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## 'I WIND MY VEIL ABOUT THIS ANCIENT STONE': YEATS'S CUCHULAIN AND MODERNITY

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In the academy as well as popular discourse, Ireland is usually referenced in geopolitical and cultural space with regard to its next-door neighbor, the island and then the empire that claimed Ireland in a 'semicolonial' status, to use a term patented by Derrick Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Attridge and Howes, 2000), for some seven hundred years. However, locating Ireland as England's Other should come with a number of conceptual qualifications. Some of these have to do with Northern Ireland, territory that can seem a standing affront to the easy binary of Irishness *versus* Englishness. Some others involve the larger diaspora, resulting from emigration around the globe, which has been estimated recently as encompassing some seventy million people (Kenneally, 2006: 108). Still others implicate in particular the hemisphere across the Atlantic.

Mere demography would seem to make the claim for a trans-Atlantic approach to Ireland: there are many more Irish Americans than there are people living in Ireland, and a lively trade of ideas has been commonplace for generations. With regard to academic politics, it is worth noticing two trends in which Ireland and the US are co-implicated. First, on the political left, the inclusion of Ireland into postcolonial area studies has tended to stress intellectual methods that posit unequal power relations or mediations like hybridity (for example, the 'hyphenated' status of Anglo-Irishness, whether the term refers to the upper classes of Ireland that were Protestant and part of the British power structure or simply to Irish writing in the English language). On the political right, Irishness has been linked with American-Irish relations, so that events in Irish history that are important to ethnic Irish America (such as the Famine), and writing that fans nationalist flames, receive the brunt of intellectual attention. Both the postcolonial and the nostalgic modes may sometimes hide a racist agenda (Irish people regarded as that rare and valuable thing in western culture, a 'white' oppressed minority). With regard to modernism, the popularity of writers like Joyce and Yeats in particular has been a feature of both trends. The positioning of the great poet and the great novelist as the two pillars of Irish modernism arose in tandem with ideological movements like New Criticism, with its high premium on close readings that reveal hermetic knowledge and humanist values, and it has been sustained since, even

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by movements with very different political stances. As Cyraina Johnson-Roullier notes in her essay, not only polarities but also border crossings depend upon borders: for Irish modernism, the imagined border has consistently been the Irish Sea.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to suggest a different focus, one that does not reproduce the familiar dialogic structure of Ireland as Not-England, or, for that matter, other related polarities, like the one that sets up Yeatsian Romantic Ireland against Joycean avant-gardism, a timeless rural antiquity *versus* advanced urban cosmopolitanism. However, it is easy to see each of these Irish Revivalisms as determinedly not-England, the one resisting the Big Empire Over the Water by fetishizing a mythologized nationalist past and the other hopping over it to align turn-of-the-century Dublin with Homeric Greece as represented stylistically by means of the techniques of international modernism. My focus will be on the figure of Cuchulain, the warrior hero that Yeats fashioned out of the *Táin Bo Cuailnge*, the most well-known story from the medieval Ulster cycle of tales, into a figure in several poems and the hero of a cycle of plays. The plays claim my attention here, as they highlight not only the enacted embodiment of the figure of Cuchulain but also its significant change over a critical period of time.

The first of the plays is *On Baile's Strand* (1904), followed by the farce *The Green Helmet* (composed in prose in 1908, rewritten in verse in 1910). These two plays are intimately related, though that relation is not often noted: Yeats wrote of the first version that *The Green Helmet* was 'meant as an introduction to *On Baile's Strand*' (Clark and Clark, Appendix 3, Vol. IV, *Variorum Plays*, 454, *Collected Works*, 863). In 1921 (following public events of 'terrible beauty' on Irish, European, and world stages), Yeats published *Four Plays for Dancers*, which included two Cuchulain plays: *At the Hawk's Well* (from 1917) and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919). *The Only Jealousy*, which is unlike the other plays for dancers in focusing not on the hero, Irish politics, or aesthetics but on the women that surround Cuchulain, was revised and retitled *Fighting the Waves* in 1930. Finally, at almost the end of his life, Yeats completed his last play, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939).

