

Book Reviews

W.B. YEATS: A LIFE; VOLUME TWO: THE ARCH-POET.
R.F. Foster. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. \$45.00. 798 pages

William Butler Yeats, who died 65 years ago in January, has not been left to rest easy in his grave. Idolized as the Everest of Irish poetry and one of the exemplars of international modernism, Yeats enjoyed much praise and celebration among poets and critics alike in the decades following his death. But with the outbreak of political violence in Northern Ireland in the late 60s, Yeats became a flashpoint first in the culture wars which raged alongside the political and sectarian strife in Ireland and, more recently, in the larger context of Anglophonic literature, a contested candidate for inclusion in the annals of postcolonial criticism. In Ireland, the Field Day Theatre Company, founded in 1980 with the express intention of interrogating the political and cultural bases of the troubles in Ireland, invited a number of critics outside of Ireland to lend weight to their overall argument that the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland was a “colonial crisis.”

Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1973) in effect launched postcolonialism as a critical discipline, joined with Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton to analyze the situation, in Said's case with a particular eye on Yeats. Interestingly enough, in contrast to Seamus Deane, who had with the other Field Day directors extended the invitation, Said did not find Yeats and his legacy part of the colonial problem; on the contrary, Yeats for Said was an exemplary postcolonial poet, one who in his poetic and dramatic embrace of the matter of Ireland, inspired a host of Third World poets to respond correspondingly to their colonial situations. The debate on Yeats's place in the newly-formed postcolonial club (and by extension the consideration of white, European Irish literature in the same terms as the literatures of Third World countries now freed from their colonial legacies) has continued and intensified both within and without Ireland, with Yeats's poetry becoming a touchstone for the many conflicting assumptions and definitions undergirding postcolonial criticism.¹ With the publication of Roy Foster's second and final volume of

the poet's biography, it is clear that all future consideration of the theoretical status of Yeats will have to contend with this monumental study, if for no other reason than to raise the discussion, as Marx suggested one must, to the level of the concrete.

As he had with the first volume, which covered Yeats's life up to the age of fifty, Foster (the Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford and the author of *Modern Ireland, 1660–1972*) asserts that he is much more interested in the "ascertainable facts" of Yeats's life than he is in the interpretation, practical or theoretical, of the poetry. Despite this disclaimer, Foster, to a much greater degree than he did in the first volume, does in fact address the circumstances surrounding and the implications inherent in some of Yeats's strongest poems. Using Yeats's well-known dictum about the transformation of the "accidence and incoherence" of a poet's life into the intended and complete ideas of his work ("He never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table"), Foster again sets out to weave the multiple threads of Yeats life ("playwright, journalist, occultist, apprentice politician, revolutionary, diner-out, dedicated friend, confidant and lover of some of the most interesting people of his day") into a tapestry firmly intermeshed in the thick of his times. Foster wishes, as he said at the outset of the first volume, to "restore the sense of a man involved in life, and in history, notably the history of his country, at a time of exceptional flux and achievement." This volume continues and completes themes laid in the first, "notably the needs created by the early emotional insecurity, the desire to achieve wholeness and pattern in life and work, and the complex and passionate relationship between the poet and his country's history." Both these statements, with their implication of a synecdoctal and symbiotic relationship between the poet and the culture which produced him, suggest a more subliminal aim of the book as the volume progresses: using Yeats's life as both lens and lever, Foster, a revisionist historian who has previously challenged the traditional pieties associated with the emergence of the Irish nation (a Gaelic and Irish populace, led by heroic and exemplary individuals, triumphantly casting off British oppression), is out to recast the cultural history of modern Ireland just as it comes into being.

This aim explains in part Foster's decision to divide the biography at the point he does. If we had only Yeats's life and work up to 1914, it would be impossible to predict the transformations which would shortly mark

both the poet and the country. Yeats, embittered by his antagonisms with the Catholic middle class over the Abbey Theatre, the Hugh Lane painting collection, and the Transport Workers strike in 1913, had lashed out at the nationalists in his poem "September 1913," and the Irish populace, promised Home Rule by the British government, overwhelmingly supported England in World War I. In his personal life, Yeats acknowledges his long and futile pursuit of Maud Gonne, the beautiful and fiery nationalist, as a "barren passion" which has left him childless at age 49 with little to look forward to. But within two years, on the day after Easter, 1916, a small group of Irish nationalists would carry out a short-lived and abortive rebellion against British rule, and, a year after that, the fifty-two-year old Yeats, very much on the rebound from proposing for the last time to Maud Gonne – and then weirdly enough to her daughter Iseult – would marry the twenty-five-year-old Georgie Hyde-Lees, a woman he hardly knew. Both events would change Yeats's life irrevocably, and Yeats's "Easter 1916," along with the Easter Rising it commemorates, would become a site of contestation in Ireland's understanding of its origins and intentions as a modern nation state.²

The poem, with its famous oxymoron ("a terrible beauty is born"), has been understood by Irish schoolchildren as a triumphant affirmation of the birth of the new nation, an illustration of what Denis Donoghue has dubbed the "Christian Brothers" version of Irish history. Foster, however, situates the composition of the poem in the context of not only Yeats's shifting and conflicted reactions, but also his interactions with those who surrounded and influenced him at the time, especially Lady Augusta Gregory. In doing so, Foster seriously interrogates and complicates such an understanding and illustrates succinctly his revisionist *modus operandi*. For one thing, Yeats was in England, not Ireland, at the time of the Rising, and his initial reaction, recorded in a letter to Lady Gregory, was one of dismay ("I am very despondent about the future. At this moment I feel all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature & criticism from politics"). His decision to write a poem in response to the event seems prompted by Maud Gonne, whose estranged husband John MacBride was one of the rebellion leaders executed by the British in the weeks following the rebels' surrender. Further, a phrase in one of Gonne's letters, "a tragic dignity had returned to Ireland," may have been the specific catalyst for the

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poem's repeated oxymoron. He began the composition while visiting with Gonne and her daughter in France (presumably to console and court), but did not complete the poem until late September, when he was residing with Lady Gregory at Coole Park in Galway. In later years, Gonne would provide her own memory of the circumstances of the poem's composition, but Foster is quick to point out the self-aggrandizing inaccuracies in her recollection. Further, he quotes at length Gonne's letter in which she indicates in no uncertain terms her dislike of the poem, especially Yeats's central image of sacrifice turning a heart to stone. As Foster concludes, "She had unerringly spotted the poem's central ambivalence, missed by those who concentrate on the images of terrible beauty and rebirth through sacrifice."

Up to this point, a traditional formalist with little patience for such circumstantial evidence might point out that Foster has only confirmed what any careful reading of the poem itself would demonstrate. But Yeats's decision to keep the poem out of public circulation for over four years reveals a great deal about Yeats and his self-conscious relationship to Irish culture and politics. As Foster had demonstrated earlier in his analysis of *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (1915), Yeats's "disingenuous masterpiece" recounting the first twenty years of his life, Yeats purposely selects, distorts, and massages the events of his life to suit an acute sense of his current and anticipated place in the history of Ireland. This continual reinvention and adaptation of himself to stress his importance in the cultural formation of the new nation would stay with Yeats throughout his life and is a complicating factor in any understanding of his poetry.

Thus, one might see "Easter 1916" as a palinode repudiating his condemnation of the Catholic middle class in "September 1913," with the transformation of the petty bourgeoisie into heroes of the "Romantic Ireland" which he had lamented as "dead and gone" in the earlier poem. But one must also note that Yeats himself is also transformed over the four stanzas of the poem from a speaker of "polite meaningless words" into the poet laureate of the new emerging nation ("I write it out in a verse"), one who feels comfortable speaking collectively for the nation as a whole ("We know their dream"). Nonetheless, in terms of Yeats's position as a public poet, both he and Lady Gregory for several years had been lobbying strongly for the return of the Hugh Lane painting collec-

tion from London to Dublin. He knew he needed the support of both the English and Irish establishments to secure the transfer, and therefore managed his image accordingly. Yeats, despite the ambivalence and ambiguity which Foster points to in the poem, realized that "Easter 1916" would be read very much at the time the way most of the Irish public has read it since. As Foster says, "in 1916 it would have been read principally as a passionate endorsement of the rebels' cause, and WBW was extremely cautious about releasing it."

The second, and much more compelling, transformation in Yeats's life is his unexpected and impulsive marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees. Foster makes clear that Yeats had indicated to a number of his correspondents that he felt the middle-aged need, especially after his purchase of Thoor Ballylee, the medieval tower adjacent the Gregory estate, to change the domestic arrangements of his life. In the summer of 1917 he returned to visit with Maud Gonne, now past her prime as the beauty who made men catch their breath in the street, and her daughter Iseult, who had since the summer before been in ardent correspondence with Yeats. In her flirtatious yet stand-offish infatuation with the poet, Iseult seems very much her mother's daughter. After Yeats's proposals to both were rejected, he seems to have decided on Georgie (later shortened to George) Hyde-Lees based as much upon a horoscope which recommended marriage before the year was out as on his earlier casual acquaintance with the intelligent but plain-looking Englishwoman. George's motives for agreeing to the marriage seem equally insubstantial. In a letter to Lady Gregory in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the marriage, George's mother pleaded: "She is under the glamour of a great man 30 years older than herself & with a talent for love-making."

