Reviving and Revising Cuchulain: W. B. Yeats's Struggle to Create a Postcolonial Culture Hero

Heather McCracken

W. B. Yeats is perhaps more often remembered as a poet than a playwright, but his work in the theater was a central part of his artistic identity during his lifetime. The form, style, and accessibility of his plays varied over his career, but the theme was consistent: Irish mythology. The myths to which he frequently returned dealt with the Ulster cycle hero Cuchulain. In addition to several poems, Yeats wrote five plays addressing different episodes in the hero's life with the purpose of shaping Cuchulain as a new culture hero for Ireland. These plays—*On Baile's Strand* (1904), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939)—are imaginative revisions promoting an Irish culture separate from that of England's, and they reflect the struggles of an author and a nation fighting for independence. Irish decolonization was not a simple, unitary effort, and Yeats believed that he could be a voice to guide the nation, whether the nation wanted his guidance or not. These struggles—defining Irish identity, moving toward independence, and Yeats's role in the formation of a postcolonial Ireland—are all on display in the Cuchulain plays. That Yeats wanted to create an Irish national identity from precolonial myths and legends is not a new discovery,[1] but

his deliberate shaping of Cuchulain as an Irish culture hero warrants more exploration. My analysis provides a deeper reading of Yeats's plays by focusing on the shifting, uncertain relations between Yeats, Cuchulain, and postcolonial Ireland, where Cuchulain is a cultural "superhero" stand-in for Irish national identity and a metonymical representation of Yeats's political frustrations. Because Yeats authored his public identity in these plays in unique and complicated ways—raising questions about his role as an artist/citizen—examining Cuchulain as a culture hero and role model for the nation illuminates the personal and political struggles that Yeats faced as a postcolonial author.

Postcolonial theorists have suggested that culture heroes such as Cuchulain function as significant metonymic figures for colonized nations struggling for a sense of identity. In *Calibrations*, Ato Quayson explains how culture heroes contribute to national identities as an invaluable part of cultural decolonization. "How," Quayson asks, "do we isolate a particular social, cultural, or political phenomenon for analysis while retaining a view of its relationship to complex and contradictory historical processes that allow it to be perceived as an object or objective field in the first place?" (31). His solution centers on the culture hero. Quayson defines the trope of cultural heroism as a "*mode of characterization of agency* whose typology involves some of the heroic associations of priests, traditional rulers, medicine men, hunters, politicians, and even thieves and popular rogues" (36). In other words, a culture hero emerges as a socially recognizable figure capable of exhibiting some degree of agency. In the case of a colonized nation, Quayson explains that the native population looks to these culture heroes as models for the formation of an anticolonial national identity because culture heroism "is a threshold that reveals important structural ideas about the nation-state form" (33). I believe it is important to attend to this threshold by examining heroic characterizations of agency for Irish decolonization efforts. As Quayson notes, culture heroism "provides a peculiar intersection of the discourses of literature, politics and civil society" (*Postcolonialism* 76). Examining culture heroes such as Cuchulain in Ireland—a nation with a well-documented unique relationship between art and politics—can help to shape an understanding of the kinds of anticolonial resistance narratives used by the Irish and to expand our understanding of postcolonial culture heroes generally.

Although Quayson drew his examples of culture heroes from

what he called "the everyday genres" of West Africa, I believe that this critical apparatus has great value in colonial settings like Ireland because of the shared concern with shaping a national identity. Understanding the image of the culture hero metonymically, we can see that this figure would serve as a valuable stand-in for such an identity. The figure of the culture hero, in other words, would represent the agent through which the agency of the Irish decolonization movement could be characterized. Stan Smith explores this idea in "'Literally, for this': Metonymies of National Identity in Edward Thomas, Yeats, and Auden," noting that "[n]ationhood is not a natural construction. It is essentially a work of artifice, for the nation has to be ideologically 'uttered' to be validated" (123).[2] A culture hero, then, is a convenient representation of the nation, but when the ideological "utterances" of nationhood have not fully coalesced—as in the case of Ireland—it is up to the author to simultaneously shape both the hero and the nation that they represent. Smith explains that this is precisely what Yeats was doing in his work, as "Yeats'[s] metonymic enquiries . . . were always directed toward finding the whole symbolically represented in the parts, to creating a balanced relation between centre and peripheries" (130). The whole that Yeats was working to represent was not just Ireland but himself as well, both of which seemed to lack agency at times. My reading of the Ulster Cycle adds a theoretical wrinkle to culture heroism by attending to the complex metonymic relationship between Yeats, Cuchulain, and the role of the artist and his art in colonized Ireland.

Yeats turned to Ireland's ancient myths to find a culture hero to reconnect the Irish with their past and promote an inherently Irish culture while simultaneously supporting the values that he believed were important for the future of the postcolonial state. The Cuchulain plays promoted Ireland's precolonial culture, but they also allowed Yeats to express his complex, and sometimes contradictory, feelings about the anticolonial cause. Cuchulain's journey in the plays provides a record of Yeats's reaction to Ireland's transition from a colonial to postcolonial state. At first glance, it seems as though Yeats chose random moments in Cuchulain's life for each of his plays. He did not work through the hero's life chronologically or thematically, and the cycle lacks a basic order or coherence. Cuchulain does not grow and evolve consistently. In the 1906 *On Baile's Strand* the hero dies as a result of his ignorance and rage, but just two years later audiences met a younger yet somehow more mature and levelheaded Cuchulain. In

another baffling turn, after Cuchulain is revived by Yeats in the 1919 *The Only Jealousy of Emer* the now-comatose culture hero is entirely stripped of his agency. While this chaotic progression of the hero's story may have confused audiences, when we look at the volatile state of Ireland during these years, a more nuanced picture of the culture hero emerges.

