

**“What stood in the Post Office / With Pearse and Connolly?”  
Heroism, Timeliness, and Timelessness in Some of Yeats’s Plays**  
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Yeats’s last play, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), together with *The Herne’s Egg* (1938) and *Purgatory* (1939), creates a separate group: all composed by the “the wild old wicked man,” who feels outdated and often mocks himself. “The wild old wicked man,” who is discontented with what he sees around him; a man who in 1938 composes *On the Boiler*, in which he “depicts the collapse of his paradigm for Ireland’s renewal through culture and discerns the seeds for a new cultural movement rooted in education and eugenics” (McKenna 73). Experimenting with wild, absurd-like plays, he tries to recycle his favorite form, the Japanese Noh, from previous years but now intertwining it with new elements. Moreover, in his late plays, Yeats continues dramatizing the hero Cuchulain that he began to do decades earlier in *The Green Helmet* (1910) and, even before that, in *On Baile’s Strand* (1904).<sup>1</sup> This play provides a definition of the Yeatsian hero that helps conjure up the simultaneity of timeliness *and* of timelessness in his plays. Focusing on this function of his hero sheds light on how Yeats modifies that hero, especially in the last stage, in *The Death of Cuchulain*.<sup>2</sup>

*The Green Helmet* anticipates or introduces works like *The Player Queen* (1922) and Yeats’s last three plays including *The Death of Cuchulain*, which is especially crucial because apart from providing a proper closure for Yeats’s Cuchulain-cycle, it presents the last stage of the hero’s portrait. *The Green Helmet* is the only comic play of the cycle. Based on an old Irish legend, *The Feast of Bricriu*, which Lady Gregory included in her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), Yeats originally meant the drama as an introduction to his first Cuchulain play, *On Baile’s Strand*.

When working on *Helmet*, Yeats was also struggling with *The Player Queen* (whose finalizing took many years). In two decades he completely reshaped the early versions of *The Player Queen*—primarily conceived as a tragedy—into a farce, because in this form Yeats saw more potential to elaborate on his theory of self and anti-self than in tragedy. In his essay “The Tragic Theatre” (1910), he defines comedy and tragedy, distinguishing between them, among others, on the basis of the presence or absence of dramatic character and passion: “it strikes us that character is continuously present in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy . . . where its place is taken by passions and motives, one person being jealous, another full of

love or remorse or pride or anger” (*The Cutting of an Agate* 28). He also mentions a third category, an intermediary form intertwining the tragic and comic: “In writers of tragi-comedy (and Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy) there is indeed character, but we notice that it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet’s gaiety let us say; while amid the great moments . . . all is lyricism, unmixed passion, ‘the integrity of fire’” (28-29). In the numerous drafts and the shorter and longer earlier versions of *The Player Queen*, we might trace how Yeats tried to turn these ideas into practice. Having realized that he could not complete the play in accordance with his tragedy-definition, he reshaped it and created a comedy, moreover, a farce, placing his figures in a play not merely humorous, but grotesque and absurd. In the above quotation, interestingly, Yeats uses the term “gaiety,” which now refers to the comic quality of *Hamlet*. Later, however, when speaking about the tragic hero, he would use the same word in a Nietzschean sense, meaning ecstatic joy or tragic ecstasy.

Meditations about drama theory had already occurred in his earlier writings, for example, in the 1904 *Sambain* (“The Play, the Player, and the Scene”), or his *Journal* (the first entry dates from 1908, the year when he began *The Player Queen*): “Tragedy is passion alone and, instead of character, it gets form from motives, the wandering of passion; while comedy is the clash of character” (*Memoirs* 152). Apart from drafting the differences between comedy, tragedy, melodrama, and farce, he also mentions tragicomedy, and, introducing one of his favorite terms, the mask (the main motif of *The Player Queen* will be searching for and finding the true mask), he continues:

