Yeats: Influence, Tradition and the Problematics of Reading

W.B. Yeats has proved to be one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, even perhaps more so than his modernist heirs Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Conflicting perceptions of him as poetic revolutionary and as traditionalist, as belated mediator of romanticism and as promoter of emergent modernity, have offered a rich and divergent range of possibility for writers coming after him. His work shadows, and is mourned within, much major poetry written immediately after his death and subsequently.

This book sets out to think through the implications of Yeats’s position as originating presence within both twentieth-century poetry and also within the century’s major movements of poetry criticism, from formalism and New Criticism to (more latterly) the textual deconstruction of the Yale-based theorists Harold Bloom and Paul de Man in their negotiations with the work of Jacques Derrida. Ideas of formal integrity and completion; tropes of presence and absence; ideas of the text as the site of family quarrel; aporia and undecidability; poetry as the place of both haunting and mourning: each of these conceptions in both areas of writing has something to say about reading Yeats himself and about the nature of work written consciously or unconsciously in his shadow. These conceptions also trouble convenient literary-critical labellings of the twentieth century as essentially modernist, then postmodernist. The haunting echoes of Yeats in subsequent poetics locates modern reading – both theoretically and practically – within essentially Romantic indeterminacies and their aftermath, indeterminacies which call into question the whole process of labelling and categorization itself.¹

Yeats’s own notion of influence as ‘magical’ transference and visionary reanimation, implicated as it is with his ideas of cultural and
national founding, and itself animated by his sense that personality and style are formed in the face of death – all have had a radical impact upon ideas of poetic rhetoric, reading, and their relation to historical event across the century. His position ‘in-between’ in relation to so many of the essential discourses and problematics within and surrounding poetry has led to a variety of responses which, in its turn, says much about the nature and function of poetry across this time, and across a breadth of cultural spaces. In this opening chapter, I will consider the bases of these qualities within Yeats’s own work, and their relation to key ideas which will be considered in later chapters.

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– I asked if Blake had influenced him & he says no, he knew nothing of him, but that minds act on each other – ‘If you shut yourself up in this room and think with sufficient vigour, you will impress your thought on others’ –

Lady Gregory’s Diary record of an after-dinner conversation with W.B. Yeats on 5th March 1899 shows the poet making a striking elision between his continuing mystical preoccupations and a surprisingly physical, dynamic definition of literary influence.² Yeats’s Peter-like denial of Blake is astonishing, given the appearance of his co-edition with Edwin Ellis of Blake’s Writings, Poetic, Symbolic and Critical of 1893. But the rapid movement in his mind from the issue of literary influence into that of the magical transference of energetic thought is characteristic, and remains a potent one within many of his later descriptions of the action of that transference.

In his 1901 essay, ‘Magic’, for example, Yeats outlines three doctrines of belief, the first of which is that the ‘borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another’. (E&I, p. 28) Flow into, or influence; Yeats’s ‘magical’ belief itself seems to open him to the whole notion of the possibility of the living ‘impressing’ their thought upon their contemporaries, but also that the dead might impress their thought upon the living. Yeats’s assertion to Lady Gregory (‘you will impress your thought on others’) is itself freighted with multiple potential when glossed by his later writings on the subject. This potential might include the kinetic (as in the description of the mystical experiment in ‘Magic’, where ‘my imagination began to move of itself and to bring before me vivid images’) to the Franken-steinian: