

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

YEATS'S LATE PLAYS: 'A HIGH GRAVE
DIGNITY AND STRANGENESS'

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I

It was Robert Gregory's staging of *Kincora* (25 March 1905) that prompted this judgement in Yeats: it was, he wrote, 'beautiful with a high grave dignity and that strangeness which Ben Jonson thought to be a part of all excellent beauty'.¹ Mounting Lady Gregory's tragedy must have posed considerable problems for the newly created Abbey Theatre, being a full-length play that required several changes of scene; money as ever with that theatre was scarce and Gregory was given little time to execute the project. He chose to make a virtue of economic necessity and painted a series of curtained settings for both interior and outdoor locations on which a selection of representative naturalistic features were stylized then reproduced in a patterned sequence. The familiar was made new, arresting, 'strange'.

It is interesting that Yeats ascribes to Ben Jonson the notion that strangeness should be a part of all excellent beauty, when it is in fact Bacon in his essay, 'Of Beauty', who expresses this Renaissance aesthetic most concisely: 'There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.'² Yet throughout 1905-6 Yeats was reading Jonson's work meticulously; the growing feud with George Moore gave some urgency to his study of a poet who could turn his private squabbles with other writers into matter for heroic satire, making a high, grave art out of such strange passions as indignation and scorn. What I suggest happened is that Yeats's mind caught up resonances of Bacon's remark while reading Jonson's *Masque of Hymen*, where the dramatist quite unusually

¹ W. B. Yeats, 'Notes and Opinions', *Samhain*, Nov. 1905, p. 3.

² I am much indebted for several of the ideas in this paragraph to Daniel A. Harris, *Yeats: Coole Park and Ballylee* (Baltimore and London, 1974), and to T. McAlindon: 'Yeats and the English Renaissance', *PMLA* lxxxii (1967), 157-69.

frames his stage-directions and account of the costumes and visual effects of the piece into an aesthetic theory and defence of the Masque as a genre. Noting how 'the exquisite performance . . . was of power to surprise with delight, and steal away the spectators from themselves', Jonson enumerates the elements that were conducive to this, beginning with the 'riches' and 'strangeness of the habites'. Later, describing the sumptuous costumes in detail, he mentions the subtle mixture of antique lines with modern materials and decorations as achieving an effect 'both graceful and strange'.¹ Like its many counterparts, *The Masque of Hymen* stages a number of miraculous appearances of classical deities but designed not so much to praise the power and authority of the Stuart court (though there is an element of that) as to preside over and order a marriage rite. The dramatic surprises of the piece, the strangenesses, are designed to show how a commonplace human ritual has a high grave traditional ordering behind it and that it is all part of a divine scheme. Man and god unite to celebrate the need for union and increase.

'Strange' is not a widely used epithet in Yeats's poetry—some thirty references are recorded in the Concordance. By far the most memorable usage is in contexts where the meaning is not simply of something which is *unusual* but of an experience that excites wonder, an alienating of the self from an old way of awareness and the apprehension of some larger metaphysical reality resulting from some unforeseen intuition or psychic shock. One remembers Leda's consciousness of the 'strange heart' of the all-mastering swan inspiring terror and submission; or in 'Her Triumph', the girl released by 'Saint George or else a pagan Perseus' from the chains that kept her in thrall to the 'dragon's will', who finds her whole mode of perception transformed:

And now we stare astonished at the sea,
And a miraculous strange bird shrieks at us.²

Outside the poetry, usage is confined to contexts where either it is linked specifically with 'beauty' to define forms of theatrical

¹ Ben Jonson, 'Hymenaei', *The Collected Works*, edd. Herford and Simpson (Oxford, 1941). vii. 229.

² W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (1961), 310. Other uses of 'strange' with the sense of a disturbed, excited, or transformed mode of perception can be found in 'Sweet Dancer' (*Collected Poems*, p. 340, line 8) and 'The Chambermaid's First Song' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 345–6, line 6). Interestingly, Yeats refers to his late poem 'Colonel Martin' as having a 'curious pathos', not a *strange* one, perhaps because that poem lacks a metaphysical dimension or the sense of a psychological awakening (see *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (1954), 896).

presentation that are arresting because boldly innovatory, as in Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory in the spring of 1916: 'There is a chance of Ricketts, Dulac and I running a season at the Aldwych Theatre next year with Beecham. . . . If it comes off there will be no compromise—romance, fine scenery, the whole *Hamlet*, *Volpone* and some Molière plays staged strangely and beautifully';¹ or it characterizes metaphysical perception: 'Bunyan, by his pre-occupation with Heaven and the Soul, gives his simple story a visionary strangeness and intensity.'² Both usages coalesce only in reference to his own dramatic invention; of the first performance of his Japanese-style dance play, *At The Hawk's Well*, he wrote excitedly: 'The form is a discovery [another term borrowed from Jonson] and the dancing and masks wonderful. . . . It was all very strange.'³ Innovations in stagecraft worked in performance, he claims, to bring the audience to a state of revelation. Later, he was to describe his plays as having 'a strange dramatic form related rather to ritual than to the ordinary form of drama';⁴ performance was to be akin to ceremony, a showing forth of mysteries.

Yeats's most conspicuous use of the epithet occurs in references to his last plays, *The Herne's Egg*, *Purgatory*, and *The Death of Cuchulain*; it was applied to each of them in turn during the weeks of composition, coupled in each case respectively with 'wildest', 'intense', and 'most moving'.⁵ 'Strange' in its simplest sense would

¹ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 612.

² W. B. Yeats, 'Edmund Spenser', *The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats* (Stratford-on-Avon, 1908), viii. 69.

³ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 611. The letter is dated 28 March 1916. Shotoro Oshima defines *yugen*, the principle behind Noh drama, as meaning literally 'obscure or dark', 'but as used by Zeami it carries the connotation of half-revealed or suggested beauty, at once elusive and meaningful, tinged with wistful sadness' (*W. B. Yeats and Japan* (Tokyo, 1965), 40). Later he offers the further definitions 'subtlety', 'mysteriousness', and 'serenity tinged with sadness'. All are akin to Yeats's use of the word 'strange'.

⁴ *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901-1937*, ed. Ursula Bridge (1953), 110.

⁵ Writing to Margot Ruddock, Yeats described *The Herne's Egg* as 'the strange play I am now writing' and later referred to it as 'my humorous, serious fairy tale' (see '*Ah, Sweet Dancer*': *W. B. Yeats and Margot Ruddock. A Correspondence*, ed. Roger McHugh (1970), 65 and 68). To Edith Shackleton Heald Yeats wrote of *Purgatory*: 'I have a one-act play in my head, a scene of tragic intensity. . . . My recent work has greater strangeness and I think greater intensity than anything I have done' (see *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 907). And to the same correspondent he remarked of *The Death of Cuchulain* some days before his own death: 'I think my play is strange and the most moving I have written for some years. I am making a prose sketch for a poem—a kind of sequel—strange too, something new' (*ibid.*, p. 922).

certainly be an apt description of all three plays—the first a cruel, Rabelaisian farce using material out of folk and fairy tale; the next a play about a haunting, the enactment of a sordid murder and talk of another; the last, though not extraordinary in its subject-matter (the death of an old warrior), is so in its method, having a fragmented structure with episodes relieved by periods of silence and darkness seemingly designed to destroy both the cumulative tension and the unity of tone one associates with tragic drama. How readily, then, can one apply to these plays the term ‘strangeness’ with the deeper, metaphysical connotations I have defined as resonant in Yeats’s use of the word? And in what sense is that ‘strangeness’ synonymous with a ‘high grave dignity’?

