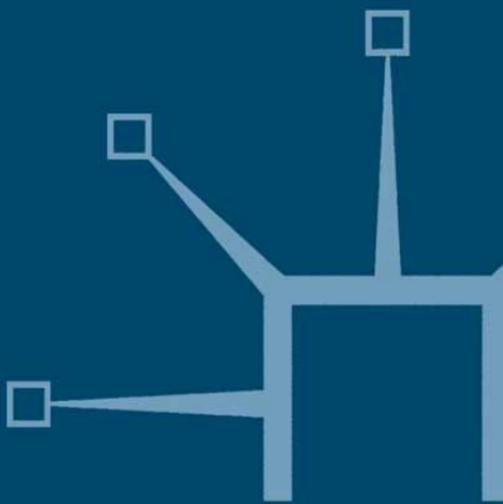


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Transition, Reception and Modernism in W.B. Yeats

Richard Greaves



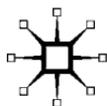
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For Michelle

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RICHARD GREAVES

Abbreviations

- Au *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955).
- CL1 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume One, 1865–1895*, ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
- CL2 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume Two, 1896–1900*, ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
- CL3 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume Three, 1901–1904*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
- E & I *Essays and Introductions* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1961).
- Ex *Explorations*, sel. Mrs W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1963).
- GYL *The Donne–Yeats Letters 1893–1938: Always Your Friend*, ed. Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares (London: Hutchinson, 1992).
- ISW *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age* (Dundrum: Dun Emer, 1903).
- L *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1954; New York: Macmillan, 1955).
- Mem *Memoirs: Autobiography – First Draft: Journal*, transcribed and edited by Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972; New York: Macmillan, 1973).
- Myth *Mythologies* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1959).
- UP2 *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, vol. 2, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
- VP *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957).
- VSR *The Secret Rose, Stories by W. B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, 2nd edn revised and enlarged, ed. Warwick Gould, Phillip L. Marcus, and Michael J. Sidnell (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional, 1992).
- YA *Yeats Annual* (London: Macmillan), followed by number and date.

- YP *Yeats's Poems*, ed. and annotated by A. Norman Jeffares with an appendix by Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1989).
- YT *Yeats and the Theatre*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada; Niagara Falls, N.Y.: Maclean-Hunter Press, 1975).

Introduction

This book has as its starting point my strong reaction against a tendency in criticism I had read to locate, see and judge the phase of Yeats's poetry from 1903 to 1914 in relation to what is referred to as 'modernism'. Initially, I was particularly outraged by the attribution of a definite change in Yeats's poetry to the influence of Ezra Pound, an attribution which surfaces still in spite of clear refutation by Thomas Parkinson in 1954.¹ But the centrality of Pound to what is called 'modernism' in literature led me to think further about the nature of the term as it is used in this context, and this is the concern of the first part of this book.

There follows a reading of the three volumes of poetry Yeats published between 1903 and 1916. I aim to offer a different way of looking at the transition in Yeats's work in this phase, seeking to account for it without relying on what John Harwood has convincingly described as the reified edifice of modernism.² It occurs to me that academic criticism sometimes overrates the significance and explanatory power of its own categories. The category of modernism can become so central in a consideration of writers and their work that it overwhelms other factors.

Reductive biographically based criticism can give the impression that the task of interpretation is merely to turn imaginative literature back into its raw material, and the reaction against it was necessary. Also, it seems to me wrong to claim that only those with years of painstakingly accumulated knowledge of the poet's biography and historical context can interpret a poem at all. I see reaction against this as part of what drives the New Critics' view of the poem as a verbal icon. I'm a teacher too, and can see the value in saying to a group of students that we can all, at least, work with the words on the page, the poem in

front of us. The problem is that this reaction can lead to a sealing off of the poem.

It is, I think, possible to restore connection with life and milieu without falling back into reductiveness. One advantage of trying to do so is that it restores particularity and diversity. I want to see Yeats as Yeats, and not as a partial example – or failed example – of modernism in literature. Professional imperatives in the academic study of literature lead increasingly to a separation of academics' ways of thinking about literature from those of others with an interest in it. Who hasn't heard the comment from a student: 'Oh, I thought that was just the kind of thing lecturers wrote for each other to read'? My view is that the attempt to see the writer's work in relation to his life is a move towards reconnection.

