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**A REVIEW OF *TRANSATLANTIC MODERNISM
AND THE US LECTURE TOUR,*
BY ROBERT VOLPICELLI**

Robert Volpicelli, *Transatlantic Modernism and the US Lecture Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 218, ISBN: 9780192893383.

Reviewed by Zoe Rucker

As Volpicelli recounts in his chapter on “W. B. Yeats as Irish Cultural Diplomat” in his new monograph, *Transatlantic Modernism and the US Lecture Tour*, when Yeats first arrived in New York to commence his first American lecture circuit, one reporter’s prodding question over his dislike for Rudyard Kipling, “The reigning poet of the English Empire,” prompted Yeats to let slip “an undisclosed ‘Irish remark’” (57). Consequently, Volpicelli tells us, Yeats spent the first few days worrying that the next day’s newspaper would read: “Yeats desires Kipling’s [*sic*] death” (57). This rather humorous anecdote is one of many in Volpicelli’s new book, which draws upon extensive archival research and presents a wealth of previously unpublished material, which he skillfully marries into this illuminating and insightful monograph.

Transatlantic Modernism and the US Lecture Tour is the first full-length study of its kind. Across five chapters, which each examine one of five modernist writers’ experiences and aims on their respective lecture tours of America, Volpicelli explores “the way the US lecture tour functioned as a far-reaching system of literary and cultural distribution during the modernist period” (3). As Volpicelli outlines in his introduction, each chapter examines a particular modernist writer through the lens of the individual performative role that Volpicelli suggests they developed for the specific purposes of the lecture tour: (Wilde) the circus curiosity, (Yeats) the international diplomat, (Tagore) the spiritual guru, (Stein) the social documentarian, and (Auden) the wartime correspondent.

Volpicelli’s chapter on Yeats is particularly timely, given the increasing interest within Yeatsian scholarship in addressing the poet’s role as cultural ambassador and his engagement with public life. In terms of the latter, this interest has notably manifested in the form of Elizabeth Cullingford’s *Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism* (1981)¹ and Marjorie Howe’s *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (2010)², which concludes with a chapter examining Yeats’s senatorial work and his attraction to eugenics. While the image of Yeats as the reclusive intellectual, descendant from the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy,

who hid away in his castle tower and in his friends' great country houses still pervades in the minds of many readers, approaches like Volpicelli's remind us that even one of the most apparently "impersonal" modernist figures could not completely seclude himself from interaction with the masses, or from forms of mass media, if he was to forward a career in the modern world. It is sometimes easy to forget that the great poets of high modernism were not financially invincible and often depended upon literary patrons or "day jobs." As Volpicelli recounts, Yeats's impetus for taking on lecture work was for the most part financial, with goals including repaying a debt to Lady Gregory or putting a new roof on his Irish castle, Thoor Ballylee—which further conveys the idea that his lecturing was a means to some other end. However, Volpicelli's research is also propelled by the fact that if these authors were embarking on these paid lecturing ventures to market their work, they also had to market *themselves* by performing an authorial persona that would capture the imaginations and affections of their audiences from the lecture stage.

In his seminal study *The Institutions of Modernism* (1999), Lawrence Rainey has previously explored different modes of authorial self-fashioning across the various mediums and institutions that were integral to the dissemination and eventual canonisation of what became "modernist" literature.³ Within the transnational context, a popular focus has, of course, been upon the centrality of small press periodicals or "little magazines"⁴ or, more recently, the prevalence of mass market periodicals (Sigler, 2022) and newspapers to authorial circulation and eventual canonization.⁵ Volpicelli's focus upon the lecture tour as a medium of literary-cultural transmission, however, revivifies and adds a new dimension to the examination of modernist authorial self-fashioning through his particular interest in the physical, embodied movement of authors and their work across borders that the transatlantic lecture tour involves. In his first chapter on Oscar Wilde's cultivation of a kind of "circus curiosity" persona, Volpicelli unpacks how the Irish Wilde, boldly donning his "aesthete 'costume'—consisting of a purple velvet jacket, stockings, and buckled shoes" topped off, of course, with his iconic shoulder-length hair, addressed his American audiences through a Barnumesque-inspired circus curiosity appearance (27).

On his own first American lecture tour, nearly twenty years later, Yeats embraced something of the exotic and romanticised form of Irishness that his predecessor had offered Americans. According to Volpicelli, although Yeats maintained a relatively muted physical appearance in comparison to Wilde, he did endeavour to embody this vision of the romanticised bardic Irish poet through his voice, which those who have encountered recordings of his poetic readings might interpret as his rendition of "ancient Irish minstrel traditions" (61). In such comparisons, Volpicelli reveals another line of influence, which is

often overlooked, running from Wilde to Yeats. In doing so, he also highlights another manner and medium through which modernist figures like Yeats can be observed to be fashioning themselves both according to and against the models set down by their predecessors.

I would argue that Volpicelli's most meaningful contributions to the realm of Yeats scholarship manifest through his research on how this international, American context served an early rehearsal stage for the public, political persona that many scholars usually consider having emerged much later in Yeats's career. As Volpicelli nicely concludes:

on the circuit, the poet learned that he had to translate himself and his ideas about Irish culture into more approachable forms if he was to circulate himself, continuously, in this especially complex landscape. Such a demand applied, Yeats found out by the end of his tour, even when he was speaking to more familiar [Irish-American] audiences. One might say, then, that Yeats ended his first tour by essentially translating Ireland for itself — a sign of just how nuanced his work as a poet-diplomat, in this age of internationalism and mass migration, had become. (79)

Indeed, Volpicelli's formulation of the international lecture tour as a space in which the poet could rehearse provisional versions of authorial image brings to light another "institution of modernism" by which authors of Yeats's stature could fashion and refashion their public authorial images. In particular, Volpicelli demonstrates the importance of the transnational context to Yeats's finally nationalist programme, highlighting another conduit of crosscultural influence that has not been sufficiently recognised and explored. Although it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the two versions of Yeats—the reclusive poet and the public man—Volpicelli's research furthers our understanding of the process by which the former became the latter.

While the merits of Volpicelli's study are certainly numerous, the monograph's rigid chapter organisation is slightly too decided. As Volpicelli formulates it, each of his chosen authors is examined along the lines of a singular role, which he sees them performing for the most part continuously across the vast expanse of the US tour destinations they visited. Perhaps the breadth of personalities an author might take while engaging with such a diverse range of audiences is implicitly expressed through the fact that Volpicelli considers five different authors; however, his manner of strictly assigning one role per author stops short of fully and sensitively engaging with the "malleability of self-presentation" which he argues the lecture tour reveals (20). This is especially true of the chapter on W. H. Auden, in which the context of Auden's transnational identity is relatively overlooked in reference to how his sometimes-ambiguous cultural allegiances between the two sides of

the Atlantic might have influenced the manner of persona he “performed.” In his introduction, Volpicelli aptly points to sociologist Erving Goffman’s concept of the “lecture,” highlighting the dichotomy between a lecturer’s “textual self,” and the performer of the text, or its “animator.” “There can of course be notable slippages,” Volpicelli writes, “between these two aspects of the lecturer’s identity; [but the primary interest] is in how the latter mediates the former in an act of self-constitution that codifies a specific image of the author for the audience” (10). Yet, in light of this, Volpicelli himself largely seems to neglect the fact that if one’s personal identity is constantly to be negotiated, self-constituted, and reconstituted, it is an oversimplification to portray one’s “lecturing identity” as essentially constant rather than a series of provisional personae. Thus, while Volpicelli’s chapter-length treatments of each of the five authors he engages with are excellent in establishing the importance of this medium of literary and crosscultural transmission to each of these canonical modernists’ careers, I would like to see a number of strands of exploration, which Volpicelli’s work paves the way for, teased out in future author-specific studies.

Further considerations of Yeats in this manner would do well to study the texts—as far as they are available—of the actual lecture speeches Yeats delivered. Although Volpicelli does point out the differences between Yeats’s approach towards audiences in areas with higher levels of Irish American populations and larger, more impersonal audiences such as that at Carnegie Hall, it would be interesting to see how the language of his addresses change relative to the contexts of different regional audiences within America. Such research may reveal a higher level of variety among the various forms of “personae” which Yeats can be seen to “test out” across the three lecture tours he embarked on between 1903–1904 and 1932–1933. For instance, there is a substantially noticeable difference between the version of himself which T. S. Eliot presented and performed in his 1933 lecture at the University of Virginia, which later became the notoriously troubling *After Strange Gods*, and the version of himself which returned to his alma mater, Harvard University, to deliver his Norton lectures on “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.” It is more than a coincidence that Eliot, always acutely aware of his audiences, chose to voice some of his more prejudiced opinions before the then largely conservative, southern white agrarian audience he knew he would meet in Virginia. In this sense, even *the* poet of impersonality can be observed to drastically change his lecture persona between audiences or, indeed, to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”⁶

In all, however, it should be reiterated that this is a superbly researched book that brings previously unpublished materials to light while also adding a previously neglected medium of cultural transmission to the momentum

behind the still incomplete transnational turn in modernist studies. I will be keen to see the many directions of further scholarship in this area that future scholars delve into, following Volpicelli's lead.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981).
- 2 Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 3 Lawrence Rainey, *The Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 4 Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
- 5 Amanda Sigler, *Modernist Authorship and Transatlantic Periodical Culture, 1895–1925* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- 6 T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, 2 vols, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), I, 5–9, l. 27.