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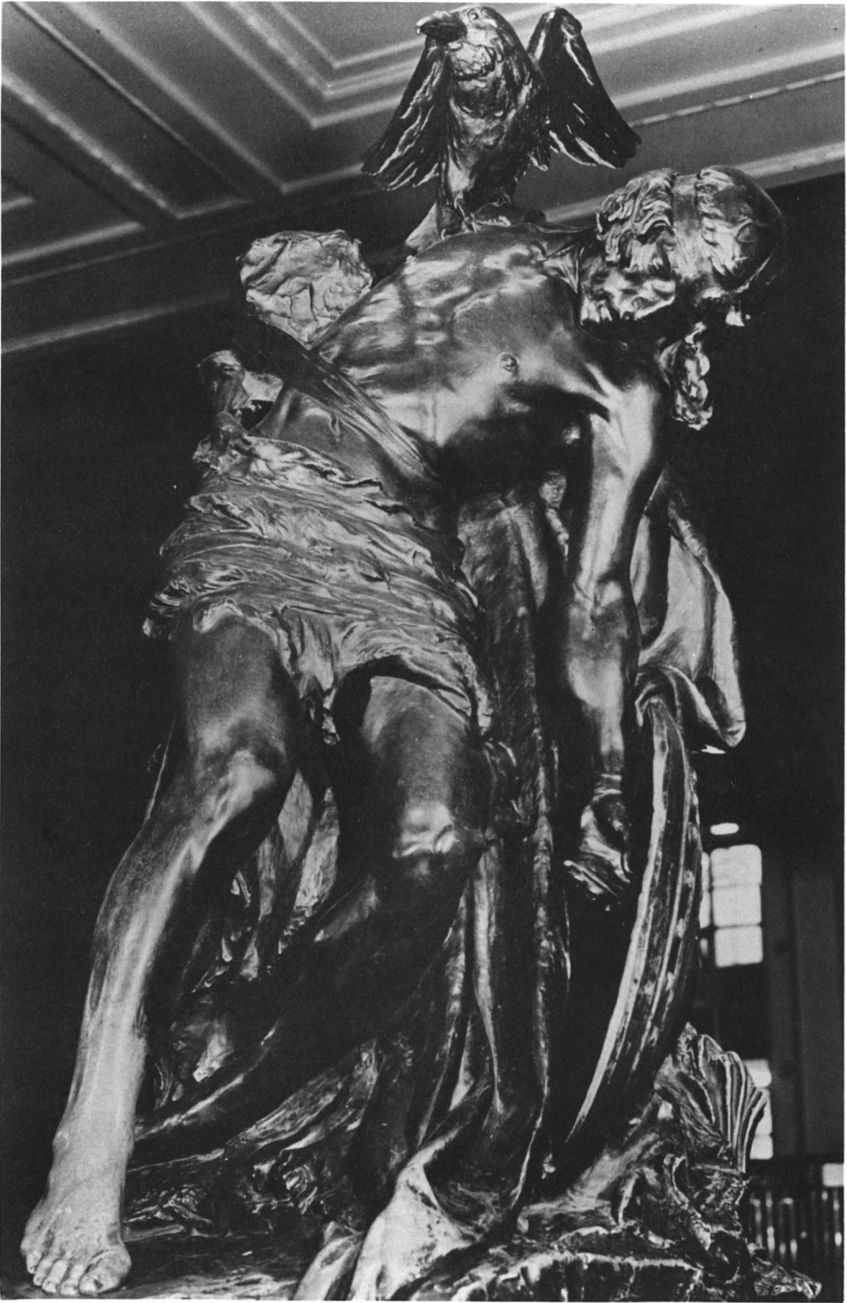
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*Statue of Cuchulain in the General Post Office, Dublin
by courtesy of the Irish Tourist Board*

