

January 2022

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Recommended Citation

Mohite, Ragini (2022) "A Review of the Poems of W.B. Yeats Volume One: 1882-1889 and *The Poems of W.B. Yeats Volume Two: 1890-1898*, Edited by Peter McDonald," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol6/iss1/7>

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**A REVIEW OF THE POEMS OF W.B. YEATS
VOLUME ONE: 1882-1889 AND THE POEMS OF
W.B. YEATS VOLUME TWO: 1890-1898,
EDITED BY PETER McDONALD**

Peter McDonald, ed. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats Volume One: 1882-1889*, Routledge, 2020, ISBN 9780367495602. VitalBook file.

Peter McDonald, ed. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats Volume Two: 1890-1898*, Routledge, 2020, ISBN 9780367497620. VitalBook file.

Reviewed by Ragini Mohite

The first two volumes of *The Poems of W. B. Yeats* inaugurate the new critical edition by the poet and critic Peter McDonald, whose editorial detail is matched by his prosodic sensitivity to Yeats's early works. These volumes are part of the Longman Annotated English Poets series, and McDonald is attentive to Yeats as an Irish poet and to the specific cultural context of his writings—an important caveat in order to situate him within this series. The general editors' note restates the original intention for the series to provide students, teachers, and general readers with "fully annotated editions of the major English poets;" to be concerned "primarily with the *meaning* of the extant texts in their various contexts;" and to combine the editor's own research with ongoing criticism in Yeats studies (Vol. 1, xi). McDonald seems to me just such a student and teacher. His editorial work is self-consciously indebted to Yeats's previous critical editors, particularly George Bornstein (whose impact is visible throughout the texts) and, among others, Jon Stallworthy and John Kelly (to whom the first two editions are dedicated). Undertaken by a single editor, the two initial volumes are remarkably cohesive. But unlike the Cornell Yeats series, which is bound in blue and bears the author's signature on the cover, this series places different artistic renditions of the young Yeats on a green cover, indicating the evolution of Yeats's own poetic prowess and public image over the years. Volume one covers the years 1882-1889 and volume two, 1890-1898. Each volume contains a chronology Yeats's life and publications for the years to which it is dedicated.

The volumes chronologically organize published poems, verse dramas, unpublished poems, and fragments that "possess inherent interest for critical reading" and point to the poet's creative developments have been included by the editor (Vol. 1, xx). This organization is, for me, the most striking element of

the series. It is a useful departure from the practice of organizing by collections as the *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, collected editions, and the Cornell series of his manuscripts follow. In this regard it flouts the primacy of authorial intention which has historically been upheld by such critical editions. Those looking to study closely Yeats's revisions, editing, and sequencing of poems into individual "design[ed]" collections can look to other critical editions (Vol. 1, xx). This series is more invested in examining the evolving linguistic codes of the poems themselves as Yeats developed organically as a poet. In charting the changing face of Yeats's poetry beyond collections, McDonald highlights the processes that underlie what Daniel Albright has called the poet's "authority to unwrite his poems as well as to write them."¹ The organization enables a simultaneous bird's eye view on Yeats's developing thematic interests, his reading and literary influences, and his attempts at developing formal proficiency during "the years of his poetic apprenticeship" (Vol. 1, xxi). "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," for instance, appears early in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1899) and inaugurates *Crossways*, but according to McDonald, is one that, chronologically speaking, publicly signals the end of a creative phase (Vol. 1, 372). The appendixes for volume one list the contents of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* and the initial prose draft of *The Island of Statues*. The appendixes for Volume Two provide the content lists for Yeats's poetry volumes of the years 1892–1899 and the late 1890s draft "Subject for Lyric." The first appendixes for each volume recognize sequencing as a compositional act, albeit one that is not the primary subject of examination here.

McDonald judiciously considers the inclusion of verse dramas; these are particularly important components of Yeats's early works. He excludes verse dramas that were intended for the stage but includes lyrics from these dramas that were printed separately. Here, he brings together verse that Yeats—persuaded by Harold Macmillan to keep the popular market and reader in mind—separated as lyric or narrative and dramatic.² Early verse dramas which were not intended for the stage and were later published as poems—being particularly indebted to nineteenth-century traditions—such as *Vivien and Time and Love and Death* are included. The inclusion of the prose draft of *The Island of Statues* indicates the importance of the line endings of the notebook text as Yeats revised the work. Appendix two of volume one provides a comparative context for the play in its prose and verse versions. The earlier *Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* places prose and verse versions and versions of significantly revised texts like *The Countess Cathleen* on adjacent verso and recto pages to facilitate direct comparison; it includes *The Island of Statues* only in verse. Though not mirroring the arrangement of the *Variorum* edition of the plays, this Appendix pays homage to the work of Russell

K. Alspach and Catharine C. Alspach by acknowledging the comparative potential of this play. The second volume includes *The Shadowy Waters*, whose generic shifts and compositional history compel some meditation. McDonald marks the 1896 transcript version as most resolutely a dramatic poem. In the introductory notes to this poem, he identifies the unfruitful plan to include illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley indicating, at the early stages of this series, Yeats's own attention to the bibliographical codes of his published works (Vol. 1, 474–76). It remains to be seen how the contents of future appendixes in subsequent volumes address these bibliographical codes, including the cover art for important texts such as *The Tower*.

For most of the poems, McDonald uses the two-volume 1949 collection of poems made by George Yeats and Thomas Mark (copyeditor at Macmillan). The editor is attuned to the role of the trusted reader and editor. The use of this edition acknowledges Mark's input on Yeats's otherwise disordered spelling and punctuation. McDonald supposes, as Albright did, that this results from Yeats's ignorance of punctuation rather than a deliberate choice to punctuate rhetorically. Important textual variants are recorded in the notes, as are the changes in titles. The editor makes smaller changes in spelling and punctuation to poems that exist only in manuscript form in the cases where his reading differs from that of previous editors—the task of deciphering Yeats's hand is admittedly an odious one. He acknowledges Yeats's inconsistent use of Irish proper names and uses the first-written versions. While the Cornell series is the most comprehensive account of the manuscript materials and prioritizes the fidelity of the transcriptions, the *Variorum* editions provide the fullest record of the printed variants. McDonald here presents the significant textual variants in relationship to their context and criticism, demystifying the editorial detail of the previous editors' efforts. While unable to reproduce the materiality of the manuscripts in the same way as the Cornell series, the editor recounts the key bibliographical codes of the manuscripts and notebooks, making notes of ink and pencil revisions, additional hands, the adjacent placements of key poems in these papers, the unavailability of certain drafts, and the locations of others in archives across the globe.

First, the dates of composition are included when available. Where manuscripts are undated, the editor approximates these based on Yeats's correspondence, style, and the bibliographical codes in the manuscript pages. Among the critical apparatus, McDonald introduces each work with important contextual and critical information: mythological, artistic, and historical sources and Yeats's knowledge of these (which was not always accurate), stylistic influences, and the details of its publication history. For instance, the notes to "King Goll: An Irish Legend" discuss the likely misdating of the first title by George Yeats at 1884. McDonald suggests that the stylistic refinement of

this poem is incongruent with his other works of 1884 and that it is better dated as a composition of 1887 (Vol. 1, 460). While reference to ongoing criticism is not comprehensive—nor can it be, in an undertaking such as this—an overview of texts’ interpretation and criticism is provided through the “major critical contributions” (Vol. 1, xxiv). The works of criticism invoked here are foundational for students of Yeats’s poetry, from Forrest Reid’s 1915 critical study to more contemporary works by Helen Vendler, Ronald Schuchard, Matthew Campbell, and others—scholars who themselves recognize the importance of editorial practice. McDonald also refers to Yeats’s other writings, correspondence, the various edited collections of his poetry and, importantly in the Modernist context, the periodicals in which poems were published.

The notes also indicate where the author alludes to the works of other poets, follows particular poetic conventions, or where there exists an unintended “convergence with another poetic text” (Vol. 1, xxiv). This feature of the editorial work is an asset for comparatists and includes sparing reference to later work influenced by Yeats and the poet’s own subsequent works. This is particularly striking, and McDonald’s intention is to understand “the degree to which his poetry is self-feeding and self-perpetuating” (Vol. 1, xxiv). For instance, “deep heart’s core,” the final phrase of the most famous of Yeats’s early poems, is heavily annotated for its comparative possibilities. In the notes, McDonald invokes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Swinburne’s “John Jones’s Wife,” *The Heptalogia*, Edward Dowden’s “Love Tokens,” and an *Irish Monthly* review of Sir Samuel Ferguson’s poetry. McDonald also references Matthew Campbell’s critique of the triple-stressed “foot” inspired by Ferguson and comments on a similar metrical effect in Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (Vol. 1, 677–78). Most significantly to Yeats’s own compositional journey, he invokes early renditions of the phrase in Act 1, scene 4, ll.14–5 of *Vivien and Time* (Vol. 1, 59), and even earlier in line 1 of “A Flower Has Blossomed”—the poem that opens the first volume and that was composed as early as 1881–82 (Vol. 1, 3). These are a clear indication of Yeats’s tendency to metrically refine his verse while also revising it macroscopically.

