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A REVIEW OF YEATS, *PHILOSOPHY, AND THE OCCULT*

Matthew Gibson and Neil Mann, eds. *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult* (Columbia: Clemson University Press, 2016), pp. xix+344, ISBN 9781942954255.

Reviewed by Gregory Castle

Amid the steady outpouring of scholarly titles on W. B. Yeats over the last quarter century or so, one discerns an equally steady advance in our understanding of the poet's occult and philosophical interests. George Mills Harper and Mary Jane Harper brought out four volumes of *Yeats's Vision Papers* and their daughter, Margaret Mills Harper, published new editions of *AVA* and *AVB* in collaboration with Catherine Paul. In 2012, Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Clair Nally published an edited volume, *W. B. Yeats's "A Vision": Explications and Contexts*, which furthered this general trend toward making *A Vision* legible to a new generation of readers. Four years later, Gibson and Mann compiled another collection, *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult*, which aims to place Yeats's philosophical and occult writings in the context of other contemporary intellectual traditions. It is a comparative study with some fascinating points of entry: Yeats's unpublished drafts; his potential borrowing from Cesare Lombroso and Oswald Spengler; his extensive immersion in the history of dreams; his study of Indian sacred books as well as Pierre Duhem's theories of the Great Year; and his interest in philosophers like Bishop Berkeley and Alfred North Whitehead. After a brisk introduction by the volume's editors, which establishes the need for the volume, Wayne Chapman walks us through some of the major works on Yeats that are important for understanding his philosophical and occult writing. In keeping with Chapman's own archival interests, he spends some time exploring an unpublished dialogue, "Anglo-Ireland. | a conversation," which he calls a "dress rehearsal" for "The Phases of the Moon" (33). He shows, through meticulous analysis of textual emendations, that it is "a good start, but a false one" (43), whose chief value is to index Yeats's changing ideas about the system underlying the poem. Chapman also argues that the dialogue is an adaptation of Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, which Yeats annotated (the editors reproduce these annotations, though not Landor's text, in Appendix I). Chapman's point about "conversation" playing a role in the development of the poem illustrates a practice evident throughout this volume: mining the archives to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about Yeats's occult system.

The remaining six chapters take us through some familiar and some not-so-familiar ground. Charles Armstrong considers Yeats's "Eastern introductions

of the 1930s”—prominently including one to Shri Purohit Swami’s *An Indian Monk*—which he argues are “so closely linked” to *A Vision* that “they might be read as mirroring texts” (90). Perhaps as important as any corollaries that may exist between Yeats’s system and Indian thought are the “reclusiveness of the ascetic ideal” and the dialectical “union of Self and Not-self” (96) that he found in the work of Swami and other Indian writers. This chapter flows easily into Mann’s discussion of dreams, which, for Yeats, provided “access to unseen aspects of reality” (109). Mann focuses on an important early notebook, called PIAL after Maud Gonno’s Golden Dawn motto, that Yeats kept from 1908–17 (155, n5). At the heart of his argument is Yeats’s enigmatic epigraph to *Responsibilities*: “In dreams begins responsibility.” Mann claims that “dreams placed responsibility on the dreamer to attempt to understand what they offered—advice, a warning, an explanation, or exploration of a theme. They were to be ‘questioned’...” (114). Mid-career works like *Per Amica Silentia Luna* (1917) and the first edition of *A Vision* (1925) engage in a form of Hermetic questioning guided by the Golden Dawn belief that “truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed” (127). Revelation comes through the agency of the *image*, which links vision and dream, for in both, “imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not” (Yeats, *CW4* 51; quoted 128). These investigations, as well as the lectures on ghosts and the Automatic Script, blur the lines between dreamer and dream, the living and the dead. Indeed, the dead figure prominently, for “Yeats almost takes it for granted that the dead will use the minds of the living in sleep and waking to achieve the recapitulations and amends they need” (145–46). The dead remain, for poet and mystic alike, “a community of spirits” (154).

In Yeats’s schema, dreams are symptoms of a larger temporal system, one in which a “community of spirits” can interact across historical epochs. Graham Dampier’s chapter on the Four Faculties (Creative Mind, Will, Spirit, and Husk) across the historical cones deepens our understanding of Yeats’s Great Wheel and his historical vision generally by linking it to Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918–23). Dampier argues that critics have missed a connection between the two: the close match between Spengler’s “morphology of history”—the idea that “every moment in history corresponds to a point in the development of a past civilization, society, or culture”—and Yeats’s theory of “‘four interacting periods’ of history” (231) that correspond to positions of the Four Faculties on the historical cones. This interaction produces cyclical movements of religious (*primary*) and secular (*antithetical*) civilizations that “always intersect and so come to signify the strife that conditions human development” (243). The “conceptually similar” approaches taken by both writers extends only to a point, however, for “[u]nlike Spengler, Yeats does not claim to have found the solutions to the problems of history” (233). Dampier raises the pertinent

question: “If the past has such a formative influence on the present, can there be any place left for novelty, progress, and change?” (247). The answer is yes, for *A Vision* “shows that every point of human progress is influenced by three past moments of time that inform the present, but without determining it” (249).