Eliminate character from comedy and you get farce. Farce is bound together by incident alone. (Eliminate passion from tragedy and you get melodrama.) In practice most works are mixed . . . . Comedy is joyous because all assumption of a part, of a personal mask, whether the individualized face of comedy or the grotesque face of farce, is a display of energy . . . . The tragic mask expresses a passion or mood, a state of the soul . . . . The mask of comedy an individual . . . . The mask of farce an energy; in this the joyous life by its own excess has become superficial, it has driven out thought. (152-53)

Hazard Adams observes that Yeats’s comic plays often tend to move toward farce “with eliminated characters and full of grotesque” situations (61). Traditional farces were often based on situational comedy, “exaggerated physical action (often repeated), exaggeration of character and situation, absurd situations and improbable events . . . and surprises in the form of

unexpected appearances and disclosures” (Cuddon 307). These plays occasionally displayed violence or obscenity, and their figures did not necessarily gain the audience’s sympathy. Yeats modified some of these features, fusing them with other forms; for example, in *The Player Queen*, the protagonists, Septimus and Decima, gained some individual characteristics in the final version of the play. In Yeats’s later years’ terminology, “wildness” usually means continuing his daring experiments; as some of his letters testify. In one to Ethel Mannin from 1935, for example, he notes: “To-morrow morning I shall finish the long detailed scenario of a play, the strangest wildest thing I have ever written” (*Letters* 845), referring to composing *The Herne’s Egg*. One result of his experiments is, again, a kind of farce—indeed, a “trap-farce,” as Márton Mesterházi calls it, meaning a typical situation in Samuel Beckett’s plays when the figures struggle in a trap created by their mania, visions, and compulsions (62). Some of the traces of this type of farce may be seen even in the otherwise cheerful *Helmet*, and later works are often “trap-farces” such as *The Herne’s Egg*; others, like *Purgatory*, contain at least a few typical features of the genre (Bódy, “Hós” 2).

In *Helmet*, farce proved an excellent choice when Yeats wished to elaborate his hero concept, crystallizing the very essence of heroism, as his hero is in fact rather a would-be hero, for the time being, who could also be mocked because of his inability to restore order in the royal court. In other cases, like *The Player Queen*, farce frames Yeats’s views about his contemporary world as well as his mask theory. Besides, argues Adams, this form seemed suitable in plays whose figures were subjected to fate, which elsewhere comes rather with tragedy, but in certain comic works of Yeats, fatalism and individual freedom are inseparable (53). In these cases, in theory at least, he did not need characters. To build up tension between the figures in *Helmet*, he simply put them in an absurd situation provided by the Red Man’s challenge, which results in comic, what is more, grotesque scenes. Another source of humor is the heroes’ obsession with heroism itself—pursuing an unattainable ideal.

Adams mainly focuses on Yeats’s comic plays; nevertheless, certain tragedies of his later years (*Purgatory*, *The Death of Cuchulain*) also demonstrate the dilemma between fatalism and free will as well as between heroism and irrationality. Additionally, Yeats pointed out another feature shared by farce and tragedy, which “are alike in this, that they are moments of intense life,” he notes in the 1904 *Sambain* (*Explorations* 153). The aging Yeats still holds an obvious interest in drama theory, more precisely, in experimenting with and intertwining different forms and embedding his “tragic joy” theory into the

plays. The following lines, for instance, come from his old-age meditations, *On the Boiler*, explaining why he chose tragedy for the last play of his Cuchulain cycle:

No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy . . . Some Frenchman has said that farce is the struggle against a ridiculous object, comedy against a movable object, tragedy against an immovable; and because the will, or energy, is greatest in tragedy, tragedy is the more noble; but I add that “will or energy is eternal delight,” and when its limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object. (*Explorations* 448-49)