The Cuchulain who treads the boards in these plays, of course, is far more Yeatsian than medieval. He is recognizably anti-British Irish in theme: through a figure that came to be identified by the poet and playwright as a personal alter-ego or anti-self, Yeats reworked the old sagas to create a usable past for Ireland, turning figures such as the sacrificial soldier and the lone adventurer from imperial discourse against the very empire that birthed them. At the same time, he is British modernist in style, appearing by means of costumes, set design, and dance that are shot through with British and European modernist modes. But Cuchulain is a multiply overdetermined sign, a regular palimpsest of a character, traveling from pre-Christian oral tale through monastic redaction, antiquarian restoration, Romantic adaptation, and nationalist populism, and brought into by modernity by Yeats. His modernity, which, I will argue, has

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that simple economics plays a considerable role in these arguments: Joyce and Yeats, the 'Great Men', act as live bait with which to attract US and Canadian students over the Atlantic to spend their much-needed dollars in summer schools and exchange programs in Ireland. In turn, major US Universities, particularly from the North East, run summer schools and even campuses in Ireland. So Irish Studies, to a large extent, is driven by Irish American ethnicity and the economic market place it provides.

reference to a trans-Atlantic paradigm, traces a different line of force in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish modernism than the more common, exclusively England-facing, trajectory.

I would like to offer here just an abbreviated sense of details I sketched out more thoroughly during the Modernist Studies Association roundtable. To begin with, this modernity is deeply racialized and gendered. Cuchulain is consistently an embodiment of anxious masculinity undone in the face of feminized otherness. He is nearly destroyed by women: both Medbh and Aoife (indirectly) in *On Baile's Strand*, the Hawk woman in *At the Hawk's Well*, Fand in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, Eithne Inguba and the Morrighu (the Goddess of War) in *The Death of Cuchulain*. All of these women characters are associated with water, shorelines, borders of territories, including the border between the living and the dead. Declan Kiberd and others have traced the figure of Cuchulain as a 19<sup>th</sup> century 'symbol of masculinity for Celts, who had been written off as feminine by their masters.' For example, in the Gaelic Athletic Association, hurling (*camán*), a revived sport that was supposedly 'beloved of the young Cuchulain', became widely popular as 'militant nationalists ... emulated the muscular imperial ethic with their own Gaelic games, Cuchulanoid models and local versions of the public schools' (Kiberd, 25, 44). In Yeats as in O'Casey and other later writers, 'the Cuchulain cult appears to the playwright less as a spur to battle than as a confession of impotence. It is only the timid and the weak, [O'Casey] implies, who desire the vicarious thrill afforded by the blood-sacrificing rhetoric of Pearse, the speaker at the window in the second act [of *The Plough and the Stars*]' (Kiberd, 224).

More importantly, this Yeatsian hero tries to hold identity but is surrounded by water, waves, wells, and the like. He is, in fact, islanded, a condition that has reference to England but only in passing compared to the psychosexual state itself. Like the common references to Hy-Brasil (citation: Graham) or Tir-na-Nóg, the Cuchulain myth, as interpreted by Yeats, is about being caught in a failed definition floating in indefiniteness, with the promise of completion just over the water. This hero must fight the waves and die, tied by an old lover's veils to 'an ancient stone', at the hands of the weakest of male foes but still holding the Gap of the North (a reference, especially in the 1939 *Death of Cuchulain*, to the North-South divide).

Interestingly, the earlier plays feature the hero fighting the waves or undone by the effort, an effort that is interpreted as failed masculinity as well as race (Aoife is Scottish; Emer, Irish in the myth, is an analogue for Yeats's British wife Georgie Hyde Lees). The late play performs a shift in the character as character, so that the play is not about him but about the female figures, the dance, and the *mise en scène* of the play itself, with an authorial stage manager playing the role of 'wild, wicked old man', outside the bounds of decorum (a figure common in late Yeatsian poetry). The titular character disappears into what Yeats would call a phantasmagoria, a reverie, that paradoxically removes him from the frame of mythologized Irish history or the modernist effects that dominate the play, into another space/time, one with a larger frame of reference: as the final song of the play has it,

No body like his body  
Has modern woman borne,



But an old man looking back on life  
Imagines it in scorn

(Clark and Clark, 554).

That space is the space of the water and the vaguely fabled land beyond it; the time is the no-time of change itself. This is the modernist space/time I'll argue for, which signifies not a set of practices but change itself, within the confines of the modern frame. By the time Yeats finished with *Cuchulain*, he had made his hero into a symbol of recognition of the need to invent Irishness, and the complex crossings of water (critical and unstable figurations of race and gender) that this project entails, its inevitable failures in a post-independence Ireland and a trans-Atlantic-focused Europe, and its tragic poise in the face of death at the hands of a blind beggar—modern, truly.

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