



Larrissy, Edward. *W.B. Yeats – Irish Writers in Their Time*.
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Come build in the empty house of the stare.
(W. B. Yeats)

Seamus Heaney, when commenting on the Yeats' poem "Meditations in time of Civil War" asserted that "it satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis". More than emotionally lauding Yeats, Heaney meant that his oeuvre's importance lies in the transfiguration of reality through its poetic interpretation. From this perspective, it is highly likely that, like a kaleidoscope, Yeats' new readings constantly offer opportunities for cultural critics to carefully revise their opinions and concerns regarding his plays, essays and poems.

This is precisely what the collection of essays edited by Edward Larissy W.B. Yeats specialist and poetry lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, professor Edward Larrissy has to propose: a fresh and original glance at the work of such an acclaimed poet, whose importance for literary Modernism, equals and surpasses T.S. Eliot's. In addition to covering a wide breadth of the poet's work, the essays by scholars like Terrence Brown, Steven Matthews and David Dwan, challenge and debate ideological approaches to his artistic and political production.

The first chapter of the book provides the readers with a wide overview on what has already been published about Yeats. Larrissy, Professor of English at Queen's University, Belfast and a W.B. Yeats specialist, objectively weighs and examines the most interesting and relevant developments in Yeats studies. The second chapter, written by the renowned historian Terrence Brown, analyses Yeats' involvement with Theosophy and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who is also portrayed in poems by T.S. Eliot and Louis McNeice.¹ From his studies of Theosophy's philosophy and his intense and personal relationship with its mystical rituals, Yeats developed his own personal treatise about philosophy and history in the book *A Vision*. His research on occultism and his avid search for an Irish identity led him to elaborate on the concept of Celticism, which was also a response to the growing materialism of the nineteenth century. Brown also mentions Yeats affiliation with the Irish Republican Brotherhood as one of the elements that defined the poet's personality and artistic choices. All in all, the historian's intention is to convey that Yeats was not simply a genius whose ideas were unique, but a man whose idealistic choices prefigured the Modernist *Weltanschauung*.

Michael O'Neill's third chapter interprets Yeats' early poetry against his admiration for the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake. O'Neill's view

is that his “expressive post-romantic territory” is a symbolic response to “the only half created consciousness of a nation in wanting” (46). Furthering the profile of Yeats as a poet, the next chapter, written by Vicki Mahaffey and Joseph Valente, focuses on Yeats development as a poet less interested in the mystical and magical Celtic Twilight, and more engaged with history and its contradictory nature. Their viewpoint is bolstered by an allegorical reading of the play *The green helmet: An heroic farce*, in which the author depicts England’s affair towards Ireland as “a kind of sport” (51). In the same questioning mode, Yeats volume *Responsibilities* (1914) exhorts the importance of a more fulfilled life without fear and violence. Its pleas go beyond political propagandacalling for a cultural revitalization of the world and its imaginative representation.

Examining the volumes *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robert and the Dancer* (1921) in chapter five, Edward Larrissy, exposes the progression in Yeats’ work. For Larrissy, Yeats’ poetry “wishes constantly to move forward, discovering new topics and new ways of addressing and framing old ones” (66). In this sense, when the volumes are read beside each other, it is possible to comprehend how the initial features of Yeats’ poetry are solidified in a volume published more than twenty years later.

Completing the section on Yeats’ poetry, Stephen Regan in chapter six examines the later poetry and the current critical movement characterising Yeats as a major modernist poet, in the same position as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. With comments on poems such as “Coole and Ballylee”, “The Gyre”, “The Second Coming”, and “Lapis Lazuli”, the critic suggests the poet has elaborated on an aesthetic which draws its emotional appeal from the concept of tragic joy. His longing for a broader historical change reflected a personal desire for a national rebirth, in contrast to the modern urban ethos.

The last four chapters of the book turn slightly from the theme of poetry and focus on Yeats’ dramatic and intellectual production, his treatment of the theme of women and his influence on more recent poets. Michael McAteer refutes the general credo that the poet’s dramas were solely based on his idealistic view of Ireland. Instead, he establishes lines of connections with German Expressionism and French Surrealism. David Dwan, on the chapter dedicated to Yeats’ thought, traces the philosophical theories which inspired him to elaborate the concept of a “Unit of Being”. Affirming that the poet was essentially elaborating on Platonic ideals, Dwan justifies philosophically Yeats’ abhorred preference for Fascism. Giving a feminist tone to the collection, Anne Margaret Daniel analyses how his wife and female friends encouraged him to write characters that depicted traces of their personalities. The last chapter, conceived by the poetry specialist David Matthews, shows how different poets – Seamus Heaney, Louis McNeice, Thomas Kinsella and Paul Muldoon – absorb Yeats’ aesthetic experiments and filter them through their own style and poetic credo.

Essentially, the strength of *this collection* lies in its potential to provide new possibilities for students, specialists and even non-specialists to understand Yeats through different prisms which are not burdened by fraught prejudices against his mysticism, Celticism or even Fascism, but which take into consideration the historical moment in which he lived and the biographical and intellectual events that shaped his character.

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Note

- 1 For more see: Madame Sostostriis in *The Waste Land* by T.S.Eliot and “Bagpipe Music” by Louis McNeice.