*The Green Helmet*, besides its comic qualities, differs from the later Cuchulain plays also in another respect: although seemingly everyone—the heroes, their wives, and even their servants—fights with someone else in the court, Cuchulain does not appear alienated from his world; Unity of Culture remains. Cuchulain’s rivals, Laegaire and Conall, show signs of uncertainty and are endowed with other unheroic characteristics: they are helpless, afraid, yet boastful, conceited, and full of self-importance. In their own way, they also try to voice what makes a hero: purely those heroic deeds with which the hero can *boast* and be admired for. It seems that the antithesis of the two boisterous figures is Cuchulain, in whose case heroism would be manifested truly in deeds. Yet the play offers a more complicated pattern. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Cuchulain is not ultimately different from the others (Bódy, “Hós” 4):

CONALL. Cuchulain, when will you stop  
Boasting of your great deeds, and weighing yourself with us two,  
And crying out to the world whatever we say or do,  
That you’ve said or done a better? (229-30)

The customary boasting self-praise of the legends is echoed by Cuchulain’s words addressed to the Red Man:

CUCHULAIN. But what are you waiting for? Into the water, I say!  
If there’s no sword can harm you, I’ve an older trick to play,  
An old five-fingered trick to tumble you out of the place;  
I am Sualtim’s son Cuchulain—what, do you laugh in my face? (232)

According to Katherine Worth, the Red Man still offers Cuchulain the chance to turn into a true hero, because he is the only one brave enough to face death, therefore, the Red Man considers him worthy of being given a lesson, at least (154). From this perspective, *Helmet* directly anticipates the last play in the cycle, *The Death of Cuchulain*, in which the author, following the Red Man's teaching, creates a situation, an opportunity for his hero to await death with a smile on his lips (Lynch 178). Although the Red Man concludes that Cuchulain is the mightiest, he warns him to dispose of all sentimental heroism (Bódy, "Hós" 5), and with his closing words, he teaches him what makes a true hero:

RED MAN. 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. (243)

This is the Nietzschean hero rejoicing, smiling even, in the shadow of death. Yeats's letters to John Quinn from 1903 indicate how much he was influenced by Nietzsche's tragic-hero definition (*Collected Letters* 313, 333). Nietzsche considered Dionysus to be the real tragic hero of Greek tragedy; nevertheless, the parameters he provides when he describes Dionysus equally describe Zarathustra. Quoting his own words from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-91), Nietzsche himself draws a parallel between the two figures: "rather one more reason to be himself the eternal Yes to all things, 'the enormous, unbounded Yea-and Amensaying' . . . 'Into all abysses I still carry my blessed Yea-saying' . . . But this is the concept of Dionysus once more" (Nietzsche 76). His keywords, "Yes" and "Yea-saying," are affirmation as opposed to negation, which has a crucial role in Western dialectics. Zarathustra and Dionysus are heroes who affirm, and in their "Yea-saying" originates the concept of *tragic ecstasy*. The hero is joyful and dances ecstatically, since "Zarathustra is a dancer" (76). Besides—and Yeats will use this motif in his later plays—Dionysus is one of the dying and resurrecting deities (Bódy, "A hós és egyes változatai" 317-18).

Nietzsche is definitely recognizable in Yeats's theory on tragedy: in the eternal recurrence, the Apollonian–Dionysian dichotomy, the role of

dance and music, and, of course, in the ecstatic hero. In his last decade Yeats created several dramatic figures who resemble the dying and resurrecting Dionysus: in *A Full Moon in March* (1935), *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1935), *The Herne's Egg*, and, last but not least, in the figure of Cuchulain himself in the last play (Bódy, "Hós" 6).

