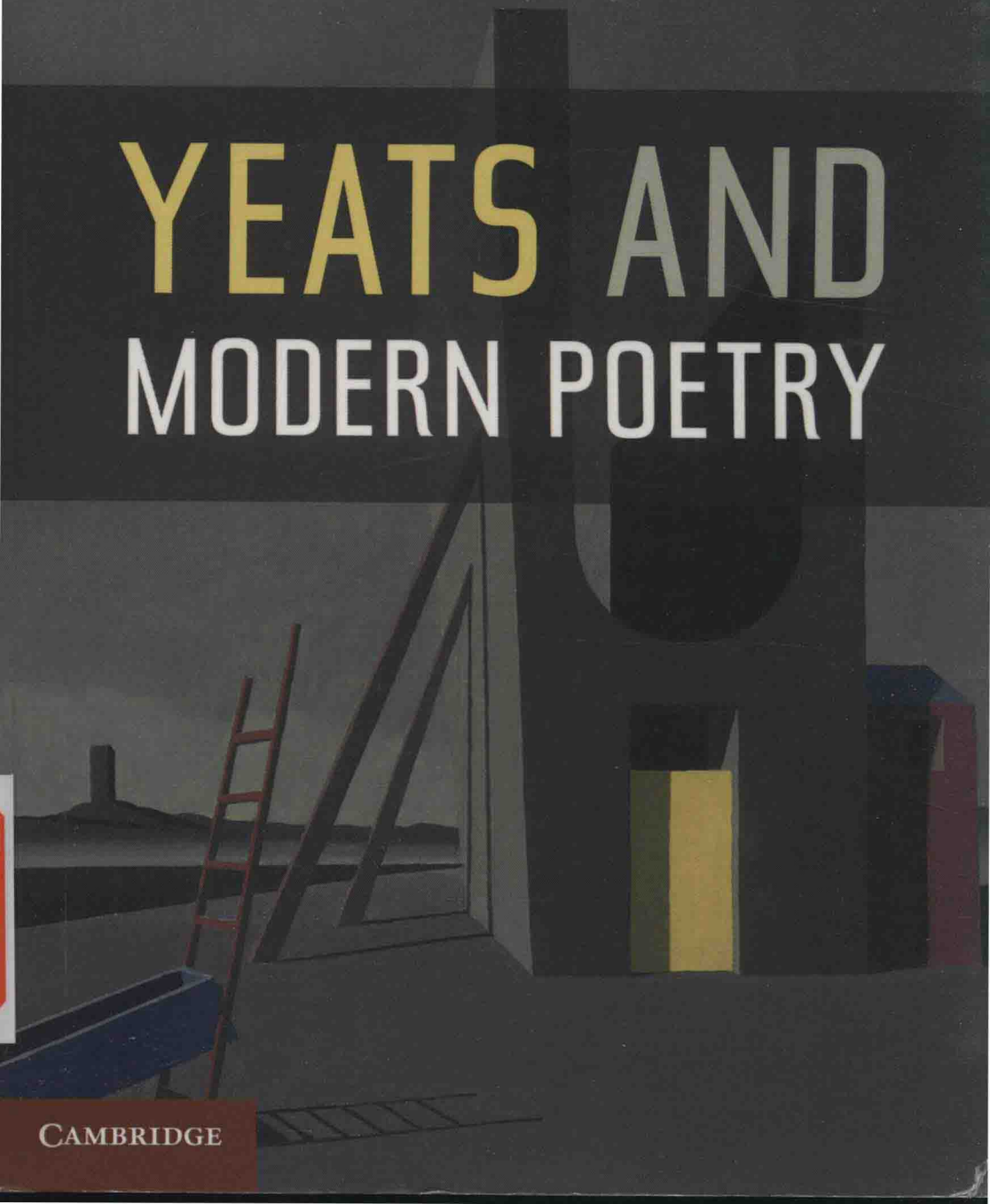
EDNA LONGLEY

YEATS AND MODERN POETRY



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"Edna Longley's *Yeats and Modern Poetry* is two books in one: it is a shrewd and luminous rereading of Yeats, and it is a powerful remapping of modern poetry, from Symbolism and Imagism to the poetry of World War I, the poetry of the 1930s, the Movement and postwar Northern Irish poetry. Yeats is illuminated as never before by being cast in dialogue with other modern poets, including Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, Auden and MacNeice, who also emerge with stunning clarity and vividness through Longley's acute juxtapositions. Incisive, meticulous and carefully researched, Longley's book advances bold and bracing claims. A masterpiece of forceful argument and precise reading, this is one of the most important books on modern poetry in a generation."

