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A REVIEW OF YEATS ANNUAL 20

Essays in Honour of Eamonn Cantwell, ed. Warwick Gould, *Yeats Annual 20* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2016), paperback, pp. xlvi+461, ISBN 978-1-78374-177-9

Reviewed by Edward Larrissy

With its eighteenth number in 2013 (reviewed by me in *RES* [2014]), *Yeats Annual* left its long-term publisher, Palgrave Macmillan, and moved to Open Book Publishers, which provides free and open online access, as well as paperback and hardback formats. The appearance, ethos and layout of the journal have scarcely changed, and provide for a generous supply of often beautiful illustrations. The familiar section on *A Vision*, “Mastering What Is Most Abstract,” remains, and there is space for a number of detailed book reviews. It is still edited by Warwick Gould, as it has been since he took over from Richard Finneran in 1985.

The ethos to which I referred centers on the presentation of detailed research findings in conformity with rigorous scholarly discipline: these findings preponderantly comprise textual, contextual and biographical information, and over the years *Yeats Annual* has helped immensely to improve, and often indeed to build, what one might call the infrastructure of Yeats studies. Nevertheless, sallies into the more abstract grounds of literary criticism and analysis are not discouraged, as demonstrated by two articles in the current volume by Paul Muldoon and Helen Vendler. But, writing of the uses of the archive which prompted the dedication of this volume, the editor speaks of the value of bearing “continuing witness to what it was to read Yeats in his lifetime,” and adds: “No amount of literary theory or post-colonial discourse can help us to do that” (69). One senses in these words that impatience with “theory” which motivated some scholars in the early years of *Yeats Annual*. There is much in the proposition, of course, but perhaps rather less than might appear, since for lack of a time machine the hermeneutic circle cannot be so decisively closed. Never will we be able to step back out of the living stream of our present. And Yeats can only speak so urgently to our current preoccupations because we discern their lineaments in his words. Furthermore, new methodologies or fields of study may offer enhanced ways of understanding the history of Yeats’s “own lifetime,” something which may be more scientifically done after the event than when the observer is immersed in living history.

For some years now, each volume in the series has been a “Special Number,” loosely, or not so loosely, united by a special topic. The current issue is named *Essays in Honour of Eamonn Cantwell*, and the main articles consist of the texts

of lectures given between 2003 and 2008 as the University College Cork/ESB International W. B. Yeats Lecture Series. Cantwell, who amassed a large and rich collection of books by Yeats, was a member of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), and the company administers the endowment he arranged for the lectures. In this volume, Crónán Ó Doibhlin provides an updated and corrected catalogue of Cantwell's collection, which was donated to the Boole Library.

The first lecture, by Warwick Gould, is on "Yeats and his Books." It does not limit itself to examples in the Cantwell collection but seeks to give enhanced substance to the long understood fact that the physical character of his books was a central preoccupation of Yeats. In this respect, Gould avowedly builds, as others have before him, on Hugh Kenner's seminal essay on "The Sacred Book of the Arts." But while Kenner was centrally concerned with Yeats's careful arrangement of a book's contents, including the juxtaposition as well as the order of poems, Gould shifts the emphasis towards the symbolic language of cover design and color, and puts his findings into dialogue with the perspective opened up by Kenner. He also contextualizes the efforts of Yeats and his design collaborators (e.g., Althea Gyles, Norah McGuinness, T. Sturge Moore). For instance, he glances at the green covers, adorned with shamrocks and harps, of earlier self-consciously Irish publications. This kind of imagery was anathema to Yeats, and he took a firm hand in guiding the design of his books away from sentimental Irishness, and towards a powerful symbolism which suggested Irish links to European and even "oriental" traditions: thus, Gould suggests the likely influence of a cover decoration of the Quran on Althea Gyles's knotwork design for *The Secret Rose* (1897). The conjoining of such perceptions with the scrutiny of the order of the poems between the covers offers the most up-to-date and comprehensive approach to "the book as artefact" in Yeats.

R. F. Foster's lecture, "Philosophy and Passion: W. B. Yeats, Ireland and Europe," is one of the lectures which best fulfils the remit of accessibility one expects of a public lecture. It glances briefly at Yeats's many European literary interests and at the phenomenon of European Celticism, and its focus is almost entirely on Yeats's politics. The lecture spends much time specifying the development of Yeats's political position in the early years of the twentieth century in isolation from any European connection: his movement away from conventional nationalism, his caution about being boxed in politically. With the aftermath of the Great War and the Russian Revolution, the European perspective is visible once again, but Foster directs his interest chiefly at Yeats's positioning of himself vis-à-vis political forces in Ireland: repudiating the British dispensation, but opposed equally to the anti-Treaty forces and to Catholic conservatism. As for the European dimension, Yeats seems to have felt that fascism (unlike communism) would safeguard individualism, and this may have been one of the prompts, remote as it may seem, to his composition

of the notorious Blueshirt marching songs. Yet as we all know, he became disillusioned with the Blueshirts. There is little to surprise in this lecture, though there are some interesting suggestions, such as the one that Yeats wrote the marching songs because he needed a spur to composition.

Bernard O'Donoghue's lecture on "Yeats and Love" opts for the same approach as Foster's, in that it offers a lucid and accessible account of this important topic and would constitute a worthwhile introduction for the general reader. It finds that Yeats is more consistent and thoroughgoing in his adoption of the role of courtly lover than is any poet since the Renaissance. In this, as O'Donoghue makes clear, he is agreeing with Gloria Kline in *The Last Courtly Lover*, and he repeats her identification of the goodly number of poems which support that thesis. He adds to this ideas from the work of the cultural theorist Denis de Rougemont, specifically the idea that "courtly love" came from the Arab world via Muslim Spain, and that its introduction into the West set up an irreconcilable tension between the native patriarchal culture and the cult of the sensitive and self-denying lover who became a lady's vassal. This figure could transform itself into the bearer of political heresy and instability.

As the history of the tradition of courtly love and the design for *The Secret Rose* intimate, Muslim culture and philosophy were abiding interests of Yeats. The first version of *A Vision*, with its Judwalis and "Desert Geometry," offers a reminder of how suggestive he found the idea of Islamic magic. This had been the case from *Mosada* onwards, with its dramatization of the conflict between triumphant Spanish Catholicism and Moorish magic. In *Mosada* it is a woman who practises the latter. O'Donoghue agrees with Kline that one of the values to be found in the courtly love tradition, and accepted by Yeats, was the male poet's capacity to learn from a woman's intuition. But this fact can also acquire an "oriental" tinge, as confirmed by "The Gift of Harun al-Rashid" or "Solomon to Sheba." Could there be some kind of "post-colonial discourse" which would shed light on these connections?

O'Donoghue notes that a realization of the conventions governing Yeats's love poems offers a much-needed complement to biographical criticism, which is focused on his troubled relationship with Maud Gonne. O'Donoghue might have reminded his auditors of the uncanny lines on the *Daimon* to be found in *A Vision* A: "every woman is, in the right of her sex, a wheel which reverses the masculine wheel." He rightly refers to Yeats's borrowing of the title of "Ego Dominus Tuus" from Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, and it is worth remembering that these are the words spoken by Love, who is then seen to hold Dante's beating heart, finally persuading Beatrice to eat it. Yeats's investment in "courtly love" is profound, and it is intertwined with his most radical thoughts about the unavailability to our conscious minds of the forces that drive us, sometimes to our own destruction. If Yeats admired Dante as the "chief imagination of

Christendom,” he nevertheless presumed to offer his own system, one that, like Dante’s, would hold the destabilizing power of love within the same view as the impulse to build and measure.