Apart from the Nietzschean tradition, Yeats relied on several other, markedly heterogeneous, sources when he shaped his own tragic hero. Significant among them, he read Baldassare Castiglione's work, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), more or less at the same time as he read Nietzsche. Corinna Salvadori gathers the issues of Castiglione's work, which probably attracted Yeats, such as the aristocratic values, harmony between a ruler and his people, and their common, shared way of thinking and culture (1). The Renaissance Urbino, the city of the Bembo family, becomes the place where the Neo-Platonist ruler, his people, and court live in harmony; they could symbolize Yeats's Unity of Culture. Urbino will be a counterpoint for Yeats when he depicts modern society. In his last plays, the admired values of Castiglione's work would be absent; sometimes all of them (*Purgatory*), in other cases some of them (*The Death of Cuchulain*). In *Purgatory*, the Big House "[w]here great men grew up, married, died" (*Collected Plays* 683), and which should fulfil the same role as the Bembo family's palace, now stands in ruins, and the figures in the play do not even resemble the aristocratic heroes, just the contrary: they are as pitiful as their contemporary world is. Against the background of Castiglione's values, *The Death of Cuchulain* partly differs from *Purgatory*: Unity of Culture is still absent, yet the hero returns, albeit in an altered form; the last play indicates how the lack of Unity of Culture modifies the hero defined in *Helmet*.

*The Book of the Courtier*, although it discusses the perfect courtier, probably contributed to shaping Yeats's tragic hero. In Urbino a noble company gathers and, to pass the time, raises an issue for sophisticated debates whether it is possible to shape or define the perfect courtier. The ladies and gentlemen speaking one by one share their theories in ornate speeches, offering various characteristics, physical and spiritual (I. 12-56). One of the guests, Ludovico da Canossa, emphasizes that "[b]esides his noble birth, then, I would have the courtier . . . endowed by nature not only with talent and beauty of person and feature, but with a certain grace" (I. 14), but he later adds that the ideal courtier should also display *sprezzatura*, "the grace of that nonchalant ease" (I. 26), which, according to Salvadori, means indifference and impetuosity at the same time (74-75). Yeats complements the courtier image with the Nietzschean ecstatic hero, who smiles even in the

shadow of death (Bódy, "A hós" 318-19). The Yeatsian hero is a child of tradition, a sort of courtier, "the epitome of the cultural, disciplined, civilized and many-sided" man (Good 75).

Being obsessed with hero-worship, *Helmet's* figures pursue an unattainable ideal, still, they are not "the epitome of the cultural, disciplined, civilized and many-sided" men, not even Cuchulain. This distinction between the true hero and those in the play, Cuchulain included, appears to be one of the main sources of humor. Cuchulain holds the promise of becoming that hero—in time, perhaps. Eventually, he will approximate that ideal in Yeats's last drama, *The Death of Cuchulain* (Bódy, "Hós" 6).

Hero, anti-hero, non-hero: these constitute a recurring issue in Yeats. A peculiar variation of the Nietzschean–Yeatsian hero is offered in *The King's Threshold* and *The Player Queen*. This variation is the artist, the poet, whom, following the romantic tradition of identifying hero and poet, Yeats adorns with similar parameters, such as "gaiety." The noble and lofty Seanchan, the poet, Shelley's (and Plato's) legislator and prophet, Carlyle's hero, one of Emerson's Representative Men, stands for divine law disparaging his king for his tyrannical ruling, which also belongs to the courtier's obligations in Castiglione. Or to quote one of the interlocutors, Ottaviano Fregoso's, words: when the courtier "sees his prince's mind inclined to do something wrong, he may be quick to oppose, and gently to make use of the favor acquired by his good accomplishments, so as to banish every bad intent and lead his prince into the path of virtue" (IV. 5).

Septimus's loftiness and bravery in *The Player Queen*, conversely, depends on how much wine he consumes. Ironically, he is the one who heralds Yeats's fundamental issues (self and anti-self, subjectivity and objectivity); nevertheless, unlike Seanchan, he is not surrounded by pupils, what is more, no one pays any attention to his vague words. Seanchan resembles the aging Cuchulain, whereas Septimus is rather a parody of Seanchan. The twist is that not (only) the hero becomes distorted, but the age he lives in: Unity of Culture disappears. The last plays all exploit this situation, sometimes within the frames of farce, such as *The Herne's Egg* and, occasionally in tragedy, such as *The Death of Cuchulain*.

The definition of the hero remains a central problem. Although it is less recognizable in *The Herne's Egg* and in *Purgatory*, Cuchulain in Yeats's last play is certainly a Nietzschean hero accepting his fate with resignation and celebrating his release from the eternal recurrence with "quiet gaiety" (Good 138). Nevertheless, what links these plays, or more precisely, these "heroes" together, is their unheroic world. Not only does Yeats continue shaping his

hero, but he also positions him in an unusual milieu, such as a “dreamscape between life and death” (Richman 181) in *The Death of Cuchulain*, which creates a feeling of displacement that saturates his last plays.

His earlier writings invoke the energetic, self-confident Yeats, yet disappointment penetrates already those written in the years 1907-10, where he complains about the audience’s lack of responsiveness: “The failure of the audience to understand this powerful and strange work [*The Playboy of the Western World*] has been the one serious failure of our movement,” he writes in 1907, although he adds that those causing scandal at the performance of Synge’s play “were no regular part of our audience at all, but members of parties and societies whose main interests are political” (originally published in *The Arrow*; *Explorations* 229). More than two decades later he notes with resignation in *Pages from a Diary in 1930*: “I wanted a theatre where the greatest passions and the permanent interest of man might be displayed that we might find them not alone over a book but as I said again and again, lover by lover, friend by friend. All I wanted was impossible, and I wore out my youth in its pursuit, but now I know it is the mystery to come” (*Explorations* 313).

In the 1930s his feeling of being lonely, unwanted, old and outdated, having outlived his age became stronger, since “[m]ost of those with whom Yeats had at one time or another made common cause—John O’Leary, John Synge, Lady Gregory, Kevin O’Higgins, George Russell—were dead” (Stanfield 185). In his last years Yeats followed Irish political life with apprehension. “I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation are the work of intellect” (*Essays* 526), he writes in the closing sentences of *A General Introduction for My Work* (1937). Although he rejected political machinations and his vision of how to solve problems differed from mainstream politics, he was deeply interested in what was happening in the country. His model was the harmonious, yet undemocratic connection between a nation and its leaders (or between patron and poet) drawn in *The Book of the Courtier*. In the 1930s he frequently meditated on Ireland choosing a different route (and dedicated a whole series of writings to it, most notably, *Boiler*). *Pages from a Diary in 1930* lists the questions he has been obsessed with for a long time, intertwined with his new readings. Richard Ellmann remarks that when Yeats prepared for the second edition of *A Vision*, “he read ever more deeply in philosophy . . . . He read widely in Bergson, ‘profound McTaggart’, Kant, Whitehead, Husserl, Hegel, Croce, Berkeley . . . Vico, and many others” (265-66). Besides, he also read and revised some eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish authors. Probably he thought that “Ireland’s closest approach to Unity of Being occurred when it could

boast of Swift, Berkeley, Burke, and Goldsmith” (Ellmann 269), whose era Yeats often contrasted with his own in his pamphlet *On the Boiler*.<sup>3</sup> One of his recurring issues, for example, is connected to human civilization: “We approach influx. What is its form? . . . Our civilization which began in A. D. 1000 approaches the meridian and once there must see the counter-birth. What social form will that birth take?” (*Explorations* 311)<sup>4</sup>

Yeats feeling unnecessary and unwanted echoes in the Old Man’s words at the beginning of *The Death of Cuchulain*: “I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of” (*Collected Plays* 693), or: “I am old, I belong to mythology” (694). Furthermore, this tone prevails in all the last plays. He considers himself and a couple of kindred spirits outsiders. For example, in *Boiler*, he remarks: “We who are the opposites of our time should for the most part work at our art and for good manners’ sake be silent” (*Explorations* 417). Unity of Culture, or more precisely, the lack of it haunts many of his later writings. There is no connection between present and past, the hero (or poet) has become alienated from his world, because he is not needed any more; this is definitely not the world of *The Book of the Courtier*.

In another letter to Ethel Mannin (from 1938), Yeats mentions that he is composing “a play on the death of Cuchulain, an episode or two from the old epic. My ‘private philosophy’ is there but there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale” (*Letters* 917). He also adds which issue of his philosophy will be included in the play: “To me all things are made of the conflict of two states or consciousness, beings or persons which die each other’s life, live each other’s death . . . . Two scones (or whirls), the apex of each other’s base” (918), he remarks, referring to his gyres.<sup>5</sup> Apart from certain, usually minor, changes in *The Death of Cuchulain*, Yeats more or less keeps Lady Gregory’s version of the legend including the hero’s destiny: Cuchulain ties himself (or in Yeats’s play he asks to be tied) to a piece of rock to die a mighty, heroic death. One of the seemingly insignificant details the author modifies is Cuchulain’s age: he is not a man in his prime, but aging, tired, resigned, and disillusioned.

Maeve Good asks whether it was the author’s intention to destroy his hero, and raises the issue of irony which dominates the whole work (141). Is irony a tool to destroy the hero? The answer originates in the discrepancy between hero and age. One cannot miss Yeats’s disparaging words in the prologue indicating that only certain ages can produce their true heroes. Probably, because of the pettiness of the present, heroes are no longer needed, therefore, they must fade away. The tragic hero becomes indifferent and, of

course, lonely. Loneliness, however, is not a new addition to Yeats's hero. Cuchulain in *Baile*, even losing his son, and Septimus, the anti-hero of *The Player Queen*, being imprisoned in his own phantasmagoria, had already been ultimately lonely. Yeats in his last play adapts the technique already familiar from *The Player Queen* and simply removes the hero from his age putting him into the insensitive present. So the Old Man's words that life has passed him by are true for Cuchulain as well. Cuchulain is still the mythical hero who faces his destiny, the heroic characteristics remain, but now are intertwined with resignation and apathy, and there is not a single reference to his belonging to any kind of community.

The question is how the author presents this changing and already alien world. At the beginning, on a completely bare stage an old man, the author's alter ego stands—the last variation of “the wild old wicked man” (Parkin 163), who, originally, would have also appeared in the latter part of the play. In an earlier draft, edited by Phillip L. Marcus, instead of the Servant of the final version, the Old Man would have returned just before the scene of Cuchulain's death: “Producer enters as attendant in grey hood” (*The Death of Cuchulain* 61). In his introductory speech, the Old Man promises to introduce the audience to his guiding principles (*Collected Plays* 693-94), although Yeats's regular audience should be familiar with them, such as pursuing the ideal performance, ideal audience, ideal play, all of which are aristocratic and sophisticated, the “beauty or subtlety” of which Yeats praised, among others, in *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (*Essays* 170). The Old Man's passionate speech is, on the one hand, a self-mockery, on the other, a rather degrading view of Yeats's era: “people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches” (*Collected Plays* 694). He likes to identify himself with an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century actor, Francois Joseph Talma's son (1763-1826). Talma's age is contrasted with the “vile age,” in the Old Man's words, and in the play, Yeats also presents what fate awaits a hero in such times. As Stallworthy contends, the aging poet behind the mask of the Old Man speaks like one would expect from a discontented old man (20).

In contrast with that of *Helmet*, Cuchulain's world has become by *The Death of Cuchulain* an uncertain realm, where people are subordinated to unknown forces, and one misstep can result in a catastrophe. Such a mistake occurs at the beginning, when Cuchulain meets Eithne bringing two contradictory messages: a letter from Emer, which warns Cuchulain not to hurry to the battle but wait until the following day, and another declared by Eithne—whom Queen Maeve, one of Cuchulain's mortal enemies, puts in a

trance—that Emer wishes Cuchulain to depart immediately, because Queen Maeve’s troops are already plundering his lands. Although the Morrighu (Goddess of Fate, War, Death) reveals the truth to Eihne, Cuchulain does not believe his mistress’ words and after accusing her of duplicity, he decides that “I much prefer / Your own unwritten words. I am for the fight” (696). Eventually, Cuchulain makes a wrong decision, which will cost him his life.<sup>6</sup>

The Blind Man, who has already appeared in *Baile*, also symbolizes the pettiness of the age. When he introduces himself to Cuchulain, the Blind Man refers to that notable event of *Baile*, when the hero still tried to stand up against unknown and uncontrollable forces. The beggar keeps his dominant characteristics from the earlier play: in a sense, he is wise, but his wisdom comes from rational thinking and not from intuition. Blindness means moral blindness as well, since he readily murders the dying Cuchulain for twelve pennies.

