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A REVIEW OF A READER'S GUIDE TO YEATS'S A VISION

Neil Mann, *A Reader's Guide to Yeats's A Vision* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2019), pp.408, ISBN: 978-1-942954-62-0, \$130.

Reviewed by Claire Nally

Anyone familiar with Yeats's intimidating but rewarding occult work, *A Vision*, will be well-acquainted with Neil Mann's comprehensive website, www.yeats-vision.com, as well as his authoritative and lifelong academic work focusing on that topic. As such, the publication of his book, *A Reader's Guide to Yeats's A Vision* will be met with some delight by Yeats scholars everywhere. Mann's latest publication aims to render *A Vision* more accessible to academics, students, and, I think, general readers interested in this mysterious text. The book also anticipates some prior knowledge of the topic, insofar as "it is written foremost for those who have already examined *A Vision* and want to understand it better" (vii). Despite this, the author is clearly mindful to make Yeats's occultism more intelligible, given the fact that each chapter in *A Reader's Guide* is organized as two parts: a shorter, summary section ("Overview") which outlines the key issues and a longer section ("In Further Detail") which offers scholarly context and more extensive treatment of important references.

As Yeats was a veteran editor and re-editor of his work, it will come as no surprise that whilst Mann pays more attention to the second published edition of *A Vision* (1937), he also maintains a clear engagement with the 1925 version, and notes that his *Guide* can be used to elucidate either version. As such, Mann's comprehensive navigation of the wealth of manuscript material relating to *A Vision* and its authorship is also extremely valuable here. The *Reader's Guide* draws clear correlations between the biographies of Yeats and Georgie Hyde-Lees, the assembly of the manuscripts that became the multi-volume *Vision Papers*, and a reading of the published version(s), as well as an introduction to the actual process of writing the material that became *A Vision* (automatic writing, the "sleeps," and the intervention of the mysterious Instructors and Frustrators). At the same time as Mann devotes a high level of detail to elucidating these concepts, he also expands upon the contexts through which we can read *A Vision*, one of which is philosophy. Mann explains that Yeats certainly thought of his work in a philosophical tradition, but one which we might think of as pre-Cartesian, insofar as it relates to metaphysical philosophy and writers such as Plato, the Neo-Platonists, and even the pre-Socratics. Noting that "what is possible and inventive in one age is outmoded and archaic in another," Mann stylishly notes that thereby "Yeats's system takes

on the appearance of ‘rejected knowledge,’ one of the definitions of the occult” (44). If we think of *A Vision* in this way, its status as an occult text is somewhat up for debate. The fact that it is often not considered a “legitimate” work of philosophy as much as one of eccentricity and arcane lore is very much subject to its anachronism in the twentieth century. In aligning *A Vision* with pre-Enlightenment philosophy, Mann suggests that *A Vision* represents a somewhat more persuasive system for understanding the world.

Mann’s book is divided into sections, rather than following the chronology of either the 1925 or 1937 versions. As such, the reader who would like to focus on specific areas or themes, such as the *Daimon* or the Four *Faculties*, can easily identify a relevant chapter. A thematic arrangement such as this also means that a whole section is devoted to key areas, such as “Gyres and Geometry.” Wrestling with perhaps one of Yeats’s more familiar occult symbols, Mann sympathetically offers a reading of those twin cones from a philosophical perspective, stating that “Yeats’s conception of cosmos is idealist” (53), but he also at this point unpacks the theory of the gyres with several interpretative illustrations. Of especial note here is how Mann identifies the significant aspects of this theory (helpfully arranged as bullet points (56–57), which certainly helps to contextualize the wider ideas related to the phases of the moon, the cycles of history and time, and the role of the Thirteenth Cone. Similarly, the chapter entitled “History: Cycles and Influx” expands upon the exposition of history which is the hallmark of so many anthologized and popular Yeats poems, including “Leda and the Swan,” “The Second Coming,” and a host of other examples. As Mann explains, “[these poems] make more sense when readers appreciate how Yeats saw the ebb and flow of the tides in human history” (267). Mann situates *A Vision* here as articulating the oscillation of religious dispensations and those of civilization (269), and offers this reading through the lens of Yeats’s familiar symbolism. For instance, in discussing the two annunciations of *A Vision*, and that anticipated in a future cycle, Mann explains that “Such a change is imminent and, in the poem ‘The Second Coming,’ Yeats asks what kind of annunciation there might be” (269). As such, Mann’s discussion is also extremely useful for both undergraduate and postgraduate students seeking in-depth background knowledge of the poems but wanting to do so from the perspective of Yeats’s more arcane thinking. However, lest a reader think that the accessible nature of the *Reader’s Guide* necessitates a simplistic approach to Yeats, it is worth noting that the allusions to philosophy, classic sources, and literary reference points are extensive. In one short discussion of the Great Year, Mann outlines the influence of Ptolemy, Hipparchus, and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* alongside a lucid discussion of how the Great Year functioned for the ancients. Vico, Hegel, and Spengler are all carefully recognized as part of Yeats’s research, but

