Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 3

Volume 3

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1960, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Sources

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PREFACE

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humankind. Literature is that which both lifts us out of our everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive life of an Emma Bovary, a Lambert Strether, a Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism is a collective term for several kinds of critical writing: criticism may be normative, descriptive, textual, interpretive, appreciative, generic. It takes many forms: the traditional essay, the aphorism, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Perhaps the single unifying feature of literary criticism lies in its purpose: to help us to better understand what we read.

The Scope of the Book

The usefulness of Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC),* which excerpts criticism of current creative writing, suggests an equivalent need among literature students and teachers interested in authors of the period 1900 to 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, and playwrights of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Moreover, since contemporary critics continue to analyze the work of this period—both in its own right and in relation to today's tastes and standards—a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student.

Thus, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* will present significant passages from published criticism on authors who died between 1900 and 1960. Because of the difference in time span under consideration (*CLC* considers authors living from 1960 to the present), there will be no duplication between *CLC* and *TCLC.*

Each volume of *TCLC* will be carefully designed to present a list of authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities. The length of an author's section is intended to be representative of the amount of critical attention he or she has received in the English language. Articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. An attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work. Additionally, as space permits, especially insightful essays of a more limited scope are included. Thus *TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of that period and to the most significant commentators on these authors. Each *TCLC* author section will represent the scope of critical response to that author's work: some early criticism will be presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism will be selected to represent any rise or fall in an author's popularity, and current retrospective analyses will provide students with a modern view. Since a *TCLC* author section is intended to be a definitive overview, the editors will include between 40 and 50 authors in each 600-page volume (compared to approximately 150 authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) in order to devote more attention to each author. Unlike *CLC,* no attempt will be made to update author sections in subsequent volumes, unless important new criticism warrants additional excerpts.

The Organization of the Book

An author section consists of the following elements: author heading, bio-critical introduction, principal works, excerpts of criticism (each followed by a citation), and, beginning with Volume 3, an annotated bibliography.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name located in paren-

theses on the first line of the bio-critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the bio-critical introduction are any name variation under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for non-English language authors. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- The *bio-critical introduction* contains biographical and other background information about an author that will elucidate his or her creative output.
- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first publication and genres are identified. In those instances where the first publication was other than English language, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first publication, not first performance.
- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author section to provide a perspective on any changes in critical evaluation over the years. For purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism.
- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader accompanies each piece of criticism. An asterisk * at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.
- The *annotated bibliography* appearing at the end of each author section suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Each volume of *TCLC* includes a cumulative index to critics. Under each critic's name is listed the author(s) on which the critic has written and the volume and page where the criticism may be found. *TCLC* also includes a cumulative index to authors with the volume number in which the author appears in boldface after his or her name.

Beginning with Volume 2, *TCLC* added an appendix which lists the sources from which material in the volume is reprinted. It does not, however, list every book or periodical consulted for the volume.

Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpts included in this volume, the permission managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in locating copyright holders, and the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, University of Michigan Library, and Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us.

Suggestions Are Welcome

If readers wish to suggest authors they would like to have covered in future volumes, or if they have other suggestions, they are cordially invited to write the editor.

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Readers are cordially invited to suggest additional authors to the editors.

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A.E.

1867-1935

(Pseudonym of George William Russell; also wrote under pseudonym of Y.O.) Irish poet, essayist, editor, journalist, and dramatist.

A key figure in the Irish Literary Revival, A.E. contributed perhaps more by his personality than by his artistry. He was a gifted conversationalist, a popular lecturer, an acknowledged visionary—an oracle of Ireland.

A.E. had a pious upbringing and was from his youth inclined toward mysticism. It was while pursuing his interest in painting at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art that A.E. met W. B. Yeats, his lifelong friend. Through Yeats, A.E. became involved in the Theosophical Movement, finding a channel for his mystical inclination. Together the two writers founded the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Many of A.E.'s beliefs have their origin in this spiritual background and are the inspiration for his early poetry, *Homeward: Songs by the Way*, *The Earth Breath*, and *The Divine Vision*. A.E. was also influenced by other mystic poets. He was devoted to the work of Emerson and recognized his own image in the poetry of Blake. A.E.'s poetry, not surprisingly, has been compared to that of Blake, Emerson, and Whitman.

A.E. was central to the rise of the Irish National Theatre and is often considered one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre. His only play, *Deirdre*, a verse drama based on Irish legend, was one of the earliest productions of the modern Irish theater. Always interested in other Irish authors, A.E. hosted a weekly gathering which drew such notables as Yeats, George Moore, Padraic Colum, and James Stephens. As editor of Dublin's literary weekly, *The Irish Statesman*, he provided another forum for writers.

A.E.'s interests were more than literary; they were also political. He was involved throughout his life in Irish agrarian and political affairs and was a moving force behind the Agricultural Cooperative Movement. He edited its chief organ, *The Irish Homestead* (later *The Irish Statesman*).

In his later years, broken by the death of his wife, Violet, and saddened that the spiritual rebirth he had sought for his homeland, and often written about had not occurred, A.E. retired to England. Critical consensus is that A.E. survives not as painter, poet, or politician, but as the embodiment of the beliefs and principles of the Irish Revival.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Homeward: Songs by the Way (poetry) 1894
The Earth Breath, and Other Poems (poetry) 1897
The Divine Vision, and Other Poems (poetry) 1904
Co-operation and Nationality: A Guide for Rural Reformers from This to the Next Generation (essays) 1912
Collected Poems (poetry) 1913
Gods of War (poetry) 1915
Imaginations and Reveries (essays and drama, includes *Deirdre: A Drama*) 1915
The National Being: Some Thoughts on an Irish Polity (essays) 1916
The Candle of Vision (essays) 1918
The Interpreters (essay) 1922
Voices of the Stones (poetry) 1925
Enchantment, and Other Poems (poetry) 1930
Vale and Other Poems (poetry) 1931
Song and Its Foundations (essays) 1932
The Avatars: A Futurist Fantasy (novel) 1933
The House of the Titans and Other Poems (poetry) 1934
Selected Poems (poetry) 1935
The Living Torch (essays) 1937

JULIA ELLSWORTH FORD (essay date 1905)

Among the poets whose work has added distinction to the Literary Movement in Ireland is A. E. . . . , whose volume of verse 'The Divine Vision,' recently published, has brought a new revelation of tender beauty in a glowing color of words, and has given a quickening insight into the mystic world. (p. 82)

