# Envisaging a Post-Colonial Theatre: W. B. Yeats and the Cuchulain Cycle of Plays

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**Abstract**:

*Starting from Edward Said's claim that W.B. Yeats's work should be seen as seminal in the process of Ireland's decolonisation, despite the artist's Ascendancy roots and Protestant sympathies, the paper focuses on the Yeatsian theatre as exemplified by the five plays which cluster around the figure of the Celtic hero Cuchulain (*On Baile's Strand, The Golden Helmet, At The Hawk's Well, The Only Jealousy of Emer, *and* The Death of Cuchulain*) in order to prove that the hybrid dramatic forms adopted by Yeats, which rework the Celtic myth within Greek and Japanese theatrical models, may be seen as a move away from "the regional nativism" characteristic of much of the Revival writings towards a "radically liberating" (Deane 1990: 5) vision on a "contaminated" culture, characterised by plurality and dialogism. As such, the Cuchulain cycle of plays may be read not only as a reflection of the Yeatsian decolonising project, but also as an early instance of a post-colonial drama, whose hybrid paradigm subverts and revaluates both imperialist and nationalist assumptions on essentialist notions of identity.*

**Key words**: *postcolonial studies, cultural nationalism, Irish theatre, Celtic myth, Noh drama, identity (re)construction*

Though most critical accounts of W. B. Yeats's multifaceted work (including not only poetry, but also drama, criticism, essays, journalism, novels and occult writings) acknowledge its link to the Irish cultural nationalism emerging in the late 19th century, "the nature and extent of Yeats's nationalism are still frequently overlooked or misunderstood in discussions of his work" (Regan 2006: 88). As Seamus Deane remarks in one of his Field Day pamphlets, there seems to be a compulsion to read Yeats's poetry, for example, as mythical and thus disconnected from the wider political and historical context related to Ireland's colonial experience (1984). Similarly, the image of Yeats as an anti-colonial writer who translated political nationalism into the artistic ambition of creating a new cultural identity for his people through the Irish Literary Revival and the founding of the Abbey Theatre, which was to become Ireland's national

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theatre, is often at odds with that of Yeats as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy (a group whose roots are to be found in the 16th and 17th centuries English colonisation of Ireland, and who had since controlled the economic, political, social and cultural life of their adoptive country), openly embracing its elitism in his disdain for an upstart native Catholic order as represented by the emerging Irish middle-class.

In the field of postcolonial studies, the problem of reconciling the contradictions and complexities characterizing both the artist's life as well as his work has often "led to some confusion and uncertainty about whether Yeats can be justifiably labelled an anti-colonialist or anti-imperialist writer" ((Regan 2006: 88). Nevertheless, Edward Said's essay, "Yeats and Decolonisation" (initially published in 1988 in the Field Day collection of pamphlets entitled *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* and incorporated in 1993 in his seminal *Culture and Imperialism*) strongly qualifies Yeats as a decolonizing, resistance writer:

> Yeats has now been almost completely assimilated to the canon as well as the discourses of modern English literature, in addition to those of European high modernism. […] Nevertheless, and despite Yeats's obvious and, I would say, settled presence in Ireland, in British culture and literature, and in European modernism, he does present another fascinating aspect: that of the indisputably great national poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, an d the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power. From this perspective Yeats is a poet who belongs to a tradition not usually considered his, that of the colonial world ruled by European imperialism now—that is, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bringing to a climactic insurrectionary stage, the massive upheaval of anti-imperialist resistance in the colonies, and of metropolitan anti-imperialist opposition that has been called the age of decolonization. (Said 1990: 69-70)

Yet, in order to reconcile the incongruities evinced by Yeats's cultural nationalism, Said makes an important distinction between two major phases in the artist's life and career: an early one, dominated by his commitment to Irish nationalism, and a late (apolitical) period, characterised solely by aesthetic concerns:

> There is, I think, a fairly logical progression then from Yeats's early Gaelicism, with its Celtic preoccupations and themes, to his later systematic mythologies …. For Yeats the overlappings he knew existed between his Irish nationalism and the English cultural heritage that both dominated and empowered him as a writer were bound to cause an overheated tension, and it is the pressure of this urgently political and

> secular tension that one may speculate caused him to try to resolve it on a "higher," that is, nonpolitical level. (Said 1990: 80)

However, as Sean M. Donnell makes the case, "describing Yeats as a 'national' poet early in his career and/or as merely an 'aesthetic' poet in his later works risks oversimplifying the relationship between the poet's nationalist commitments and his aesthetic predilections" (2009). Yeats's cultural nationalism is intertwined with his aesthetic ideology, because the two "do not exist in mutually exclusive spheres; rather, they represent commingling spheres of influence within the poet's work" (Donnell 2009).

