The Cold Heaven

Deirdre Toomey

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and striken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment? (VP 316)

This poem’s powerful sense of place has led many readers (including myself) to assume that it is set in a bleak West of Ireland landscape of the type depicted by Jack B. Yeats. However, to my knowledge, the only reader to have half-guessed its gestation in Yeats’s own experience is W. J. Mc Cormack, who, when asked where he thought it was set, replied grimly ‘In Enniscorthy station waiting for a train’.

Maud Gonne was sufficiently moved by the poem to ask Yeats what it was about, an unusual reaction for her. Yeats told her that ‘it was an attempt to describe the feelings aroused in him by the cold detached sky in winter. He felt he was alone responsible in his loneliness for all the past mistakes that were torturing his peace of mind.’ The comment reflects very closely a line of the first draft—‘My soul turned upon itself in torment’. The late Derry Jeffares managed to extract this astonishing memory from the old Maud Gonne when interviewing her in the mid 1940s, having whetted her interest by
telling her he thought that ‘The Cold Heaven’ related to Yeats’s belief that ‘men live their lives backwards after death’. Her response was to come out with her memory of Yeats’s own explanation. Derry usually tried to head her off well-rehearsed political rants (which he described as being as ‘if she were switched to automatic pilot’) and to get her talking about a poem by mentioning sources he had discovered, as well as analogues in diaries, letters and books in Yeats’s library. It certainly worked in this case (YA9 266–67).

The setting of ‘The Cold Heaven’ is not, however, an Irish landscape at all. Yeats was travelling by train from Manchester (where he had been on tour with the Abbey Players) to Norwich on 21 February 1911 when he drafted the poem. His first draft is diary-like and consists of lines describing the tedium of the long cold journey. ‘I lay on the cushions half asleep’ counting the stations ‘Gazing through the window of the railway carriage. . . [Thinking] of nothing but the journey end . . . half asleep in the darkening railway carriage’ and so on. After half a page of such ramblings and jottings Yeats burst straight into a draft of the first lines,

‘Over a darkling water gleam county
As though ice burned and was yet the more ice’.  

Yeats was travelling from Manchester to Norwich via London to see an amateur production of The Countess Cathleen staged and directed by Nugent Monck, a follower and colleague of the histori-cist Shakespearean producer and director William Poel. Monck was heroically engaged in the development of a literary theatre in Norwich, and was later to become an assistant manager of the Abbey Theatre. Yeats had earlier written to Monck to advise him that he did not have a specific historical period in mind for The Countess Cathleen but had set it in what he termed ‘the vague period of the folktales’. He told Monck, who was worried about costumes, that in 1899, for the first performance of The Countess Cathleen, he had hired costumes from Nathan’s and that the assistant there had told him that nothing was known about the costume of the mediaeval

Irish except that ‘the people had no clothes and they wore their hair long to hide stolen articles in it’ (9 February 1911, CL InteLex 1539).

Yeats was very moved by Monck’s production, telling Edith Lister that it was ‘like a page from a missal’ (23 February 1911, CL InteLex 1551). The play was performed, not in the large drawing-room of Monck’s Elizabethan house, The Crypt, where he had staged tableaux with his all male acting troupe, but in Norwich’s magnificent Georgian Assembly rooms with a cast drawn from pupils of Norwich Girls’ School. The first performance was reviewed favourably by the Eastern Daily Press, which described the play as ‘An Irish Folk Play’, with special praise for Miss Irene Varley, who played the Countess. (Yeats had thought of a child actress, Dorothy Paget, for the Countess in 1899, but had been argued out of this idea.) He was moved enough by the production to respond to cries of ‘Author! Author!’ by standing up on his seat and saying that he had undertaken a ‘six hours journey to be present’ and that he was ‘highly delighted’ by the performance adding that to ‘Mr. Monck and all who had taken part’ he paid a tribute of ‘unqualified praise’.2

It could be that the prospect of seeing the play performed for the first time in nearly 20 years had mobilised thoughts of Maud Gonne, for whom Yeats had written The Countess Cathleen, and that this poem was, as the manuscript evidence might suggest, drafted on his journey from London to Norwich. The line in an early prose draft which indicates that he was approaching his journey’s end at evening (‘impassioned evening blazed’), might indicate that the poem was drafted as he approached Norwich, as does the rook-infested landscape of frozen wetlands.

Although the play was dedicated to Maud Gonne, [a]t whose suggestion it was planned out and begun Yeats had already, in a letter of late 1888, told Katharine Tynan that he hoped to do something with the legend of Countess Kathleen O’Shea which he had anthologised in his Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry. It was evidently at his first meeting with Gonne on 30 January 1889 that, as he recalls, he became anxious to dramatise this legend in order to please her, saying, wildly, that he wished to follow in the footsteps of Victor Hugo’s Les legeneds des siecles (Mem 41); His attempted pro-

2 Eastern Daily Press, 24 February 1911, 6.
nunciation of this title must have dismayed the francophone Gonne. In his letter to John O'Leary describing this first meetings, he moved swiftly from her radical political position ('she herself will make many converts') to a discussion of the play, which he says that he has 'long been intending to write' (CL1 137-38). Gonne had some experience of acting and urged Yeats to write a play for her. As Yeats recalled this in Memoirs, 'She spoke to me of her wish for a play that she could act in Dublin . . . I told her of a story I had found when compiling my Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, and offered to write for her the play I have called The Countess Cathleen' (Mem 41). Despite desperate pleading by Yeats, Gonne refused to play the title role. In her chronologically vague account of this episode, probably of 1892, she recalls that Yeats had read the play to a Dublin group. 'He said that he had written the part of the Countess Kathleen for me and that I must play it'. The version which he read out is presumably close to the 1892 proofs, which include a manuscript cast list—although Florence Farr is down to play the Countess. Maud Gonne refused the role, saying that it would distract her from her political work, although she admitted to being 'severely tempted'. Yeats then said that if she refused he would have to bring over an English actress to play the part; Maud adds tartly 'which eventually he did with no great success' (SQ 175-77).

Yeats's identification of Maud Gonne with the self-sacrificing Countess Cathleen was very powerful indeed. He saw Gonne as a woman compelled to behave self-destructively; in early 1899, writing from Paris, he told Lady Gregory that 'Hers has been in part the war of phantasy & of a blinded idealism against eternal law' (CL2 357). The Countess Cathleen also defies 'eternal law' by selling her soul to devils disguised as merchants, but is finally redeemed by her idealism and altruism. In 1889, Gonne had walked into a pre-created role, in that her work in the West of Ireland among the evicted tenants, as well as her wealth and her great beauty, made her an ideal modern analogue for the Countess.

In 1889 Yeats undoubtedly was given a vivid account of her recent work among the evicted tenants in the west of Ireland, the consequence of the failure of the 'Plan of Campaign', of women with new born babies being evicted, of old couples married for 50 years
being evicted from the house which they had built and of her own successful interventions, placing evicted people in local hotels at her own expense. This early engagement with Maud Gonne as heroic saviour of the desperate certainly fits

memories which should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago

which, by the time of composition of this poem, were of events nearly twenty years before.

Yeats projected a moment of crisis from his railway carriage onto the winter landscape of South Norfolk, celebrated for its vast rookeries, icy marshes and wetlands; there had been heavy snow and frost in Norfolk in mid-February 1911, weather so severe that parts of the Broads were frozen.\(^3\) As for ‘rook-delighting heaven’, Norfolk, particularly the Yare valley, has the largest rook colonies in Western Europe. A photograph (Plate 21) shows the rookery at Buckenham Carr Woods, west of Norwich, where up to 80,000 rooks nest nightly. A description of the rooks descending on the trees by an ornithologist of our day certainly fits ‘suddenly’; Mark Cocker describes the rooks at Buckenham Carr Woods as coming into view ‘as if breaking suddenly through a membrane’.\(^4\) The striking compound epithet ‘rook-delighting’ is present in the first draft version of the poem.

The experience recorded in the manuscript draft of the poem came as Yeats had been in Manchester with the Abbey company who had just offered a triumphant performance of his _Deirdre_; he told Mabel Dickinson that there were ‘people standing up everywhere’ for Synge’s _Playboy_ (CL InteLex, 1554). He was moving from a successful present to memories of May 1899 and of a less successful past. In travelling to Norwich for a performance of _The Countess Cathleen_ he was travelling ‘ceaselessly back into the past’. His ‘boyish plan’ of an Irish National Theatre had now been fully realised, with a success in


\(^4\) In his _Crows Country_ (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 2.
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a major English city. From Manchester he was now to revisit, as it were, the modest beginnings of the project, *The Countess Cathleen*, his first play performed in Dublin, in May 1899 with the nascent Irish Literary Theatre, as it then was. The prospect of seeing a new production of this play, originally written for Maud Gonne, must have mobilised very powerful emotions of 'love crossed long ago', as well as a painful examination of conscience. Yet, Yeats in this moment of crisis blamed himself for her rejection of his love, and 'took all the blame out of all sense and reason'. This represents a strange reaction from Yeats's indictment of Gonne in 'Friends', written shortly before, in January 1911, as one

\[\ldots\] that took  
All till my youth was gone  
With scarce a pitying look  
(*VP* 315)

'The Cold Heaven' follows 'Friends' in the Cuala setting so the reader is presented (on one page) with this bitter reproach and an acceptance of responsibility and of blame; 'I took all the blame'. In 'Friends', thoughts of Maud Gonne make Yeats 'shake from head to foot', while and in 'The Cold Heaven' he cries and trembles 'and rocks to and fro'. The link between the two poems is thus enhanced by the powerful physical response to memories and thoughts of Gonne. As the Old Man says in Yeats's penultimate play *Purgatory* souls are forced to return and

'Re-live  
Their transgressions, and that not once  
But many times' (*VP* 1042)

The irrational belief that he was in fact to blame for the misery of his youth and his frustrated love for Maud Gonne might well draw upon a book which had influenced Yeats greatly as young man, Ráma Prásád's *Nature's Finer Forces*, a study of the Hindu *Tattwas*, but also a meditation upon Karma.5 Yeats's friend Dorothea Hunter stressed its importance to the young Yeats in a letter to Richard Ellmann, and Yeats's own lightly annotated copy is in the Lilly Library, Indiana. Prásád argues that a crime or wrong will lead to the

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5 (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1890), hereafter *NFF*. 
repetition of the offence in another incarnation; so the murderer
still yearns to murder and destroy... but the picture of the ebbing life of his
victim is now part and parcel of his constitution; the pain, the terror, and
the feeling of despair and helplessness are there in all their strength... He
is subject to unaccountable fits of terror, despair and helplessness (NFF 134-
35).