Yeats's *Autobiographies* (1936) helps bring this picture into view. The work, more accurately described as a collection of personal and political essays rather than a traditional autobiography, is not a wholly reliable biographical source. But this under-studied exercise in life writing does provide valuable insight into how the author viewed himself and the evolving factor of his politics. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats carefully crafted his public persona as an Irish author and nationalist who was conflicted about the Irish cause. As Joseph Ronsley notes in *Yeats's Autobiography: Life as Symbolic Pattern*, "Yeats was candidly eager to blend his life and his art into a single image" because he believed that there could be no real separation between the art and the artist (1). Yeats understood that he was writing not only for himself but that his work would represent the Irish as they fought for independence from English rule. The *Autobiographies* provide a clear indication of how Yeats viewed himself as an artist and an Irish citizen. According to Ronsely, Yeats believed that he was "the product of a heritage linked intimately with Ireland's history and culture," so much so that "he also saw his personal history blended with that of his country, and he began to think of his own image as a kind of symbol of Ireland" (18). Throughout *Autobiographies*, Yeats criticizes Irish politics for having been ineffective and needlessly divisive, but he is also critical of his own behavior at times. Read alongside the Cuchulain cycle, the observations recorded in *Autobiographies* illuminate Yeats's artistic choices in the shaping of his culture hero. As Yeats's relationship to the Irish cause changed, his culture hero evolved as well, linking the author's political journey to his plays.

Early in his literary career, Yeats decided to dedicate himself to creating and promoting an Irish national literature. In *Autobiographies* he describes how he conceived of the idea that his "native scenery might find imaginary inhabitants" as he "half planned a new method and a new culture" for Ireland (139). Yeats was beginning to see the need for a cultural identity in order to inspire decolonization, and he believed that he might be the one to create it. It was John O'Leary's influence that encouraged Yeats to see the possibility of the unifying power of literature. Yeats claims that

O'Leary made him realize that "we might bring the halves together if we had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory" (*Autobiographies* 105). Throughout his twenties and thirties Yeats passionately advocated for O'Leary's anticolonial vision of a national culture. However, as he aged, he found himself at odds with his fellow nationalists and struggled to find his place in the movement. When the fight for decolonization expanded beyond literature and culture to military intervention, Yeats was turning fifty and, rather than wholeheartedly supporting the cause, the aging author felt isolated from the movement and lacking agency as an artist.[3] He was surprised to see Ireland actively working toward independence, but he found that he was uncomfortable with the means used to achieve this goal. Faced with the violent reality of revolution, the author feared needless sacrifice.[4] Following events like the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, Yeats grew increasingly uncomfortable with the cost of decolonization and the kind of nationalism it produced. Although the Irish Free State was successfully established in 1922, the civil war that followed seemed to justify his skepticism. Yeats continued to believe that even an independent Ireland would not be successful without unity, but he was convinced that his voice was no longer being heard—a notion that embittered him against the Irish public. Yeats had wanted to establish a national culture that would unify Ireland; but the Irish rebellion had moved forward without him, leaving civil war and instability in its wake. Worst of all, the national pride that he bolstered with his work seemed to him to have contributed to the deaths of many young nationalists and led to more violence. In the last years of his life, he struggled to understand what he believed in and seemingly abandoned politics and his hopes for a national culture altogether.[5] During all this turmoil and uncertainty, Yeats's culture hero shape-shifted through each new play.

On Baile's Strand: Cuchulain's Ignorance and Fury

In the first Cuchulain play the culture hero is (rather unheroically) easily manipulated, ignorant, and incapable of controlling his temper. Originally written and performed in 1904 at the Abbey Theatre[6] and then heavily revised and re-debuted in 1906, the first Cuchulain play focuses on a tragic episode in the hero's life that results in his son's death and his own premature demise. It may seem odd to begin with the hero's death, but this can be explained by considering the political climate and Yeats's frustrations

with the Irish cause at this time. When Yeats started working on his first Cuchulain play, there had been little progress toward Irish independence since Charles Stewart Parnell's failed attempt to pass Home Rule; and the disillusionment and hopelessness following Parnell's death in 1891 still lingered. Cuchulain's first appearance expresses both Yeats's personal frustrations and the frustrations of the nation at a time when it seemed the anticolonial cause was floundering. He believed the Irish could be reached through the stage; and while he wanted his culture hero to be inspiring to his audiences, he also needed to make him relatable. At the time, the feeling of hopelessness that Cuchulain experiences in this play must have seemed a very relatable subject for Ireland and for Yeats as well.

The tragedy of *On Baile's Strand* hinges on Cuchulain's decision to swear loyalty to the High King of Ulster, Conchubar, despite the fact that the hero is a king in his own right. Richard Ellmann argues that Cuchulain's tragic fall is caused by "his listening to the voice of apparent reason[...] instead of following his impulse to make friends with the unknown warrior" (169-70). While it is true that the Hound of Ulster is led astray by the words of others, ignoring his own instincts, there is more to this tragedy than a simple divide between reason and instinct. In "The Death of Cuchulain's Only Son," Elizabeth Cullingford concludes that "Cuchulain's anguish is the result of his *hamartia*, which Aristotle defines not as a fatal flaw but as a tragic error" (45). Cullingford's tragic error theory allows for a more nuanced reading of this important episode in the hero's life than Ellmann's and puts the focus on the fatal decision that he makes in this play. The tragic error that Cuchulain makes is not that he simply ignores his instincts; instead, the root cause of this error is his decision to bow down to the High King. He willingly forfeits his political agency. The dramatis personae identifies Cuchulain as King of Muirthemne—a kingdom in Ulster—and Yeats quickly establishes the hero as widely revered for his heroic deeds and conquests. Speaking with Conchubar, Cuchulain lists some of his famous feats to make a case for why he should not bow down to another man:

> Must I, that held you on the throne when all
> Had pulled you from it, swear obedience
> As if I were some cattle-raising king?" (*The Plays* 157)

Cuchulain views himself as Conchubar's equal, but Conchubar reminds Cuchulain that he does not possess the wisdom that the High King does. Conchubar manages to convince Cuchulain to bend the knee by arguing that the hero needs his guidance to restrain his dangerous physical strength, an argument made even more convincing when the other kings agree. A joyous celebration breaks out as Cuchulain takes his oath, but the play quickly takes a turn and reveals the high cost of this decision: not only will Cuchulain lose his life but first he will unwittingly kill his only son.