If Spengler offered Yeats confirmation of his system at the level of history, in Katherine Ebury’s account Cesar Lombroso offers something more localized: confirmation of Yeats’s understanding of the relation, in *A Vision*, between genius and certain “types” in the Phases of the Moon. There is little doubt that Yeats owned Lombroso’s *After Death—What?* (1909) and that he reveled in crime fiction. More important, there are suggestive parallels between the phases and Lombroso’s thought on the “moral implications” of “beauty and ugliness” (69), which leads to a provocative discussion of his “theorizations of the criminal body” and Yeats’s figure of the Hunchback (72–73). At times, the grounds for a connection appear rather thin, as when Lombroso’s thoughts on creative genius are said to “coincide” with Yeats’s on the basis of a short-list of geniuses from Balzac to Whitman that “both discuss in detail, or who are otherwise important to their system of thought”; or when Ebury notes that Lombroso’s “direct influence on Yeats’s typology seems clear” (73; my emphasis). However, she is on solid ground when she turns to *Purgatory* and the *On the Boiler*; the convergence of “criminality, eugenics, and spiritualism in Lombroso’s work” (75) seems especially germane to Yeats’s late Gothic play of crime and destiny and his dyspeptic tract on Ireland’s national health.

Gibson’s contribution on the concept of the Great Year and Duhem’s *Système du monde*, like Colin McDowell’s essay on Bishop Berkeley, revisit familiar themes in Yeats’s occult writings and philosophical research. Gibson exhaustively explains the workings of the Great Wheel and the historical cones before offering an equally comprehensive account of Yeats’s evolving understanding of the Great Year—that is, the cycle of equinoxes around the solar ecliptic that Yeats believed lasted for 36,000 ordinary solar years (today’s estimate is 25,800). His goal was “to integrate the cycle of the individual soul into the changes and fluctuations of a world soul informing history itself” (172). He dallied with concepts like the “Kalpa,” which is “1,000 Maha Yugas” (one Maha Yuga is “12,000 divine years”), which adds up to “4,320,000,000 human years” (190–91). Though he settled on a more scientific measurement of the Great Year, he never lost sight of the mystical power it held. Duhem’s importance lay primarily in “conditioning Yeats’s improved understanding of the concept” (208), particularly his adoption of a 36,000-year limit structured around the Platonic “perfect number” thirty-six (and its multiples) (211–12). According to Gibson, Yeats also found in Duhem’s theory of the Great Year an alternative to Nietzsche’s “eternal return.”

If Gibson drills down into the temporal concepts that govern *A Vision*, McDowell ranges widely across Yeats's works, considering his attitudes toward abstraction and particularity, focusing on Berkeley but making forays into other thinkers. As he and other contributors to this volume show, Yeats was zealous in his pursuit of ideas from any tradition that coincided with and helped clarify his own occult system. Philosophy was part of that system, rather than the other way around, as Yeats's reading of Berkeley (and, for that matter, Duhem) indicate. With Berkeley we return to the dream, and specifically to Yeats's notion that the philosopher had "proved all things a dream" ("Blood and the Moon," quoted 254). McDowell distinguishes between the "'old' view... that Berkeley is a 'subjective idealist'"—a view exemplified by Yeats's line—and a new one that sees the philosopher as a "common-sense realist" (256). Yeats's admiration for Berkeley is due in large measure to the latter's reconciliation of the abstract and particular, which he expresses laconically in the *Commonplace Book*: "all abstract ideas whatsoever are particular" (261). As McDowell points out at the end of his essay, Berkeley shared with Zen Buddhism a belief in the limit imposed by experience, a belief that Yeats described in a letter to Sturge Moore: "Nothing can exist that is not in the mind as 'an element of experience'" (273). Yeats seizes upon Berkeley because he sees in his work, especially in the *Commonplace Book*, the anti-mechanistic, anti-positivist, ideas that he favored (264). McDowell reminds us that Yeats's spiritualist and occult writings were informed by a close understanding of those philosophers whose thought overlapped with his own.

This volume offers no conclusion, but McDowell's reflections on the abstraction and the particular and on the value of experience in determining what exists resonate throughout *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult* and speak also to our own era, in which new forms of abstraction threaten our purchase on day-to-day life and our dreams for the future. The essays compiled by Gibson and Mann remind us that Yeats's solution to the questions of our existence, our time in this "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (*VP* 629–30), is to take responsibility for dreams and to welcome all of time into a redemptive poetic vision.