Introduction

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W. B. Yeats is a writer who requires, and at the same time tests, contextual study. Few can challenge his literary dimensions: a protean sensibility spanning the transition from Victorian romanticism into modernism. His output, produced with sustained intensity for over half a century, encompassed lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetry; thirty-three plays; a library of prose ranging from fiction to polemic journalism to autobiography; and he also developed a complex occult system. His impact was, however, also cultural and political in a socially engaged sense: he led the Celtic Revival; was active in nationalist movements; established the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre; and served as a senator in the newly independent Irish Free State. As a complement to this prodigious activity, he spun a constant correspondence linking a huge range of personnel into his public and intimate passions.

Thus, more than most writers, Yeats insists on being seen not so much *in* his context as *of* it: as much the producer as the product of his times. The answer to the famous question he posed late in life: 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?' (CW1 353) is neither simple nor obvious. The retrospective look by the elder Yeats into the likely effect of his early influence construes the context that shapes his present verse as in part his own responsibility. He seeks to self-contextualize within a world he has helped to make. It is important to recognize within this a Shelleyan insistence on cultural politics, to promote poets as acknowledged legislators: and this is a fair conclusion, given Yeats's status. Any thoroughgoing attempt to contextualize Yeats must account for these imbrications, both recognizing and resisting his writing's tendency to set the terms for its own study.

W. B. Yeats in Context aims to meet this challenge. Firmly embracing the 'historical turn' that informs contexualization, this collection nevertheless views this process, rather than turning away from theoretical nuance

and textual analysis, as demanding an increasingly supple set of orienting co-ordinates. The ambition is for a rapport between historical and critical vocabularies: a set of conversations, wherein critical discourse can be seen as informing historical judgment while at the same time acknowledging itself as part of socio-cultural processes. By establishing a range equal to the extensive interests of its subject, this book presents the multifarious aspects of Yeats's work within a series of contexts broad enough to facilitate an informed placing of his importance.

In seven distinct parts, *W. B. Yeats in Context* establishes historical, conceptual, and literary criteria through which its subject can be usefully seen. The first three parts, 'Times', 'Places', and 'Personalities', treat him in terms of the social, political, and geographical circumstances that shaped his development. Parts IV and V: 'Themes' and 'Philosophies', feature discussions of the intellectual frameworks in which he operated. Parts VI and VII, 'Arts' and 'Reception', explore the literary traditions with which he was engaged, the wider artistic practices which influenced him, and the history of production and reception which has attended his work. The several categories produce a composite picture, enabling linkage, and with it a supple articulation of mutually informative contextual studies. The discussion of Yeats and Pound, for example, relates back to the historical and biographical studies, and looks forward to discussions of aesthetics, fascism, modern poetry, and critical controversy.

Yeats's capacity to court controversy was evident from the outset. The combination of this instinct to provoke with an equal ability to impress has unsurprisingly made his life and work the site of sustained scholastic activity. Alongside the evident fascination with his life, recent years have witnessed a range of studies considering his writing in widely diverse terms, be they class, postcolonial, gender, Irish studies, literary-historical, poetic, or postmodernist. Many of the authors of these interrogations may be found among the contributors to this volume; many more can be discovered in the further reading they recommend here. This diversity illustrates the vibrant relevance of Yeats to contemporary critical enquiry and demonstrates that he remains of avid interest to more than one segment of the academy. In a sense, what makes him attractive to so broad an audience also makes him a prime candidate for contextualization, since the various paradigms into which he may be contextualized reflect his range of significances. This in turn evinces both his importance and his controversiality – since he is central to competing discourses, each eager to claim him for their own. *W. B. Yeats in Context* maps Yeats scholarship as it stands today, while offering a series of new directions for the future.

TIMES

The opening sequence of essays offers a chronological overview of Yeats's life, exploring in five separate chapters the significant events and trends of thought within which he evolved. As his most authoritative biographer, R. F. Foster has declared, Yeats did not live thematically, but 'day by day' (Foster-1 xxvii), and in a manner that binds him tightly to larger historical forces. It is partly the combination of involvement in, and literary comment upon, evolving social and political movements that makes him such a compelling figure. Indeed, fascination with the 'making' of Yeats has meant that Foster has not been alone in the recent impulse to examine the process of his career: six biographies have been published in the last decade. This may be because the fluctuating tension between Yeats's public and personal selves seems key to his creative productivity. As this first part demonstrates, any attempt to establish a 'periodization' of the poet's development involves close consideration of the collisions between wide and more intimate worlds.