Helen Vendler’s lecture on “The Puzzle of Sequence: Two Political Poems” exemplifies the intense study of stanzaic form of which the most ambitious expression is *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (2007), and her lecture concerns her discussion of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Blood and the Moon,” drawn from that book. Sequences provide an opportunity for gauging not only the symbolism that may be implicit in a particular choice of stanza, but also what may be implied by juxtaposition and contrast. The methods used to insinuate significance may be “magical” (in a numerological manner) or derive from the “desire to exemplify a particular genre, rhythm, or stanza form” (120). In the case of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” we begin with the stately Renaissance feel of the *ottava rima* stanzas in which Yeats recalls pre-war civilization. But the second section consists of one complicated ten-liner divided asymmetrically in point of rhyme and rhythm. It evokes the violent movement of history through the symbol of Loie Fuller’s Chinese dancers, with their dragon and gong.

Paul Muldoon’s “Yeats and the Refrain as Symbol” fastens on the way in which the refrain crystallizes and intensifies a feature implicit in all writing and reading: the capacity “to represent at once fixity and fracture, regularity and rupture, constancy and change” (156). Muldoon’s argument that the refrain is the performative working out of Yeats’s symbolic system is convincing: it is “a physical manifestation of the winding stair and the perning gyre” (156). Rather than developing this perception towards some general point made, Muldoon, commendably I think, illustrates it by as sensitive and minute explication of the tensions between fixity and movement to be found in close readings of a number of poems, including “Easter, 1916” and “Long-legged Fly.”

John Kelly’s lecture on “Eliot and Yeats” is a welcome addition to the study of the relationship between these two poets, not least because of the solid work it conducts in finding and examining such a wide variety of interactions and mutual references. He is able to draw upon the newly available letters between both poets, as well as hitherto uncollected articles and prose “to suggest that the relationship was more complex and less antipathetic than has hitherto been thought” (180).

Kelly notes the divergent paths each poet pursued from a starting point of shared anxiety lest history should be merely an absurd process of endless repetition: “But whereas Yeats defiantly sought to redeem the world through Imagination” (184), Eliot returned to Christianity. I would add that even this difference masks similarity. “Imagination” is a big word, and a similar point might have been conveyed by recalling that Yeats’s ambitious esoteric system

involves structure and measure, and a complex interpretation of history, fit to vie with orthodox Christianity. It is relevant that both poets admired Dante as the exponent of the coherent beliefs of a unified culture.

Kelly refers to Yeats's transient interest in Madame Blavatsky (201), and to the not entirely satirical portrayal of Madame Sosostris in *The Waste Land*. But while he thinks it significant that Jessie L. Weston consulted Yeats about the Tarot, it is surely of equal significance that she had been a member of the occultist Quest Society, founded in 1897 by G. R. S. Mead, who had been Madame Blavatsky's London secretary. Weston saw the Grail legend and esoteric traditions through the same lens, and this perspective is relevant to Yeats and Eliot: they shared a fascination with the vigor and symbolic cogency of ancient sacred rituals, combined with a hunger to find contemporary forms which could convey that vigor and thus renew modernity by connecting it to ancient springs. This hunger for what is urgent and direct inspires their shared hatred for what Yeats called "opinion" in verse.

After the lectures come a number of "Research Updates and Obituaries." Colin Smythe looks at the textual history of *Mosada*. Gould finds *The Flying Dutchman* in the background to the same work. Geert Lernout considers the influence of the Indian mystic Tukaram on Yeats. Günther Schmigalle writes on Yeats's acquaintance with Max Dauthendy and James and Theodosia Durand. Deirdre Toomey finds "Three Letters from Yeats to the Anarchist Augustin Hamon." John Kelly has discovered some "ghost-writing" that Yeats undertook for the Irish diva Sarah Allgood, allowing her more time for the Abbey. The obituaries, by Nicholas Burke and Richard Allen Cave, are those of Jon Stallworthy and Katharine Worth.

The Section on "Mastering What Is Most Abstract" is given over to a review essay by Colin McDowell on the recent Harper and Paul edition of *A Vision* (1937), and the book reviews cover recent work by W. J. McCormack, Winifred Dawson, Brian Arkins, and Ann Margaret Daniel—whose edition of Olivia Shakespear's *Beauty's Hour* is found by Deirdre Toomey to be impeccable.