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# Being in the World: George Bornstein's Legacy

*Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux*

The work of my scholarly life would not have been possible without George Bornstein. I was one of his first PhD students, and from the start he had a firm sense of what was required of a mentor: upbeat, honest support; a personal connection that drew me and many others into his home and family and gave me a sense of how humane and pleasurable the life of a scholar could be; and, as he once told me when I was in my fifties, "lifelong services."

I, the eldest of four children and used to having little kids around, babysat regularly for George and his wife's two-year-old son Benjy, a real pleasure in my graduate-student life, separated in so many ways from communal, familial life. On a research trip to London with them, I strolled with Benjy on walks whose length appalled his parents, though he seemed happy and slept well. When I was finding my way toward a dissertation topic and thought it might be on Hopkins and Lowell, I haltingly explained my idea to George one day in his office. He stared at me silently with that disconcerting, long, up-from-under-the-eyebrows George look, sucked on the pipe he smoked then, and said slowly, "Hmmm. If you could write on any poet you wanted, who would it be?" I understood he was telling me that *he* was not enthusiastic about supervising a dissertation on authors not on his list of favorites. I also realized immediately that I had a ready answer to his question, and it wasn't Hopkins or Lowell. "Yeats," I said. Another excruciating pause; another look; another draw on the pipe. "Have you thought about Yeats's interest in the visual arts?" George well knew that most of my graduate school friends were in art history and that I had dabbled in it, and in the studio. And that was that. I've been tilling that field ever since, and even took a brief turn with Lowell.

My experience was, I know, replicated in various ways for so many of George's students, some of them contributors to this special issue. Across the generations of his numerous graduate students, many of us have become friends, and all of us live within the circle that has spread out in multiple directions from George's mentorship—we are editors, scholars, teachers, mentors, department chairs, deans, provosts. And that is to say nothing of the large circle of scholars and poets on both sides of the Atlantic that he called friends, and the many

readers of his books, articles, and against-the-grain letters to the *Detroit News* that carried his scholarly opinions to a wider public.

In the 1990s, George helped shape the field of textual studies, and opened a rich ground of inquiry at the intersection of editing, material culture, and literary studies, with fruitful implications particularly for the study of Yeats, as this issue so amply demonstrates. George explored the meaning-making possibilities of material production for both writers and readers, deepening our reading, broadening our understanding of the expressive terrain of literature, and thereby revising the then-dominant view of modernism. George's insistence on versions, rather than the search for the definitive text, freed us to consider the settings of poetry, how poems appear in the world, and to interpret a work differently in its various material forms with their attendant political and cultural valences. George understood the collaborative nature of textual production, one that was clear to him as a scholar as well. He was also a firm believer in the value of close reading, of taking the time to pay careful, thoughtful attention—slow reading.

Throughout his scholarship, too-easy narratives of literary history, be they told by scholars or poets, rubbed George the wrong way. Pieties bugged him. He was never one to let prevailing orthodoxies go unquestioned, his arguments often built around showing the limitations of what he considered overly simple thinking. He disliked the tendency of conviction to leave complications by the wayside—even as, I note, he was himself quite sure in his convictions.

In his early work of the 1970s on modern poets' complex responses to their romantic forbears,[1] George sought to upset "modernist orthodoxy," as he called it: the view of the modernist poem as a stable, static, well-wrought urn established by the New Critics. They had built that image of modernism, George argued, on the antiromanticism of Eliot's essays, itself mistakenly founded on Eliot's reading "his objections to the late, decadent romanticism that surrounded him back into the early, strong variety." "In distorting literary history," he argued, "criticism had distorted modernism itself."[2] In insightful close readings of Yeats's "The Tower" and "The Second Coming," as well as work by Stevens, Pound, and Eliot himself, George traced romanticism's through line in the modernist concept of poetic structure: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice," as Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" describes quotidian acts of creation, including its own.[3] From the start, then, George saw 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.

In the repeated pattern of his career, George began in Yeats, circled out to other writers, then rounded again to Yeats to set out anew. When he started his life as a prodigious editor of Yeats in the 1980s, I remember his surprise at how

much he liked it. All told, he produced seven volumes, varied in their contents and editorial challenges—manuscript materials, newly-discovered unpublished poems, journalism, essays, facsimile editions—a remarkable achievement.[4] In his scholarship, George was nothing if not meticulous—every quotation, every footnote exactly right—aware, as he was, of how easily embarrassing and misleading mistakes happen. He routinely cited misinterpretations—"howlers"—deriving from insufficient attention to the context or circumstances of a poetic or scholarly text. He taught his graduate students rules to live by: double-check every quotation; never quote a quoted passage (always go back to the original—you'll be surprised); proofread your work, preferably out loud, preferably with someone on hand to check against your manuscript. Many of his graduate students served as his research assistants; we read proofs of his books aloud. No surprise, then, that George found the painstaking, detailed work of editing congenial and that he well understood how many hands touch a text, how variants happen, and how sufficiency is not easily attained.

In editing Yeats's early poems, George quickly butted up against the limitations of the traditional "Greg-Bowers" theory of editing, as he later reflected.[5] Yeats troubled their fundamental premise that the authority of an edition lies in the author's final intentions that the editor must discern, with the aim of ultimately producing a "definitive," ideal text, whether that text ever existed in the world or not. Not only was Yeats a constant reviser of his own earlier poems, published and unpublished, complicating the editor's task, but he routinely published his poems in different formats, in different arrangements within volumes, and for different occasions and audiences. Different versions had different physical features—not just the words, punctuation, and capitalization, but also design (font, layout, etc.), paper, covers, illustrations, and so on. And Yeats was actively invested in all aspects of his publications. All reflected his intentions, at least as far as he was able to exert them. This brought George face-to-face again with "modernist orthodoxy": "Seemingly diametrically opposed to the New Criticism with its 'intentional fallacy' ruling out the author's intentions from criticism altogether, traditional textual theory in some ways conspires with the New Criticism in that both posit a unique status for the art work as a well wrought urn, at once unitary, authoritative, and superior to historical contingency, the product instead of an autonomous creative artist."[6] In editing, George discovered not only a way to get Yeats's work into the hands of scholars and general readers, but another arena in which to pursue his revisionist agenda, and further evidence of the need to do so.

But, in immediate practical terms, what was an editor to do? In creating another incarnation of a Yeats work, decisions had to be made, and made on some basis. This fundamental question, dropping as it did into the fullness of 1980s poststructuralism, opened another, increasingly important argument

in George's passionate defense of modernism, and literary studies generally, against ahistorical reading, an argument that both used poststructuralism's insights and defended literature against its extremes. Textual theory's concept of versions, necessarily finite in number, provides, George argued, "an interesting middle ground between stable unitary notions of the text on the one hand and post-structuralist freeplay of endless deferral on the other." Versions "establish a physical, literal, and empirical level of meaning to such terms as revision, erasure, instability, and writing itself." Textual theory's recognition of authorial intention that changes over time and is conditioned by the work of multiple hands and the material and social circumstances of publishing "lead[s] us away from an ahistorical conception of the work of art toward one of its historical situation and contingency."[7]

George pursued the middle ground, first, with a commitment to transparency, to the open, detailed, accounting of textual choices made in editing a text so that readers knew what they held in their hands. Working from manuscripts for the previously unpublished poems in *Under the Moon,* for example, he alerts readers of "For clapping hands," "In the manuscript the second word of this line reads 'though' presumably in error for 'thou'" and, with editorial humor, "Yeats presumably intended 'wrapt' as 'wrapped,' but in his wayward orthography may have meant 'rapt.'"[8] Among the four approaches to editing that Peter Shillingsburg identified—"the historical and the sociological along with the aesthetic and the authorial," as George enumerated them[9]—in choosing base ("copy") texts, he subscribed to the historical and the authorial. Writers and *their* contexts, historical and material, remained always at the center for George. He worked from published texts that had appeared in the world, and with the author's known intentions in overseeing the final published edition of the work, as he and coeditor Richard Finneran explained in their edition of Yeats's *Early Essays* (*CW4 325*). In titling *Under the Moon*, he could have devised his own, but instead honored Yeats with the title Yeats had "originally intended for the major gathering of his early work eventually published as *Poems* in 1895."[10] Other ways of editing, however, were brought deliberately and explicitly into view. In *Early Essays*, for example, he and Finneran "gestured," as they explained, "toward other ways of editing that allow the reader additional information and allow him or her to reach independent and informed judgements" (*CW4 325*): materials dropped from earlier versions are noted or wholly reproduced in notes and an appendix, as are, scattered throughout, reproductions of illustrations, cover designs, and endpapers. In selecting what to reproduce in facsimile for the volumes of manuscripts of Yeats's early poetry, George openly chose "a group likely to be of most value to scholars," allowing his understanding of his audience to guide choice.[11] In discussions of editorial theory, he argued always for keeping in play multiple

possible approaches to editing texts.[12] Beyond this, the range of George's editorial projects—manuscripts, readers' editions, facsimiles—speaks not only to what opportunities came his way, but to his commitment to getting different kinds of textual incarnations into circulation.

*Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (2001), the influential centerpiece of George's career, gathered together and extended his thinking over the previous fifteen years. It opened the field of textual studies and his own investigations to a wide range of writers in addition to Yeats, from Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound to James Joyce, Emma Lazarus, and Gwendolyn Brooks, from the Irish Revival to the Harlem Renaissance. Above all, George demonstrated the rich interpretive possibilities attention to material texts and their production hold for modernist criticism.

George had a keen eye for the possibilities of a concept, which he held onto and returned to for grounding. As M. H. Abrams's "greater romantic lyric" gave him the hook to explore the deep connection between the mind's movement in romantic and modern poems, so Jerome McGann's distinction between a text's "linguistic code"—the words themselves—and its "bibliographic code"—layout, paper, design, and other physical features—opened a cache of interpretive possibility. All make meaning, the linguistic and bibliographic inflecting each other, the material condition requiring historically-situated reading, specific and nuanced, grounded in the aspirations and realities of material production, in attention to, and interpretation of, the visual, the haptic, sometimes the aural and olfactory, as well as the linguistic—not the only way to read, but *a* way to read with fresh insight and expanded understanding. That way of reading opened additional insights in his "ongoing revaluation of modernism."[13]

For readers of Yeats, George gave us, to name a few examples, a new view of *The Tower* (1928), a monument in the modernist decade mirabilis of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, in fact a shape-shifting assemblage of changing contents and bibliographic codes, built from previous pieces and continuing, even today, to change. He asked us to consider Yeats's Ronsardian love poem "When You Are Old" published in dizzyingly various incarnations that change the meaning of the poem's exhortation to the beloved to "take down this book": from the intimate, hand-made, full-vellum, gilt-edged manuscript notebook Yeats gave Maud Gonne (1891); to *Poems* (1895), where it becomes part of a series of poems titled "The Rose," "a complex meditation on nationalism, esoterica, eroticism, and poetry" enhanced in editions from 1899 on by Althea Gyles's elaborate gilt-on-blue cover of intertwining roses; to Finneran's sober edition of *Collected Poems,* appropriate to "the lifetime poetic achievement of the first Irish poet to win the Nobel Prize."[14] He showed us a "September 1913" actively intervening in the politics of the day, attacking enemies and vaunting friends, when first published in *The Irish Times* surrounded by reports of labor strikes

(which Yeats supported) crushed by police attacks and lockouts, and in the midst of the related bitter controversy over the government's refusal of Hugh Lane's gift of French paintings to establish a modern art gallery for Ireland. He showed us how little is left of this poem as radical political speech by the time it appears in the vastly different textual circumstances of the primary texts we now have, such as *Collected Poems* and such contemporary anthologies as the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*.

What to do about this diminution of meaning over time? While George viewed the loss with an elegiac "sense of our own belatedness, of our inadequacy to recuperate the lost codes of lost locations in space and time,"[15] in scholarship as in life, he looked for the compensatory. In codex editions: more illustrations, more bibliographic description would be something. He held out hope for digital editions. With their high reproduction values and their increasingly sophisticated ability to layer a text's various incarnations and provide fuller notes, they might capture the material "palimpsest" of incarnation on top of incarnation that was, for him, the text. Although he didn't undertake a digital edition himself—significantly rounding out his career with facsimiles of two of Yeats's volumes, things you could hold in your hands—he encouraged the pioneers by serving on the advisory boards of the Emily Dickinson, Modernist Networks, and Yeats electronic projects.

In *Material Modernism*, George also helped recuperate the crucial role of women as editors and publishers in the production of modernism and its material manifestations: Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, Dora Marsden's and Harriet Shaw Weaver's *The Egoist,* Bryher's *Life and Letters Today* and *Close Up*, Weaver's Egoist Press, Bryher's Brendin Publishing Company, Woolf's Hogarth Press, Gertrude Stein's Plain Edition Press. George took Marianne Moore as primary example: she was deeply connected to the network of editors and publishers making modernism, she herself edited *The Dial* during some of its most important years (1925–1929), she was highly aware of the meaning-making possibilities of the material body of her own poems, and her works shift in particularly dramatic ways from incarnation to incarnation, as in "The Fish," which George spun out in detail.

For Yeats, of course, there was Cuala Press, originally Dun Emer Press—about which more later in this special issue—founded by his sister, Elizabeth Corbet ("Lolly") Yeats, and literally a family business, sometimes resident in Yeats's own house. From its founding in 1903 as a feminist, nationalist venture intended to provide his sister a living, Yeats published almost all of his volumes of poems first with Dun Emer/Cuala before releasing them through commercial houses.

In the final chapter of *Material Modernism*, "Afro-Celtic Connections," George took an impassioned leap into our contemporary debates about race that

would become the center of his scholarly work for the rest of his life. Tracing the "long history of cross-constructions between those two cultures, usually driven by a common experience of oppression and hope of emancipation," he argued, consistently, for more historically informed and nuanced understandings of both race and cultural production.[16]

Most important for this special issue is George's dual contention that "hybridity is the normal condition of culture and the precondition of its creation, particularly in the modern world. It is also . . . the normal condition of textual production in the material sense."[17] Later pointing out that "race" in the past applied not just to Blacks, but to Jews, the Irish, and other national groups that we might consider under today's racial category "White,"[18] George uncovered a dense network of affiliations: Frederick Douglass finding common cause with the poor of Ireland, quoting Daniel O'Connell who, for his part, publicly attacked American slavery as part and parcel of the oppression that plagued colonial Ireland; DuBois frequently noting the common racial prejudice against the Irish and African Americans; the writers of the Harlem Renaissance looking to their Irish forerunners to chart a path ahead; both groups reacting against cultural stereotypes, suffering "the painful ambiguity of using language associated with the oppressor," and engaging "the struggle to create new cultural institutions."[19] Those struggles were embodied in such material form as *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1920) where James Weldon Johnson invoked an analogy to Synge's need "to find a form that will express the racial spirit," and *The New Negro* (1925) where Alain Locke declared that "Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland."[20] George's reading of the first publication of *The New Negro* by Albert and Charles Boni brought home two points. First, Locke's collaboration with his friend the White artist Winold Reiss on the title page decoration and illustrations mark this as a hybrid, verbal-visual work whose bibliographic complexity and racial inflections modern editions erase by omitting Reiss's work, "reducing a multicultural to a monoracial volume,"[21] hardening contemporary constructions of racial distinctions. Second, writers of the Harlem Renaissance, like those of the Irish Revival, marginalized as they were, found outlets in similarly marginalized publishers in the United States: Alfred A. Knopf, Harcourt and Brace, Boni and Liveright (later A&C Boni), and Ben Huebsch (which merged with Viking in the mid-1920s), founded by mostly Jewish men excluded from the established New York publishing industry and dedicated to promoting ethnic literature around the world and at home. Viking continues to hold Joyce's copyright. Boni and Liveright published Yeats's *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* as well as work by other Irish writers. George developed these connections and the ideas of cultural production they evidenced in his final critical book, *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish from 1845-1945*

(2011), expanding the historical scope and detail, moving well beyond Yeats and literary production into politics, music and more, and deepening the Jewish connection he had begun to tease out in *Material Modernism.*

In rereading George's work, I am struck again and again by the sheer wealth of dense detail that informed his readings and his view of modernism. His mind teemed. There is much still to learn from him. There's generosity in those details, discovered with delight, thoughtfully assembled—generosity to the writers he loved, to us his readers, to what he understood as a clearer vision of historical, human, complexity. As we loop back into his work, we might carry his expansive yet attentive-to-the-specifics thinking forward into our own work, keeping in mind the big picture as well as the details that give it life and substance.

George's generosity and scope extended beyond the work. When David Holdeman solicited contributions to this special issue, he commented on the enduring "friendly, collaborative, and intellectually vibrant" nature of the world of Yeats studies. George entered that world as a twenty-something scholar, expanded it, and dedicated himself over his long career to keeping the doors open and welcoming. That spirit stretched beyond the Yeats community as he widened the circle, taking glee almost in gathering together scholars from across the historical range of literary study, across languages, across the humanities, pulling them into closer relation, into a common field. He collaborated with other scholars on numerous books (Ralph Williams, Theresa Tinkle, Hugh Witemeyer, Hans Gabler, Richard Finneran). He organized countless conference panels, served on numerous editorial boards and MLA executive committees. He founded the University of Michigan Press's series Editorial Theory and Literary Criticism and gathered submissions. Notably, he was a driving force behind the interdisciplinary Society for Textual Scholarship, an organization that may sound dusty, and was anything but. He constantly ushered his graduate students and other scholars, especially those at the start of their careers, into the fold of a small, friendly organization—a manageable organization, the other end of the scale from the Modern Language Association--that offered the possibility of rubbing shoulders with and learning from, even collaborating with, scholars in other disciplines from around the world. He reveled in those gatherings. "It's more fun with other people," he always said.

George had infectious, unabashed energy. He loved life and knew its waywardness. In his later years, he allowed a more personal voice into his scholarship, especially in the introductions to his last books, the two facsimile editions of Yeats, to whom he always returned. This, on the last lines of "From the 'Antigone,'" the final poem of *The Winding Stair*, closes his introduction to that volume:

the poet plunges back into the human heart again, where all the ladders start. In the final turn, the poet then leaves us with the image not of himself but of Antigone, as she courageously descends to meet her fate. And that finally is what Yeats gives us, and what *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* gives us—the impetus to go on and to go forward, in his poetry and in our own lives. It is an ending that defies closure, as Yeats at his best so often does.[22]

## Endnotes

1 George Bornstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); George Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); George Bornstein, *The Postromantic Consciousness of Ezra Pound* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1977).

2 Bornstein, *Transformations*, 18,15.

3 Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 239; quoted in Bornstein, *Transformations*, 1.

4 Two volumes of early poems for the Cornell Yeats series of manuscript materials, *The Early Poetry. Volume I: Mosada and The Island of Statues: Manuscript Materials* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) and *The Early Poetry. Volume II: 'The Wanderings of Oisin,' and Other Early Poems to 1895* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); a volume of unpublished early poems he titled *Under the Moon (*New York: Scribner, 1995*)*; two facsimile editions, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, A Facsimile Edition (New York: Scribner, 2011) and *The Wild Swans at Coole*, A Facsimile Edition (New York: Scribner, 2017); and, for the Scribner/Macmillan *Collected Works*, for which he served as a general editor in its later years, *Letters to the New Island: A New Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1989; London, 1990) coedited with Hugh Witemeyer, hereafter CW7, and *Early Essays* (New York: Scribner, 2007) coedited with Richard Finneran, hereafter CW4.

5 George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54.

6 "Why Editing Matters," the excellent overview of editorial theory that introduces *Representing Modernist Texts: Editing as Interpretation*, ed. George Bornstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 5.

7 "Why Editing Matters," 7, 8.

8 Yeats, *Under the Moon*, ed. Bornstein, 111.

9 "Why Editing Matters," 9. See Peter Shillingsburg, *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

10 Yeats, *Under the Moon*, ed. Bornstein, 21.

11 Bornstein, "Preface," *Early Poetry*, I, xi; Bornstein, "Preface," *Early Poetry*, II, xiii.

12 "Why Editing Matters," 9.

13 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 1.

14 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 51.

15 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 64.

16 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 141.

17 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 140.

18 George Bornstein, *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish from 1845-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 24.

19 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 148.

20 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 148, 149.

21 Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 151.

22 Yeats, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, ed. Bornstein, xxxiii.