Aside from their technical form, 'A. E.'s' poems might have been voiced in remote ages in the East, if we except those which are love poems. In these songs of personal feeling one realizes deeply the spiritual side of love. Above all they are touched with a tenderness and sadness unspeakable, but it is a noble sadness which is the dominant note of his love poetry. It renounces that it may attain to a higher fulfillment. This sad, but far from despondent note throughout 'A. E.'s' poetry, is essentially a modern phase that can as well be discerned in the painting as in the poetry

of the latter part of the nineteenth century, especially among the Preraphaelites; and the twentieth century is under this same influence. (p. 83)

'A. E.' has close affinity to our master Emerson; both drew much of their inspiration from the same source, the *Upanishads*. They both found their way homeward to the strange world the seers tell of, 'the world at the back of the heavens.' While Emerson is a poet of deeper thought and broader harmony, 'A. E.' has the great gift of delicate melody. His unusual metres, often repeated, have a peculiar fitness for the thought expressed. An interesting peculiarity of his thought is his constant appeal to the power of 'Quiet' which gives us the uplifting calm that the twilight hour brings, but he has greater gifts for us in reserve; his optimism is not the outcome of mental passiveness, but the result of his philosophy of Eternal Beauty as the root of all things permanent. . . . (p. 85)

[The] heart of this great mystic, 'A. E.,' is aglow with the spirit of his time, and that the voice of Ireland's most spiritual singer is one of the greatest voices of the Irish Movement—the new Renaissance, not of learning but of feeling. (p. 86)

Julia Ellsworth Ford, "'A. E.,' The Neo-Celtic Mystic," in Poet Lore *(copyright, 1905, by Poet Lore, Inc.), Vol. XVI, No. IV, Winter, 1905, pp. 82-6.*

CORNELIUS WEYGANDT (essay date 1907)

["Reconciliation," included in "The Divine Vision,"] is a poem I do not pretend to understand in detail, but I do feel its drift. . . . Many of [Mr. Russell's] poems are like this poem in that you must content yourself with their general drift and not insist on understanding their every phrase. I suppose to the initiated mystic they are more than presentations of emotions that need not be translated into terms of thought for their desired effect.

To Mr. Russell, poetry is a high and holy thing; like Spencer he believes it the fruit of a "certain enthousiasmos and celestial inspiration:" it is his religion that Mr. Russell is celebrating in his verses, many of which are in a sense hymns to the Universal Spirit, and all of which are informed by such sincerity that you do not wonder that his followers make them their general gospel. (p. 155)

Seventeen of "A. E.'s" one hundred and sixty poems are definitely declarations of belief, but declarations so personal, so undogmatic that you would hardly write him down a didactic poet at first reading. "A New Theme" tells of his desertion of subjects "that win the easy praise," of his venturing "in the untrodden woods To carve the future ways." Here he acknowledges that the things he has to tell are "shadowy," that his breath in "the magic horn" can make but feeble murmurs. In the prologue to "The Divine Vision" he states the conditions of his inspiration: [the meditative twilight hours, when songs spring from his heart, which is "touched by the flame"]—that is the flame of his being that, "mad for the night and the deep unknown," leaps back to the "unphenomenal" world whence his spirit came and blends his spirit into one with the Universal Spirit. This same union through the soul's flame "A. E." presents in his pictures, and in his prologue to the "The Divine Vision" he writes that he wishes to give his reader

To see one elemental pain
One light of everlasting joy.

This elemental pain, as I take it, is the pain of the soul shut up in its robe of clay in this physical, phenomenal world, and so shut off from the spiritual world, the world of the unphenomenal or unknowable. The "everlasting joy" I take to be the certainty of eventual union with the Universal Spirit in the unphenomenal world, a union and a joy anticipated in the occasional temporary absorptions of the soul into the Universal Spirit in moments that Emerson experienced as "Revelation" and Plotinus as ecstasy. (p. 156)

The typical poem of "A. E." is that in which the sight of beautiful things of this phenomenal world in which we live lifts his soul to participation in the Universal Spirit. It is most often through some beauty of the sky at sunset . . . or at sunrise, when there is "fire on the altar of the hills" . . . that he becomes one with the Universal Spirit in "the rapture of the fire," that he is lost "within the Mother's being," he would say; that the soul returns to the Oversoul, Emerson would say. There are ways by which the soul homes other than these—sometimes it is "By the hand of a child I am led to the throne of the King," but it is most often by way of beauties of the sky. (p. 157)

How important the symbol is to "A. E."—as important as it is to Emerson—may be gathered from "Symbolism." . . . (p. 158)

In this poem is the proof of how intimately "A. E." could write of the sweet things of earth did he so choose. But he does not so choose, except rarely, and sometimes he leaves out the statement of beautiful material things by which he customarily bids farewell to earth in his aspiration to spiritual things, and writes only of unearthly things—as of some girl that he, an Irishman living in the Dublin of to-day, loves in the Babylon of three thousand years ago, to the annihilation of space and time. This is written in the very spirit of Emerson's declaration that "Before the revelation of the soul, Time, Space and Nature shrink away." . . . "A. E.," like Emerson, holds that the true poet is he who "gives men glimpses of the law of the Universe; shows them the circumstance as illusion; shows that Nature is only a language to express the laws, which are grand and beautiful; and lets them, by his songs, into some of the realities." Emerson yearns that "the old forgotten splendours of the Universe should glow again for us;" and "A. E." believes that we at times attain "the ancestral Self," his restless ploughman, "walking through the woodland's purple" under "the diamond night," "Deep beneath his rustic habit finds himself a King."

"A. E.'s" poems on death are little different from those in which he celebrates the soul's absorption into the Universal Spirit, since death means to him only a longer absorption into the Universal Spirit. . . . (pp. 158-59)

So sustained is the habitual altitude of Mr. Russell's thought, so preoccupied his mind with spiritual things that the human reader must feel lonely at times, must feel the regions of the poet's thought alien to him. At such times it is a positive relief to find the poet yearning for the concrete sweet things of earth. (p. 159)

It is love, love of country, love of countryside, and love of woman that he writes of when he does write of "loved earth things." "A Woman's Voice," and "Forgiveness"

are poems so simple that none may misunderstand; they have the human call, so rare in "A. E.," but it is not strong human call. Of such love-songs he has written but few—poems out of the peace and not out of the passion of love; of passion other than spiritual ecstasy and rapt delight in nature there is none in his verse. Although he has been given "a ruby flaming heart," he has been given also "a pure cold spirit." Only about a fourth of his poems have the human note dominant, and even when it is so dominant, as when he writes of his country, he is very seldom content to rest with a description of the beauty of place or legend; the beautiful place must be threshold to the Other World, as "The Gates of Dreamland." . . . (pp. 159-60)