This changed world is uncertain. The hero himself is uncertain, and depends on unknown powers. The stone pillar to which, in the myth, Cuchulain ties himself so that he could stay standing and thus die a hero’s death, will now symbolize exactly the opposite: unheroic, unworthy death. “Twelve pennies! What better reason for killing a man?” (702) are the words Cuchulain welcomes his death with. Had the play ended here, resignation and absurdity would have dominated, even if resignation or apathy does not necessarily go hand in hand with bitterness in Yeats’s later works. In “Lapis Lazuli” (1938), for example, it is “gaiety” as a suitable attitude to seeing our surroundings that helps us overcome struggles, tragedies, and dichotomies, or, as Otto Bohlmann remarks: “There is ecstasy in the midst of ‘their tragic play’—Nietzsche’s conception of tragedy as a triumph over the monstrous, a draught of joy in the face of the terrible” (57).

At the end, the play seemingly changes its time dimension. Only seemingly, because the world of the myth resembles Yeats’s contemporary world, only the hero belongs to the past. Now, however, modern music starts, and the musicians, who commemorate the deceased hero, belong to the present. The shift is similar to that at the end of Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) or Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1924): our world does not need heroes.

Yeats offers two closures. One of them is Emer’s dance, which celebrates Cuchulain’s final escape from the eternal recurrence and his becoming part of *Spiritus Mundi* (Néneyi 71). The other is indicated by the Harlot’s song hinting that in the paltry world hero and heroism are senseless—or questionable at best. Nevertheless, these two closures, in my view, do not contradict each other. The dance closes Cuchulain’s life as well as the whole drama cycle. The

song however, together with the Old Man's prologue, creates a kind of frame; therefore, the time dimensions seemingly shift from present to past, then back to present. In fact, the play offers a somewhat more complicated pattern: the middle part (the dialogue), retelling the legend, is merely a veneer, and behind it we might feel the actual present much in the same way as in the prologue and the epilogue-like song. The aging Cuchulain and the Old Man resemble one another: both of them were born into the past and they have no place in the present. In the first section of the Harlot's song, a modern man remembers the great heroes of old days: "Conall, Cuchulain, Usna's boys, / All that most ancient race . . . / Recall what centuries have passed / Since they were living men" (704), while in the second, the text refers to the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916 and headquarters of the Rising: the Dublin General Post Office. Today the dying Cuchulain's bronze statue, created by Oliver Sheppard, is situated in the main hall of the building.

What stood in the Post Office  
With Pearse and Connolly?  
...  
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed  
He stood where they had stood?

No body like his body  
Has modern woman borne,  
But an old man looking back in life  
Imagines it in scorn.  
A statue's there to mark the place,  
By Oliver Sheppard done. (704-05)

In Yeats's late works, some poems depict statues or statuesque figures, for example, "Lapis Lazuli" (1938), "The Statues" (1939), "A Bronze Head" (1939), but the motionless Caesar is also statuesque in the "Long-legged Fly" (1939). These statues all stand for a kind of perfection, a desired condition. The reader might recall Walter Pater's thoughts of the perfectly proportioned human bodies in his *Greek Studies*: "You have pure humanity there, with a glowing, yet restrained joy and delight in itself" (qtd. in Østermark-Johansen 266), or Herbert J. Levine's observation on Pater's *Leonardo* essay: how the image reflects the spiritual life (Levine 175). These statues also represent the moment when the self discovers Unity of Being. They all gaze and their stare—according to Rachel V. Billigheimer—symbolizes permanence, indifferent acceptance (143), and the resignation of tragic joy.