“I make the truth”: Vision and Revision in Yeats’s *The Death of Cuchulain*

by PHILLIP L. MARCUS

THE DEATH OF CUCHULAIN was W. B. Yeats’s last play: he began it sometime in 1938 and worked on it almost up to the day of his own death. (He did not live to see the play in print.) Not surprisingly, the vision embodied in the play concerns the significance of death itself, both for the one who dies and for the world left behind. The extant manuscript materials for the play give no indication that Yeats had any major difficulties in articulating his stance concerning that most crucial of questions: composition seems to have proceeded rather smoothly (by Yeatsian standards), and there was nothing even remotely comparable to the major shifts in development revealed in the history of such plays as *The Shadowy Waters*, *The Countess Cathleen*, and *The Player Queen*. It is very possible, of course, that now-lost documents from the earliest stages of composition would show great struggles to clarify and express the meditations upon death out of which the play must have begun, but what remains attests less to struggle than to achievement.¹

However, *The Death of Cuchulain* is still one of Yeats’s most enigmatic works, and the unpublished materials do help illuminate some of its depths. A case in point involves revision of a key passage describing the encounter between Cuchulain and Eithne. In the earliest extant typescript the passage in question reads as follows (italic type indicating holograph corrections and revisions):

~~Soldier~~
~~Attendant~~
Servant

~~Your men stand ready.~~

Your great horse is bitted. All wait the word.

Cuchulain I come to give it, but must ask a question.

This woman, wild with grief, declares that she

Out of pure treachery has told me lies

1. This essay is based upon my forthcoming book-length analysis of the manuscripts, “Remembered Tragedies: The Writing of *The Death of Cuchulain*.”

That should have brought my death. What can I do?

How can I save her from her own wild words?

Servant

~~*Soldier*~~

~~*Attendant*~~

Is her confession true?

I make the truth

~~*nothing is true*~~

~~*I make the*~~

Cuchulain

~~*No, most untrue. What can be true*~~^λ

I say

~~*But that she brings*~~

~~*She has but brought*~~ a message from my wife.²

The progression of events in the encounter is obscure and difficult to follow. Eithne, bringing Cuchulain a letter from Emer warning him not to fight until reinforcements arrive, has been put into a trance by Cuchulain's old enemy Maeve and tricked into giving him a conflicting message urging immediate combat. The Morrighu reveals the duplicity to Eithne, but Cuchulain will not accept this story and insists on believing that Eithne herself, desirous of a younger man, planned the scheme to send her aging lover to his death. Eithne is piqued to a state of frenzied rage, not by the accusation, which she denies, but by the thought that Cuchulain has so declined from his former greatness as to forgive where he *imagines* there to be treachery. She will do anything, even denounce herself to Cuchulain's men and meet death at their hands, in order that her shade may greet his "and prove it is no traitor." When Cuchulain's servant comes to summon him to the battle, Cuchulain tells him, falsely, that "This woman, wild with grief, declares that she / Out of pure treachery has told me lies / That should have brought my death." Apparently Cuchulain is trying to protect her by forestalling the false confession she might make after his death. When the servant asks "Is her confession true?" Cuchulain proleptically undercuts it: "No, most untrue. / She has but brought a message from my wife."

This initial "No, most untrue" in the unrevised typescript triggered a series of revisions in which Yeats explored the underlying question of "truth" itself. The order in which he wrote the alternate versions can only be guessed at; as his habit was to put revisions first above the line involved, perhaps "nothing is true" was the earliest. In "No, most untrue" the concept of truth is being used narrowly, in a context of possible lying and deception. "Nothing is true" can also be taken in this sense—i.e., "none of what she says is true"—and the continuation "But that she brings a message from my wife" demands such a sense; but isolated in a hemistich "nothing is true" becomes susceptible of interpretation in a more philosophical sense as a totally pessimistic, Pyrrhonist

2. National Library of Ireland MS 8772(6), p. 7; quoted with the permission of Senator Michael B. Yeats and Miss Anne Yeats. Canceled roman type indicates cancellation in the process of revision.

view of man's knowledge and perhaps also of his existence. One of the most characteristic movements of Yeats's thought is from the declarative statement to the interrogative, and such a movement seems to have taken place here. "What can be true," while it could be a rhetorical version of "Nothing is true," calling for the answer "nothing," could also be a genuine question.

In the final stage of revision, the line which had been a sweeping negation becomes a dramatic affirmation. Truth emerges as subjective and personal, its ontological status dependent upon the individual: "I make the truth." The exclamation point in the printed versions is not authorial, and Cuchulain's mood in speaking the line *could* be almost ruminative rather than emphatic; in either case the final affirmation is far more significant than the colorless original version and shows that the old heroic pride the passing of which Eithne has been lamenting is not yet extinguished.

However, while direct affirmation is fully in character for Cuchulain, it is less so for Yeats. The movement of the revisions was apparently from statement through speculation back to statement, but Yeats may well have been dramatizing only part of himself in this final swing of the pendulum. To illustrate this it will be necessary to consider certain philosophical speculations elsewhere in Yeats's late work.

In late 1938 letters to Ethel Mannin, Yeats made two comments relevant to the philosophical import of *The Death of Cuchulain*. In the first he compares Rilke's view of death and Miss Mannin's in her novel *Darkness My Bride* with

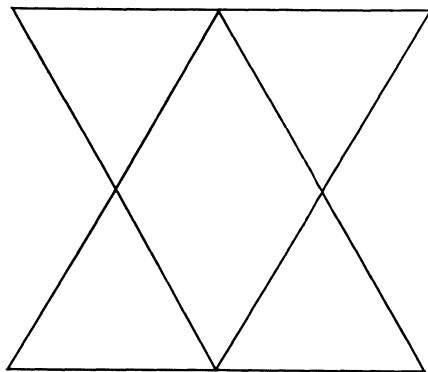
the same thought as it is in what I call my 'private philosophy' (The *Vision* is my 'public philosophy'). My 'private philosophy' is the material dealing with individual mind which came to me with that on which the mainly historical *Vision* is based. I have not published it because I only half understand it. . . . According to Rilke a man's death is born with him and if his life is successful and he escapes mere 'mass death' his nature is completed by his final union with it. Rilke gives Hamlet's death as an example. In my own philosophy the sensuous image is changed from time to time at predestined moments called *Initiatory Moments* (your hero takes ship for Bordeaux, he goes to the Fair, he goes to Russia and so on). One sensuous image leads to another because they are never analysed. At *The Critical Moment* they are dissolved by analysis and we enter by free will pure unified experience. When all the sensuous images are dissolved we meet true death. Franz will follow the idea of liberty through a series of *initiatory* moments . . . but will never I think analyse the meaning of 'liberty' nor the particular sensuous image that seems to express it, and so will never meet true death. This idea of death suggests to me Blake's design (among those he did for Blair's *Grave* I think) of the soul and body embracing [see illustration on back cover]. All men with subjective natures move towards a possible ecstasy, all with objective natures towards a possible wisdom. . . .³

3. *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 916-917; see also *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (1940; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 184 for an August 15, 1938 letter in which Yeats refers to Rilke's attitude towards death.

There is no direct reference here to *The Death of Cuchulain*, but not only the general subject but also the specific question of whether or not certain literary heroes attain "true death" establish an implicit resonance.

That resonance is made explicit in the second (later) letter in which he wrote

Goethe said the poet needs all philosophy but must keep it out of his work. I am writing a play on the death of Cuchulain, an episode or two from the old epic. My 'private philosophy' is there but there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale. It guides me to certain conclusions and gives me precision but I do not write it. To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. That is true of life and death themselves. Two cones (or whirls), the apex of each in the other's base.⁴



The diagram of interlocked cones following this passage is familiar to readers of the "public philosophy" of *A Vision* (see illustration); the use of the same symbol in the "private philosophy" makes it clear that private and public philosophies were merely complementary parts of the same system, one concerned primarily with individual mind, the other more historical, but interpenetrating and thus *both* "there." In fact, the first time the diagram of the cones appeared in *A Vision* itself, Yeats described it in virtually the same terms used in the letter: "Here the thought of Heraclitus dominates all: 'Dying each other's life, living each other's death.'" In a crucial though seldom noticed paragraph in the first version of *A Vision* Yeats identified the relationship between his "philosophy" and his creative work: "I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul's. . . ."⁵ "The Phases of the Moon" was a mistaken effort at exposition of the soul's history; his mature poems and plays, including *The Death of Cuchulain*, were its dramatization.

4. *Letters*, ed. Wade, pp. 917-918.

5. *A Vision* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925), p. xi.

The material specifically alluded to in the letters to Ethel Mannin seems to be that found in a manuscript called "Seven Propositions":

- I. Reality is a timeless and spaceless community of Spirits which perceive each other. Each Spirit is determined by and determines those it perceives, and each Spirit is unique.
- II. When these Spirits reflect themselves in time and space they still determine each other, and each Spirit sees the others as thoughts, images, objects of sense. Time and space are unreal.
- III. This reflection into time and space is only complete at certain moments of birth, or passivity, which recur many times in each destiny. At these moments the destiny receives its character until the next such moment from those Spirits who constitute the external universe. The horoscope is a set of geometrical relations between the Spirit's reflection and the principle [*sic*] masses in the universe and defines that character.
- IV. The emotional character of a timeless and spaceless spirit reflects itself as its position in time, its intellectual character as its position in space. The position of a Spirit in space and time therefore defines its character.
- V. Human life is either the struggle of a destiny against all other destinies, or a transformation of the character defined in the horoscope into timeless and spaceless existence. The whole passage from birth to birth should be an epitome of the whole passage of the universe through time and back into its timeless and spaceless condition.
- VI. The acts and nature of a Spirit during any one life are a section or abstraction of reality and are unhappy because incomplete. They are a gyre or part of a gyre, whereas reality is a sphere.
- VII. Though the Spirits are determined by each other they cannot completely lose their freedom. Every possible statement or perception contains both terms—the self and that which it perceives or states.⁶

There is no doubt that the world view stated through these propositions was one which Yeats found particularly congenial,⁷ and he gave memorable poetic expression to a similar position in "The Tower" (where "made" and "create" are used precisely as Cuchulain uses "make"):

I mock Plotinus' thought
 And cry in Plato's teeth,
 Death and life were not
 Till man made up the whole,
 Made lock, stock and barrel
 Out of his bitter soul,
 Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
 And further add to that
 That being dead we rise,
 Dream and so create
 Translunar paradise.⁸

6. Quoted by Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: the Contrary Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), pp. 287-288. Professor Adams' interpolated commentaries have been omitted.

7. See *Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty* (1944; rpt. Dublin: Irish University Press, 1971), pp. 18-19, where the point is noted by Yeats himself.

8. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (1957; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 415. In the poem, Plotinus represents a world view in which ultimate reality is seen as transcendent and as external

However, it is equally certain that he was aware of its limitations in comparison with Nicholas of Cusa's more inclusive view of reality as the *coincidentia oppositorum*. In the revised *Vision* Yeats wrote that "the whole system is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolised as the Sphere, falls in human consciousness, as Nicholas of Cusa was the first to demonstrate, into a series of antinomies. . ."; and Michael Robartes' "faith" is that "Every action of man declares the soul's ultimate, particular freedom, and the soul's disappearance in God; declares that reality is a congeries of beings and a single being."⁹ The same thought is expressed more fully in the 1930 diary:

I think that two conceptions, that of reality as a congeries of beings, that of reality as a single being, alternate in our emotion and in history, and must always remain something that human reason, because subject always to one or the other, cannot reconcile. I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. I think that there are historical cycles wherein one or the other predominates, and that a cycle approaches where all shall [be] as particular and concrete as human intensity permits. Again and again I have tried to sing that approach, *The Hosting of the Sidhe*, 'O sweet everlasting voices', and those lines about 'The lonely, majestical multitude', and have almost understood my intention. Again and again with remorse, a sense of defeat, I have failed when I would write of God, written coldly and conventionally. Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease.¹⁰

In the pseudo-chronology of early Irish epic legend, Cuchulain's life overlaps that of Christ.¹¹ The hero is a representative of a "subjective" historical era in which the predominant view of reality is the "congeries of beings" and man is "unique and free."¹² "The heroic act," Yeats had written, ". . . is an act done because a man is himself, because, being

to man. In a 1928 note to "The Tower" (*Variorum Poems*, p. 826) Yeats tried to put Plotinus and Plato in the other camp, saying he "forgot that it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence" and quoting a passage from the *Enneads* that begins "Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things. . . ." In fact, Yeats was misinterpreting Plotinus here: although the "soul" referred to in this passage was one of three Divine Hypostases in his philosophy, the highest of the three was definitely a totally transcendent one. In *Pages from a Diary*, p. 21, Yeats returned to the view embodied in the poem itself, saying Plotinus, "as he was compelled to at his epoch, thought of man as re-absorbed into God's freedom as final reality." See also *A Vision* (1925), pp. 214-215.

9. *A Vision* (1937 version; New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 187 and 52.

10. *Pages from a Diary*, pp. 18-19. See also *A Vision* (1937/1956), p. 193. A related passage occurs in *Wheels and Butterflies*: "We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography, and with Plotinus that every soul is unique; that these souls, these eternal archetypes, combine into greater units as days and nights into months, months into years, and at last into the final unit that differs in nothing from that which they were at the beginning: everywhere that antinomy of the One and the Many that Plato thought in his *Parmenides* insoluble, though Blake thought it soluble 'at the bottom of the graves'" (pp. 107-108). Yeats's own view would seem to be in agreement with Blake's (*Jerusalem*, pl. 48).

11. On this chronology, see John V. Kelleher, "The Táin and the Annals," *Ériu*, 22 (1971), 107-127. Yeats referred to the overlap in his introduction to *Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men* (*Explorations*, p. 15).

12. See *A Vision* (1937/1956), p. 262, where Yeats says that "before the birth of Christ religion and vitality were polytheistic, antithetical. . . ."

himself, he can ask nothing of other men but room amid remembered tragedies; a sacrifice of himself to himself, almost, so little may he bargain, of the moment to the moment. . . ."¹³ Cuchulain's "I make the truth" is more than heroic pride: it embodies a philosophical position essentially identical to that in the "Seven Propositions."

Yeats, it must be repeated, sympathized with that view and to a great extent identified with it. But unlike Cuchulain he considered it to be only "part of truth." He knew that in Cuchulain's day Christ had already initiated an eventual reversal of the gyres, a movement towards belief in reality as a single being. And if he envisioned himself in the waning phases of the Christian cycle, hopefully heralding the return of Cuchulain and of a "subjective" culture (and this theme in his work is sounded as early as "Rosa Alchemica"¹⁴) he was aware that this change too would bring its countermovement. He might even have noted the irony in the fact that Cuchulain's spirit had been brought back into Irish life by a pious Catholic like Patrick Pearse and that the act was commemorated by a statue depicting the dead pagan hero in a position inescapably reminiscent of Christ on the Cross (see illustration).

The sixth of the "Seven Propositions" was itself a warning of the limitation of any man's knowledge, and Yeats was recognizing the same fact in the second of the letters to Ethel Mannin by yoking his reference to the "private philosophy" with an explanation of the inescapable duality of all existence save that in what he symbolized as the Sphere. Man *might* embody the truth, but to declare that he makes it is only, quite literally, a half-truth.

To distinguish between Yeats's own vision and that of his *persona* is not, of course, to deny to Cuchulain either heroism or the "true death" referred to in the first Mannin letter. In the light of that letter *The Death of Cuchulain* seems structured around a series of "critical moments" in which various "sensuous images" from Cuchulain's past are analyzed and, presumably, dissolved. The result is "pure unified experience" and "true death." As an emblem of this concept of death Yeats invoked Blake's design of "the soul and the body embracing." He says that "All men with subjective natures move towards a possible ecstasy, all with objective natures towards a possible wisdom. . . ." The ultimate state would be the reconciliation or "embrace" of ecstasy and wisdom, of Phase 15 (represented by the perfectly proportioned human body) and Phase 1 (the soul detached from body). Although a passage in one draft speaks of Emer hearing Cuchulain's soul "sing in its eternal joy," perhaps in the finished play his "song" expresses the more limited and temporary "ecstasy" attainable by certain subjective natures such as his. At the moment of death Cuchulain sees "The shape that I shall

13. *Wheels and Butterflies*, pp. 70-77.

14. See also *The Tables of the Law. The Adoration of the Magi* (London: privately printed, 1897), pp. 45-46; and *Wheels and Butterflies*, p. 102.

take when I am dead, / My soul's first shape, . . ."; and "first" suggests that the *final* release is not yet at hand. But the soul *will* sing; and though the Harlot of the lyric cannot grasp the "thighs" of the Irish heroic dead, Cuchulain, as he takes his place "amid remembered tragedies," may have effected the embrace of the disparate parts of his own personality, the coincidence of his will and his destiny.

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