"In Connerama" and "An Irish Face," poems with earthly titles, you expect only things earthly, but in these two, he uses the picture of the concrete only as the symbol of the universal. The reason Mr. Russell must take you to the supernatural in these poems is because he sees spirits everywhere he goes in Ireland. "Never a poet," he writes, "has lain on our hillsides but gentle, stately figures, with hearts shining like the sun, move through his dreams, over radiant graves, in an enchanted world of their own," (p. 160)

When we come to consider the technique of Mr. Russell's art we find him anything but Emersonian. Mr. Russell has, in general, command of form, melody, harmony, distinction. Who reads carefully will remember many fine lines; who reads only once will be as one lost in sunfilled fog like that of "A. E.'s" own Irish mountains; but he should be patient, he should wait and look again and again, and finally he will see, even if earth be still dimmed with fogbanks, much of the heavens, free of fog, and radiant with cold white light. There are comparatively few "purple patches" in Mr. Russell's poetry, for the reason that each poem depends for its chief appeal on one mood or thought of dream immanent in it rather than on any fine phrasing. The effort to catch the meaning of the verse—seldom apparent at first glance—prevents the noting of as many purple lines as there are. Nor when noted are such lines readily memorable since they are apt to lack association with known and loved things to bring them back to the reader. And again the poems are very short, intimations, suggestions rather than expressions—and their intangible themes are often much alike, and poem becomes confused with poem in the memory. (pp. 162-63)

Cornelius Weygandt, "'A. E.,' the Irish Emerson," in The Sewanee Review *(reprinted by permission of the editor; © 1907 by The University of the South), Vol. XV, No. 2, Spring, 1907, pp. 148-65.*

ERNEST A. BOYD (essay date 1915)

The very title of this exquisite little book [*Homeward: Songs by the Way*] indicates the author's attitude toward life. Home, to "A. E.," means the return of the soul to the Oversoul, the absorption of the spirit in the Universal Spirit. *Homeward* is the narrative of his spiritual adventures, the record of those ecstasies which mark the search of the soul for the Infinite. (p. 252)

Homeward was followed [by *The Earth Breath* and *The Divine Vision.*] . . . These latter volumes do not, in a sense, represent any progression; they are the utterances of a similar contemplation, and were, in essentials, contained in his first book. . . . There is, of course, the deeper note of a more mature reflection, a certain sadness which has come with the years. The eager spirit still aspires homeward, but the goal is yet far away. In the preface to his *Collected Poems* . . . , "A. E." confesses to the change of mood which makes his later work slightly different from the earlier. . . . This volume is . . . the complete expression of "A. E.'s" thought, no less than the final collection of his verse. So far as its content is concerned, the book is perfect. Some of the less successful poems of the earlier volumes, notably of *The Earth Breath* and *The Divine Vision,* have been omitted. It is interesting to note that only two from *Homeward* have been suppressed. This is a significant illustration of the initial perfection of his work, and of the constancy of belief it has expressed. Form has never been a preoccupation of "A. E."; his verses are sometimes marred by clumsiness and obscurity of phrase, and he openly avows his inability to remould them before giving them in their now definite arrangement. Nevertheless, *Collected Poems* is an achievement of which Irish literature may be proud. Seldom has such beauty of thought and language been accompanied by the restraint which makes this book the small but great contribution of "A. E." to contemporary poetry. (pp. 253-54)

Concerned as most of his poems are with the relation of man to Deity, of the soul to the Eternal, "A. E.'s" verse has been pronounced "inhuman" by some critics. The great themes of poetry, love and death, are not absent from his pages, but they are treated from the special standpoint of the transcendentalist. "A. E." is enamoured of beauty and mystery, he is enthralled by a sense of immortal destinies. In the love of woman he feels an emotion which goes far beyond that conveyed by the mortal senses. . . . Often one reads some exquisite evocation of the Irish countryside, only to find, after a verse or two, that the poet has peopled this landscape with the phantom figures of the heroic age, or with the flaming beings seen in mystic ecstasy. What seemed to be a simple picture becomes a glimpse behind the veil, and bog and mountain are forgotten in the splendour of the vision. Similarly in his love poems "A. E." has the faculty of projecting his emotion into regions beyond time and space. . . . Death, for him, has none of the mysterious terror which has inspired so much fine poetry. To "A. E." the immortality of man is assured, for is he not of the same divine substance as the Great Source of all being? (p. 255)

The *leitmotiv* of "A. E.'s" poetry, and the fundamental postulate of his philosophy, is the divine origin of man, the gradual falling away of the human race from its heroic destinies, and its present enslavement to materialism. It is only when he is aroused by some noble ideal, or some great memory, that man rises to a realisation of the divinity that is in him. His constant endeavour is to fan this divine spark into flame. Hence his love and admiration for the heroic figures of Celtic history and legend, when man carried latent within him all the potentialities of nature, and his faculties were not diminished by specialisation. (p. 256)

"A. E." rightly conceives it the aim and *raison d'être* of the new Anglo-Irish literature "to create a national ideal in Ireland, or rather to let that spirit incarnate fully which began among the ancient peoples, which has haunted the hearts, and whispered a dim revelation of itself, through the lips of the bards and peasant storytellers." In *The Dramatic*

Treatment of Heroic Literature are set forth the reasons which call for the re-creation of the bardic tales at the hands of the modern poets, and more particularly the use of this material in the Irish Theatre. "A. E." was afterwards to put his theories into practice by writing *Deirdre*. . . . The author has since recanted some of the views he first held as to the desirability of staging the heroic stories, perhaps as a result of his dissatisfaction with his own effort in that direction. There can, however, be no question as to the suitability of such a natural tragedy as that of *Deirdre* for the stage. [John Millington] Synge's version, incomplete as it is, shows sufficiently the power of this theme, when treated by a real dramatist. Of "A. E.'s" *Deirdre*, as of that of Yeats, it may be said that it is a work of poetic rather than dramatic merit. (p. 257)

Ernest A. Boyd, "'A. E.'—Mystic and Economist," in The North American Review *(reprinted by permission from* The North American Review; *copyright © 1915 by the University of Northern Iowa), Vol. 202, No. 717, August, 1915, pp. 251-61.*

DARRELL FIGGIS (essay date 1916)

