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A REVIEW OF *THE CRITICAL THOUGHT OF W. B. YEATS*

Wit Pietrzak, *The Critical Thought of W. B. Yeats* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), hardback and ebook, pp. x+258, ISBN 978-3-319-60089-5.

Reviewed by Matthew Gibson

Wit Pietrzak has chosen a novel way of addressing Yeats's critical ideas, which is simply to look at original critical collections like *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) and *The Cutting of an Agate* (1919; revised edition) with a view to determining what are the essential elements of Yeats's plan for good criticism, good literary practice, and above all for a new National Irish Literature in English. He observes Yeats's fights with political and religious dogmatism, his understanding of the role of symbol as opposed to allegory, his insistence on an elite group reinvigorating the nation through the re-moulding of local, mythological symbols, and the tensions between the masses and the elite individual poet; and he also considers Yeats's fight with the "impersonality" of Modernism in his later works. The book is well-researched and clearly written, although on occasions it does seem to veer from a central line due to the tasks Pietrzak has set himself.

The introductory chapter considers the role of Yeats's critical practice and the ideas behind his criticism in relation to his project for Ireland and a new national culture. The second chapter, "Popular Audiences and Poetical Culture," considers Yeats's earliest ideas and his rejection of dogmatic nationalism as a source for literature thanks to his battles with the politician Charles Gavan Duffy over the Irish Library Series. The chapter shows how Yeats came to accept "cosmopolitanism" in criticism while insisting that the actual roots of Irish literature should be based in its local mythology and folklore, but refashioned by skilful poets—a view painfully at odds with the ethically-minded Duffy, who believed that Irish literature should really be about promoting patriotism and ethics.

The third chapter boldly devotes itself to *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) and treats that work as though it is a unified whole, despite the fact that the works were written over an extended period of time. Turning his attention to works such as "What is Popular Poetry?," "The Moods," and "Speaking to the Psaltery," Pietrzak produces careful readings which prove that Yeats believed that the written word is corrupting and that the best symbols for art are expressed in the spoken tongue, some years prior to his essay of 1906, "Literature and the Living Voice." Pietrzak's readings here are very convincing, even if they somewhat conflict with the "sacred book" theory purported by Warwick Gould.¹ Pietrzak

describes the Doctrine of the Moods as a set of transcendent symbols that are always limited by their corporeal, sensual form and further argues, with support from Richard Rorty, that the meaning of symbols is impossible to exhaust over time; from this inexhaustibility proceeds the peculiar appropriateness of national myths for literature, which are constantly refashioned by elite writers, eventually becoming accepted by the masses. The chapter also deals with Yeats's real-life experiences at the time, including his unpleasant political alliance with Maud Gonne, his more "internationalist" stance at the time of the Eglinton controversy, weaving in elements from Yeats's activities at the time to explain his evolving ideas. It is fair to say that despite the detail which informs this chapter, Pietrzak might have done well to consult scholars like Peter Liebrechts and Jacques Aubert in his discussion of the Moods, as he refers to very little existing criticism of this topic—of which there is more than he seems to realize.

The fourth chapter turns to the essays in the second edition of *The Cutting of an Agate* (1919), and in particular to Yeats's continued bureaucratic arguments at the Abbey Theatre and political fights with Maud Gonne. Pietrzak details Yeats's changing views on Shakespeare and theatre generally after visiting Stratford-upon-Avon—which also made Yeats far more nuanced in his understanding of English culture. The author also examines Yeats's interest in Noh theatre as a means of creating an elite theatre for an "intellectual aristocracy" (97), with the aim of reshaping myth for the ultimate good of the national literature. As such, while admitting Yeats's initial need for a small audience, the chapter downplays Yeats's pessimism of the kind expressed in his open letter to Lady Gregory, "A People's Theatre" (1919), which expresses a belief that the Abbey has failed in capturing the public's attention. Pietrzak furthers his argument on Yeats's belief in the limitless nature of the true symbol's meaning, as opposed to allegory, arguing that allegory relies on "acquired meanings" and "extant cultural modes," while symbol "always adverts to some truth only partly glimpsed and never fully unveiled" (102). He notes that this distinction comes from Yeats's work on William Blake (although there is also the possibility that it was influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Lay Sermon "Blessed are Ye who Sow beside all Water"). Treating *The Cutting of an Agate* as a unified whole in this chapter is problematic, since Yeats re-edited the 1912 version to incorporate much earlier prose in the 1919 volume, thus making any analysis grounded on assumptions of unity very hard to conduct.

The fifth chapter tackles above all else *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* in seeking to expand Yeats's discussion of symbolism. It begins with an examination of Yeats's attitude to Emanuel Swedenborg and his understanding of the mystic's limitations in works like *Arcana Coelestia*—the limitation being Swedenborg's dryness and inability to present correspondences through concrete and sensory language. The chapter then goes on to consider the two parts of *Per Amica*

Silentia Lunae, “Anima Hominis” and “Anima Mundi,” and details the rise of the theory of Self, Mask and Anti-Self as a form of artistic practice governed by the struggle with the Daimon, and the comparisons to be drawn between T. S. Eliot’s theory of tradition and impersonality and Yeats’s own of the Great Memory in the Soul of the World. Pietrzak thus is one of the few critics to argue that *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is presenting not simply an exposition of spiritualist ideas in “Anima Mundi,” but a theory of literary creation, and his interpretation invites comparison with Cairns Craig’s bold attempt several decades ago to argue that the latter part of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was really describing an associative theory of reading.² Pietrzak makes the point that the failure of the poet when forging his Mask points to the constant refashioning of the national symbol, a perpetual deferral, and also opines that in describing the symbols of the Soul of the World, Yeats fails to detail the part played by the individual poet in adding to the tradition—which would have made sense given his determination to see poets as subjective re-moulders of shared traditional symbols.