In the poem “The Statues,” after the enumeration of the classical figures, Cuchulain also appears:

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side.  
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,  
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?  
We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face. (282)

What the poem symbolizes corresponds to the play: “Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace / The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.” The darkness is the *Anima Mundi*, from which Cuchulain’s image emerges binding past and present. Seemingly, a statue of a past hero was erected to commemorate the modern heroes, but, according to the play, Cuchulain does not belong to the past either: he, as a hero, is beyond time. Consequently, the statue symbolizes the very essence of heroism; statues all evoke the feeling of timelessness. In this context the statue is much more than a memorial of a half-forgotten hero of the past; in an ideal case, seeing the statue, the same feelings will be evoked in everybody. This is why the sculptor is side by side with the poet in Yeats’s poetic testament, “Under Ben Bulbin” (1939):

Poet and sculptor, do the work,  
Nor let the modish painter shirk  
What his great forefathers did,  
Bring the soul of man to God,  
Make him fill the cradles right. (302)

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The starting point of this paper could equally have been Yeats’s earlier play, *On Baile’s Strand*. Still, it focuses on *The Green Helmet*, partly because of Cuchulain’s original chronology. Besides, *The Green Helmet* seems more an antecedent to *The Death of Cuchulain*, since it includes the Yeatsian hero’s definition. As I focused on the first and last phases of the hero’s portrayal, I did not include the young and reckless Cuchulain of *At the Hawk’s Well* (1917) and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919).

<sup>2</sup> To complete this essay I incorporated some parts of my Ph.D. dissertation in it, including a chapter on Yeats's *The Death of Cuchulain*, which—apart from some shorter paragraphs—I have never published elsewhere. Mária Kurdi was one of my opponents in the dissertation defense committee, and I truly appreciate her advice and suggestions for improvement, which I tried to follow as far as I could when revising my work.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Pages from a Diary in 1930*, Yeats frequently indicates his readings, for example, Swift's letters and various essays, which led him to meditate on other eighteenth-century thinkers, Burke and Berkeley, who often appear in the context of his usual preoccupations, such as contrasting the ideal with the actual, or meditations on human civilization and his contemporary Ireland (*Explorations* 289-325).

<sup>4</sup> After publishing *A Vision* in 1925, in the following decade Yeats rewrote it to publish the revised work in 1937. *A Vision* incorporates some of his half-life-long preoccupations concerning, for example, human history, whose antithetical nature is expressed by the main symbol of the work, the gyres: "a double cone or vortex preferring subjectivity and objectivity as intersecting states struggling one against the other" (*A Vision* 71). When a historical era approaches its end, it falls into chaos.

<sup>5</sup> Yeats explains what he means by his "private philosophy" in another letter to Mannin (also from 1938): "material dealing with individual mind which came to me with that on which the mainly historical *Vision* is based" (*Letters* 916). Besides, intertwining life and death is pivotal in Yeats's works, occurring, for example, at the beginning and at the end of the prologue in *The Death of Cuchulain*, when the Old Man suggests that a good dancer would be capable of evoking life and death at the *same* time (*Collected Plays* 694) because they are one another's prerequisites in the endless series of the souls' reincarnations. At the beginning of the prologue, the Old Man declares that the play's, and moreover, the whole Cuchulain-cycle's, theme is the hero's "life and death" (693) indicating that this motif has appeared in the earlier Cuchulain-plays, among others, in *Baile* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. The motif of "life and death" dominates several poems as well, such as "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus" (1933), "News for the Delphic Oracle" (1939), and, more importantly, "Cuchulain Comforted" (1939), which might serve as an addition to *The Death of Cuchulain* because it corresponds to the issue of heroism, now in the context of reincarnation and phases between life and death.

<sup>6</sup> It is also true for *Baile*, where Cuchulain's wrong decision leads to fatal catastrophe and retribution.

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