[Æ] was more content to record his [discoveries] than to communicate [them]: had he as a poet been more self-aware he might by a better craft, born of brooding, have more often lit a flame in his verse, to burn intensely there and to light other brains, where it is content to tell of a fire in the poet himself altogether so much brighter than in the poetry he made. There is no poem, so sincere is this poet, and especially in his early verse, that does not tell of a vision that he does not feel that it is important we should know. He was never at heart interested in the poem only for the poem's sake; and he never in his verse took a holiday—at least in his published verse. And we feel this. We feel that there is no poem, however it fail, that does not record a spiritual discovery; but we are often baffled, because the poem, while it tells us of the discovery, is not itself the fine ritual in which the discovery is involved. The poet has his vision, we know; though visions are by no means always the starting-point for song, yet we are seldom uncertain in this case. Indeed, that is the thing that tantalizes. For the magician's sleight sometimes is lacking; and thus we hear him telling us of things, sometimes facilely and always mellifluously, but we are disappointed because he cannot make his vision ours for ever. At such times we feel that if he had brooded over his craft as he brooded over the things he wished to convey by his craft he would have made us better sharers of the things that remain his.

For the poems of these days are one continuous inspiration of theme. "Homeward, Songs by the Way" is an unbroken series. It is linked with "The Earth Breath" by the inclusion in that volume of many poems of the first song; the last of which appeared in "The Divine Vision," where the poet first begins definitely to turn to speechcraft from songcraft, and to utter in a fine pomp what he first had sung in purity, even though the song were not always uniformly magical. (pp. 30-1)

Yet a poem may be taken where the clearness of the vision is indisputable and the result one to be pondered on, where, however, the answering mood in us is not uplifted to an equal height. Such a poem is "Om." We know how it came. As the accountant sat at his desk, it and all around him were whirled away while he looked intently on the sight before his open eyes. . . . The record of the thing seen is complete, told with music and wisdom. But what have we missed? We have missed just what it brought to the poet. The ecstasy it wrought in him he has not wrought in us, for all that we know well, from the record and some alchemy in its making, that the ecstasy was there. The very chord he heard is hardly heard by us, for it is strange that the tone conveyed by the word "Om" is not the tone-dominant of the poem. (pp. 33-4)

[In "The Great Breath"] we are lifted to an equal mood; the ecstasy that was in the singer is the ecstasy that passes to us. So it is with "The Unknown God," with its higher, clearer tone, and "Refuge" from ["The Divine Vision"], with its deep mature reticence. Yet, whether we hear or do not hear his ecstasy, never was there so exact a poet as this. Many of his poems come not only from the inmost circle of spiritual insight, but also from the outer circle of psychic vision; and much that might seem, at a cursory glance, extravagant imagery, will be found to be no more than meticulous accuracy to what he has beheld. Perhaps they too much demand a knowledge of mystic signs and symbols; perhaps they unwisely, in some cases, decree for us a like psychic experience if not learning—unwisely for poetry, which should not need annotation but should address itself directly to the pure and aspiring spirit of man: that may very well be; but there are none of his poems that we may set aside as inexact. "The Robing of the King," for example, records precisely what in vision he beheld, rightly or wrongly, as the meaning of the Crucifixion, surrendering, as he does, its outward appearance to those who did not know the esoteric event that was happening. And there are many poems of this sort, that are rather less poems than texts, like the texts of the East, to be brooded upon like symbols and unravelled like mysteries. Not only, however, are the visions of the "household" so written. On the hills of Ireland, aflame once with mystic fires, this man may have beheld the great ones once again, have seen things not easy to be told, and have recorded them with the care of a man of faith. These things are not lightly to be spoken of; but to be passed from hand to hand; and Irishmen at least will read "The Child of Destiny" with attention. (pp. 35-7)

If a man has to write . . . of [the] fine intimacies [of spiritual life] the writing will be just as complex as the spiritual life is complex, and will seem obscure in exactly the same relation as his experiences and discoveries will defy expression. He will have to ambush the shy things that lurk in the thicket of his soul, and net them subtly and quickly in the tones and colours and rhythms of words rather than in their bold and limited meanings. That will not lead to clarity; clarity in such a case would be a profound lie; for precious things are precious in both meanings of the word.

It is a very delicate net of words, for instance, he has thrown round some of the intimations of the spiritual meaning of Life in his essay "The Renewal of Youth." "We came out of the Great Mother-Life for the purposes of soul," he says; and in the wonderful music of that essay he writes of the source and destiny of that experience for which we have been lent to Life. (p. 47)

That of which he writes is the same . . . as he sang of in "The Robing of the King"; and to say of it, as of the essay, that it is prose at its highest, is to give it but half its praise. It is the writing of a seër: a seër who sees the golden end with the golden uprise, and who perceives, therefore, that

"every word which really inspires is spoken as if the Golden Age had never passed," for "the great teachers ignore the personal identity and speak to the eternal pilgrim." It may be true, in the opening words of this essay, that "humanity is no longer the child it was at the beginning of the world," that "its gay, wonderful childhood gave way, as cycle after cycle coiled itself into slumber, to more definite purposes, and now it is old and burdened with experiences"—experiences gathered, as his profound faith is, not merely as written in histories dealing with the outward life of nations and the race, but in renewed reincarnations of innumerable souls—but it is equally true that the life that runs now is the life that ever ran; and if we could but strike down to that depth, or if some seër could do so, or if some artist, who is the seër expressing himself in Beauty, could do so, then we would renew our youth, we would smile in the face of old Circumstance with the youngling joy that is our true heritage, and like happy children wise with understanding refashion Seeming into the ideal truth of Being. (pp. 48-9)

"The Renewal of Youth" is great prose, quite conceivably the greatest prose of its time; but it is this firstly because it is, in strict terms, a holy book. It is not concerned with dead things, with ethics and moralities, but with the fount from which these things arise, and in connection with which they are not dead but alive. (pp. 49-50)

["Deirdre" is] a pitiful tale that could be charged with so many significances—justly and truly as it came to Æ, and in pure and musical prose. It does not express Æ to us: or rather, since it is impossible for a man to write without in some degree expressing himself, it merely carries off the things that had lightly gathered on the surface of his mind. The manner of its inception precluded a deep and meditated utterance; and leaves us with the thought that if Æ had not written with that marvellous facility of his, some of his later writings might more constantly have come burthened with permanent vision rather than radiant with a wonderful casual insight. (p. 140)

Darrell Figgis, in his Æ (George W. Russell): A Study of a Man and a Nation, *Maunsel & Co. Ltd., 1916, 159 p.*

IRWIN EDMAN (essay date 1923)

Poetry, politics, and philosophy are by no means so dissevered in essence as they frequently are in practice, and it is a rare exhilaration to find a book which is a sincere and passionate fusion of the three. A. E. is one of the few living writers who could accomplish the feat. It is impossible offhand to think of any other literary man in this generation whose life has been at once that of a mystic philosopher and a revolutionary publicist, an intense poet and active politician. "The Interpreters" is that rare thing in philosophy, sustained and sensitive reflection upon a subject matter no less intimate and real than the author's own experience.

Not often outside the dialogues of Plato, and scarcely anywhere in recent philosophical literature, does one find ideas so completely dramatized. . . . The characters are rebels against an imagined world state whose empire and ideal are marked by world-wide uniformity. They are caught on the verge of a successful revolution and are thrown into the arsenal which they have barely failed to capture. . . . [These] doomed prisoners elect to spend their remaining hours before execution at dawn in revealing to each other the roots of the ideals for which they have dared to die. For these are not ordinary social reformers in whose literary programs lurk no spiritual meanings, and in whose narrow perception of means gleams no heaven of deeply conceived ends. These have rebelled not against a polity but against a spirit. . . .

There are, wrapped in this exaltation, two major convictions, both dubious empirically, but both deeply true to the essential idealism of man. The first is that political creeds drive their meaning if not their origin from a spiritual insight deeper than the external facts and programs with which they are ostensibly dealing. The second is the insistence that all living thought and vital emotion derive from a universal life, that the cosmos is the source of all the varied flowers of faith that come to fulness in the human spirit. Neither of these poetic dogmas is literally true. . . . No one, perhaps, but a Celtic poet could have written a book on politics in the spirit of a Neo-Platonic mystic. . . . Perhaps no one but a man brought up on Irish folk-lore could believe so tenderly in the lyric goodness of things. In any case, it would be hard to find in contemporary literature so moving and magical an essay in "relating the politics of time to the politics of eternity." And this most Platonic symposium is written in a prose tuned to the grandeur of its theme and its intention.

Irwin Edman, "The Politics of Eternity," in The Nation *(copyright 1923 by the Nation Associates, Inc.), Vol. CXVI, No. 3016, April 25, 1923, p. 499.*

W. B. YEATS (essay date 1926)

A few months before I had come to Ireland [AE] had sent me some verses, which I had liked till Edwin Ellis had laughed me from my liking by proving that no line had a rhythm that agreed with any other, and that, the moment one thought he had settled upon some scheme of rhyme, he would break from it without reason. But now his verse was clear in thought and delicate in form. He wrote without premeditation or labour. It had, as it were, organized itself, and grown as nervous and living as if it had, as Dante said of his own work, paled his cheek. (p. 241)

Men watched him with awe or with bewilderment; it was known that he saw visions continually, perhaps more continually than any modern man since Swedenborg. . . . He and I often quarrelled, because I wanted him to examine and question his visions, and write them out as they occurred; and still more because I thought symbolic what he thought real like the men and women that had passed him on the road. Were they so much a part of his subconscious life that they would have vanished had he submitted them to question; were they like those voices that only speak, those strange sights that only show themselves for an instant, when the attention has been withdrawn; that phantasmagoria of which I had learnt something in London: and had his verse and his painting a like origin? And was that why . . . , after writing *Homeward; Songs by the Way,* where all is skilful and much exquisite, he would never again write a perfect book? (pp. 242-44)

[AE] had, and has, the capacity, beyond that of any man I have known, to put with entire justice not only the thoughts, but the emotions of the most opposite parties and personalities, as it were disolving some public or private uproar into drama by Corneille or by Racine; and men who

have hated each other must sometimes have been reconciled, because each heard his enemy's argument put into better words than he himself had found for his own; and this fight was in later years to give him political influence, and win him respect from Irish Nationalist and Unionist alike. It is, perhaps, because of it—joined to a too literal acceptance of those noble images of moral tradition which are so like late Graeco-Roman statues—that he has come to see all human life as a mythological system, where, though all cats are griffins, the more dangerous griffins are only found among politicians he has not spoken to, or among authors he has but glanced at; while those men and women who bring him their confessions and listen to his advice carry but the snowiest of swan's plumage. Nor has it failed to make him, as I think, a bad literary critic; demanding plays and poems where the characters must attain a stature of seven feet, and resenting as something perverse and morbid all abatement from that measure. I sometimes wonder what he would have been had he not met in early life the poetry of Emerson and Walt Whitman, writers who have begun to seem superficial precisely because they lack the Vision of Evil; and those translations of the Upanishads, which it is so much harder to study by the sinking flame of Indian tradition than by the serviceable lamp of Emerson and Walt Whitman. (pp. 245-46)

W. B. Yeats, "The Trembling of the Veil: Ireland After Parnell" (1926), in his Autobiographies *(reprinted by permission of A. P. Watt Ltd.), Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955, pp. 197-250.**

JOHN EGLINTON (essay date 1935)

[When Russell's first] poems appeared, . . . the favourable reception they met with proved how widely diffused was the interest in [Theosophy's] beliefs and doctrines, some knowledge of which, one would think, was necessary for their comprehension. There is no doubt about Russell's poetic gift. . . . [Verse] is Russell's natural instrument. What is essential in his mind can only find expression poetically. The gift has remained with him all through life, and in his *Collected Poems* we find a progressive mastery of the lofty diction which he has elaborated for himself. The workmanship is not always fine; 'mystic', 'dreamy', 'diamond', 'starry', are tawdry substitutes for the 'inevitable' word, which is often avoided. And though there is a good deal about Beauty in the poems, beauty in his sombre twilight world is rather an object of belief than of delighted apprehension. . . . But as a poet of ideas there is no poet of his time quite like Russell. Sometimes his verses are the expression, almost crude, of the beliefs which have rooted themselves in him: the best of them are the embodiment and often perfect expression of moral intuitions; and not seldom he has been moved to utterance on public matters, as in the lines *'On behalf of some Irishmen not followers of tradition'*, which Ireland will carry in its memory like an arrow in the wound. The poems tell of spiritual agonies and triumphant spiritual perceptions, and often the impression one receives is of a terrible sadness, for the attitude with which this proud soul confronts the universe has not infrequently drawn upon him a response, or laid bare an irresponsiveness, which would have crushed any but the most pertinacious conviction. . . . [His] moments of illumination alternated with disconcerting avowals of doubt, and the very 'kingliness' and 'lordliness' of the beings to whose world he aspired, seemed to indicate a non-religious and even non-philosophic dissatisfaction with his own earthly lot. Yet the consolatory power of Russell's poetry was to my knowledge more than once manifested: as when Dowden, who visited the beautiful Duchess of Leinster in her last illness, mentioned that she had found much comfort in *Homeward: Songs by the Way*. (pp. 48-51)