Not surprisingly, Yeats had almost immediate second thoughts on the enterprise and, in a very troubled state, was continuing to write to Iseult during the first days of his honeymoon. At this point it seemed only a "miraculous intervention" could save the impulsive marriage, and that is exactly what occurred. George sensed that she was receiving messages from the spirit world to be written through her and began experimenting with automatic writing in which she transcribed passages from "Instructors" for Yeats. The restorative effect was immediate. As Yeats says in a letter to Gregory, "The strange thing was that within half an hour after the writing of this message my rheumatic pains & my neuralgia had gone

and I was very happy. From being more miserable than I ever remember since Maud Gonne's marriage I became extremely happy." Foster provides enough information about George's familiarity with mediums and occult lore to indicate that the intervention of the "Instructors," at least initially, was an inspired stratagem on George's part to rescue the floundering marriage (some of the messages included instructions on having sex with his new bride, disparagements of Maud and Isuelt, and encouragements about the children they should have). But Foster also adds, "it is probable she got more than she bargained for."

On the one hand, seeing the sessions as a kind of "transactional analysis," Foster suggests that "through this strange process the principals were getting to know each other for the first time." The subsequent psychic sessions would become a kind of joint spiritual odyssey and seal the union between the two, at least through the birth of their children Anne and Michael. On the other hand, what started out as consolation and encouragement in the face of emotional confusion would, over the weeks and months which followed, become a relentless and exhausting mining of George's psyche. Yeats, who had sought counsel and direction through automatic writing several years earlier in response to Mabel Dickinson's pregnancy scare, rapidly became obsessed with the communications, especially when he was assured by the Instructors that "we have come to give you metaphors for your poetry." Through hundreds of sessions during the first three years of their marriage, Yeats pressed George with questions for the "Instructors," the answers to which would fill thousands of pages of script and eventually form the basis, in Yeats's mind, of the complex "System" codifying history and psychology which he published as *A Vision*, first in 1926, then in considerably revised form in 1937.

As the above should indicate, there are two very different personalities whom Foster has to deal with in this encyclopedic biography (the two volumes run over 1400 pages), linked by an egotism which was alternately (or perhaps simultaneously) vulnerable and indomitable. There is the savvy political infighter who learned the ins and outs of strategic negotiation on the committees of the Order of the Golden Dawn in the 1890s and through the endless political and financial struggles of the Abbey Theatre during the first decade of the century. Foster now shows us this Yeats campaigning for the restoration of the Hugh Lane paintings, becoming a Senator in the new Irish Free State and fighting literary cen-

sorship and the divorce laws which the new government imposed, briefly but inconclusively taking up the cause of Irish fascism, and becoming the poetic arbiter of the age in his highly contested selections for the 1936 edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. But there is also the impressionable Willie Yeats who, smitten by Maud Gonne from their first meeting in 1889, spends the next 28 years in futile pursuit of her, memorializing the futility in poem after poem. It is this Yeats who, once again in emotional turmoil now triangulated among Maud, Iseult, and George, finds a way to suspend his incredulity and mine it as a source for his art.

Needless to say, what is propitious for art may not be a secure basis for an enduring human relationship, and one of the most poignant and painful elements in this volume is Foster's complex portrait of George Yeats as she gradually realizes what is involved in living with a great man. With the birth of their children, George's role as spiritual medium was superseded by that of, as she complained in a 1927 letter to Lennox Robinson, "a nurse a governess a secretary & a housekeeper," and it seemed equally clear that, without the specific direction of the Instructors, their erotic life had disappeared as well. As Yeats spent more time away from home, either in London or once again in extended residence at Gregory's Coole Park in Galway, George's attitude, fueled by an increasing dependence on alcohol, hardened toward both her husband and his spiritual aspirations. Just as *A Vision*, which Yeats had spent seven years preparing, was being published, George, in an exasperated letter to Thomas MacGreevy, exclaimed, "There's nothing in his verse worth preserving but the personal. All the pseudo-mystico-intellecto-nationalistic stuff of the last fifteen years isn't worth a trouser-button." In a later scene which could have been lifted from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Foster cites Brigit Patmore's description of George and Yeats at a dinner party. Yeats, who wore woolen socks over his gloved hands because of the unexpected snow that evening, "giving the alarmed impression of arms ending in stumps," was talking somewhat disconnectedly about his conflicted impression of Ezra Pound. Patmore's attention, however, was focused on the great man's wife: "George had acquired the habit of bending her head over her plate and, with her eyes fixed on some ice-pudding, she said in a low voice, "Willie talking poppycock."

Less comic but perhaps more predictable, Yeats began to search elsewhere for erotic stimulation, which he came to see more and more as a

necessary catalyst for his writing, even as his health degenerated. A near-fatal bout of Malta fever seems to have startled him back into both his life and his work. In 1934 he had the potency-restoring Steinach operation (which, considering it was a simple vasectomy, affected his psyche more than his physiology), and, over his last decade took up with a range of younger women: the writer Ethel Mannin, the poet Lady Dorothy Wellesley, whose house at Penns became an English substitute for Coole Park after Lady Gregory's death in 1932, the emotionally unstable actress Margot Ruddock, and Edith Shackleton Heade, who lounged bare-breasted with Yeats at the gardens at Chentry House. George was not only aware of these affairs, but toward the end accompanied the ailing Yeats halfway to his assignations and sent notes on with instructions about his clothes and medications.

Foster manages to weave both the public, political Yeats and the private, at times bathetic Yeats into a fluent, coaxial narrative across the tumultuous last 25 years of his life. Foster situates this complex Yeats in the midst of the Irish War of Independence and subsequent Civil War, the sharp debates on civil liberties in the Irish Free State throughout the twenties, the changing mood of Ireland and Europe through the thirties as fascism and totalitarianism darken the political horizons. Throughout, Foster cites (and sites) the astonishing appearance of poems such as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," the Byzantium poems, and "Lapis Lazuli," erupting at moments in Yeats's life of great political, organizational, or amorous distraction.

Foster's literary commentary on the poems is both deft and nuanced, but, as he makes clear early on, he is not out to provide definitive interpretations; rather, he provides the biographical, political, and cultural contexts and invites the reader to take it from there.

The one place where Foster draws a line is *A Vision*. Even though he agrees that it is best seen as a "spiritual autobiography," the rational historian finds Yeats's explanation of human history and psychology in terms of Phases of the Moon "ponderous, self-regarding, wildly didactic, inconsistent, and unconvincing." For Foster, the real interest in the book is what it suggests about Yeats's reductive understanding of human beings ("*A Vision* is the work of a mind that tries to see people as constructs"). In terms of its literary or philosophical or historiographical

worth, however, Foster pretty much agrees with Ezra Pound's initial reaction to Yeats's moon-oriented metaphysics: "very very very bug-house."

This bracing skepticism is also found in Foster's presentation of the central figures in Yeats's life, and it lends authority to the biography. For example, John Butler Yeats, the poet's father, was given ample and sympathetic attention in the first volume. An unsuccessful painter and very "unVictorian" father, his real patrimony to his son was his sensibility. He read widely and critically, invariably chose writers as his friends, and made sure his son was placed in the crosscurrents of conversations swirling through his house and atelier. Yeats himself, recollecting at his seventieth birthday celebration the "accidents" of his life which made him a poet, pointed to "my father's studio" as the crucial element of his formation. Throughout both volumes Foster refers to father and son with acronyms ("JBY" and "WBY") explaining, "They were both, in their ways, achieved and astonishing personalities." But when JBY moved to New York in 1907, he became more and more dependent on his famous son for support, apparently more satisfied to be a splendid conversationalist and after-dinner speaker than a self-supporting artist. Foster is fascinated, but not beguiled, and, when he summarizes the life and work of this prodigal but improvident father, he is merciless: "JBY would carry on defining and reassessing himself as a public performance for the entertainment of others, until he died."