– Jahan Ramazani, author of *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*

Scholars and critics commonly align W.B. Yeats with Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and the modernist movement at large. This incisive study from renowned poetry critic Edna Longley argues that Yeats's presence and influence in modern poetry have been sorely misunderstood. Longley disputes the value of modernist critical paradigms and suggests alternative perspectives for interpreting Yeats – perspectives based on his own criticism, and on how Ireland shaped both his criticism and his poetry. Close readings of particular poems focus on structure, demonstrating how radically Yeats's approach to poetic form differs from that of Pound and Eliot. Longley discusses other twentieth-century poets in relation to Yeats's insistence on tradition, and offers valuable insights into the work of Edward Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Wilfred Owen, Hugh MacDiarmid, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Geoffrey Hill, Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes. Her postscript addresses key issues in contemporary poetry by taking a fresh look at Yeats's enduring legacy.

Edna Longley is Professor Emerita in the School of English at Queen's University Belfast.

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EDNA LONGLEY grew up in Dublin and was educated at Trinity College Dublin. For thirty-nine years she taught in the School of English at Queen's University Belfast, where she is now Professor Emerita. She is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy and a Fellow of the British Academy. Longley has written extensively on modern poetry, and is well known for her association, as critic, with the poetic movement in Northern Ireland since the 1960s. Her books include *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (1994), *Poetry & Posterity* (2000) and her annotated edition of Edward Thomas's *Collected Poems* (2008). She has co-edited (with Peter Mackay and Fran Brearton) *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (2011) and (with Fran Brearton) *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and His Legacy* (2012).

To the memory of Michael Allen (1935–2011), a great critic with whom I wish I could have discussed more of this book.

Preface

In 1942, the American poet Delmore Schwartz asked whether any book could tell 'the whole truth' about W.B. Yeats (1865–1939):

> Is it not clear that [its] author will not be Irish? Not only have the Irish admirers and followers of Yeats seemed to miss a great deal, so that they are hardly able to distinguish Yeats from AE [the poet George Russell]; but ... Yeats's career and work must for some time be bound up with many native feelings about Ireland ... Yet ... an American will not write this book because he will not know enough about Ireland ... [And] no Englishman will write [it], not even an unhappy Englishman who desires the death of the old gang.[1]

Yeats studies have globally multiplied during the last seventy years, and 'the whole truth' will remain ever elusive. Yet Schwartz raised questions of critical perspective that still affect Yeats's position in modern Anglophone poetry, however secure that position may be. Critics have often explored his diverse impact on individual poets (not only English-language poets),[2] and 'influence' will be a factor in this study too. But rather than attempt the Sisyphean task of tracking every homage, echo or reworking, I want to consider Yeats's broader aesthetic presence: to look at some facets of Yeats with 'modern poetry' in mind, some facets of 'modern poetry' with Yeats in mind. If Yeats can be hard to get into focus, 'modern poetry', in theory and practice, can be hard to get into focus without Yeats. It does not help that the foundational narratives are more likely to centre on T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. So I will be partly concerned with ways in which Yeats's poetry has, or has not, been read. That includes critiques conditioned by 'native feelings about Ireland', aesthetic categories like 'modernism' and 'Symbolism', cultural-political theory as represented by the 'archipelagic' and 'postcolonial' ('death of the old gang') paradigms and approaches more specific to poetry: one chapter discusses Yeats the 'war poet'. There is also the key question of how Yeats himself reads 'Yeats and modern poetry'.