Yeats returned to this conception in January 1918, asking George
Yeats's spirit controls 'Does the murderer believe that he is commit-
ing the murder again?' (YVP1 316). No reply survives. Prasád applies
the same argument to the reincarnated adulterer who is attracted to
woman after woman: 'all the complicated quarrels of lovers might
with ease be traced to causes such as these' (NFF 135-66). So Yeats
seems to assume that the misery caused by Maud Gonne's long
rejection of him is a punishment for sins in a previous life. To adapt
a later formulation of Yeats's, she is a 'A sweetheart from another life'
(VP 39) whom he has injured in some previous incarnation.

In some respects this poem of 1911 represents the first develop-
ment of Yeats's concept of the Phantasmagoria, initially termed the
Dreaming Back in the first version of A Vision. Indeed Yeats's occult
use of the term Phantasmagoria might also reflect the influence of
Prasád who, in Nature's Finer Forces refers to what he calls the
'Cosmic Picture Gallery' in which all actions good or bad, are pre-
served in Prana, the life principle of the Universe (NFF 122-38).
Prasád believed that 'everything in every aspect which has been or is
being on this planet has a legible record in the book of nature, and
the tatwic rays of the Prana and the mind are constantly bringing
these pictures back to us. It is to a great extent due to this that the
past never leaves us, but always lives within us' (NFF 129). Yeats
reverted to a version of Prasád's conception of the Cosmic Picture
Gallery when he later asked George Yeats's spirit Controls early in
their marriage 'How far are pictures in Anima Mundi an aggregate
of individual memories' following this with 'Is it image or the event
itself'? (YVP1 86).

In his earliest direct formulation of the concept in A Vision
(1925), when he was describing what he then termed The Dreaming
Back, Yeats uses examples which could have been taken directly from
Prasád; in particular when referring to ‘ancient and modern tradition’ in which ‘the murderer may be seen committing his murder night after night’, a reference to Prasád’s illustration of the ‘cruel murderer’ who is forced to repeat his crime while absorbing the feelings of his victim (a phenomenon later developed in *Purgatory*). This is more succinctly formulated in *A Vision* (1937): ‘if the life was evil, then the *Phantasmagoria* is evil, the criminal completes his crime’ (*AVB* 230).

‘And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro
Riddled with light’.

These lines are horrifying enough but it is the question which forms the last four lines which is, in every sense, chilling

Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken
Confusion of the death bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?’

Of course, since youth, Yeats, as a working folklorist, had been collecting Irish beliefs concerning the soul after death. His uncle’s second-sighted servant Mary Battle had told him of a bush where there are two souls doing their penance under it. When the wind blows one way the one has shelter, and when it blows from the north the other has shelter.6

He published another such story in ‘The Tribes of Danu’, a story evidently collected by Lady Gregory, telling of a ghost which spent seven years in a tree at Kinadyfe and seven years after that under the little bridge beyond Kilchreist, below the arch with the water running under her and while she was in the tree whether there was frost or snow or storm, she hadn’t so much as the size of a leaf to shelter her (*UP2* 61).

Yeats also would have known of the folk-tale collected by Jeremiah Curtin and published in *Tales of the Munster Fairies*, of ‘ghosts ... on the strand, walking back and forth, perishing with the

6 Ms NLI 30481. WBY had been told this by Mary Battle in October–November 1898.
Yeats was also fascinated by a story in Herodotus of the wife of Periander returning as a ghost to complain of the cold. He uses this anecdote in *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places* to gloss an Irish folk anecdote which he gathered in 1897 from a shepherd at Doneraile, haunted by the ghost of a relative who appeared stark naked and who pleaded for clothes to be given in her name to a beggar, so that she could be clothed in the otherworld (*CWS* 72).

This material which assumes a freezing cold punishment was not confined to folklore, but also drew on old Irish conceptions of Hell as cold. The most spectacular account of the frozen Celtic hell is to be founded in the *Fis Adamnan* which was available to Yeats in C. S. Bowell’s edition of 1908. This is evidently one of the ‘books’ (in the draft this read ‘old books’) to which Yeats refers at the conclusion of the poem. The vision has been attributed to Saint Adamnan, although it is now thought to be a work of the early middle ages, but attributed to the earlier saint who is described as the ‘High Scholar of the Western World’, presumably as an act of piety. When Adamnan’s soul departs from his body he first passes into a conventional blissful Christian afterworld, the land of saints, angels and the divinity. Adamnan sees the veils of fire and ice which separate this stereotypical heaven from various purgatories and hells; he views a river of fire and various purgatorial landscapes, ‘marshy places’, then the nethermost Hell, ‘a land burned black, waste and scorched’, then ‘a glen of fire’, then a barren landscape ‘very rugged, icebound’, traversed by four rivers, ‘one of snow’. Although punishment by fire is included in this vision, this Irish Hell has also cold, ice, snow and a barren and bleak landscape. This combination of fire and ice is perhaps recalled in ‘As if ice burned and was but the more ice’.

