



Longley, Edna. *Yeats and Modern Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2013. 268 pp.

Modernism Against the Grain

How “modern” do we consider the poetry of William Butler Yeats to be? What definitions or critical views of a poetic *Modernism* would include or exclude Yeats, turn him into a modernist precursor, an anti-modern nationalist, or a poet originally from a Symbolist current who made into Modernity in the latter part of his career? *Yeats and Modern Poetry*, a study by Edna Longley seeks to debate and find answers to these questions, bringing into the discussion the historical background and the political agendas of the many different lines in Yeats’s reception, from the last century to our time. The book presents the shifting connotations of some of the labels applied to him by reception studies such as modern, aristocratic, Irish revivalist, nationalist, conservative, traditional or a mixture of those terms. Longley examines, then, the post 1969 readings of Yeats that have placed him outside the more recent Modern/Modernist anthologies and critical studies, and introduces her own hypothesis for how it came to be.

The author also points to the fragility of critical definitions for terms like “modern” and “modernist” whether or not Yeats is co-opted to such conflicting titles. Sometimes his placement or omission is made to serve critical purposes outside any formal analysis of his poetry. To counter that trend, she offers insightful readings of his poems, side by side with the work of other poets in order to revisit critical opinions in terms of influence and contend for Yeats’s Modernity. As Yeats had his own critical view of Modernity, it would seem that he was in favour of more aristocratic or traditional values. The great part of his reception would have failed to notice that his attitude was steps ahead, reading “Modern” (and also “*Modernism*”) against the grain and taking a counter current that is, in itself, quintessentially Modern. A transversal Modernity that can be seen now as residing in matters where he was mostly perceived as anti-modern.

The first focus of the study is then, with very good reasons, Yeats’s own criticism, his considerations of Ireland as an audience, how necessary he thought this audience to be, his views on the question of Modernity, and his own personal poetics – including his polemic choices (and omissions) for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and the writing of “that unclassifiable work *A Vision*” (p. xi). The tensions generated by this search of an Irish audience at the same time that the poet had to face his unpopularity and establish his own poetic project, proved to have consequences that can be seen in his work, as Longley analyses excerpts of Yeats’s poetry and prose. She also considers the implications of “the Yeats question”: the problematic relationship of “Yeats’s Irishness,

his aristocratic roots, the Celtic Revival, Nationalism, the opposition of popular taste versus aesthetics – and how all that affected Yeats - and his reception. According to the author, “the growth of literary studies since 1970 vindicates Yeats’s original critical project.” and these more recent readings are also presented in the study.

From the considerations of chapter 1 the author moves to the chapters dedicated to what she calls “triangular comparisons”: two poets per chapter are contrasted with Yeats in terms of style, influence, and the critical reception of their poetry. Chapter 2, called “Yeats and American Modernism”, compares how notions of “modernism” can be traced in comparative readings of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The author points to the influence of New Criticism in placing Yeats, Eliot and Pound as important Modernists, and how Hugh Kenner’s work *The Pound Era* has afterwards considered Pound in a more central position, countered, as shown by Marjorie Perloff, by Harold Bloom’s preference over Wallace Stevens. She also shows how, for the same line of “Pound-based” criticism, Eliot (and Yeats) would become dissociated of Pound. From the evolution of the criticism of Eliot and Pound and how they were read and used as models and influences, she shifts the focus on their poetry and ideas, and how they constructed their own poetry. This is perhaps the only moment in the book where her argument needs further discussion, for any eclipsing of Yeats’s “Modernity” by critics cannot be countered by trying to reduce the quality and importance of Eliot and Pound. The attempts to minimize their genius in favour of Yeats’s do not add to the initial notion that seemed to be pointing to a revision of the Modernist canon by tracing critical forces behind questionable choices and showing the fragility of the “modern/modernist” labels.

Chapter 3 focuses on the poetic comparison on Edward Thomas and Wallace Stevens, both younger than Yeats and both, according to her, having poetic works that link them to the term “Symbolism” and to the poetry of Yeats in formal terms. Here the argumentation uses Yeats’s poem “The Wind among the Reeds” and his essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” as a key to unlock the modes in which these poets view Symbolism as a movement, their reaction to French Symbolism, their views on form, *vers libre*, and how all that was received by the critics. The argumentation again shows the inconsistency of critical labels when contrasted with the actual poems and poetic projects in question.

Chapter 4, “Monstrous familiar images” is dedicated to war poetry - a polemic topic considering that Yeats himself has expressed, in the Preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) his reasons for omitting WWI: “I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.”

Wilfred Owen (one of the felt “omissions” of the anthology) is one of the focus of her comparative readings, along with Louis MacNeice. In a 1936 letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats comments on the reception of his Oxford anthology: “(...) the critics get more and more angry. When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets’ corner of a county newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most

famous poem in a glass-case in the British museum – however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same” (Jeffares 43). According to Longley, though, the distance of the two poets is not so great, for both share roots in Romanticism and Symbolism; she states: “one reason why Yeats’s dismissal of Owen can seem a denial of likeness is that Owen preceded him in developing a visionary response to ‘times like this’” (110). She uses this apparent distance to question how War poetry was dissociated from Modern poetry and the reasons behind Yeats’s rejection of the Great War as a topic for poetry, though he cannot be excluded from it. The topic of Yeats and his audience returns, for the War Poem is also a public poem. And that brings us to the last chapter, where the author will return to the question of Irishness, and how criticism “has not always reconciled a ‘national’ and ‘international’ Yeats,” (153) but it would be, as Longley demonstrates, impossible not to read both if we want a more rounded reading of Yeats, one that brings together the different facets of his work.

Throughout the book, the choice of comparing Yeats with other poets renders some very good poetry analysis. In the postscript, Longley asks where Yeats’s formal legacy is to be found after MacNeice, and points to the way he was read by more contemporary Northern Irish poets, who brought him “back home”, though assimilating him through his international reception (208). If and how his continuous influence can be felt in contemporary Irish poetry, is a question for more focused studies, but the critic indicates a method, through her own examples, of how to reach connections of form – the structure and poetic devices in the poems – with not only poetic, but also ethical and political preoccupations in the minds of the poets in question. Each section of poetry reading is alone worth the reading of the book, but above all, the volume adds to the debate of canon formation, Yeats’s reception, and the necessary debate over the meaning and the usefulness of the “modernist”/“post-modernist” categories in our readings of his poetry.

Andrea Martins Lameirão Mateus

Works Cited

- Jeffares, Norman. *W. B. Yeats: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.