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YEATS AND MATERIALITY

David Holdeman

This special issue of *International Yeats Studies*, “Yeats and Materiality,” is dedicated to the memory of George Bornstein (1942–2021). Beginning in the early 1990s, George’s critical and editorial publications transformed discussion of the material texts of Yeats’s works by illuminating the interpretive implications of what he (borrowing a term from Jerome McGann) called their “bibliographic codes.” The contributors to this issue—some George’s former students, all grateful beneficiaries of his scholarship—wish to honor him by extending a critical conversation he was instrumental in establishing. Increasingly, this conversation encompasses not only scrutiny of Yeats’s bibliographical coding but also broader consideration of his engagements with materiality. This collection thus includes both studies of the material texts of particular Yeatsian works and analyses of the poet’s responses to and implication in materiality, material culture, and material texts outside the corpus of his works.

Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux leads things off with a discerning assessment of George’s critical legacy and a heartfelt tribute to his generosity as a mentor and friend. Tracing “the repeated pattern of his career,” which “began in Yeats, circled out to other writers, then rounded again to Yeats,” she describes his critical vision as, in essence, an attempt to see “at the center of the modernist mode of being in the world a relentless, repeated, necessary process of embodiment in the search for what will ‘suffice,’ with all the contingency and instability that word carries.” Like Beth, I studied with George at the University of Michigan, and I join her in gratefully acknowledging that the work of my scholarly life “would not have been possible without George Bornstein.” Her moving tribute is followed by a contribution from Clare Hutton on one of George’s favorite topics: the Cuala Press and its production of “socialized text.” Hutton focuses on Cuala’s 1916 edition of *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, arguing that it “bears the kind of material reading advanced by George Bornstein in *Material Modernism*, a pioneering work which argues that ‘meaning is transmitted through bibliographical as well as linguistic codes.’” She emphasizes the “material circumstances” faced by the Yeats sisters at Cuala Industries while also considering how “the content of the book which Elizabeth Yeats printed so carefully on her brother’s behalf . . . position[ed] her as non-entity.” Although my own essay, placed after Hutton’s, comments briefly on

the bibliographical coding of *Responsibilities*, its principal subject is “the early absence and later, occasionally central, presence of material artifacts in Yeats’s poetry,” particularly “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and other poems set at Thoor Ballylee. In a similar vein, James Pethica offers a sweeping analysis of “Yeats’s representations of the materialities of Coole Park,” charting the poet’s “evolving conceptions of Gregory and the estate” while also “highlight[ing] the anxieties about authorial agency and the influence of tradition that were crucially present in his relationship both to the house and estate, and to its chatelaine.”

Whereas the essays by Hutton, myself, and Pethica center on books, domestic spaces, and personal relationships, Christopher Morash takes up the materiality of Yeats’s theatrical work, analyzing *The Herne’s Egg* in support of the thesis that “Yeatsian farce is a genre that insists on the irreducible materiality of bodies and things.” Searching for middle ground—a destination habitually pursued in George’s own critical work—Morash questions how we might learn to “read Yeats’s symbolic language in a way that is neither a materialist critique of metaphysics per se, nor, at the other extreme, an evangelical call to endorse something like the ‘perennial philosophy.’” Morash’s emphasis on both the visual and aural elements of *The Herne’s Egg* makes an apposite segue to contributions by Adrian Paterson and Ragini Mohite, which also remind us that, for Yeats, contact with materiality may be mediated by both sight and hearing. Paterson, in a wide-ranging essay, extends George’s “concentration on texts’ physical existence in the world” to show how such noisy poems as “Byzantium” present “the sonic complexities of materialism as a necessary but vital step to purity and harmony beyond.” Moving on from the implied sounds of Yeats’s printed poems to actual recordings of oral performances, Mohite explores the pedagogical usefulness of crowd-sourced audio archives, especially the “Your Yeats” playlist created in 2015 for the 150th anniversary of Yeats’s birth. Like Mohite, Charika Swanepoel investigates Yeats’s implication in the digital materialities of the twenty-first century. Updating earlier assessments of Yeats’s representation in popular culture, she chronicles the incarnation in internet meme culture of the “digimodernist” icon, William Butler YEETS. Finally—and fittingly, given George’s distinguished record as a manuscript editor—Wayne Chapman supplies the second installment in an ongoing *International Yeats Studies* series on Yeats’s five Rapallo notebooks.

I thank all of these contributors for the rare excellence of their efforts and for their wholehearted willingness to join me in honoring George. I am equally appreciative of the journal’s editor, Rob Doggett. This special issue was his idea and he was instrumental in shaping it. Rob and I are both grateful to the University of Michigan English department for providing generous financial support. Lastly, on behalf of all of George’s students, friends, and

fellow scholars, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank Jane York Bornstein and the Bornstein family for decades of cheerful friendship and many, many kindnesses.