This hell does not draw on a pre-Christian underworld, although bleaker Otherworld landscapes were to be found in pre-Christian

7 London: David Nutt, 1895, 146.
8 *An Irish Precursor of Dante: A Study on the Vision of Heaven and Hell ascribed to the Eighth-century Irish Saint Adamana, with Translation of the Irish Text* (London: David Nutt, 1908). This volume was in Nutt’s series *The Grimm Library* with which WBY was familiar as he had reviewed two volumes from it in 1897 (*The Voyage of Bran*).
9 Ibid., 29.
10 Ibid., 29-37.
narratives. Cuchulain travels through one such dark and bleak Otherworldly landscape in Tochmarc Emere, a journey to which Yeats was to revert in his final poetic exposition of the Phantasmagoria, ‘Cuchulain Comforted’. However, between the ‘The Cold Heaven’s’ account of the horror of mid-life looking back to ‘love crossed long ago’, and the dying man’s writing ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, a deathbed dramatization of the fear of the afterlife, lies the Automatic Script, with its prolonged exposition of the afterlife and its punishments and transformations. These are what Yeats called ‘George’s ghosts’, her spirit revelations, which replaced the printed authority of ‘the books’, and allowed Yeats to discover a vocabulary for the distinct phases of the period after death.

George Yeats later told Richard Ellmann that for many years Yeats had ‘been very frightened of death until his very serious illness 3 years before his death, after which he had said to her; “It is harder to live than to die”’ (YA16, 316). His fear would not have been the agnostic’s or an atheist’s fear of annihilation, of extinction, as in Philip Larkin’s overwhelming fear of a death as

\[
\text{a black-sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back} \\
\text{A huge and birdless silence}.^{11}
\]

Given his belief system, Yeats’s fear would have been of the period after death, of the Phantasmagoria and the Shiftings. His poor health from 1929 onwards had given him plenty of material for reflection on mortality. His blood pressure was at one point a horrifying 260 systolic (the normal systolic reading is 120). He later optimistically anticipated the possibility of its being reduced to a mere 190 systolic—still life-threateningly high. His blood pressure was probably controlled to some extent by hearty doses of liquid morphine at night. Yeats’s own remedy for hypertension was to live on olives, burgundy and bread when away from home. Consciousness of rapidly impending death comes in letters of 1938 such as his reference in a letter of 18 May 1938 to Olivia Shakespear to ‘my remaining life’

Her death in October 1938 evidently shocked Yeats greatly. Indeed, this would have been a case of Larkin's 'Next, please'.

Awareness of death is also omnipresent in his great late play *Purgatory*, first drafted in April 1938. When writing to Ethel Mannin on 20 October 1938 he discussed the significance of his final play *The Death of Cuchulain* which he was then drafting, despite great physical weakness. He told her that his 'Private Philosophy' was in the play (his 'public philosophy' was to be found in *A Vision*: see *CL InteLex 7315*.) He had already written to her on 9 October to tell her of 'true death' which would occur when 'all the sensuous images are dissolved' (*CL InteLex 7312*). In *Purgatory* Yeats had very much returned to the ideas of Ráma Prásád and of the endless re-enactment of evil deeds. So that the 'souls in Purgatory that come back . . . [r]e-live their transgressions'. As Prásád puts it 'the murderer still yearns to murder and destroy'.

And in *Purgatory*, which Yeats described, on 15 March 1938, to Edith Heald as 'a scene of tragic intensity', having told her that it had evolved from a 'long dream like absorption in my work' (*CL InteLex 7201*) the Old Man tells his son that that they will see the 'souls in Purgatory that come back | To habitations and familiar spots' (*VP 1042*). In fact, in a dramatic tour de force quite extraordinary for a play to be staged in an Ireland still subject to powerful clerical censorship, Freud's primal scene, the parental intercourse which leads to the Old Man's conception, is played out again by the ghosts of his parents in the ruins of the ancestral house, an ancestral house evidently based upon Coole.\(^{12}\) Yeats to some extent gives voice

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12 Hints of the burning of Moore Hall by the IRA in 1922 also resonate in the play especially given Yeats's belief that the Moore family had become degraded by marriage with those of peasant origin (*Mem 270-71*). Roy Foster locates the germ of the play, the destruction of a big house by marriage with peasants, in Tyrone House in Galway (*Life 2*, 618). There was a controversy in the *Irish Times* after the *first night of Purgatory* but it turned less on the content of the play (which few understood) than on Yeats's appearing to appropriate a Catholic concept, that of Purgatory. Yeats refers in letters to the misreporting of his curtain speech which the *London Times* gave as 'he had put his thoughts about this world and the next into the little play' (16 August 1938, 10). He told Dorothy Wellesley that he had said 'I have put no thoughts into this play because they are picturesque but my own beliefs about this world and the next' (15 August 1938, *CL InteLex 7290*). When badgered as to the meaning of the play by Father Terence Connolly S.J., whom Yeats called a
to his own sentiment through the old man who, reflecting on the ruin of this Big House, says

‘to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died
I here declare a capital offence’ (VPi 1044).