The women in Yeats's life proved a mixed blessing, and Yeats's comment on his first meeting with Maud Gonne ("There the troubling of my life began") provides an accurate description of their relationship, even after his 1917 marriage to George. Foster doesn't have much patience with Gonne, and her anti-Semitism later in life seems a final commentary on the extreme politics which obsessed and distorted her life. Iseult Gonne, whose self-absorbed and histrionic flirtation with Yeats seems genetic, doesn't fare much better. She married Francis Stuart, a violent and abusive novelist, and thereby proved herself once more her mother's daughter. In contrast, Yeats's forty-year friendship with Olivia Shakespear, the lover he broke off with when she realized he was still in love with Maud Gonne, provided Yeats with an intimate, intellectual confidante of unswerving support. In addition, for all the troubles of Yeats's marriage, it is clear that George bestowed and sustained a necessary stability throughout the final decades of his life. George, even though she became more

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impatient with Yeats's increasing impetuosity (at one point she said she felt "like a child of five in charge of a Tiger in a wire cage"), dutifully rescued him from his adventures, erotic and otherwise, and cared for him at home. Yeats seemed to take much of this for granted, but, once in a delirium brought on by heart and kidney trouble on Majorca, he cried out, "George, George, call the sheriff!" Given the Bergmanesque scenes from a marriage which Foster has recounted, one wonders if this is a frantic cry for order from the throes of Yeats's multiple entanglements or a subconscious acknowledgment of private marital grievances.

If there is a hero, or more accurately a heroine, among Yeats's lifelong associates for Foster, it is surely Lady Augusta Gregory, who epitomized for Yeats the eighteenth century Ascendancy ideal of patriotism and service which he would valorize in his later writings. From the time they first met in 1894, she collaborated with Yeats collecting folklore, writing plays, bringing into existence the Irish Literary Theatre. She had offered Yeats summer residency at Coole Park for twenty years, and it was there he wrote or completed some of his most powerful poems and plays. As his marriage to George faded, he once again returned to Coole as a privileged retreat for contemplation and creativity, and Gregory once again welcomed him, right up to her death from breast cancer in 1932. As Foster makes clear in his commentary on "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," the poem, initiated as an ode to Gregory, emphasizes by the metaphor of the underground river which connects Coole with Ballylee the intimate and symbiotic confluence of their lives' work. At the time of Gregory's death, Yeats had interrupted his stay at Coole for a short visit to Dublin. He returned the morning following her death, and, when told at the railroad station, Yeats began suddenly and uncontrollably to weep. Foster includes at that point a note Gregory had penciled to Yeats some months earlier when she thought she might die, and the farewell letter – two paragraphs of understated modesty and gratitude in the face of death – is one of the most moving passages in the entire biography. As it happens, the letter was undelivered, and Yeats in his lifetime never could thank Gregory for writing the letter, or living that life. But Foster allows us to.

As this deft tactic illustrates, this biography is much more than the assemblage of ascertainable facts which Foster promised at the outset, although the sheer amount of documentation and citation is staggering (Foster has been researching Yeats since 1987, continuing the earlier work

of F.S.L. Lyons, to whom he has dedicated both volumes). Moreover, Foster the historian does indeed link the poet to the emergence of the Irish Free State in 1922, and his tracing of Yeats's fight against censorship and championing of divorce in the Irish Senate complicates triumphalist versions of the nation's coming into being. The more theoretical question of Yeats's nationalism – as exemplary embodiment of his nation's cultural independence or as subliminal ventriloquist of colonial paradigms – becomes, if anything, even more complicated in this retracing of Yeats's public and private vacillations. But this stunning biography as a whole moves beyond any agenda, political or otherwise. To tell this story properly, Foster had to combine a literary critic's sense of poetry with a novelist's sense of timing and organization and, through it all, rely on a brilliant eye for a telling quotation to underscore the urgency, irony, or absurdity of a situation. The result is a compelling narrative which illuminates the transformations of both the man and the nation, and which is now an indispensable part of our understanding of the poet. There's no doubt that the culture wars in Ireland, revisionist and anti-revisionist, will continue, and all sides in the postcolonial debate will find much in both volumes to support their position. But any student of Yeats or modern Irish culture now has a new place to start.

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NOTES

1. Said's original analysis can be found in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (1990), and updated in his chapter on "Yeats and Decolonization" in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Before his death last September, Said's most recent statement on Ireland's postcolonial status, emphasizing Ireland and Palestine's parallel structural break with their history, can be found in his Afterword, "Reflections on Ireland and Postcolonialism" in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003). Jahan Ramazani provides a cogent overview of both the controversy and its complications in his chapter "W. B. Yeats: A Postcolonial Poet?" in *The Hybrid Muse* (2001).

2. For a review of revisionist and anti-revisionist understandings of the Easter rebellion and its place in Irish historiography, see *Revising the Rising*, ed. Máirín Ní Dhonchadha and Theo Dorgan (1991), the Field Day collection of critical essays marking the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising.