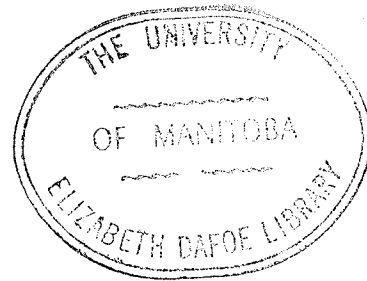


THE UNITY OF
THE CUCHULAIN CYCLE OF PLAYS
OF W. B. YEATS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Graduate Studies
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Reginald R. Skene
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An Abstract of
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The purpose of this thesis is to establish that the five plays Yeats wrote concerning the life and death of the Irish hero Cuchulain constitute a unified and coherent cycle of plays. It is the contention of the writer that certain of themes and patterns of imagery in these plays are apparent only when the plays are considered as parts of a closely knit series. It is further contended that the production of all five Cuchulain plays, in a single evening, would serve to overcome the apparent obscurity of the individual plays, and make Yeats's treatment of the heroic life comprehensible.

Chapter I attempts to make a prima facie case for unity in advance of studying the question in depth. To this end, a single image is traced through the entire series of Cuchulain plays. Emphasis is on the playwright's use of the "feather image" to link the plays of the cycle together and to develop one of Yeats's major themes.

Chapter II is an exploration of the relationship between the Cuchulain cycle and the Great Wheel of lunar phases, a central symbol in Yeats's A Vision. It is argued that the Great Wheel is used to harmonize a number of distinct patterns of theme and imagery in the plays, all of which patterns are cyclical in nature. The Great Wheel is considered as a symbolic representation of the life of the Moon, then as symbolic representation of the life of the Sun, and, finally, as a series of symbolic incarnations.

Chapter III concerns itself with the elements in the cycle which derive from Celtic mythology. Chapter IV considers the autobiographical elements in the plays. In Chapters V to IX, each of the Cuchulain plays is examined in turn. Particular attention is paid to Yeats's use of the Cuchulain legend as found in Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne, and to the manner in which he adapted it.

The picture which emerges from the first nine chapters is that of a play cycle which is unified in itself and which also has a unifying effect on Yeats's thought. Yeats tried to bring together in the Cuchulain plays the ideas about life, about Ireland, and about the heroic ideal, which were his constant preoccupation. The cycle may be seen as having grown, like A Vision, out of Yeats's life-long search for unity, and more particularly out of his work on an Irish mystical Order.

Chapter X is a logical outgrowth of the contention that much of the meaning of the individual Cuchulain plays can be comprehended only when they are considered as parts of a unified cycle. Chapter X outlines plans for the production of the five-play cycle on a single evening.

The principle which is stressed in the production plans is the necessity of finding visual representations for the symbolic patterns implicit in the imagery of the Cuchulain plays. If such a production could be successfully accomplished, it would finally establish for theatre audiences, as well as for literary critics, that the Cuchulain cycle is a unified work, a piece of coherent theatre, comprehensible to an audience on a multiplicity of levels.

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:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

from "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

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PART ONE

THOSE THINGS THAT THEY WERE EMBLEMS OF

CHAPTER I

A FOOL AND HIS FEATHERS

In his book Yeats's Iconography, F. A. C. Wilson rejects the idea that the Cuchulain plays of W. B. Yeats constitute a coherent cycle of plays.

There is, or so it seems to me, no such thing as a Cuchulain cycle among Yeats's plays, and I think Bjersby's study (valuable though it is) a piece of false emphasis; these plays, planned independently, do not cohere in any essential respect, and Yeats's attempt to interrelate them is largely wasted ingenuity.¹

Such an emphatic statement by an influential critic demands careful consideration. One cannot help wondering, however, what special meaning Wilson gives to the words "any essential respect". The Cuchulain plays do, after all, tell the story of the life of Cuchulain. Further, a consideration of the plays as a unified series reveals at least three interrelated plot patterns which run through the entire cycle. The love-hate relationship of Cuchulain and Aoife is traced in At The Hawk's Well, On Baile's Strand, and The Death of Cuchulain. The course of Emer's love for Cuchulain is recounted in The Green Helmet, The Only Jealousy of Emer, and The Death Of Cuchulain. Behind these two love stories and influencing the course of their development is a supernatural conflict between

¹ F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography (London: Victor Gollancz, 1960), p. 41.

the spirits Fand and Bricriu. Cuchulain falls under the spell of Fand in At The Hawk's Well and is chosen as champion by Bricriu in The Green Helmet. In The Only Jealousy Of Emer, the two spirits battle for the soul of Cuchulain. Yeats's final revision of The Only Jealousy Of Emer has the effect of integrating the cycle more closely. In the version of the play published in 1921 in Four Plays for Dancers, there was a verbal confrontation between Fand and Bricriu.² In the text as prepared by Yeats for the Collected Plays of 1934, this confrontation is eliminated. Yeats forces us to rely more heavily on the previous plays to account for the antagonism between Bricriu and Fand. Since, on one level of meaning, Fand represents Unity of Being and Bricriu represents Discord, we see at the very heart of the Cuchulain cycle one of Yeats's favourite antinomies.³ As I hope to demonstrate, there are a number of less obvious, but equally important, thematic and structural patterns running through the entire Cuchulain cycle, giving it a high degree of organic unity. Some extremely important patterns of imagery also become apparent when we regard the Cuchulain plays as a unified series. The more one examines the plays, the more difficult it becomes to accept

² W. B. Yeats, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, edited by Russell K. Alspach (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 559 and 561.

³ cf. W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 67.

F. A. C. Wilson's statement that Yeats's attempt to relate them was "wasted ingenuity".

Although few critics would join Wilson in his point-blank denial of the existence of a Cuchulain cycle, most have acted as though one did not exist. Birgit Bjersby arranges the plays in such an order that they tell the story of Cuchulain's life, but, since she is primarily interested in Yeats's use of sources, she contributes little to our understanding of the Cuchulain cycle as a work of dramatic art.⁴ Peter Ure, while acknowledging that Yeats regarded the Cuchulain plays as a coherent series, analyses the plays separately and in the order in which Yeats wrote them.⁵ This is the procedure followed by most critics. Probably the best of the recent books on Yeats's plays is Leonard Nathan's The Tragic Drama Of William Butler Yeats.⁶ Nathan gives excellent analyses of the individual Cuchulain plays but pays scant attention to their interconnection. Morton Seiden sees the Cuchulain plays as a coherent cycle based on Celtic heliolatry, but he does not pursue the analysis beyond the identification of Cuchulain with the sun,

⁴ Birgit Maria Hermine Bjersby, The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats (Upsala: Lundequist, 1950).

⁵ Peter Ure, Yeats The Playwright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 61.

⁶ Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats (New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 1965).

Emer with the moon, and Cuchulain's enemies with the forces of darkness.⁷ In a later chapter I hope to demonstrate the importance of this suggestion in tracing the structural pattern of the Cuchulain cycle.

The reluctance of critics to study the five Cuchulain plays as a unified series seems all the more remarkable because the plays are relatively short. A single-evening presentation of the five-play cycle is well within the realm of theatrical possibility. The entire cycle would take no more time than the average five-act play. The greatest bar to such a production is the wide divergency of styles of production envisioned in the stage directions of the individual plays. My own view is that a harmonious production style for the Cuchulain cycle should grow out of an understanding of the cycle as a whole and should aim to emphasize those elements which give the cycle its coherence.

It will, of course, be argued that the order in which Yeats wrote the plays makes it highly unlikely that the cycle could have the degree of unity I am suggesting. Yeats wrote On Baile's Strand (Play Three in the cycle) in 1901 in collaboration with Lady Gregory. The Green Helmet (Play Two) was completed in 1909. Then, in 1915 and 1916, after Ezra Pound had

⁷ Morton Irving Seiden, William Butler Yeats - The Poet As A Mythmaker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 226.

introduced him to the Japanese Noh Plays, he wrote At The Hawk's (Play One) and The Only Jealousy of Emer (Play Four). Yeats's final Cuchulain play, The Death of Cuchulain, was written in December 1938, a month before the poet's own death.

On closer consideration, it is apparent that such a schedule of composition is not at all inconsistent with the development of a unified cycle of plays. On Baile's Strand, the first Cuchulain play Yeats wrote, contains the central incident of the Cuchulain story. It tells of Cuchulain's slaughter of his son, and of the subsequent madness which causes him to fight the waves. The Green Helmet, the second play Yeats wrote, serves as an introduction to On Baile's Strand. The two dance plays At The Hawk's Well and The Only Jealousy of Emer extend the two-play series to four by telling how Cuchulain came to be so cursed that he should kill his own son, and by showing us the outcome of his fight with the sea. Finally, in the face of his own approaching death, Yeats completed the series with The Death of Cuchulain. Looked at in this way, Yeats's order of composition seems a perfectly natural approach to the building up of a play cycle around a central incident.

As Yeats's series of Cuchulain plays grew in number, the poet was careful to link them by imagery as well as plot. The full complexity of the patterns of Yeats's imagery becomes apparent only when we view the cycle as a whole. This will be appreciated if we trace a single set of related images through

the entire cycle.

As a symbolist, Yeats was careful never to limit his metaphors to a single meaning. Thus, the interpretation of any pattern of imagery may be undertaken on a number of different levels. The bird image in the Cuchulain plays is one of the poet's most striking recurring symbols, and is a major factor in drawing the five-play cycle into a unified whole. As we shall see in a later chapter, the birds which appear in the Cuchulain plays have a deep significance when considered in the context of Celtic mythology and occult symbolism. Doubtless, Yeats hoped that the archtypal nature of his symbols would awaken a response in the Unconscious of the theatre-goer.⁸ But the coherence of the cycle does not depend either on the possession of special esoteric knowledge or on the luring into personal consciousness ideas from Spiritus Mundi. The bird imagery should be quite comprehensible to an audience without special knowledge, provided that the Cuchulain cycle is seen from beginning to end and due regard is given to the interrelation of the five plays. It is this surface meaning that I should now like to explore, considering the plays, not in the order they were written, but in the order which presents the life of Cuchulain chronologically.

⁸ cf. W. B. Yeats, "A People's Theatre", Explorations (London: Macmillan & Co., 1962), p. 255. (Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the works of Yeats are made to the most readily available collections of essays, plays and poems now in print and not to the volumes in which the works first appeared.)

That the hawk is an important symbol in the cycle is apparent from the very opening of At The Hawk's Well. Yeats's stage directions require a black cloth on which is painted a gold pattern suggesting a hawk. The Guardian of the Well attracts Cuchulain's attention with the cry of a hawk. The costume revealed when she throws off her cloak suggests a hawk, and it is with a hawk-like dance that she lures Cuchulain from the well. That Cuchulain's fascination with the hawk is intimately bound up with his role is also apparent. At his very approach a great grey hawk sweeps down from the sky, tearing at him and smiting him with its great wing. Cuchulain's response marks him as one born to the heroic life. He fights the hawk off with his sword but longs to subdue it, to make it his own. The Old Man identifies the hawk with the Woman of the Sidhe herself. He calls her "the unappeasable shadow", flitting upon the mountain-side, to allure or to destroy. He warns Cuchulain that it is the spirit of this mountain witch that takes possession of the fierce women of the hills, who, under the leadership of Aoife, are so strong in battle. Most important is the effect of the hawk on all who dare to gaze into its eyes.

There falls a curse
 On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes;
 So get you gone while you have that proud step
 And confident voice, for not a man alive
 Has so much luck that he can play with it.
 Those that have long to live should fear her most,
 The old are cursed already, That curse may be

Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
 Or always to mix hatred in the love;
 Or it may be that she will kill your children,
 That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
 Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
 With your own hand.⁹

It is I think, fairly clear that, whatever the hawk may represent on other levels of interpretation, to gaze into her eyes is to commit oneself to a life of heroism. To make the heroic commitment is to condemn oneself to a life of violence and to give up forever the prospect of domestic tranquility and love unmixed with hate. The shadow of the hawk appears to Cuchulain in three forms: the bird on the mountain-side, the entranced Guardian of the Well, and possessed Aoife. In his response, he shows himself ready to accept the curse of the heroic life and the curse of heroic love. That such heroism is also folly is pointed up by the song of the musicians at the end of At The Hawk's Well.

'The man that I praise',
 Cries out the empty well,
 'Lives all his days
 Where a hand on the bell
 Can call the milch cows
 To the comfortable door of his house.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 Dry stones in a well?'

'The man that I praise',
 Cries out the leafless tree,

⁹ W. B. Yeats, The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats
 (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963), p. 215.

'Has married and stays
 By an old hearth, and he
 On naught has set store
 But children and dogs on the floor.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 A withered tree?' ¹⁰

This equation of hero and fool is picked up and explored in the ironic sub-plot of On Baile's Strand, the third play of the cycle.

In On Baile's Strand we see that the heroic commitment not only destroys any chance of domestic tranquility but poses a threat to civil harmony as well. Yeats brings the heroic Cuchulain into direct confrontation with the High King Conchubar, who represents the community's claim to a life of peace and security. Cuchulain is called upon to give up his life of ecstatic dance and unruly conflict and swear allegiance to the more rational and socially responsible Conchubar.

Cuchulain's whole heroic way of life is described in terms of hawk imagery. Even his alleged supernatural conception is spoken of as a union between hawk and woman.

For I would need a weightier argument
 Than one that marred me in the copying,
 As I have that clean hawk out of the air
 That, as men say, begot this body of mine
 Upon a mortal woman.¹¹

He addresses his followers as

Nestlings of a high nest,
 Hawks that have followed me into the air
 And looked upon the sun. . . .¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 219-20. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 257. ¹² Ibid., p. 260.

And when they reveal they are willing to trade the heroic life for Conchubar's offer of civil tranquility, Cuchulain accounts for it thus:

You've wives and children now,
And for that reason cannot follow one
That lives like a bird's flight from tree to tree.¹³

When Cuchulain is brought face to face with the son he does not recognize, his conversation is filled with references to the hawk as a symbol of heroism and courage. Speaking of the young man's bravery in challenging him, Cuchulain says,

To have shown the hawk's grey feather is enough,
And you speak highly, too.¹⁴

His own reaction to the challenge is also hawk-like.

But the Hawk's sleepy till its well-beloved
Cries out amid the acorns, or it has seen
Its enemy like a speck upon the sun.¹⁵

He dismisses Conchubar's offer of wisdom with the words

What's wisdom to the hawk, when that clear eye
Is burning nearer up in the high air? ¹⁶

With this picture of the hawk-like heroism of Cuchulain is contrasted our final view of Conchubar:

— you who sat up there
With your old rod of kingship, like a magpie
Nursing a stolen spoon.¹⁷

The sub-plot of On Baile's Strand offers an ironic comment on Cuchulain's heroic commitment and on the relation-

¹³ Ibid., p. 261. ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 265. ¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid. ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 277

ship between Cuchulain and Conchubar. Just as Cuchulain and Conchubar are bound together by their need for each other, so the Fool and Blind Man find themselves bound in partnership. The Fool and Blind Man are, as Yeats himself pointed out, shadows of Cuchulain and Conchubar.¹⁸ In the light of the bird imagery which we have traced as descriptive of Cuchulain's heroic commitment, the nature of the Fool's folly becomes interesting.

It is not the hawk that the Fool pursues. Instead he seeks out chickens and turns them over to the Blind Man; chicken-theft provides an ironic parallel to Cuchulain's heroic deeds in the service of Conchubar. Leaving such practical matters as cooking to the Blind Man, the Fool goes out and runs races with the witches at the edge of the waves. Like Cuchulain, he sees himself as specially sought after by the women of the Sidhe.

Wait a minute. I shouldn't have closed the door. There are some that look for me, and I wouldn't like them not to find me. Don't tell it anybody, Blind Man. 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. That's wide enough. All the witches can come in now. I wouldn't have them beat the door and say, 'Where is the Fool? Why has he put a lock on the door?'¹⁹

¹⁸ Richard Ellmann, Yeats - The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1948), p. 166.

¹⁹ Collected Plays, p. 248

Surely this is a comic parallel to the experience of Cuchulain in At The Hawk's Well and his later experience in The Only Jealousy of Emer. The fact that Cuchulain has been, in his conversation, dressing himself in the hawk-plumes of heroism gives meaning to the picture of the Fool, robbed of his chicken, sitting decorating his hair with feathers. The willingness of Cuchulain to give up tangible goods in pursuit of the heroic dream is underlined by the Blind Man's remark about the Fool.

I gave him what he likes best. You do not know how vain this Fool is. He likes nothing so well as a feather.²⁰

The sub-plot also provides ironic commentary on the essential blindness of Conchubar, the uninspired authority figure, and on the nature of his betrayal of Cuchulain. The Fool joins the Blind Man because he would starve, did not the Blind Man mastermind his chicken thefts. However, the entire raison d'être of the relationship would appear to collapse when the Blind Man eats the whole chicken, leaving the Fool with the feathers. Just as the Blind Man would be helpless without the Fool's services, so Conchubar needs the strong arm of Cuchulain. The only benefit Cuchulain gets from the relationship is the stabilizing influence of a high king, whose regime guarantees freedom from strife so that one's posterity,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 273

the most desirable kind of immortality, may be secure. Cuchulain, himself apparently childless and at the head of a young and energetic band of warriors, sees no need for security bought at the price of freedom. It is only because his followers, having grown older and attained offspring of their own, have become more conservative that Cuchulain agrees to swear allegiance. When Cuchulain himself is faced by the son he did not know existed, and whom he still does not recognize, he suddenly feels that desire for peace and abhorrence of conflict that he previously lacked. He refuses to fight the young champion. Now Conchubar uses his power to force Cuchulain to fight. The oath that was to make the world safe for each man's personal dynasty is used to rob Cuchulain of his son. The chicken for which Cuchulain entered Conchubar's service is gone; like the Fool, Cuchulain is left only with the feathers, in his case the heroic but futile gesture of the fight with the sea.

Just before it is revealed to Cuchulain that he has killed his son, the two plots are brought together. The Fool's chicken feathers provide the central symbol of the scene. Cuchulain is actually wiping the blood from his sword with feathers taken from the Fool as the Blind Man informs him that the blood was that of his son.

In The Only Jealousy of Emer, Yeats takes up another aspect of the bird symbol introduced in At The Hawk's Well and

thence shows us another side to the hero's quest, for the hero also seeks after beauty. The song of the First Musician tells us:

A woman's beauty is like a white
Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone
At daybreak after stormy night
Between two furrows upon the ploughed land.²¹

This ideal of beauty with which the goddess Fand is now identified is sharply contrasted with the hawk-like form in which she first appeared to Cuchulain, for she was then half bird of prey, and Cuchulain fell under her spell. She taunts him:

You were not so dumbfounded when
I was that bird of prey, and yet
I am all woman now.²²

When Cuchulain returns to the world from his sojourn with Fand it is to the world of violence and discord he returns. Bricriu, god of Discord, is triumphant. The hero knows neither the attainment of perfect beauty nor the comfort of domesticity. His life remains one of heroic struggle, getting what solace he may in the arms of Eithne Inguba.

At the end of The Death of Cuchulain the Blind Man returns. In a scene which resounds with ironic echoes of On Baile's Strand, he takes Cuchulain's life. The meaning of this scene is clear. Cuchulain now stands in place of the

²¹ Ibid., p. 281. ²² Ibid., p. 292.

Fool, for Hero and Fool are one, The Blind Man prepares to steal Cuchulain's head for twelve pennies, just as he stole the chicken from the Fool long ago. As a final ironic touch, Cuchulain muses about a feathery vision.

Cuchulain. 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?

Blind Man. Your shoulder is there
 This is your neck. Ah! Ah! Are you ready
 Cuchulain!

Cuchulain. I say it is about to sing.²³

And thus, by means of bird imagery once again, Yeats places the Divine Folly of the hero in its spiritual context, while in no way lessening our appreciation of the irony of the situation.

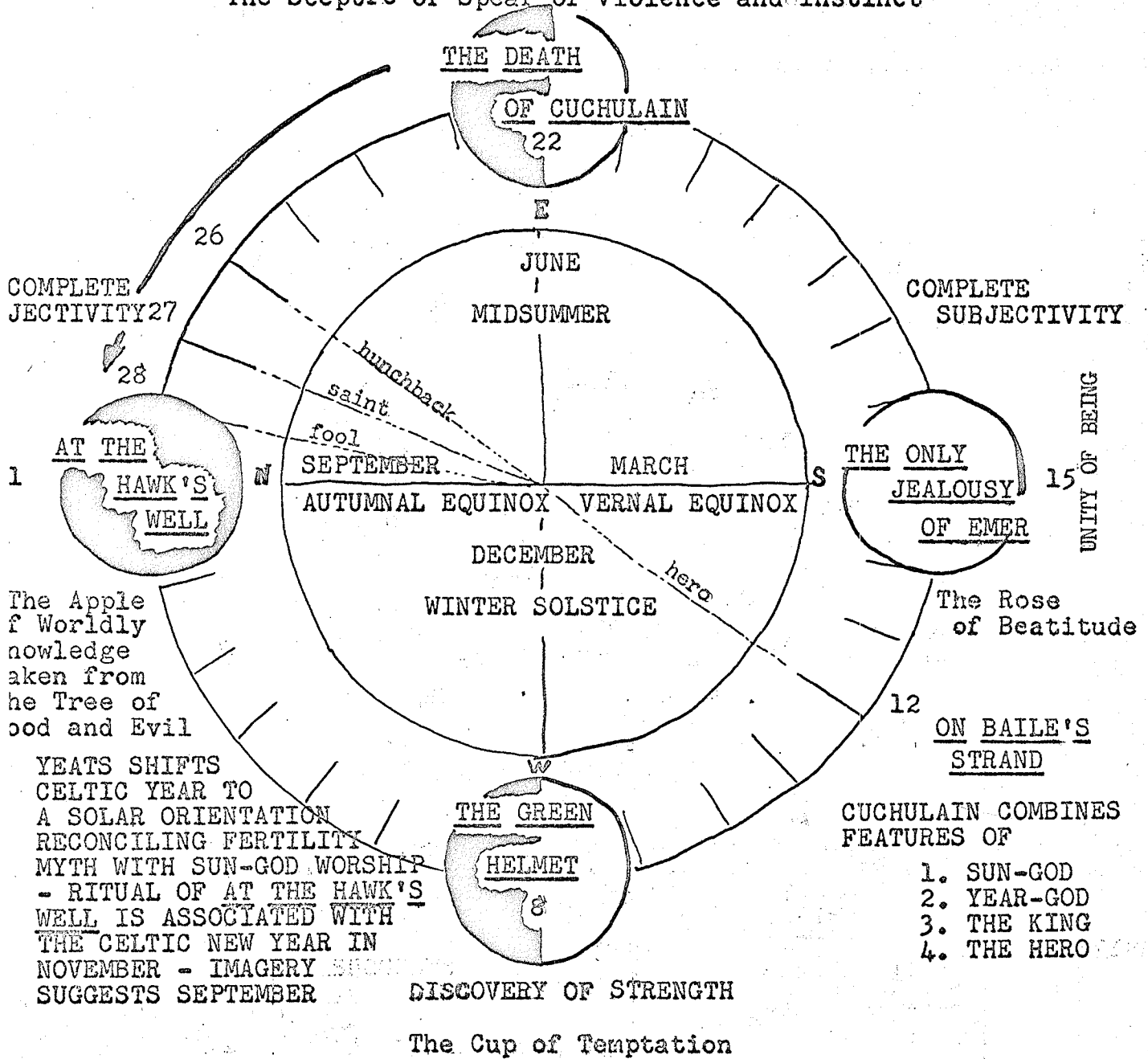
It should be clear from this analysis of Yeats's use of a single cluster of related images that Yeats was most scrupulous in his efforts to bring the image patterns of the separate Cuchulain plays into harmony with each other. It should also be apparent that certain of the image patterns can be discerned only by following them through the entire cycle. The degree of coherence in the imagery of the Cuchulain cycle surely justifies us in considering it as a single work of art. It remains now to discover the structural plan which

²³ Ibid., pp. 702-703.

gives it an underlying unity.

BREAKING OF STRENGTH

The Sceptre or Spear of Violence and Instinct



CHAPTER II

THE GREAT WHEEL

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
The full and moon's dark and all the crescents,
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in;
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.

from "The Phases of the Moon"¹

Yeats saw all human experience as cyclical. His principal symbol for illustrating this was a Great Wheel around the circumference of which were arranged the twenty-eight phases of a symbolic moon. Alternatively he saw life as moving between objectivity and subjectivity on a pair of interpenetrating gyres. In A Vision he explains:

This wheel is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought. Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it is attainable, at Phase 15 and returns to Phase 1 again.²

That Yeats should have used such cyclical arrangement as the organizing principle for his most ambitious play cycle would seem to be an idea hardly calculated to startle those who are familiar with the tendencies of Yeats's thought. Yet it is an idea that to this point has attracted little critical attention.

It is clear from the speeches of the Ghost of Cuchulain

¹ Vision, p. 60.

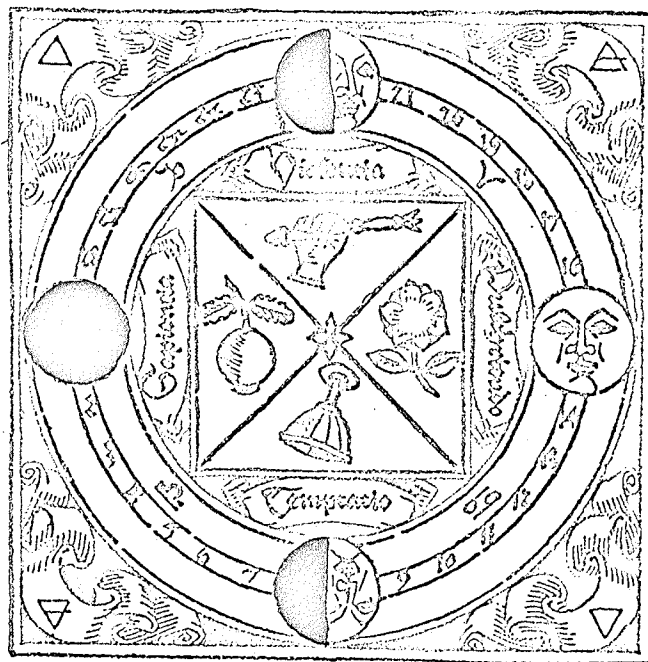
² Ibid., p. 81.

and of the Woman of the Sidhe in The Only Jealousy of Emer that such an arrangement is intended. It is also apparent that The Only Jealousy of Emer is a dramatization of the fifteenth phase. The Ghost of Cuchulain asks:

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?³

The effect of this speech is to identify the Woman of the Sidhe (the goddess Fand) with the moon in its fifteenth phase, that is, the phase of the full moon. Seiden quotes Sir John Rhys as referring to Cuchulain as "the most prominent sun god of pagan Ireland".⁴ As we shall have occasion to prove later, there can be little doubt that Yeats accepted and used this traditional association of Cuchulain with Celtic heliolatry. If Fand is seen as representing the moon and Cuchulain the sun, then the demand of the goddess that Cuchulain kiss her takes on a new meaning. The moon requires the kiss of the sun to complete her fulness. At all other phases of the moon, the shadow of the earth intervenes. In this love story of sun and moon, the union can be only momentary. Inevitably, the shadow of the earth returns, just as Cuchulain's memories of earthly life come between him and Fand.

³ Collected Plays, p. 291. ⁴ Seiden, op.cit., p.226.



The Great Wheel
from the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominum*

The Great Wheel as shown on page 66 of A Vision

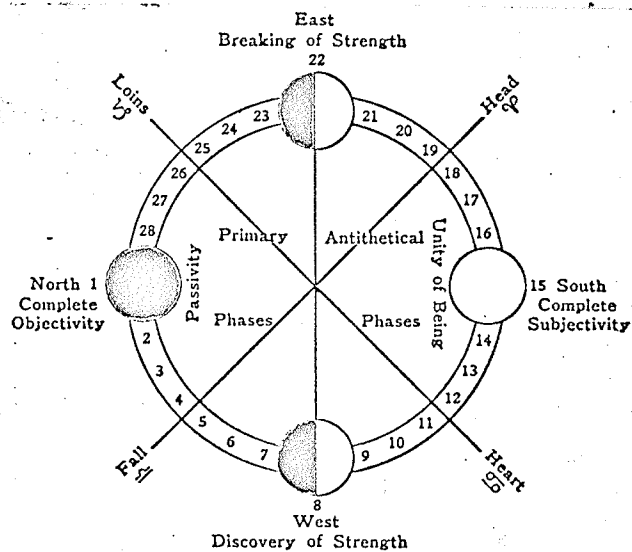


Diagram from page 81 of A Vision

PLATE II

Woman of the Sidhe. Time shall seem to stay his course;
 When your mouth and my mouth meet
 All my round shall be complete
 Imagining all its circles run;
 And there shall be oblivion
 Even to quench Cuchulain's drouth,
 Even to still that heart.⁵

This identification of Cuchulain and Fand with sun and moon holds for At The Hawk's Well too, but here we see the relationship of sun and moon when the moon is at Phase One or totally darkened. Here it is the sun who seeks out the moon, but cannot reach her. It is significant that the Woman of the Sidhe is described as the "the unappeasable shadow"⁶ and is associated with images of darkness. When Cuchulain pursues her, she flees from him and hides in the rocks.⁷

The diagram of the Great Wheel on page 81 of A Vision shows the two other important phases to be Phase Eight, at the end of the first quarter, and Phase Twenty-two, at the end of the third. (See plate II, p.20.) I would place The Green Helmet at Phase Eight and The Death of Cuchulain at Phase Twenty-two. I would place On Baile's Strand at Phase Twelve, which Yeats designates as the Phase of the Hero, an appropriate position for the central play of the Cuchulain cycle.

This hypothesis, that the Cuchulain cycle constitutes a dramatization of crisis points on Yeats's Great Wheel, receives striking confirmation if we look at the symbols which

⁵ Collected Plays, pp. 292-293. ⁶ Ibid., p.214.

⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

decorate the illustration on page 66 of A Vision. (See plate II, p. 20.) The illustration shows the twenty-eight phase lunar wheel. Opposite Phase One is the Apple of Worldly Knowledge taken from the Tree of Good and Evil. We think of the tree symbolism in At The Hawk's Well and particularly the hazels which drop their nuts into the well. The words of the Musicians also come to mind: "Wisdom must live a bitter life."⁸ Opposite Phase Eight is The Cup of Temptation, a symbol most appropriate to the imagery and theme of The Green Helmet. Opposite Phase Fifteen is the Rose of Beatitude, which like the full moon, is a symbol of absolute beauty and perfection, characteristics explored in The Only Jealousy of Emer. Phase Twenty-two is The Sceptre or Spear of Violence and Instinct.⁹ This is a symbol appropriate to both the conflict in which Cuchulain, in The Death of Cuchulain, finds himself and the fate which meets him.

The fixing of the positions of the five Cuchulain plays on the Great Wheel is only the first step in understanding the complex design which underlies their apparent diversity. If the Wheel is considered to represent a lunar month, then the pattern of the Cuchulain cycle may be seen as the love story of the sun and the moon. The two most important

⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁹ Source of labels for these symbols is Morton Seiden, op. cit., p. 75

plays in this pattern are At The Hawk's Well and The Only Jealousy of Emer. But a second, and more important, pattern is imposed on the first, for the Cuchulain cycle not only traces the relationship between moon and sun through a lunar month; it also traces the fortunes of the sun itself through an entire solar year. But how does the solar year relate to Yeats's Great Wheel of lunar phases? In a much neglected passage of A Vision Yeats tells us:

I am told to give Phases 1, 8, 15, 22 a month apiece, the other phases the third of a month, and begin the year like the early Roman year in the lunar month corresponding to March, when days begin to grow longer than nights:

March . . .	Phase 15
April . . .	Phases 16, 17, 18
May . . .	Phases 19, 20, 21
June . . .	Phase 22

and so on.¹⁰

Applying this table of correspondence to the phases the plays illustrate, we get some interesting results.

At The Hawk's Well would be placed in September, at the autumnal equinox, The Green Helmet in December, at the winter solstice, On Baile's Strand in February, near the old Celtic festival of Imbolc. The Only Jealousy of Emer would be set in March, at the vernal equinox, and The Death of Cuchulain in June, at the summer solstice. (See plate I, p. 17.)

¹⁰ Vision p. 196.

Since these dates marked the festivals of primitive heliolatry, an interesting possibility presents itself. Are the Cuchulain plays really a series of rituals centred around the Sun-God and celebrating important events in the Solar year?

Throughout the entire cycle, Cuchulain is described in terms of solar imagery. When he first appears in At The Hawk's Well he is dressed like a young Sun-God. The Old Man says:

If I may judge by the gold
On head and feet and glittering in your coat,
You are not of those who hate the living world.¹¹

In The Green Helmet Emer speaks of "His mind that is fire, His body that is sun", and declares that she is "moon to that sun", and "steel to that fire".¹² In On Baile's Strand it is said of Cuchulain:

He burns the earth as if he were a fire,
And time can never touch him.¹³

The terms in which Cuchulain describes his supernatural parent are suggestive of Sun-God imagery.

My father gave me this.
He came to try me, rising up at dawn
Out of the cold dark of the rich sea.
He challenged me to battle, but before
My sword had touched his sword, told me his name,
Gave me this cloak, and vanished. It was woven
By women of the Country-under-Wave
Out of the fleeces of the sea.¹⁴

¹¹ Collected Plays, p. 211. ¹² Ibid., p. 239.
¹³ Ibid., p. 256. ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 268.

If Cuchulain's story is a legend built around an image of sunrise, his own fate at the end of On Baile's Strand suggests the sun setting beyond the western sea. The Fool describes it thus

There, he is down! He is up again. He is going out in the deep water. There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him, the waves have mastered him.¹⁵

While such sentiments represent man's naif response to the apparent death of the sun and the coming on of darkness, Emer places the occurrence in the context of a cyclical pattern. Cuchulain is not dead, she says in The Only Jealousy of Emer. The final death of Cuchulain will be an event of cosmic significance. She describes the final death of Cuchulain in terms of the end of the world and the death of the sun.

Although they have dressed him out in his grave clothes
And stretched his limbs, Cuchulain is not dead;
The very heavens when that day's at hand,
So that his death may not lack ceremony,
Will throw out fires, and the earth grow red with blood.
There shall not be a scullion but foreknows it
Like the world's end.¹⁶

I have already pointed out in another context the identification of the Woman of the Sidhe with the moon approaching its fifteenth phase and the significance of her longing to kiss Cuchulain. It is, I think, clear that Cuchulain is treated as a sun figure throughout the first four plays.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 278. ¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 283 - 284.

The Death of Cuchulain contains little explicit sun imagery, but there is a clear suggestion that Cuchulain is master of time and change, and not its servant.

You thought that if you changed I'd kill you for it,
When everything sublunary must change,
And if I have not changed that goes to prove
That I am monstrous.¹⁷

It is the ironic circumstances of the death of the hero, however, that suggests most strongly Cuchulain's identity with the Sun-God. A blind man begins to feel from Cuchulain's ankles to his neck and when he reaches Cuchulain's neck the stage is plunged into darkness.¹⁸ Cuchulain's head is then represented by a black parallelogram.¹⁹ Clearly this could be a symbolic representation of a solar eclipse.

Analysis of the individual plays in terms of their setting in the solar year brings certain patterns of imagery and plot more sharply into focus.

It is immediately apparent that the imagery of At The Hawk's Well is closely tied to a September date and to the autumnal equinox. The withered leaves of the hazel which the guardian of the well has been raking, the salt sea wind which seems so ominous, the dropping of the hazel nuts — all these are the signs of autumn and all are presented so that they evoke in us those emotions of fear and foreboding primitive

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 697. ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 702. ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 703.

man must have felt at the first signs of approaching winter. This pattern of imagery is supported by the related image of the setting sun and by the emotions and attitudes of the old man, who is in the autumn of life. This period of a man's life is described directly by the musicians in terms that suggest the later poem "Among School Children".

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!'²⁰

At the equinox, daylight and night, the time of waking and sleeping, are evenly balanced. The world stands poised between light and darkness, the vital processes of summer, the long sleep of winter. The songs of the musicians reflect this.

The heart would be always awake,
The heart would turn to its rest.²¹

And again

'Why should I sleep?' the heart cries,
'For the wind, the salt wind, the sea wind,
Is beating a cloud through the skies;
I would always wander like the wind.'²²

But later

'O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind!'
Cries the heart, 'it is time to sleep;

²⁰ Ibid., p. 208. ²¹ Ibid., p. 209. ²² Ibid.

Why wander and nothing to find?
Better grow old and sleep.'²³

The Old Man's lighting of a fire at the beginning of At The Hawk's Well is, of course, an act symbolic of man's resistance to the winter he knows will come. The hearth imagery in the final songs of the musicians looks ahead to that desolate season.²⁴

If we place The Green Helmet at the date of the mid-winter solstice, we are struck by a remarkable coincidence. The fourteenth-century poem Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight tells a similar story and is also set in December. Is it possible that the plot of The Green Helmet is itself a myth somehow connected with the winter solstice?

It is difficult for the modern mind to recapture the attitude of primitive man to the seasonal changes he experienced. Any change in one's environment is bound to awaken terror if one does not understand the processes which cause the change, and one must be continually fearful that the change will go too far, that life will become untenable. Much primitive myth seems designed to reassure man that seasonal changes are cyclical; much ritual seems designed to perpetuate the cyclical pattern by imitative magic. The myth around which The Green Helmet is written seems to have roots in such seasonal ritual;

²³ Ibid., p. 210. ²⁴ Ibid., p. 220.

further, the story of the Red Man seems particularly appropriate to that important crisis in the solar year, the winter solstice.

Through October, November and early December, the days become ever shorter, while the sun appears to lose its life-giving power even during those hours which the darkness does not dominate. The sun is obviously losing a battle with the forces of darkness; the greatest fear is that the sun will finally be extinguished altogether. It is only when the sun has faced this possibility of total extinction on the shortest day of the year, when the forces of darkness appear to be within reach of total victory, that the sun is granted a reprieve. The days begin to lengthen, the sun gains strength, the darkness is pushed back. Surely this is the plot pattern of The Green Helmet. Cuchulain, representing the Sun-God, is ranged in opposition to the forces of darkness -- the Black Men in the service of Bricriu, god of discord. It is only after Cuchulain has submitted cheerfully to the supreme test, offering himself for total extinction at the hands of the forces of darkness, that he is chosen as the champion and faces the future with full confidence of growing power. The sense of exultation one feels in the ending of The Green Helmet is parallel to the wild joy of primitive celebrants asserting their faith in the cyclical pattern of the seasons at the extreme low point of the Sun-God's powers, the winter solstice.

The play which tells the story of this crisis in the life of the Sun-God is a complex network of symbolic imagery. This imagery tends to support the main theme. Yeats's change in the colour of the helmet from the gold of a previous version of the play to the green of the final version tends to make the issues clearer. It becomes evident that the question of whether Cuchulain shall be champion or shall be destroyed by the forces of darkness is intimately bound up with the regrowth of vegetation. The threat of total victory by the Black Men is made more ominous by an eclipse of the moon.²⁵ The ability of Bricriu to survive decapitation seems to me to be a double symbol. In itself, it is a reminder of the death and resurrection theme which is the drama of the cyclical seasonal pattern, but it also conveys the sense of futility man feels as the sun conquers darkness temporarily in the days preceding the solstice, only to find that darkness returns apparently strengthened by the encounter.

On Baile's Strand we have placed in the first part of February. There was a Celtic festival, Imbolc, held at this time of year but we know little about it. It appears to have been associated with the goddess Brigit, a potent fertility figure.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., p. 241.

²⁶ T. G. E. Powell, The Celts (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 119.

There seems little in On Baile's Strand to link it to a particular season of the year. However, the identification of Cuchulain with the Sun-God is strong. The song of the Women, and the ceremony of the fire, the swords and the cup, which are associated with Cuchulain's oath of allegiance, give the play a ritualistic quality suitable to the central play of a cyclical telling of the Sun-God legend. The central plot of the play, the legend of the killing of Cuchulain's son, probably has as its origin some forgotten pattern of human sacrifice associated with the death and resurrection of the Sun-God. The actual resurrection itself takes place in The Only Jealousy of Emer. That this play should be associated with the vernal equinox is most fitting for the theme of re-birth that it represents. Spring has, of course, been the occasion for the rituals of re-birth in all the great religions.

The Death of Cuchulain begins as Midsummer ritual at Phase Twenty-two on the Great Wheel. Just as the winter solstice is the time of the Discovery of Strength for the sun and the beginning of its recovery, so the summer solstice is the time of the Breaking of Strength, after which the sun begins to lose in its battle with the darkness.²⁷ In the course of the play we are taken through the last six phases of the Great Wheel

²⁷ The two terms "Discovery of Strength" and "Breaking of Strength" are, of course, from the diagram on page 81 of A Vision. See plate II, p. 20.

(perhaps this is what the six antagonists and six mortal wounds symbolize) until, with the death of Cuchulain, the solar year has run its course. As the Blind Man harvests Cuchulain's head for twelve pennies, we are back ready to begin Phase One again. The year will begin once more.

The Great Wheel which gives form and unity to the Cuchulain cycle has three aspects. It may be seen as a cycle of lunar phases; it may be seen as a representation of the solar year; but it is also a cycle of symbolic incarnations, representing the stages in the life of a man, a civilization or an age, and representing also the series of lives a man must pass through before being released from the wheel of existence. This is not the place to discuss in full the complex esoteric system which Yeats offers in A Vision as a metaphor for reality. Nor is such an analysis necessary for the understanding of the Cuchulain plays. However, certain of the incarnations mentioned in A Vision are important in attempting to understand the pattern of imagery in the Cuchulain cycle.

Probably Yeats's clearest and most concise statement of the incarnations is contained in the dialogue poem "The Phases of the Moon". Robartes expounds the theory:

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in;
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.
From the first crescent to the half, the dream
But summons to adventure, and the man

Is always happy like a bird or a beast;
 But while the moon is rounding towards the full
 He follows whatever whim's most difficult
 Among whims not impossible, and though scarred,
 As with the cat-o'-nine-tails of the mind,
 His body moulded from within his body
 Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then
 Athena takes Achilles by the hair,
 Hector is in the dust, Nietzsche is born,
 Because the hero's crescent is the twelfth.
 And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
 Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.
 The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
 In its own being, and when that war's begun
 There is no muscle in the arm; and after,
 Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,
 The soul begins to tremble into stillness.
 To die into the labyrinth of itself! 28

This summary seems to me to describe admirably the adventures of the hero Cuchulain from At The Hawk's Well to The Only Jealousy of Emer. Of the utmost importance is the statement that there is no human life at the full or the dark. This accounts not only for the fact that in The Only Jealousy of Emer Cuchulain is captured by Fand, leaving his inert body to be possessed by the spirit Bricriu, but also for the fact that in At The Hawk's Well when the water of immortality rises, the Old Man is unconscious and Cuchulain is not present. Phase One and Phase Fifteen are supernatural incarnations, marking the only occasion when the spirit world and the natural world interpenetrate. Yeats found in the Japanese Noh play a form suitable for the representation of such an interpenetration of worlds,

28 A Vision, p. 60.

and, in the dance, his symbol for such a spiritual visitation.²⁹ He uses the dance in At The Hawk's Well as a symbol of supernatural incarnation at Phase One; in The Only Jealousy of Emer it marks the intervention of the supernatural at Phase Fifteen; in the ending of The Death of Cuchulain the dance marks a return to Phase One. The answer to those who feel the Cuchulain cycle lacks unity because Yeats did not re-write On Baile's Strand and The Green Helmet is obvious. The Noh play form is suitable only to representing the interplay of human and supernatural beings. Thus it is fitted to the representation of the hero's life only in Phase One and Fifteen of his existence. The two non-dance plays in the cycle required no altering to fit into the pattern of the Cuchulain plays. A heroic farce in ballad meter and humanistic tragedy in blank verse and prose seem to me to be forms well suited to the representation of Phases Eight and Twelve.

Robartes' words about the "always happy" hero turning at Phase Eight to follow "whatever whim's most difficult/ Among whims not impossible" seems to me to characterize the hero of The Green Helmet. In that play the Red Man, placing the Helmet on Cuchulain's head, says:

²⁹ W. B. Yeats, "Introduction by William Butler Yeats to Certain Noble Plays of Japan", Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 159.

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;
 The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a
 gambler's throw;
 And these things I make prosper, till a day come that
 I know,
 When heart and mind shall darken that the weak
 may end the strong,
 And the long-remembering harpers have matter for
 their song.³⁰

These last words seem to look forward to the conflict between
 Cuchulain and Conchubar which in On Baile's Strand ends in
 the defeat of Cuchulain. The events of this play are also
 echoed in the words of Robartes. The words "twice born, twice
 buried" are interesting as a description of the fate of the
 hero at Phase Twelve, the hero's crescent. This is particularly
 true in the light of the double tragedy in which Cuchulain kills
 the copy of himself he meets in the person of his son and is
 killed by the waves. It is also interesting in the light of
 Cuchulain's later rebirth in The Only Jealousy of Emer. The
 description of Phases Thirteen and Fourteen seems to outline
 the fate of Cuchulain at the end of On Baile's Strand --
 his internal conflict, his loss of strength, his frenzy and
 the final dying of his soul "into the labyrinth of itself" are
 all identifiable episodes in the play.

In connection with our discussion of the hero's crescent,

³⁰ Collected Plays, p. 243.

perhaps one other observation about Yeats's system of incarnations should be made. Seeing life as a system of antinomies or paired opposites, Yeats held that each man's destiny was worked out in the interplay between Will and Mask, Creative Mind and Body of Fate.³¹ A man's Mask represents that incarnation which is opposite him on the Great Wheel. Thus the Mask of the Hero (Phase Twelve) is the Hunchback (Phase Twenty-Six). This counter-posing of Hero and Hunchback has great significance for the symbolism of the Cuchulain cycle. Yeats speaks, in A Vision, of the Hunchback as a phase for which it is difficult to find illustrative examples from personal experience.³² If we study carefully Yeats's description of this symbolic type, however, we can see aspects of the Hunchback in at least three of the persons who are set against the Hero in the Cuchulain plays.

The most obvious characteristic of the Hunchback, physical deformity, we see in the form taken by Bricriu in The Only Jealousy of Emer. When Bricriu possesses the Figure of Cuchulain, the Figure wears a distorted mask and has an arm withered in the socket.³³ It is obvious that the play is, among other things, a working out of the relationship between a man and his Mask. The Ghost of Cuchulain represents the Will of the

³¹ Vision, p. 73. ³² Ibid., p. 177.

³³ Collected Plays, pp. 287 - 288.

Hero, while the Figure of Cuchulain represents his Mask, derived from the phase of the Hunchback. The other two personages who are set up against Cuchulain and bear some of the characteristics of the Hunchback are Conchubar, in On Baile's Strand, and his "shadow" the Blind Man. Yeats's description of the approach to life represented by the phase of the Hunchback could well be a description of Conchubar's mechanical over-emphasis on social rather than spiritual and emotional values:

The moral abstract being no longer possible, the Will may seek this substitute through the knowledge of the lives of men and beasts, plucked up, as it were, by the roots, lacking in all mutual relations; there may be hatred of solitude, perpetual forced bonhomie, yet that which it seeks is without social morality, something radical and incredible.³⁴

Yeats earlier in the discussion lays the emphasis on a tendency to betray:

and he is full of malice because, finding no impulse but in his own ambition, he is made jealous by the impulse of others. He is all emphasis, and the greater that emphasis the more does he show himself incapable of emotion, the more does he display his sterility. If he live amid a theologically minded people, his greatest temptation may be to defy God, to become a Judas, who betrays, not for thirty pieces of silver, but that he may call himself creator.³⁵

This is a description which defines Conchubar's motivation and throws light on his relationship to the vital Cuchulain; it also accounts for the Blind Man's malice toward the Fool. The reference to Judas is particularly interesting in the light of

³⁴ Vision, pp. 178 - 179. ³⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

the Blind's Man's betrayal of Cuchulain in The Death of Cuchulain, not for thirty pieces of silver, but for twelve pennies.³⁶

Robartes describes Phase Fifteen, the phase of The Only Jealousy of Emer, thus:

All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world.³⁷

Aherne replies:

All the dreams of the soul
End in a beautiful man's or woman's body.³⁸

Even the part played by Bricriu seems to be indicated by Robartes' words:

. . . there is no deformity
But saves us from a dream.³⁹

The key to the symbolism of the ending of The Death of Cuchulain seems to me to be contained in Robartes' description of Phases Twenty-six, Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight:

Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents.
The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow
Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter --
Out of that raving tide -- is drawn betwixt
Deformity of body and of mind.⁴⁰

³⁶ Collected Plays, p. 702. ³⁷ Vision, p. 61.

³⁸ Ibid. ³⁹ Ibid., p. 63. ⁴⁰ Collected Plays, p. 697.

The association of the Blind Man with the phase of the Hunchback has already been illustrated, as has the association of Cuchulain at the point of death with a Divine Folly represented by his fascination with the feathery shape. It was Eithne Inguba who earlier commented on his passive martyr-like attitude:

You're not the man I loved,
That violent man forgave no treachery.
If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,
It is because you are about to die.⁴¹

Now Cuchulain displays no anger at the Blind Man's intent to murder him for twelve pennies. Cuchulain, the wounded Saint, is drawn between deformity of body and of mind. Robartes' words are almost a summary of Cuchulain's career, including, surprisingly, a reference to the "raving tide".

Robartes' description of the fate of souls which pass beyond the twenty-eighth phase brings to mind Emer's dance with the black parallelograms.

Because all dark, like those that are all light,
They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,
Crying to one another like the bats:
But having no desire they cannot tell
What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph
At the perfection of one's own obedience;
And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,
Insipid as the dough before it is baked,
They change their bodies at a word.⁴²

The unsubstantial nature of these bodies at Phase One of the

⁴¹ Collected Plays, p. 697. ⁴² Vision, p. 63.

new cycle reminds us of the harlot's song at the end of the play. The harlot talks of Conall, Cuchulain and Usna's boys but complains:

I adore those clever eyes,
Those muscular bodies, but can get
No grip upon their thighs.⁴³

The form that the unbaked dough of Cuchulain's soul will take when the "first thin crescent is wheeled around" has important implications for the fate of modern Ireland. But more of that later.

⁴³ Collected Plays, p. 704.

CHAPTER III

THE DAGDA AND THE MORRIGAN

Morton Seiden comments on Yeats's attempt to integrate his beliefs into a synthesis of myth and mystical doctrine:

In fact, Yeats preferred to see little or no difference between Gaelic myth and Hermetic dogma; hence during the mid-nineties he hoped to found a kind of magical society in Ireland. The society, to be called the Irish Mystical Order, was to borrow its doctrines from Celtic heliolatry; but Celtic heliolatry was to be interpreted according to the eschatology of the Orphic Mysteries, of Blake and Shelley and of the Theosophists and the Hermetic Students. The purpose of the Order was to ally, in Ireland, art with Gaelic and Greek myth, national politics, and regeneration of the modern Celt. And for Yeats it was to provide an opportunity more completely to integrate -- to hammer into unity -- his scattered readings, while reaffirming his allegiance to the romantic Ireland of his imagination. For one reason or another, however, his dream of an Irish Mystical Order never materialized. Instead, he wrote A Vision.¹

And we might add, he also wrote the Cuchulain cycle. If, as Seiden suggests, A Vision is the fruit of a decade of work on the secret doctrine of the Irish Mystical Order that never came to be, the Cuchulain cycle surely contains rituals of that Order worked into a slightly different form. I have already illustrated the relation of this cycle to the principal symbol of A Vision. It is obvious from our analysis that Yeats uses the Great Wheel to harmonize a great number of distinct, yet interrelated patterns in the play cycle. Thus Cuchulain

¹ Seiden, op. cit., pp. 46 - 47.

may be seen as Celtic hero, Sun-God or the Soul of Man, undergoing a series of incarnations— all of this without destroying the coherence of the series of plays. The plot may be seen as a love story (or several love stories), as a supernatural conflict, or as a working out of a series of antinomies. Surely Yeats's skill in using symbols to bring such diverse elements under control is a result of the years he spent trying to reconcile Blake with Madame Blavatsky, the Rosicrucians with the ancient Druids, to create a ritual for his Irish Mystical Order.

Just how closely related the Cuchulain cycle is to Yeats's work on the Mystical Order will be illustrated by the following extract from the record of one of Yeats's experiments. In order to hasten the work on the ritual of the order, Yeats organized in 1897 a group of mystically-inclined Celts for the purpose of visionary exploration. Richard Ellman quotes a report of one of their meetings.

Those present were seated in a circle with the table of four elements in the centre. . . . D.E.D.I. [Yeats] performed a Celtic ceremony of invocation. This transported us to a mountainous district where in the midst of the hills we found ourselves before an ancient well. Leaning over the well on our left grew a mountain-ash tree laden with red berries that kept dropping, dropping into the water, so ripe that they seemed like drops of blood reddening the pool as they sank. Then appeared a venerable figure, luminous but human, the figure of a man with a white beard. He knelt beside the well and looked into the water. D.E.D.I. addressed him as 'Cuala' and asked if he could tell us how he came to be here and connected with this well. Then looking with him into the water we saw that it was full

of moving reflections, as of horses and chariots and battles in constant procession and we understood that once he had been involved in much stir and strife of the world and had then renounced it all in pursuit of his Ideal. . . . Then S.S.D.D. [Florence Farr] discovered that to place the two forefingers crossed (right over left) upon the lips, touching both lips had a strange restorative effect and in fact this sign is the salutation and the key to the World of Heroes. Further investigation revealed that this is the world of Form and is associated with space as distinguished from the World of Spirit associated with cycles and periods. That this is the plane of Art. That its nature is airy. That the placing of the crossed fingers on the lips increases the power of concentration and of vision and also gives more heat and light. Saluting with the sign of the Ashwand we returned as we came to the path through the wood where the Guardian waited to guide us. We noticed that the figure seemed less luminous and that we ourselves were much brighter, having absorbed light from the throne -- and now it was twilight among the trees where before had been darkness. When we left the Guardian at his station we saluted with the X sign and again when we passed Manaanan for it seemed befitting; and when at last we mounted through the dark Lethe-like waters we brought with us still the light from the throne. Two of our number had not brought enough of this light with them and when we reached the well, they noted the leafless ash-trees and the chill and cheerless aspect of the scene which was not so to the rest. So we all waited together till the ash-tree budded again and the scene assumed warmth and life. Then D.E.D.I. banished as before.²

No experience was ever wasted upon Yeats. One cannot but note that much of the content of this vision, originally intended to be the basis for a ritual of the Irish Mystical Order, found its way into At The Hawk's Well almost two decades later.

It was as a preparation for his work on the Irish

² Ellman, op. cit., pp. 124 - 125.

Mystical Order that Yeats read John Rhys's Celtic Heathendom.³

I have already mentioned Rhys's emphasis on heliolatry as a key to Celtic myths. It is probably through the influence of Rhys that Yeats came to regard Cuchulain as a representation of the Sun-God. Seiden characterizes Rhys's approach thus:

Rhys -- and the full importance of this detail will become clearer as we proceed -- postulated that in Celtic heliolatry a symbolic wheel of the sun represents, as a rule, the revolving seasons, the adventures of nature gods or heroes, and the waxing and waning day. In the mythological battles of the Tuatha de Danaan and the Formorians, ancient Irish nature deities, moreover, he said that there are symbolized certain conflicting opposites; and these opposites he called man and woman, life and death, light and darkness, day and night, and summer and winter.⁴

Such an approach to Celtic myths was bound to appeal to Yeats's synthesizing mind, and certainly his interpretation of the Cuchulain legend was markedly conditioned by such ideas. But the unbounded enthusiasm of early students of Celtic culture for heliolatry does involve some difficulties. Let us take a look at the Celts through the eyes of our much more cautious contemporary students of primitive cultures.

A picture of the Celts as preoccupied with the movements of the sun cannot be accepted without qualifications. Of course, every people acknowledges the overwhelming importance of the life-giving powers of the sun, and the significance of solar imagery in such legends as that of

³ Ibid., p. 123. ⁴ Seiden, op. cit., p. 16.

Cuchulain is undeniable. Out-and-out sun worship and its corollary, the solar orientation of the calendar, are however, features of a settled, agricultural society. Celtic society was heroic and pastoral. The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology says of the principal festivals of the Celts:

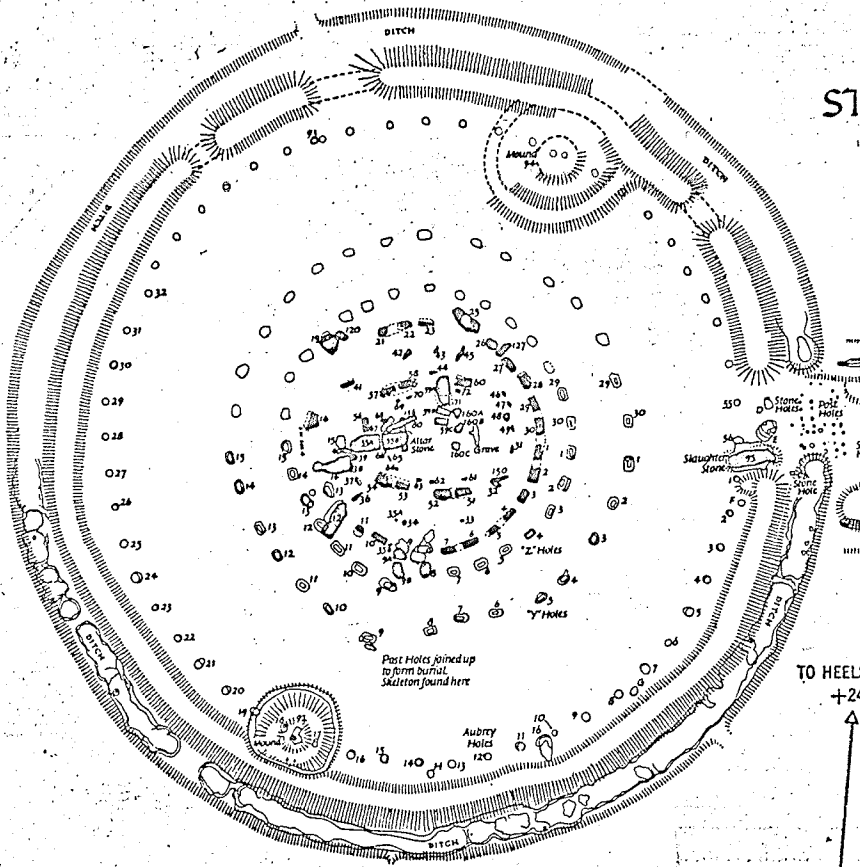
That the feasts of Samain and Beltine were of considerable antiquity is suggested by the strongly pastoral basis of the Celtic economy. Although the sun appears to have been invoked at Beltine the Celtic year had no solar orientation. There is nothing of the solstice or equinox and one is reminded of Caesar's comment that the Celts measured time by nights instead of days.⁵

The solar orientation which Yeats gives to his Great Wheel and to the Cuchulain cycle is not primarily a feature of the Celtic pastoral culture. As far as the British Isles are concerned, solar orientation may be considered as pre-Celtic. Recent work done on Stonehenge in southern England would seem to indicate that that structure is an ingeniously designed astronomical observatory dating from 1500 B.C., a thousand years before the arrival of the Celts. Using a computer to correlate stone alignments with known astronomical data, Professor Gerald Hawkins of Boston University has demonstrated that the great stone circle was set up to provide spectacular views of sun-rise and sun-set, moon-rise and moon-set, at crisis points in the solar year -- that is, at

⁵ Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1959), p. 244.

These plans
of Stonehenge
show its
resemblance
to the symbol
of the Great
Wheel. The
alignment
of the stones
with rising
and setting
sun and moon,
at crisis
points in the
solar year,
shows the use
of the great
stone
circle as an
observatory.

S1



TO HEELSTONE

+24

- > SUNRISE
- - -> MOONRISE
- <- SUNSET
- <- - - MOONSET

- +29 WINTER MOON HIGH
- +24 SUMMER SUN
- +19 WINTER MOON LOW
- 19 SUMMER MOON HIGH
- 24 WINTER SUN
- 29 SUMMER MOON LOW

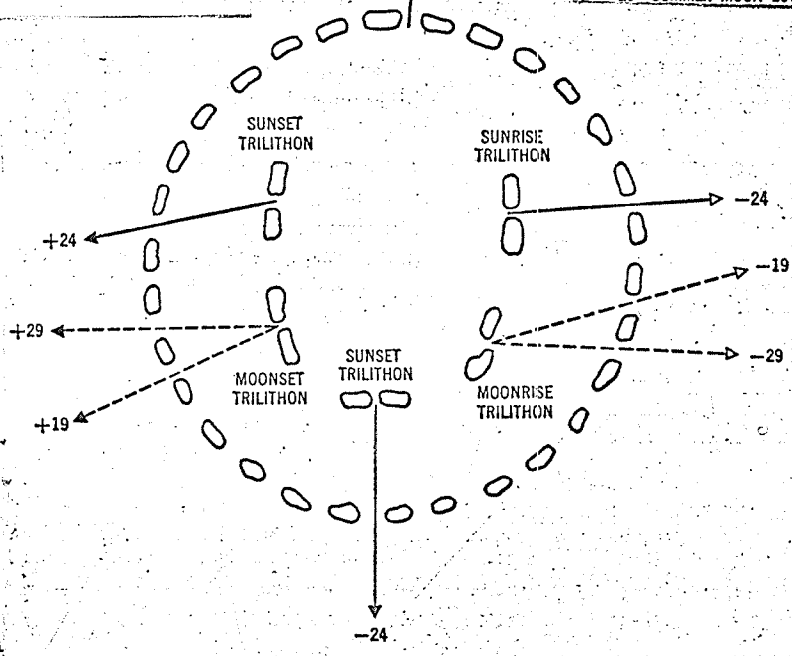
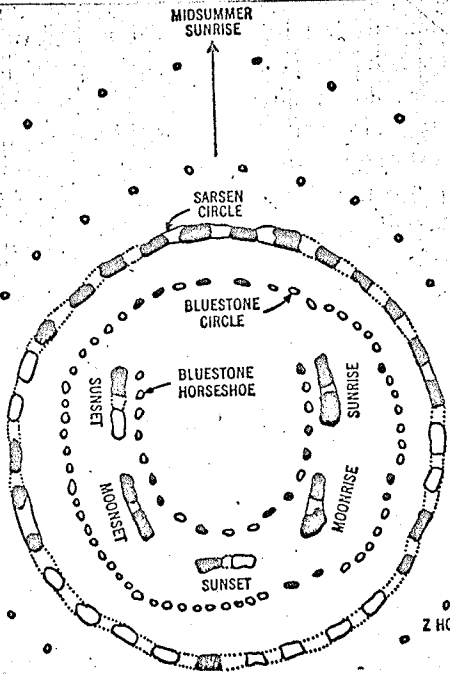


PLATE III

solstice and equinox. Used in conjunction with the great circles of holes surrounding it, it may have served as a Neolithic computer, designed to predict eclipses of the sun and moon.⁶

Stonehenge was apparently one of a number of such structures in the Early Bronze Age throughout the British Isles. Doubtless they were the sites of rituals directed at the worship of the Sun-God as well as astronomical observation posts. It is interesting that, viewed from above, such structures as Stonehenge bear a striking resemblance to a representation of Yeats's Great Wheel. (See plate III p. 46.) This is a symbolic association that Yeats would not have disavowed. It was, after all, not until recently that Stonehenge ceased to be regarded as a temple of the Druids, and in the heyday of the Celtic revival nobody bothered to distinguish between Celts and members of earlier cultures. Besides, as we have seen, heliolatry either pre-Celtic or as practiced by subject peoples did influence certain aspects of such legends as those of Cuchulain.

