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Edward Clarke

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A REVIEW OF *YEATS NOW: ECHOING INTO LIFE*, BY JOSEPH M. HASSETT

Joseph M. Hassett, *Yeats Now: Echoing into Life* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press Ltd, 2020), pp.188, ISBN: 9781843517788.

Reviewed by Edward Clarke

Y*Yeats Now: Echoing into Life* reads like an annotated edition of Joseph M. Hassett's commonplace-books. The author has been kind enough to arrange under different headings lines he has noted, mostly from Yeats's poetry, and to provide his musings on them, reflections that are usually full of quotations from other writers. The headings include such themes as "Making Your Soul," "Loving," "Marrying," "Growing Old," and "Facing Death," and so this book allows Yeats's *Collected Poems* to function as a guide to life. This personal, and not academic, engagement with the poet is enhanced by interspersed photographs of book covers, portraits, a poets' house, and two graves, some of them taken, I believe, by Hassett himself.

It has been a refreshing pleasure to encounter Yeats in such a setting. Leafing through these pages often I found myself surprised by lines that I had long overlooked or daydreaming through the windows of some of the more famous places in his poetry. I began to enjoy him again, just as I used to before I ever studied the distinguished poet in earnest. I perceived the lyrics to glimmer as they began to fulfil both Yeats's and Hassett's hope that they "take on a second beauty, passing as it were out of literature and becoming life" (inside front cover).

In the section called "Loving" we are directed to one of Yeats's "signature sound bites": "*I have spread my dreams under your feet; | Tread softly because you tread on my dreams*" (57),¹ and I believe that this book heeds the speaker's request here as it treads through the *Collected Poems*. After briefly referencing Patti Smith, Hassett is careful to explain how these lines are designed "to be read in a very specific way" and thus "embody an immensely powerful dramatic trick:" they are part of "a series of statements and invocations that require the reader to pause dramatically at the end of each line" (58). In the section called "Hospitable Places," Hassett quotes from the poem "To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee": "*And may these characters remain / When all is ruin once again,*" to demonstrate how "In our world of evanescent electronic communication, Yeats's poem gives permanence to the idea that carefully crafted writing continues to exert influence long after its author's death" (72).

Each time Hassett ruminates on the lines he has extracted from the *Collected Poems* and elsewhere, he draws on an array of later writers, from Paul Ricoeur to Ben Lerner. The more I encountered such later writers the more I began to wonder about Yeats's possible reaction to this arsenal of reference. Would he have appreciated his work being so smothered in Seamus Heaney's benign appraisals as it is throughout *Yeats Now*? The cantankerous old poet was careful enough to make his poems speak from the traditional place of wisdom, which must always break out of the now, and so his lines make any later writer quoted by Hassett who does not speak so carefully from that place, already seem somewhat dated. Matthew Arnold would have described as "touchstones" the Yeats lines quoted by Hassett,² and I wonder about the metal of some of the authors scraped against them in this book.

Unlike contemporary sound bites or tweets, Yeats's conceptions have been packed into the ice or salt of poetic form for their long journey to the future; his thoughts are not commonplace because they have been transformed into something stranger during this process of preparation. In this way they already speak from their destination, which may not necessarily be gained today, and sometimes they seem to be slightly out of reach of Hassett's attempts to read them in terms of such contemporary authors as Patti Smith or Zadie Smith.

Although this book has the feeling of a non-discursive commonplace-book it is quite carefully put together. I note that at its very center, for example, Hassett quotes what might be perceived as the preeminent line of Yeats for our age: "*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*", which is also "frequently quoted by politicians and journalists" and often tweeted in response to the news today. It is good to be reminded that as much as this line describes the ever-spiralling chaos of contemporary life, the reason for its popularity is its "enormous power of 'poetic concentration'" (93). The ending of *Yeats Now* is also quite eschatological as it moves from "Growing Old" to "Facing Death" and "Last Words." Here Heaney presides and the arrangement of quotations and commentary seems like a kind of elegy for the later poet.

One of the strengths of this book is its interplay of texts and images. I loved the way we are first introduced to Althea Gyles through a photograph of her in 1893; then we are shown her beautiful cover for *The Wind among the Reeds* before she is finally mentioned in the body of Hassett's text itself, six or seven pages later, when two more of her rich covers are reproduced. Gyles was keen to make Yeats's 1897 volume *The Secret Rose* "look like a textbook of magic called a grimoire" (20). Hassett does not quite make Yeats's *Collected Poems* into a magician's manual, although I do feel that Gyles could preside as an anthologizing spirit over his book: as Hassett notes, Yeats commented that "she collects the necessities of life from her friends and spends her money on flowers" (21).

Yeats Now is full of many beautiful flowers of verse, but I think its author has also collected the necessities of life from Yeats's writings. Its cover is not inspired by Gyles's designs but by that other great maker of Yeats's covers, Thomas Sturge Moore. Underneath Hassett's juxtaposition of our "evanescent electronic communication" (72) with the well-crafted permanence of Yeats's poetry, you will find a photograph of the winding stair in Thoor Ballylee, side by side with Sturge Moore's cover design for *The Winding Stair*. It seems fitting to have this image replicated on the cover of *Yeats Now* since the book would wind its way through the heart of the *Collected Poems*. As it treads its winding course there it expresses "the energy and strength that can be tapped by maintaining a psychological link with our ancestors" (73) even as confusion falls upon our thought today.

NOTES

- 1 Throughout this review I have retained the italics used by Hassett for the Yeats quotations that form the titles to sections of his book.
- 2 See Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (London: Penguin, 2015), 334.