Suddenly broke out the Great War, which altered everything in this world, and not least the politics and prospects of Ireland. Russell was deeply stirred, and not, at least at first, specially as an Irishman. His horror of the slaughter was like that of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the hero stands with Krishna in the interspace between two vast hosts drawn up for mutual destruction. . . . Russell lifted up his voice, and in a series of poems, in which his diction and sentiment reached their highest elevation, addressed the British public through the columns of *The Times* on the iniquity of war and of the statesmen who had brought it about. . . . [With] Russell the ethical problem was complicated by the fact that as a good Irish nationalist he would probably have reconciled himself easily enough to the collapse of the 'bubble Empire' as a thing good for the world, good for his own country, good perhaps for England itself; and this attitude, though intelligible, was hardly one to elicit any consolatory response from divine wisdom, like the agonised perplexity of Arjuna. *Gods of War* . . . was nevertheless, in dignity of poetic expression, one of Russell's most remarkable volumes of verse. (pp. 56-7)

John Eglinton, "A.E. and His Story," in his Irish Literary Portraits *(copyright © 1935 by Macmillan & Co. Ltd.; reprinted by permission of Macmillan, London and Basingstoke), Macmillan, 1935, pp. 39-61.*

PADRAIC COLUM (essay date 1936)

A.E.'s poetry belongs to an age remote from the modern one, and unless we have something in us which has survived from that age we will be interested only now and again in this, which is so impersonal, which makes such little innovation.

It is poetry that is close to the Vedas and Zoroastrian hymns. How little it has been influenced by the modern world with its religions, its philosophies and its social order! A. E. was aware of all of them, but they never made him dubious about the myth that gave a center to his poetry, the myth that he had evolved for himself. Men were the stayed Heaven-dwellers, the divinities who had descended into chaos to win a new empire for the spirit. "Homeward, Songs by the Way," was the title of his first volume, and it implied a return to remembrance, to the heaven that men had forgotten themselves out of. And the title-poem in his last volume, "The House of the Titans," dealt with the same myth. . . . A. E. was criticized because his verse forms were the accepted ones, because his frequent use of "immemorial," "vastness," "ancient," "dream," "beauty," made such words seem like counters rather than words with a life of their own. It has to be admitted that there is an amount of rhetoric in this poetry. But there is high distinction too: A. E. was an artist as well as a prophet. . . .

In [his] volume, "The Voices of the Stones," a poignant sense of loss makes itself felt—it is in that beautiful poem, "Promise," although there is still a faith that all losses will be restored. From this on the poet faces a lightless world:

companions have gone, age is coming on, the old simple, innocent, useful life is broken up; a cry that questions all goes up from this prophet of immortality. But A. E. would have his last utterance one of faith. And so he ends the selection that he had made just before his death with a poem [of faith] that is characteristic of his whole life. . . .

He believed in reincarnation and there was something about himself that made us suspend our disbelief in that strange doctrine. He must have existed in one of those ancient civilizations where the philosopher and the poet, the prophet and the priest, were one and the same person. (p. 23)

There are more accomplished poets and more competent philosophers left in the world. But we cannot turn to them with affection as we turned to A.E. (p. 24)

Padraic Colum, "A.E. and His Poetry," in The New Republic *(© 1936 The New Republic, Inc.), Vol. 87, No. 1119, May 13, 1936, pp. 23-4.*

(essay date 1937)

The meditative twilight hour which predominated in A.E.'s poetry, with its transitory skies and delicately constellated colours, more than any other influence helped to establish in many minds the mood of the Celtic Twilight, though the poems themselves in their early matured thought owe little to that convention. The discipline of the true visionary differs from that of the imaginative artist, and the poems of A.E. do not yield their inner meaning with that sharpness of impact which we associate with vision. In their delicate impressionism, their mingling of shadow and jewel points of light, a system of worship is adumbrated, but the poems have the immediate effect of moving at a distance from the inner line of their significance. The intensity of their mystical earth-worship was expressed with an awe and reverence, a stillness of contemplation which evoked an answering mood of stillness. Even those who were but dimly conscious of the living mythus underneath, which gave the poet all the substance of his thought, could not but be aware of a self-flattering sense of spiritual expansion in themselves. . . .

But it is actually in the remote nature of his inner thought that A.E. differed so greatly from other poets who have patched up for themselves a compromise with temporal beliefs. The apparent comfort of his thought, with its expression in a modulated vowel music and tender touch, hid an implacable belief in the astounding responsibility of the human soul destined to shape and reshape itself in every circumstance of delight or terror. . . . His final belief in goodness and pity gave a tenderness to his poems and an air of mildness which did not seem incompatible with the tenets of Christianity. He was, however, a professing polytheist; and in the mythology, the intuitive symbols of older creeds, which other poets use as a state of thought, he found the actual and even visible action of spirit. . . . The poet's private devotion to [a] religion of nature, despite a multitude of world affairs, is shown by the fact that in his last narrative poem, "The House of the Titans," written in the comparative leisure of age, he attempted to re-interpret his spiritual beliefs in terms of Celtic divinity, gathering in meditation the vestigial survivals of that ancient Pantheon and reconciling it with Eastern thought. . . . (p. 765)

It is necessary to emphasize the religious nature of A.E.'s verse and clarify our own attitude, for otherwise we fail to perceive the full implications of his natural worship or account for its literary limitations. He meant what he said; and there is a direct simplicity in many of his earth hymns. . . . He employed common measures, ordinary rhymes and a modicum of rhythm and, except for an insistence on vowel patterns, which was due to a strong aural sense, he avoided technical elaboration in his own work, though it delighted him in the work of his contemporaries. Though the moods within them are many, there is no development in the ordinary sense of the word in his poems. We may note indeed a growing sparsity and clearness of outline, but there is no fundamental change. . . . Judged by the romantic canon of poetic surprise, a canon which has received many rude shocks in recent years, the religious procession of his poetry becomes self-same. But the quality which emanates from these poems seems at times a conquest of sheer spirit over matter. The compelling power of a multitudinous faith, terrible for all its tenderness and attendant calmness, is, to say the least of it, exhilarating. The visional and imaginative quality of this poetry affords us a unique experience. The sense of spiritual significance gives to it a religious power which seems beyond the analytical range of literary criticism. (pp. 765-66)

"Prose and Poetry of A.E.: 'The Candle of Vision'," in The Times Literary Supplement *(© Times Newspapers Ltd. (London) 1937; reproduced from* The Times Literary Supplement *by permission), No. 1864, October 23, 1937, pp. 765-66.*

MONK GIBBON (essay date 1937)

I hesitate to dogmatise about [A. E.'s] verse. He wrote no poem in which there was not beauty of thought and sincerity of utterance but he wrote many poems in which the form seems inadequate and the imagery a little vague. Here . . . we need to beware that the fault is not sometimes our own. The mystical poets demand to be read almost a single poem at a time. Otherwise we cannot keep pace with the wheeling of systems in their metaphysical universe. The implications of his verse take us too far. Every poem really needs separate acceptance, a separate meditation; the crust of the ascetic rather than the rich and varied banquet before which appetite presently fails. As with his prose they should be read at a time when our mood is already in some measure attuned to them. Then a poem that seemed to mean little before will unlock its heart to us, speaking direct to that spiritual ear which, when it hears at all, seems to hear certainties. The journey which A.E. asks the mind to take is often a far one. It is not the surface meaning of his words which matters but their profound inner content and implication. We should be careful before we agree with the opinion of one critic that A.E. "will be remembered for his life and talk, for the personal manifestations of his gentle and radiant spirit, rather than for his poetry."

For that spirit reveals much of itself to us in the poems. His poetry is nearly always an attempt to plumb some mystery of the soul or to reveal some moment of illumination in consciousness. (pp. 53-4)

Monk Gibbon, "AE," in The Living Torch *by A.E., edited by Monk Gibbon (reprinted by permission of Macmillan, London and Basingstoke), Macmillan, 1937, pp. 3-84.*

SEAN O'FAOLAIN (essay date 1939)

There is really no progression in [Æ's] verse: it is the same note at the end and at the beginning; there is neither advance nor decline. (p. 47)

I loved him and we all loved him as a man. As for his poems, they are sweet and they are noble, but they are not Æ and they are not life. Yeats was right enough about Æ. He sought not himself but a way of life, and no man who does not find himself can find life. His best poems, like "We must pass like smoke or live within the spirit's fire," are the perfect expression of traditional wisdom as he adapts it, hardly altering it. In the volume before me, "The Living Torch," we have some of his best work, and it is almost exclusively day-by-day journalism, though journalism without peer. There he is himself as the sage who sees all things, even the most commonplace, as part of the eternal procession. But his conception of order to which all things are related is a traditional conception, not, need it be said, the less admirable and satisfying for that reason, though the less interesting for being "found" rather than "self-won."

When one places Æ and W. B. in opposition to each other it is this that finally emerges—that the poetry of Yeats is the poetry of a personality; unsure, unequal, adventurous, most satisfying when it is most personal, dismaying when it is least personal—even tiresome then, of an egregious folly; while the poetry of Æ, like the poetry of Crashaw, or Herbert, or Vaughn, is the poetry of character, satisfying when felicitous, its enemy triteness and mechanical sentiment. If I were to be wrecked with either on a desert island, or have the choice of either as a companion in death, I should not hesitate which to choose. For the desert island, I should choose Æ—and read Yeats. For the end—Yeats. Because we live as we can, but we die as we must. I should get no companionship from Yeats; he is wrapped up in his own world. . . . But, as against Æ's kindness, tolerence, journalism, sociability, and wisdom, he has what is more to the point of a crisis—pride, and passion. (pp. 56-7)

Sean O'Faolain, "Æ and W. B.," in Virginia Quarterly Review *(copyright, 1939, by the* Virginia Quarterly Review, *The University of Virginia), Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter, 1939), pp. 41-57.**

FRANK O'CONNOR (essay date 1939)

[A.E.'s] conversation, like his life, ran in patterns: well-formed phrases, ideas, quotations, and anecdotes, which he repeated over a lifetime without altering an inflection. (p. 64)

"A.E.," I once teased him, "Joyce makes you say, 'the only thing that matters about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring.'"

"Well, that's clever of him," A.E. exclaimed with genuine surprise, looking at me over his spectacles. "That's true, you know. I may quite well have said that." He said it at least once every day. It was one of the patterns of speech that had lasted him a lifetime. . . . (pp. 64-5)

Critics accused [A.E.] of vagueness and platitude—sometimes very bitterly—and it was hard to defend him. But for myself I feel certain that those vicious tricks of style which made him obscure a really individual perception in language where repetition killed all sense of wonder, were nothing more or less than habits of phrasing picked up heaven knows how or where in boyhood. At the first page of the first prose book of his I open, I find two clichés—"the genie in the innermost" and "an outcast from the light." The repetition of them over a hundred pages stuns the reader, yet this book, "Song and its Fountains," contains the finest criticism of Yeats ever written; it is just a few pages but full of delicate, individual perception, and it may give an idea of A.E.'s conversation when, as sometimes happened, the fog seemed to lift from his brain.

It is the same with his poems and pictures. Heaven knows from what early study of Nonconformist hymns a man so alive to the magic of poetry—and poetry simply bubbled from him—picked up those barbarous, jangling rhythms; the metrical equivalent of clichés—though there are clichés enough. (pp. 66-7)

He produced abundantly, effortlessly, and yet seemed to find no real delight in his work, because picture, essay, poem, created without the anguish of the artist, left an unsatisfied creative urge, and he can never have known the utter emptiness of the artist who exhausts himself in one supreme effort and feels there can nothing more to say. (p. 68)

[There] was too much daylight in A.E. to nourish poetry. I am reminded of that bright glare upon the crude colors of his canvases [in his home], and of the masses of shadow among the flickering candles in Yeats's [home]. These two things might almost be taken as symbolical of a contrasted objectivity and subjectivity in the two men, and when I read Synge or Lady Gregory I notice that mass of shadow which they, like Yeats, have in their work. Call it shadow, subjectivity, idealism , humbug, what you will—it is what one needs if one is to live in the garish daylight of a democracy dominated by parish priests. (p. 74)

That fable of light and shadow, of objectivity and subjectivity, is one way of expressing my idea of the old feud between Yeats and A.E., but it was a difference that expressed itself in almost every detail of their lives. (p. 75)

Why is there no development in his work? What was the "fog" in his brain? A life that was all externalization, an art that was all disguise, a philosophy that was but a prison for an abounding nature—what was the reality? Was there some sort of failure to shake off his boyhood and accept the dialectic of life? Under the platitude there was another Russell without any Nonconformist benevolence; sometimes he speaks in the poems with a harsh, clear, noble voice. . . . There should have been a Russell of middle life with a voice like that, but the dialectic breaks down, the antiself, as Yeats would say, is missing. (p. 80)