The sixth chapter deals entirely with *A Vision* (1925), a book whose basic system Pietrzak manages to outline very well (albeit with what appears to have been some careful guidance from Neil Mann). Returning again to Yeats’s antinomy of personality versus impersonality, and the power of the individual imagination over accepted dogma, Pietrzak considers this in relation to the distinctions between Fate and Destiny in Yeats’s system: the one enforced by the objective Primary Phases when the Will and Mask are weak; and the other a result of the struggle for Personality and Mask in the subjective, antithetical Phases, a feature which again relates to the individual poet’s relation to the masses and national culture. Noting from Neil Mann’s own work that tension and antinomy between opposites is one of the most important features of *A Vision*, Pietrzak finishes by centring on “Dove or Swan” and Yeats’s programme for how the individual poet achieves self-expression in different eras and against different societal pulls. He makes the erroneous point that this is the only part of the book to find its way into the 1937 edition unchanged (a fair few of the passages in it were in fact revised), but nevertheless makes strong points about the individual artist’s role in transforming an entire culture—a point not dissimilar, on a political level, to Hegel’s concept of the “world historical figure.”

The seventh chapter is devoted to an analysis of two works: The “Introduction” to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) and *Essays* (1931–36). In particular Pietrzak gives attention to what he deems Yeats’s unfair critique of Eliot, noting that he only drew from Eliot’s earlier poems to make him appear merely a “satirist” (185), and notes that he had more in common with Eliot’s later theories of personality than he and later critics have argued. The critique is lengthy and full of good observations, but it suffers from Pietrzak’s “work-by-work” analysis, since much of what Yeats writes in his introduction

is illuminated by cross-reference to *Essays*, such as his introductions to Hone and Rossi's *Bishop Berkeley* and to "Fighting the Waves" from *Wheels and Butterflies*. Indeed, the discussion of Modernist "flux" and the pivotal antinomies of mirror and lamp—central to all these texts—in this reviewer's opinion are crucial to examining the fluctuations over the forty-year period that Yeats is describing, and his own place inside them. Pietrzak is right to assert that the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* is really an explication of Yeats's own poetical biography, and one might add that it could also act as a guide to the age-old controversy on the right order for his *Collected Works*, as it helps us understand his own career self-evaluation towards the end of his life. In his critique of *Essays*, Pietrzak looks more at the role of philosophy in honing Yeats's critical attitudes, and in particular the distinction between Bishop Berkeley and G. E. Moore.

The final chapter analyses Yeats's essays "On Modern Poetry" and "A General Introduction to my Work," in both of which Pietrzak notes Yeats's opinions on the slow encroachment of rationalist and Empirical philosophy on poetry in his own era.

The book is for the most part well written, provides some very good readings of the essays and gets close to many of the central tensions in Yeats's ideas. The structure of going from book to book partially obscures the actual chronology of Yeats's ideas; while Pietrzak discusses Yeats's fin-de-siècle criticism and then examines the criticism of the First World War era, he writes too little of Yeats's views during the earlier Edwardian era, after he had abandoned Symbolism and before he developed his theory of personality in art being a "secondary self," creating a distinction between character and personality, and ultimately a mask made from doing battle with the anti-self. This is a pity, as this short era, whose major work of ideas was "Discoveries" (1907; included in both the 1912 and 1919 editions of *The Cutting of an Agate*, but given little attention by Pietrzak due to his focus on the later edition), was a peculiar one in which Yeats flirted with the idea that poetry and drama depended upon developing "the habitual self" (*E&I* 269), and tried to find a balance in drama between the poetry of the cliques and realism. This means that Pietrzak's view that Yeats himself considered J. M. Synge to be the "ideal figure" of the Irish dramatist, "opposed to the everyday and yet situated in it" (Pietrzak, 112), is not quite correct. Synge was for Yeats a particular kind of brooding poet, who could create rare "moods" through the "passive act" of rejecting and selecting from what he has seen in life, rather than being antithetical to life and in search of personality (*E&I* 329): a poet who could make the needed compromise between realism and symbolism in this interstice period of Yeats's own aesthetic development. For this reason Yeats later placed Synge at the early Primary Phase 23 in *A Vision*, and some way from Yeats's own Antithetical Phase 17, in which the poet

seeks pure personality, and which more properly represents the anti-realist impulse of Yeats's later drama, beginning from 1907 onwards. Likewise, much of the criticism in *Samhain*, which was published year by year, is also ignored. A further caution might be that Pietrzak's interest in Yeats's criticism gives too little space to his reading of Occult writers like Eliphas Levi and S. L. Macgregor Mathers, whose translation of the various books of the Zohar gave Yeats access to a Cabbalistic use of symbols which definitely influences the techniques of criticism present in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Despite these misgivings, Pietrzak has produced a work which adds much to the discussion and which is deft in its use of historical context and critical interpretation.

Notes

1. See, for example, Warwick Gould's chapter, "Yeats Deregulated," in Deirdre Toomey, ed., "Yeats and Women," *YA9* (1992): 356–72.
2. See Cairns Craig, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).