The combative and oppressive relationship between Cuchulain and Conchubar represents the relationship between Ireland and England at the time the play was written. Yeats also added two major characters to his play, the Fool and the Blind Man, to more fully establish the power dynamic between Conchubar and Cuchulain. The Fool and the Blind Man establish the events about to unfold at the start of the play and provide helpful commentary on the action, but they also serve as symbolic reflections of Cuchulain and Conchubar. In a 1910 letter to Gordon Craig, Yeats described the purpose of these characters: "[The Blind Man] is the shadow of Concubar (sic), the High King, as the Fool is Cuchulain's shadow. In a sense they are reason and impulse, policy and heroism, the cold and the hot, the mind and the senses and a thousand other things that should suggest themselves to the imagination when the curtain falls" (qtd. in Yeats, *Plays* 850). Contemporary audiences recognized the political commentary. As Gerardine Meaney explains, "The parallels with the colonial situation were obvious when the play was first staged" (247). Irish audiences identified Ireland's submission to England in Cuchulain's acceptance of "the false authority of the king" and the betrayal of his own nature and the destruction of his descendants "in the interests of that king" (Meaney 247). While the High King claims that his sovereignty over Cuchulain will benefit them both, Conchubar immediately takes advantage of the hero's oath to force him into unwittingly killing his only son, destroying his heir and future. If, as Quayson argues in *Calibrations*, culture heroes are "a mode of characterization of agency," this version of Cuchulain represents Yeats's belief that Ireland's ambivalence had resulted in loss of their agency to the English.

The original myth[7] and the play tell the same basic story of the son's death: a mysterious boy challenges Cuchulain, the hero kills the boy without knowing he is his son, and this realization causes him to lose control and fight the waves. However, in Yeats's revisionist myth Cuchulain's

pledge of loyalty to Conchubar results in two tragic deaths: Cuchulain's son and, in a departure from the original myth, Cuchulain's. The fact that Yeats chose to heighten the consequences of Cuchulain's oath of fealty is significant. While Yeats shows his culture hero being manipulated and mistreated by Conchubar, Cuchulain is not entirely free from guilt, and there must be consequences for his actions. His death, after all, ultimately results from his inability to harness his anger. Cuchulain does not blame himself for being so easily misled, and instead redirects the blame and loses control completely. Striking the High King's chair, Cuchulain screams the accusation, "'Twas you who did it—you who sat up there / With your old rod of kingship," and then races offstage to seek his vengeance (173). On the surface, this may have seemed to contemporary audiences like the right course of action. Perhaps Cuchulain, like the Irish, should stand up to his oppressor and take action. But his solution is ultimately too chaotic and disorganized and, so, doomed to failure, much like the numerous rebellions in Ireland's colonial history. Yeats wanted cautious, planned, and organized resistance to colonial rule in the tradition of John O'Leary. This is not the behavior that Cuchulain models, and he dies as a result. Filled with anger and incapable of controlling his actions, Cuchulain runs past Conchubar and into the sea to fight the waves instead. Hearing the description provided by the Fool—"O! he is fighting the waves!"—the Blind Man explains that the hero "sees King Conchubar's crown on every one of them" (173). Eventually the waves master him, and the hero dies.

Cuchulain's failure is an important aspect of the play and Yeats's initial metonymic vision for his Irish culture hero in general. In *The Irish Dramatic Revival*, Anthony Roche provides insight into the subject of failure when he notes the Shakespearian inspiration for the play. Roche notes that, before writing *On Baile's Strand*, Yeats visited Stratford-upon-Avon, where he saw *Richard II* and *Henry V*, among others, and was inspired by the contrast between the two. Roche argues that Yeats wished to "promote the 'failure' of [Richard] as more admirable than the 'success' of [Henry]. In so doing, he is constructing a political allegory, with the sensitive failure of Ireland overcome by the Machiavellian force of England" (37–38). So, while the play ends with the failure of the culture hero, his failure was meant to be relatable and inspiring.[8] When shaping his culture hero, Yeats was unconcerned with representing an infallible character, which makes sense if we read Cuchulain as a stand-in not only for the nation but for Yeats himself.

As Cullingford reminds us in *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, Yeats was prone to feelings of inadequacy: "As Ireland's national poet he had a responsibility to the people, and he was uncomfortably aware that in some respects he might be failing them" (46). But Cuchulain's shape-shifting throughout the Ulster Cycle reveals moments during Ireland's struggle for independence when Yeats felt more confident about the role he played.

The Green Helmet: Cuchulain as Cautious Mediator

Irish audiences responded positively to *On Baile's Strand*, resulting in a new surge of optimism and hope for Yeats's cultural revival; and he was uplifted, convinced that his work could influence Irish audiences and direct the course of the Irish cause. *The Green Helmet*, performed for the first time in 1910, is a more lighthearted and optimistic representation of the culture hero. The last time audiences saw Cuchulain he was drowning in his foolish fight against the waves, but here he reemerges as levelheaded and clever. The action takes place before the events of *On Baile's Strand*, allowing Yeats to establish Cuchulain's past and to more fully develop his culture hero. Metonymically, Cuchulain appears at this moment to represent Yeats's confidence in himself and his nation. Believing that the Irish were moving away from failures like the fall of Parnell, Yeats attempted to promote the ideals of unity and cooperation through Cuchulain in *The Green Helmet*.