W. J. Mc Cormack begins this exploration by advising us to consider Yeats's earliest years 'both through his writings and what one might crudely term "the facts"'. These include the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, an occurrence which not only 'began to rend the veil which enshrined Christian metaphysics' but also contributed to the physical and social conditions experienced by the young poet at such residences as Ashfield Terrace, where 'the western hinterland of Yeats's home advertised a triple offence to the tradition he nurtured in poem and book-review – lower-middle-class evangelicalism, limited liability disposal of bodies, and thriving exotic Catholicism'. By contrast, Stephen Regan's essay on the *fin de siècle* emphasizes artistic as opposed to material and social contexts, arguing that the 'ideals of beauty and . . . imaginative openness to unconventional subject matter' gained from his exposure to the Aesthetes and Decadents 'positively reinforced his cultural nationalism. The crucial hinge between art and politics . . . lay in his unconcealed opposition to English materialism and philistinism'. Adrian Frazier, whose essay follows Yeats between 1898 and 1913, shifts the emphasis again, focusing on psychological contexts, specifically those created by the poet's 'deliriously angry' responses to Maud Gonne's revelation of her long-hidden sexual affair with Lucien Millevoye. In 'War, 1914–1923', Ben Levitas returns to historical and political concerns. Registering Irish historiography's recent attention to Ireland as 'inevitably caught up in' the First World War, he asks 'How should we recalibrate Yeats within this expanded context?' The answer explores

unexpected connections between the poet, the worldwide influenza pandemic which afflicted George Yeats during her first pregnancy, and the Irish War of Independence. Paul Scott Stanfield maintains the emphasis on Irish and European political conditions in the part's final essay, which covers the period from 1924 to 1939, when passionate engagement and solipsism seem once again in flux. Stanfield exposes the ironies inherent in the fact that Yeats 'was closer to spheres of actual power than any other writer of comparable stature in England or the United States; at the same time, his most cherished political ideas were so remote from those of any actually existing Irish party that eventually all he could do was fantasize that the present dispensation would soon and suddenly end'.

PLACES

While Yeats's works can be tracked across time, they must also be put in place. His writing is notably 'cartographic': rich in allusion to landscape, often construing in potent symbolic terms the localities he held to be significant. Such evocations necessarily invite interrogation of the transformative process of this symbolic rendering – particularly where his landscapes are held in juxtaposition, or acknowledge distance, as famously is the case in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree': 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; / While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey' (CW1 35). These four chapters dwell on the relationship of these significant spaces to his writing, observing Yeats's interpretation (and occlusion) of his surroundings. They reflect his itinerant trajectory, allowing for a breadth of reference that ties in with later chapters on aspects literary and political.

David Fitzpatrick's discussion of Sligo qualifies common assumptions derived from Yeats's own accounts of 'that valley his fathers called their home' (CW1 182). Fitzpatrick points out the shallowness of the poet's familial roots in Sligo – his mother was the only one of his fourteen parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents to be born there – and argues that Yeats's depictions of his Sligo relatives play down their Orangeism while playing up their interest in Freemasonry. Yeats's London connections are surveyed by Timothy Webb, who emphasizes the young poet's shocked, unsettled responses to the 'souls of the lost' he observed walking the city's crowded streets; London's 'principal effect', Webb argues, 'was to remind [Yeats] of his own nationality'. Noting Yeats's attachments to London and Sligo, Anthony Roche observes how Dublin 'triangulates and complicates the polarities of place': 'In London he would be accepted without question as an "Irish poet"; in Sligo he would always be knit by the ties of family;

but in Dublin he would always face opposition, especially on the score of his Irishness, and in countering that opposition the mask of W. B. Yeats would be fashioned.' Jonathan Allison concludes the part by viewing the poet's attachments to Galway through the lens of poems inspired by Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee, especially 'The Wild Swans at Coole' and 'Coole Park, 1929'.