In a purgatorial afterlife The Old Man’s mother ‘must live |
Through everything again in exact detail’ (VPi 1046). After the horror of this scene the Old Man seeks to end the cycle by killing his son as he had killed his own father. So his mother, the ‘consequence’ of her crime not being at an end, must continue the ‘dream’. To the Old Man’s horror the purgatorial drama re-enacts itself in the ruined house and he exclaims ‘Twice a murderer and all for nothing’ (VPi 1049). Purgatory displays even more vividly than the punishments of ‘The Cold Heaven’ Yeats’s sense of horror at the Phantasmagoria, of the endless re-enactment of a crime. In fact, when Purgatory was staged, two distinct conceptions of Phantasmagoria were presented, first the purgatorial re-enactment of the crimes of this life in the afterlife, and second its actual representation as theatrical phantasmagoria. Yeats had asked for a bare stage design and Anne Yeats produced something which must have been very close to his wishes, an almost empty stage with a bare white tree and a backdrop with a window opening in it. Yeats had asked for ‘gauzed’ windows through which the dead parents’ bridal night could be seen, and on 26 July

‘smooth rascal’ (CL InteLex 7290) he replied ‘In my play, a spirit suffers because of its share, when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house; that destruction is taking place all over Ireland today’ (Irish Independent 13 August 1938). Father Connolly had got hold of a text of the play after the first performance on 10 August and had hoped to create a scandal concerning the theology of the play. Connolly, a man of deep culture (he edited Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore) later presented his part in this controversy as that of an innocent led astray by the Irish Press and concluded ‘The incident greatly hampered my study of Irish playwrights and poets’ (The Book of Catholic Authors, III, 1945). In response to Connolly’s questions Yeats told the Irish Independent that ‘Father Connolly has said that my plot is perfectly clear but that he does not understand my meaning. My plot is my meaning. I think the dead suffer remorse and re-create their old lives just as I have described. There are mediaeval Japanese plays about it, and much in the folklore of all countries’ (13 August 1938, 9).
1938 George Yeats told Hugh Hunt, the producer, that Yeats wished the production to be ‘bald’ without music (CL InteLex 7281) and when discussing the staging of the ghostly re-enactment of the bridal night Yeats, writing from Steyning on 28 July 1938, declared ‘I suggest two gauzed windows. So that the marriage chamber window will not be that where the bride is alone, nor that where the husband fills his whiskey glass’ (CL InteLex 7282). The Times reviewer praised Anne Yeats’s designs for bringing ‘the ghostly vision of the pedlar’s mind before the audience with startling vividness’ (16 August 1938, 10).

The dead woman, whose folly destroyed a great house by her marriage to a groom from a racing stable will re-enact her marriage night perhaps for hundreds of years in the ruins of the house. Her son, the Old Man, says ‘she knows it all, being dead’ (VP/1043). He cries at the conclusion of the play

And she must animate that dead night
Not once but many times!
             Oh 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’
(VP/1049).

In A Vision 1925 Yeats says of this experience, speaking of the dead person, that if ‘his nature had great intensity, he may dream with slowly lessening joy and pain for centuries’ (AVA 246).

When Yeats came to dramatise Cuchulain’s experience of the Phantasmagoria or Shiftings, he did so in a version then entitled ‘Cuchulain dead’. He worked from a prose version of the poem, which he had read out to Dorothy Wellesley and her friend Hilda Matheson in the early part of January 1939. Dorothy Wellesley also recalled the fact that Yeats had already proposed to write it in terza rima, by the time that he read her the prose version. George Yeats had taken down the dream upon which the poem is based from his dictation at night, and this prose fragment was preserved by Dorothy Wellesley. George Yeats told T. R. Henn that Yeats had dictated this
to her at 3 am on the night of 7 January, although unambiguously dated letters indicate that he was already working on the poem well before this date. Thus, he had already written to Edith Heald on 1 January telling her ‘I am making the prose sketch for a poem—a kind of sequel—strange too—something very new’. This is the narrative which Yeats dictated to George late at night:

A shade recently arrived went through a valley in the Country of the Dead; he had six mortal wounds, but had been a tall, strong, handsome man. Other shades looked at him from among the trees. Sometimes they went near to him and then went away quickly. At last he sat down, he seemed very tired. Gradually the shades gathered round him, and one of them who seemed to have some authority among the others laid a parcel of linen at his feet. One of the others said: ‘I am not so afraid of him now that he is sitting still. It was the way his arms rattled.’ Then another shade said ‘You would be much more comfortable if you would make a shroud and wear it instead of the arms. We have brought you some linen. If you make it yourself you will be much happier, but of course we will thread the needles. We do everything together, so everyone of us will thread a needle, so when we have laid them at your feet, you will take which ever you like best.’ The man with the six wounds saw that nobody had ever threaded needles so swiftly and so smoothly. He took the threaded needles and began to sew, and one of the shades said: ‘We will sing to you while you sew; but you will like to know who we are. We are the people who run away from the battles. Some of us have been put to death as cowards, but others have hidden, and some even died without people knowing they were cowards.’ Then they began to sing, and they did not sing like men and women, but like linnets that had been stood on a perch and taught by a good singing master’ (LDW 193).

This has all the quality of a dream, or a hypnagogic vision, and Yeats probably did dictate his memory to George Yeats at 3 a.m.: I feel sure that George’s memory is to be trusted as to the time of night, if not the date. Yeats had already complained of sleeplessness in letters to Edith Heald and this sinister vision or dream was probably the product of a semi-sleepless night. It might have been directly caused by digitalis toxicity (digitalis, one side-effect of which is nightmares, would have been used to control Yeats’s heart failure).
He had been prescribed digitalis for this purpose in September 1936, and he probably continued to take it, despite his belief that his heart failure could be cured by a milk and fruit diet. He had written to Dorothy Wellesley on 8 September 1936:

The dire effect of a plate of duck made me take the law into my own hands. I refused everything but milk and fruit. Immediate improvement. Doctor had been sent for, prescribed digitalis (foxglove). Some days later he congratulated me on my recovery. I said 'Diet'. He said 'Digitalis'. I said 'Diet'. . . now I breathe like anybody else, and walk about for the short time allowed like anybody else . . . the question is, will this pleasant state continue now that the digitalis is stopped . . . I was really ill up to about three weeks ago. My young cautious doctor had made it clear that I might expect to be henceforth an invalid, living between bed and chair. Now he talks of complete recovery (CL InteLex 6644).

Digitalis based medications are even in modern formularies something of a problem as there is a low therapeutic ratio; in other words, there is not much of a ‘cushion’ between the therapeutic dosage and the toxic dosage, especially in the elderly, in whom blood concentrations of Digitalis can rise alarmingly to toxic levels which can cause nightmares and hallucinations.

On 12 May 1938 George Yeats had written in some anxiety to Edith Heald, with whom Yeats would be staying in England asking her to ‘extract from him his prescription for the digitalis mixture and make him take it twice a day while he is still with you!’ A second, rather more friendly letter expressed her entire confidence that Edith Heald would manage Yeats’s medication competently.\(^\text{17}\) Despite medication Yeats regularly suffered from oedema of the ankles, an indication of cardiac insufficiency and thus of congestive heart failure. A grim litany of reference in letters to his swollen ankles indicates the seriousness of the condition. However, he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley on 22 June 1938 to tell her that ‘an eastern sage had promised me a quiet death’ (CL InteLex 7259). He might have hoped to die as quietly and optimistically as his father, whose last words to Jeanne Robert Foster were “Remember you have promised me a sitting in the morning” adding, ‘a good death, I think’ (CL InteLex 4071).
Yeats had told Edith Heald 8 December 1938 that following a sleepless night his mind was so full that he had done ‘a wonderful day’s work’ (*CL Intel* 7350). Helen Vendler has pointed to the fact that relatively few of the words in the ‘prose theme’ carry over into the poem.

Cuchulain Comforted

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still.
And thereupon that linen-carrier said:
‘Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

‘Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud.
Mainly because of what we only know
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

‘We thread the needles’ eyes and all we do
All must together do.’ That done, the man
Took up the nearest and began to sew.

‘Now must we sing and sing the best we can,
But first you must be told our character:
Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

'Or driven from home and left to die in fear.'
They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds


The decision taken to write in *Terza Rima* represents an obvious tribute to Dante and to the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. The dream draws upon Dante’s describing himself at the opening of the *Inferno*, as being in a dark wood ‘Midway along the journey of this life I found myself in a dark wood, having lost my way’. Yet Yeats’s dream also half recalls the 11th Book of *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus visits the land of the dead and meets the angry spectre of the mighty hero Heracles, who frightens the other dead, who flee from him, described as crying like wild birds. Yeats had used this episode from *The Odyssey* to conclude ‘Swedeborg Mediums and the Desolate Places’ in October 1914, a ‘huge spirit essay’ on which he had been brooding for many years, in effect from late 1898 onwards (*Ex 70; CW 5* 72-73).

Given the extreme difficulty of using *Terza Rima* in English and Yeats’s own physical exhaustion, it is remarkable that in the sole surviving holograph draft of ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, dated Jan 13, in which the poem is still entitled ‘Cuchulain Dead’, Yeats does not have a list of rhymes ready for use, that is ‘dead’, ‘head’, ‘blood’, ‘tree’, ‘authority’, ‘three’ and so on. He had done this with a far less taxing verse form (a truncated sonnet) for ‘The Fascination of What’s Difficult’, noting months before he began to draft the poem the major rhymes ‘bolt, colt, jolt’, even noting a half rhyme which he did not use ‘exult’ (*Mem 229*).

However, in this earliest surviving draft of ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, as it becomes, the *Terza Rima* scheme is intact in its final version, although there are light revisions to other parts of the poem. Yeats’s long established method of composition by chanting to himself might have allowed him to prepare the rhyme scheme before he began to write, but possibly—given his physical weakness—there were drafts which do not survive. If indeed he had
already begun to compose without paper in the darkness after dictating the prose theme to George, he would have been following the practice of the classical Irish poets, who were trained in the Bardic Schools to compose orally in darkness at night in their cells or studies and who were only allowed light and writing materials when a poem was complete.

James Pethica, the editor of the manuscripts of Last Poems, judges ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ to have been written ‘with a speed and certainty of aim that was rare for Yeats at any point in his career’. This is, however, a judgement based upon the surviving manuscript record. George Yeats, nursing a dying man and dealing with all the problems of terminal illness in a foreign country, as well as coping with all those who wanted to be with Yeats as he died, could not necessarily retain every scrap of manuscript; moreover, she gave several important manuscripts of this last winter to Dorothy Wellesley. She just might have given some manuscript materials relating to this poem to Edith Heald, as a large number of manuscript drafts of his last poems came into Edith Heald’s possession. Edith Heald arrived just as Yeats was approaching the point of death and, with George Yeats, kept a vigil by his body.

George Yeats preserved the carbon of the corrected typescript of the poem in which it becomes ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ rather than ‘Cuchulain Dead’, a very significant change, which immediately signals to the reader that the protagonist is undergoing a benign transformation in the afterlife and is not merely dead or being punished. This, then, is death and transfiguration. The very late change of title owes much to the circumstances in which it was made, effectively in articulo mortis.

The otherworld landscape in this poem is a wood, thus linking the setting to the opening of the Divine Comedy and the dark wood in which Dante finds himself. Yet the young Cuchulain in Tochmarc Emere is sent on a quest by Emer’s father Forgael, who wishes him dead, through a sinister otherworld plain in which the grass blades are like spear points and which was also so cold that a traveller’s feet would be stuck to the ground. Cuchulain then enters a dark valley

which he can traverse only via a perilous bridge (a motif which also appears in Adamnan’s account of Hell). Before he is able to meet Scathach, the female warrior whose name means ‘shadow’, ‘shade’ or ‘veil’ in Irish, and who will teach him battle skills in a mysterious land which is an Underworld or Hades. In ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ the landscape is equally sinister but the skills to be taught are no longer masculine but feminine, weaving and sewing, not swordplay. The eyes which stare ‘out of the branches’ might seem to derive directly from Dante, who places the spirits of the damned in trees in the Seventh circle of the Inferno. Like much else in Yeats’s poetry, however, this motif might come from a hiding place ‘forty years deep’, a story of 1893, collected in 1897, ‘The Curse of the Fires and the Shadows’ in which the Irish folk belief that ‘the dead in Purgatory are said to be spitted on the points of the trees’ is used (M2005 120). This Irish folk belief is also found in ‘The Rose of Shadow’ a story of 1894 (VSR 228).

What is unambiguous is that Cuchulain is being obliged to undergo not the Phantasmagoria but the Shiftings in which, after death and placed beyond good and evil, a person is obliged to become his or her antithesis, or as Yeats puts it in ‘The Gates of Pluto’ ‘to live through a life which is said to be in all things opposite to that lived in the world’ (AVB 229). Thus the great warrior is forced to do women’s work and to consort with ‘convicted cowards’. Then he is implicitly rewarded by transformation into a bird, just as Cuchulain, when dying in Yeats’s play The Death of Cuchulain, foresees. There, Cuchulain’s last words are

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 that not a strange shape for a soul
Of a great fighting man?’ (VPI 1060-11)

According to Phillip Marcus, the germ of Cuchulain’s experience of the *Shiftings* after death had already come to Yeats when drafting the play.\(^{20}\)

The sinister shrouded beings who are ‘bird-like things’ have a relationship with the *Morrigu*, the Irish triple war goddess with a crow’s head who triumphs over the dead Cuchulain and holds up his severed head at the conclusion of the play. There is also in the ‘bird-like’ aspect of these sinister beings in ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ a recollection of an earlier episode in the life of Cuchulain when he ventures into *Gleann na Mbovher*, the Glen of the Deaf, where the three deformed one-eyed daughters of Maeve’s Druid, the wizard *Caitlin*, persecute him. In Eleanor Hull’s redaction of this narrative the ‘three maimed daughters, lightly fluttering, swiftly swooping . . . sought the spot where the day before they had descried Cuchulain . . . Up then they rose bird like, airly soaring, soaring with the moaning magical wind of their own making’. The three witches, identified with the *Morrigu* by Eleanor Hull, then by enchantment make from puff balls and fluttering leaves in the wood the illusions of warriors so that the entire glen is apparently filled with soldiers. Although Cuchulain is warned that these battalions are phantoms, he fights them.\(^{21}\)

Thus Yeats’s dream or hypnagogic vision represents a transformation of myth and legend; the bird-like creatures are not malevolent and they do not tempt Cuchulain to battle, as do the *Morrigu*; rather they direct him to harmless female activity. The shrouded figures represent a benevolent transformation of the supernatural being (or beings) who arranged Cuchulain’s death in his last battle and who perch on his shoulder in the form of a bird (a scaldcrow or hooded crow) when he is dying.

The shrouds at first are sinister, but then become increasingly benevolent. They are possibly also to be identified in terms of Yeats’s system, with the ‘teaching spirits’ who may assist the dead person in both versions of *A Vision*. We move from a narrative in which a

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\(^{21}\) *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, 239-242.
wooded mysterious glen is filled with the shouts of phantom soldiers and the noise of their phantom weapons, to the shrouds warning Cuchulain ‘the rattle of those arms makes us afraid’, and pressing him into gentle, transfiguring activity.

Yeats had a long-established identification with Cuchulain, more with Cuchulain’s emotional life than with his career as hero. This was endorsed in the automatic script as early as November, 1917 when George Yeats’s controls patiently confirmed Yeats in his belief that that each of the Cuchulain plays when being written had a relation to his own life. He was then drafting a penultimate Cuchulain play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, closely based on the very recent crisis in his emotional life, the conflict between his infatuation with Iseult Gonne and his marriage to George Hyde-Lees. Indeed, on 21 December, 1917 Yeats had asked George’s spirit controls whether his own ‘sins’ were to be compared with Cuchulain’s (*VPl* 67).

As we have seen, Yeats told Ethel Mannin in October 1938 that *A Vision* contained his public philosophy but that something of his private philosophy was to be found in ‘The Death of Cuchulain’ and that this philosophy (which he did not yet fully comprehend) had guided the play (*CL InteLex* 7315). Later, on 20 October, he added that the philosophy should not be apparent, and that the play should be like ‘an old faery tale’. It was however a ‘faery tale’ which demanded severed heads and a Salome-like dance by Emer around the head of her husband, Cuchulain.

On 14 January, 1939, Yeats described ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ to Edith Heald as ‘a lyric which has risen out of’ *The Death of Cuchulain* (*CL InteLex* 7371). We might therefore ask why he had this obsession with Cuchulain’s after-life? When Yeats had read the draft version of the play ‘with great fire’ to Dorothy Wellesley, she was very moved ‘half aware that it was in some sense a premonition of his own death’. In the letter of to Heald, written just after having completed the poem, Yeats said that his ‘whole mind has changed, it is more sensitive, more emotional’ (*CL InteLex* 7371).

In *The Cold Heaven* Yeats, then in mid-life, had already projected the horrors of the *Phantasmagoria* and its punishments, but he was now asking himself, only two weeks before his death, through
the figure of Cuchulain, what transformation and frightening sub-
mission to his antithesis must a great poet undergo in the Shiftings,
‘confusion of the death-bed over’? If, in the after-life Cuchulain, the
Champion of Ulster and greatest Irish hero, must submit to cowards,
sew and weave like a woman and be transformed into a singing bird,
what transformation might a great poet expect, when he experiences
the Shiftings? Gone is the euphoric conception of the after-life
which Yeats had delineated in ‘Broken Dreams’, a poem of late
October 1915:

But in the grave all, all shall be renewed,
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood,
And with the fervour of my youthful eyes
Has set me muttering like a fool (VP 356)

The ecstatic, paradisal confidence of this poem, ‘The certainty that I
shall see that lady’, is utterly remote from the sinister purgatorial
prospects of the Phantasmagoria or of the Shiftings. In ‘Broken
Dreams’ the after-life is conceived of in terms of renewal and recom-
pense, reparation for the sorrows of this life rather than in terms of
suffering, punishment and transfiguration.

In the Automatic Script, on which Yeats drew for A Vision, Yeats
placed himself at Phase 17, the Daemonic Man, although he does not
acknowledge this in either published text. He gives Dante, however,
as an example of this Phase, and describes it as so named because
‘Unity of Being’ and consequent expression of Daemonic thought is
‘now more easy than at any other phase in the Great Wheel’. This
might indicate that what such a figure must face in the
Phantasmagoria is fragmentation, dispersal. Yeats describes Phase 17
as one in which ‘all mental images . . . flow, change, flutter, cry out,
or mix into something else . . . without frenzy’ and states that ‘this
phase has for its supreme aim . . . to hide from itself and others this
separation and disorder’.

In one sense this fragmentation and dispersal had already been
realised in his last play. The Death of Cuchulain offers a phantas-
magoria—in the aesthetic and the theatrical sense of the word, a crowd of phantasms—of Yeats’s ruling symbols and obsessions. The dance, the severed head, the blind man, the ballad singer and not least Cuchulain himself are paraded almost indulgently. As the very old man (‘looking like something out of Mythology’) who introduces the play says ‘Emer must dance, there must be severed heads—I am old I belong to mythology—severed heads for her to dance before’ (VP1 1052). This brief, symbolically charged play does not cohere, it disperses. On about 21 January Yeats, perhaps slightly defensively, had told Dorothy Wellesley, to whom he had already read a draft of The Death of Cuchulain, ‘that “Shakespeare is only a mass of magnificent fragments” and that perhaps thousands of years might pass before the perfection of Greek drama and its Unity of Being could be once more achieved (LDW 194).

Whatever happened to Yeats’s spirit at 2.30 pm. on 28 January, 1939 after a prolonged period of unconsciousness, we may be grateful that his own fears and his fusion of Hindu philosophy and Catholic theology via Dante had produced a magnificent deathbed poem, perhaps the greatest poem ever written in extremis. He had told Dorothy Wellesley only shortly before his death that ‘I feel that I am only beginning to understand how to write’ (LDW 194).

‘Cuchulain Comforted’ remains an extraordinary testimony to Yeats’s not having developed what, writing to John Quinn in September 1921 concerning his father, he said that he most feared ‘the clouded mind of . . . old age’. ‘I have been praying that I might be spared that mind or the years that bring it’ (CL InteLex 3985). Thomas Hardy, another great poet of old age, self-accusation and death, had said in 1899 that ‘no man’s poetry can be truly judged till its last line is written. What is the last line? The death of the poet’.22

22 Florence Hardy and Thomas Hardy, The Later Years of Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1930), 80.