The play features a pair of men who find themselves in need of Cuchulain's bravery when a mysterious figure threatens their lives. The hero tries to help the men, and while petty squabbling initially hinders his attempts, the play concludes with Cuchulain honored as the greatest hero in Ulster. In the original myth, Cuchulain performs a variety of physically demanding feats before being named the Champion of Ulster, but Yeats's version ignores the hero's physical might and instead praises his quick thinking and desire to unite his people. This revision is significant because it helps to achieve Yeats's desired political message of unity and an emphasis on intellect over violence, giving Cuchulain a positive sense of agency. While Cuchulain's physicality was the focus of his heroic virtues in *On Baile's Strand*, that play suggests that Yeats believed violence might result only in further harm for the Irish, especially if their fighting was disorganized.[9] In *Imagining Ireland in the Poems and Plays of W. B. Yeats*, Anthony Bradley explores this shift in the hero's representation. Bradley notes that while the play is "set in ancient Ireland, the virtues of its hero, Cuchulain,

are less those of the warrior, and more of a cultural hero who might redeem contemporary Ireland through his example of selflessness, in opposition to widespread mean-spiritedness, divisiveness, and venality" (44). Following Parnell's death, Yeats witnessed a growing division among the Irish people, even within the anticolonial movement, and he was keenly aware that a united Ireland had a better chance at achieving and maintaining independence. Through the characterization of Cuchulain as a cautious mediator, the culture hero embodies this ideal and seems to at times speak for Yeats in *The Green Helmet*.

The setting of the second Cuchulain play is war-torn Ulster. But it is not just outsiders that threaten the peace, as "neighbour wars on neighbour, and why there is no man knows" (242). This description of Ulster seems to represent Yeats's opinion of Ireland in 1910, but Yeats was determined to "bring the halves together" (*Autobiographies* 105). Yeats explores this hope in the play by using the culture hero to restore order with patience and wisdom. Although Cuchulain's first reaction to learning of his countrymen's plight is to meet the challenge with his sword, he quickly reassesses the situation and realizes that the best solution is to avoid violence. The Red Man that has come to Ulster seeking the debt that is owed him—a head—creates an opportunity for the hero to mediate his own people when they begin to fight over the green helmet that the Red Man says is meant to be worn by the best and bravest among them. Laegaire and Conall—the men indebted to the Red Man—both claim that they are most deserving of the helmet, insulting one another to prove their worth, but Cuchulain comes up with a wiser solution. Taking the helmet from the others, the hero explains his plan: "I did not take it to keep it—the Red Man gave it for one, / But I shall give it to all—to all of us three or to none" (248). This diplomatic solution is thwarted with the arrival of each man's servants and wives, who begin arguing, neighbor against neighbor, all claiming that their man is the best. Cuchulain is unable to mediate the disagreements and feels his agency slipping away, so out of frustration the hero throws the helmet into the sea and admonishes the rowdy group for its pointless arguing. Rather than joining forces to find a solution to the shared threat, they have wasted time fighting one another; and when the Red Man reappears, they are at his mercy, forcing Cuchulain to offer up his own head to end the conflict.

Although the culture hero models Yeats's ideal behavior—seemingly acting *for* Yeats—there was no guarantee that audiences would follow

his lead. Yeats was concerned that, just as the characters in his play fail to listen to Cuchulain, the Irish would continue to fight internally rather than focusing on their common enemy, making unity and independence impossible. As Paige Reynolds notes in "'A Theatre of the Head': Material Culture, Severed Heads, and the Late Drama of W. B. Yeats," the fact that the hero has to take this drastic action to resolve a dispute over a material object reveals a "disdain for the material by focusing on its capacity to upset and corrupt . . . [and] demonstrates the failure of language" (443). Like Yeats himself, Cuchulain is frustrated that his words go unheeded, but Yeats does not celebrate this attempt at a sacrificial act. In direct opposition to *On Baile's Strand*, Yeats emphasizes the cost of such a sacrifice by noting that the death of the hero would be deeply felt by the community. In this moment of his culture hero's life, he is portrayed as too valuable to his community to be needlessly sacrificed. Rather than kill him, the Red Man declares Cuchulain the Champion of Ulster and gives him the helmet. Cuchulain has survived this trial so that he may better defend his people in the future. As opposed to the tragic conclusion of the previous play, Yeats leaves audiences with an optimistic look into the future, but only if the Irish could emulate the culture hero that he was shaping for the nation. The culture hero's story celebrates wisdom over physical might and discourages recklessness. This vision for Ireland is also expressed in *Autobiographies* when Yeats argued, "the need of a model of the nation, of some moral diagram, is as great as in the early nineteenth century, when national feeling was losing itself in a religious feud over tithes and emancipation" (364–65). More specifically, he believed that proper moral models were needed to "bid the people love and not hate," which is exactly what Cuchulain does in *The Green Helmet* (365). Yeats's personal optimism about the Irish cause and his role in 1910 are reflected in the play, and so he shapes his culture hero in his own image by celebrating and advocating for unity.