PERSONALITIES

An emphasis on contextualization might resist the study of close friendships, declining the personal in favour of temporal or local frames, social categories, and critical concepts. In Yeats's case, however, intimates are inextricably bound into a critical and conceptual matrix. He insists that studying them be an aspect of studying him: 'my glory was I had such friends' he wrote in his late poem 'The Municipal Gallery Re-visited' (CW1 328). In fact one might say that Yeats exposes the failure of any contextualization that omits an investigation of the ways intense personal interaction constructs or disrupts the 'cultural field' of a given author. Naturally, an essential aspect of such an investigation is a positioning of such characters within their own temporal frames and social categories, taking care to guard against a tendency merely to place such bodies in orbit around Yeats.

Douglas Archibald organizes just such a careful rearrangement by cataloguing the different versions of John Butler Yeats perceived by his son at various stages of their relationship and by later critical appraisers. Archibald charts the gradual role reversal between the 'protective, supporting, impatient' father and the 'dutiful, awed, resisting' son; he also acknowledges recent feminist assessments in which John Butler Yeats's 'feckless charm and pluckiness . . . [are] set against the cramped loneliness, misery, and physical decline of Susan Yeats and [the] lack of any financial stability, settled household, or formal education for her daughters'. W. B. Yeats's relationships with important women form the subject of the two following essays, by Karen Steele on Maud Gonne and Judith Hill on Lady Gregory. Steele positions Gonne both outside and inside Yeats's orbit, devoting the first part of her essay to Gonne's efforts to create a place for women in the nationalist movement and the second to Yeats's poetic representations of her complexly 'composite' form. Hill delineates the challenges Lady Gregory encountered in attempting to be not only Yeats's patron and collaborator but also a creator in her own right; she concludes that Lady Gregory's 'ability to both devote herself to and distance herself from Yeats created,

ultimately, the very best environment for the poet, nurturing discipline and imagination'.

Nicholas Grene and Catherine Paul take up two of Yeats's closest artistic associations: J. M. Synge and Ezra Pound. Grene emphasizes the extent to which Synge took on the role of Yeats's anti-self: Yeats admired Synge's 'pure self-sufficiency of vision' and 'mythologized it as the opposite of his own'. Paul underscores various aspects of Pound's 'crucially reciprocal' relationship with Yeats, such as the fact that 'there are geometric and philosophical similarities between the gyres that would power the system of Yeats's *A Vision* and the vortex that was, for a time at least, a powerful image of Pound's conception of the interplay between individuals, historical events, and greater knowledge'. If these essays demonstrate that Yeats's artistic partnerships are also friendships, the last in this part shows that equally, his most intimate attachments had a critically creative dimension. Margaret Mills Harper's study of his wife George makes two suggestions for critics who wish to 'dislodge the polarities of accounts in which either WBY or GY can seem the other's dupe'. One 'involves the scholarly use of astrology, the interpretative sign system' constantly used by the Yeatses; the other requires attention to the peculiar brand of comedy featured in such texts as *A Vision*, texts 'redolent with modes such as self-parody, paradox, and irony' and 'offering a teasing dance of partial and misinformation as well as highly serious claims to profound, even sacred, illumination'.

THEMES

It is not surprising that Yeats should be a controversial writer: as a disciple of William Blake, opposition and antagonism are at the centre of his poetry. People, since they are invited to do so, take sides, and it has been a recurring feature of Yeats studies that his work is defended or defamed with passionate reference to one side of the dialectical joust. This is not least because in comparison to his poetry and drama Yeats's prose is more virulently polemical, providing supporting ammunition that seems to clarify less obvious verse. Certainly, however, his work sprang out of, and has since produced conflicts that reflect close concerns of the age. Was he, on balance, a radical or reactionary force? This part approaches such questions by examining his contribution to the terms of debate, contextualizing him within the broader frameworks of cultural and intellectual history. A range of recent studies emphasize a more plural, evasive subject, apparent in such titles as Marjorie Howe's *Yeats's Nations* (1996) or Jonathan Allison's edited *Yeats's Political Identities* (1996); this section of essays produces a

no-less diverse range of approaches, generating a set of competing as well as complementary interpretations.[1]

Donald Childs opens the debate by lighting up crucial facets of Yeats's political identities. His essay 'Class and eugenics' argues that, for Yeats, 'culture is both social and biological: huckster blood predisposes one to huckster culture. And so a properly Irish person . . . is well-bred both by class traditions and by eugenical reproduction'. David Lloyd in contrast directs the focus to Yeats's relationship to nationalism and postcolonialism. Taking influential essays by Seamus Deane and Edward Said as his starting points, Lloyd notes that the two 'differ profoundly in their evaluation of the shift in both poetry and politics between what we conventionally know as the "early" and the "late" Yeats, Said descrying in the latter a movement towards a poetry of liberation, Deane the reservations of an Anglo-Irish settler colonial in the face of his caste's loss of power'. In response, Lloyd looks closely at 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'The Tower', illustrating his view of the late Yeats as a 'new synthesis . . . in which the political question becomes less that of political mobilization, or of the shaping of cultural institutions for a nationalist movement, than that of the nature and legitimacy of the state and the role of violence in its formation'.

Examining a quite different set of power relations, Vicki Mahaffey sets Yeats in the context of gender; concentrating on those poems in which he 'imaginatively projected himself into the bodies of women before, during, and after they gave birth, virtually crossing the boundary of biological difference', she argues that as 'a dramatist and poet (and political thinker) Yeats was always aware of the theatrical nature of social behaviour, and that gender is a partly deliberate and partly unconscious performance of mutually exclusive roles in a social script'. Yeats's aesthetics comes to the fore in James Pethica's essay, which recounts the process by which the poet 'refined the ideas about Art he had inherited from nineteenth-century and earlier sources, adapting them to engage more fully with the political and literary environments he encountered'. In the end, this process produced a 'toughened Romanticism which narrowed the ostensibly massive divide between his work and that of his younger Modernist rivals'. Finally, R. F. Foster confronts the vexed question of Yeats's involvement in fascism. Weighing the poet's interests in Mussolini, eugenics, and the Irish Blueshirts – along with his failure to adopt strong anti-Nazi stances in the 1930s – against his unwavering support for intellectual and artistic freedom, his fascination with unfascistic Sweden, his lack of interest in Pound's overtly fascist stances, and the absence of anti-Semitism in his thought and work, Foster

concludes that 'It is easy to convict Yeats of political myopia, a tendency to strike attitudes for effect, and right-wing beliefs about social organization and the degeneration of the modern world. But the most hostile of witnesses searching for a consistent pro-Nazi stance, after trawling the archives can come up with little more than a sequence of red herrings. His understanding of what he sometimes called "Fashism" was as idiosyncratic and inaccurate as his spelling of it.'

PHILOSOPHIES

Yeats drew upon a complex range of 'worldviews', which accumulated and transformed as he encountered new ideas. This part explores the systems of thought that attracted him, providing insight into his intellectual frames of reference. As a range of chapters, it requires an eclecticism that mirrors Yeats's own, not merely in terms of subject, but in terms of methodology. His philosophical thinking seldom limited itself to the realm of ideas; it also became implicated in socio-cultural formations, as is the case with his relationship to orthodox Christian teaching in Ireland and his involvement with celticism and folklore. Likewise, his interrogations of western philosophy, from Plato to Nietzsche, resulted in applied ideas, operating in the realms of his aesthetic and political attitudes, as well as informing poetical judgments. On top of all this, it must be remembered that elements of all his conceptual meanderings contributed to an active attempt to respond, rather than passively digest – culminating in his own metaphysical system laid out in *A Vision*. This part examines a diverse range of influential systems of thought, commenting on both the uses Yeats made of them, and the degree to which they were altered in their application or expression.

In 'The Church in Ireland: Protestant and Catholic', Nicholas Allen examines a series of incidents ranging from the poet's birth 'in a decade book-ended by the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland (1869)' to his Senate career, his involvement in the controversial journal *To-morrow*, and the emergence of *A Vision*. These episodes cumulatively suggest that, as Allen puts it, 'Protestant and Catholic are inadequate registers of the difference between Yeats and his antagonists, not least because Yeats slipped with guile between heresy and the orthodox'. The poet's swerve from orthodoxy takes centre stage in Timothy Materer's essay on Yeats and occultism, which emphasizes the 'disparate threads' of the poet's beliefs and his balancing of belief against irony and scepticism. Materer posits William James as an illuminating guide and also suggests that 'Yeats is not far from a tradition of Christian

scepticism that runs through Montaigne, Pierre Bayle, and Kierkegaard'. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar picks up one of the threads mentioned by Materer in her account of Yeats and folklore. For Yeats, according to Garrigan Mattar, folklore formed 'the collaborative Ur-text of a spiritual and imaginative faith'; she traces the incremental development of his understanding and use of this Ur-text from *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) to *Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland* (1920). Another of Materer's 'disparate threads' is taken up in Shalini Sikka's essay on 'Indian thought'. Sikka stresses Yeats's discovery, through collaboration with Shri Purohit Swāmi, of parallels between the conditions he symbolized with the dark and full moons and the Upaniṣadic account of '*Suṣupti* and *Turīya*, the highest states of consciousness achievable by man'.