I would argue that we can find a key to the nature of Yeats’s last plays in the work he did in preparing Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* for the Irish stage. It was a project that occupied Yeats intermittently from 1904 until the tragedy was finally produced at the Abbey in December 1926. Given the finished text, the delay is explicable: Yeats’s poetic and dramatic styles at that early date could in no way have encompassed the ‘bare, hard’ prose¹ that he ultimately adopted to match the tone of Sophocles’ dialogue—a charged, rhythmic prose vitalized only by the stress of the characters’ emotions. Two aspects of Sophocles’ dramaturgy seem particularly to have caught Yeats’s imagination and are sharply defined in his version. First, there is the way every shift in the sequence of events is a manifestation of the god Apollo’s power; Apollo’s control, his ordering, is everywhere felt yet nowhere distinctly seen, except by Tiresias, until Oedipus himself recognizes who is master of his fate. For all his intelligence and reasoning, the king lacks vision which would give him access to the divine scheme of things. Breaking the pragmatist in Oedipus is the god’s only means to revelation. Secondly, there is the irony and pathos of the many characters who seek to defeat the cruelty of fate over the years but who, in acting out of human kindness, merely prolong the doom and intensify the horror. The few moments of reflection in the play are invariably elegiac, the conditional tenses conveying profound regret that the characters had not suppressed their good intentions: ‘It had indeed been better if that herdsman had never taken your feet out of the spancel or brought you back to life.’² Briefly,

¹ ‘My version of *Oedipus* comes on tonight. I think my shaping of the speech will prove powerful on the stage, for I have made it bare, hard and natural like a saga’ (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 720).

² Sophocles’ ‘*King Oedipus*’, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (1969), 514.

in their agony the characters contemplate lost possibilities for shaping the action differently. Both themes have their counterparts in Yeats's last plays.

Man's war with god and the triumph of miracle over reason had been the subject of earlier plays by Yeats such as *The Hour Glass* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*; but the idea of man's struggle with god for mastery over the man's fate, for the man's right to shape his identity as he chooses, had not seized hold of Yeats's imagination so fiercely as in the last three dramas nor called forth from his invention such audacious stagecraft to illustrate the workings of destiny. At the start of *The Death of Cuchulain*, the hero is urged by his mistress, Eithne, to ride out and fight but Eithne carries in her hand a letter from his wife, Emer, bidding him rest at home and make love with Eithne, since to ride forth would mean his certain death. When Cuchulain consults a servant over this dilemma, that man not surprisingly asks which woman is telling the truth and Cuchulain answers, partly to defend both women's honour, partly to assert his own invincible nature, 'I make the truth!'¹ Riding forth, he meets his death, which in a later scene the Morrighu, the Celtic goddess of war, claims is all of her devising. Making the truth is the ambition of the principal characters in all three plays we are considering—a dangerous ambition given the connotations of 'fabricating' that lie behind the verb 'to make'. The nature of the truth each character seeks to promote is what dictates the particular tone of the play in which he appears. Congal and Attracta, the Old Man in *Purgatory*, Cuchulain and Emer, are in some measure granted their wish; what they severally create in their respective plays is an expression of their essential selves, their spiritual beings, and as such is a judgement upon them.

II

The Times Literary Supplement reviewing *The Herne's Egg* on its publication noted the 'extravagant and audacious fancies' of the play but dismissed them magisterially as the 'signs of flagging inspiration', the work of a Wild Old Wicked Man.² To me the play seems one of Yeats's most intricately structured. Earlier in his

¹ W. B. Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain*, *Collected Plays*, p. 698.

² *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 Jan. 1938, p. 56. This is Harold Bloom's view too; he describes the play as demonstrating 'the strength of a great imagination misused' (*Yeats* (1970), 422). Helen Vendler finds the play 'a rather arid and contrived piece of theatrical writing' lacking humanity and pursuing 'a tiresome and unsuccessful tone' (*Yeats's 'Vision' and the Later Plays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 160).

career Yeats made a significant observation about the nature of farce. He had been involved in rehearsals of Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and Sheridan's *St. Patrick's Day* at the Abbey. Sheridan he came to consider as perhaps too leisurely a writer for farce, being happy to arrest the stage action to allow dialogue to illuminate character; *St. Patrick's Day* lacked a hard, clear line. With Molière the effect was very different:

I felt all the time there was a rhythm, a time, a beat, something that could almost be measured with a baton—an abstract, musical energy as it were. . . . Passion and energy when they flow unchecked become rhythmical, they take upon themselves a definite beat. . . . The energy . . . ascends into the world of pattern.¹

Much the same can be said of *The Herne's Egg*. Yeats had worked hard to achieve a verse for the play as 'bare, hard and natural' as his speech for *Oedipus*, discarding his first choice of sprung rhythm because of 'the constant uncertainty as to where the accent falls [which] seems to make the verse vague and weak'; he preferred 'a strong, driving force' as a ground base, that would none the less permit him to effect transitions into a 'subtle hesitating rhythm' where dramatic circumstance required.² The verse with its short lines of sometimes three, sometimes four, stresses has great vigour and of itself characterizes for us the world and mind of the warrior Congal, that 'weather-stained, war-battered | Old campaigner', a truculent bully for whom blows are an immediate form of self-expression rather than thought or discourse:

CONGAL. How many men have you lost?
 AEDH. Some five-and-twenty men.
 CONGAL. No need to ask my losses.
 AEDH. Your losses equal mine.
 CONGAL. They always have and must.
 AEDH. Skill, strength, arms matched.
 CONGAL. Where is the wound this time?
 AEDH. There, left shoulder-blade.
 CONGAL. Here, right shoulder-blade.
 AEDH. Yet we have fought all day.
 CONGAL. This is our fiftieth battle.
 AEDH. And all were perfect battles.³

The momentum felt here in the pounding rhythm is evident in the play as a whole: once Congal has challenged the authority of the

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Discoveries: Second Series*, ed. Curtis Bradford (*Massachusetts Review*, no. 5, (1964), 297–8.

² *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 845–6.

³ W. B. Yeats, *The Herne's Egg, Collected Plays*, pp. 645–6.

god, the Great Herne, by stealing the forbidden eggs to be a relish at his celebratory feast with Aedh, he falls under the god's curse and his doom is pursued inexorably. The stylized effect of character realized through the verse is adequate to Yeats's purpose, for it is the *pattern* of Congal's fate that is the poet's main concern; it is through the patterning of the events that make up the play's structure that the Great Herne, like Apollo in *Oedipus*, stands revealed, everywhere felt but nowhere seen.¹

To see what Yeats added to the material he drew from his source, Sir Samuel Ferguson's epic poem *Congal* (1872), is to understand the significance of the structure of *The Herne's Egg*. Yeats chiefly borrowed from Ferguson a number of what might best be described as narrative motifs, preferring the *idea* behind an incident rather than the incident itself as particularized by Ferguson—the long-standing feud between Congal and a neighbour; the temporary truce broken when Congal considers himself insulted by a trivial mishap at a feast designed to celebrate the peace; the violence of the hostilities when renewed; Congal's pursuit of battle regardless of omens warning that the consequences will be his death; his facing that death with only a fool for companion; his realization in death of the utter futility of his existence. The major distinction between the two works is obviously the tone: what in Ferguson is a sombre epic, in Yeats is a subject for irony and farce, provoking laughter to keep an audience detached and critical of the characters' conceptions of themselves. Though, dying, Ferguson's Congal weeps 'with many bitter sighs | In sudden vision of his life and all its vanities',² Ferguson never invites the reader to suppose Congal is anything but heroic, however bizarre the situations may be into which he is precipitated by his fiery temper. For Yeats's audience, Congal is from the start absurd; the heroic stance in battle of himself and his men appears merely vainglorious when presented as a manic version of a jig, where the actors move rhythmically, going through the motions of fighting, though 'sword and sword, shield and sword never meet' but are simulated by clashing cymbals and the boom of drums.³ When it does become a matter of fighting to the death, Congal and his arch-rival, Aedh,

¹ The Great Herne is to be seen painted on the backcloth during the first scene of the play, but Yeats asks that 'all should be suggested, not painted realistically'. The Herne remains high above the stage of human action, remote, withdrawn. Later, when the Herne attacks Congal and his men when they are about to enter the city of Tara, his presence is suggested to our imaginations by the men's mimed responses of fear and aggression.