At the Hawk's Well: A Young and Immature Cuchulain

It can be difficult to reconcile the culture hero Yeats presented in his next Cuchulain play with the one in *The Green Helmet*. As previously mentioned, the disjointed and inconsistent nature of the play cycle can be confusing and can discourage readings that attempt to bring together the various fragments to create some coherence. However, once again, a clearer picture of the culture hero's evolution emerges when we consid-

er Ireland's political climate and Yeats's relationship to it. In "Yeats's Last Play," K. P. S. Jochum explains that after 1910 Yeats grew discouraged with his Irish audience, "as they favored a more realistic trend he had not anticipated" (221). This shift caused Yeats to concentrate on writing plays for smaller drawing-room performances, believing that the theater-going public was unwilling to appreciate his work or was incapable of it. Instead of writing popular plays that were entertaining and accessible, he turned his attention to experimental plays for the supposedly more educated upper classes.[10] The result was *At the Hawk's Well*, a Japanese Noh–inspired drama featuring an immature and overzealous Cuchulain. The first performance took place on April 2, 1916—three weeks before the Easter Rising— for a small audience in a London drawing room. The play was later published in 1917, but it was not performed at the Abbey Theatre until 1930. The characters and the circumstances of the play would have been known to contemporary audiences familiar with Ulster mythology; but the story itself does not exist in the myths, and the style of the play is relentlessly abstract. Convinced that his cultural revival was failing because the Irish rejected his work, Yeats funneled his frustrations into his culture hero as he struggled with his diminished role and lack of agency in the Irish cause.

Yeats critiqued Irish audiences and the anticolonial movement through his culture hero in *At the Hawk's Well* by depicting Cuchulain as foolish, ignorant, and immature. This shift in the representation of his culture hero follows from Yeats's belief that the Irish cause had stagnated. Isolated from the movement and from Ireland—Yeats was living in London at the time—he had no idea that the Easter Rising was on the horizon, believing instead that the Irish were ambivalent and unwilling to oppose the English. While he began to develop this pessimism after he debuted *The Green Helmet*, his opinion of Irish audiences had degraded so much that he once again worried he was failing the Irish, just as the Irish were failing him. Still, Yeats does not treat his hero with total contempt in *At the Hawk's Well*. Cuchulain's failure in the play stems partly from youthful folly and partly from supernatural forces that are beyond his control. The culture hero is depicted as young and admittedly ineffectual, but his immaturity is understandable considering his age. Audiences knew that Cuchulain would mature into the Champion of Ulster, but they also knew that the behavior exhibited in this play would lead to his death in *On Baile's Strand*. *At the*

Hawk's Well signals a warning of the tragedy to come in both Cuchulain's story and, as far as Yeats believed, in Ireland.

In *At the Hawk's Well* Cuchulain is rash and ignorant. He fails to achieve his goal—drinking from the well of immortality—but he was never supposed to be seeking this in the first place. Unable to resist an adventure, Cuchulain is distracted from his original purpose, and he ends up in a remote cave inhabited by the Old Man and the Guardian of the Well. Unbeknownst to Cuchulain, the Old Man has been waiting for the well to fill with water for fifty years. Each time the water appears, the Old Man is enchanted; he falls asleep, and when he wakes, the well has dried. Despite the Old Man's failure to drink from the well, he clings to a desperate hope that the next time he will succeed. The Old Man tries to warn the zealous young hero against wasting his life as he has. While Cuchulain acted almost as a stand-in for Yeats in *The Green Helmet*, here the author appears to be more closely aligned with the Old Man, imparting advice that falls on deaf ears. Cuchulain ignores the Old Man's counsel and tries—and fails—to drink from the well. Rather than learning from the experiences of those who came before him, the hero dawdles at the well until he forgets his original quest. The play ends with Cuchulain racing offstage to fight an approaching army, without any reflection on the time he wasted in the cave. Yeats's critique in *At the Hawk's Well*, therefore, seems to target not only his own inability to communicate with the Irish but also Ireland's lack of focus on the most pressing matters of Irish independence. While it is important to recall that Yeats had no idea that the Easter Rising would happen just a few weeks after this play was performed, this chaotic violence and disorganized action was exactly the kind of behavior he warned against in his portrayal of the culture hero. Cuchulain fails to drink the water and immediately leaves the cave to fight, but Yeats seems to ask who the bigger fool is: the brash young warrior or the hopeless Old Man? This question takes on an added significance when applied to Yeats's personal experiences as a fifty-year-old man looking back on a life dedicated to writing for a cause that no longer seemed to want him. The Old Man is described as waiting fifty years to drink from the well of immortality, and Yeats was exactly fifty years old when he wrote *At the Hawk's Well*.

In the previous two plays, we saw Cuchulain as a metonym for the Irish and for Yeats himself as an artist. Now, in *At the Hawk's Well*, we see Yeats detach himself from Cuchulain, who still serves as a metonym for the

Irish movement, and represent himself as the figure of the Old Man. With this, the question of agency arises once again. What kind of agency is either of these characters, and the people they represent, capable of? Does an artist such as Yeats have any suasive power over his audience? Do those in his audience have any agency over their well-established patterns of violence and forgetfulness? Yeats seems to be asking these questions in *At the Hawk's Well*, and his response is pessimistically uncertain.

The Only Jealousy of Emer: A Sacrifice for Cuchulain's Legacy

Shocked by the Easter Rising and unsettled by the violence and the initial lack of approval from the Irish public, Yeats fretted over how many people had to die before the Irish public would care about independence. It was not until the leaders of the Rising were executed that many expressed support for the cause, but the threat of more violence left Yeats unsure about the cost of independence with Ireland still divided. Although he was no longer directly involved with the movement, he remained devoted to contributing to the nation's cultural identity as a means of achieving unity. Yeats expressed in *Autobiographies* his belief that "nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images" (167). One image that Yeats hoped would bring about this unity was Cuchulain, but after the Rising he realized that he could not control how the Irish received and understood his culture hero. He might have been inspired by the fact that one of the leaders of the Rising, Patrick Pearse, embraced the image of Cuchulain if not for the fact that the author disagreed with his interpretation of the hero. In "The Death of Cuchulain's Only Son," Elizabeth Cullingford explains that Pearse admired Cuchulain's "reckless courage and his willingness to die young in pursuit of honor," but Yeats rejected this martyrly interpretation (45). Nevertheless, Yeats did believe that his culture hero had partly inspired the rebels participating in the Rising and had to acknowledge that even though Pearse's interpretation of Cuchulain differed slightly from his own, they shared the same desire to see Ireland free and were inspired by the same basic image of the culture hero as a defender of Ireland.[11]

