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(excerpts of poems):


INTRODUCTION

I thought ‘my children may find here
Deep-Rooted things,’ but never foresaw its end
—W.B. Yeats, “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”

One cannot sum up a nation intellectually.
—W.B. Yeats, Memoirs

Deep-Rooted Things examines Yeats’s shifting relationship with the discourses of British cultural imperialism and Irish nationalism during Ireland’s transition from colony to (partially) independent nation in order to provide new, historically grounded readings of his poetry and drama. It demonstrates how Yeats’s writings represent a thoroughgoing and often conflicted response to the multiple and competing formulations of identity, nationhood, and history central to these discourses and to the broader pressures, ambiguities, and paradoxes of (post-)coloniality. Focused on the key historical events that he witnessed and on the nationalist movements that he both embraced and resisted, Deep-Rooted Things reads the core features of Yeats’s aesthetic program, his tendency to reinvent himself as an artist and to privilege contradiction over resolution, as repeated attempts to provide in art a foundation for national unity throughout this period of transition or national crisis. Exactly how Yeats responds to the events and movements that he witnessed—from the expansion of cultural and militant nationalism during the late 1800s and the Abbey Theatre conflicts of the early 1900s, to the Easter Rising (1916), Anglo-Irish War (1919–1921), Irish Civil War (1922–1923), and consolidation of the Irish Free State—varies widely, as he never remained content for long with one specific political or aesthetic position. Yet, it is precisely this willingness to change, this tendency toward fluidity and even internal contradiction, that makes Yeats such a compelling figure. And it is this multifaceted Yeats, this poet and dramatist whose art gives voice to a
violent, divided, tragic, and, at times, heroic (post)colonial Ireland, that *Deep-Rooted Things* seeks to reveal.

By emphasizing a multidimensional and conflicted Yeats, my work follows the lead of some recent scholarship, most notably that of Marjorie Howes, whose important and insightful book, *Yeats’s Nations*, demonstrates the extent to which the poet’s conceptions of “nationality” and “Irishness” are contingent upon “specific configurations of gender and class.”¹ While my own study touches upon similar questions of class and, in particular, gender, it differs from Howes’s by reading the divergent nationalist stances that emerge in Yeats’s poetry and drama as rooted directly in his continued attempts to negotiate the political, economic, and cultural conditions of Irish (post)coloniality. At the same time, *Deep-Rooted Things* departs substantially from the majority of current works devoted to the “postcolonial Yeats.” Although I incorporate postcolonial theory with an eye toward the unique features of the Irish context, I have sought to move beyond the usual question of how or why Yeats can be properly considered a postcolonial writer. In part, this is because other critics, such as Jahan Ramazani, have skillfully responded to the question; and, in part, because the question, most recently addressed in the collection *W. B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*, often produces strained readings designed either to adopt Yeats into the now fashionable club of Third World writers or to attack him (once again) for his sometimes conservative political stances.² Resisting the prevailing desire to hang a positive or negative label on Yeats’s political and nationalist commitments, I have aimed to tease out the diverse features of those commitments as they emerge in his art by privileging complexity over political value, internal instability and contradiction over consistency.

I have also sought to break new ground by challenging and reconfiguring the postcolonial theoretical paradigms that have informed much of the recent scholarship, particularly the almost ubiquitous reliance upon Frantz Fanon. His cogent remarks on the pitfalls of nationalism and his distinction between a regressive “national consciousness” and a progressive “political and social consciousness” are certainly applicable to the Irish context.³ We need only recall the Irish Free State’s censorship of film and literature, bans on divorce and contraception, and at times brutal suppression of dissension to recognize the dangers of an insular national consciousness that persists in the aftermath of colonial rule. Yet his theories, when applied broadly to Yeats, have the tendency to limit our perspective. While Fanon himself, as I discuss in chapter 4, is careful to distinguish among different forms of nationalist resistance, the Fanon lens tends to inscribe a form of binary thinking. As a teleological narrative of decolonization that posits, in the words of Edward Said, a progression from “nativism” to “liberation”—from a nationalist stance that remains fixated on “local identity” and communal “essences” to an alternative stance that embraces “a more gener-
uous and pluralistic vision of the world”—the Fanon model appears to suggest a clear division between these two stages, promoting the belief that all types of nationalism are identical and equally problematic. My point is not to defend nationalism, nor is it to reject wholesale the findings of those critics who have examined Yeats by way of Fanon, such as Said, or who have outlined the politically suspect features of Yeatsian nationalism, such as Richard Kearney, Seamus Deane, Terry Eagleton, and others. Rather, my intent is to shift the terms of the debate in order to recognize that where imperialism “succeeds” as a form of political, social, and economic domination precisely because it is fluid and adaptable, nationalism is equally fluid and adaptable, equally multifaceted. Just as the nation cannot, for Yeats, be apprehended “intellectually” (Mem, 143), or cannot be reduced to one knowable, quantifiable thing, nationalism in Yeats’s works is never one discrete position or mode of writing.

_Deep-Rooted Things_ thus attends to those ambivalent moments in Yeats’s verse and drama that, because they exceed ready-made political labels, prompt us to reexamine and to reformulate our understanding of the complex and pervasive relationships among literature, colonialism, and nationalism. The chapters introduce, combine, and reconfigure elements from more broad-based discussions of postcoloniality (psychological co-dependency, nationalist constructions of history, metaphoric exile, Fanon’s conception of “nationalitarianism”) and from other theoretical paradigms (feminist performance theory, Marxist approaches to modernism), to offer fresh readings of central poems and plays in the Yeats canon. The specific goal is to expand the scope of Yeats scholarship by presenting his work as part of an ongoing and often troubled dialogue with the multiple discourses of British colonialism and Irish nationalism. Because Yeats’s writings also engage with the overarching and uneven development of Ireland as a modern nation, the larger goal is to place Yeats—canonical “British” high modernist and conflicted Irish nationalist—at the center of groundbreaking debates concerning the development of literary modernism in light of postcolonial theory.

Yeats is a particularly important figure for extending the parameters of postcolonial theory and for exploring questions of modernist aesthetics in relation to questions of empire and nationhood because he writes from an interstitial position, a space between imperial center and colonial periphery. Like the character Lois in Elizabeth Bowen’s _The Last September_ (1929), an Anglo-Irish woman who experiences a sense of disconnect from both her aristocratic British relations and from the peasant Irish who work her family’s land, Yeats the Protestant nationalist and nationalist critic remained estranged from the British-cum-Anglo-Irish culture that represented his familial and literary heritage and from the Irish culture that fundamentally informed his politics and inspired his art. Indeed, it is no coincidence that _Reveries over Childhood and Youth_ (1916),
the first volume of his *Autobiographies*, opens with two “fragmentary” and “contemporaneous” memories that evoke feelings of cultural isolation, as the child Yeats recalls “looking out of an Irish window” and “looking out of a window in London” (*Au*, 41). Yeats’s anxious attempt in later years to identify with an enlightened Protestant tradition, founded upon fantasies of a mythic Ireland where landlord and peasant exist in harmony, is symptomatic of this uncomfortable, interstitial position, as is his tendency, during his early *Celtic Twilight* (1893) period, to adopt a celebratory nativist view of the Irish peasantry. His outsider status also accounts, in part, for his consistent willingness to challenge the dominant positions of the Protestant and Catholic leadership. Although he steadfastly rejected any form of extreme unionism, he was equally ready, when the Catholic majority came to power, to voice the concerns of the Protestant minority, famously arguing against specific measures, such as the ban on divorce, and against the Free State’s broader isolationist policies.

Yeats’s interstitial position is, however, most significant as a shaping force in the development of the core assumptions that underpin his various political and nationalist stances. Although Yeats, as a nationalist, owes a clear debt to the Young Ireland movement of the mid-1800s, which posited cultural revival as the first step toward national unity, his underlying beliefs are unique with respect to the Irish context, sharing elements with a number of later nationalist movements that emerged in Africa and Asia. As the theorist Partha Chatterjee has argued, Indian nationalism responds to the pervasive influence of colonization “by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual”: an “external” realm of science and commerce in which the West reigns supreme, and an “internal” realm of the spirit in which the traditions of native culture and the “essential” features of the East are preserved. Crucially, the aim is not simply to maintain this division but also to create a new independent nation in which the spiritual realm becomes a living presence in all facets of the modern community. This, writes Chatterjee, is nationalism’s “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western.” Yeats’s own vision relies upon a similar, though not identical, set of assumptions.

For Yeats, who associates Western modernity not only with the apotheosis of British imperial culture, industrial capitalism, and bourgeois society but also with the emergence of empirical, rational, scientific, and utilitarian modes of thought, the West is less a geographic space and more a form of consciousness. Described variously in his writings as “abstract,” “mechanical,” “objective,” or, with some qualifications, “modern,” this type of thought pervades contemporary society, creating and maintaining nations in which individual creativity is supplanted by mass consciousness, as spirituality hardens into religious orthodoxy, an awareness of the past as a living force gives way to a deadening
sense of duty to tradition, and all things, including art, are judged according to their economic, political, or moral use value. As Yeats writes of phase twenty-four in *A Vision* (1924, 1937), the phase of Queen Victoria, “a code of personal conduct, . . . formed from social and historical tradition, remains always concrete in the mind. All is sacrificed to this code” (*V*₂, 169–170). In such nations, this “code” operates on an ideological level—“its subconscious purpose,” explains Yeats, “is to compel surrender of every personal ambition” (*V*₂, 170)—by prompting individuals to embrace passively the will of the collective, promoting what an early theorist of nationalism, Ernest Renan, describes as “the individual’s abdication for the good of the community.”

Anticipating Ashis Nandy’s contention that “colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies,” Yeats came to associate this ideology of passive abdication, this mindset in which the individual “is flooded with the joy of self-surrender” (*V*₂, 170), with both the imperial center and the colonial periphery, frequently arguing that popular nationalism—with its emphasis on moral purity, duty to tradition, and the political importance of art—functions not as an alternative to but as an extension of Western consciousness. “English provincialism,” notes Yeats, “shouts through the lips of Irish patriots who have no knowledge of other countries to give them a standard of comparison, and they, with the confidence of all who speak the opinions of others, labour to thwart everybody who would dig a well for Irish water to bubble in” (*IDM*, 116).

Yeatsian nationalism is thus based on a fundamental desire to create an Ireland that is modern, in the sense that it can take an active role in the global community, without being a mirror image of England, an Ireland that shapes and is shaped by its interaction with other nations without losing its cultural autonomy—“It is, I think, an insult to the country,” explains Senator Yeats, “to suggest that it is to be kept up by law and artificial barriers” (*SS*, 47). Specifically, he imagined a nation in which all people, “artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer . . . accept a common design” (*Au*, 167), but he did not mean that the people should be compelled to embrace one specific vision of the community. As he wrote in 1905, “Nobody can force a movement of any kind to take any pre-arranged pattern to any very great extent” (*IDM*, 89). Rather, for Yeats—who believed that communities, like the occult societies he frequented, are bound by spiritual, nonrational connections—true national unity only emerges organically. That is, each individual, by deliberately seeking to actualize his or her own creative self in all facets of life, will unconsciously partake in the collective labor of shaping the nation, this “common design.”

In promoting this vision, Yeats sought to fulfill the ultimate goal of nationalism: the creation of a nation that is predicated not upon Western modes of thought, whether they are in the service of imperial assimilation or colonial resistance, but upon an alternative form of consciousness that preserves creative
individuality and allows the nation to take shape out of the untapped imagination of the people. That Yeats’s ardent desire to actualize this ideal vision led him to flirt with fascism and to slip into a reactionary mindset is not surprising, and, depending on our political leanings, we can applaud the attempt or criticize the result. In this book, however, I want to focus on how these core assumptions impact the drama and poetry, as Yeats raises and engages with a series of issues that, in part because of his own literary and cultural legacy, have remained central to Irish and postcolonial studies to this day: identity and nationhood, historiography and epistemology, tradition and modernity.

In order to explore Yeats’s engagement with these issues and to highlight the connections between his art and the historical contexts within which it is produced, I have confined the opening four chapters of my study to two discrete periods: the first decade of the twentieth century, when Yeats was involved in the creation and promotion of an Irish National Theatre Society; and the years from 1919 to 1928, when Yeats the artist and senator struggled to reinvent himself as a cultural nationalist against the backdrop of the Anglo-Irish War, the Irish Civil War, and the consolidation of the Free State. As a dramatist writing in the years after the death of Charles Stewart Parnell and the subsequent emergence of competing nationalist movements, from Gaelic revival, to land policy reform, to militant resistance, Yeats was particularly concerned with questions of identity and nationhood. Convinced that, as he would later write, “nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images” (Au, 167), he sought to present in plays such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) an image of heroic Irish identity, of noble self-sacrifice, that expresses and harmoniously balances individual consciousness and communal consciousness: the image of a young man who, in asserting his own will by choosing to embrace a glorious death over a mundane life, paradoxically asserts the deeper will of the collective, the desire for national autonomy. Yet the almost cult-like following that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* generated helped Yeats to recognize the inherent dangers of an aesthetic program rooted in a metonymic relationship between individual identity and national identity. Instead of achieving a harmonious balance, communal consciousness entirely supplants individual consciousness, thereby perpetuating a reactionary nationalist climate in which the negative stereotypes of British cultural imperialism are simply replaced by positive images, with the whiskey-drinking “stage Irishman” giving way to the hard-working peasant farmer, the chaste wife, and the noble martyr.

Because of his outsider status and thoroughgoing attachment to personal artistic sincerity, Yeats was, perhaps to a greater extent than other cultural nationalists, acutely aware that artists who confine themselves to promoting such models of Irish identity are doomed not simply to produce bad art but also to reinforce an insular, provincial outlook that is ultimately detrimental to the na-
tional cause. Intuiting what subsequent postcolonial authors and theorists would describe as nationalism’s Manichean logic, Yeats explains that “a nation is injured by the picking out of a single type and setting that into print or upon the stage as a type of the whole nation. . . . If Ireland were at this moment, through a misunderstood terror of the stage Irishman, to deprive her writers of freedom . . . she would lower her dignity in her own eyes and in the eyes of every intellectual nation” (IDM, 87). The controversies over the plays of John Millington Synge—in which hard-line nationalists rejected Synge’s subversive models of peasant identity as “calumny gone raving mad” and a “gross and wanton insult to the Irish people”—served only to reinforce Yeats’s skeptical position.11

Unlike other writers who chose cosmopolitan exile as a liberating answer to Irish provincialism, such as George Moore, James Joyce, and, later, Samuel Beckett, Yeats remained committed at this point in his life to a decidedly nationalistic program that, by preserving artistic individuality, would simultaneously provide a foundation for Irish national unity. As he writes in 1901, the artist who remains true to personal expression—who does not “try to make his work popular” and who instead “make[s] his work a part of his own journey towards beauty and truth”—will enable “Ireland to re-create the ancient arts . . . as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class” (EI, 206–207). As an artist struggling to actualize this vision at a time when cultural and militant nationalists increasingly demanded explicitly political art, the Yeats of this period offers plays that raise and respond to a series of questions that underscore the possibilities and limitations of his own ambiguously nationalistic program: Is there a form of nationalist drama that can evoke a sense of homogeneous communal identity, while simultaneously remaining true to the heterogeneous voice of the individual? Can such nationalist art register and resist the constructions of Irish identity found in the discourses of cultural imperialism without reinscribing another form of essentialist logic, the replacement of one stereotype with another? Is it possible, in short, to create a truly national theater that rejects both sublation, the promulgation of “universal” works that ignore questions of cultural difference, and sublimation, the production of works that fetishize cultural difference by merely celebrating positive images of native identity?

These questions, which speak to the uneasy connections between Yeats’s art and the identity-based rhetoric of colonialism and nationalism, form the basis of chapters 1 and 2. In the first, I examine Yeats’s important early play, On Baile’s Strand (1904, 1906), in relation to the discourses of mid- and late-nineteenth-century cultural imperialism, focusing in particular on how the play responds to the racial theories of Matthew Arnold and to the legacy of colonization in the Ireland of Yeats’s day. Since questions of identity are invariably bound up with questions of gender, in chapter 2 I address performances of gender and
nationhood in two key works from this period: *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Deirdre* (1907). For most feminist scholars, focusing on Yeats’s gendered formulations of nationhood means focusing on representation, the degree to which his female characters reinscribe or challenge conventional notions of femininity popularized in the discourses of patriarchal nationalism. In so doing, they tend to ascribe to Yeats’s work a developmental narrative in which the patriarchal or nationalist representations of female identity in his early plays, the woman as nation and the woman as guardian of the domestic sphere, give way to the protofeminist or antinationalist representations of his “mature” plays, the woman as desiring subject and complex, willful heroine.12

Without entirely rejecting this reading, I have, in keeping with my broader desire to tease out the ambiguities and multiple stances of Yeatsian nationalism, incorporated performance as both an alternative theoretical vantage and focal point for engagement. As a theoretical vantage, performance, which calls attention to the unstable nature of representation itself, shifts the focus to the conflicts and uncertainties of Yeats’s nationalist project that manifest themselves in his dramatic constructions of femininity, masculinity, and the nation. As a focal point for engagement, performance highlights the degree to which gender and nationhood are not abstract issues in Yeats’s work but are bound up with his attempts, during this transitional period in his life, to condition audience reception in a theater that seeks to fulfill the larger drive of nationalist art, the realization of communal unity, without adopting the conventions of “popular” nationalist drama.

Like the first decade of the twentieth century, the years from 1919 to 1928 represent a time of national crisis for Ireland and of personal crisis for Yeats. Always quick to see his own work in the realm of culture as the driving force behind Ireland’s independence movement (a position that revisionist historians have since called into question),13 Yeats felt responsible, in every sense of the word, for the supposed transformation in the Irish mind that had sparked not simply the revolution itself but also the internal divisions that erupted in the Civil War and that continued to haunt the Free State. Although Yeats viewed his dramatic movement as a popular success, he describes it, in his 1919 essay “A People’s Theatre,” as “to me a discouragement and a defeat,” for it had achieved not the organically unified nation he had imagined, but an Ireland dominated by the mechanical Western consciousness he so reviled: “the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics” (*IDM*, 128). Ireland had indeed become a mirror image of England, a nation shaped by a rigid understanding of nationalism that fixes the gaze of the people not upon the complexities of the present but upon the sacrifices of the past, a nation where art and thought are judged according to political use value and all individual “actions” are submitted to “the most unflinching
Yeats confronted this modern Ireland by exploring in art questions of historiography and epistemology, ways of writing and knowing the past and present. As I argue in chapter 3, which focuses on his two seminal war poems, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” Yeats responds directly to the evolutionary narratives of history central to the discourses of imperialism and nationalism: narratives of colonization, which point to Britain’s “civilizing” role in Ireland in order to justify military intervention; and narratives of nationalism, which laud the sacrifices of previous generations in order to legitimate further acts of violence. The poems foreground what I term “historiographic desire”—the desire to use history as a means of giving order to the present—by repeatedly frustrating that desire, as Yeats prompts his reader to view the unfolding violence as violence and to recognize that the old progressive modes of understanding history must be cast aside before new, alternative visions of a truly independent Ireland can be imagined.

In chapter 4, I expand upon this notion of alternative vision by examining, as a whole, Yeats’s finest volume of poetry, *The Tower* (1928). I argue that the collection charts a cycle of imaginative disengagement followed by reengagement on the part of the poet, as Yeats struggles to discover an external vantage—a position of “imagined exile”—from which the recent past may be meditated upon and new forms of communal unity, always presented in his verse as possibilities, not certainties, might be envisioned. My aim in both chapters, again, is not to judge his work on political grounds but to demonstrate how his poetry, through its engagement with the varied discourses of empire and nationhood, testifies powerfully and ably to the chaos, uncertainty, and incoherence of Ireland’s violent emergence from centuries of colonial rule.