One artistic corpus where such antithetical elements are conjoined is represented by Yeats's series of five plays that cluster around the figure of the Celtic hero Cuchulain. *On Baile's Strand*, the first of these, was worked and reworked over several years until being published in the 1903 collection *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age*. The following year it was first produced, being included in the opening bill of the newly-established Abbey Theatre, an enterprise behind which Yeats was a major artisan in keeping with his conscious efforts at building an Irish national drama. The other four plays span the years of revolution which resulted in the establishment of the Irish Free State until shortly before the poet's death in 1939, namely *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1916), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1916) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1938).

All the plays draw their subject-matter from the various translations of the Ulster or Red Branch cycle of Celtic stories (see Mathelin 1972), of which Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* published in 1902 as a continuous narrative of the tales, ranks as the most important source. As such, they inform what Said considers to be characteristic for Yeats's (as well as other postcolonial writers') "search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths and religions" (1990: 79).

In the light of the above, it can be stated that Celtic myth enabled Yeats to forge a new emblem for the nation in the figure of Cuchulain, the principal hero of the Ulster Cycle and the epitome of the Celtic hero, ideally embodying the qualities of a whole people. In addition to this, by resorting to Celtic myth, Yeats also found the means of developing a successful form of theatre in keeping with his often stated principle advocating poetry before the actor, the actor before the scene, and the decorative scene before the realist one, due to his consideration that "the theatre began in ritual and cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient

sovereignty" (Yeats quoted in Maxwell 1984: 33). Last but not least important, Yeats's recourse to Celtic material as an origin-inspiring myth through which his nationalist-aesthetic project could be advanced also provided him with the source onto which to sublimate his own personal conflicts and to translate his philosophical system of opposites, exploring contrasts between the physical and spiritual dimensions of life, between sensuality and rationalism, between turbulence and calm, the progression which can result from reconciling them, as well as his belief in the essentially cyclic nature of life and history [1].

For example, in the first play, which follows quite faithfully the original tale, *Aided Oenfhir Aífe* (The Violent Death of Aoife's Only Son) in which the hero is led to kill a young man from the rival country of Scotland where Aoife, the warrior queen reigns, and learns too late that the youth was his own son, the age of Cuchulain is specifically changed to that of the forty-year old Yeats, and the hero's unspoken sensitivity to his childlessness may bear comparison to the dramatist's own circumstances. In addition, the play establishes an uncomplicated set of contrasts in character and role between Cuchulain and King Conchubar and their inglorious opposites, the Fool and the Blind Man, each of whom may stand for one aspect in the fourfold division of the self which is modelled on William Blake's symbolic system. Paired off in a dynamic tension of contraries, the four characters correspondingly stand for Energy/Reason/Emotion/Material Senses. The opposing protagonists are also aspects of the conflicting drives within civilisation, freedom vs. order, and aspects of a single personality, id vs. ego (Rees 1971), with the opposition being doubled in the minor characters, who are also ironic projections of Hero and King.

In *The Green Helmet*, which borrows from two separate tales, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) and *Fled Bricrenn* (Bricru's Feast) to show Cuchulain being awarded the green helmet, the "champion's portion" of the legend and thus becoming the first warrior of Ulster, in the quarrels of the heroes there are references to Synge and to contemporary Irish squabbles. *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, originating in *Serglige Con Chulainn* (Cuchulain's Illness) which portrays the hero torn between his earthly love for Emer and the goddess Fand from the Otherworld, is very different from its source, being influenced by the emotional crisis that Yeats was undergoing at the time, which involved the personalities of his recent bride George (Georgina) Hyde-Lees, Maud Gonne (to whom he has several times proposed marriage), and Gonne's daughter Iseult (who had rejected

his love) who are reflected in the play's female characters. Moreover, there are clear attempts to elaborate in dramatic form some of Yeats's favourite philosophic theories, by dividing the hero's part into Ghost and Figure, with the latter further exchanging personalities function of the mask worn by the actor, and having the choruses touch upon the correspondence between the twenty-eight days of the phases of the moon and the stages of human existence. *The Death of Cuchulain*, based on *Aided Chon Culainn* (The Violent Death of Cuchulain) in which the hero, contending once more alone against the enemies of Ulster, meets his death on the plain of Mag Muirthemne, fastened to a pillar stone, Cuchulain has aged with the playwright, while the aesthetic views which the Old Man expounds satirically in the prologue to the play correspond to those outlined in Yeats's essays.

In each play the original epic material is reduced to a single event, which occurs off-stage or behind a curtain: Cuchulain's fight to death with his son in *Baile's Strand*, his battle against the warrior women led by Aoife in *At the Hawk's Well*, or the cutting off of his head in *The Death of Cuchulain*. While physical action is not entirely dispensed with, the dramatic focus of the plays is internal, in keeping with Yeats's concept of tragedy as "an activity of the souls of the characters, an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself" (Innes 1992: 361). Because the tragic moment is "a moment of intense life" (Styan 1992: 62), drama should achieve a simplification of character and action able to compress past and future into its brief epiphany like a lyrical poem (Maxwell 1984: 40). And the dramatic form which best accommodated Yeats's aesthetic philosophy was the Japanese Noh drama, an aristocratic and ceremonial form of theatre originating in the 14th-century, at the heart of which is the expression of intense emotion in a stylised, often repetitious manner. It is a complete art form that employs music, dance and mime to augment the poetic content; the intense emotion portrayed concentrates upon idea rather than personality (Taylor 1976: 63).

*At the Hawk's Well* is the first play which is directly influenced by the Japanese Noh, though the choral figures of *On Baile's Strand* may be seen to anticipate its formula. Here Yeats moves away from conveying meaning essentially through words, as the play enforces the elements of song, movement and ritual on a simple narrative line of Yeats's own invention. The Three Musicians whose prologue introduces the inner play ceremonially unfold a black cloth which shows the image of a golden hawk on a patterned screen which is directly related to the crouching figure of

the Guardian of the Well on the ground. The triangle formed by the trio of Musicians is paralleled by the triangle made up with the entrance of the other two characters of the play: the Old Man and the Young Man (Cuchulain in his youth.). The two are strangers and opposites: one is young, the other is old; one is brave, the other one nervous; one is dashing and confident, the other one passive and bitter, but underneath there is a deep likeness between them. Both of them wear abstracting masks and move like marionettes, both of them are seekers of the immortality that the water of the well is said to confer to those drinking it, and both are mesmerised by the Guardian's dance which starts once the dry well briefly fills. With movement set in, the second triangle disintegrates as Cuchulain is deluded into following the divine dancer off-stage, while the Old Man, lulled to sleep, is concealed by the unfolded cloth. The trio of Musicians remains to sing of heroic and mundane fates, reinforcing the meanings that the play tried to convey not solely by dialogue and songs, but through clusters of visual images and movement together with the sounds of gong, drum and zither which took up the burden when the characters were mute. The symbolic abstraction and balletic structure of the play replace action by ritual, restoring drama to its original power, able to evoke a sacred presence with all the devices of ceremony, dance, poetry and scenery (Hinchliffe 1977: 21).

The Noh offered Yeats a form for what he envisaged as the *anti-self* (Bentley 1979: 337) of the contemporary theatre dominated by realism and the objective and materialistic values of the modern world, as well as an image of nobility and impersonality which he could counterpoise to that of faction which seemed to him to characterise the contemporary scene. Nevertheless, as Seamus Deane remarks, despite its esoteric ambitions, its aristocratic gestures and its select audience, at no point did Yeats's career as a dramatist display any rupture between the sense of Irish national life and the desire to write plays (Deane 1985: 115).

If in the Noh plays one can detect his "desire to reshape Ireland through the appeal of a revivified formality of stage manner which would represent a new formality of social behaviour and relationship" (Deane 1985: 117), the Cuchulain cycle of plays may be seen as Yeats's conscious attempt to supply a new self-image for the nation, predicated upon the idea of heroism and individuality, in a celebration of the wilful spirit, which, nevertheless should submit to its destined end. The Cuchulain of *On Baile's Strand* is the proud, passionate and self-assertive spirit which is being tamed by the crafty Conchubar and forced to subordinate his will to the

king's authority. But, in accepting the oath of allegiance, Cuchulain alienates himself from his heroic part to become one who fulfils a role imposed by Conchubar which will compel him fight and kill his son against his instincts. Maddened by grief at his loss, Cuchulain will then attack the waves, engaging in a battle which cannot be won, in a wild expression of self-destructive lamentation. *The Green Helmet* shows the hero offering up his life in order to save the people from the destruction threatened by the mythical Red Man. However, the motivation for this act lies solely in Cuchulain's self-gratification and expression and not in the need to suppress the individual according to the needs of his community. In *At the Hawk's Well* the choice is different from that in the previous play. Urged by the Old Man to remain by the well and accept the modest, unheroic fulfilment of settled life or else the curse of the goddess would condemn him to a ceaseless wondering combative life during which, at one time, he might be driven mad and kill his own children, Cuchulain chooses action, embracing his heroic destiny in a decision to use his life as he wills and not give in to a deceitful goddess's whim. *The Death of Cuchulain* presents an ageing Cuchulain, bound by his years and deeds to mortality, who nevertheless decides to embrace his destiny to the end, going to battle to meet the death preordained by the Morrigu at the pillar-stone. Yet the hero does not meet a glorious death in battle, nor is he killed by Aoife, who has appeared from his past as if intending to avenge the death of their son. It is ironically the contemptible Blind Man from *On Baile's Strand* who feels his way up the dying hero's body and beheads him for sordidly materialistic reasons. While Cuchulain's mode of death is an indictment of materialistic man, it also casts a mordant final eye on the heroic legacy, and whether or not this is repudiated is left in doubt. The climax of the play is represented by Emer's dance in which she moves as if in adoration and triumph before Cuchulain's severed head, as if the dancer could resurrect the hero. The scene then changes to a modern fair, where street-singers sing a song that "The harlot sang to the beggar-man" (Yeats 1964: 241), which restates the myth and thus bridges the heroic and the contemporary worlds, even if the latter one is a debased variant of the first.

Throughout the Cuchulain cycle of plays, Yeats had moulded his protagonist as an idealised model of heroic individuality, convinced that it was precisely that quality which was marginalised and threatened with extinction in the emergent nation. It is true that one reading of Yeats's mythological plays sees them as an attempt at recovering the spiritual dimension in the life of a people who had been transformed into the

materialistic middle classes of the Anglicised commercial cities, and the main battle fought through his drama becomes that between the Celtic sensitivity and imagination and the Saxon calculating materialism. The polarity is apparent throughout his work: Cuchulain and Conchubar, Blind Man and the Fool, Subjective and Objective Man. But, at the same time, Yeats's construction of Cuchulain may be read as part of his effort to counterpoise his ideal of an aristocratic order, merged with his own Protestant Ascendancy ethos, to the actuality of the "new class", represented by a nationalist bourgeois Catholic order, who had become the leaders of the "people-nation", usurping its Anglo-Irish meritocracy. This seems to do justice to Said's assertion according to which Yeats's early "liberationist and Utopian revolutionism" is "belied and even cancelled out by his later reactionary politics" (1990: 89).

Yet, rather than considering the Cuchulain plays as progressive attempts at separating the personal from the political and withdrawing from the revolutionary and anti-colonial camp ascribed by Said, Yeats's dramatic experiments in casting the Irish literary tradition in the complex staging model offered by Noh may be seen as a consciously undertaken challenge at finding new forms of cultural expression that could transcend both colonial and nationalist borders in a "contaminated" space, where the cultural interchanges between the Celtic and Japanese traditions intersect and interact with the personal, the political and the aesthetic, continuously redefining each other, ultimately creating a hybrid theatrical model through which oppositional structures become ambivalent, enabling thus a pluralistic and dialogic vision of identity.

Identity and authenticity are the two core concepts upon which the decolonisation process rests. As Tim Gauthier explains, "in response to the colonial suppression of native identity, the nationalist project seeks to discover an 'essence,' something that will define what constitutes 'being Irish.'" Yet, one should always be alert to "the tenuous nature of its construction," due to the fact that "this authenticity is itself contingent upon definitions of self, language, and history" (Gauthier 2002: 337). As such, Yeats's early engagement with the cultural nationalism of the Revival may be seen to mark the beginnings of this process, as a direct translation of the nationalist drive to construct a pristine identity by an immersion into Celtic myth and the precolonial past. Nevertheless, his subsequent treatment of the same mythic material in the polysemic and hybrid matrix of his Cuchulain cycle of plays indexes the tensions and uncertainties inherent in maintaining any essentializing view of identity, at the same

time at it records, in symbolic form, both the larger-scale historical forces and the heterogeneity of "national" forms of affiliation.

If Edward Said's essay placed Yeats's achievement at an early stage of the process of full decolonisation, considering that "he stopped short of imagining full political liberation he might have aspired toward" (1990: 94), his Cuchulain cycle of plays might prove the opposite. Anticipating "a later and alternative internationalism" (McAteer 2010: 195), it may be read not only as a reflection of the Yeatsian decolonising project, but also as an instance of a "radically liberating" (Deane 1990: 5) vision of a post-colonial theatre. Seen as "a form of cultural criticism and cultural critique" (Slemon 1987: 14) and as a textual/cultural expression of "resistance to colonisation" , such a theatre includes "acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-contact) communities", as well as "acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms", at the same time at which it stresses the "provisionality of post-colonial identities" by situating itself "within the hybrid forms of various cultural systems" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 3, 11). Such a reading may nuance the understanding of Yeats's complex role in the history of Irish identitary quests in a (post)colonial context.

**Notes**

[1] A more detailed discussion of the individual plays included in the Yeatsian Cuchulain cycle is presented in Ioana Mohor-Ivan, *The Celtic Paradigm and Modern Irish Writing*, Galaţi, Galaţi University Press, 2014, pp. 90-103.

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