The plan upon which Yeats's Cuchulain cycle is based represents a synthesis of the lunar-oriented culture of the pastoral Celts and the earlier heliolatry of the Bronze Age peoples. It also serves to link Celtic paganism with the

⁶ Gerald S. Hawkins, Stonehenge Decoded, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966).

solar-oriented religions of other cultures. This synthesis is accomplished very simply. Yeats takes the Celtic calendar and applies it to the Great Wheel, this time on a solar axis.

Thus, At The Hawk's Well, which, viewed as an event in the life of the sun, takes place at the autumnal equinox, has associated with it all the ritualistic and mythological features of the Celtic New Year, the feast of Samain, which, in the Celtic year, was November first. The other festivals are likewise shifted. The important months of the year are no longer November, February, May and August but September, December, March and June. At Phase Twelve, however, On Baile's Strand does fall at the time (February) of the festival of Imbolc.

What are the legends connected with the four main Celtic festivals and what have they contributed to the Cuchulain cycle? In answering this question we become aware of yet another motif in the complex but unified pattern Yeats has woven throughout the five Cuchulain plays.

The myths and rituals associated with the festival of Samain, the Celtic New Year, are suggestive of the atmosphere of At The Hawk's Well. The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology describes emotions aroused in the Celts by Samain.

The beginning of the Celtic New Year was a particularly important event and the Mythological Cycle contains in its many references to Samain evidence of ritual acts which took place at this time. On the eve of the feast, time appeared to belong neither to the old year nor to

the new. There was a feeling that this lack of distinction in time was matched by a similar indistinct boundary between the world of man and that of his gods. Although man had taken possession of the land after their defeat the Tuatha De Danaan were still powerful and could affect man's welfare. Whereas the mythical heroes of the Celts could venture bravely into side to meet their gods either as allies or enemies, the ordinary people felt less sanguine about the possibility that on the eve of Samain the people of the side left their domain and wandered in the world of man. Furthermore the beginning of the year was a solemn event, coming as it did at the beginning of winter, to a people whose agricultural economy was still liable to failure.⁷

It is obvious that the dispute between The Old Man and The Young Man in At The Hawk's Well is a symbolic representation of the inability to distinguish between the rights of the old and the new year on the eve of Samain. The momentary filling of the magic spring and the maiden's possession by the Woman of the Sidhe are symbolic of the interpenetration of the spiritual world and the material world at this time. That Yeats saw this visitation as recurring at yearly intervals is shown by a line from an early prose draft of the play. The line does not occur in this form in the final verse version.

OLD MAN. I know you will drink it. Will you swear to let me drink first? But believe me, it is better for you to go away. You are young, you can come again some other year.⁸

The fears associated with Samain are expressed by the Musicians

⁷ Larousse, p. 244.

⁸ Curtis B. Bradford, Yeats at Work, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965). p. 180.

in the finished play.

Second Musician. I am afraid of this place.⁹

And later

First Musician [singing or half-singing].

O God, protect me
From a horrible deathless body
Sliding through the veins of a sudden.¹⁰

The plot of the entire Cuchulain cycle is intimately connected to another group of interrelated Samain myths.

There is less fear in those myths of Samain centred on the union of male deities with a mother-goddess figure. Such is the myth of the Dagda's union with the Morrigan by the River Unius and with Boann, the goddess of the River Boyne. Possibly at this feast, too, there were rites performed to ensure the fertility of the land during the coming year.¹¹

That Yeats saw such myths as central to the Cuchulain legend from the very outset is borne out by the words of the Fool in On Baile's Strand, the first-written of the Cuchulain plays:

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.¹²

T. G. E. Powell, in describing the nature of Celtic gods, has this to say of the Dagda.

The name Dagda, used normally with the definite article, means the Good God, but not good in the ethical sense, but good-at-everything, or all-competent. He is the father of the tribe, its protector and benefactor, and it may be said at once that this is the basic type of all

⁹ Collected Plays, p. 209. ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

¹¹ Larousse, p. 244. ¹² Collected Plays, p. 248.

the Celtic male deities whether in Ireland or beyond.¹³

Of the marriage of the Dagda he says

The Dagda's mate at Samain was, as has been indicated, a nature goddess. In the name Morrigan, Queen of Demons, she occurs frequently in Irish texts, but this name is interchangeable with other horrific ones such as Nemain, Panic, and Badb Catha, Raven of Battle, while other conjunctions include a whole range of horse -- more strictly, mare -- attributes and symbolism. The Celtic goddesses in fact also conform to a general type, but not tribal, or social, for they are of the land or territory to be placated, taken over, or even enslaved, with the occupation of the ground. They display both fertility and destructive aspects, and may be symbolized in the sun and moon no less than in zoomorphism, and topography.¹⁴

Powell goes on to point out the Celtic tendency to split gods and goddesses into three. Thus a fertility goddess is very apt to appear as three different persons simultaneously.

Another particular aspect of the Celtic deities, male and female, is that of triplism. This matter has been explored a good deal. It is not a tendency to trinitarian concepts, or of the union of three distinct supernatural beings. It is, in fact, an expression of the extreme potency of any one deity. It may be likened 'to the power of three', and this number was sacred, and auspicious, far beyond the Celtic world as Indian parallels could again show.

It is worth while considering some examples of Celtic triplism, for there appear to be certain differences in its application according to the sex of the deity. It is perhaps also a more pronounced attribute amongst the goddesses, and here it takes the form of groups of three different names, as in Morrigan, Badb, Nemain, who are equivalent to Morrigna, in the plural. So, too, there are three Brigits, and three Macha; the triad Eire, Banba, and Fodla may be less ancient although the individual names can claim genuine antiquity. Of others, both Carmen, and Tlachtga, gave birth to triplet sons.¹⁵

¹³ Powell, op. cit., pp. 117 - 118.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118. ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

This principle of triplication should be borne in mind when we trace Yeats's development of the theme of union with a fertility goddess through the Cuchulain cycle. It is worth noting that three female characters figure prominently in each play. In At The Hawk's Well Cuchulain meets the Woman of the Sidhe in the form of a great hawk; then he is enchanted by the Guardian of the Well; finally he goes out to meet Aoife in battle. Powell's remark about Celtic goddesses displaying "Both fertility and destructive aspects" points directly to the love-hate relationship of Cuchulain and Aoife and reminds us of the Old Man's warning of the curse which falls upon those who gaze into the eyes of the Hawk-Woman:

That curse may be
 Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
 Or always to mix hatred in the love;
 Or it may be that she will kill your children,
 That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
 Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
 With your own hand.¹⁶

The principle of triplication is extended to the other plays. In The Green Helmet, Emer, Laegaire's wife, and Conall's wife, represent another aspect of the feminine principle. In On Baile's Strand, three women sing of witches and of the supernatural as Cuchulain takes the oath. In The Only Jealousy Of Emer, Fand, Emer, and Eithne Inguba figure prominently in an examination of femininity considered against the background of

¹⁶ Collected Plays, p. 215.

Yeats's theories about the fifteenth phase. Here again, the theme of the union with a fertility goddess is strong. In the final scenes of The Death of Cuchulain, Aoife, The Morrighu, and Emer figure prominently.

Closely related to the mythological marriage between the Dagda and the Morrigan was Celtic kingship ritual. It is this system of ritual that gives Yeats much of the detailed imagery of the Cuchulain plays. T. G. E. Powell describes it thus:

The subject of kingship ritual is too elaborate to be discussed at length here, but some principal aspects may be mentioned. In the first place the Irish king was thought of as being the mortal mate of the territorial nature goddess. At Tara it was Etain, or Medb, who accepted the kings as husbands. The goddess handed them the goblet, the symbolic act of marriage in Celtic society, and in other mythological stories, the young king meets her at a well or spring where she awaits him in the guise of a beautiful maiden. The king must needs possess a mortal wife, although her ritual function is not so clear as is that of the queen in Aryan India. The Tara kingship stories are much concerned with instancing 'perfect reigns' in which there were plentiful harvests and other ideal conditions, but the king must grow old, and with his ageing came the risk of the decline in prosperity of the people of the land. At this stage the goddess takes on the aspect of a repulsive hag, withering with the king's declining powers, and emphasizing the need for a new mate who will ensure the continuation of prosperity. There can be little doubt that the Celtic king, in fully pagan times at least, met a violent but ritual end, and there are a number of somewhat veiled allusions to deaths by weapon wounds, drowning and burning, in the midst of high magic, in the presence of the hag and the tribal god.¹⁷

This account of Celtic kingship ritual sheds light on a

¹⁷ Powell, op. cit., pp. 121 - 122.

number of aspects of Yeats's treatment of the Cuchulain story. In the first place, the tradition that the king meets the goddess in the guise of a maiden by a well or spring obviously provides Yeats with the central incident of At The Hawk's Well. When we add to it the details gained from the joint vision of Yeats and his mystical associates in London -- the tree, the Old Man, the rocky setting -- we have the entire opening scene of At The Hawk's Well. The fate of the ageing king is also of great significance. The bitterness of the Old Man in At The Hawk's Well and the sharp contrast between his despair at his failing powers and Cuchulain's faith in his luck can be seen as the contrast between the old and the new king as the goddess takes a new mate. The reference to ritual murder is a most suggestive one in the context of the situation in The Death of Cuchulain. The six wounds of Cuchulain, his binding himself to the stone pillar (pillars were sacred to the Celts), the symbolic winding of Aoife's veil about him, his trancelike state as he is decapitated, all have the air of "high magic" about them. Emer's dance of the severed heads is, of course, pure ritual. If we see Aoife as representing one aspect of the nature goddess, then her presence is quite accountable, as is the change she had undergone.

Cuchulain. Your hair is white.

Aoife. That time was long ago,

And now it is my time. I have come to kill you.¹⁸

On another level Yeats takes the pattern of the transfiguration of the goddess, from beautiful maiden to hag and and turns it into a complex symbol -- one of the unifying patterns of the Cuchulain cycle. Instead of emphasizing a simple transformation denoting age alone, Yeats brings into play another of the shape-shifting powers of the nature goddess. They often appeared as goddesses of destruction before a battle. The Badb, for example, may appear in her bird form, the raven or crow, "to gloat over bloodshed, inducing panic and weakness among the contending warriors".¹⁹ Yeats uses this characteristic to make a transformation of the goddess a cyclical rather than just a linear transformation. He thus gives the bird imagery mentioned earlier a deeper symbolic meaning. In At The Hawk's Well -- Phase One on Yeats's Great Wheel -- the main aspect of the nature goddess is her Hawk-like form. In The Only Jealousy of Emer -- Phase Fifteen -- in the person of Fand she represents ideal beauty. In The Death of Cuchulain -- approaching Phase One again -- she takes a bird-like shape, the crow-headed Morrighu, Goddess of War.

In The Only Jealousy of Emer it is made clear that Yeats intends us to see the transformation of the goddess and Cuchulain's reaction to it as an important theme of the

¹⁸ Collected Plays, p. 699. ¹⁹ Powell, op. cit., p.123.

play cycle.

Ghost of Cuchulain. 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.

Woman of the Sidhe. Hold out your arms and hands again;
 You were not so dumbfounded when
 I was that bird of prey, and yet
 I am all woman now.

Ghost of Cuchulain. I am not
 The young and passionate man I was,
 And though that brilliant light surpass
 All crescent forms, my memories
 Weigh down my hands, abash my eyes.²⁰

This is typical of Yeats's use of mythological elements in his art. Taking a simple pattern such as the transformation of the goddess from maiden to hag, he alters it so that it fits into his system of cycles and antinomies. Suddenly the ironies of the heroic personality are brought into sharp relief, for as Yeats employs the symbol of the transformation of the goddess, Cuchulain desires her when she is at her most destructive and rejects her when she is most filled with love.

²⁰ Collected Plays, p. 292.

CHAPTER IV

THE RAG-AND-BONE SHOP OF THE HEART

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

from "The Circus Animals' Desertion"¹

The events of Yeats's personal life have a clear relevance to all of his work. In one sense, Yeats's plays are as much personal documents as the lyric poetry. They are not, however, mere autobiography treated allegorically. Yeats accurately states the relationship between his life and his plays in "The Circus Animals' Desertion". His "masterful images" are complete and require no knowledge of his biography to explain them; they do grow in "pure mind" so that they take on a life of their own. As we have seen, the principal pattern in the Cuchulain cycle is the life and death of Cuchulain, his assumption of the heroic role and the implications of this heroic commitment for his life. As we shall see in later chapters, the major incidents of Yeats's plot come directly from Lady Gregory's book Cuchulain of

¹ W. B. Yeats, The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan and Co., 1952), p. 392.

Muirthemne. Patterns of imagery and the structural framework of the cycle are, as we have seen, conditioned by Yeats's knowledge of Celtic mythology and by the theoretic assumptions he developed more fully in A Vision. It is characteristic of Yeats that he should so combine all these elements into a coherent and unified work of art, in itself complete and suggesting meanings universal in their application, yet at the same time remaining intensely personal. To understand this interweaving of objective and subjective elements, it is worthwhile to ask the question: "but out of what began?"

It is when we consider the biographical elements in the Cuchulain plays that the dates of their composition become particularly relevant. It is as though Yeats had some half-formed idea of the final shape of the cycle in his mind from the beginning, but that he had to wait until some event of his life gave him the experience and the emotional stimulus to write each particular segment. Such an hypothesis would account for the order in which the Cuchulain plays were written. The period of writing and re-writing On Baile's Strand was a period in which Yeats had become a man of affairs and, as a director of the Abbey theatre, was constantly trying to balance the needs of administrative policy (the world of Conchubar) against the romantic ideals he had held in the nineties (the world of Cuchulain). It was also a period during which it was becoming increasingly apparent to him that

the heroic world of Maud Gonne could not be reconciled with his own half-acknowledged dreams of domesticity. The Green Helmet (in an earlier version, The Golden Helmet) was written immediately after the riots over Synge's Playboy of the Western World. There is no doubt that Yeats had always had as an ideal the reckless and cheerful courage which Cuchulain displays in The Green Helmet. But is only after Yeats himself had displayed just such courage in facing the Dublin mob that he was capable of giving it dramatic expression. At The Hawk's Well was written during a period when Yeats had begun to take a harder and less sentimental look at the great love of his life. The portrayal of the Hawk woman and Cuchulain's reaction to her owes a great deal to that re-assessment. The Only Jealousy of Emer dates from the period of another of the great crises in Yeats's life. Following the death of John MacBride as a result of the Easter rebellion of 1916, Yeats made marriage proposals to three women. Portraits of these three women figure prominently in The Only Jealousy of Emer. Yeats's last Cuchulain play, The Death of Cuchulain, was not written until Yeats himself was face-to-face with death. Into this play Yeats poured both his bitterness as an unpopular playwright looking back on his career and his appreciation of the ironies of approaching a death wherein the heroic circumstances could not be controlled as they had been in life.

The most important single fact in the life of W. B. Yeats was his hopeless devotion to the celebrated beauty and and Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne . It was through her that he became involved in Nationalistic politics, through her that he overcame his natural timidity and assumed the role of hero that he might impress her, through her that he remained unmarried until late in life and found himself at the age of forty-nine, as he writes in 1914, without progeny and without domestic roots.² Joseph Hone remarks in describing their first meeting: "Yeats was now twenty-three and the trouble of his life had begun."³ In At The Hawk's Well, written when he was fifty, Yeats records in the speeches of the Old Man his feelings of bitterness in looking back at the futile love, while, in the attitude of the Young Man, he re-creates the spirit with which he faced the future at the age of twenty-three on his first meeting with Maud Gonne. The Old Man has been waiting at the well for fifty years, and feels deceived and cheated. The musicians at the end of the play sing of the domestic happiness which the Old Man has given up and the Young Man is determined to give up for this fruitless quest. This quest seems closely related to the "barren passion" Yeats had

² Collected Poems, p. 113.

³ Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats 1865 - 1939 (London: Macmillan & Co., 1962) p. 67.

spoken of in a poem written to Maud Gonne in January 1914.

Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine. ⁴

In another of the poems published in 1914, Yeats links Maud Gonne with the image of a predatory bird. The relevance of this association to At The Hawk's Well is obvious.

And what of her that took
All till my youth was gone
With scarce a pitying look?
How could I praise that one?
When day begins to break
I count my good and bad,
Being wakeful for her sake,
Remembering what she had,
What eagle look still shows,
While up from my heart's root
So great a sweetness flows
I shake from head to foot. ⁵

The association of Maud Gonne with bird imagery (elsewhere in the lyrics she is linked with the phoenix, then the swan) may have had its origin in a striking feature of her entourage.

Joseph Hone describes Yeats and Maud Gonne in London thus:

In London what a curious sight they must have presented to the Cockneys -- the young poet and the European beauty: the poet, with pale face and long hair and rich melancholy eyes, held her cloak and superintended the transport of the bird-cages beneath the high sooty arch of Victoria Station; beside him Maud Gonne, as tall as he, eyes fiery from her Parisian politics, her clothes swirling with her long strides and wide gestures. Either alone would have arrested attention; together with coats and bird-cages, amid the fuss and paraphernalia of a railway station, they set the platform astare. Once he ⁶ had to carry a full-grown Donegal hawk to her compartment.

⁴ Collected Poems, p. 113.

⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

⁶ Hone, op. cit., p. 84.

In the poetry of The Wind Among The Reeds, published in 1899, ten years after Yeats's first meeting with Maud Gonne, we see that even in the early years of their relationship Yeats knew at what cost he had braved that "eagle look". He knew from the outset the nature of her indomitable will.

Nor would you rise and hasten away,
Though you have the will of the wild birds,
But know your hair was bound and wound
About the stars and moon and sun.⁷

And he is aware of a curse, not unlike the curse under which Cuchulain lives.

I became a man, a hater of the wind,
Knowing one, out of all things, alone, that his head
May not lie on the breast nor his lips on the hair
Of the woman that he loves, until he dies.
O beast of the wilderness, bird of the air,
Must I endure your amorous cries?⁸

Emer's bitter words in The Only Jealousy of Emer come to mind as Yeats describes the effect of Maud Gonne's image on a woman with whom he has tried to sustain a relationship.

Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,
I had a beautiful friend
And dreamed that the old despair
Would end in love in the end:
She looked in my heart one day
And saw your image there;
She has gone weeping away.⁹

Emer describes the effect of the hawk-woman on Cuchulain thus:

I know her sort.
They find our men asleep, weary with war,

⁷ Collected Poems, , p. 81. ⁸ Ibid., pp. 81 - 82.

⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

Lap them in cloudy hair or kiss their lips;
 Our men awake in ignorance of it all,
 But when we take them in our arms at night
 We cannot break their solitude.¹⁰

In a poem published in 1919 Yeats returns to this theme of the permanence of Maud Gonne's image and its dominance over his life and relationships.

Others because you did not keep
 That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
 Yet always when I look death in the face,
 When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
 Or when I grow excited with wine,
 Suddenly I meet your face.¹¹

The words of Cuchulain as he pursues the hawk-woman also find echoes in Yeats's lyric poetry. Cuchulain says:

Run where you will,
 Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist.
 Some were called queens and yet have been perched there.¹²

In the 1904 volume, In The Seven Woods, the association of Maud Gonne with the legendary queens of Celtic mythology is established.

'Your strength, that is so lofty and fierce and kind,
 It might call up a new age, calling to mind
 The queens that we imagined long ago. . .¹³

In another poem of the same volume, these queens are linked to the story of a wood-woman and a hawk:

Therein are many queens like Branwen and Guinevere;
 And Niamh and Laban and Fand, who could change
 to an otter or fawn,

¹⁰ Collected Plays, p. 290. ¹¹ Collected Poems, p. 174.

¹² Collected Plays, p. 217. ¹³ Collected Poems, p. 86.

And the wood-woman, whose lover was changed to a
blue-eyed hawk;¹⁴

In a poem published in Wild Swans At Coole in 1919, Maud takes her place once again as a member of Yeats's private royalty. Of the three women of whom he has been dreaming, Yeats says:

One is a harlot, and one a child
That never looked upon man with desire,
And one, it may be, a queen.¹⁵

In view of the peculiar relationship between Yeats's hopeless longing for Maud Gonne and his devotion to Irish Nationalism, it is hardly surprising that, in At The Hawk's Well, sexual desire and the heroic commitment should be so inextricably mixed. Richard Ellman describes how Yeats became a political activist. He points out that Yeats at first intended to carry on "a secret spiritual propaganda for the most profound minds."

He soon realized that such a propaganda might not be sufficient to affect events, and shortly before Parnell's death in 1891 he decided to form literary societies. In his plans, he later confessed self-deprecatingly, 'there was much patriotism, and more desire for a fair woman.' He speaks in the first draft of his Autobiographies of how he justified his plans to his 'nervous mocking self' by saying that Ireland which could not support a critical press must find a substitute. A moment later that nervous self would convict me of insincerity and show me that I was seeking a field of work that would not be demoralizing as I thought that even the most necessary politics were, not all but mostly for her. . . . ' Like other young men, he wanted to prove his courage and strength to his beloved and to himself. But we should not allow his own confession of a multiplicity of motives to blind us to

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 91 - 92. ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

the larger idealism which animated all that he did for his country.¹⁶

Ellman's caveat is well taken, but for Yeats, love and patriotism would be forever inseparable. Maud Gonne was Cathleen Ni Houlihan making a private appeal to Willy Yeats. Even as he thinks of the heroes of Ireland's past in the poem "September 1913", the image of the sexual lure recurs:

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son':
They weighed so lightly what they gave.¹⁷

I think there can be little doubt that At The Hawk's Well represents, among other things, a symbolic representation of the pattern of love, hate and heroism which Yeats had experienced in his relationship with Maud Gonne. It was only after he had begun to look with less sentimental eyes upon this relationship that he was able to write the play. In the earlier stages he would have been less likely to give vent to the bitterness which is reflected in the Old Man's complaint that he has been cheated by the dancers.¹⁸ By the time he wrote At The Hawk's Well he was able to see Maud Gonne as one who passed in and out of his life "to allure or to destroy".¹⁹

In a poem published in 1910 he had asked:

¹⁶ Ellman, op. cit., p. 103. ¹⁷ Collected Poems, p. 121.

¹⁸ Collected Plays, p. 213. ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 215.

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets against the great,
 Had they but courage equal to desire?²⁰

Now he thinks of her as one "that took/ All till my youth was
 gone/ With scarce a pitying look".²¹

In The Green Helmet, Cuchulain demonstrates for us a
 heroism at once gay, reckless and totally unselfish. The Red
 Man describes it as a heroism of

. . . the laughing lip
 That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise or
 fall;
 The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed
 by all;
 The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a
 gambler's throw;²²

In January 1907, the year previous to the first production of
 the original version of this play (under the title, The Golden
 Helmet), Yeats himself had an opportunity to display just
 such heroism. The poet's part in leading the Abbey Theatre
 through the difficult days of the riots over Synge's The
 Playboy of the Western World gave him a taste of the courageous
 life which had a pronounced effect on the Cuchulain play on
 which he was working.

The plotting of The Green Helmet was obviously influenced
 by the circumstances of the Playboy riots. Cuchulain, like Yeats,

20 Collected Poems, p. 101. 21 Ibid., p. 139.

22 Collected Plays, p. 243.

was in Scotland when the trouble began. Again like Yeats, Cuchulain establishes his courage by taking upon himself another man's quarrel. The emphasis given the rioting in The Green Helmet also shows the influence of Yeats's experience in the Abbey Theatre during the week's run of The Playboy of the Western World. An account of the events at the Abbey Theatre that week should make the parallels apparent.

Behind the Playboy riots was a conflict between the more extreme sections of the nationalist movement and the Abbey Theatre with its claim to being an Irish national theatre. Yeats and his colleagues had fought to maintain the principle that a truly national theatre should be an institution with artistic integrity, and not simply an organ of propaganda for the cause of extreme nationalism. The little clubs and societies into which the Irish nationalist movement had split suspected that the Abbey was in the hands of Anglophiles. They insisted on seeing Synge's portraits of Irish peasant life as libels on the Irish character and his plots as a defamation of Irish womanhood. Because his characters spoke realistically, he was accused of filling the mouths of his characters with "barbarous jargon" and "elaborate and incessant cursing".²³

²³ Daniel J. Murphy, "The Reception of Synge's Playboy in Ireland and America: 1907 - 1912", Bulletin of the New York Public Library, Vol. 64, No. 10, p. 521.

Since the real issue of the Playboy riots was the question of who should be recognized as the legitimate champion of Irish nationalism, Yeats's change of the helmet from gold to green is significant. As I have mentioned, the colour green makes the helmet a more suitable fertility symbol; it also makes it possible to see the helmet as the crown of Irish nationalism, the crown which Yeats was defending in the Playboy riots.

Yeats was on a lecture tour in Scotland when a telegram from Lady Gregory about disorders at the Saturday night opening of The Playboy brought him back to Dublin. Daniel J. Murphy gives this account in an article in the Bulletin of the New York Public Library, October 1960.

Yeats returned from Scotland in time for the Tuesday performance. Lady Gregory had in the meantime given seats to some Trinity students in order to have a favourable claque. Holloway said they were drinking and, before long, fighting with the rest of the audience; one of them had to be ejected by Synge. Before the performance began, Yeats made a speech in which he invited all to a public discussion of the play Monday next at the Abbey. As soon as the play started, the disturbances began. Yeats tried three times to talk to the audience, and three separate attempts were made to continue the play.²⁴

Wednesday brought more rioting. Murphy quotes the account in the Freeman's Journal.

Cat calls, strident bugle notes, and the fierce demonstrations added to the general din. . . . For fully five minutes not

²⁴ Ibid., p. 523.

a word spoken on the stage could be heard . . . but from then to the end of the act, the dialogue was not completely smothered. . . . The second act, however, was all uproar, and concluded among a hurricane of uproar. The interval between the acts was occupied by a fist fight in the vestibule, and the singing of "The Peeler and the Goat". The third act was unintelligible, played amid bugle calls, hisses, applause and boos. After the performance, the house had to be cleared by the police, and demonstrators marched, under police surveillance, through Abbey Street and O'Connell Street.²⁵

The behavior of this mob equipped as they were with bugles (Yeats himself identified the instruments as "tin trumpet-pets")²⁶ certainly provided a model for the rioting of the rabble in The Green Helmet, while Yeats's attempt to restore order suggests Cuchulain's similar attempts. The pack of charioteers and kitchen and stable boys, who symbolize the Dublin mob, are described by Conall in the play.

There, do you hear them now? Such hatred has each
for each
They have taken the hunting-horns to drown one another's
speech
For fear the truth may prevail.²⁷

But as with Cuchulain, it was in the final test that Yeats established the full measure of his heroism. Yeats had promised a public debate on The Playboy to be held the Monday following the week's run. The house was packed with enemies of the Abbey Theatre and of Yeats's kind of nationalism.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 524.

²⁶ W. B. Yeats, Explorations (London: Macmillan & Co., 1962), p. 226.

²⁷ Collected Plays, p. 234.

Greene and Stephens, in their biography of Synge, describe the scene.

When the debate took place, as Yeats had promised, on Monday night, Synge was not present, but apparently everyone else in the Dublin literary world was. Mary Colum, who was then a student, wrote an eyewitness account of it, and the Dublin newspapers gave it full coverage. Yeats made what was certainly one of the most courageous utterances of his life to an audience almost entirely hostile and threatening. The riots and the bitter controversies that erupted out of them were to have a lasting effect on him -- even more than upon Synge, "so absorbed in his own vision of the world that he cares for nothing else." But Yeats never weakened in his commitment to the ideals he had so belligerently expounded. As he stepped out on the stage that night his audience knew that he was unruffled by their hostility as were the immaculate evening clothes he had put on as a further note of defiance. Mary Colum wrote that when they refused to listen to him he reminded them that he was the author of Cathleen Ni Houlihan. "The audience, remembering that passionately patriotic play, forgot its antagonism for a few moments and Yeats got his cheers. . . . I never witnessed a human being fight as Yeats fought that night, nor knew another with so many weapons in his armory." 28

It is a picture of the hero of the laughing lip, the steady heart and the hand that scatters life like a gambler's throw. It is the picture of the man who has earned the right to wear the Green Helmet of true Irish patriotism.

On Baile's Strand was written immediately after Yeats experienced the shock of learning of Maud Gonne's marriage to John MacBride in 1903. Yeats felt he had been betrayed by his own prudence and had for this reason lost Maud Gonne to a

28 David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, J. M. Synge 1871 - 1909 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), p. 248.

more dashing suitor.²⁹ Richard Ellman describes Yeats's reaction to the marriage.

Yeats blamed his own timid, critical intellect for restraining his impetuous nature so that when he should have embraced he had feared and qualified and idealized. He had lost the capacity for acting on instinct which men like MacBride, lacking the critical mind, possessed. Maud Gonne's marriage was therefore an indictment; instead of condemning her, he condemned himself, 'took all the blame, out of all sense and reason.'³⁰

Ellman points out that Yeats dramatized this sense of guilt by representing the two opposing parts of his nature as Cuchulain and Conchubar in On Baile's Strand. The central incident of the play is the conflict between father and son, a theme which Ellman points out was close to Yeats's heart, but the real struggle is between Cuchulain and the high king. It is here that we find the "heart mysteries" which Yeats mentions in "The Circus Animals' Desertion".³¹

. . . the real struggle is between the warrior Cuchulain, instinctively loving and hating, and the crafty king Conchubar who forces Cuchulain to slay unwittingly his own son. Cuchulain's tragic fate, like Yeats's own, is caused by his listening to the voice of apparent reason; instead of following his impulse to make friends with the unknown warrior, he allows Conchubar to persuade him that the cry of his heart is witchcraft, and discovers too late the identity of his opponent. Yeats never explained this meaning of the play, said in fact that he had

²⁹ cf. "Reconciliation", Collected Poems, p. 102.

³⁰ Ellman, op. cit., p. 166.

³¹ Collected Poems, p. 392.

forgotten what his symbols meant except that the fool and blind man, who constitute a kind of chorus to the main action, are the shadows of Cuchulain and Conchubar.³²

There is another area of Yeats's life in which Yeats was beginning to feel the danger of Conchubar's pattern of life and thought smothering his instincts, and his ability to live life spontaneously. As a theatre manager responsible for day-to-day theatre business, he often felt that he had surrendered the heroic life for one of soul-dulling routine. Looking back on this period in a later poem he said:

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
That must, as if it had not holy blood
Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,
Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
As though it dragged road-metal. My curse on plays
That have to be set up in fifty ways,
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
Theatre business, management of men.
I swear before the dawn comes round again
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.³³

It is just such an enslavement to the world of administrative necessity that is dramatized in Cuchulain's taking the oath in On Baile's Strand; it is just such a bitterness at having lost what is essential in life that is expressed in the Fool's disillusionment with his partnership with the Blind Man.

The death of John MacBride as a result of the Easter Rebellion of 1916, brought Yeats's life to the point of a

³² Ellman, op. cit., p. 303

³³ Collected Poems, p. 104.

major crisis. Maud Gonne MacBride, who had for some years been estranged from her husband and by whose image Yeats was still enthralled, was at last free. Before the news of the Easter Week executions Yeats had already spoken to Miss Georgie Hyde-Lees of marriage. When he heard of the death of MacBride, however, he hurried to Maud Gonne's side. Joseph Hone says of this period:

Yeats' first impulse was to ask Maud Gonne to marry him now that she was free, and yet before going to France he all but made a compact with Lady Gregory, for the sake of the Abbey Theatre (which at this time largely depended for its existence on the donations of rich Irish Unionists), and as a "refuge from some weakness in myself", not to marry unless Maud Gonne renounced all politics, including amnesty for the political prisoners.³⁴

As might have been expected, Maud Gonne was more interested in politics than in marriage at this crucial point in Ireland's troubles.

In the summer of 1917, Yeats proposed marriage to Maud Gonne's adopted niece, Iseult. When she refused him, he decided to return to his original plan and marry Miss Hyde-Lees. They were married October 20th, 1917. Joseph Hone points out that Yeats "did not spare himself examination of conscience, for he feared that he had given pain to Maud Gonne by his proposal to Iseult, and made two women unhappy." ³⁵

In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats praised the domestic virtues of his bride:

³⁴ Hone, op. cit., p. 303.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 306.

My wife is a perfect wife, kind, wise, and unselfish.
I think you were such another young girl once. She has
made my life serene and full of order.³⁶

Out of Yeats's soul-searching at this period came
The Only Jealousy of Emer, with its tribute to woman's beauty
and its picture of a man torn between an image of perfection,
the memory of a virtuous woman, and the reality of a young
girl. There can be little doubt that Maud Gonne, Georgie
Yeats, and Iseult Gonne provided Yeats with the models for
Fand, Emer, and Eithne Inguba in The Only Jealousy of Emer.
That Yeats himself associated Maud Gonne with the play is
established by a section of The Trembling of the Veil, published
in 1922. He ends a section on the beauty of Maud Gonne with an
excerpt from the opening lyric of The Only Jealousy of Emer.

. . . for that reason, as I have known another woman do,
she hated her own beauty, not for its effect upon others,
but its image in the mirror. Beauty is from the antithetical
self, and a woman can scarce but hate it, for not only
does it demand a painful daily service, but it calls for
the denial or the dissolution of the self.

How many centuries spent
The sedentary soul,
In toil of measurement
Beyond eagle or mole
Beyond hearing and seeing
Or Archimedes' guess,
To raise into being
That loveliness? ³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁷ W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood
and Youth and The Trembling of the Veil (London: Macmillan and
Co., 1926), p. 448.

As I have already demonstrated, the lyric poetry of this period establishes the degree to which Yeats was still enthralled by the image of Maud Gonne.

Yet always when I look death in the face,
When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face. ³⁸

When we realize that Georgie Yeats may have turned to experimenting with automatic writing during her honeymoon as a way to take Yeats's mind off this ever-present image, the words of Emer take on a new poignancy.

I know her sort.
They find our men asleep, weary with war,
Lap them in cloudy hair or kiss their lips;
Our men awake in ignorance of it all,
But when we take them in our arms at night
We cannot break their solitude. ³⁹

Emer's acceptance of the fact that Cuchulain returns, not to her, but to the young Eithne Inguba after his sojourn with Fand, is a reflection of Georgie's acceptance of Yeats's turning first to Iseult Gonne with a proposal of marriage before returning to her. Yeats could scarcely have conceived of the self-sacrificing nature of Emer's love, if he had not had the example of the love of the woman he married upon which to model it.

The Death of Cuchulain, written as it was just before the death of its author, has a very special place as an

³⁸ Collected Poems, p. 174.

³⁹ Collected Plays, p. 290.

autobiographical document. In the person of the Old Man out of mythology, Yeats looks back with bitterness at certain aspects of his life, particularly at his experience as playwright and man of the theatre. In the person of Cuchulain, he expresses the mingled courage and resignation he feels in the face of death. In his plotting, he shows that the death of a man who has tried to live according to an heroic ideal can have its ironic side too. Just as Cuchulain appears to be headed for a suitably heroic death at the hands of Aoife, Aoife excuses herself; death comes at the hands of a blind beggar who kills Cuchulain for twelve pennies. Such a death seems something of an anti-climax after a hero's life. Even the hero's spiritual deliverance from the pain of living strikes him as odd, not glorious.

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? ⁴⁰

It was with such an attitude, courageous, resigned, with a wry appreciation of the ironies of his situation that W. B. Yeats faced his approaching death.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 702.

PART TWO

THE DREAM ITSELF

CHAPTER V

AT THE HAWK'S WELL

Yeats begins his poem "The Second Coming" with the image of a circling hawk.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹

Here the hawk is a symbol of the disintegrating age as it moves from Phase Twenty-eight to Phase One of a new cycle, the beginning of a new era. The circling hawk symbolizes the extreme expansion of the tendency of one age, heralding the divine incarnation which will mark the beginning of a new.

The hawk-woman in At The Hawk's Well betokens just such a moment of crisis, this time not at the beginning of a new historical age but at the beginning of Cuchulain's commitment to the heroic life. It is at such a moment that the world of the spirits and the world of man interpenetrate. The well of immortality constitutes just such a supernatural manifestation when it bubbles unseen. The water seems to represent the unity of being which exists, even though unattainable, at the centre of life at the phase of extreme

¹ Collected Poems, pp. 210-211.

discord and objectivity. But Cuchulain is fated to pursue a course of bloodshed, and discord, and bravery. It is only after he has experienced tragic suffering and his soul has died "into the labyrinth of itself" that he will approach unity of being.² This will involve another supernatural manifestation, and Cuchulain's contact with complete subjectivity will be momentary. He will then move back toward a surrender to the discordant, objective world. At his death he will have completed the cycle and will return to Phase One.

Since At The Hawk's Well represents a phase in the life of Cuchulain in which the world of man and the world of the spirits interpenetrate, Yeats's choice of the Noh play form is a fitting one. Noh plays generally tell the story of some visitation by a spirit. Yeats describes the typical Noh plot in his introduction to Certain Noble Plays of Japan.

The adventure itself is often the meeting with ghost, god or goddess at some holy place or much-legended tomb; and god, goddess or ghost reminds me at times of our own Irish legends and beliefs, which once it may be differed little from those of the Shinto worshipper.³

As I have pointed out, the story of Cuchulain and the hawk-woman finds its origin in Yeats's experiments in symbolic ritual and in his knowledge of the fertility and kingship myths of the Celts. His main source of material for the

² Vision, p. 60.

³ Reprinted in Pound and Fenollosa, Classic Noh Theatre, p. 159.

Cuchulain plays, Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne, makes no mention of such an incident. The story of Cuchulain's meeting with Aoife is briefly mentioned.

So then Cuchulain and Aoife attacked one another and began a fierce fight, and she broke Cuchulain's spear in pieces, and his sword she broke at the hilt. Then Cuchulain called out, "Look, the chariot and the horses and the driver of Aoife are fallen down into the valley and are lost!" At that Aoife looked about her, and Cuchulain took a sudden hold of her, and lifted her on his shoulders, and brought her down to where the army was, and laid her on the ground, and held his sword to her breast, and she begged for her life, and he gave it to her. And after that she made peace with Scathach, and bound herself by sureties not to go out against her again. And she gave her love to Cuchulain; and out of that love great sorrow came afterwards.⁴

In dramatizing this part of the Cuchulain story, Yeats chooses not to deal directly with the encounter with Aoife. As the play ends, the encounter is about to take place. We are told of it later in On Baile's Strand. Yeats's dramatic strategy is rather to treat the whole matter symbolically. The emphasis is thrown on the spirit which animates Aoife rather than on Aoife herself. This spirit, symbolized by the Woman of the Sidhe, appears first to Cuchulain as a great hawk, then as the shadow by which the Guardian of the Well is possessed. Cuchulain's love-hate relationship with this spirit is worked out in the hawk-dance with which the Guardian lures Cuchulain. With this relationship established

⁴ Lady Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne (London: John Murray, 1902), p. 38.

in our mind, we accept Cuchulain's encounter with Aoife as inevitable. The battle with Aoife, who is under the spell of the fierce hawk-like spirit of the Woman of the Sidhe, and the subsequent love encounter are simply a manifestation of the curse Cuchulain assumed at the Hawk's Well.

The shift from Lady Gregory's matter-of-fact narrative to a symbolic representation of Cuchulain's assumption of the curse is underlined by the first words of the Musicians. "I call to the eye of the mind," they say, indicating that the action is actually in the world of thought.

Before proceeding further, perhaps it would be well to say something about Yeats's use of masks. Since Yeats had no opportunity, after the completion of the Cuchulain cycle, to revise the individual plays bringing into harmony the various theatrical conventions he had used at the different points of his career at which he wrote the plays, we can have no idea whether Yeats was satisfied that he had used masks according to a consistent pattern. Although there are some difficulties, I think a fairly coherent theory of Yeats's use of the masks can be derived from the stage directions of the Cuchulain plays.

The most puzzling thing about the use of masks in At The Hawk's Well is that four of the characters have their faces made up to resemble masks while two are actually masked. What can this mean within the symbolic framework of the play?

A fairly straightforward answer immediately suggests itself. In the first place, the mask-like quality of all the faces depersonalizes them. They are important for what they represent, for they are figures in a ritual, the acting out of a "heart mystery". But there is a difference. Behind the masks of Age and Youth are real people, for Age and Youth are roles a man assumes. But those to whose faces the paint is applied directly are themselves mere masks. The Musicians exist only in their function; they describe the scene and speak the thoughts of the players but never take part in the the action.⁵ The Guardian of the Well becomes a mask for that "unappeasable shadow", the Woman of the Sidhe.