These comparative notes will likely prove an arduous task in the later volumes, as Yeats’s work matured, was revised, and his influence was taken up by later writers. To this end, the editor also makes the diplomatic choice to “freeze” (Vol.1, xxvi) poems in time in cases where they were taken up for revision across many years and changed materially. This act of freezing situates each version of a revised poem into the stylistic period of Yeats’s craft to which it was true and avoids muddying the chronological ordering. It also enables extended commentary on sources and contexts for poems and their compositions, overviews of their early reception and reviews, and later criticism and interpretation. The first volume contains “The Wanderings of Oisín and

How a Demon Trapped Him” (522–624), which is preceded by extensive critical apparatus on its background, textual history, and mythological sources and provides comparative insight into its literary sources. It also includes notes on the poem’s early reception and reviews including an unsigned one by Oscar Wilde, which was of some importance to Yeats. Meanwhile the editorial notes to “The Wanderings of Oisín” (270–359) in the second volume focus prominently on its contexts of formal and stylistic revision and inclusion in various collections over the years. It also includes a repeated discussion of the key sources for those coming to the volume individually, and critical material on the revised poem.

In making room for early reviews, McDonald highlights Yeats’s own attentiveness to the intent and reception of his works. Among other editorial inclusions, he acknowledges the author’s critical view of poems such as the hastily written elegy for Parnell, “Mourn—And then Onward” (Vol. 2, 56–58), the deliberate exclusion of certain poems from later collections, an awareness of his audiences (as both author and editor), public dialogues and controversies regarding some poems (“The Ballad of Father Gilligan,” Vol. 2, 6–12), and the uncertain journeys to publication made by others (“To – (Remembrance),” (Vol. 1, 429–32). Additionally, by including lyrics that were published independently while also being part of dramatic or prose texts, McDonald—like Yeats—remains cognizant of the overlapping audiences of these works and the generic interactions in key writings by the Modernist author. This is particularly evident in the lyrics from *The Countess Kathleen*. For instance, “Who goes with Fergus” (Vol. 1, 698–702) is introduced with the recognition of its impact on James Joyce (who heard it chanted by Florence Farr). The other significant inclusion is “I Never Have Seen Maid Quiet” (Vol. 2, 166–67), which had multiple revisions and was a part of Yeats’s story “The Twisting of the Rope” (1892). Key poems in volume two contain notes after the copy-text that provide other important versions and accompanying notes by the author, such as his commentary on “The Secret Rose” from the 1899 *The Wind Among the Reeds* (Vol. 2, 457–58).

The first two volumes reveal Yeats’s developmental work on key subjects in addition to form and style. This includes a movement towards political subject matter and his later editorial work with translation. “The Two Titans” (Vol. 1, 387–94) arrives as the author’s self-described political poem. “Hushed in the Vale of Dajestan” (Vol. 1, 347–49) is his translation of the Russian poem “The Dream” by Mikhail Lermontov, and “How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent” is a poem on Hungarian nationalist themes (Vol. 1, 480–94). Yeats is inclined to preserve the lyric form and rhyme scheme of the former’s source text. Both for these poems and for “When You are Old” (in Vol. 2, 59–62, a version of a French sonnet by Pierre de Ronsard), the editor provides originals and/or prose transcriptions of the source poems and extracts from sources from which Yeats

drew. I am not surprised to find a young poet using translation to strengthen his poetic foundations, and it clearly indicates—as *Mosada* (Vol. 1, 218–50) does—Yeats’s early predilection for international and oriental influences that developed in nuance alongside his formal mastery.