It might seem a problem that Yeats tends to see 'modern' and 'poetry' as oxymoronic. At the end of 'The Statues' (1938) he pits the matrix of his art against modernity:

> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face. (*CW1* 345)

Earlier, 'Ego Dominus Tuus' (1915) had distanced 'form' from the modern in more purely aesthetic terms. '*Hic*', who represents post-Romantic subjectivity carried to excess, says: 'I would find myself and not an image.' '*Ille*' replies:

> That is our modern hope, and by its light
> We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
> And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
> Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
> We are but critics, or but half create ... (161–2)

Yeats's poetic lexicon always favours the 'ancient' or 'old' over the 'modern': a word framed by invisible inverted commas even where not overtly negative. In 'Among School Children' the children learn in 'the best modern way' (219). Yet, perhaps as a critical-creative rearguard action, Yeats agreed to edit the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). And in 'High Talk', written three months after 'The Statues', he accepts the label 'modern' – if with a long spoon or long leg:

> Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.
> What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,
> And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher ... (351)

That ironical self-portrait locates the sources of Yeats's poetic modernity in the 1890s – in 1900, he says, poets 'got down off [their] stilts' (*OBMV* xi) – and further back. Yeats's fidelity to his 'great-granddad', to his early reading of 'nothing but romantic literature' (*CW5* 205), will be seen here as marking the extent to which modern poetry (not just Yeats's poetry) has continued to draw out the implications of Romantic aesthetics. From *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) onwards, Yeats provides latter-day evidence for Löwy's and Sayre's thesis, in *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, that Romanticism is not 'a critique rooted in some elsewhere' but 'a modern critique of modernity'. Denis Donoghue writes: 'Yeats's wilfulness is his modernity. The poems relate themselves to our time by affronting it.'[3]

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The *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* certainly affronted other people's ideas of 'modern poetry'. This stops it from being taken seriously as a critical intervention, and may have damaged Yeats's reputation as a critic. Because I believe that the anthology can tell us a lot about 'Yeats and modern poetry', although we may need to read between the lines or against the grain, it will provide a connecting thread throughout this book. So will Yeats's criticism more generally, despite his tendency to dismiss literary criticism along with modernity. Even in his introduction to what he calls 'my critical prose', he says that, when culture abandons tradition, 'the time has come to read criticism and talk of our point of view' (*CW5* 218–19). Yeats's criticism has proved less amenable to academic processing than that of Eliot or Pound, perhaps because his assumptions and methods are furthest from those of the academy. All three poets are aesthetically self-conscious, obsessed with their relation to 'tradition', given to boosting their poetry with critical polemics. But Yeats's manifestos sit less neatly beside his poems when the 'modern movement' is being showcased. This is partly because, after his early crusade on behalf of Irish literature and Irish criticism, he wrote less criticism in a strict sense (see Chapter 1). We often have to trace his thinking about poetry through writings whose ostensible focus is magic, mythology, philosophy, memoir, the visual arts, the theatre, Irish affairs. Meanwhile his ostensibly 'critical' writings wander off in those directions too. Yeats's criticism belongs to a multi-genre body of prose – which includes that unclassifiable work *A Vision*.

This is to say that Yeats the critic is nearly always Yeats the poet. His criticism shares in a holistic adventure of the mind. 'Discoveries' is an apt title for more than a particular set of brief reflections with headings like 'A Guitar Player' and 'The Tree of Life'. In another introduction to 'critical essays' Yeats asks: '[W]hy should I write what I knew?' and continues: 'I wrote always that when I laid down my pen I might be less ignorant than when I took it up' (*CW5* 84). More than most poets, then, Yeats elides the hyphen in 'poet-critic'. Like his poems, his criticism moves forward on several fronts at once. And the elision cuts both ways. At some level, Yeats is nearly always 'critic-poet' as well as 'poet-critic'. It seems integral to his art that he should be constantly rethinking his aesthetic in complex symbiosis with his practice. 'Lapis Lazuli' exemplifies how themes, phrases or images from Yeats's criticism play into his poetry, sometimes years later (see p. 63f.). Thanks to his roots in Aestheticism, discussed in Chapter 3, Yeats's poetry is more radically self-conscious, more intensely and consistently reflexive, than that of Eliot and Pound. But, as Jahan Ramazani

brilliantly regrets in his essay 'Self-Theorising Poetry', 'lyric reflexivity' has lost its critical clout to less bespoke kinds of theory:

> Yeats's poetry theorises itself ... it furnishes and unsettles its own *ars poetica*. At a time when lyric reflexivity is relegated to the margins of criticism, Yeats may goad us to ask again whether poetry that articulates its own 'conditions of production' shuts itself off from the world or tells the one kind of news that a poem can tell compellingly – where it comes from and where it goes to, what inspires it and how it weighs on the real.[4]

It might seem a more complex achievement to encode the aesthetic ground in the poem than (as with conceptual art) to attach it separately. I try to read poems by Yeats for their reflexive 'news': for 'self-theorisation' that may prove more revealing than some widely applied critical categories or paradigms.