That Yeats consciously moved toward a greater and greater depersonalization of the characters in At The Hawk's Well is borne out by a study of the development of the play through its successive drafts. In Yeats At Work, Curtis B. Bradford shows how the character who begins in the first draft as Cuchulain, and whose fame is recognized by the Old Man, becomes in the final version of the play simply Young Man. In the final version, the Old Man recognizes him neither by name or reputation. Bradford summarizes:

The few characters in a dance play are not people, but rather timeless persons -- a Young Man, a Stranger, a

⁵ Classic Noh Theatre, p. 158.

Swineherd, a Queen. They are usually masked, their movements are formal, unimitative, so that in spite of the intimate nature of Yeats's theatre a great aesthetic distance is achieved. Every effort is made to avoid an empathetic response between audience and actors.⁶

We are reminded of a statement made by Yeats in an essay on tragedy written in 1910:

Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brighted image-crowded sea. That which is before our eyes perpetually vanishes and returns again in the midst of the excitement it creates, and the more enthralling it is, the more do we forget it.⁷

It was just such an effect that Yeats aimed at in At The Hawk's Well. His introduction to the Japanese dance play had given him the means by which to attain it.

I mentioned earlier that the entire Cuchulain cycle may be seen as a working out of Yeats's central antinomy. Man moves in life between involvement in the external struggles of life and a withdrawal into the "labyrinth" of his own soul, between discord and concord, between passionate desire and unity of being, between objectivity and subjectivity, Yeats's Primary tincture and his Antithetical. In the pattern of the whole cycle, this antinomy is represented by the struggle

⁶ Bradford, op. cit., p. 215.

⁷ W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan & Co., 1961), p. 245.

between Bricriu, god of Discord, and Fand, who represents Unity of Being. At The Hawk's Well introduces us to this war of opposites.

The opening song of the Musicians introduces "A well long choked up and dry/ And boughs long stripped by the wind."⁸ The waters of the well represent immortality or wisdom, two qualities associated with Unity of Being. In a fruitless quest for the waters, the Old Man has avoided involvement in life, being too timid to gaze into the eyes of the hawk. He now feels cheated, since the result of his quest has been a barren emptiness. The trees, on the other hand, have dared to live exposed to the wind. They probably represent knowledge of good and evil, the loss of innocence of him who exposes himself to objective living, to passion and to discord. They too are now barren, stripped by the wind, their vital force gone.

The Musicians also introduce us to the face of the hero:

And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.⁹

Notice the ever-present image of the destructive and cruel "salt sea wind". We will see later how the sea is closely related to Bricriu, god of Discord, and to Cuchulain's Body of

⁸ Collected Plays, p. 208. ⁹ Ibid.

Fate, that is, those external factors that work upon him.

The irony of a man seeking immortality, if immortality means a continuation of this life, is brought out by the Musicians. Ninety years on the wheel of life is a dubious benefit. Man's heart is shown to be subject to conflicting desires, to continue involvement with life or to escape from it.

The heart would be always awake,
The heart would turn to its rest.¹⁰

When the Old Man enters he attempts to build a fire to protect him from the cold, but the flames serve only to illuminate the stripped hazels and the empty well. The Old Man rails against the indifference and apparent stupidity of the Guardian of the Well. He longs for conversation touching upon his plight, even if it is a series of banalities.

The Young Man enters, showing the impatience of youth.

And though I have trod the rocks for half a day
I cannot find what I am looking for.¹¹

The Old Man, who has waited without reward for fifty years reacts with hostility. Having chosen the path of subjective withdrawal, he resents the boldness and the freedom of the man of action.

If I may judge by the gold
On head and feet and glittering in your coat,
You are not of those who hate the living world.¹²

And again:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 209. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 211. ¹² Ibid.

What mischief brings you hither?-- you are like those
Who are crazy for the shedding of men's blood,
And for the love of women.¹³

The Young Man tells that he is on a quest, searching for a well, some hazels and a solitary girl. But the spot is not as he had imagined it:

I but see
A hollow among stones half-full of leaves. 14

The Old Man tells his story and warns that the rewards of such a mystic quest do not come easily. He has lain in wait fifty years, yet is always sleeping when the water rises. The Young Man says that he will pierce his foot to keep from sleeping. The Old Man warns his young companion that the way of the hero is hard. He advises the Young Man to give up his quest before it is too late.

Young Man. My luck is strong,
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they
That dance among the stones put me asleep;
If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot.

Old Man. No, do not pierce it, for the foot is tender,
It feels pain much. But find your sail again
And leave the well to me, for it belongs
To all that's old and withered.

Young Man. No, I stay.¹⁵

They are interrupted by the cry of the hawk that issues from the Guardian of the Well. The Young Man tells of his experience with the great grey hawk that tried to keep him from the well.

13 Ibid., p. 212. 14 Ibid. 15 Ibid., 214.

The Old Man identifies the hawk with the Woman of the Sidhe, who is also the "deathless body" that is sliding through the veins of the Guardian of the Well and the "unappeasable shadow" that will possess Aoife and her fierce women of the hills. The symbolism here must be judged in the context of the symbolic patterns we traced through the entire play cycle in Chapters II and III.

The Celtic myth of the transformation of the goddess is an important key to the symbolism.¹⁶ Although the woman of the Sidhe is identified with the goddess Fand in The Only Jealousy of Emer and is at that point a symbol of Unity of Being and absolute subjectivity, in At The Hawk's Well she is a bird of prey, and in The Death of Cuchulain, a crow-headed war goddess. This is in accord with the symbolism of the Great Wheel. At Phase Fifteen Fand and Bricriu struggle for the soul of Cuchulain, for at this point they are mortal enemies, Fand representing Unity of Being and a withdrawal from life into pure subjectivity, and Bricriu representing the discordant and painful involvement in the objective world. At Phase One, the phase of extreme objectivity, the goddess appears to be allied to those forces represented by Bricriu and she herself leads Cuchulain away from the well of subjectivity and into involvement in the conflicts of the objective world. As

¹⁶ See pp. 53-56 for an account of this myth.

Cuchulain moves from Phase Twenty-eight toward Phase One again, the goddess is again cruel and allied to the objective world. This time she takes the form of a bird of carrion, marking the end of the cycle.

When we realize that pursuit of the Hawk-goddess symbolizes heroic involvement with the objective world, then the curse to which the Old Man refers becomes comprehensible.

There falls a curse
On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes;
So get you gone while you have that proud step
And confident voice, for not a man alive
Has so much luck that he can play with it.
Those that have long to live should fear her most,
The old are cursed already. The curse may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
With your own hand.¹⁷

This speech looks ahead, of course, to the love of Aoife and the "great sorrow" that came out of it. But it is also a general statement of the tragic fate that awaits the man who commits himself to a life of heroic involvement. The Young Man is repelled by results of the Old Man's withdrawal from life and rejects his advice.

You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks,
As though you had no part in life.¹⁸

When the moment comes for the water to bubble in the well, the Old Man sleeps. The Young Man, seized by the madness of the

¹⁷ Collected Plays, p. 215. ¹⁸ Ibid.

heroic idea, grows pale and staggers to his feet. He pursues the Guardian of the Well, who leads him away by means of a hawk-like dance. He is in love with heroic conflict and dreams he will subdue a hostile fate.

Young Man. Run where you will
 Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist,
 Some were called queens and yet have been perched
 there.¹⁹

As he leaves in pursuit of the Hawk-woman, the water splashes. He hears it, but rejects the kind of immortality, the wisdom and Unity of Being it represents, choosing instead the world of conflict and discord -- the world of the hero.

Cuchulain, of course, cannot subdue his fate any more than he can catch and subdue the Hawk-woman. In the end, all heroes are tragic heroes. They find their fulfillment in defeat. Thus the Old Man's fifty-year watch for the waters of the well implies a kind of heroism too. What they have both given up is the contentment that comes from an unexceptional domestic existence. The Musicians sing:

He might have lived at his ease,
 An old dog's head on his knees,
 Among his children and friends.²⁰

Perhaps true wisdom, true Unity of Being, comes from thus harmonizing oneself with nature. The Old Man, who pursues a harder idea of wisdom would call such a life folly, yet it is a folly to be cherished.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 217. ²⁰ Ibid.

Folly alone I cherish,
 I choose it for my share;
 Being but a mouthful of air;
 I am content to perish;
 I am but a mouthful of sweet air.²¹

The pursuit of wisdom in the Old Man's sense of the word, the search for immortality through the attainment of an ideal, is a bitter course.

O lamentable shadows,
 Obscurity of strife!
 I choose a pleasant life
 Among indolent meadows;
 Wisdom must lead a bitter life.²²

If there is a kind of wisdom in the folly of the indolent and pleasant living of life as a mouthful of air, the hero's sterner choice makes him a fool. He gives up happiness in pursuit of an ideal that can bring only frustration and tragedy. The closing lyrics put the case clearly.

'The man that I praise',
 Cries out the empty well,
 'Lives all his days
 Where a hand on the bell
 Can call the milch cows
 To the comfortable door of his house.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 Dry stones in a well?'
 'The man that I praise',
 Cries out the leafless tree,
 'Has married and stays
 By an old hearth, and he
 On naught has set store
 But children and dogs on the floor.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 A withered tree?'²³

The idea that it is a heroic dream itself that produces the

²¹ Ibid., p. 219. ²² Ibid. ²³ Ibid., pp. 219 - 220.

tragedy of the hero's life, is re-inforced by our memory of a poem from In The Seven Woods in which Yeats used a similar image.

No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind;
The boughs have withered because I have told them
my dreams.²⁴

²⁴ Collected Poems, p. 87.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREEN HELMET

The basis for the plot of The Green Helmet is a skillful interweaving of two episodes from Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne: "Bricriu's Feast, and the War of Words of the Women of Ulster" and "The Championship of Ulster". Yeats's rearrangement of these two episodes provides a striking example of his skill in adapting mythological materials to suit the requirements of dramatic presentation and to satisfy his need for symbols to harmonize with the patterns by which he interpreted experience.

In Lady Gregory's account, Bricriu is not a god, merely a noble with a reputation for mischief. On receiving an invitation to Bricriu's feast, Fergus says, "We will not go, for if we do, our dead will be more than our living, after Bricriu has set us to quarrel with one another."¹

When the men of Ulster consider staying away, Bricriu threatens to sow discord throughout the land:

"I will stir up strife," said Bricriu, "between the kings and the leaders, and the heroes of valour, and the swordsmen, till everyone makes an end of the other, if they will not come with me to use my feast." "We will not go for the sake of pleasing you," said Conchubar. "I will stir up anger between father and

¹ Lady Gregory, op. cit., p. 49.

son, so that they will be the death of one another," said Bricriu; "if I fail in doing that, I will make a quarrel between mother and daughter; if that fails, I will set the women of Ulster one against the other, so that they will come to deadly blows, and be striking one another on the breast."²

The men of Ulster decide to attend the feast after first taking the precaution of placing their host under guard in another place during the feast.

This precaution is of little effect against Bricriu's talent for sowing discord. He first promotes a dispute among the three heroes, Legaire, Conall, and Cuchulain, over who shall receive the "hero's portion" -- a choice cut of meat along with which go many other honours. No sooner is peace restored -- by arranging a series of contests to determine the Championship of Ulster -- than a dispute breaks out among the wives of the three heroes over who is the fairest and the most deserving of honour. As in The Green Helmet, the question of which lady shall enter the hall first is solved by breaking holes in the wall so all can enter simultaneously. The dispute turns into a war of words.

The Championship of Ulster is to be determined by a series of contests, the last of which brings the three heroes face-to-face with a Stranger who is looking for a man who will keep his word and hold to his agreement. When asked the nature

² Ibid.

of the agreement, the Stranger replies.

"Here is this axe," he said, "and the man into whose hands it is put is to cut off my head to-day, I to cut his head off to-morrow. And as you men of Ulster have a name beyond the men of all other countries for strength and skill, for courage, for greatness, for highmindedness, for behavior, for truth and generosity, for worthiness, let you find one among you that will hold to his word and keep to his bargain."³

Legaire is the first to accept the challenge. But when he has severed the Stranger's head from his body, the Stranger rises up, gathers his head and axe, and strides from the hall, his neck streaming with blood. When he returns to claim Legaire's head, Legaire loses his nerve. The same thing happens when Conall accepts the challenge. Again the Stranger survives decapitation. Conall breaks his word.

Cuchulain executes a spectacular decapitation of the Stranger, hurling his head to the top of the rafters, so that the whole house shakes.

When the Stranger returns, Cuchulain's nerve does not fail him. He stretches his neck on the chopping block. Instead of cutting off Cuchulain's head the Stranger strikes the floor with the blunt side of the sword. He is Curoi, son of Daire, who was to be judge of the Championship of Ulster.

"Rise up, Cuchulain," he said. "Of all the heroes of Ulster, whatever may be their daring, there is not one to compare with you in courage and in bravery and in truth. The Championship of the heroes of Ireland is

³ Ibid., pp. 78 - 79.

yours from this out, and the Champion's Portion with it, and to your wife the first place among all the women of Ulster. And whoever tries to put himself before you after this," he said, "I swear by the oath my people swear by, his own life will be in danger."⁴

In adapting this story for dramatic presentation, Yeats gains considerable compression by combining Bricriu and Curoi into one character, the Red Man. In making Bricriu a god, while still preserving his penchant for mischief-making, Yeats makes him more useful as a symbol and prepares us for the part this spirit will play in The Only Jealousy of Emer. It is interesting that in that play Yeats makes a point of distinguishing between Bricriu of the Sidhe and Bricriu the human being.⁵ Showing Cuchulain as returning from Scotland to take on a challenge that has been accepted by others in his absence, Yeats makes Cuchulain's heroism all the more impressive. It also enables Yeats to fit the play into his cycle as a sequel to At The Hawk's Well, when that play is written six years later.

Two changes in emphasis are also important. Yeats's version of the War of Word differs sharply from Lady Gregory's version. In Cuchulain of Muirthemne Emer dwells upon her own beauty and worthiness as well as the greatness of her husband. Yeats discards the first part of her argument and centres her eloquence purely on her admiration for Cuchulain. Thus he

⁴ Ibid., p. 81. ⁵ Collected Plays, p. 287.

prepares us for her unselfish love in The Only Jealousy of Emer. The second significant change in emphasis is in the final speech of the Red Man. Cu Roi's speech is a simple declaration of Cuchulain's superiority in courage and in truth. The final speech of the Red Man is a considerable elaboration of this: it puts forth a definition of the heroic personality and the heroic attitude toward life. It is the hero of the laughing lip and the unembittered heart that is specifically praised.

The form Yeats chose for the story of The Green Helmet is heroic farce. The rhymed couplets, the violence of the action and the imagery, the startling lighting effects, the bizarre cat men all serve to give the effect of a headlong plunge into a world of discord and conflict. This effect was heightened in the Abbey Theatre production by a set designed with startling and violent colour contrasts.⁶ The tone of the verse is one of exhilaration and reckless gaiety.

Yeats manages the plot so that the action of play moves from one crisis to the next at a breath-taking pace. Excitement mounts ever-higher until the final moment when Cuchulain is crowned champion.

The opening dialogue between Laegaire and Conall establishes an atmosphere of nervous excitement. The sea is spoken of as a source of danger. Cuchulain's voice is heard,

⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

but Laegaire and Conall are certain that Cuchulain is still in Scotland. We hear of conditions in Ireland in Cuchulain's absence -- all obviously due to the workings of some spirit of discord. "Here neighbour wars on neighbour, and why there is no man knows,"⁷ says Conall. And there is strife among the women because of Emer's airs of superiority and her extravagant praise of Cuchulain.

When Cuchulain arrives they try to keep him out. There is a scuffle and Cuchulain gains entrance. Even when they recognize him, Conall and Laegaire try to send Cuchulain away. Cuchulain suspects they have some great adventure they are unwilling to share with him.

You are waiting for some message to bring you to
war of love
In that 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.⁸

At this point they decide to tell Cuchulain about the Red Man who offered to play them "head for a head". Cuchulain at first doubts the truth of the story, thinking they were drunk. Conall and Laegaire insist that the man who could take up his severed head in his hands and splash himself into the

⁷ Ibid., p. 225. ⁸ Ibid., pp. 227 - 228.

sea, is returning for their heads.

Conall. And he called for his debt and his right,
And said that the land was disgraced because of us
two from that night
If we did not pay him his debt.⁹

The twelve months the Red Man gave them before collecting his debt are now up, and Conall and Laegaire are in despair.

At this point the Red Man returns. Cuchulain confronts him boldly, but instead of insisting on a head, he presents the Green Helmet as an award to the best man there. When he leaves, a quarrel ensues which is only broken up by Cuchulain's suggestion that they all drink from the helmet as a symbol of equality and collective heroism. But the God of Discord has spread dissension much farther than this. At this moment a riot breaks out among the charioteers and stable-boys as to whose master is best. No sooner has Cuchulain begun to restore order than the women are heard arguing as to whose husband is best. They come to the door, struggling for precedence. Cuchulain puts his spear across the door and Laegaire and Conall break holes in the walls. Cuchulain removes his spear and the women enter the room at the same moment. A war of words among the women ensues. Cuchulain throws the helmet into the sea, but the wrangling continues.

Suddenly the lights are extinguished by the black hands. Even the moon goes into eclipse. When the moon begins to shine

⁹ Ibid., p. 230.

again, the Red Man has returned. He demands his debt, but only Cuchulain asserts his willingness to give his head. Emer pleads with him to put up with shame rather than give his life. ("It is you, not your fame that I love.")¹⁰ Cheerfully he offers his head.

Quick to your work, old Radish, you will fade when
the cocks have crowed.¹¹

Instead of beheading Cuchulain, the Red Man chooses him champion, awarding him the Green Helmet.

The Green Helmet shows us the heroic commitment in another dimension. The Red Man -- Bricriu, God of Discord -- represents the world of violence and conflict in which the hero moves. As in At The Hawk's Well the sea is an important symbol of this cruel, harsh destiny which the hero must cheerfully meet. "We have nothing to fear," says Conall, "that has not come up from the tide."¹² Cuchulain's heroic gesture in fighting the "invulnerable tide",¹³ will continue the pattern of symbolism established here.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 242. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 243. ¹² Ibid., p. 224.

¹³ Collected Poems, p. 40.

CHAPTER VII

ON BAILE'S STRAND

In an essay written in 1903 entitled "Emotion of Multitude", Yeats wrote:

The Shakespearean drama gets the emotion of multitude out of the sub-plot which copies the main plot, much as a shadow upon the wall copies one's body in the firelight. We think of King Lear less as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time. Lear's shadow is in Gloucester, who also has ungrateful children, and the mind goes on imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured the world.¹

This statement describes the effect Yeats aimed for in interweaving the plots of On Baile's Strand. The tragic incident on which the play is based provides Yeats with his ideal of "Character isolated by a deed".² But the sub-plot copies Cuchulain's situation, making of his conflict the conflict of all humanity. The shadow characters of Fool and Blind Man also provide an interpretation of Cuchulain's tragedy, for they act out a symbolic representation of the conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar. The skill with which Yeats interweaves the two plots of On Baile's Strand marks one of his finest achievements as a dramatist in the period preceding his experiments with the Japanese dance play form.

¹ Essays and Introductions, p. 215.

² Collected Poems, p. 392.

The main plot of On Baile's Strand is based on "The Only Son of Aoife", an episode in Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne. In Lady Gregory's version of the story Cuchulain knows that he has left Aoife with child. Aoife's hatred of Cuchulain is based on jealousy of Emer.

The time Cuchulain came back from Alban, after he had learned the use of arms under Scathach, he left Aoife, the queen he had overcome in battle, with child. . . .

It was not long after the child was born, word came to Aoife that Cuchulain had taken Emer to be his wife in Ireland. When she heard that, great jealousy came on her, and great anger, and her love for Cuchulain was turned to hatred; and she remembered her three champions that he had killed, and how he had overcome herself, and she determined in her mind that when her son would come to have the strength of a man, she would get her revenge through him. She told Conlaoch her son nothing of this, but brought him up like any king's son; and when he was come to sensible years, she put him under the teachings of Scathach, to be taught the use of arms and the art of war. He turned out as apt a scholar as his father, and it was not long before he had learnt all Scathach had to teach.³

Aoife sends Conlaoch into Ireland with three commands upon him: first, never to give way to any living person; second, not to refuse a challenge from the greatest champion alive; third, not to tell his name on any account. He lands at Baile's Strand at a time Conchubar is holding his court there.

Conlaoch first fights Conall and defeats him. Then Cuchulain challenges him. The two champions are evenly matched and Cuchulain finds himself pressed very hard. He calls for his spear.

³ Lady Gregory, op. cit., p. 313.

And he called for the Gae Bulg, and his anger came on him, and the flames of the hero-light began to shine about his head, and by that sign Conlaoch knew him to be Cuchulain, his father. And just at that time he was aiming his spear at him, and when he knew it was Cuchulain, he threw his spear crooked that it might pass by him. But Cuchulain threw his spear, the Gae Bulg, at him with all his might, and it struck the lad in the side and went into his body, so that he fell to the ground.⁴

Conlaoch identifies himself and Cuchulain is overcome with grief as his son dies. As Cuchulain laments his lost son, Conchubar makes a decision.