² Sir Samuel Ferguson, *Congal*, 2nd edn. (Dublin and London, 1893), 167.

³ *Collected Plays*, p. 345.

can find no better weapons than a couple of broken table legs. In defeat Aedh cannot rise to the magnanimity of Finn or Conchubar's famous champions; the manner of his dying shocks even Congal for its want of decorum:

Died of a broken head; died drunk;
Accused me with his dying breath
Of secretly practising with a table-leg,
Practising at midnight until I
Became a perfect master with the weapon.¹

Yet for all the laughter he excites, Congal is not without a certain dignity that grows stronger as the play develops. Yeats's farce may be questioning one kind of derring-do heroics but subtly an alternative concept of heroism begins to define itself through the action.² It is here that the patterned structure of the play is crucial to our understanding; and pattern is imposed on the action by the creation of a character for which there is no precedent in Ferguson's epic—the priestess *Attracta*, the promised bride of the Great Herne, who eagerly awaits the god's advent and their mystical union.

Summoned by a flute and not by percussive music, *Attracta's* arrival in the play poses an immediate challenge to Congal's authority; her confidence, born of her spiritual fervour, lies outside all Congal's previous experience, Aedh being his mirror-image; her difference unsettles him. He feels called upon to define his importance as a way of justifying his decision to rob the hernery of its eggs:

Tara and I have made a peace;
Our fiftieth battle fought, there is need
Of preparation for the next;
He and all his principal men,
I and all my principal men,
Take supper at his principal house
This night, in his principal city, Tara,
And we have set our minds upon
A certain novelty or relish.³

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 660.

² In several of his plays Yeats seems anxious to examine traditional concepts of heroism and through a counter-theme to offer different grounds for a definition of the heroic. I shall later in this lecture offer such an interpretation of *The Death of Cuchulain*. *The Dreaming of the Bones* also shows how the Young Soldier seeking to escape the reprisals after the Easter Rebellion is wanting in a proper heroism; he cannot break free of traditional modes of thought and forgive Diarmuid and Dervorgilla their passionate sin that brought the English into Ireland. That would require a heroic effort of the imagination which the man cannot sustain. The fact that he is the only unmasked character in the play also suggests his lack of heroic potential.

³ *Collected Plays*, p. 648.

Till now Congal has been the centre of his world; it has been his to command and control. Never having needed to explain himself, he lacks the appropriate language and rhetoric. The reiterated epithet 'principal' fails to impress; the verbal inadequacies suggest a corresponding psychological inadequacy. His self-possession gutters and his request, when framed in terms of setting his mind upon a novelty or relish, appears a vain, dilettante whim; when he next tries to rephrase this as a plain command, it sounds brash. Not surprisingly *Attracta* refuses. Challenged, he attempts to unsettle her authority through insult, dismissing her as mad, waiting to be 'trodden by a bird'; to our surprise he tries immediately to retract the statement ('But you are not to blame for that'), then carefully redefines the idea in more generous and indeed pitying terms:

Women thrown into despair
By the winter of their virginity
Take its abominable snow,
As boys take common snow, and make
An image of god or bird or beast
To feed their sensuality:
Ovid had a literal mind,
And though he sang it neither knew
What lonely lust dragged down the gold
That crept on Danae's lap, nor knew
What rose against the moony feathers
When Leda lay upon the grass.¹

As the first developed poetic image in the play, the speech is peculiarly arresting; it is as if a long-repressed sensibility in Congal is stirring awake seeking to explain, justify, even excuse to himself *Attracta's* denial; he seems to wish by some act of imagination to come at the truth of the woman. Pleased with himself, Congal destroys the tone of sympathy this establishes by offering next to 'know' her physically and so cure her longing and then goes on sacrilegiously to steal the heron eggs, so meriting the curse that he will die at the hands of a fool; but neither of these developments invalidates his moment of reverie, when a different kind of dramatic rhythm intrudes on what has been the play's norm.² As

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 649.

² Interestingly, Yeats makes this mood of reverie a part of Congal's temperament from the very first scene, where he interrupts *Aedh's* attempt to liven up their rest from fighting by telling a joke with more poignant ruminations:

AEDH. A story is running round
Concerning two rich fleas.
CONGAL. We hop like fleas, but war
Has taken all our riches.

At this moment the tendency to reverie is still couched in the comic idiom;

the action grows weirder (Attracta is sent into a mysterious trance; she substitutes a hen's for a heron's egg in Congal's dish at the feast; Congal kills Aedh; then, seeing it all as the malign influence of the Great Herne, he seeks redress by punishing Attracta) Congal is required to use his mind more and more energetically in struggling to impose some logic and meaning on events; his punishing the Herne through Attracta is his bid to recover mastery and control, together with the ease and simplicity he knew before he encountered her. The punishment offered Attracta nicely exemplifies the degree of change that has come over Congal; it will be a rape by himself and his men but a rape carried out with high solemnity and he devises an elaborate ritual in which the men will establish the order of their coupling. There is to be nothing unmannerly, disloyal, or loutish about the proceedings; Law, Logic, Mathematics will be observed. The juxtapositions here are preposterous but the moment shows Congal's dim perception that humankind requires sanctions for its conduct beyond its own basic needs. His mistake is in trusting to reason rather than imagination and vision for his sanction, which is why he falls so ludicrously short of his ambition. Hesitantly he is growing in moral awareness but lacks the necessary further dimension of spiritual understanding. What impresses about Yeats's invention here is his ability to establish a serious psychological theme without destroying the tone of farce. Our laughter is richly complex.

Seven men claim a rape; Attracta claims that she entered into her marriage with the Herne. The stagecraft gives the audience the privilege of seeing the relative truth of both claims: it is all a question of imagination. Deep in her trance where she moved

only later does it grow to provide a counter-rhythm in the play, but the moment shows how careful Yeats is to provide grounds for the psychological development of his characters. This whole episode appears to have been added late in Yeats's conception of the play. On 19 Jan. 1936 he wrote to Margot Ruddock: 'I have had to stop my play but I will take it up again when I am better. Before the doctor intervened I had written Act 1 and Scene 1 Act 2 and a lyric which I like.' These would appear to be what were subsequently entitled Scenes II and III of the published text. In a postscript to a letter to Miss Ruddock on 20 April 1936, Yeats jotted: '*Short Story* | Two *very* rich fleas retired and bought a dog', which is the substance of Aedh's joke. As the play developed, Yeats presumably saw a need to define the quality of Congal's life before his encounter with Attracta and his imbroglio with the Herne. The audience required a sense of a norm against which to measure Congal's growth. One is from this the more impressed with the economy and brilliance of the opening scene in creating both an authentic saga-world and a very sophisticated relation between the audience and that world.

like a puppet at the god's will, *Attracta* experienced the union as the god begetting 'His image in the mirror of my spirit'; and the men too were manipulated by the Great Herne in all they did and all they seemed to do, his unconscious agents in perfecting a rite whereby *Attracta's* devotion to her calling was rewarded in a fashion to make her 'love-loneliness more sweet'. The men's comic perfunctory ritual is paradoxically part of a high, grave ceremony, but only the audience has the double vision necessary to perceive this truth. Outraged by *Congal's* intransigence, *Attracta* summons the Herne's support in declaring her pure; three times the heavens rock with thunder at her behest. All but *Congal* at first kneel, then prostrate themselves; and with the final peal even *Congal* sinks to the ground. But in the moments when they face each other in the thunder, *Attracta* seems to notice him as an individual for the first time. Just as earlier her resistance to his authority had worked a change in his sensibility, so now, as an exact counterpart to that scene, *Attracta* is moved by what she considers his sacrilegious audacity and questions the source of his strength to resist the belief that all is of the god's doing, even while accepting the curse that he is to 'die at a fool's hand'. She seems to recognize in him a quality that renders her own authority incomplete. Stung by this, she challenges him to face death at the moment when she will experience her apotheosis:

CONGAL. If I must die at a fool's hand,
 When must I die?
 ATTRACTA. When the moon is full.
 CONGAL. And where?
 ATTRACTA. Upon the holy mountain,
 Upon Slieve Fuadh, there we meet again
 Just as the moon comes round the hill.
 There all the gods must visit me,
 Acknowledging my marriage to a god;
 One man will I have among the gods.¹

The *Congal* we meet in the final scene is a changed man, his dynamic energy has ebbed as if exhausted by the profound reverie that experience has induced in him. The Fool he finds on the mountain anxious to kill him and achieve fame and wealth occasions only indifference in *Congal*. He wins their fight effortlessly but that affords no joy; it is how to defeat the curse that obsesses him. He is absolute for death but insists on choosing the manner of his dying. To die by his own hand, he decides, will give him victory over the Herne. It is a masterstroke of stagecraft to

¹ *Collected Plays*, pp. 369-70.

give Congal as his companion here a fay Irish clown. Self-absorbed in the trivia of his existence, reducing all Congal's soul-searching by his literal-minded responses, the Fool is a finely conceived device against which the audience can measure the extent of Congal's growth in awareness since the days of his brasher state of innocence. Congal is terrified lest in committing suicide he become himself the fool ordained by the curse. But can one call that man a fool who has the courage to admit to the stupidity of his past life and sit in judgement upon himself with such passionate scorn?

I never thought of such an end.
 Never be a soldier, Tom;
 Though it begins well, is this a life?
 If this is a man's life, is there any life
 But a dog's life?¹

Where the comic devices of the earlier scenes cut Congal's heroic pretensions down to size by exciting laughter, here they arouse an acute pathos. Even in dying Congal knows no peace or certainty; the gods he fears have powers in the after-life; the Herne may retaliate by giving him a shameful reincarnation. He cannot even in death free himself of the idea that life is a perpetual struggle for supremacy. Just as his every act formerly was an expression of the Herne's power, now his every thought attests to the reality of the god, yet Congal cannot take the final step into faith and trust as *Attracta* did in the god's beneficence, which is the source of her quiet authority. *Attracta* appears and sees her revenge is complete ('I called you to this place, | You came, and now the story is finished')² but she finds no satisfaction in that. Till now she has been a remote figure in her single-minded devotion to the god, but Congal's daring has awakened her to a different order of reality, the reality that is human suffering, physical and spiritual.³ Earlier

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 675.

² *Ibid.*, p. 676.

³ Noticeably on her journey to the holy mountain *Attracta's* mood is no longer confident or ecstatic. She repeats the song that she sang at the moment of her union with the Great Herne which questioned how she might change as a result of her mysterious marriage with a god; but now the tenses of the verbs are all in the past and the questions remain, as if she is troubled by fears and uncertainties:

When beak and claw their work began
 What horror stirred in the roots of my hair?
Sang the bride of the Herne and the Great Herne's bride.
 But who lay there in the cold dawn,
 When all that terror had come and gone?
 Was I the woman lying there?

She seems to be questioning the very nature of her identity.

Congal promised her that through sexual union she would become 'all woman'. All vows, promises, curses, as in fairy-tales, come true in this weird play, though never quite as speaker or listener envisages. Congal's approach is now one of desperate entreaty, not command:

Protect me, I have won my bout,
But I am afraid of what the Herne
May do with me when I am dead.
I am afraid that he may put me
Into the shape of a brute beast.¹

His dying humiliated releases in *Attracta* all a woman's tenderness. She promises Congal protection in his after-life since she supposes his 'shape is not yet fixed upon'.

Yeats for his conclusion designs his most extravagant conceit yet; but defies us in its performance to find in it matter for laughter. Acting out of her new-found sympathy, *Attracta*, once so proud a virgin, urges her attendant to lie with her and beget a child that may inherit Congal's spirit. But the Herne, quixotic to the last, arranges that a donkey conceives instead and Congal the obstinate must be reborn in its image till presumably he learns a donkey's patience. The attendant, Corney, has the last word:

I have heard that a donkey carries its young
Longer than any other beast,
Thirteen months it must carry it.

[*He laughs*]

All that trouble and nothing to show for it,
Nothing but just another donkey.²

This is not the apotheosis *Attracta* hoped for; her presuming to take destiny into her own charge out of sheer kindness has robbed her of that future and left her caught in the toils of human compassion, suffering, and fallibility. The fact that every line risks laughter intensifies the pathos of the characters' frustration and despair.³ It is the nature of farce to denigrate and travesty but it is characteristic of Yeats that he should give some human worth to

¹ *Collected Plays*, pp. 676-7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 678.

³ The presence throughout the action of the last scene of 'the moon of comic tradition, a round smiling face' painted on the backcloth, riding high and indifferent over the painful action involving the mortals, cannot but provoke our compassion. It is a nicely calculated device to arrest any tendency in the audience to laugh at the characters' fears at the prospect of disgraceful reincarnations and exemplifies Yeats's unerring skill in controlling his audience's responses.

Congal and Attracta that survives the ridicule. In their efforts to come at the truth of the strange world they inhabit they may expose themselves to laughter but they earn at the last an undeniable dignity in the very process of being broken by the god's power. Nothing is what it seems in this play: sacrilege is transformed into a divine ritual, a king is a fool but yet no fool, a fierce virgin seeks sexual fulfilment as an act of compassion; the logic of farce is seen to be a demonstration of divine power, a fairy tale becomes a discourse on man's need for faith. The bizarre suffers a sea-change in Yeats's imagination and becomes something rich *because* strange. For Yeats in its composition as for an audience in its performance, *The Herne's Egg* is a joyous exercise of the imagination, a playing with metaphysical possibilities and certainties.

III

In staging *Purgatory* a director has quickly to resolve the vexed question of how to handle the ghosts, those silent, passive presences within the stage action. (One checks at describing them as 'spectators', for that implies a degree of involvement and these figures are wholly detached from the speaking characters and each other.) Should they be represented by actors or left to the audience's imagination? The visual dimensions of a play are always an exactly calculated element in Yeats's dramaturgy and, having experienced both ways with the ghosts in the theatre, I would argue in favour of using actors as he specified: without their presence on stage one risks dismissing too easily and too soon as madness the Old Man's tale of pollution and of a murder that is both revenge and expiation, so losing sight of Yeats's focus, which is on the nature of the tale in the telling, the power of a diseased imagination to make its own truth and the extremes to which such a mind will go to authenticate a private fantasy. The Old Man is possessed by the past; the ghosts, his parents, the shapers as he sees it of his present self, are the most intimate embodiment of that past and witness to its truth. The ghosts actualize the Old Man's concept of destiny. But here we touch on one of the many startling incongruities which abound in this play.

The Old Man's tale concerns the decline of a Great House (the play is set in its ruins), for which he deems his mother responsible: all was a consequence of her ill-considered marriage to a groom who could not respect the aristocratic traditions of her family but, after her death in childbirth, 'squandered everything she had' on

'horses, drink and women' and finally 'burned down the house when drunk'.¹ Outraged, the Old Man, then just sixteen years of age, 'killed him in the burning house'. The admission of the murder tells us much about the Old Man's psychology. It occurs in a moment of profound intimacy with his companion, his son and heir to the Great House: the Boy has till now never known the truth about himself or his father; in the early stages of the play he has been weary to the point of derision with the Old Man's mood of reverie and openly scornful of his reference to ghosts and the horrors of Purgatory ('I have had enough! | Talk to the jackdaws if talk you must'),² but the story of his grandparents excites his interest and he begins to match this information with rumours he recollects hearing. It is the Boy who first mentions the murder:

Is what I have heard upon the road the truth
That you killed him in the burning house?

The Old Man asks apprehensively if they are alone—'There's nobody here but our two selves?'—but the Boy calms his fears—'Nobody, Father'—and the Old Man confesses:

I stuck him with a knife,
That knife that cuts my dinner now,
And after that I left him in the fire.³

Much of the dramatic power of the episode derives from the incongruities of tone and idea: the rare flow of sympathy between the Old and Young Man (it is the only moment the Boy admits respectfully to their proper relationship in calling the Old Man 'Father') creates an eerie context for this particular question and its answer as the two men find companionship in their fascination with blood. Then there is the actual admission of guilt: the metrical stress draws attention to the fact that the verb is not as one might expect 'struck' but the crueller 'stuck'; the hunting connotations of the word amplify our horror that a man can be so conceived as prey, though the Old Man consistently refers to his father as a 'beast'. Our revulsion is intensified further by the description of the knife as that which 'cuts my dinner now'. Together with the confidential mood which the men have created, this image defines how there is no shame, no remorse for the killing; rather the Old Man's tone is one of quiet satisfaction, of an appetite appeased. For years within the daily ritual

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Purgatory, Collected Plays*, pp. 683-4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 682.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 684.

of eating the knife has been to him a private acknowledgement of a deed accomplished, giving the past a constant and vital life in his memory.

Later with that same knife he savagely murders the Boy, lest in his turn he too 'Begot and passed pollution on'.¹ The Old Man sees himself as polluted, yet he takes an undeniable pride in the deed that forged his link to the chain of corruption—again, an incongruity. His obsession with the consequences of actions increasingly draws our attention to the lack of logic in his reverie. After his justification to himself for killing the Boy, he attempts a tone of candour:

I am a wretched, foul old man
And therefore harmless.²

There is clearly an allusion to *King Lear* here, as F. A. C. Wilson was the first to point out; Yeats's aim seems to be to illuminate our understanding by suggesting contrasts with Shakespeare's original rather than parallels. Lear kneeling before Cordelia sees himself a broken man in no way deserving pity or love:

I am a very foolish fond old man . . .
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.³

Having the courage to admit to his essential self, Lear achieves a tone of complete humility. Yeats's Old Man struggles towards such a penetrating insight (he *is* 'wretched' and 'foul') but the magnitude of the challenge defeats him and he retreats into the easier comfort of self-pity. The difference from the Shakespearian moment heightens our shock at the moral evasion here and the fraudulent logic that can excuse a callous murder and its equally callous justification as 'harmless'. The pretension to humility is horrifyingly smug: the Old Man does not speak like Lear out of the heart of truth.

It is the nature of the ghosts as Yeats presents them that helps to define ultimately why we recoil from this moment as insincere. On his arrival in the ruined house the Old Man intimates that he senses presences there other than his own and the Boy's; when the Boy scoffs at such a suggestion ('Your wits are out again'), the Old Man muses privately about the fate of souls after death:

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 688.

² *Ibid.*, p. 688.

³ *King Lear*, iv. vii. 60–3.

never meet',¹ and Swift, whose terrors wrack and exhaust the body of the medium Mrs Henderson. The one variation Yeats works on the Noh theme is to create a more pronouncedly tragic mood by showing the manifestations provoking revulsion in the spectators which fails to bring peace to the dead. The ghosts in *Purgatory* by contrast are not seen to be suffering, though the Old Man claims they are; rather, as I noted earlier, they are passive and silent, making no appeal for understanding. Curiously, too, the Old Man tries to distinguish between them as pertaining to different orders of reality: his father's ghost he dismisses as 'But the impression upon my mother's mind' while 'she is alone in her remorse'.² Yet both are equally palpable to our sight. With the murder of the Boy it becomes clear that the whole movement of the play has been a carefully prepared act, a ritual of expiation to purge, so the Old Man supposes, the burden of guilt that harrows his mother's soul. But is it an act of sympathy? Sympathy alone could bring her freedom. Noticeably, it is his own peace of mind the Old Man extols in his moment of jubilation:

When I have stuck
This old jack-knife into a sod
And pulled it out all bright again, . . .
I'll to a distant place, and there
Tell my old jokes among new men.³

The verbal echo 'stuck' hints at ironies and consequences that the Old Man is choosing to ignore; but almost immediately he is plunged into doubt as to his achievement ('Twice a murderer and all for nothing')⁴ and his levity gives way to profound despair. What triggers this shift in awareness is the recurrence of the sound in his imagination with which he elected to begin his ritual of purgation—the hoofbeats that announce his father's return from the tavern, the prelude he supposes to the night of his conception and certainly to the night in which the house was burned and the father slain. The verbal echo ('Beat! Beat!') invites us to think again of the opening of the ritual in the light of our experience of its conclusion, to hold past and present for a moment simultaneously in mind.

What the invocation of the hoofbeats first introduced, we recall, is the Old Man's imaginative recreation of the circumstances of his birth. He speaks with remarkable authority; there is no hesitancy

¹ W. B. Yeats, *The Dreaming of the Bones, Collected Plays*, p. 441.