The final chapter extends the scope of my analysis by addressing directly the relationship between Yeats the nationalist and Yeats the modernist. Traditionally, scholars have tended to present his commitment to nationalism and to modernist aesthetics as two discrete and conflicting impulses in his work, juxtaposing the politically engaged artist who, in the words of David Young, sought “to write for and about Ireland” with the “symbolist-turned-modernist” who, in meditating upon such universal themes as the ephemeral nature of love, the decay of the body, and the winding gyres of history, strove “to create radically new forms and ways of perceiving the world in the service of art.” Other scholars, particularly those Marxist and postcolonial critics who focus specifically on Yeats’s aesthetics in relation to British colonization and Irish colonial resistance, frequently emphasize the degree to which Yeatsian modernism represents not an alternative to nationalism but an extension of that project. Both Yeats the nationalist and Yeats the modernist respond to the pressures of modernity, a
bourgeois Ireland dominated by materialism and a blind attachment to patriotic idealism, by embracing the aesthetic and the mythic as means of giving order to and retreating from the chaos of the present. Such readings underscore a key assumption at the heart of most current postcolonial and Marxist readings of literary modernism: the belief that any aesthetic project that deploys the autonomous art object in response to the material realities of history necessarily represents a form of false consciousness, a retreat from the real into an abstract, ahistorical realm of myth and universal “truths.”

Recent criticism aimed at rescuing Yeats from the modernist abyss has tended to do so by placing him in alternative theoretical camps, viewing him either through a postmodern lens that stresses chance and linguistic play or from a postcolonial vantage that, by linking Yeats with writers such as Derek Walcott and Salman Rushdie, emphasizes a relentlessly deconstructive or hybrid aesthetics. My own approach is to begin with the assumption that Yeats does indeed embrace the aesthetic in response to the pressures of modernity—but by this I mean a certain kind of response and a certain form of modernity. In contrast with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the two high modernist poets with whom he is usually associated, Yeats adopts a poetics that is relentlessly dialectical, continually shuttling between unity and disunity, never remaining content for long with the type of “objective” closure that Eliot realized in *Four Quartets* or that Pound sought to achieve in the overarching narrative of the *Cantos*. This dialectical feature of his art, often stressed in more traditional approaches, emerges out of Yeats’s encounter with Irish modernity, a space in which the “grand narratives” of colonialism and popular national resistance are always revealed as fundamentally contingent, modes of seeing that, while promising to extricate the subject from the decay of modern life and the tide of meaningless history, only serve to enforce a deadening adherence to a pragmatic form of Western consciousness in which the individual is sacrificed to the abstract dictates of the state. Yeats was also sensitive to a key paradox facing the Irish writer: the fact that the English language itself, the basis of art and thought, continually reminds the native subject of his or her own alienated position within the “civilizing” narratives of imperial conquest. Although Yeats never advocated a return to Gaelic, a move that he saw as promoting isolation from the global community, he remained cognizant of the link between the dispossession of the Irish language and the growing influence of Western consciousness in Ireland, forms of apprehension that operate, on the level of language, to reduce art to some utilitarian purpose.

In chapter 5, I also argue that Yeats responds to this encounter with Irish modernity by adopting a form of negative dialectics, offering the autonomous art object as a means of registering and resisting the pressures of a (post)colonial Ireland in which art, language, and thought are always judged, whether
from the vantage of colonial assimilation or nationalist resistance, according to their use value—an Ireland, that is, in which the poet is compelled to produce committed art. Yeats’s turn to the autonomous art object functions not only as a retreat from the chaos of an Ireland in transition but also as an alternative means of engaging with and responding to the material pressures of that period of flux, of national crisis. As is the case with all five chapters in this book, my aim, in rejecting compartmentalized political readings of his art, is to allow the complex and multifaceted nature of Yeats to emerge, to demonstrate how his poetry and drama, in engaging with the contested discourses of British imperialism and Irish nationalism, offer powerful and sophisticated responses to the incoherence of a (post)colonial Ireland that, as W. H. Auden has famously written, “hurt [Yeats] into poetry.”

Because Deep-Rooted Things focuses on specific moments during which Yeats engages with the uncertainties and tensions of an Ireland in transition, it is not intended as a chronological or exhaustive account of his extensive body of work. Rather, the movement of the chapters—from his early work in the theater, to the war poems and The Tower as a whole, to the symbolist and more recognizably modernist verse of his early and middle phases—is intended to mirror the uneven or “mixed” course of Irish history, as questions concerning identity, historiography, and the impact of modernity continually resurface in new forms. Because this book stresses the relationship between Yeats’s work and issues of colonization and colonial resistance, it confines itself to Yeats the conflicted nationalist and nationalist critic. There are, of course, other Yeatses, including the figure who first attracted my own passionate interest: the poet whose verse encompasses larger themes such as the bitterness of desire, love and memory, the longing for permanence in art, the relationship between self and soul or body and mind, and the ultimate attempt on the part of one man to go “Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb” (“Vacillation”). My own representation of Yeats the politically attuned artist is not designed to replace this celebrated poet but to uncover new possibilities for reading his verse and drama. By using different theoretical approaches—never as ends in themselves but as means to present fresh perspectives on the literature—I hope to enhance our understanding of one discrete yet important aspect of Yeats: the extent to which his art, in its engagement with questions of nationhood and the broader impact of British colonization, remains deeply rooted in his conflicted attitude toward the land of his birth—an Ireland where, as Yeats wrote late in life, “No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive” (LE, 210).
CHAPTER
ONE

Mixing Everything Up at the Beginning

Telling Stories about Colonization in *On Baile’s Strand*

There is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.

— Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

What a mix-up you make of everything, Blind Man! You were telling me one story, and now you are telling me another story. . . . How can I get the hang of it at the end if you mix everything at the beginning?

— The Fool, in *On Baile’s Strand*

The words of a fool spoken to a blind man—a fool and a blind man bound together by necessity and mutual distrust. One needs wisdom, the other sight. One lacks guidance, the other passion. A story to be understood, mixed from the beginning, mingled in the telling, uncertain in the closing. In this play written for Ireland’s fledgling National Theatre, drawn from Ireland’s mythic past, and centering on the self-defeating passion of a legendary Irish hero, it is perhaps more than fitting that the Fool, with the insight of his Shakespearean namesake, should ask his eternal companion about beginnings and endings, narrating past and present, finally getting the hang of the story. For these are the questions of a colonized people whose sense of identity is inextricably bound with empire and whose history is not one tale but a tangle of multiple stories,
silences, erasures, buried myths of heroism and tragic defeat. Although Yeats wrote late in life that he felt “enchanted” by “the dream itself” of On Baile’s Strand—the image of Cuchulain, “Character isolated by a deed,” turning his sword upon “the ungovernable sea” (“The Circus Animals’ Desertion”)—the play has other stories to tell. These are stories of colonization and colonial memory, of two cultures bound together in mutual fascination and animosity, and of an artist and a people who, in the words of Seamus Heaney, “keep striking / Inwards and downwards” into the past only to find that “Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before.”

Yet these are not the stories found in scholarly readings of On Baile’s Strand. In part, this is due to the fact that the play—first performed in 1904 at the opening of the Abbey Theatre and staged again, after substantial revising, in 1906—is generally considered a transitional text that marks a departure, both aesthetically and politically, from the type of romantic and, in the case of Cathleen ni Houlihan, more directly anti-imperial nationalism expressed in Yeats’s early verse and drama.

As Yeats himself explains in a 1904 letter to George Russell, much of his work from the 1890s suffered from “an exageration [sic] of sentiment & sentimental beauty” (L, 434), and in his notes for In the Seven Woods (1904) he characterizes On Baile’s Strand as “foreshadowing . . . a change that may bring a less dream-burdened will into my verses” (VP, 814). Yeats was equally clear regarding his political attachments, describing the first years of the twentieth century as a period when, as he would later write in “J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time” (1910), he experienced “the dissolution of a school of patriotism that held sway over my youth,” a school of patriotism devoted to the idealization of all things Irish, to the denigration of all things British, and to an uncompromising, revolutionary agenda as it might be “understood by a child in a National School” (EI, 312, 313). Cultural nationalism had, by privileging the political over the aesthetic, failed to produce the type of lasting art that truly “define[s] races,” and, in keeping with his critique of his own work, Yeats suggests that such art had, from the time of Thomas Davis to the present, remained “rhetorical, conventional, [and] sentimental” (EI, 341, 313). Accordingly, those critics who examine On Baile’s Strand in political terms (a relatively small number given the amount of scholarship that the play has generated) frequently target Yeats’s complex and progressively critical attitude toward both militant nationalism and his own cultural nationalism, arguing, in the manner of Susan C. Harris, that the play functions to undercut “a petrified nationalism that . . . has lost the ability to adapt to new challenges and precludes any innovative approach to the problem of Ireland’s political or cultural liberation.”

From a postcolonial perspective, particularly one that would find affinities between Yeats and other more recognizably postcolonial writers, this type of nationalist focus offers a useful point of entry. Yeats’s rejection of a nationalist focus offers a useful point of entry. Yeats’s rejection of a nationalist
project founded exclusively on Irish culture, suspicious of all outside, particularly British cosmopolitan influences, and bent upon the subjugation of art to directly political ends, marks him as one of the earliest colonial artists to confront fully the limitations of anti-imperial nationalism. To be sure, his antipathy is motivated in part, as Conor Cruise O’Brien and others have suggested, by hostility toward Ireland’s emerging Catholic middle class—the primary advocates, according to Yeats, of “popular,” unabashedly patriotic drama—and in part by an increasing sense of disconnection from the political and militant vanguard of the nationalist movement. Yet, in both these respects, as C. L. Innes notes, Yeats shares much in common with other colonial and postcolonial writers and intellectuals from Africa, India, Australia, and elsewhere. Yeats came to realize, implicitly if not expressly, the essentially derivative nature of anti-imperial nationalism: its uncritical adoption of imperial models of nationhood and freedom “organized around,” as Gerry Smyth neatly summarizes, “notions such as tradition, authenticity and sovereignty”; its necessary yet fundamentally limiting desire to reverse empire’s binary logic, to celebrate that which had marked the colony as Other, and thus to replicate rather than challenge the very value system by which empire legitimates itself; and its dangerous insistence upon national purity, a call for hegemony that, like imperialism’s ideological imperatives, serves to silence dissenting voices. When Yeats, in 1903, castigates the Irish politician who “is more concerned with the honour and discipline of his squad than with the most beautiful or the most profound thought” and the Irish nationalist who “refuses to use, even in the service of one’s own cause, knowledge acquired by years of labour, when that knowledge is an Englishman’s” (LAR, 100), he may be accused of (perhaps reactionary) idealism, yet his desire to challenge an inflexible nationalist program represents an important intervention that, as Edward Said has argued, necessarily prefigures “a more openly liberationist” movement.