"There is trouble on Cuchulain," said Conchubar; "he is after killing his own son, and if I and all my men were to go against him, by the end of the day he would destroy every man of us. Go now," he said to Cathbad, the Druid, "and bind him to go down to Baile's Strand, and to give three days fighting against the waves of the sea, rather than to kill us all."⁵

Cathbad does as he is bidden. After venting his wrath on Aoife by splitting a stone into quarters, Cuchulain fights the waves.

Lady Gregory's version concludes:

Then he fought with the waves three days and three nights, till he fell from hunger and weakness, so that some men said he got his death there. But it was not there he got his death, but on the plain of Muirthemne.⁶

A comparison of Lady Gregory's narrative with the final version of On Baile's Strand yields considerable insight into what Yeats was trying to accomplish in that play. The entire subplot was invented by Yeats. The main plot he borrowed from Lady Gregory but adapted to suit his needs.

Yeats makes Cuchulain unaware that he has left Aoife

⁴ Ibid., p. 316.

⁵ Ibid., p. 319.

⁶ Ibid.

with child. He also eliminates the scene in which Conlaoch reveals his identity. This makes possible the superb scene in which the two plots are brought together in On Baile's Strand as the Blind Man reveals the truth to Cuchulain little by little. Aoife becomes a more impressive character when jealousy of Emer is eliminated as a source of her hatred. Her actions are simply a manifestation of the curse that falls upon those who choose the heroic life. She, like Cuchulain is fated always to mix hatred in love.⁷

The occasion for Conchubar's holding court at On Baile's Strand is of no importance in Lady Gregory's narrative. In Yeats's earlier version of the play it was also of little importance. In his final version of the play, however, it becomes of the utmost significance. Conchubar has called the court so that Cuchulain may take the oath of allegiance. It is this oath of allegiance that forces Cuchulain to kill his son against all instinctual promptings. This war between external duty and instinct becomes a central theme of the play. As a means of bringing this out, Yeats reverses one circumstance of the original story. In Yeats's play it is not Conlaoch who recognizes Cuchulain and deliberately refrains from killing him; rather it is Cuchulain who recognizes a resemblance to Aoife in the Young Man, suppresses the impulse to spare him,

⁶ Ibid., p. 319. ⁷ Collected Plays, p. 215.

and goes ahead with the killing. This makes the grief of the guilt-ridden Cuchulain more terrible. Because it is Conchubar's oath that causes Cuchulain to over-ride his emotional promptings, Cuchulain is given a motive for trying to kill Conchubar. It is clearly Conchubar he thinks he is attacking when he slashes at the sea. Yeats makes no mention of a Druid's spell. Rather, as Emer says in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the hero goes mad with sorrow and wades out to fight the "deathless sea".⁸

The suggestion that there are varying stories as to the circumstances of Cuchulain's death enables Yeats to introduce the death and resurrection theme of The Only Jealousy of Emer into his cycle.

Of the characters in On Baile's Strand, only the Fool and Blind Man are masked. This serves to emphasize their function as symbols -- shadows of Cuchulain and Conchubar. At the opening of the play, the Fool comments upon the interdependence of himself and the Blind Man. This prepares us for the later discussion of the similar interdependence of Cuchulain and Conchubar. Then the Fool tells of his relationship with the witches. His experience is almost a direct burlesque of Cuchulain's supernatural visitations. The parallelism is further heightened when the Blind Man and Fool

⁸ Ibid., p. 284.

actually assume the roles of Conchubar and Cuchulain to act out the debate over the oath of allegiance which the Blind Man says is about to take place. The Fool gets hungry, and the Blind Man, to distract him, tells him of the Young Man who has come to challenge Cuchulain. He reveals that the Young Man is Aoife's son, and we hear something of the relationship between Cuchulain and Aoife. The Fool suspects that there is some pattern in all of the things he has heard, but cannot work it out even with the aid of both feet, a bag and his cap, to represent Cuchulain, the Young Man, Conchubar and Aoife respectively. As the Fool gives up the problem, he turns to thoughts of food. Again to distract him, the Blind Man dangles the key to the puzzle before him.

Blind Man. Listen. I know who the young man's father is, but I won't say. I would be afraid to say. Ah, Fool, you would forget everything if you could know who the young man's father is.⁹

They are interrupted by the entrance of Cuchulain and Conchubar, and the debate over the oath of allegiance takes place in earnest.

The debate between Cuchulain and Conchubar delineates the conflict between the heroic life and the prudential life aimed at domestic peace and social stability. This theme was introduced at the end of At The Hawk's Well. There he who rejects the life of domestic tranquility because of an heroic

⁹ Ibid., p. 253.

ideal was characterized as an "idiot". By means of the subplot of On Baile's Strand, Yeats is able to make a similar comment. Cuchulain, who prefers the ecstatic life to the more tangible satisfactions offered by Conchubar's competent and orderly administration is like the Fool who prefers stories and feathers to food. But if the hero is a Fool, then the uninspired administrator is a Blind Man, devoted as he is to mere forms and cut off from the life of instinct and any clear perception of the values in life worth preserving. Because of this he is basically treacherous, being hostile to Cuchulain's heroism, even though he needs it.

In the course of the debate, Yeats begins to interweave those separate strands of the plot of which the Fool was unable to make coherent sense. Conchubar bases his demand that

Cuchulain take an oath of absolute obedience on the fact that the young man from Aoife's country has been able to land on the unguarded shore of Cuchulain's territory, while Cuchulain was hunting or dancing with his companions. Cuchulain at first rejects the suggestion of a limitation on his power in his own territory.

Cuchulain. He can be driven out. I'll not be bound.
 I'll dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love,
 Wherever and whenever I've a mind to.
 If time had not put water in your blood,
 You never would have thought of it.¹⁰

Conchubar cuts to the centre of the dispute. He wishes to

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 255.

leave a strong and settled country to his children. His children fear the free and untrammelled spirit of Cuchulain. Cuchulain, who objects to the principle of compulsion ("Am I/ So slack and idle that I need a whip/ Before I serve you?")¹¹ voices his contempt for Conchubar's children. They are soft, with no marrow in their bones.

Conchubar accuses Cuchulain of railing at them because he has no children of his own. Cuchulain replies that no ordinary child would suddenly make him biddable as the other.

I would leave
My house and name to none that would not face
Even myself in battle.¹²

Thus the central irony of the play is prepared for. It is precisely because Cuchulain's son dares to face Cuchulain in battle that he loses his life. The talk now turns to Aoife, another element in the Fool's puzzle. Again, the heroic virtues are ranged against the domestic.

Cuchulain. You call her a 'fierce woman of the camp',
For, having lived among the spinning-wheels,
You'd have no woman near that would not say,
'Ah! how wise!' 'What will you have for supper?'
'What shall I wear that I may please you, sir?'
And keep that humming through the day and night
For ever. A fierce woman of the camp!
But I am getting angry about nothing.
You have never seen her. Ah! Conchubar, had you seen her
With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers
Thrown backward, and the bowstring at her ear,
Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes
Full of good counsel as it were with wine,

¹² Ibid., p. 258.

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.¹³

And so irony is piled on irony. The child who would dare to face Cuchulain in battle, the king to whom Aoife is fitted to give birth, is the Young Man who has landed on Baile's Strand to challenge the champion Cuchulain. When Cuchulain tells of making love to Aoife, that "kiss/ In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce/ Of oil and water,¹⁴ the audience is given the key to the Fool's puzzle. But like the Fool before him, Cuchulain is incapable of understanding the connections.

Urged by his followers, whose own families have given them a stake in an orderly land, Cuchulain agrees to take the oath of obedience. The oath ceremony is a ritual union of the hearth-fire and the sword. The warring opposites are united. A new compact is effected.

Conchubar. We are one being, as these flames are one:
 I give my wisdom, and I take your strength.
 Now thrust the swords into the flame, and pray
 That they may serve the threshold and the hearthstone
 With faithful service.¹⁵

It is a compact exactly parallel to the compact between the Blind Man and the Fool. The results of each compact will also be similar.

When the Young Man enters to challenge Cuchulain, the

¹³ Ibid., pp. 258 - 259.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 263.

champion is moved by feelings to befriend him which he does not understand. A resemblance to Aoife in the bearing of the Young Man, and perhaps some vague parental instinct in Cuchulain, lead him to put up his sword and offer to exchange gifts. This scene, like the last, is fraught with irony. The gift Cuchulain offers the Young Man is a cloak given him by his father when his father rose at dawn out of the sea to challenge him in battle. Cuchulain ironically predicts the outcome of any battle between father and son which may take place.

-- Boy,
 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.¹⁶

Conchubar will have none of this friendship. The unanswered challenge of the Young Man soils the honour of the throne he will leave his children. He invokes the newly-made oath of obedience, commanding Cuchulain to fight the Young Man. Cuchulain is still obeying his instincts and strongly moved by his attachment to the boy, seizes Conchubar. The kings around him shout that witchcraft has maddened Cuchulain so that he has attacked the High King. Cuchulain, believing that the Young Man must have cast a spell on him, turns and accepts the challenge. As they go out, the three Women around the ceremonial fire predict the destruction of the house of Cuchulain.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 270.

The scene between the Fool and Blind Man which follows serves as a symbolic representation of the scene between Cuchulain and Conchubar. As one of the Women said of Cuchulain's fate,

Life drifts between a fool and a blind man
To the end, and nobody can know his end.¹⁷

The Fool has been betrayed by the Blind Man. The Blind Man has eaten the chicken which the Fool stole as his part in their partnership. The Fool points out that he is continually being victimized by the Blind Man. He has been robbed of the only thing which would justify the partnership. This is obviously exactly what has happened to Cuchulain. Cuchulain took the oath of obedience in response to the argument that it would make the land safe for everyone's children. The oath has been used by Conchubar to rob Cuchulain of his only child.

Cuchulain, however, is not aware of what he has done in slaying the Young Man. In the next scene Yeats skillfully brings the two plots together so that the Blind Man can reveal the truth to Cuchulain. I have already discussed in Chapter I the use Yeats makes of the feather symbol to accomplish his dramatic aims. The Fool, says the Blind Man, likes feathers better than meat. As if to prove this, the Fool is sticking feathers in his hair. Cuchulain takes a handful of feathers to wipe the blood from his sword. It is at this point that the Blind Man

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

reveals to him that the blood is that of his son. It is a terrible moment -- a powerful piece of theatre.

Cuchulain. I had rather he had been some other woman's son. What father had he? A soldier out of Alba? She was an amorous woman -- a proud, pale, amorous woman.

Blind Man. None knew whose son he was.

Cuchulain. None knew! Did you know, old listener at doors?

Blind Man. No, no; I knew nothing.

Fool. He said a while ago that he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had overcome her in battle. /Pause.

Blind Man. Somebody is trembling, Fool! The bench is shaking. Why are you trembling? Is Cuchulain going to hurt us? It was not I who told you, Cuchulain.

Fool. It is Cuchulain who is trembling. It is Cuchulain who is shaking the bench.

Blind Man. It is his own son he has slain.¹⁸

There is a classical economy here, an almost Sophoclean inevitability. Like Oedipus questioning that other blind man about the slayer of his father, Cuchulain presses forward in unrelenting eagerness for the knowledge which will destroy him.

The knowledge completely disorients Cuchulain. In his grief, he casts about to discover who or what it is that has betrayed him. Is it the people of the Sidhe who have betrayed him? Is it heroic commitment, or his war-like life? He cannot understand. Killing has always before been glorious and filled

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 276

with "heart-uplifting pride".¹⁹ Has he been betrayed by his emotions, by his heroic instinct? No. It is Conchubar, with his prudence, his cold intelligence, who has tricked him. The hawk has been deceived by the magpie. He strikes out with his sword at Conchubar's empty chair.

'Twas you who did it -- you who sat up there
 With your old rod of kingship, like a magpie
 Nursing a stolen spoon. No, not a magpie,
 A maggot that is eating up the earth!
 Yes, but a magpie, for he's flown away.
 Where did he fly to?²⁰

Intent on killing Conchubar, Cuchulain rushes from the room, but he is mad with grief, and it is the waves he fights. The gesture is a symbolic one. It is the supreme example of Yeats's ideal, "character isolated by a deed". Cuchulain, battling the waves is kind of an archetypal pattern of the tragic experience. Like Hamlet's taking arms against a sea of troubles, and Canute commanding the tides to stand still, it is doomed to failure. But its very futility, and the courage with which the hero faces the futility of his heroic gesture, constitute a confirmation of the nobility of the human spirit. I have ~~already~~ already mentioned the sea as being connected symbolically with the figure of Bricriu and thence with the hostile destiny of Cuchulain. In fighting the waves, Cuchulain is not just mistaking them for Conchubar; he is waging a last battle directly with

²⁰ Ibid., p. 277.

his fate. When the waves defeat him his soul will "tremble into stillness,/To die within the labyrinth of itself!"²¹ For, paradoxically, water is also a symbol of Unity of Being, and Fand is the wife of Manannan, god of the sea.

Like the Greek tragedians, Yeats gains particular power in his final scene by having the most spectacular action happen off-stage. Having the Fool so absorbed in the off-stage action that the Blind Man has to call him three times is particularly effective. The Blind Man's abrupt pulling of the discussion from the heroic plane down to the level of petty thefts gives a final ironic comment on the values of both the Blind Man and Conchubar. It also prepares us for the scene in The Death of Cuchulain where we find him ready to steal Cuchulain's head for twelve pennies.

Fool. There, he is down! He is up again. He is going out in the deep water. There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him!

Blind Man. Come here, Fool!

Fool. The waves have mastered him.

Blind Man. Come here, I say.

Fool. /coming towards him, but looking backwards the door/ What is it?

Blind Man. There will be nobody in the houses. Come this way; come quickly! The ovens will be full. We will put our hands into the ovens. /They go out. 22

²¹ Vision. p. 60. ²² Collected Plays, p. 278.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ONLY JEALOUSY OF EMER

The Only Jealousy of Emer is a key play in the Cuchulain cycle. From the time that he wrote his first Cuchulain play, On Baile's Strand, Yeats had intended eventually to complete a unified Cuchulain cycle. His early plans envisioned a play cycle somewhat different in form from the one he finally wrote. In a note on On Baile's Strand, published in 1906, he wrote.

It is now as right as I can make it with my present experience, but it must always be a little over-complicated when played by itself. It is one of a cycle of plays dealing with Cuchulain, with his friends and enemies. One of the plays will have Aoife as its central character, and the principal motive of another will be the power of the witches over Cuchulain's life.¹

There are no such plays in the Cuchulain cycle, though it is possible to see in these two ideas the seeds from which At The Hawk's Well and The Only Jealousy of Emer grew.

As Yeats worked on the Cuchulain cycle, certain images recurred, certain ideas took their place as central themes of the series of plays. Many of these images and ideas were the same ones which found their way into A Vision, a book the first version of which was nearing completion when Yeats wrote The Only Jealousy of Emer. Thus it is in The Only Jealousy of Emer

¹ Variorum Plays, p. 526.

that Yeats makes his symbolism explicit and gives us the tools to interpret the meaning of the patterns of imagery which run through the previously written plays as well. In a note on the play, Yeats links it directly to A Vision and to the poem "The Phases of the Moon".

While writing these plays, intended for some fifty people in a drawing-room or a studio, I have so rejoiced in my freedom from the stupidity of an ordinary audience that I have filled 'The Only Jealousy of Emer' with those little known convictions about the nature and history of a woman's beauty, which Robartes found in the Speculum of Gyraldus and in Arabia Deserta among the Judwalis. The soul through each cycle of its development is held to incarnate through twenty-eight typical incarnations, corresponding to the phases of the moon, the light part of the moon's disk symbolizing the subjective and the dark part of the objective nature, the wholly dark moon (called Phase 1) and the wholly light (called Phase 15) symbolizing complete objectivity and complete subjectivity respectively.²

Yeats goes on to discuss the theory that the physical beauty of a woman is the result of "emotional toil in past lives" and to comment on the ugliness of objective natures.³

The battle between the supremely beautiful Fand and the deformed and ugly Bricriu is, of course, the battle between subjectivity and objectivity. This is made clear in an exchange between the two which Yeats included in the versions of the play published in 1919, 1921 and 1923, but cut from the version he published in The Collected Plays in 1934.

Woman of the Sidhe. / to figure of Cuchulain/. To
you that have no living light, but dropped

² Ibid., p. 566.

³ Ibid.

From a last leprous crescent of the moon
I owe it all.

Figure of Cuchulain. Because you have failed
I must forgo your thanks, I that took pity
Upon your love and carried out your plan
To tangle all his life and make it nothing
That he might turn to you.

Woman of the Sidhe. Was it pity
You taught the woman to prevail against me?

Figure of Cuchulain. You know my nature -- by what
name I am called. ⁴

It is interesting to speculate why Yeats made this cut. There are I think two reasons. First, the elimination of the scene between Fand and Bricriu simplifies the play and tends to focus more attention on the dancer and on other stylized elements. A simplified prose version of the play with philosophical dialogue severely cut had been produced in 1929 and Yeats had been pleased with the effect. There was, however, an even more important reason for cutting this scene in The Collected Plays of 1934. In this collection, Yeats arranged the four Cuchulain plays, not in the order in which they had been written, but as a cycle telling the story of Cuchulain. In the context of the cycle, the scene became unnecessary. We had been introduced to the Woman of the Sidhe in At The Hawk's Well and to Bricriu in The Green Helmet. The cutting of the scene of dialogue between them has the effect of throwing us back upon the entire cycle to interpret their hostility to one another. By weakening

⁴ Ibid., pp. 559, 561.

the self-sufficiency of The Only Jealousy of Emer, Yeats strengthened the coherence of his cycle.

Although Lady Gregory devotes a chapter to the adventure of Cuchulain with Fand, and Yeats obviously began writing his play with Lady Gregory's narrative in mind, he allows himself the greatest possible freedom in arranging and interpreting the material. Lady Gregory's Account is found in an episode of Cuchulain of Muirthemne itself entitled "The Only Jealousy of Emer".

In Lady Gregory's story, Cuchulain tries to kill an enchanted bird for his mistress, Eithne Inguba, and is put under a spell by two women of the Sidhe. He is unconscious for a year. When he regains consciousness, one of the women appears again and informs Cuchulain that Fand, who has been deserted by her husband Manannan, lord of the sea, has fallen in love with him. The messenger's name is Liban and she is the wife of Labraid of the quick sword. Labraid sends a request that Cuchulain give him "one day's help against Senach of the crooked body, and against Eochaid Juil, and against Eoghan of Inbhir, that is Eoghan of the River's Mouth." ⁵

After a number of complications, Cuchulain fights the battle for Labraid, and stays a month with Fand. When he leaves, he agrees to meet her at a yew tree at the head of Baile's Strand.

⁵ Lady Gregory, op. cit., p. 280.

But when all this was told to Emer, there was great anger on her, and she had knives made ready to kill the woman with; and she came, and fifty young girls with her, to the place where they had settled to meet. . . . "No harm shall be done to you by her," said Cuchulain; "and she shall not reach to you at all. Come into the sunny seat of the chariot, opposite myself, for I will defend you against all the many women of the four points of Ulster; for though Forgall's daughter may threaten," he said, "on the strength of her companions, to do some daring thing, it is surely not against me she will dare it." ⁶

Although threats of force are of no avail, Emer is able to win back Cuchulain by her willingness to give him up.

"It is certain," said Emer, "that I will not refuse this woman if you follow her. But all the same, everything red is beautiful, everything new is fair, everything high is lovely, everything common is bitter, everything we are without is thought much of; everything we know is thought little of, till all knowledge is known. And O Cuchulain," she said, "I was at one time in esteem with you, and I would be so again, if it were pleasing to you."

And grief came upon her and overcame her. "By my word, now," said Cuchulain, "you are pleasing to me, and will be pleasing as long as I live."

"Let me be given up," said Fand. "It is better for me to be given up," said Emer. "Not so," said Fand "it is I that will be given up in the end, and it is I that have been in danger of it all this time."

And great grief and trouble of mind came on Fand, because she was ashamed to be given up, and to have to go back to her home there and then; and the great love she had given Cuchulain troubled her. ⁷

Fand does go back to her husband Manannan. This development outrages Cuchulain.

It is then there was great anger on Cuchulain, and he went with great leaps southward to Luachair, the place of rushes; and he stopped for a long while without drink, without food, among the mountains, and where he slept every night, was on the road of Midluachan. ⁸

⁶ Ibid., pp. 289 - 290.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 290 - 291

⁸ Ibid., p. 293.

Conchubar sends Druids to calm him. They put an enchantment on him, and then administer a drink of forgetfulness. The Druids give a drink of forgetfulness to Emer as well, so that she may forget her jealousy. Manannan shakes his cloak between Cuchulain and Fand that they should never meet again.

Yeats makes use of many of the details of Lady Gregory's narrative, but he uses them in a manner that radically alters their significance. The Fand episode is made to follow Cuchulain's fighting with the waves. This serves to integrate it into the cycle and allows Yeats to make it a part of the complex system of symbolism he is developing in the plays. Cuchulain's unconscious state, the result of a spell cast upon him by two women in the original story, is, in the play, the result of his apparent drowning at the end of On Baile's Strand.

The trance state is seen as simultaneous to the meeting with Fand rather than prior to it. In making this change Yeats alters the meaning of the entire episode. The trance state is seen as an instance of the soul leaving the body. This makes possible the possession of the body by the spirit Bricriu. It also makes clear that the meeting with Fand (a naturalistic meeting between two lovers in Lady Gregory's book) takes place in the labyrinth of Cuchulain's soul, and that Fand herself is a symbol. Cuchulain's meeting with her signifies a state of soul, not merely another amorous adventure.

Another detail which Yeats takes from Lady Gregory's story and uses in an entirely new context is the renunciation by Emer of Cuchulain's love. In the original story, Emer and Fand seem to be engaged in a contest of self-sacrifice out of love for Cuchulain. Fand withdraws from the field because she is impressed by Emer's queenly qualities and Emer wins back the love of Cuchulain. In the play, the renunciation is a weapon given to Emer by Bricriu to give her power over Fand. As such it has significance within the symbolic pattern of the play. Bricriu, himself, is an interpolation original to Yeats. Lady Gregory has Manannan himself ride out of the sea. Yeats, incidentally, refers to Fand in the prose version of the play as the daughter, not the wife, of Manannan.⁹ Evidently he felt that marriage, even to a god, would interfere with Fand's symbolic significance.

Since The Only Jealousy of Emer, like At The Hawk's Well, tells of the interpenetration of the worlds of the spirits and of man, Yeats again finds the Noh play form suited to his purpose. His use of masks seems to conform in general to the convention established in At The Hawk's Well. The Musicians again have their faces made up to resemble masks. This direct painting of the faces indicates that the Musicians are not characters themselves but are masks through which the thoughts of the characters speak. The Ghost of Cuchulain and the Figure of

⁹ Variorum Plays, p. 550.

Cuchulain are both masked. This not only establishes the symbolic nature of the play but provides the technical means by which to show the possession of Cuchulain's body by Bricriu and the return of Cuchulain to it. Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe, is also masked. This increases her idol-like appearance and shows her as being important for what she symbolizes in the play. Yeats is unsure of the status of Emer and Eithne Inguba, since he suggests that they be either "masked, or their faces made up to resemble masks." ¹⁰ It seems to me that this is a crucial decision. Masked, the two women take on the aspect of symbolic characters fully equal and in opposition to Fand. Otherwise, they become masks themselves, masks that the nature goddess might wear -- partial incarnations of that femininity that Fand represents in near-absolute form. The latter interpretation seems to me to be more in harmony with the symbolic pattern evident if the plays are performed together as a cycle.

The opening song of the Musicians concerns the theory that the physical beauty of a woman is the result of emotional toil in past lives. It establishes the relationship between suffering and beauty and associates beauty with subjectivity and the "labyrinth of the mind".

What death? what discipline?
 What bonds no man could unbind,
 Being imagined within
 The labyrinth of the mind,
 What pursuing or fleeing,

¹⁰ Collected Plays, p. 281.

What wounds, what bloody press
 Dragged into being,
 This loveliness? ¹¹

This association of beauty with suffering, harmony with discord, is important for the interpretation of the play. It is through the greatest of suffering that Cuchulain has been brought face to face with Fand, through heroic immersion in the objective world that he has been brought to this point of almost pure subjectivity, through defeat at the hands of a hostile destiny that his soul has died into the labyrinth of itself so that he has almost attained Unity of Being. This is why, in that scene from the earlier version of the play which I have already quoted, Bricriu, who represents objectivity says:

Because you have failed
 I must forgo your thanks, I that took pity
 Upon your love and carried out your plan
 To tangle all his life and make it nothing
 That he might turn to you. ¹²

The reference to beauty as a discipline attained through many incarnations also has relevance to the change we have noted in the Woman of the Sidhe, from Hawk-goddess to beautiful woman. In At The Hawk's Well, she is cruel and savage, very much a part of the atmosphere of darkness, discord and objectivity of Phase One. Now she is the epitome of beauty, a symbol of subjectivity. It is the process of this change which is described in the opening song.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 282.

¹² Variorum Plays, p. 559.

In the first scene, Cuchulain's body, apparently lifeless after succumbing to the waves, lies in a fisherman's cottage. Emer has called Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's latest love, that she may try to call him back to life. When Eithne Inguba kisses the lips of the inert form it is immediately possessed by an ugly and deformed spirit, Bricriu, "maker of discord among gods and men".¹³ Bricriu obviously represents the tragic destiny of Cuchulain, for on his appearance, everything Cuchulain loves must fly away. Eithne Inguba goes out, but Emer is outside the range of Bricriu's power because Cuchulain no longer loves her.

In return for bringing Cuchulain back to the world of men, Bricriu asks that Emer renounce her one last precious possession, the hope that Cuchulain will one day return to her at their hearth. When Emer refuses, Bricriu shows her the Ghost of Cuchulain and Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe. Fand asks Cuchulain for a kiss, that she might be complete and that he might become immortal. Cuchulain holds back because of a memory of Emer. Finally, Cuchulain is about to give Fand the kiss she desires when Emer renounces Cuchulain's love forever. Cuchulain returns to his body and to Eithne Inguba.

When seen in the context of the Cuchulain cycle, the symbolic pattern of the play may be readily discerned. Phase

¹³ Collected Plays, p. 287.

Fifteen marks the point of extreme subjectivity in the soul's progress on the Great Wheel. The direction of its quest changes at this point.

Before the full
It sought itself and afterwards the world.¹⁴

This change of direction involves a complete re-orientation of all the forces which work upon the soul. Emer's love is one such force.

From the point at which Cuchulain assumes his heroic commitment in At The Hawk's Well, the hearth, a symbol of domesticity, is set in opposition to the violent and discordant world of heroism. Emer, a representative of this world of domesticity, tries to persuade Cuchulain in The Green Helmet not to make the heroic gesture which serves to make him Bricriu's man. We have seen that hearth, fire, and sword are principal symbols in On Baile's Strand. The pattern of conflict in the first three plays of the Cuchulain cycle is fairly clear. Cuchulain is committed to the heroic life of objective action. He thus seeks his fulfillment in the world of Bricriu. In the meantime, the love of Emer, her beauty, and the domestic values she represents, pull him constantly in the direction of subjectivity. Emer is in opposition to Bricriu. It is only when Cuchulain's total defeat at the hands of a hostile destiny forces him into the labyrinth of his soul so

¹⁴ Vision, p. 62.

that he faces extinction in the direction of pure subjectivity that Emer becomes a force pulling Cuchulain back in the direction of the objective world. To do this she must renounce the domestic values for which she has stood and ally herself with Bricriu, for she is bringing Cuchulain back to a world of discord from the promise of total harmony.

In their final song, the Musicians represent the thoughts of Emer as she addresses them to Eithne Inguba, who now enjoys the love of Cuchulain. She indicates the relationship of individual women to the principle of femininity as represented by Fand. The song explains why she reserved her only jealousy for the threat of total subjectivity which Fand represents. It confirms the statement she has already made about the frustration of being unable to break a man's solitude.¹⁵

Commenting first on Eithne Inguba's excitement in the arms of Cuchulain, the song tells of Emer's confrontation with Fand.

Why does your heart beat thus?
Plain to be understood,
I have met in a man's house
A statue of solitude,
Moving there and walking;
Its strange heart beating fast
For all our talking.
O still that heart at last.¹⁶

The song points out how the memory of that which is specifically human and imperfect in life may draw a man away even from a merging with perfection.

¹⁵ Collected Plays, p. 290. ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 295.

Although the door be shut
 And all seem well enough,
 Although wide world hold not
 A man but will give you his love
 The moment he has looked at you,
 He that has loved the best
 May turn from a statue
 His too human breast.¹⁷

Finally, the jealousy of Emer is accounted for. Although the love and beauty of each woman constitute a partial manifestation of the feminine principle, of harmony, of subjectivity, yet each woman must fear a man's falling under the spell of total subjectivity. When a man becomes absorbed in an image in his own soul, individual women lose their power. Fand, her beauty completed by the kiss of Cuchulain, would obliterate his love for Emer or Eithne as the full moon obliterates the stars.

What makes your heart so beat?
 What man is at your side?
 When beauty is complete
 Your own thought will have died
 And danger not be diminished;
 Dimmed at three-quarter light,
 When moon's round is finished
 The stars are out of sight.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid. ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 296.

CHAPTER IX

THE DEATH OF CUCHULAIN

Because all dark, like those that are all light,
They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,
Crying to one another like the bats;
But having no desire they cannot tell
What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph
At the perfection of one's own obedience;
And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,
Insipid as the dough before it is baked,
They change their bodies at a word.

from "The Phases of the Moon" ¹

The changes Yeats makes in Lady Gregory's account of the death of Cuchulain serve to co-ordinate his final play with the rest of the Cuchulain cycle, to bring it into line with his ideas about Phases Twenty-two to Twenty-eight on the Great Wheel, and to enable him to convey certain of his personal attitudes toward his own past life and approaching death.

Yeats's plot is based on certain incidents from the episodes "The Gathering at Muirthemne" and "Death of Cuchulain" from Cuchulain of Muirthemne. In Lady Gregory's story, the enemies of Cuchulain gather to destroy him. Cuchulain realizes his danger but is ready to plunge into battle regardless.

And then one of the daughters of Catalin took the appearance of a crow, and came flying over him and saying mocking words, and she bade him go out and save his own

¹ Vision, p. 63.

house and his lands from the enemies that were destroying them. And though Cuchulain knew well by this time it was witchcraft was being worked against him, he was ready as before to rush out when he heard the sounds and the shouting of battle; and there came trouble and confusion on his mind with the noise of striking and of fighting, and with the sweet sounds of the harp of the Sidhe.²

To save him from the death which awaits him should he plunge precipitously into battle, Emer and Conchubar engage Niamh, his best-loved mistress, to put him under oath not to go to battle unless she gives him leave. But Badb, one of Catalin's three deformed and one-eyed daughters, takes on the shape of Naimh and urges him to go into battle. Later, when Naimh denies having released Cuchulain from his bond, he will not believe her.

In the battle, Cuchulain is fatally wounded. He asks permission of his enemies to go to the lake and drink.

There was a pillar-stone west of the lake, and his eye lit on it, and he went to the pillar-stone, and he tied himself to it with his breast-belt, the way he would not meet his death lying down, but would meet it standing up. Then his enemies came round about him, but they were in dread of going close to him, for they were not sure but he might be still alive.³

The Grey of Mancha returns from the dead and makes three attacks on Cuchulain's enemies. Lugaid, son of Curoi, then cuts off Cuchulain's head. Conall comes to avenge Cuchulain and Emer delivers a long lament to the head of Cuchulain. When Conall returns with the heads of Cuchulain's enemies, Emer sings the Lay of the Heads. Then she is buried with

² Lady Gregory, op. cit., pp. 326-327. ³ Ibid., p. 340.

Cuchulain.

Yeats ties this story in with the other Cuchulain plays by substituting Eithne Inguba for Niamh, bringing Aoife onto the scene, and having Cuchulain's head removed by the Blind Man of On Baile's Strand. The characteristics of the daughters of Catalin in their various forms are split between the crow-headed war goddess, the Morrighu, and Maeve herself, who is described as having an eye in the middle of her forehead.⁴

In The Death of Cuchulain the main themes of the cycle are seen in a new perspective. Cuchulain's heroic defiance gives way to a heroic acceptance of his fate. As his death approaches, he gains wisdom, serenity, and a superhuman tolerance. Eithne Inguba realizes the significance of the change and cries out against it:

You're not the man I loved,
That violent man forgave no treachery.
If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,
It is because you are about to die.⁵

But Cuchulain is unshaken. His enemy, Maeve, has tried to trick him. She has put Eithne under a spell, so that Emer's attempt to save his life will lead instead to his death. Cuchulain discovers the deception, yet still chooses to engage in open battle against great odds, a decision which will bring his death. He accuses Eithne of having betrayed him because she wants a new lover, insists on forgiving her alleged

⁴ Collected Plays, p. 696. ⁵ Ibid., p. 697.

treachery, and thwarts her play to throw away her life to prove her innocence. The play abounds in such twists of fate and is characterized both by a tragic dignity and by the wry irony of aborted heroics.

The poet himself appears at the beginning of the play, as an Old Man out of mythology. The Old Man introduces the play. As in At The Hawk's Well Yeats has dramatized the dichotomy of his own nature. The Old Man and the hero are in ironic contrast. Looking into the face of death, Cuchulain is resigned; the Old Man is irritable. He rails splenetically against the theatre audience in this vile age of "pickpockets and opinionated bitches". Dwelling on the dramatic significance of the dance, he calls for dancers who, unlike those painted by Degas, do not have the faces of chambermaids. This prepares us to accept the central importance of Emer's ritualistic dance about the head of Cuchulain at the end of the play, for it is in this ritual that the conflicts and ironies of Cuchulain's life and death are finally resolved. "I promise a dance," says the Old Man. "I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil." ⁶

Woven into the fabric of The Death of Cuchulain are the themes of the other Cuchulain plays. Emer's capacity for self-sacrifice is again demonstrated when she sends Eithne

⁶ Ibid., p. 694.

Inguba to Cuchulain as a bed-partner so that he will not go to his death. The love-hate relationship of Aoife and Cuchulain is explored as they meet for the last time. The play seems to be sweeping toward a heroic climax, with Cuchulain meeting his death at the hands of the vengeful Aoife, when the Blind Man enters. Aoife withdraws and Cuchulain meets his death at the hands of a man who has been offered twelve pennies for his head.

I pointed out in Chapter II the significance of the details of the last scene as a representation of the three last phases of the Great Wheel, the phases of Hunchback, Saint, and Fool.⁷ The darkness which marks the removal of Cuchulain's head also marks the return to Phase One. The black parallelograms of Emer's dance are the heads of those who "Because all dark . . . are cast beyond the verge"; they are the unkneaded dough of spirits between incarnations.

It is in modern Ireland, in the folly and the heroism of the Easter rebellion, that Cuchulain gets his next incarnation. Here, as in At The Hawk's Well, "A terrible beauty is born."⁸ This is the significance of the song of the Street-Singer which ends The Death of Cuchulain. The song views the problem of the heroic commitment in a contemporary perspective. It is the song of a harlot, and her anguish is the anguish of modern Ireland. She knows and loves the romantic

⁷ See pp. 36 - 40 supra. ⁸ Collected Poems, p. 203.

Ireland of Conall and Cuchulain, but the dream of this Ireland is unsubstantial and, in the end, unsatisfying.

I adore those clever eyes,
Those muscular bodies, but can get
No grip upon their thighs.⁹

By the real world, symbolized by the men whose flesh she has gripped with her own flesh, she is both attracted and repelled. But is the everyday world of common sense the only reality? Cannot the romantic dream become flesh? Cannot Cuchulain return? She thinks of the Easter rebellion.

What stood in the Post Office
With Pearse and Connolly?
What comes out of the mountain
Where men first shed their blood?
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
He stood where they had stood? ¹⁰

But the final note is one of ironic ambiguity. The dream which had become flesh becomes a public monument.

A statue's there to mark the place,
By Oliver Sheppard done.
So ends the tale that the harlot
Sang to the beggar-man. ¹¹

Perhaps this too is a strange shape for the soul of a great fighting-man.

⁹ Collected Plays, p. 704.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 705.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 704 - 705.

CHAPTER X

PRODUCING THE CUCHULAIN CYCLE

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.

from "To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing" ¹

There should be no insurmountable obstacles to the production of the five Cuchulain plays as a cycle to be presented in a single evening. Such a production would solve two of the main problems which have faced producers of the individual plays. In the first place, prior knowledge of the Cuchulain legend would no longer be necessary to an understanding of the action, since the five-play cycle is largely self-contained and self-explanatory insofar as it concerns the story of Cuchulain's life. Secondly, as I have tried to demonstrate, the symbolism and patterns of imagery are not nearly so obscure and puzzling when considered in the context of the whole cycle. To make the cycle fully coherent and comprehensible, however, a production of the cycle would have to be designed with a view to underlining those aspects of the plays which give the cycle its unity.

¹ Collected Poems, p. 122.

The apparent diversity of style in the plays of the Cuchulain cycle need not hamper the producer. As I have pointed out, the style of each play is adapted to its function as a part of the total pattern Yeats develops as Cuchulain moves from phase to phase on the Great Wheel of his life. A producer would do well to keep to the main conventions Yeats has established for the use of masks in At The Hawk's Well and The Only Jealousy of Emer, perhaps extending them to The Death of Cuchulain as well. Some element of costuming should be found to establish the continuity of characters from one play to another, even when, as in the case of Fand and Bricriu, they undergo radical changes from play to play. Some common denominator in the costume design should also be used to bring out the principle of triplication in the case of the female characters and the principle of paired opposites in the case of the males. Although the style of the Noh play should in general be respected, those elements which served to introduce the individual plays when they were performed in drawing rooms might well be discarded in the interest of knitting the plays together more closely. The Musicians need not fold and unfold a cloth in order to sing the songs which introduce the dance plays. Some alteration of the Old Man's speech in The Death of Cuchulain might be desirable, though his presence is still dramatically necessary.

The most important task facing a producer who intends

to present the Cuchulain cycle is the selection of a stage set which would provide a suitable ritualistic setting for all the plays and also serve to emphasize those patterns of meaning and imagery which run through the plays giving the cycle its coherence. The set must strike the audience as an impressive and suitable setting for Celtic ritual; it should incorporate features of the Great Wheel and it should be adapted to show visually the events in the life of the sun and the moon which provide much of the imagery of the plays.

The stage design I propose as a setting for the Cuchulain cycle is derived partly from Yeats's reference to a "place of stone" as a suitable setting for the secret exultation of the tragic hero who seeks his fulfillment in that task which is most difficult, and partly from recent studies of the practices of ancient sun-worshippers. I have already mentioned how closely an overhead view of Stonehenge resembles the Great Wheel which provides the central symbol around which the Cuchulain cycle is built. As Professor Hawkins has pointed out, such structures were used by primitive, pre-Celtic peoples to trace the progress of the sun and moon and to predict eclipses.² Doubtless they were also the temples in which the rituals of primitive heliolatry took place. Although there is no evidence that such structures as Stonehenge were used by Druids for their rites in Celtic times, the association between Stonehenge and the Druids is strong in

² See pp. 45 - 47 supra.

the public mind. Certainly Yeats and other artists of the Celtic revival assumed that such places of stone were the sites of sacrificial rituals by the Druids.

The set would be simple: a great circular platform in front of a large, curved cyclorama, behind which sun and moon effects could be created. On the upstage side of the circular platform, I would erect the great stone archways of Stonehenge, with the "heelstone" framed in the centre arch; behind this heelstone, the midsummer sun would rise. Several of the huge stone trilithons could be represented on each side of the platform.

Staging the cycle on such a set, it would be possible to represent sun-rise, sun-set, moon-rise, or moon-set at any time of the year, either by a "sun" or "moon" light in an appropriate position behind the cyclorama or by front-of-house lighting hitting the stage from an appropriate angle. Eclipse effects would also be possible. There is an eclipse of the moon in The Green Helmet and an eclipse of the sun suggested by The Death of Cuchulain. A midsummer sunrise over the heelstone at the beginning of The Death of Cuchulain, a sun rising on the cyclorama during the course of the play, and an eclipse as the Blind Man feels from Cuchulain's feet to his neck, would be effects particularly appropriate to the underlying symbolism of the play cycle.

Such staging should provide an audience with an evening

of poetic and ritualistic drama, at once comprehensible as myth, yet replete with symbols to stir those deeper levels of the unconscious mind that Yeats liked to refer to as Spiritus Mundi. So staged, the Cuchulain cycle should prove to be a unity in theatrical terms as well as in abstract conceptual terms.

The Cuchulain cycle is a particularly interesting application of the vision of Shakespeare and Sophocles to the problems of our century. Set in the remote past, the cycle is sharply contemporary in its implications. Thus Cuchulain is betrayed by the Blind Man in the last play just as Parnell and others were betrayed by blind Ireland. Full emphasis is given to those moments of tragic ecstasy when the dykes which separate individuals are broken down, but these moments of intense experience are set in the context of the cyclical pattern of the life process itself. The double focus, on the tragic fate of the hero and on the recurring cycles of life itself, is the source of the irony which pervades the final scene of The Death of Cuchulain. The pattern of the Cuchulain cycle is one which allows us to participate fully in the tragedy of the hero, yet it does not demand that we abandon the skepticism and irony of the modern temper. Yeats affirms life without over-simplifying it. His vision is particularly suited to the needs of a century in which men crave meaning, yet are loathe to abandon their hard-won doubts.

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