² W. B. Yeats, *Purgatory, Collected Plays*, p. 688.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 688–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 689.

or supposition, such as marks his mood of reverie; it must be fantasy, yet the language is exact, the lines of verse firmly end-stopped to imply factual accuracy:

The hoof-beat stops,
 He has gone to the other side of the house,
 Gone to the stable, put the horse up.
 She has gone down to open the door.
 This night she is no better than her man
 And does not mind that he is half drunk,
 She is mad about him. They mount the stair.
 She brings him into her own chamber.
 And that is the marriage-chamber now.
 The window is dimly lit again.¹

Yet what man can know the truth of such an event? As he follows the lovers in imagination to the moment of his conception, he cries out against it:

Do not let him touch you! It is not true
 That drunken men cannot beget,
 And if he touch he must beget
 And you must bear his murderer.²

This is the moment that started the chain of consequences which he asserts his mother in Purgatory relives as punishment for her lust; the horror for him in this is the uncertainty whether she can so 'renew the sexual act | And find no pleasure in it',² for that alone, he argues, will bring release. But is that dread truly her soul's predicament or his? Out of perplexity his mind throws up an astonishing conceit:

Go fetch Tertullian; he and I
 Will ravel all that problem out
 Whilst those two lie upon the mattress
 Begetting me.²

It is a prodigious feat of the imagination to contemplate discoursing on philosophy beside the bed on which one is being begotten, as if one might thereby recreate the soul differently, control the nature of one's conception, and mould destiny anew. It is perhaps at times every man's wish but one rarely pursued with such a relentless attention to detail. Startling, perverse though the image may be, it exactly captures the Old Man's characteristic habit of mind: he is so obsessed by the past that it is no longer simply a matter for imaginative recall, rather he inhabits it as

¹ *Collected Plays*, pp. 685-6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 686.

a living reality; the past is for him a continuous present and the ghosts must be palpable presences during a performance if we are to gain access to the full horror of the Old Man's condition. As the Boy comes through the story under the power of the Old Man's imagination, he begins, as we do, to share the Old Man's mode of perception. When the Boy sees his grandfather's ghost and learns its identity, he cries out in terror in terms that show his complete identification briefly with the Old Man's *timeless* vision:

A body that was a bundle of old bones
Before I was born. Horrible! Horrible!¹

And he 'covers his eyes'. Rejecting what the Old Man thus offers him as his inheritance marks him out for death, since to refuse to be so possessed is to challenge the Old Man's authority and his conception of the truth. Every refashioning of the story designed to ease his mother's guilt only renews the Old Man's bitter crying out against her as the creator of his fate. Yet is not his whole theory of destiny a cunning evasion of responsibility for what he is in himself, a projecting of his private guilts on to the older generation? He keeps the past vitally alive as a protection against the present, the reality that is that wretched, foul old man who has relentlessly betrayed his aristocratic background. This is why the ghosts remain silent and passive observers, not witnesses to a truth about himself he would like with all the fervour of his being to endorse but cannot: that he is the victim and not the master of his own life.

It is, as Peter Ure remarks, 'as pretty an entanglement as Yeats ever devised'.² The 'strangeness' is readily apparent; but 'a high grave dignity'? In arguing for its presence in *Purgatory*, I would call to mind Yeats's comment on his experience of Shakespearian tragedy:

I feel in *Hamlet*, as so often in Shakespeare, that I am in the presence of a soul lingering on the storm-beaten threshold of sanctity. Has not that threshold always been terrible, even crime-haunted?³

Such a possibility is what Yeats delicately intimates in the conclusion to his play. There is no denying the energy of the Old Man's mind; and energy, as Yeats recognized, always excites wonder in the theatre, however channelled. That energy insinuates itself till it gains possession of the Boy's imagination and indeed of the audience's too. Only when the Old Man's mind

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 688.

² Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (1963), 107.

³ W. B. Yeats, 'The Death of Synge', *Autobiographies* (1955), 522.

knows defeat does Yeats encourage us to think back and review more critically its processes of thought, to hold past and present in balance in the mind and perceive the incongruities that the Old Man purposefully evades. In despair the Old Man calls out:

O God,
Release my mother's soul from its dream!
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.¹

The urge remains to condemn his mother, but this is balanced by the appeal for divine aid and the gift of peace, in itself a move to escape the tyranny of self that his hypocritical concern for his mother masks. Is the Old Man's mind in exhaustion finding the seeds for a new growth in awareness? Or is the new-found reliance on God a clutching at a new prop for his self-pity? The play holds the possibilities in balance.² There is in the great cry an admission of defeat, and that argues, as with Congal, for a certain courage; the tone too is heartfelt, its sincerity is no longer in question. It is the mind's capacity for change and, by implication, for renewal even when confronting an emotional nadir that impresses. Yeats takes no moralistic stand; even in so abject a figure as this 'wretched, foul old man' he recognizes seeds of worth.

IV

When *Purgatory* was first staged at the Abbey (10 August 1938), it shared the bill with a revival of *On Baile's Strand*, the first and in many ways most popular of the cycle of plays Yeats created out of events in the life of Cuchulain. After the performance, he observed: "'Cuchulain" seemed to me a heroic figure because he was creative joy separated from fear.'³ By October of that year

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 689.

² I disagree with Helen Vendler's interpretation of the play as ending 'on a note of exhaustion and impotence' (*Yeats's 'Vision' and the Later Plays*, p. 202). I prefer Katharine Worth's view of the conclusion (*The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (1978), 187), that 'the circle is not totally filled: the mightier spirit invoked might find its way in through the chink the Old Man manages to prise open at the end'; but, if anything, I would argue the case more strongly. Again a reference-point might be found in Yeats's work on Sophocles' *Oedipus* plays and in this instance more especially in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which Yeats prepared for staging at the Abbey in 1927. He remained fascinated by the proposition that a man broken utterly in his essential self by the gods might acquire almost godlike powers of knowledge as a consequence of the experience. The subject is explored most impressively in the final pages of *A Packet for Ezra Pound*.

³ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 913.

he was writing *The Death of Cuchulain*, inspired by that new insight into his hero and curious, as Yeats always was, to test the truth of his response. Some critics have found the play a test of their patience: Helen Vendler finds it 'disconnected and jerky' in its structure and feels that 'weariness and indifference' characterize its tone and that both the hero and his creator are overwhelmed with apathy.¹ The dramatic structure is disconnected certainly, but purposefully so. Yeats had of late grown interested in the plays of the German Expressionist Ernst Toller, to whom he had been introduced by Ethel Mannin; *Hoppla!* and *The Blind Goddess* had particularly excited him 'in their passion for justice', and he considered Toller 'a greater technical innovator than Pirandello'.² The design of *The Death of Cuchulain* has much in common with Toller's technique of creating a series of episodes, or 'stations' as he called them, connected less by a developing narrative than by an underlying intellectual concern. There is in Yeats's play little narrative in the traditional sense of an exposition and development; indeed, we are expressly warned by the Old Man who acts as prologue that we shall be disappointed if we expect as much. Music and dance and severed heads are what we are offered, but to avoid sensationalism, we are told, these heads will be represented symbolically by 'parallelograms of painted wood'³ and the dancing will not be in the style of the fashionable ballet, all those chamber-maids spinning like so many peg-tops. It is a laughing, scoffing, teasing prologue, asking us what can we expect of one of Mr Yeats's plays but the unusual, the strange. Such narrative detail as we are given is offered almost as an afterthought; we see Cuchulain's decision to go out and fight the armies of Maeve and her 'Connaught ruffians'; hear from Aoife that, having received six mortal wounds, Cuchulain asked permission of his enemies to

¹ *Yeats's 'Vision' and the Later Plays*, pp. 236, 240, and 252. Harold Bloom sees in the play 'a final destruction of any myth of the hero', and claims this is Yeats's intention (*Yeats*, p. 429).

² 'My great sensation of recent weeks has been Toller's *Seven Plays*. . . . That night when you brought him to see me I could not explain myself because I had a completely false picture of the man in my mind, founded upon a very bad performance of an early play of his. I had no notion of his intellectual power. If the new Directorate of the Abbey . . . support me I will incorporate him in our repertory. . . . I hope when I return to London, as I shall in a few weeks, to see something of Toller' (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 833-4). *Masses and Man* and *Hoppla!* had both been staged by the Dublin Drama League in Jan. 1925 and March 1929, respectively; *The Blind Goddess*, in an adaptation by Denis Johnston, was included in the Abbey repertory in 1936; retitled *Blind Man's Buff*, it was the theatre's longest running success to date.