Believing that he was perhaps incapable of shaping the current state of the movement, Yeats turned his attention to imagining Ireland's future and ensuring that his culture hero would be a part of that. In "The Rebirth of Tragedy: Yeats, Nietzsche, the Irish National Theatre, and the

Anti-Modern Cult of Cuchulain," Michael Valdez Moses observes that by 1919 Yeats increasingly concentrated on building a "symbolic relationship with the emergent 'postcolonial' nation-state" in order to "project an alternative vision of community, one knowingly at odds with the actual 'state' of the Irish nation" (572). This alternative vision is on display in the experimental drama *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. The abstract quality of the play expressed Yeats's lack of trust in the general Irish public,[12] but the tale of rebirth and a new beginning for Cuchulain suggested some hope for the future and the hoi polloi. The doubt and anxiety between Yeats's lack of faith in the Irish and his hope for their future propels *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, culminating in a great sacrifice for the culture hero's future.

Resurrecting the hero from his premature death in *On Baile's Strand*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* loosely follows a myth focusing on the competing women in Cuchulain's life: his wife Emer and his mistresses. Both the play and the original myth conclude with an irrevocable rift between the hero and his wife. After learning that the Hound of Ulster did not die in *On Baile's Strand*—he is just trapped in a supernatural coma—Emer is approached by a mysterious figure who claims to have the power to revive the hero. For him to do this, Emer has to pay a high price: she must give up the chance to have Cuchulain return to her, rather than a mistress, at the end of his life. After some hesitation, she accepts the deal to save Cuchulain. Upon awakening, Cuchulain finds comfort in the arms of his mistress, believing that she has rescued him from his deathbed, while Emer watches in silence. Cuchulain required the guidance of his wife, who was willing to sacrifice her own happiness for his sake and the sake of Ulster. As James P. Farrelly argues in "Cuchulain: Yeats's 'Mental Traveller,'" Emer acts as a "figure of objectivity, conscience, and social responsibility" (35). The culture hero's experience suggests that Ireland, independent or not, would fail if the Irish did not value the compassion and intelligence that Yeats promoted in his culture hero from *The Green Helmet*. In "'The Age-Long Memoried Self'" Gregory Castle notes that Emer's sacrifice also ensures that Cuchulain's legacy is secure. Castle writes, "[B]y renouncing her love for him, she refuses her own fame, her own claim on futurity, in order to guarantee his in trust" (143). Following the Rising, Yeats was beginning to accept that his culture hero belonged to—was a product of—the people, and he wanted to ensure that Cuchulain would remain a national figure. Seeing how much had been made of Cuchulain during the Rising, Yeats had proof that his

culture hero was catching on and that a national literature had a role in the anticolonial movement. It makes sense then that Yeats would choose this moment to revive his hero, even if he wasn't directly engaged with the cause anymore. Much like Emer must watch her husband leave in the arms of another, Yeats had to cede some control over his culture hero. Yeats similarly had to accept that he, as an artist, may not have as prominent a role in a postcolonial Ireland as he previously wanted.

Cuchulain's resurrection would have been impossible without Emer, but she receives no praise or reward for the role that she has played. Rather than allowing his culture hero to learn from the experience that led to his death, Yeats keeps Cuchulain from evolving in this play and maintains his lack of agency. Instead, the focus is on those who nurture and care for the culture hero, suggesting that Yeats was concerned with how the Irish would appreciate his literary contribution to the cause. Unable to move or even speak in this play, Cuchulain is revived through the positive agency exhibited by Emer's nurturing and selfless sacrifice. We may read Emer as the Irish or as Yeats himself, giving life to his culture hero and the national culture he believed was necessary for Ireland's independence; but either way it is clear that Cuchulain is helpless on his own. Agency, Yeats now seems to suggest, is a distributed social process—not an inherent trait. Following the Easter Rising, culture heroism is a matter of collective action. In 1921, Ireland achieved its independence, and so, with the hero revived and firmly established as a culture hero, Yeats turned his attention away from the Cuchulain cycle until 1939.

The Death of Cuchulain: A Wise and Mature Cuchulain for the Future

Written near the end of his life, *The Death of Cuchulain* conveys Yeats's final assessment of his nation. The play opens with an old man's monologue that introduces the play and allows the author to speak to the audience. Yeats, speaking through the Old Man, describes himself as "out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the [play] is made of" (545). Yeats knew that he was dying, and he worried about the legacy he was leaving behind. Would he be remembered and appreciated for the work he had done for Ireland's cultural identity? While the opening monologue expresses a pessimistic view of his legacy, the rest of the production is a celebration of life and the culture hero's legacy. Ultimately, the final play of the

cycle looks toward Ireland's future with hope by presenting a fully mature and wise culture hero that Yeats would be proud to have shaped over the years. While the cycle had seemed random and disjointed before—as the hero goes from chaotic to wise to immature to barely alive—the understanding that Yeats was shaping the hero in both his own image and the image of the nation allows us to see a logical progression emerging. Each play's theme aligns with Yeats's relationship to the Irish cause at the time it was written, and the final play brings all the pieces together to cement the culture hero's legacy.