I wanted to see the transition in Yeats's poetry in the context of his life – for instance, his position in Ireland, his relationship with Maud Gonne – not to iron out the particularities of *his* transition by seeing it only as an instance of a retrospectively identified and labelled literary category. I am interested in the ways in which Yeats represents Yeats in his poems, and in the relationship between the construction of the figure of the poet within the poems and the construction of the public figure of Yeats in Ireland. I am also interested in the Yeats constructed in other texts: his autobiographies, letters, essays. The feeding back of the influence of these constructions into the life of the man who writes fascinates me.

To refuse to allow Yeats to disappear into the category of modernism (or even to disappear in being found inadequate to be included in it) seemed to me crucial. In 'The Tree of Life' in *Discoveries*, Yeats claims that the artist must climb free of 'common interests', of the interests of the 'market-place', but not climb *too* high. He establishes a sense here of relinking art and the quotidian world even as he preserves distance and artistic integrity. Seeing in Yeats's idea the figure of the poet owing responsibilities to two spheres which can seem incompatible led me to think of what strikes me as a growing inwardness, reflexiveness, self-concern in literary studies. The figure of Yeats the poet, textually constructed, existing within the work, is, nevertheless, connected with the flesh-and-blood figure. The connection is complex, but it is not non-existent. The figure of Yeats the poet, then, guarantees a connection between the work and the life, between literature and the world.

1

Problems with Modernism

I

There is general agreement that Yeats's work altered considerably in the phase which includes *In the Seven Woods* and *Responsibilities and Other Poems*. Some critics have judged that at some time in this phase Yeats became a modernist poet. But what do they mean by 'modernist'? Matei Calinescu finds the first favourable application of the term to literature in Latin America, by Ruben Dari, in 1888.¹ He notes the difficulty of establishing the use of the term in anything like its current sense in connection with literature in English, but suggests a little magazine, *The Modernist: A Monthly Magazine of Modern Arts and Letters*, published in 1919 (though this magazine turns out to be more political than literary),² and John Crowe Ransom's 'The Future of Poetry', published in *The Fugitive: A Journal of Poetry* in February 1924. Ransom claims that it is necessary for poetry to recognize modernism, though '[i]t is undefined'. He does describe the manifestos of the Imagists as modernist.³ He also refers to 'the Moderns', 'we moderns' and 'modern poets'. The Imagists' 'modernist manifestos' are, for Ransom, partly a declaration of what the modern poet should do. But, as John Harwood points out, Calinescu's understanding of the term 'modernism' seems to be conditioned by its use in literary criticism from the 1960s on. The idea of attempting to trace the history of the usage of the term can be overwhelmed by the attempt to trace the origins of 'a reified construct' projected from one's own time, and that it is a construct gets forgotten. The existence of something called 'modernism' (which is also what Calinescu means by it) is inferred from a reference to it by someone who says it is 'undefined'.⁴

R. A. Scott-James, in his *Modernism and Romance* (1908), distinguishes his use of the term from the theological use, and claims to be using it in the sense suggested by Hardy.⁵ He believes it difficult for poets to find expression in a scientific, self-conscious and materialistic age which has even infected the English language. But his intention is not to identify and describe as 'modernist' a particular type of poetry, but rather to show the difficulty of writing poetry in modern times. The earliest extensive treatment of modern poetry in English which specifically categorizes some of this as modernist seems to be Riding and Graves's *A Survey of Modern Poetry*, published in 1927.⁶ Calinescu claims that by this time, 'the term [modernism] must have established itself as a meaningful – though still largely controversial – literary category'.⁷ This seems rather speculative, and a little difficult to interpret, if Calinescu wants to say that the term is meaningful yet there is controversy over *what* it means. He speculates that since 'modern' could be used as adjective and noun and the word 'modernism' had until recently been tainted by pejorative connotations, 'a large number of aesthetic theories, insights, and choices, which today we would not hesitate to describe as "modernist," went on being formulated within the broader framework of the idea of the modern'.⁸ The readiness today to call 'modernist' what at the time was called 'modern' indicates what is happening here. Within 'the modern', academic criticism from the 1960s on has distinguished a 'modernist'.⁹