³ W. B. Yeats, 'The Death of Cuchulain', *Collected Plays*, p. 694.

drink from a pool before he tied himself upright to a pillar-stone to die; and finally the Morrighu, the war-goddess, tells us tersely who dealt those six wounds and, pointing to the six heads at her feet, adds 'Conall avenged him'.¹ The implication is that if we wish to know more *facts* we should consult 'the old epics'.² Though the episodes of the play follow a chronological order, Yeats seems deliberately to stress in the mode of presentation he asks for their nature as independent episodes: each is preceded by darkness in which we hear wild pipe and drum music; when the lights go up, there is instantly silence and the stage remains bare for upwards of half a minute before the action commences. When the episodes end, the light fades slowly till in darkness the wild music begins again so that we are left on each occasion contemplating a tableau—Eithne certain that Cuchulain is to die and frantic that she cannot withhold him from the fight; the Blind Man with his knife poised before severing Cuchulain's head; Emer still but caught in a posture of listening intently; and in the Epilogue we are specifically invited to call to mind Oliver Sheppard's statue of the dead Cuchulain that graces the Dublin Post Office. 'Stations' is a good word to define the effect: the episodes are like moments of intense illumination, potent memories called forth from the well of consciousness and brought sharply into focus in the 'eye of the mind' till they resolve themselves into graphic emblems. What connects the episodes, gives them unity, is not, then, the circumstances of Cuchulain's dying but a concern to define his state of mind under the pressure of death, testing that 'creative joy separated from fear' to the utmost verge of human experience.

In the first episode, a distraught Eithne, Cuchulain's mistress, arrives urging him out to fight to protect his homestead from his enemy Maeve's marauders; she says she has come at his wife Emer's bidding, but she carries in her hand a letter from Emer that 'tells a different story'—he is to wait till the morrow when Conall Caernach 'comes | with a great host' to be his aid.

And there is something more to make it certain
I shall not stir till morning: you are sent
To be my bedfellow.³

Eithne is perplexed but senses the hand of the Morrighu, the war-goddess, in fostering this confusion; the goddess, indeed, briefly manifests herself and, touching Eithne's eyes, does give her the gift

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 703.

² *Ibid.*, p. 693.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 695–6.

of insight to perceive that she has been under a trance till now induced by Queen Maeve. We, seeing the Morrighu, believe this to be the truth; but what is Cuchulain to believe who does not see her? If he decides to fight, he will fight: great odds mean nothing to him. But what is he to make of Eithne's apparent treachery, her confusion on being discovered, and her plea in excuse that it is all enchantment? He chooses to interpret it in personal terms:

You need a younger man, a friendlier man,
But, fearing what my violence might do,
Thought out those words to send me to my death.¹

The verse is measured, thoughtful, dispassionate, for Cuchulain is moved only by a wish to come at the truth. That he does not rage in the face of such a supposition convinces Eithne—so sharp has her intuition become under the Morrighu's influence—that Cuchulain must be at the point of death:

You're not the man I loved,
That violent man forgave no treachery.
If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,
It is because you are about to die.²

Cuchulain's only fear ('Spoken too loudly and too near the door') is that she will disturb his men; her certainty excites in him no fear, only a touching concern for her mounting hysteria. Eithne bids him let his servants mutilate her in the cruellest fashion they can devise to prove her truth; Cuchulain responds calmly: 'Women have spoken so, plotting a man's death.'³ It is an observation, not a judgement; it beautifully holds open all the possibilities for interpreting Eithne's motives and intention and is an admission of the impossibility of knowing the truth absolutely. A servant interrupts them with news that Cuchulain's army is assembled and then occurs the exchange I mentioned earlier when Cuchulain explains Eithne's anguish and his own dilemma to the man and asks his opinion. But notice the terms in which he frames the question: 'What can I do? | How can I save her from her own wild words?' Above malice, anger, revenge, his thoughts are only for Eithne's good. The man asks the inevitable question in return but the one which we know it is impossible for Cuchulain to answer: 'Is her confession true?' Cuchulain's reply is again meticulously judged: 'I make the truth! | I say she brings a message from my wife.'³ The man is answered and in a manner that protects Eithne,

¹ *Collected Plays*, pp. 696–7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 697.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 698.

but still the options are carefully held open. How different this is from the truths that Congal and the Old Man seek to endorse out of self-centred fears at the complex incongruities of the worlds they inhabit. Cuchulain's attitude admits to the complexities but refuses commitment to a viewpoint that might endanger his love for Eithne. Despite what she fears to the contrary, his detachment is not aloofness or indifference, but an expression of his enduring passion for her. The truth Cuchulain makes is selfless; it is a profound act of courtesy to his beloved and proof of his utter fearlessness. The possibility of death holds for him no terrors; the more frantic Eithne becomes at the turn events are taking, the more calmly assured is Cuchulain's tone and manner. To the last he is a model of kindness and generosity; his departing words to the servant are expressive of his care:

Should I not return
Give her to Conall Caernach because the women
Have called him a good lover.¹

'Manhood is all,' Yeats wrote in *Explorations*, 'and the root of manhood is courage and courtesy',² an idea culled from his reading with Lady Gregory of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. Castiglione, with Spenser, by a synthesizing process typical of Yeats's imagination, came, as Daniel Harris has persuasively argued, to corroborate 'the courteous fusion of aesthetic and social ideals he [Yeats] found in Celtic civilisation'.³ Earlier plays in the Cuchulain cycle—*The Green Helmet* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*—had explored the relation between courtesy and absolute fearlessness, but always in terms of action and decision; in *The Death of Cuchulain* he returns again to the theme, but to examine it as a habit of mind, the temperament in which courtesy is an expression of that virtue most prized by Castiglione, nonchalance, *sprezzatura*, the recklessness that betokens a high, grave dignity at heart, that 'sense of buoyancy and release', as Northrop Frye has defined it, 'that accompanies perfect discipline'.⁴ That Yeats considered it an ideal worth emulating till the end of his life is substantiated by references to Castiglione's ideas in *On The Boiler* (1939) and his correspondence with Dorothy Wellesley.⁵ This seems to me as much a part of the 'private philosophy' he claimed

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 698.

² W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (1962), 228.

³ *Yeats: Coole Park and Ballylee*, p. 34.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), 93-4.

⁵ See *Explorations*, p. 431, and *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 857.

he had subsumed within the play, as his theories about 'beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death'.¹ Our modern concepts of heroism are being challenged and refashioned as less a question of deeds accomplished than the sustaining of a particular attitude to existence.

In the next episode, Cuchulain, wounded, has withdrawn from the battle and is struggling to tie himself to a pillar-stone, where he is joined by Aoife, who helps him secure himself with his belt, then winds her veils about him till he is trapped, disarmed, and immobile. Cuchulain shows no fear, indeed he gently chides her for spoiling her rich veils since he is too weak from loss of blood to resist; besides, he recognizes and accepts that she has the right to deal his death-blow. The idea of that right over him releases in both of them a train of memories of their warring together, of his conquest of her, her seeking him out by night, intent on murdering him, the animus that resolved itself in love-making, her conception of a son that, grown to manhood, she sent out to fight his father, and Cuchulain's fight with and killing of the youth he learned too late was his child. They are bitter memories, hedged about with anger, hatred, and tragedy; and yet, through this process of shared recall, the two create a rare intimacy together. There is no recrimination or malice but a kind of wonder at the inexplicability of human passion. His imagination is preoccupied with the fact of slaying his own son; hers with the circumstances of that son's conception; but what unites them is the mood of reverie and of humility before the event. Neither can attempt explanations, only state the bare facts. The verse moves slowly but with a rapt intensity; the facts of the past are isolated one by one within individual lines of verse, yet dramatic tension is not lost: the unstated emotion that shapes the sequence of memories ensures that the rhythm does not fragment within so many end-stopped lines—rather it sustains a profound momentum:

I seemed invulnerable; you took my sword,
 You threw me on the ground and left me there.
 I searched the mountain for your sleeping-place
 And laid my virgin body at your side,
 And yet, because you had left me, hated you,
 And thought that I would kill you in your sleep,
 And yet begot a son that night between
 Two black thorn-trees.²

¹ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 918.