Motivated by a renewed sense of purpose and optimism, Yeats gave his culture hero a death that is less an end and more a beginning. Yeats kept most of the broad strokes of the original myth in place—Cuchulain receives several mortal wounds in a battle defending Ulster, leaving him so weak that he must tie himself to a tree in order to die standing on his feet rather than on his knees, and then a final blow is delivered by one of his enemies—but the revisions that Yeats made result in a very different kind of death for the hero. In *The Death of Cuchulain*, the hero has accepted the fact that he will die and does nothing to avoid it, insisting that he would rather die fighting than flee from battle. While this may be interpreted as reckless folly, Yeats does not criticize Cuchulain's choice. When the hero proclaims, "I make the truth" he is expressing his refusal to allow others to dictate his behavior (549). Having established an understanding of agency as a distributed social process in the previous play, Cuchulain's death does not mean the end. A few years—and a few plays—earlier, Yeats likely would have condemned the notion of a heroic death, but at the end of his life he believed that dying was an unavoidable step toward a meaningful legacy. This change in attitude aligns with Yeats's belief that, as Michael Wood describes it in *Yeats and Violence*, "violence may alter the world. It could wreck ideals certainly, but just as possibly might open the door to a new order" (15). Perhaps this final violence against his Cuchulain formed a threshold toward a new order dedicated to a new characterization of agency.

Yeats insists that, in death, Cuchulain will live on through his legacy, and so he downplays the finality of his demise. Described as "singularly unheroic" by Nicholas Andrew Miller, Cuchulain's end lacks the grandeur that you would expect from an epic hero's death (144). In the original myth, while the hero dies in a defenseless state, he is cut down by a worthy foe and a fellow warrior. In the play, it is the Blind Man who kills him. Cuchulain,

tied to a pillar-stone with his hands bound behind him, is already dying from the wounds he has received in battle, but the Blind Man strikes the deathblow. The Blind Man is a fellow countryman, so the death is an act of betrayal to both Cuchulain and Ulster. However, Cuchulain accepts his fate and seems even to encourage the man: "You have a knife, but have you sharpened it?" (552). As Brendan Kennelly argues in "The Heroic Ideal in Yeats's Cuchulain Plays," "the play concludes with a lyrical affirmation of the value of the heroic life" (20). The hero may have died unceremoniously, but his death is not unheroic because he lived a noteworthy life that guaranteed his legacy; his death was merely pro forma.

The hero accepts his death and seems satisfied with the life he has led. Cuchulain is confident that not only will he be remembered as Ulster's greatest hero and defender but also that he will live on in a new form: an everlasting bird. He reassures the Blind Man and the audience that death will not truly be the end for him:

> 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?
> .....
> I say it is about to sing." (552)

These are Cuchulain's last words, and they suggest a final evolution in Yeats's vision of his culture hero, who is no longer a "great fighting-man" but instead "a soft feathery shape." Formless, Cuchulain's soul—his heroic agency—will drift and sing like a bird. When Emer performs a dance of mourning for her dead husband, she is rendered motionless upon hearing the faint sound of a bird singing in the distance. The bird is an expression of Cuchulain's soul, and when audiences leave the theater, we might imagine they would hear many birds singing and possibly intuit that those natural inhabitants of Ireland are imbued with Cuchulain's heroic agency.

In the final lines of the play Yeats further established and distributed Cuchulain's cultural heroism. After all others have left the stage, three musicians remain. Recalling the Easter Rising, the Singer tells the audience how the culture hero inspired the nation:

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?" (554)

Earlier in his life Yeats was not as enthusiastic about the possibility that his work might have inspired violent revolution, but here he accepts the role his culture hero played. Rather than question the way that independence was won, Yeats focuses on Cuchulain's permanent place in Irish history thanks to his efforts to revive and establish him as an Irish culture hero. As the Singer explains in his final verse, "A statue's there to mark the place, / By Oliver Sheppard done" (554). Sheppard's sculpture, titled "The Dying Cuchulain" and depicting the final moments of the hero's life, was completed in 1911 and later installed in the General Post Office in 1935 to commemorate the Rising. In *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory* Nicholas Andrew Miller explains that the statue was placed in the Post Office because it "fulfills the function of conventional memorial, juxtaposing the methodological goals of historicism and idealism as counterparts in the formation of national identity" (129).[13] That Cuchulain was used as a way of memorializing the Rising proved that he had become a cultural touchstone in Ireland. As Bradley argues, "In the figure and actions of Cuchulain, Yeats presents to himself and his audience an image of heroism now conceived of as facing one's death (and not merely an enemy) with resolution and composure, with a fortitude that faces up to the ignobility that threatens every life at its close, and with the certainty that such heroism inspires those who come after" (173). Recognizing that the culture hero had not always been interpreted the way that he wanted, Yeats used *The Death of Cuchulain* to emphasize the heroic qualities he believed were worthy of praise and celebrated his own contribution to the Irish cause.

Early in his career Yeats expressed a desire to use mythology to shape a new culture hero for the Irish: "Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in Prometheus' stead. . . . Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?" (*Autobiographies* 166–67). Yeats wrote and produced plays based on ancient

stories in an effort to inspire Ireland to embrace Cuchulain as a national culture hero of the kind Quayson describes. But Yeats's Cuchulain undergoes such profound character shifts that he never seems to be the same hero twice—which is why he provides an interesting case study to develop our understanding of the postcolonial culture hero. Quayson reminds us that cultural heroism is a "*mode of characterization of agency*." Reading the Ulster Cycle alongside Yeats's *Autobiographies*, I have focused throughout this analysis on agency, because it is a crucial concept for colonized people struggling with their ability to "ideologically utter" their national identity. My analysis demonstrates that Yeats's thoughts on his and the Irish people's agency shifted along with his political outlook. While he initially adhered to the commonsense understanding of agency as an inherent quality of autonomous agents, he eventually complicates this agent-agency relationship in favor of a view of agency as a social process distributed among collectives of artists, publics, and, at the very end of his final play, the artworks themselves.