Frank O'Connor, "Two Friends: Yeats and A. E.," in The Yale Review *(© 1939 by Yale University; reprinted by permission of the editors), Vol. XXIX, No. 1, September, 1939, pp. 60-88.**

HERBERT HOWARTH (essay date 1958)

In the last thirty years of his life AE was a great figure. He was not the most famous living Irishman, but he was the most famous Irishman who permanently lived in Ireland. Shaw and Joyce were abroad, Yeats was at home only for a period. It was clear that AE was not a poet of Yeats' order nor so idiosyncratic a personality, but he was better-loved as a man and perhaps better-respected as a thinker and humane arbiter. He was consulted on private and public problems, and wrote in the Press on all the issues of the day

like a man who knew himself to be the national conscience. It is lucky for a nation if it has an AE to admonish it; but such work sometimes dies with the man, and the next generation cannot easily understand what made him so important to his contemporaries. By giving the greater part of his energy to arbitration and polemic he neglected his poetry and painting; he wrote poetry and painted for refreshment in scanty intervals from public life, whereas Yeats—or Eliot—made public pronouncements secondary to, and developed from, their work at their art. So his poems and paintings grew only a little; at the end of his life they still seemed much what they had been at the outset; and by the 'twenties they already had a faded air, and were loved for his sake rather than their own. Now they are largely ignored. . . . [His] mood is so different from the prevailing mood of our time that only three or four of his poems come to my mind as I go about life—and a test of a poem is whether it does this—and that if words of his come unsolicited to my help, they are more often from his polemical prose. (pp. 165-66)

AE's poems lie within a very restricted range. A limitation can also be a definition, if it is notably personal, and AE's best poems are perhaps recognisable as his own by the circumscription and the one or two personal touches within it. His vocabulary mainly depends on the romantic postulation of the vision of the heavenly courts. His imagery is of the same order, deriving partly from nineteenth-century English poetry, partly from English translations of oriental literature; it is only occasionally sharpened by the sights and sounds of the everyday world. AE once spoke of his highest delight as the "intoxication" of the Sufi, and some of his poems evidently hope to catch that divine intoxication; but only one or two kindle with it. There is nothing in the tradition of English literature to help a poet to write with the Sufi note, for the English imagination has found other routes into ecstasy; and AE was not the great technical innovator who opens a new route for future poets. He had three or four forms at his disposal: compact quatrains, such as Blake sometimes used so magnificently; compact six-line stanzas; a five-line stanza, occasionally and experimentally; couplets. Now and then he writes couplets eight trochaic feet to the line, the lines long and raking enough to dazzle, the poems short enough for the dazzle to enchant, not to overpower.

At their best the poems have a double effect: they are contained by their compact patterns, and yet we see their vision as if the compact cage were momentarily broken. When that happens AE gives the feeling that the mystical poets traditionally give, that they have riven a cleft into the frame of the universe and we look into celestial spaces. . . . But these moments, in which the poems transcend the conventions of their period and kind, and catch the timelessness which they invoke as a solvent for the wrongs of time, are few. (pp. 180-81)

Perhaps his problem as a poet was that, right to the end, he only valued the esoteric in poetry. Though as a man he had wrestled with reality effectively, he did not entirely approve of what he had done, and had a nostalgic preference for the theosophist-poet of 1894. The best of his late published poems are the natural partners of the best of his early poems, as if his life had undergone no change. Possibly his most superb verses are those on the last page of *The Candle of Vision:*

> No sign is made while empires pass.
> The flowers and stars are still His care,
> The constellations hid in grass,
> The golden miracles in air.
>
> Life in an instant will be rent
> When death is glittering, blind and wild,
> The Heavenly Brooding is intent
> To that last instant on Its child.

The verses have a hammered quality, which expresses the workmanship of God which they celebrate. They are written towards the end of the Great War, and the prose that precedes them shows that AE has been reflecting on the significance of that Armageddon and the terrorism and sacrifices in Ireland. "Powers that seem dreadful", he says, "things that seemed abhorrent . . . will reveal themselves as brothers and allies." But for all their excellence the stanzas do not show that AE has lived and developed for twenty-five years since he wrote the poems in *Homeward.* If they had appeared in *Homeward,* they would have seemed the best of the book, just as they seem the best of all AE, but they would not have been conspicuously maturer than the work around them nor out of place, whereas the poetic prose-sketches of early AE look almost a century apart from his mature prose. . . . Just a poem here and there assimilates the new understanding and energy that turn his prose from feminine to masculine. (pp. 182-83)

Herbert Howarth, "AE—George William Russell," in his The Irish Writers 1880-1940: Literature under Parnell's Star *(© 1958 by Herbert Howarth), Rockliff, 1958, pp. 165-211.*

RICHARD J. LOFTUS (essay date 1964)

A.E.'s attitude toward the national political movement in Ireland, like that of Yeats, passed through various phases. (p. 99)

Occasionally A.E.'s public attitudes find expression in his verse. "On Behalf of Some Irishmen Not Followers of Tradition," for example, like Yeats' "To Ireland in the Coming Time," is a defense of an aesthetic grounded in the unorthodoxy of theosophy. In his poem A.E. exhorts the youthful poets of Ireland to reject "the sceptyred myth" of conventional belief and to dedicate themselves to "The golden heresy of truth." The Easter Rising of 1916 inspired A.E. to compose a most moving poem, "Salutation," addressed to Padraic Pearse, James Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh, Countess Markievicz, and those other rebels whom he did not know personally. . . . A.E. composed "Salutation" shortly after the abortive rebellion and had it privately printed and distributed. The poem has often been anthologized, yet A.E. omitted it from the final selection for the collected edition. Deeper and more lasting, perhaps, was his response to the death of Terence MacSwiney, the mayor of Cork, after a sixty-nine-day hunger strike in Brixton Gaol during the Black and Tan War. In a sonnet, "A Prisoner," A.E. compares MacSwiney to the "fabled Titan chained upon the hill." . . . MacSwiney's act of passive heroism demanded and won the poet's admiration; whereas his response to deeds of violence was ordinarily characterized by indignation and regret. So, in "Waste," A.E. decries the slaughter of the Irish Civil War as a "sacrifice / For words hollow as wind," . . . an allusion in general to the emptiness of political oratory and, perhaps, in particular to the fact that Eamon De Valera rejected the