Michael Valdez Moses, Matthew Gibson, and Jefferson Holdridge shift the conversation to Yeats's philosophical interests, beginning with Moses's essay on Nietzsche. Moses underscores the influence on Yeats's drama of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and on the later poetry of Nietzschean conceptions of the relationship between violence and culture. Addressing the second of these influences, he argues that 'Yeats was less devoted to seeking out or celebrating new forms of heroic violence, and more interested in envisioning how the actual bloodshed and anarchy of modernity might yet serve some larger cultural purpose'. Gibson considers Yeats's contact with classical philosophy, exploring the derivation of Yeats's daimonic theory; the influence of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Plotinus on the antinomies and 'four *Principles*' of *A Vision*; and the origins of the poet's understanding of the Great Year of antiquity. Holdridge returns to Ireland, specifically to the eighteenth-century Ireland of Berkeley, Burke, Swift, and Goldsmith, and their treatments of landscape and family. For Holdridge, Yeats's attraction to these writers stems from the fact that, in their work 'revelations or discoveries of the relationship of place . . . open into demonstrations that remembrances and cures for familial or social relationships are co-terminus, if not easily achievable'.

ARTS

For Yeats, the formal demands of literary production constituted a subject to write about as well as a practical consideration. It is thus crucial that he is seen in terms of the development of literary and artistic forms as well as in social, cultural, and historical frames. There is no opposition here, however: such concerns necessarily tie in with more material questions. If Yeats is influential, it is an influence borne of technical mastery, and

that in turn sits in particular relation to literary traditions. His verse must be contextualized within the literary field if we are to consider fully its purchase in the realm of social and cultural thought.

Yeats famously posed the question (in 'Among School Children') of the relationship of the ideal to the real via a fascination with the relation of artist to art practice: 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (CW1 221). Although first and foremost a writer, his range of artistic associations and inspirations always insisted on the integration of forms and ideas beyond literature. His writing is full of dancers, sculptors, and painting. Beyond a literary rendering of such pursuits, however, he was deeply involved in public provision of the arts in various forms; and his theatrical work was a palette wherein he mixed such influences to temper his language with their operation. This part addresses specific literary and artistic contexts within which Yeats developed, concentrating on poetry, but expanding to discuss drama, dance, the novel, and the visual arts.

Phillip L. Marcus and Matthew Campbell begin the discussion by taking stock of the literary influences of nineteenth-century Ireland and England. Marcus observes Yeats's varied responses to Thomas Davis and the Young Ireland movement as well as his stronger attraction to the Irish bardic tradition as filtered by Mangan, Ferguson, and O'Grady, suggesting that these three figures in particular 'left a permanent trace'. Campbell shows how the examples set by Blake, Shelley, and Tennyson enabled Yeats to test the possibilities and limits of symbolism. James Longenbach brings us into the twentieth century in his essay on 'Modern poetry'. Within this context, Yeats both absorbs and transmits influence. Longenbach lays particular stress on the new tone – 'the adamant disregard for expectation, the refusal to repeat the past, to countenance prior achievement' – that animates the poet's work after 1908; he also describes the 'strategic repetition' of images in *At the Hawk's Well* as the 'crucial intermediary step' between 'imagist concision' and 'the organizing principles that would ultimately distinguish so many long modernist poems, beginning with the early cantos and *The Waste Land*'. Richard Cave's chapter on Yeats and theatrical culture and Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux's on Yeats and the visual arts likewise present their subject as both shaping and shaped by his context. In the theatre, Yeats's collaborations – with the Fay brothers, William Poel, Charles Ricketts, Gordon Craig, Ezra Pound, and Ninette de Valois – are the key: 'he gravitated to precisely the people that would best offer help and what followed was a shared intellectual and practical collaboration'. Loizeaux emphasizes, first, the role played by Pre-Raphaelite painting in the development of Yeats's influential theory of the symbol and, second,