By the same holistic token, Yeats's 'Irish' criticism and efforts to create an 'Irish criticism' cannot be segregated from his self-theorising. Although (or because) it contains a good deal of autobiography and politics, his essay 'J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time' (1911) is as relevant to emergent 'modern poetry' as Eliot's 'The Metaphysical Poets'. This essay, the critical essay in which Yeats most profoundly engages with a contemporary, shows that Ireland led his criticism to be much occupied with the distinctive qualities of the artist's or poet's 'mind', and therefore, crucially, with what distinguishes poetry from other kinds of utterance. Thus he writes that the political mind, which he saw as poetry's rival, 'ends by substituting a traditional casuistry for a country' (*CW4* 228). Synge belongs to the foundations of modern poetry because he helped to rescue Yeats from everything that dilutes the poetic impulse: 'Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible' (246). Synge rather than Pound, as Pound acknowledged (see p. 57), challenged and changed Yeats's poetry. His work exposed Yeats to 'all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy' (236). Synge's belief that '[b]efore verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal' also had wider currency around 1910.[5] But it was Yeats's *Responsibilities* (1914) that Synge most significantly 'stung into life'.

In 1938, in an article that called Yeats 'the best of modern poets', the American poet-critic Archibald MacLeish complained that the term 'modern poetry' was 'inexact' since 'no poetry can be continuously "modern" and since this particular poetry happens to be about thirty years old'.[6] In

this book, 'modern poetry' will have a hint of Yeatsian inverted commas about it, but will nonetheless signify how poetry changed during Yeats's literary lifetime, with some extension to the two decades after his death, and with a contemporary postscript. My discussion of critical approaches will extend to the present day. To consider facets of 'modern poetry' from a Yeats-centred viewpoint is necessarily to be selective. Highlighting one poet casts another into shadow. Obviously I do not mean to exclude Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence or Robert Graves, for instance, from the story, or to exclude what comparisons between their poetry and Yeats's might tell us. Different permutations and combinations bring different facets into view. Indeed, to highlight Yeats may be to open up 'modern poetry' as a multifaceted enterprise. Again, while some of the early twentieth-century poets juxtaposed with Yeats will seem obvious choices (Eliot, Pound, perhaps Wallace Stevens), Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen will seem less so. I allow that Thomas's appearance in three chapters may stem from my bias as an editor of his poems. But his poetry throws into relief dimensions of Yeats's poetry that recede when Yeats is consigned, with Eliot and Pound, to the file marked 'modernism'. Similarly, Louis MacNeice's centrality to Yeats's posterity has not always or everywhere been understood. Poets are often grouped or compared on conventional and unexamined grounds that need to be shaken up. Just as Yeats synthesised many precursors, so his poetry ramifies in many directions.

Because it all comes down to poems and poems also ramify, each chapter singles out a particular poem by Yeats in a way that, I hope, will anchor the chapter's theme. The poems are: 'At the Abbey Theatre', 'Lapis Lazuli', 'The Two Trees', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'Under Saturn' and the last poem of 'The Tower'. Even that small sample gives the lie to any notion that 'traditional form' always means the same thing. I also hope to anchor so vast a theme as 'Yeats and modern poetry' by concentrating on the structural questions that are the nub of the matter, on internal and external factors that shaped Yeats's forms, on his aesthetic dialectics with other poets. Yeats was the poet who most comprehensively renewed the forms and genres of lyric poetry for the modern world. Perhaps he renewed poetry itself. In order to confront or affront modernity, Yeats had to dig deep. He had to mobilise all the 'irresistible' qualities that make a poem a poem.

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