again, these complexities do not overshadow the major objective, which is to unpack *A Vision* for the reader.

Mann's scholarship also outlines the editorial and textual emendations which characterize the differences between the two versions of *A Vision*, and the text spends some time addressing how Yeats's style can be both poetic and obtuse, scientific, and explanatory. Related to this idea of style and accessibility, Mann situates *Per Amica Silentiae Lunae* (1917) as a useful prelude to the complexities of *A Vision*: "What were suggestive juxtapositions in *Per Amica Silenta Lunae*, where the reader has to supply something to reach understanding, become frustrating *non sequiturs* in *A Vision*, where the reader is simply perplexed" (60). It is this comprehensive engagement with Yeats's other works which establishes not only *A Vision's* importance to the symbolism of the poetry and plays, but its integral role in understanding Yeats's thought.

For those scholars wishing to follow up on Mann's sources, a bibliography would have been useful, in addition to the extensive explanatory notes at the end of the text. However, it would be churlish to regard this publication as anything other than foundational in terms of introducing *A Vision* to a new generation of readers, as well as supporting current scholarship as a reference aid. It is also a thoughtful corrective to those who have dismissed *A Vision* as simply Yeats's "silliness" or his "Southern Californian" interests, as W. H. Auden famously claimed. Rather, this is a realistic but non-judgmental examination of the limitations, complexities, and rewards involved in studying *A Vision*. Mann expands upon this in "Reframing *A Vision*," noting that whilst readers may have been frustrated by Yeats's lack of clarity about his theory, at the same time, the importance of this work cannot be underestimated, "whether a key to Yeats's poetic symbolism or an astrological key to life" (295).

As a note of caution, whilst Mann suggests that "*A Vision* puts forward no clear morality, but the concepts that emerge from its understanding of human life and history are profoundly humanist, pluralist and tolerant" (297), it is very much the case that *A Vision* cannot be depoliticized or dislocated from some of Yeats's other works (*On the Boiler* being a notable example, as well as his infamous marching songs). So, I do wonder if there is a rather optimistic reading in Mann's claim that "outside of the framework of reincarnation, the shift is one of empathy: that many approaches to a good life are very different, and that there, but for the grace of God, go you or I" (297). Yeats's assertion of the rights and freedoms of individuals was applicable only to certain people at specific times; his earlier socialism gave way to a much more disenchanted politics, and I cannot help but wonder if this is being glossed over here.

In final praise of the volume, it is also very much the case that whilst this Guide identifies a number of key scholars in this very specific field of Yeats studies (Kathleen Raine, Colin McDowell, Warwick Gould, Margaret Mills

Harper, and of course, George Mills Harper), the critical and theoretical positions of these writers do not intrude upon Mann's objective to explain *A Vision*, and he does not merely put forward another argument which contributes to the already expansive body of *A Vision* criticism. Essentially, this book is not about uncovering a submerged reading of *A Vision*, but rather, it is a stylish teaching tool, a research aid, and a companion to Yeats's occult philosophy.