, Usna's boys,
All that most ancient race
(Plays, 704)

that must be passed on to the Irish in their struggle for a national identity. As the Old Man points out, the story of Cuchulain becomes "the music of the beggar-man" (Plays, 694), the music of the people.

In this final play there is a review of all those characters of

the former plays who were relevant to Cuchulain's life, and each one is seen in a somewhat ironic light. The Old Man of At the Hawk's Well returns as "an old man looking back on life/[and] Imagines it in scorn" (Plays, 705). His final words are: "I spit! I spit! I spit!" (Plays, 694). Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's last love, becomes the victim of Cuchulain's withdrawal from life. Emer is left with nothing but a dance of death. Aoife, robbed of a life with Cuchulain and of her son, also loses the right to kill Cuchulain. The Blind Man (the shadow of Conchubar) wins Cuchulain's head, but it is a petty victory, a gain of twelve pennies. Only the Morrighu (representing the Sidhe and the Shape-Changeers) is a winner. But because for the gods, Cuchulain's life is no more than a prize in a game, his death is meaningless for them.

It is only Cuchulain, himself, who is truly victorious. Out of his tragedy he gains wisdom and acceptance of life, and an understanding of death as the natural fulfilment of life. It is only as he sees the image of his soul, singing in death, that he achieves true ecstasy.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Only a few weeks before Yeats died, he wrote in his letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham: "I must embody [truth] in the completion of my life" (Letters, 922).¹ In his old age, as he approached death, Yeats began to see death as the natural fulfilment of life. He, himself, had created the philosophical system of A Vision, but never had the gyres, the phases or the Great Wheel taken on such clarity or relevance as when he finally related his own life to the universal pattern. In this vision of the total pattern of the cycles of life, Yeats saw truth. In the completion of his life, Yeats felt he could embody truth.

Yeats had been concerned with the legend of Cuchulain as early as 1892, when he wrote the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," but it was not until he wrote the last Cuchulain play that he could see the total significance of the life and death of Cuchulain.

In a retrospective view of the events of Cuchulain's life, Yeats could see a pattern similar to that of his own life. And as Yeats saw that his own death would ultimately embody truth, so he saw that Cuchulain's death embodies truth. However, just as it is necessary for Cuchulain to undergo the journey from blindness into vision, so Yeats, himself, spent many years of confusion, trying to understand the meaning of life and death. And just as Cuchulain does not gain clear insight until the very moment of death, so Yeats did not understand until very shortly before his own death, that "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it."

It has been shown that at the most significant points in his own

¹See p. 2, above.

life, Yeats added another chapter to Cuchulain's life. For Yeats, these periods of his life were times of insight and vision. For the most part, they were also times of disappointment, disillusion or defeat. It is appropriate that the first Cuchulain play written, On Baile's Strand, was created at a time of extreme conflict for Yeats. Having found the means whereby to project his inner conflict (that is, through the character of Cuchulain), Yeats proceeded to use Cuchulain each time a crisis arose in his own life. Thus, over the years from 1903 to 1939, Yeats used his own life as a model for the life of Cuchulain.

In the dramatization of the life and death of Cuchulain, Yeats has shown us that there can be true victory in the retention of dignity and honour in the midst of defeat, and that out of tragedy can come insight and vision. But it is not only in the Cuchulain plays that Yeats deals with these themes. Throughout his poetry, from the early years to his death, Yeats's concern with the paradox of victory in defeat and his search for a vision are evident. But it was not until he, himself, finally understood death as the natural completion of life, that he found the answers to his search. Having come to an acceptance of life and death and being able to see his own life as one small cycle in the universal pattern, Yeats could finally complete the last Cuchulain play. When the five plays are arranged in the order of the events of Cuchulain's life, we can see an answer to the problem of life and death. Although Yeats could not solve the problem until shortly before his own death, his search is reflected in his poetry. That he was aware of his own need to justify man's mortality is evident as early as 1888. In a letter to Katherine Tynan, dated March 14, 1888, he wrote:

I have noticed some things about my poetry I did not know before, in this process of correction; for instance, that it is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world . . . that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge but of longing and complaint--the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge. (Letters, 63)

In his early poetry, Yeats wrote of his longing for the Irish heroic age, expressing his love for the days of romantic Ireland. In "He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes," Yeats wrote:

I bade my heart build these
poor rhymes:
It worked at them, day out,
day in,
Building a sorrowful loveliness
Out of the battles of old times.
(Poems, 71)

In "To his Heart, bidding it have no Fear," he wrote:

Him who trembles before the
flame and the flood,
And the winds that blow
through the starry
ways,
Let the starry winds and the
flame and the flood
Cover over and hide, for he
has no part
With the lonely, majestic
multitude.
(Poems, 71)

The same emotions and longing that created these two small poems motivated the telling of the story of Cuchulain. In these early years, Yeats was very much preoccupied with the legendary heroes, as he wrote such poems as The Wanderings of Oisín (1889), "Fergus and the Druid" (The Rose (1893)), "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" (1903) and "Baile and Aillinn" (1903). Although it was the character of Cuchulain that Yeats chose to elaborate on, Cuchulain represents all the Irish heroes. As Yeats wrote his Last Poems (1936-39), he saw in his dramatization of

Cuchulain's legend all the mysteries and beauty of the heroic age:

And when the Fool and
 Blind Man stole the
 bread
 Cuchulain fought the
 ungovernable sea;
 Heart-mysteries there, and
 yet when all is said
 It was the dream itself
 enchanted me:
 ("The Circus Animals'
 Desertion," Poems, 392)

For Yeats, the idea of victory in the midst of defeat was another concept that developed through the years. Perhaps the strongest statement Yeats made on this theme is his poem "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing"² (Responsibilities (1914)). In his poem "Upon a Dying Lady" (The Wild Swans at Coole (1919)), written for the dying Mabel Beardsley, Yeats compares the Lady to great heroes who, though doomed, triumph in their disasters:

. . . Achilles, Timor, Babar,
 Barhaim, all
 Who have lived in joy and
 laughed into the
 face of Death.
 (Poems, 179)

In his Last Poems, Yeats again wrote of victory amid defeat:

For beauty dies of beauty, worth
 of worth,
 And ancient lineaments are
 blotted out.

 We that look on but laugh
 in tragic joy.
 ("The Gyres," Poems, 337)

Yeats believed that conflict is the basis of all life, and the thought of old age and death was the source of much of his internal conflict, for Yeats was a great lover of life. As he wrote in a letter

²See pp. 1-2, above.

to H. J. C. Grierson, dated February 21, 1926: "One never tires of life and at the last must die of thirst with the cup at one's lip" (Letters, 711). In his poetry there are two patterns of thought dealing with age and death: the first is one of bitterness and rage; the second is one of vision and acceptance.

In the first pattern, Yeats describes old age as a burden, as in "Sailing to Byzantium" (The Tower (1928)):

An aged man is but a
paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a
stick, . . .
(Poems, 217)

A man in old age is seen as "That defiling and disfigured shape" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul," Poems, 266). In the poem "The Tower," Yeats asks:

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?
(Poems, 218)

and:

Did all old men and women,
rich and poor,
Who trod upon these rocks or
passed this door,
Whether in public or in secret
rage
As I do now against old age?
(Poems, 221)

But despite this impatience with death, Yeats did have some insight into a total vision of life and death, even though the vision was not completely clear to him until shortly before he died. In an

early poem from The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910), Yeats wrote:

Though leaves are many, the
 root is one;
 Through all the lying days of
 my youth
 I swayed my leaves and
 flowers in the sun;
 Now I may wither into the
 truth.

(Poems, 105)

This poem is appropriately entitled "The Coming of Wisdom with Time." As Yeats approached death, his bitterness and rage were modified by acceptance and understanding. In "Lapis Lazuli" he writes of three ancient Chinamen, carved in lapis lazuli:

. . . and I
 Delight to imagine them
 seated there;
 There, on the mountain and
 the sky,
 On all the tragic scene they
 stare.
 One asks for mournful melodies;
 Accomplished fingers begin to
 play.
 Theirs eyes mid many wrinkles,
 their eyes,
 Their ancient, glittering eyes,
 are gay.

(Poems, 339)

It was through these "ancient, glittering, gay eyes" that Yeats began to see life and death.

Thus it is obvious that Yeats's concern with heroism, victory and defeat, and life and death is not limited to the five Cuchulain plays. These themes are the foundations of Yeats's poetry, prose and drama. In this light the pattern of Cuchulain's life takes on added significance as we see that his story is the journey of a man of courage from blindness into vision.

As Cuchulain moves through the action of the plays,--as they appear in the order of the events of his life--he is led from victory to disaster, to acceptance and in acceptance, a return to victory. His final exultation, as he dies, comes not from the memories of his victories in battle, but from a total vision of life.

In At the Hawk's Well, Cuchulain is presented with a choice of either a life of action or a life of settled domesticity. Because he is young and reckless, he sees victory and defeat only in terms of winning or losing a battle. Coming to the Well to drink of the waters of immortality, his most complete humiliation would be to become a decrepit, whining old man, as is the Old Man waiting beside the Well. In his "folly of youth" (Plays, 212) he refuses to accept the limits of mortality. He wants to be a hero, and therefore chooses the life of action. However, in making the choice, he challenges the gods by daring to look into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well. The Guardian accepts his challenge by entering into a dance with him. Although Cuchulain is, as yet, unaware of the implications of his choice, he has, in fact, made a commitment to be led through tragedy to an understanding of the true meaning of defeat and victory.

In The Green Helmet, Cuchulain has achieved the status of hero, as he understands it. He has successfully challenged the supernatural (Bricriu) and has won the title of Champion of Ulster. Married to a proud and lusty wife who worships him, he is at the height of his success, and has gained all his worldly desires. However, he is still unaware that these superficial victories do not satisfy the terms of his original commitment. Before he can become worthy of the insight and vision that

are the rewards of Yeats's tragic hero, he must be raised to extreme heights and then brought down to extreme depths.

The rise and fall of Emer is a lesser, but similar pattern. Her fulfilment would appear to be in her identity as Cuchulain's wife. In The Green Helmet she, too, is at the height of her success. She is married to the Champion of Ulster and is, subsequently, First Lady of Ulster. Yet, Emer must also undergo tragedy and must ultimately find fulfilment in her unselfish, unacknowledged redemption of Cuchulain in The Only Jealousy of Emer.

By the time of On Baile's Strand, Cuchulain's recklessness and "success" have become too much for Conchubar to handle. Fearing for the safety of the land and for the rights of his children, Conchubar forces Cuchulain to take an oath of obedience. As Cuchulain takes the oath, going against the instincts of his soul, tragedy descends upon him. The curse, prophesied by the Old Man at the Hawk's Well, is realized as Cuchulain kills his only son. In living a life of action, Cuchulain has ignored the demands of society, setting his own desires and impulses above all else. The debt he must pay is his son's life. In the midst of this overwhelming tragedy, Cuchulain comes to know the meaninglessness of victories in battle and the vanity of man's attempts to defeat the gods and fate.

In The Only Jealousy of Emer, Cuchulain, overcome by the enormity of his tragedy, "withdraws" from life and moves into a death-like trance. As he goes through the process of Dreaming Back, his guilt is purged and he emerges a "purified" man. The play is based on a psychological analysis of Cuchulain's projection of his experiences as he "dreams" of

the women in his life and as he begins to see his life as a pattern. Once he has come to terms with his experiences and his relationships, he can begin to see the pattern of his life as one small cycle in the universal pattern.

In this play Emer suffers both tragedy and fulfilment. Knowing she does not, now, have Cuchulain's love, she forfeits any chance of ever regaining it. In return, she redeems him from Fand and brings him back to life, so that he can prepare for death and achieve his final ecstatic vision. Emer's defeat is the loss of Cuchulain's love. Her triumph is her awareness that it is she, alone, who is capable of saving him. Like Cuchulain, Emer dares to bargain with the gods.

Fand, too, suffers defeat. She loses the love of Cuchulain, her battle with Bricriu and the opportunity to be freed from the cycles of rebirth. It is not only man, but the gods as well, who are subject to the universal pattern. Fand must now move through the objective incarnations.

For Eithne Inguba, success in this play is merely a reprieve, for she ultimately suffers defeat in The Death of Cuchulain. She retains Cuchulain's love, claiming to have saved him, but later becomes a victim of her love as Cuchulain willingly gives her away to Conall. In the end she does not even have dignity in defeat. She becomes hysterical, threatening suicide.

In The Death of Cuchulain, Cuchulain finally abandons those worldly pleasures that had once been so important to him. He gives Eithne away to Conall and forfeits the chance to win in battle, ignoring Emer's warning to wait for help. He moves willingly and almost eagerly

into death. As the image of Aoife comes before him, the pattern of his life becomes complete. Having seen Aoife, he is ready to die. He finally gains insight into the cycles of life and death as he is about to die. Seeing the image of his soul after death, he cries out in tragic ecstasy: "I say it is about to sing." This final vision, in the moment of his death, is Cuchulain's supreme victory.

With the appearance of Aoife, we are reminded that she, too, has suffered because of her involvement with Cuchulain. He has been the only man to overcome her in battle and in love. But having once made love to her, Cuchulain abandoned her. He has killed her only son, and although he admits her right to kill him, she loses that pleasure to the Blind Man. Finally, she will never have the satisfaction of knowing that it was she, above all other women, whom Cuchulain desired the most.

For Yeats, the significance of Cuchulain's victory amid the defeat of death extends beyond the context of the five Cuchulain plays. Yeats was always concerned with the political situation of Ireland and was always a staunch and loyal supporter of the Irish heroes. He often called upon the names of these heroes to stir the Irish into action for their country. During the controversy over the Lane pictures, Yeats wrote "September 1913," complaining:

Romantic Ireland's dead and
gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.
(Poems, 121)

After the Easter Rising in 1916 and the execution of the rebel leaders Yeats wrote "Easter 1916." Praising the memory of the leaders he wrote:

. . . enough
 To know they dreamed
 and are dead;

 A terrible beauty is born.
 (Poems, 204-05)

Again in "Sixteen Dead Men," he wrote:

But who can talk of give and
 take,
 What should be and what not
 While those dead men are
 loitering there
 To stir the boiling pot?
 (Poems, 205)

In the midst of the Irish struggles for national identity, Yeats saw Cuchulain as the embodiment of Irish romantic heroism and the symbol of Irish nationalism. As Yeats suggests in the final song of the Street-Singer in The Death of Cuchulain, Cuchulain can be the guiding spirit of the Irish Nationalists:

Who thought Cuchulain till
 it seemed
 He stood where they had stood?
 (Plays, 705)

It was the memory and the spirit of Cuchulain that motivated the Irish heroes of 1916 and it is his memory and spirit that many Irishmen today may be recalling as they find themselves in the midst of new troubles in 1970.

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