To read On Baile’s Strand in this manner is thus to appreciate Yeats’s willingness to address directly the limitations of nationalism as an essentially derivative discourse. But it is also to confine our own analysis to the terms established by Yeats himself. As a writer who, in the words of R. F. Foster, always maintained a “powerful sense of his own history,” Yeats often stressed, in later years, a clear division between his youthful attachment to cultural nationalism and his rejection, in the aftermath of Cathleen ni Houlihan and the controversies surrounding Synge’s plays, of a nationalist mindset “full of abstractions and images created not for their own sake but for the sake of party” (EI, 316). This developmental narrative is central to Yeats’s autobiographical self-fashioning as an aloof artist for whom cultural nationalism was simply the product of youthful enthusiasm, “a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies” that he quickly discarded (“A Coat”).
At the time when Yeats began writing *On Baile’s Strand*, however, his position with respect to nationalism was considerably less certain. Though his essays repeatedly stress his growing dissatisfaction with the *Celtic Twilight* school of his youth, they also record his continual struggle to articulate the contours of a truly national theater, one that will provide the foundation for popular unity precisely because it remains true to artistic sincerity, a “theatre where the capricious spirit that bloweth as it listeth has for a moment found a dwelling-place” (*IDM*, 35). If he rejects propaganda art, he also views literature as “the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of values” (*IDM*, 34). If he cautions dramatists against focusing exclusively on Irish subjects in order “to change or strengthen opinion,” he concedes that “if, in the sincere working-out of the plot, they alight on a moral that is obviously and directly serviceable to the National cause, so much the better” (*IDM*, 33). In this respect, Yeats’s national theater occupies a position between the pedagogical narratives of popular cultural nationalism and the relentlessly skeptical discourses of explicitly antinational art. Although his later pronouncements suggest a clear progression from the former to the latter, his vision of the theater from the 1900s reminds us that nationalism is not a coat that can be easily cast aside but a complex series of stances containing possibilities that the Yeats of this period struggles to exhaust. If, as Said has argued, “nativism is not the only alternative” to the essentialist logic of cultural imperialism, Yeats demonstrates that a rejection of nativism does not necessarily amount to a wholesale rejection of anti-imperial nationalism.9

Where *On Baile’s Strand* is concerned, our emphasis on the complexities of Yeatsian nationalism enables us to view the play not simply as a negative response to the ideological imperatives of popular cultural nationalism but also as a work that engages fundamentally with the discourses of cultural imperialism. While the play certainly does signal a departure from *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and even more so from the conventions of popular nationalist melodrama,10 *On Baile’s Strand* remains true in spirit to the revolutionary impulse driving these earlier works: the desire to expose the influence of colonization and to transform an imperial narrative of Ireland’s past, which records only the failures of a people bent upon but incapable of governing themselves, “into,” in the words of D. E. S. Maxwell, “a history of artistic triumph.”11 Whereas Yeats sought in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* to do so by adopting preexisting nationalist codes, presenting imperialism as an exclusively material-level phenomenon, an immediately recognizable evil against which Ireland’s heroic martyrs have tirelessly struggled, in *On Baile’s Strand* he rejects those codes to offer a more complex engagement with Ireland’s colonial past and present.

Though the play is set in Ireland’s heroic age, a mythical time preceding British colonization, *On Baile’s Strand* responds directly to British imperialism
in three specific ways: by laying bare the power dynamics of cultural imperialism, by exposing the psychological impact of colonization, and, ultimately, by transforming Ireland’s tragic past into art, a move which, as I will argue at the close of this chapter, should not necessarily be dismissed as a politically regressive retreat from the material into the realm of the aesthetic. In terms of cultural imperialism, *On Baile’s Strand* can be productively read within the context of Matthew Arnold’s “racial” theories as they are outlined in his influential work “On the Study of Celtic Literature” (1867), specifically Arnold’s juxtaposition of the emotional Celt against the practical-minded Anglo-Saxon and his vision of a British nation saved from “Philistinism” by the harmonious incorporation of Celtic “sensibility.” While the play’s Arnoldian affinities, as several critics have noted, are readily apparent—Yeats himself evoked Arnold’s racial distinctions when he described Cuchulain as “wandering passion” and Conchubar as “reason” (*CL*, 527)—scholars have failed to appreciate the extent to which *On Baile’s Strand* represents a subversive response to Arnold’s relatively “liberal” form of cultural imperialism, an imperial project that, from the perspective of the colonized, demands submission even as it offers a seemingly benign form of incorporation.

Matthew Arnold’s dialectical understanding of race relations and his belief in the essential superiority of British culture over Irish culture—“The more intensely the Irish desire a separate Parliament, the more it proves that they ought not to have one,” was his response to William Gladstone’s 1886 Home Rule Bill—accorded with the racial theories promulgated by his contemporaries, though he differed slightly in placing a limited “value” on certain Celtic traits. In this respect, he was similar to the French linguist Ernest Renan, whose essay “The Poetry of the Celtic Races” (1854) establishes the racial tropes later adopted by Arnold. Just as Renan describes the Celtic race as lacking “any aptitude for political life” but capable of an “infinite delicacy of feeling,” Arnold, while criticizing the Celt’s fundamental lack of “steadiness, patience, [and] sanity,” suggests that “the sensibility of the Celt, if everything else were not sacrificed to it, is a beautiful and admirable force.” Like Renan, Arnold subscribed to the general belief that “superior” races must naturally supplant “inferior” ones, and he was content to see the eradication of Gaelic as a living language—witness his commitment as Inspector of Schools to English over Welsh—and of Celtic culture as a living culture. But with one qualification: Arnold called for the incorporation of the Celtic “spirit,” those “admirable qualities” of the Celt that should be preserved, into an Anglo-Saxon culture that, in England, had degenerated into Philistinism. According to Arnold, the laws of racial history pointed to this inevitable and, from his perspective, positive submergence of Celtic culture into Anglo-Saxon culture: “The fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one
homogeneous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly trends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time.”

Arnold’s incorporative vision presents the Irish as a people whose culture had been and might again be harvested for the betterment of the colonizer. As Robert Young persuasively argues, Arnold’s call for the establishment of a “Chair of Celtic” at Oxford speaks directly to the cultural imperialist basis of this vision: “Never was the colonial relation to other cultures in the nineteenth century more clearly stated: the force of ‘modern civilization’ destroys the last vestiges of a vanquished culture to turn it into an object of academic study. . . . The function of the chair is to reactivate the traces of the colonized so as to transform the moribund culture of the colonizer, and even ‘to send a message of peace to Ireland.’” Not surprisingly, this “message of peace” held considerable appeal for “English liberals,” to quote Declan Kiberd, “who agreed that Celtic spirituality and poetry might repair many gaps in the English personality.”

Arnold’s views were, of course, less palatable to the Irish—Yeats devotes much of his 1897 essay, “The Celtic Element in Literature,” to debunking many of Arnold’s claims—but his basic assumptions, re-presented so as to idealize those Celtic traits that Arnold denigrates, fundamentally influenced the revivalists, including Yeats. Notes Kiberd:

It is remarkable, in retrospect, how durable such thinking proved, even among those Irish who fancied that they had exploded it. Many embraced the more insulting clichés of Anglo-Saxonist theory on condition that they could reinterpret each in a more positive light. The modern English, seeing themselves as secular, progressive and rational, had deemed the neighbouring islanders to be superstitious, backward and irrational. The strategy of the revivalists thus became clear: for bad words substitute good, for superstitious use religious, for backward say traditional, for irrational suggest emotional.

Yeats’s 1901 essay, “At Stratford-on-Avon,” offers one example of this type of reversal, and before turning to On Baile’s Strand, I will briefly examine that essay, in part because its anti-imperial elements have not been entirely appreciated and in part because the essay, which ultimately replicates many of Arnold’s basic assumptions, provides a clear contrast to the more radical strategy undertaken in the play.