Notes

1. As David Lloyd notes in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, "Yeats, as is well known, devoted three decades of his life to a cultural nationalism whose object was to forge a sense of national identity in Irish subjects such that their own personal identity would be fulfilled only in the creation of the nation" (69). In recent years the political aspect of the plays has received more scholarly attention in articles such as Ioana Mohor-Ivan's "Envisaging a Post-Colonial Theatre: W. B. Yeats and the Cuchulain Cycle of Plays," but while these examinations have provided an introduction to the importance of reading Yeats's plays in a postcolonial framework, there has not been an in-depth reading of Cuchulain's role as a culture hero.

2. For more in-depth explorations of the construction of national identities, see Neil Lazarus's *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. For examinations dealing with the construction of Irish nationalism, see Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Robert Tracy's *The Unappeasable Host: Studies in Irish*

Identities, and David Dwan's *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland*.

3. As Elizabeth Cullingford notes in *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, this isolation was not self-inflicted and should not be taken to mean that he was no longer dedicated to the cause: "If Yeats had less to do with politics as time went on the reason is clear: he did not withdraw; he was pushed. . . . [H]is attitude to the great national demand—freedom from England—never wavered" (61).

4. Yeats was particularly conflicted about the Easter Rising, which occurred without his prior knowledge while he was living in England. Cullingford explains, "Yeats's reactions to the event were complex; he was deeply moved by the resurgence of a romantic nationalism which he had considered moribund, but on the human level he mourned the waste of life and promise. If the rebels were heroic, they were also tragic" (*Yeats* 85).

5. Yeats insisted that he was done with politics in a 1936 letter to Ethel Mannin (Yeats, *Letters* 850–51), but he never totally abandoned politics. In fact, Yeats's political beliefs have been hotly contested among scholars because of a brief flirtation with fascism in his later years. This subject has been adequately covered, most notably in Grattan Freyer's *W. B. Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition* and in Elizabeth Cullingford's *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*.

6. Yeats believed that "[y]ou cannot keep the idea of a nation alive where there are no national institutions to reverence, no national success to admire, without a model of it in the mind of the people" (*Autobiographies* 364). The Abbey Theatre was meant to fill this need. As Anthony Roche tells us in *The Irish Dramatic Revival*, "Yeats wanted to be heard by and to influence the Irish people and theatre offered him the ideal opportunity" (31). Unfortunately, forming a national theatre proved a much more difficult project than Yeats anticipated. For more information about the struggles of the Abbey Theatre, see Adrian Frazier's *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey* and James W. Flannery's *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice*.

7. While Yeats referenced both Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland* (1880) and Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cúchulainn of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (1902) as his source material, he relied

more heavily on Gregory's text, a translation of Cuchulain's heroic deeds from the Ulster Cycle epic, *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, which Yeats described as "keeping closer to the Gaelic text, and with greater powers of arrangement and a more original style" (*Autobiographies* 183). The epic was a popular favorite among the members of the Irish Literary Revival, but a fair amount of revision was required to satisfy their nationalistic goals because, as Maria Tymoczko notes in *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, the *Táin* is not necessarily appropriate as a "document of cultural nationalism" (66). Translations like Gregory's reworked the epic in order to make it more palatable to contemporary readers, foregrounding individual heroes like Cuchulain. It was this version of the epic that Yeats adapted for his plays, so when I refer to the "original myth," this is what I have in mind.

8. For more on the prominence of failure in the construction of Irish national identity, see Nicholas Andrew Miller's *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory* and Joseph Valente's *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*.

9. As alluded to earlier, Yeats's relationship to violence was not consistent throughout his lifetime. This inconsistency seems to be, at least in part, explained by the fact that Yeats understood violence as an uncontrollable and unpredictable force. As Michael Wood argues, "[v]iolence as Yeats helps us to understand it—whether personal, political, or apocalyptic—is always sudden and surprising, visible, unmistakable, inflicts or promises injury and is fundamentally uncontrollable" (20). This is very clearly seen in Cuchulain's own uncontrollable violence in the plays.

10. One of the most perplexing issues that arise when reading Yeats's culture hero in terms of anticolonial politics is the fact that, at times, the author seemed to favor certain aspects of colonial rule. In "Yeats and Eugenicism," Spurgeon Thompson questions Yeats's status as a postcolonial author on these grounds. While Yeats may have been an advocate for Irish independence before it was won, Thompson argues his case based on Yeats's documented disdain for the masses—the "uneducatable" according to Yeats—and his preference for the Anglo-Irish ruling class. However, as Elizabeth Cullingford points out, "if [Yeats] hankered after any aristocracy it was 'the aristocracy of the artists, the only aristocracy which has never oppressed the people'" (*Yeats* 61).

11. As Michael Wood explains, "Yeats could understand Pearse without sharing his politics because Pearse's politics were based on the myth Yeats had so deeply construed. And if Yeats came as he did to think Pearse was 'a dangerous man' driven by 'the vertigo of self-sacrifice,' he could scarcely deny his own contribution to the vertigo" (194).

12. In 1937 Yeats explained some of the motivations behind the abstract style of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*: "While writing these dance 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. . . . I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilisation very unlike ours" (qtd. in Yeats, *Plays* 694–95).

13. Just as Yeats disagreed with Pearse's interpretation of Cuchulain, he was not necessarily a fan of Sheppard's work. Yeats's primary objection to the statue was its celebration of the hero as a martyr. Miller writes, "If Cuchulain is somehow an exemplary Irish hero, it is not because his acts are appropriately sacrificial; Yeats's point, after all, is that they are incommensurable with the commemorative valuation of sacrifice" (148).

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