² *Collected Plays*, pp. 700–1. I do not find the blank verse of this play 'eclectic', 'literary', or 'inadequate', as F. A. C. Wilson does (*W. B. Yeats and Tradition*

And the past renews itself in the present; brought to Cuchulain's side again in hatred and by a desire for his death, she finds with him companionship in tragic awareness; where there should be anger, there is only peace. Disturbed by the arrival of a new character, Aoife does not take a quick revenge; she withdraws and hides, anxious to return, renew her questioning, and prolong this felicity.¹

The Blind Man who now appears also claims to have been Cuchulain's companion in the past: 'I stood between a Fool and the sea at Baile's Strand | When you went mad.'² The attitude, prosaic, indifferent, points an immediate contrast with the preceding encounter; there is no imaginative engagement behind the words, they are just a callous statement of fact. The old beggar is utterly self-absorbed in the matter in hand, his bringing Cuchulain's head in a bag to Maeve for a reward of twelve pennies. Finding Cuchulain trussed by Aoife makes the task all the easier; his complete insensitivity is outrageous:

Somebody told me how to find the place;
I thought it would have taken till the night,
But this has been my lucky day.³

Remorselessly he feels with his hands over Cuchulain's body to find his neck and get a good purchase on the hero's shoulder to steady himself for the blow. Our revulsion at the indignity of it all is acute. But what of Cuchulain's response? He cries out: 'Twelve pennies!' And the Blind Man interrupts him with the assurance that he would not agree to the fee until it was ratified by none

(1958), 193); admittedly, it abounds in factual statement, but the emotional complexity behind each seemingly simple utterance brings to the verse in performance great poignance and a richness of implication.

¹ This moment is often dismissed as rather shoddy stagecraft on Yeats's part: Richard Taylor in *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō* (New Haven and London, 1976), 189, remarks of Aoife that 'her complete meaninglessness as a dramatic character is accented by the woefully inadequate invention of her last speech'; Peter Ure in *Yeats the Playwright*, p. 81, is unsure whether the moment is 'contrived, awkward and feebly explained' or a 'master-stroke' deliberately drawing attention to Yeats's departure here from his source-material concerning the circumstances of Cuchulain's death; Katharine Worth too feels that 'invention seems to falter here' (*The Irish Drama of Europe*, p. 190). The moment, in my view, is perfectly coherent, arising logically out of the dialogue and play of feeling within the episode that precedes it. Yeats's control of his characters' psychology is exact and attention to this fact in performance ensures that Aoife's departure from the stage is in no way an anticlimax.

² *Collected Plays*, p. 701.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

other than Queen Maeve herself. How are we to define Cuchulain's tone? Has he succumbed to an all-too-human bitterness out of despair and self-pity at this abuse of his honour? The Blind Man's interjection is nicely calculated to keep us at a pitch of suspense. When Cuchulain next speaks it is to repeat his exclamation—'Twelve pennies!'—before his mood defines itself precisely:

Twelve Pennies! What better reason for killing a man?
You have a knife, but have you sharpened it?¹

Yeats always admired Shakespeare's Cleopatra for her jesting under the pressure of death. There is irony here but one that springs from a rich amusement at the grotesqueness of the situation; more than that there is an attempt at imaginative identification with his killer. Cuchulain's indifference to his own fate is complete; he is above scorn and derision, terms which are petty because self-absorbed. (Is perhaps that scoffing prologue designed to facilitate by contrast our appreciation of Cuchulain's manner here?) To the last Cuchulain's courtesy, for it is that, has not failed him; here is the recklessness that is a high, grave dignity, the self-possession found only where there is a rigorous self-conquest.²

Corinna Salvadori, writing about Yeats's debts to Castiglione, has argued that 'Yeats equates possessing *sprezzatura* with reaching "the innermost secrets of God"'.³ There is no finer demonstration of this belief than in the closing moments of this play. As the Blind Man is poised to strike, Cuchulain has no thought for immediate pain; his body, caught in the tangles of Aoife's veil, is brought to the quick of attention by a waking vision:

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?⁴

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 702.

² One recalls from 'Estrangement' Yeats's observation that 'in daily life one becomes rude the moment one grudges to the clown his perpetual triumph' (*Autobiographies*, p. 463). Harold Bloom argues that Cuchulain in this episode knows only extreme bitterness and that 'this bitterness demeans the hero' (*Yeats*, p. 430), when Yeats by a very subtle dramatic artistry discounts such an interpretation of his hero's conduct.

³ Corinna Salvadori, *Yeats and Castiglione: Poet and Courtier* (Dublin, 1965), 75.

⁴ *Collected Plays*, p. 702.

Again as with Aoife, the tone is of wonder ('And is not that a strange shape for the soul | Of a great fighting-man?'). As the knife falls, Cuchulain is arrested in the posture of acute listening and his dying words are an ecstatic affirmation: 'I say it is about to sing.'¹ It is against that transcendence that we are asked to measure the Morrighu's claim to have 'arranged the dance' that is Cuchulain's fate.¹ As destiny, she may have shaped the *facts* of his last battle and death, but she has no power to control the *manner* of his dying. To the last, in his mind, Cuchulain is a free agent and joyously so. As she departs, the Morrighu summons Emer, Cuchulain's wife, to celebrate his funeral obsequies in dance. She moves at first in rage among the severed heads of the men who wounded her lord; but dance is of its very nature a depersonalizing of emotion, a translation of feelings into patterns of movement until the movement, the physical release, becomes autonomous when the dancer's private consciousness is suspended. Rage gives place in Emer to veneration of Cuchulain's head; as she loses herself in expressing the depth of her love for him, her body becomes less and less frantic, then absolutely still, till caught up and held in a posture of acute listening that exactly mirrors Cuchulain's at the point of death. Her devotion expresses itself as an act of imaginative identification with her husband in his dying and her reward is intuitively to share his moment of vision. In the prolonged silence we suddenly hear 'a few faint bird notes'.² She too knows peace. The stage effects are of the simplest (stylized movement, silence, a tableau, a faint sound), yet how profound are the meanings Yeats has invested them with in our imaginations. Freed by virtue of his recklessness from the anxiety that Congal and the Old Man of *Purgatory* suffer in their attempt to shape life to vaunt their own truth, Cuchulain knows tragic joy. In his war with Fate, the Morrighu, both can claim the victory; it is all a question of the imagination. Who would have supposed that a warrior would find in so strange an emblem as a bird's cry confirmation of his lasting fame as a model of heroic excellence that would be in future ages the inspiration for many a legend and ballad? It is a strange symbol surely for the soul of a great fighting-man. Yet such is the power of Yeats's artistry to work upon our imaginations that he convinces us absolutely of its dignity, its aptness, and its truth. *The Death of Cuchulain* is a play of excellent beauty precisely because it admits such strangeness in its proportions.

¹ *Collected Plays*, p. 703.

² *Ibid.*, p. 704.