One generalization Riding and Graves *do* make about the poetry they want to characterize as 'modernist' is that the plain reader finds it difficult to understand. This difficulty may make the statement: 'Keep out. This is a private performance,'¹⁰ or it may be a means of demanding the application of a higher level of attention and intelligence on the part of the reader. The potential of the second for academic criticism is clear. Here is poetry the interpretation of which demands an elite of specially trained readers. The idea of poetry as private performance is also significant in relation to what later critics concerned with modernism have to say and in possible sources for critical tenets which fall within the ambit of the retrospectively projected idea of modernism.

Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* strongly makes the case for the resemblance of modernist critical tenets to those of French Symbolism, though he is careful to point to the parallel track of a similar influence from Blake and Pater.¹¹ Donald Davie's response to Kermode accuses him of failing to distinguish between post-Symbolist and Symbolist practice, but this kind of distinction is unlikely to be clear-cut, of course, since the degree of transformation that demands the 'post' is a matter for debate.¹²

The chief difficulty that arises with the French Symbolist poetry of Mallarmé in particular is that privacy of performance threatens to

become complete; that is to say, the extension of Mallarmé's poetics to their logical limit would create a private language, one without reference to the external world. Kermode was not the first to see Symbolism at the root of some of the literature of the modern period. Edmund Wilson, in *Axel's Castle*, setting out to 'trace the origins of certain tendencies in contemporary literature',¹³ heads his opening chapter 'Symbolism'. It is the emphasis on the individual that, for Wilson, threatens to make poetry too much of a private performance, 'indeed ... so much a private concern of the poet's that it turned out to be incommunicable to the reader.'¹⁴

If Kermode is right in seeing Symbolism as so influential, then the idea of the autonomy of the text, very much a part of the New Criticism which developed at least in part from the critical ideas and theories of Eliot and Pound, can also be seen as a development from Symbolist ideas. Riding and Graves make a concern with the autonomy of the poem one of the distinguishing marks of their idea of modernism. '[T]he important part of poetry is now not the personality of the poet as embodied in a poem'; the poet is to separate the poem from his own personality in order to make it independent, 'a new and self-explanatory creature'.¹⁵ Yeats's 'secondary personality' is very much 'the personality of the poet as embodied in the poem', however problematic the relationship with the biographical figure of Yeats may be. Yeats's 'something intended, complete' is this personality; Riding and Graves's idea of the poem as 'complete' makes it a self-enclosed system. Their 'modernist' poem is a 'rootless flower', detached from the life from which it grows. Their insistence on the poem's own personality implies that it is particularly amenable to a purely textual analysis.

Davie's response to *Romantic Image* indicates how he thinks French Symbolism does not merely use images from the external world to reflect the poet's state of mind. The French Symbolist poet was able to assume that 'the relationships the poet seemed to discover in the world outside were really relationships true only of his own psychological being, and projected on to the external world as on to a screen.' Why then wait for the right screen? The poet can construct his own 'apparently external worlds free of the logic and the structure of the everyday ...'¹⁶ Davie acknowledges the collapse between inside and outside that can occur here, and that some of the resulting poetry is 'entirely solipsistic'. He claims that the work of Yeats, Eliot and Pound has partly, though not yet completely, rehumanized poetry, and that the task to be completed is the rehumanization of poetry that would come with the escape from solipsism involved in the re-establishment

of an external world, though without losing the technical advances made through the dehumanization of poetry by the French Symbolists.

The attack he makes on Kermode here points to a problem of cause and effect. Davie judges Kermode's suggestion that Yeats builds the way out of solipsism by 'keeping in mind the claims of the common reader' (468) to be unsatisfactory. His own idea is that once the external world is re-established by the poet in his work, the common reader will be once more accessible to him (or, maybe, the poetry to the reader). This 'which comes first?' kind of dispute indicates a relationship between the difficulty of 'modernist' poetry (that is, the difficulty the common reader experiences in understanding it), and the philosophy behind it. Does the modernist poet deliberately make his poetry hard to understand because he wants to limit his audience, or is the difficulty of understanding it due to what the common reader recognizes as the world, external reality? Both of these possibilities lead to a spiral, are self-feeding, tend to increase.

Difficulty of understanding leads to the forming of an elite audience, and the necessity for explication which members of this elite can supply to neophytes. The connection of this tendency with the rise of the academic study of English is obvious. Second, if the work has no reference to external reality, no reference outside itself, it will demand a special technique of interpretation according to its internal structure. Again the fostering of an elite cadre of interpreters is indicated, and, more damaging, a tendency for literature and criticism to become involved in a closed circle, with no connection with the outside world, to become completely reflexive, marginalised and trivial.¹⁷ Edward Said links the New Criticism and French Structuralist criticism as movements which began with the laudable aim of removing the barrier placed between the common reader and literature by specialists who claimed that large amounts of extrinsic information were necessary to understanding. It is, then, all the more unfortunate that 'an interest in expanding the constituency lost out to a wish for abstract correctness and methodological rigour within a quasi-monastic order.'¹⁸ J. G. Merquior points out that while F. R. Leavis complained of an over-concern with the social contexts of literature, late twentieth-century criticism is 'text-besotted', at the expense of consideration of the social ground of literature.¹⁹ As the textually obsessed criticism that Merquior deplores separates literature from the world, from its social and human context, so it loses touch with – fails to pay genuine attention to – the literature it purports to address. For him, 'the true object of literature is not itself – it is the human experience of the world.'²⁰

Criticism which insists that literature refers to nothing outside itself will itself become reflexive and narcissistically trivial.

Davie's awareness of these problems is indicated in his hope for a rehumanized literature, but his dismissal of Kermodé's suggestion as to how Yeats might have contributed to such rehumanization suggests partisanship towards Pound. What Kermodé's claim for Yeats's work draws attention to is a quality in it that comes from his involvement with theatre. It is not only that Yeats has in his mind the fear of coming to 'chaunt a tongue men do not know', or that he is constantly aware of the need not to ascend so far out of the everyday that he loses touch with people; it is also that Yeats's dramatic sense keeps his eye on his audience in such a way that his performance cannot become an entirely private one. Of course, this dramatic aspect has a figurative element, and it seems unlikely that Pound wrote the *Cantos* purely for his own amusement, that they were not intended to be read by others. But it does seem that Yeats's involvement with theatre led to a greater awareness than Pound had of the sense of relationship with an audience involved in performance.

A later essay of Davie's distinguishes between poets like Yeats who 'see poetry as a vehicle for personality' and others who aim to make their poems 'seem to be a product of language', 'the poet merely a medium through which the language becomes articulate'.²¹ There are the histrionic, self-dramatizing poet and the poet who aims at an impersonality which makes the poem a formal construction, impersonal because its elements seem to speak through their relationship to each other. Davie's idea of the poet as medium is, of course, that put forward by Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Charles Feidelson connects the autonomy of language with modern literature and criticism. Criticism finds the 'structure' it explores in language, 'not *behind* the poem in the writer's mind or *in front* of the poem in an external world.'²² But Feidelson's comments on Eliot indicate that the nature of the medium rules out the private performance, no matter how difficult the poetry seems. His analysis liberates the poem from the poet, but into the shared world of language. He sees as mistaken Edmund Wilson's view of a trend to extreme individualism.²³

Poetry as histrionic, as an occasion for self-dramatization, links Yeats's poetry with the concept of poetry as performance. How private this performance is in Yeats's case is problematic, and might be seen to change between 1903 and 1914; but the extent to which private performance is a paradox, the extent to which performance implies an audience, demands attention. Even oral poetry can be performed privately,

and we should not forget the contemplative qualities of literature in any reaction against Romantic individualism.²⁴ But Yeats's theatrical experience and sense of drama direct him to an audience.²⁵

II

The idea that poetry can be the vehicle of personality might remind us of Riding and Graves's distinction between the personality of the poet and the personality of the poem, of which the second is supposed to be paramount in the modernist poem. But, especially when considering Yeats, it raises the question of just what personality is. Yeats addressed the issue of self-dramatization in his 1909 Journal (Mem 142). His secondary personality is a construction of himself within and through his work, and this personality is distinct from, though related to, the biographical personality. What then becomes important is the relationship between these two figures. The idea that all personality is role-playing, that to play a part, to dramatize oneself, is, in fact, the way to true self-realization, is common to Yeats and modern psychology.²⁶

Stephen Spender, in *The Struggle of the Modern*, claims that modern poetry short-circuits the 'I' which is the writer present within his work in a 'communicating relationship' with the reader.²⁷ He connects this idea with the poetics of Rimbaud, where the 'systematic disordering of the senses ... cuts out that which is consciously the poet ... who writes "I"'. The poet's brain again becomes merely the medium on which, this time, 'experiences write'.²⁸ There is a certain similarity to the idea in the opening of Yeats's 'A General Introduction for my Work' (E&I 509), but Spender's idea is much closer to Eliot's catalyst in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', that is the idea of the poet's mind as a place of confluence for experience, which Yeats would have considered too passive. Spender's distinction between 'modern' and 'contemporary' (for which the current equivalents would probably be 'modernist' and 'modern') groups, on the modern side, imagists with French Symbolists represented by Rimbaud, Eliot (by implication) and Henry James; and on the contemporary side H. G. Wells, Shaw, Bennett, Galsworthy and the Georgian poets. The 'I' of Wells, 'acting as interpreter between Wells's often poetic material and the reader' is the object of particular scorn.²⁹

There is something of the twentieth-century cult of immediacy behind an apparent wish in Spender to be rid of the author's mediating presence, as well as the desire to escape from rhetoric (a desire associated with Symbolism). But Yeats's idea of the secondary personality

offers another kind of mediating presence. The establishment of the secondary personality within the work is a way in which the poet can escape solipsism while retaining the advantage available through impersonal technique of avoiding egotism, a way in which the solipsism that threatens to result from Symbolist poetics can be avoided. The work retains a measure of autonomy from the poet, since the secondary personality is itself a construction of the work, yet, in dramatic terms, the poem is not a private performance since the 'I' that is the secondary personality maintains the link with the audience, maintains the element of communication. Of course, the potential charge of rhetoricalness returns with the sense that the poem is an act of communication.

The idea of the autonomy of the text, the work which stands free of its creator, was an influential one in criticism and theories of poetry in the twentieth century. We can see a connection with Symbolism in a claim made by the Symbolist painter Gustave Kahn: 'The essential goal of our art is to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the Idea)'.³⁰ Compare George Oppen's comment on the meaning of the word 'Objectivist' in *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, to which he, Pound and Williams contributed: 'the poets' recognition of the necessity of form, the objectification of the poem.'³¹ The poem becomes a thing in its own right, something which stands independent of its author's intention, through form, which allows its constituent parts to function in relation to each other regardless of any value they might have as instruments for the communication of some message from the author. Form, then, frees the poem from rhetoric. It also contributes, according to Davie, to the freeing of the poet from the feeling that he needs to consider his audience. Davie sees 'Objectivism' as leading to a healthy disregard for the poem's audience.³²

I am attempting to trace here the continuing influence of a Symbolist idea. But it is an influence that the post-1960 adoption of 'literary modernism' has picked up and run with. Erik Svarny, for instance, sees a similar idea of objectification of the poem in Imagism, and also in a phase of Eliot's and Pound's poetic practice:

This demand for 'impersonal' aesthetic autonomy can be seen to be relevant to Pound's and Eliot's adoption of the Gautier quatrain, for once the writer eschews a communicatory aesthetic and begins to regard the poem as an artefact, it becomes possible that the increased 'detachment' of the poet *vis-à-vis* the poem will encourage him to regard it in spatial terms, as a self-sufficient entity to be