Close attention reveals that the formal nuances of Yeats’s later years were also being developed early. The broken line in the sestet of “Leda and the Swan” is foreshadowed by the broken final line of the octave in the unprinted 1883 “As Me Upon My Way The Tram-Car Whirled,” a sonnet which McDonald calls “an exercise in verse form” (Vol. 1, 76). This is one way in which the first volume acts as a critical and editorial companion piece to the 1994 volume of the Cornell edition edited by Bornstein: *The Early Poetry, Volume II, The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Early Poems to 1895: Manuscript Materials by W. B. Yeats*.³ Reviewing four volumes of the Cornell series, Robin Gail Schulze recognizes Bornstein’s attention to pictorial and bibliographical codes, noting that a doodle of a “winding vortex, a tornado-like swirl” resembling the later gyres on the manuscript pages of “Pan” “speaks to the first flush of his symbolical imagination and to his early sense of the pyrrhic phases of history.”⁴ While McDonald’s edition certainly prioritizes the linguistic codes, its layered use of editorial and critical practice also illustrates Yeats’s increasing formal and stylistic arsenal. It builds on Bornstein’s arguments for the textual process rather than “finished” products. Indeed, McDonald reiterates that Yeats’s acts of revision were deliberate, compositional, and creative in nature. Future volumes will likely help the reader infer that they not so much culminated in a final text as were interrupted by the author’s death. The reader also sees the timely presence of key players in Yeats’s oeuvre, whether it is literary influences like Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Aubrey De Vere, and others; political figures like Charles Stewart Parnell, or personal interlocutors like Laura Armstrong, Katharine Tynan, Maud Gonne, and Olivia Shakespear.

McDonald provides annotations for Irish names, local places, and legends referenced in Yeats’s work; this is particularly useful for general readers and international students unfamiliar with Irish legends and geography. However, several other aspects of Yeats’s writing also require attention, as is evident in notes to poems like “The Cap and Bells” (Vol. 2, 183–96) and “The Moods” (Vol. 2, 197–202). “The Two Trees” (Vol. 2, 102–13) compels the editor to contextualize Yeats’s hand in Maud Gonne’s initiation into the Order of the Golden Dawn, his work on Blake, and Sephiroth imagery. The rose poems require significant explication on the complex, multi-layered symbolism at play. These are introduced with discussions of the mystical and magical connotations of the rose, its romantic significance, the rose of Irish nationalism (and connectedly, the genre of emigrant poems). McDonald clarifies that the rose symbolism “possesses both public and more private aspects for WBY”

(Vol. 2, 114), and its deliberate foregrounding contextualizes the “symbol-led aesthetic” of his 1890s poetry, blurring the lines between “religion, eroticism, and nationalism” (Vol. 2, 118). This explication usefully indicates the editorial and critical work to come in the volumes on Yeats’s later poetry; given the long-term development of Yeats’s symbols, the later volumes of this edition will inevitably need to sustain a referential relationship to these initial volumes.

Texts of this nature require comments on their materiality in addition to that which they interrogate. This series has been published both in hardcover and eBook formats. The latter, however, presents unique possibilities and challenges for a text of this nature. The VitalSource software—designed to disseminate educational reading materials—on which the eBooks are made available by Routledge provides useful academic functionality, allowing readers to highlight and to make notes and flashcards. Though it is one of several such software programs and may not be as widely used internationally across institutions (based on affordability and digital access constraints), it supports the series’ editorial intention to design texts for university scholars alongside general readers. However, the fixed formatting of these e-volumes prevents alterations and imposes onto the eBook the restrictions of the printed page, limiting the search option’s abilities and rendering the text enlargement and highlighting options futile. This poses a challenge on devices with smaller screen sizes. Each volume provides an index of poem titles and their first lines. However, given the range of contextual and critical material in the volumes, a reflowable format and enhanced search option would enable better navigation and supplement the indexes well. With greater demand for digital texts in libraries as universities move to online or hybrid learning, such technological support for the editorial process would rejuvenate what Bornstein describes as “forms of display that represent a dynamic development” of textual processes and would therefore add a further layer of bibliographical code in the digital format.⁵

NOTES

- 1 *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), li.
- 2 *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, l.
- 3 *W. B. Yeats, The Early Poetry, Volume II: “The Wanderings of Oisín” and Other Early Poems to 1895*, ed. George Bornstein (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- 4 Robin Gail Schulze, “The One and the Many: Reading the Cornell Yeats,” *Text* 10 (1997), 334–35.
- 5 George Bornstein, “Teaching Editorial Theory to Non-Editors: What? Why? How?” *Text* 9 (1996), 150.