In “At Stratford-on-Avon,” Yeats responds to the Shakespeare scholarship of his day, concentrating primarily on the work of his father’s close friend,
Edward Dowden, Irish-born professor of English literature at Trinity College, unionist sympathizer, and author of *Shakspere [sic]: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875). According to Dowden, a model for Shakespeare’s ideal state administrator can be found in *Henry V*: “It is clear and unquestionable that King Henry V is Shakspere’s ideal of the practical heroic character. He is the king who will not fail. He will not fail as the saintly Henry VI failed, nor as Richard II failed, a hectic, self-indulgent nature, a mockery king of pageantry and sentiment and rhetoric.”20 Replace “Richard” with “the Celt” and we have nearly a direct paraphrase of Arnold’s characterization of the “sentimental” Celtic race, a people “undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent by nature,” who, like Richard, are easily captivated by the outward finery of military displays: “The Gauls had a rule inflicting a fine on every warrior who, when he appeared on parade, was found to stick out too much in front. . . . Such a rule is surely the maddest article of war ever framed.”21 But unlike Arnold—who was accused by Yeats’s younger contemporary, Wyndham Lewis, of emphasizing Shakespeare’s Celtic qualities22—Dowden constructs a distinctly Anglo-Saxon Bard. Relying on Arnold’s basic assumptions yet eschewing his critique of current British culture, Dowden offers a Shakespeare whose ideal leader, Henry, embodies a set of Anglo-Saxon traits at once abstract and essentially British: “With his glorious practical virtues, his courage, his integrity, his unfaltering justice, his hearty English warmth, his modesty, his love of plainness rather than of pageantry, his joyous temper, his business-like English piety, Henry is indeed the ideal of the [successful] king.”23

What is interesting about Dowden, however, is that he does not read Shakespeare, in the manner of most of his contemporaries, exclusively as a transparent example of Victorian pragmatism. For Dowden, Shakespeare, as an artist and a businessman, is a composite of two temperaments, the emotional and the reasonable, and Shakespeare’s success is the result of his ability to harmoniously balance this internal division by exhibiting “self-control,” a type of “serene self-possession which he had sought with . . . persistent effort.”24 Though the Bard may give voice to the passionate broodings of a Hamlet or to the deluded idealism of a Falstaff, he always remains grounded in the rational, policing his own emotions so that he does not ultimately succumb to the irrational or sentimental. This emphasis on internal control speaks to the cultural imperialist function of Dowden’s biographical reading of Shakespeare. Writing at a time when Irish land-league groups had begun to agitate for a militant uprising, Dowden’s Shakespeare provides a universal model for how the colonial subject might police himself, continually repressing his passionate or violent emotions by turning to reason and sanity. Thus, in the following passage that summarizes Dowden’s position, the term “rebel” takes on an added and directly political resonance: “[Shakespeare] is inexorable in his plays to all rebels against . . .
fact; because he was conscious of the strongest temptation to become himself a rebel.”

Yeats neatly reverses the racial dialectic upon which Dowden’s reading is based, adopting Shakespeare as, in the words of Philip Edwards, “an honorary Celt.” Indeed, just as Wole Soyinka has stated that Shakespeare “may turn out to be an Arab after all,” Yeats’s Shakespeare turns out to be Celtic after all. If Dowden’s Shakespeare views Richard with contempt, Yeats’s Shakespeare views him with “sympathetic eyes” (EI, 105). If Dowden and his fellow critics characterize Richard as “sentimental, weak, selfish, insincere,” Yeats, presenting Richard’s emotional temperament in a positive light, describes him as “lovable and full of capricious fancy” (EI, 103–105). More important, Yeats lays bare the cultural bias implied in Dowden’s celebration of Henry, arguing that Dowden and his successors, who “grew up in a century of utilitarianism” (EI, 102), discovered in Shakespeare, in high culture itself, a set of decidedly Anglo-Saxon values that they immediately present as universal, the essential qualities of the true heroic statesman. Yeats astutely links this desire with cultural imperialism, offering a type of postcolonial critique, echoed later by Said and others, in which the universal and essential are revealed as fundamentally contingent, a set of Western constructions used to legitimate the supremacy of imperial culture and to justify its colonizing mission: “In Professor Dowden’s successors this apotheosis went further; and it reached its height at a moment of imperialistic enthusiasm, of ever-deepening conviction that the commonplace shall inherit the earth, when somebody of reputation, whose name I cannot remember, wrote that Shakespeare admired this one character alone out of all his characters” (EI, 104–105).

The person whose name Yeats cannot remember was likely Sidney Lee, a British scholar who describes Shakespeare’s Henry V as “evok[ing] a joyous sense of satisfaction in the high potentialities of human character and a feeling of pride among Englishmen that one of his mettle is of English race.” For individuals such as Lee who, writes Yeats, assume “that Shakespeare judged men with the eyes of a Municipal Councillor weighing the merits of a Town Clerk” (EI, 105), Shakespeare’s Henry functions as a source of racial pride that validates their own rational, Enlightenment-based, Anglo-Saxon values. For the Irish-born Dowden the case is more complicated. His valorization of Henry and “distaste” for Richard, Yeats provocatively argues, are the result of a colonial mindset whereby the colonized finds only shame in his own country and admiration for the imperial country: “He lived in Ireland, where everything has failed, and he meditated frequently upon the perfection of character which had, he thought, made England successful. . . . [He] thought that Henry V . . . was not only the typical Anglo-Saxon, but the model Shakespeare held up before England” (EI, 104).
“At Stratford-on-Avon,” by stressing the cultural biases of Dowden and his successors, serves as an important anti-imperial critique, a work that, as Kiberd briefly notes, “restore[s] to Shakespeare’s texts an openness which they had once had, but long since lost under the distortions of an imperial interpretative psychology.” At the same time, the essay, because it relies upon Arnold’s basic racial assumptions, represents a fundamentally derivative exercise that reverses but does not, in the end, radically undermine empire’s binary logic. Indeed, Yeats’s essay, written from the perspective of an Irishman touring in England, serves as a fascinating example of the colonized unconsciously mimicking the travel writings of the colonizer.

Arnold begins his essay by recalling a holiday on Britain’s Welsh coast, a device that he uses to foreshadow the contrast between the dark, hard world of the Saxon and the light, soft world of the Celt. Gazing across a bay, eastward toward Liverpool, “that Saxon hive,” Arnold finds the view decidedly lacking in charm: “The horizon wants mystery, the sea wants beauty, the coast . . . has a too bare austereness and aridity.” Gazing westward toward Wales, “Every-thing is changed.” The landscape is bathed in “the eternal softness and mild light of the west,” and the hills fade away “in an aerial haze.” Yeats employs the same strategy. London, the imperial center, is described as a place where “the first man you meet puts any high dream out of your head,” while the quaint, exotic landscape of Stratford is a place ripe for dreams and filled with “an unearthly energy” that Yeats immediately links with Ireland: “I have felt as I have sometimes felt on grey days on the Galway shore, when a faint mist has hung over the grey sea and the grey stones, as if the world might suddenly vanish and leave nothing behind, not even a little dust under one’s feet” (EI, 97). Both men—Arnold in a Welsh landscape “where the past still lives” and Yeats in the “quiet streets” of Stratford “where gabled and red-tiled houses remember the Middle Ages” (EI, 96)—discover in their travels a world connected with the past, a Celtic world in which art remains alive, the very antithesis of Arnold’s Saxon east and Yeats’s materialistic London. However, while Yeats, in the manner of the colonial pioneer, would encourage others to follow in his stead—“adventures like this of Stratford-on-Avon show that people are ready to jour-ney from all parts of England and Scotland and Ireland . . . to live with their favorite art” (EI, 98)—Arnold, in the manner of the cultural imperialist, calls upon the British nation to recognize the intellectual and artistic use value of Celtic culture, to reawaken and reincorporate that Celtic spirit that has been the wellspring of Britain’s greatest poetry.

“At Stratford-on-Avon” thus demonstrates Yeats’s debt to Arnold’s racial theories and the extent to which Yeats, even as he critiques Dowden, remains bound in empire’s dialectical logic. The case is different with On Baile’s Strand. While
Yeats again relies upon Arnold’s racial tropes, he fundamentally challenges Arnold’s notion of cultural incorporation by giving voice to the underlying power dynamics, submission masked as productive incorporation, that remain silent in Arnold. The play opens with an apparent vision of racial harmony, as the emotional Fool—a decidedly Celtic figure in touch with Ireland’s spiritual world—praises the reasonable Blind Man, his “clever” Saxon counterpart:

What a clever man you are though you are blind! There’s nobody with two eyes in his head that is as clever as you are. Who but you could have thought that the henwife sleeps every day a little at noon? I would never be able to steal anything if you didn’t tell me where to look for it. And what a good cook you are! You take the fowl out of my hands after I have stolen it and plucked it, and you put it into the big pot at the fire there, and I can go out and run races with the witches at the edge of the waves and get an appetite.35

The two—dependent upon each other for the most basic of needs, the acquisition of food—would seem to embody a productively hybrid relationship, the Blind Man serving as intellect and the Fool as body, or, to use Arnold’s terms, Saxon “steadiness” blended with Celtic “sensibility,” or, at the risk of reading the play as political allegory, imperial planning coupled with colonial manpower, the mind of the colonizer benevolently guiding the hand of the colonized.

Yet, to tease out the political ramifications of this relationship, we need not turn to the allegorical. The issue of power immediately surfaces as the Fool and the Blind Man discuss the High King’s desire to bind the intractable Cuchulain to an oath of fidelity whereby, as the Blind Man plainly states, Conchubar will become “Cuchulain’s master in earnest from this day out” (*VPl*, 463). During this initial discussion, what begins as a comic exchange, with the Blind Man voicing the opinions of Conchubar and the Fool of Cuchulain, quickly becomes a not entirely veiled debate over racial superiority, as the Blind Man asserts the primacy of Saxon reason over Celtic passion. When the Fool, with characteristic naïveté and insight, exclaims, “Cuchulain’s master! I thought Cuchulain could do anything he liked,” the Blind Man responds with cold logic: “So he did, so he did. But he ran too wild, and Conchubar is coming to-day to put an oath upon him that will stop his rambling and make him as biddable as a housedog and keep him always at his hand” (*VPl*, 463). The Blind Man’s characterization, applicable both to Cuchulain and to the Fool, draws upon notions of racial hierarchy present in Arnold and common in late nineteenth-century British popular culture. Just as Arnold emphasized the Celt’s penchant for anarchy and just as the Irish Celt was represented in myriad political cartoons, especially during periods of revolutionary agitation, as an unruly beast that must be tamed,
an aggressive animal that responds only to the firm hand of a stronger ruler, Cuchulain is described as “too wild,” a “rambling” figure whom Conchubar will make “as biddable as a house-dog.”

In the voice of the Blind Man, in this curt summation of Conchubar’s later arguments, we also hear the authoritative voice of Arnold’s brand of cultural imperialism, addressed this time not to the colonizer but to the colonized: “Take the oath, Cuchulain. I bid you take the oath. Do as I tell you. What are your wits compared with mine, and what are your riches compared with mine? And what sons have you to pay your debts and to put a stone over you when you die? Take the oath, I tell you. Take a strong oath” (VPl, 463–465). These are the questions that Arnold implicitly asks of the Celt who, “in spite of his admirable gifts of quick perception and warm emotion,” in spite of his achievement in “the comparatively petty art of ornamentation, in rings, brooches, crosiers, [and] relic-cases,” has “in material civilization . . . been ineffectual.” The Fool’s response—“(crumpling himself up and whining): ‘I will not. I’ll take no oath. I want my dinner’” (VPl, 465)—is at once comic and subversive, arising out of a downward shift in the level of discourse from the national to the individual. By highlighting a basic need (particularly, given the haunting presence of the Famine in Irish culture, the need for food), the Fool’s reply marks a disruptive gap in what Homi Bhabha terms the “performative” narratives of nationhood, between, in this case, the desires of imperial nationalism, the interpolation of the racially Other colonial subject into a cohesive narrative of Enlightenment progress, and the actual, heterogeneous desires of that subject. The Blind Man’s command, which calls upon the Celtic Fool to assume the role of silent colonial citizen, is belied by the Fool’s unconsciously subversive response, as a vision of harmonious hierarchy gives way to comic difference, a narrative of national progress juxtaposed with a basic human want, the desire for food. Indeed, the fact that a fowl is stolen suggests that this is a (colonial) realm where individuals compete over limited resources, a subtle reminder of the material inequalities that cultural imperialist narratives of productive hybridity continue to conceal.

This early dialogue neatly foreshadows the debate between Conchubar and Cuchulain, serving to cast Conchubar’s seemingly adroit arguments in an ironic light, but a second level of irony is introduced when we consider the oath discussion within the particular context of Arnold’s racial theories and the broader context of cultural imperialism. Initially, Conchubar plays upon Cuchulain’s secret longing for a child—“I have heard you cry, aye, in your very sleep, / ‘I have no son’”—suggesting that the oath will prevent Cuchulain’s “house and lands” from “pass[ing] into a stranger’s keeping” (VPl, 483). Because Cuchulain appears frequently in Irish popular culture as the embodiment of Ireland itself, what is at stake here is not simply Cuchulain’s individual legacy but that
of the Irish nation and, by extension, the Celtic race. According to Arnold, the Celt, once “the Titan of the early world, who in primitive times fills so large a place on earth’s scene,” has, for “want of sanity and steadfastness,” failed to evolve. He “dwindles and dwindles as history goes on, and at last is shrunk to what we now see him. For ages and ages the world has been constantly slipping, ever more and more out of the Celt’s grasp.” Just as Arnold notes that “the Celt [has been] ineffectual in politics,” Conchubar reminds Cuchulain that he is “but a little king and weigh[s] but light / In anything that touches government” (VP1, 481). And, where Arnold points to the Celt’s steadfast idealism as a weakness, his readiness “to [react] against the despotism offact” as a fundamental flaw that prevents him from developing, Conchubar cries in exasperation: “Now as ever / You mock at every reasonable hope, / And would have nothing, or impossible things” (VP1, 485). Conchubar assumes that national (and thus cultural) evolution will only take place through adaptive incorporation, a blending of Celtic passion with Saxon reason:

Will you be bound into obedience  
And so make this land safe for [your followers]?  
You are but half a king and I but half;  
I need your might of hand and burning heart,  
And you my wisdom. (VP1, 491)

However, as with the previous argument between the Fool and the Blind Man, a certain degree of what we might term ideological slippage occurs. “For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal ideal, needs its Other.” Thus writes Partha Chatterjee, and, while his comments are directed toward colonial nationalism’s desire “to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment,” the image of imperial progress, they speak also to the hegemonic desire of cultural imperialism and to the place of the colonized Other within that desire circuit. Throughout the oath debate, Cuchulain’s responses serve to expose the contradiction between an imperial narrative of progress—one that calls upon the colonized to reject his primitive (Celtic) past and embrace a modern future, to “leave,” in Conchubar’s words, “a strong and,” tellingly, “settled country” (VP1, 479)—and the colonized’s actual position within that narrative. Unlike the Fool’s comic response, Cuchulain’s words indicate an awareness of the role that he is called upon to assume, an awareness that Conchubar’s gift of stability contains only the chains of “obedience”:

And I must be obedient in all things;  
Give up my will to yours; go where you please;  
Come when you call; sit at the council-board
Among the unshapely bodies of old men;
I whose mere name has kept this country safe. . . .
Must I, that held you on the throne when all
Had pulled you from it, swear obedience
As if I were some cattle-raising King?
. . . Am I
So slack and idle that I need a whip
Before I serve you? (VPl, 479)

The passage bluntly counters the High King’s talk of harmonious incorporation. For Cuchulain, the oath calls him to renounce his autonomy, which has kept his kingdom safe, and to play the role of “some cattle-raising King” who cringes before the whip of progress and Saxon reason.

Moreover, Cuchulain’s arguments, which echo Yeats’s comments on the cultural biases of Dowden and his followers, reveal the extent to which Conchubar’s seemingly universal and essential notions of progress are, in fact, contingent, dependent upon the assumption that the listener embraces the same value system as the speaker. “For you thought,” notes Cuchulain, “That I should be as biddable as others / Had I their reason for it; but that’s not true” (VPl, 463). Cuchulain’s use of the word “reason” is provocatively ambiguous. Viewed from one angle, Cuchulain is simply noting that Conchubar’s appeals, his claims about children, are not applicable to Cuchulain, the Irish hero who, at this point in the play, mistakenly believes that he has no child. Viewed from a second angle, Cuchulain is referring to a type or mode of reasoning. In other words, Conchubar’s pragmatic arguments do not apply to Cuchulain because he does not reason in the manner of Conchubar or Conchubar’s followers. Indeed, Cuchulain’s reply works nicely as a counter to Arnold’s (and, for that matter, Dowden’s) claim that “balance, measure, and patience” represent “the eternal conditions . . . of high success.”48 It is not the case that Cuchulain, as a Celtic figure, lacks the ability to reason; rather, he perceives that reason is itself a construct, that what Conchubar views as a reasonable course of action is, from Cuchulain’s position, entirely unreasonable. Power is again at the root of this disagreement, a fact made clear when Cuchulain notes: “For I would need a weightier argument / Than one that marred me in the copying” (VPl, 483–485). The printing metaphor is subtle, for the implications of Conchubar’s argument are not abstract but immediate. The imposition of a Saxon/imperial worldview writes Cuchulain into a new narrative of cultural progress that “mars” him “in the copying” because it interpolates him as bondsman, as the Celtic subject who must renounce his will to the pragmatic demands of the state’s true leader, the eminently rational Conchubar.

Despite his awareness of what is at stake, Cuchulain does eventually agree to accept the oath. His decision to do so is abrupt, based not upon Conchubar’s
appeals but upon the desires of Cuchulain’s own followers. Given that Yeats himself showed scant interest in conventional realism, particularly the type of drama that explores the psychological motives of individual characters, it is not surprising that critical discussions of On Baile’s Strand rarely focus on this moment of transition. “A search for a motive,” writes Rupin Desai, “would be in vain, for there is no motive. . . . Cuchulain’s about-face . . . is intended to remain slightly inexplicable and nonrealistic.” While true up to a point, the question of motive is, in fact, of central importance. When Cuchulain’s men suggest that he should embrace Conchubar’s proposal, the High King remarks: “There is not one but dreads this turbulence / Now that they’re settled men” (VP1, 493). The adjective “settled” perhaps hints of colonization, though the primary reference is to a change in popular attitude, as if the passionate heart of Celtic society had already been displaced by the practical mind of Saxon culture. Cuchulain’s words bear this out:

I understand it all.
It’s you [his men] that have changed. You’ve wives and children now,
And for that reason cannot follow one
That lives like a bird’s flight from tree to tree. —
It’s time the years put water in my blood
And drowned the wildness of it, for all’s changed. (VP1, 493)

All has changed. What seemed possible during the oath debate, the rejection of Conchubar’s values and a new blossoming of Celtic society, had been foreclosed from the start. It is Cuchulain alone who has remained true to his Celtic roots, existing, like Arnold’s defeated Celtic titan, in a fundamentally altered world that he no longer controls. The absence of motive indicates an absence of viable options, the absence, from Cuchulain’s perspective, of any real choice. As the Blind Man states early on, “Cuchulain is going to take an oath to Conchubar who is High King” (VP1, 471, emphasis added). The past has determined the present. Irish culture has changed, and Cuchulain must change with it. Viewed from this angle, the play speaks to an Irish present that is truly mixed from the beginning, a present in which cultural incorporation has already occurred, a present in which the fact of colonization, even when the focus is Ireland’s heroic age, remains a palpable force. Indeed, On Baile’s Strand, as I will argue in the next section, is as much about the process of colonization as it is about the legacy of colonization, the psychological impact of Ireland’s mingled past as experienced by both Saxon and Celt, colonizer and colonized, master and bondsman.

As several postcolonial theorists—from Frantz Fanon, to Albert Memmi, to Abdul JanMohamed—have argued, the psychology of colonizer and colonized
is shaped by the fact of empire, with each viewing the other with a mixture of disdain and desire. For the colonizer, the colonial subject represents both the uncivilized and the primitive exotic whose backward ways, numerous character flaws, and supposed connection to humanity at its most basic—that which has been lost in modern, industrial society—justify, on the level of culture, empire’s economic project, its incorporation of the unenlightened into the civilized imperial state. For the colonized, the imperial subject represents an oppressive force, the ruler bent on exploitation, but he also embodies that which the colonized would become, the modern cosmopolitan subject. Thus, argues Memmi, both imperial subject and colonial subject acquire their senses of identity in relation to the projected Other: “The colonial relationship . . . chain[s] the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, mold[ing] their respective characters and dictat[ing] their conduct.” This “implacable dependence,” this co-dependency, is mediated by power, as each subject conceives of himself or herself in a hierarchical relationship with that projected Other, the slave to be ruled or the master to be served, the primitive to be idealized (and thus granted symbolic but not actual power) or the cosmopolitan to be emulated.

*On Baile’s Strand* anticipates a type of later postcolonial drama perhaps best exemplified by the Caribbean writer Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* (1969), in which co-dependency operates as a pervasive force, defining, in Césaire’s case, the relationship between Prospero (imperial master) and Caliban (colonial slave). In Yeats, co-dependency functions as a partially conscious subtext that haunts, particularly if we attend to the 1906 revisions, the relationship between the Fool and the Blind Man and between Cuchulain and Conchubar. In the 1904 version, the Fool and the Blind Man, named respectively Barach and Fintain, are relatively realistic characters who interact with other characters on stage, including several young Irish kings. Barach clearly represents a Celtic figure whose outward appearance, “a tall thin man with long ragged hair, dressed in skins,” and opening lines, “I will shut the door, for this wind out of the sea gets into my bones” (*VPl*, 456), suggest an organic connection with primitive Ireland. He speaks in a lyrical manner, and his words are colored by a Celtic landscape inhabited by spirits, witches, and “the Riders of the Sidhe,” his description of an encounter with a changeling reminiscent of numerous characters from Yeats’s early verse: “Yesterday when I put out my lips to kiss her, there was nothing there but the wind” (*VPl*, 458). Fintain, is, by contrast, “somewhat older,” a “fat blind man” whose clipped speech—as he feels about the room asking, “What’s this and this?” (*VPl*, 458)—indicates a concern with practical matters. In the 1906 version, Yeats again emphasizes the division between the emotional Fool and the pragmatic Blind Man, but here the co-dependent nature of their relationship is brought to the fore. They are given generic names, are dressed in an equally “ragged” manner, speak only to each other and, significantly, to
Cuchulain alone, and in later performances wear masks. Always appearing together on stage, they represent two halves of a complete individual, relying upon each other for the basic acquisition of food, as Yeats highlights by moving the discussion of the stolen fowl, which appears at a later point in the first version, to the opening.

The interplay of opposites, the clash between the emotional and the rational, is nothing new in Yeats. Nearly all of his early plays dramatize this theme. The use of the subplot, however, represents a significant departure that Yeats, as he writes in 1903, adopted from Shakespeare: “The Shakespearian drama gets the emotion of the multitude out of the sub-plot which copies the main plot, much as a shadow upon the wall copies one’s body in the firelight. We think of King Lear less as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time” (EI, 215). And it is by attending to the power dynamics evident in the subplot that we begin to view On Baile’s Strand less as an abstract exploration of dialectical opposition and more as a direct investigation of an Irish present infected by its colonial past, the “history of a whole evil time” expressed in the eternal co-dependency of Fool and Blind Man, slave and master.

The Blind Man has, throughout the play, contrived to keep the stolen fowl all to himself by, appropriately enough, distracting the Fool with words. Left with nothing, the Fool, in a speech that gives voice to the frustrations of the slave, rails against his master, responding to the Blind Man’s question — “If I did not take care of you, what would you do for food and warmth?” (VPl, 516)—with abject hatred: “You take care of me? You stay safe, and send me into every kind of danger. You sent me down the cliff for gulls’ eggs while you warmed your blind eyes in the sun; and then you ate all that were good for food. You left me the eggs that were neither egg nor bird” (VPl, 516). Compare the Fool's comments with those of Césaire’s Caliban: “You [Prospero] haven’t taught me anything at all! Except of course to jabber away in your language so as to understand your orders: chop the wood, wash up, fish, plant vegetables; all because you’re far too idle to do it yourself.” Significantly, the Blind Man’s treachery has occurred before, suggesting that their “hybrid” relationship predates the action of the play. In addition, if we again bear in mind the specter of the Famine in Irish culture — British ships laden with food departing in full view of starving Irish peasants — the Fool’s words take on a new, tragic poignancy, expressing the rage of the (colonial) bondsman who has yielded the material resources of the land to the languishing (imperial) master and has received scant compensation for his labors, “eggs that were neither egg nor bird,” potatoes unfit for consumption.

Despite the Fool’s awareness of his partner’s betrayal, their relationship, as the play’s conclusion reveals, will continue, in fact must continue, for they cannot, as both companions instinctively understand, exist apart from each other.
When Cuchulain, having realized that he has killed his own son at Conchubar’s behest, attacks the waves, the Fool is briefly possessed with an almost revolutionary zeal, reading Cuchulain’s battle against the ocean (which occurs off stage and is reported to the audience through the Fool) as a nationalist might read a tale of failed independence, with every blow a strike against empire: “There, he has struck a big one! He has struck the crown off it; he has made the foam fly. There again, another big one! . . . There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him, the waves have mastered him!” (VPl, 524). The Fool’s words are at once comic and tragic, but they are also, considered within the context of nationalist melodrama, decidedly parodic and play upon a nationalist tradition that, in the manner of Cathleen ni Houlihan, glorifies the tragic death of the Irish hero. Cuchulain falls before the indomitable sea, yet, because his death is rendered from the perspective of the Fool, whose naïve enthusiasm prevents him from grasping the fundamentally tragic nature of Cuchulain’s actions, the audience cannot read the play (from a nationalist vantage) simply as another example of heroic martyrdom or (from a liberal, cultural imperialist vantage) as an instance of the Celt’s tragic nobility. Each wave has been divested of its crown, but the sea itself cannot be destroyed. Whether conceived as martyrdom, a sacrifice that will fire the blood of future revolutionaries, or as an example of the tragic failures of Celtic culture, a confirmation of Arnold’s belief that the Celts “went forth to war . . . but they always fell,”55 Cuchulain’s death is, in the end, merely the tale of a fool told to a blind man.

What remains is eternal co-dependency, as the Fool, though temporarily inspired by a call for change that he seemingly cannot grasp, returns to the Blind Man:

Blind Man: Come here, I say.

Fool (coming towards him, but looking backwards towards the door): What is it?

Blind Man: There will be nobody in the houses. Come this way; come quickly! The ovens will be full. We will put our hands into the ovens. (They go out.) (VPl, 525)

Unlike Césaire’s play, in which Caliban ultimately exposes and rejects empire’s binary logic, revealing the extent to which Prospero’s sense of self is conditioned by the presence of the disempowered Other, the subplot of On Baile’s Strand does not reach this moment of postcolonial revelation-revolution. Instead, the cycle of desire and disdain, of hierarchy masked as hybridity, will continue, as the two companions again go in search of food and experience the pleasure and
pain of thrusting their hands into ovens for sustenance, the pleasure and pain of colonial co-dependency.

The subplot establishes the relationship between the two characters as a frame, seemingly affirming empire’s binary logic as an inescapable trap that Cuchulain, like the Fool, is forced to confront. As Reg Skene insightfully argues, the Fool and the Blind Man, because they appear only to Cuchulain, “may be taken . . . as symbolizing principles operating in the mind of Cuchulain, the Fool symbolizing Cuchulain’s intuition and imagination, the Blind Man his critical and prudential intelligence.”56 We have already suggested how these dual principles speak to Arnold’s racial theories, and here we can usefully politicize Skene’s analysis by positioning the Fool and the Blind Man as two poles of an ambivalent colonial psyche, the colonized Celt whose sense of self oscillates between these two conflicting, yet inextricably linked, subject positions.57

Prior to the oath, Cuchulain castigates his followers for embracing a pragmatic worldview—“I had thought you were of those that praised / Whatever life could make the pulse run quickly”—and he mocks the legalistic formality of the oath, asking with ironic defiance: “If the wild horse should break the chariot-pole, / It would be punished. Should that be in the oath?” (VPl, 497–499).

Following the oath, his outlook abruptly changes, marking a transition whereby the Celt temporarily adopts the “reasonable” mindset of the Saxon. When the Young Man arrives at the instant the oath ritual has concluded, Cuchulain senses a kinship with his unrevealed son, and, having completed one oath of allegiance, immediately attempts another, spreading out a cloak and invoking the “Nine queens out of the Country-under-Wave / [who] Have woven it” (VPl, 511).

In the manner of the newly colonized who finds himself operating in a world structured by a fundamentally different political and cultural system, Cuchulain, in attempting to establish a second, parallel oath, simply follows the example of Conchubar, the metaphoric colonizer. In essence, Cuchulain would play the role of Conchubar; the Celt would mimic the Anglo-Saxon, the bondsman the master. Though Cuchulain’s actions are labeled by the other kings of Ireland as the product of delusional thinking, of “witchcraft,”58 they are entirely consistent with the outward trappings of Conchubar’s pragmatic worldview. Yet Cuchulain, entirely at sea as a practical statesman, is deluded in assuming that the rules of the game are the same for slave and master, that the Celt can simply become the Anglo-Saxon—that Saxon logic applies to all subjects, that incorporation means equality. This assumption blinds Cuchulain to the fact that, just as the water ritual is incompatible with the previously enacted fire ritual, this second oath violates the dictates of the first. From the perspective of Conchubar, the Young Man, the representative of an enemy nation, must be expelled, and the sovereignty of the nation must be privileged above the will of the individual.
As Conchubar’s champion, Cuchulain cannot establish a personal alliance with the enemy. Thus, Conchubar quickly halts the ritual—“No more of this. I will not have this friendship. / Cuchulain is my man, and I forbid it” (VP/1, 511)—and Cuchulain, in a flight of confused passion, turns upon his son and kills the child whom he had secretly longed to embrace.

Cuchulain’s sudden reversal, his seemingly inexplicable attack upon the Young Man, has been the source of considerable scholarly consternation, but our reading of the play in terms of colonial relations offers one possible explanation. In a present structured by empire’s co-dependent logic, formalized in the High King’s oath, the Celt, the once autonomous Irish hero, is defined as bondsman (“Cuchulain is my man”), an individual whose own will is given over to that of his Saxon master. The death of Cuchulain’s son represents the inevitable outcome of the oath, the ultimate fulfillment of the bondsman’s role, the sacrifice of the Celt’s own child at the bidding of his Saxon master. Indeed, as C. L. Innes argues, the conflict between father and son, while a common literary theme, “takes on a number of additional weightings” in nationalist literatures, with the son’s challenge to the father indicative of a challenge on the part of the colonized “to the patriarchal authority of the colonizer.”59 On Baile’s Strand gives an ironic twist to this standard nationalist theme by presenting a Celtic figure who, having renounced his own desires to that of the Saxon, unintentionally slays his own son, the very individual who might have carried on Cuchulain’s legacy.

Main plot and subplot merge when Cuchulain returns from the strand to find the Fool and the Blind Man locked in physical confrontation, and in this moment, in Cuchulain’s attempt to comprehend the “story” of the Fool and the Blind Man—the story of a stolen fowl, the story of his son’s arrival, the story of a relationship rooted in betrayal, mutual disdain, and desire—Yeats offers an Irish hero suddenly realizing his own position bound within empire’s binary logic. The Blind Man and the Fool speak simultaneously, the former again employing the rhetoric of the supposedly benevolent imperial guardian who “must be always thinking,” and the latter sounding the triumphant cry of the colonized in revolt, the Celt who speaks in verse:

When you were an acorn on the tree-top,  
Then was I an eagle-cock;  
Now that you are a withered old block,  
Still am I an eagle-cock. (VP/1, 518–519)

The Fool plays the part of eagle to Cuchulain’s hawk, imagining, in the manner of the romantic nationalist, that his master has been overcome, that freedom is at hand, that the spirit of the Celt has outlived the now “withered old block” of
Saxon might. But for Cuchulain, the tale yields not triumphant hope but tragic despair, as the Blind Man finally reveals the identity of the Young Man.

Like the Fool, Cuchulain recognizes that he has been betrayed. The hero who had been governed only by his individualistic impulses has now been reduced to the status of slave, a man who has killed his own son at the behest of his imperial ruler, and, like the Fool, Cuchulain temporarily revolts. In a second act of passionate violence, he turns upon Conchubar’s throne, figuratively killing the master:

Now I remember all.
(Comes before Conchubar’s chair, and strikes out with his sword, as if Conchubar was sitting upon it.)
’Twas you who did it—you who sat up there
With your old rod of kinship, like a magpie
Nursing a stolen spoon.60 No, not a magpie,
A maggot that is eating up the earth!
Yes, but a magpie, for he’s flown away.
Where did he fly to? (VPl, 522–523)

Cuchulain’s words neatly capture the despair of the colonized Celt, the Irishman who, “remember[ing] all,” recognizes his now fundamentally disempowered position. Conchubar is likened to a maggot that, in a reference to imperial expansion, “is eating up the earth,” and to a magpie, a creature of the air that is not confined to any one geographic space. Both metaphors—indeed, the fact that Cuchulain vacillates between metaphors—serve to mark Conchubar as all-encompassing, a ruler of land and air who cannot be expelled any more than the sky can be rid of birds or the earth of maggots. Cuchulain thus departs ready to avenge his son, calling, “Conchubar, Conchubar! The sword into your heart!” (VPl, 523), but it is clear that the master cannot be destroyed. Pausing before Conchubar, Cuchulain, as if recognizing the futility of his revolutionary desire, turns upon the waves to fight a battle that he cannot win. In contrast with Césaire’s A Tempest, written during a period when former Caribbean colonies had begun to achieve independence, On Baile’s Strand, written during a period, after the fall of Parnell, in which British colonial rule remained firmly in place, does not conclude with the hope of colonialism’s demise. Despite Cuchulain’s awareness of his disempowered position, despite the tragic nobility of his final act, empire’s co-dependent logic will, as the reuniting of the Fool and the Blind Man indicate, continue into the future.

If co-dependency remains in place and if the Celt’s dream of killing his Saxon master merely yields the Celt’s ultimate destruction, is it nevertheless possible
to read *On Baile’s Strand* as a revolutionary anti-imperial work? At first glance, the answer would seem to be “no.” Indeed, what Yeats offers as a response to imperialism—the Irish hero tragically hurling himself against the sea—would appear to represent, from a critical postcolonial perspective, an example of nativism, a retreat from history into the realm of essences. In a particularly revealing moment recorded in Joseph Holloway’s journals, Yeats claims to have “had Charles Stewart Parnell in his mind when he wrote *On Baile’s Strand.* ‘People who do aught for Ireland,’ he said, ‘ever and always have to fight with the waves in the end.’” Playing the role of political hero to that of Synge, the artistic hero, Yeats’s Parnell embodied an uncompromising Irish individualism, what Yeats, writing in 1904, terms “the permanent character of the race”: “If one remembers the men who have dominated Ireland for the last hundred and fifty years, one understands that it is strength of personality, the individualising quality in a man, that stirs Irish imagination most deeply in the end. There is scarcely a man who has led the Irish people, at any time, who may not give some day to a great writer precisely that symbol he may require for the expression of himself” (*Ex*, 147–148). If Yeats had Parnell in mind, it is likely because both Parnell and Cuchulain perfectly express, not in triumph but in failure, the “strength of personality” that “stirs [the] Irish imagination,” a distinctly Irish form of heroism, “a gay struggle without hope,” as Yeats would write later in life (*LSM*, 154). Where “contemporary English literature takes delight in praising England and her Empire,” Irish art dwells “on ideas living in the perfection of hope, on visions of unfulfilled desire, and not on the sordid compromise of success. The popular poetry of England celebrates her victories, but the popular poetry of Ireland remembers only defeats and defeated persons” (*UP2*, 187, 196).

Viewed from this perspective, *On Baile’s Strand* would seem to fulfill the dictates of “popular” Irish art, thereby affirming rather than challenging empire’s binary logic. Caught in an irrevocably altered world that calls him to play the role of Celtic slave, Cuchulain remains true to his individualistic Irish heart, embracing, like so many Irish “martyrs” before and after him, his tragic fate. What remains for the nationalist artist is to transform that moment of self-destruction into art: to express, in the death of the Irish hero, the pure soul of an Irish nation ever beautiful in defeat. As a reading based upon the work of G. C. Spivak would suggest, in *On Baile’s Strand* the subaltern—the “native”—“speaks” through Cuchulain’s suicide, yet in that act of speaking we do not hear the voice of the colonized Irish but the voice of Yeats, the nationalist artist who offers, in precisely the manner of Arnold, tragic failure as the defining characteristic of the Irish hero and an essential quality of the Celtic race. Considered from this vantage, Yeats occupies the position of the elite colonial artist who, while avoiding the Scylla of imperial modernization, the temptation
(in the manner of Dowden) to embrace a British model of Enlightenment progress, runs afoul of the Charybdis of colonial nativism, the temptation to speak the authentic voice of the primitive Irish Celt.

Without entirely dismissing this reading, I will close by offering an alternative based upon a model of counterhegemonic art and theory formulated by the postcolonial critic Asha Varadharajan. In Exotic Parodies, Varadharajan employs Theodor Adorno, particularly his emphasis on negative dialectics, to complicate a now standard postcolonial framework that “shifts the interest from [as Spivak writes] ‘rendering vocal the individual’ to ‘rendering visible the mechanism’ of silencing,” a framework in which the subaltern “object . . . continues to function as a dark continent of sorts, a species of otherness whose point of reference remains the Eurocentric and masculine self.” If postcolonial theory repeatedly calls attention to the production of the object by the subject, a form of “identity thinking” whereby the elite intellectual (Western critic or, in Yeats’s case, Protestant nationalist) reproduces the colonial subject in his or her own image, negative dialectics, by insisting upon the “recalcitrance” of the object, its critical resistance to this subsuming project, provides a different critical mode. Focused on “the estranged appearance of reality” that “harbors . . . the truth of reification and thus can be unriddled to elicit something besides its deceptive appearance,” negative dialectics conceptualizes the subaltern “object as containing both its history and its denied possibilities,” a form of subaltern consciousness that is more than, in Spivak’s words, “the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.” For our purposes, Varadharajan’s model is important because it allows us to perceive in On Baile’s Strand, in a work that seemingly retreats from the material fact of colonization into essential notions of Irish identity, a form of strategic negation, a manifestation of subaltern consciousness that registers empire’s co-dependent logic but that does not fetishize the subaltern as heroic victim.

On Baile’s Strand anticipates a type of revolutionary drama that lays bare empire’s crippling co-dependent legacy but that does not simply adopt a nativist or explicitly nationalist position precisely because Yeats, despite Cuchulain’s final, seemingly heroic resolution to thrust his sword into Conchubar’s heart, remains true to the original Cuchulain myth by having him suddenly turn his sword upon the waves and not the High King. To attack Conchubar, regardless of whether or not Cuchulain succeeds, would readily affirm the dictates of overtly political nationalist art by reenacting symbolic revolution (the death of Conchubar) or by reenacting symbolic revolutionary failure (the death of Cuchulain at the hands of the High King’s men). Cuchulain, caught within empire’s dialectical logic and cognizant of the role he has embraced, chooses a different alternative. Where Césaire’s Caliban rejects his position as primitive by renouncing the name Prospero has given him—“Call me X. . . . Like a man without a
name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen”—Cuchulain renounces his position as Celtic bondsman by a more radical act, destroying himself.65 Conchubar’s position as master and his vision of a “settled” Ireland governed by Saxon reason and protected by Celtic strength are contingent upon Cuchulain silently assuming his role within that co-dependent relationship: to be the Saxon master, Conchubar requires his Celtic slave. By refusing to accept that role, Cuchulain opts out of the equation, thus achieving, in an act that refuses both sublation and sublimation, a negative affirmation of his own autonomy. Adorno’s words from Minima Moralia are certainly applicable here: “There is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.”66 On Baile’s Strand does not offer the quiet comfort of nationalist melodrama, nor does it affirm the Celt’s tragic nobility; rather, it tells the story of colonization and its legacy, fixing its audience’s gaze upon the death of an Irish hero who, by refusing to play the role of tragic or heroic revolutionary bondsman, reminds us of “the possibility of what is better,” a new story of Ireland.