

W.B. YEATS: THE POET AS CRITIC

VINOD SENA

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TO
BHADRASENA, MY FATHER,
FOR THE GIFT OF
A LIFE-LONG FRIENDSHIP

Preface

I first read W. B. Yeats's *Essays and Plays and Controversies* in the course of a study of T. S. Eliot's dramatic career. The contrast between the critical methods of two contemporaries could not have been more striking. Yeats lacked the academic impersonality and system of the younger poet, yet had a firmer hold on the essential nature of the theatre. Casting around, I was rather surprised that apart from an interesting discussion in Ellis-Fermor's *Irish Dramatic Movement*, Yeats's performance as critic had gone almost unnoticed. Were the academics deliberately punishing him for his scant regard of the outer forms of their discipline? Or were they so unaccustomed to any mode of criticism but their own that they were unable to make anything of Yeats's?

One asked oneself such questions, and asked too if the un-academic stance of so deliberate a writer as Yeats could be merely accidental? The outcome in my case is the present study. The introductory chapter tries to account for the neglect of Yeats's criticism and brings out the great importance it had for him. The concluding one explores something of the varied significance which it may have for us, and raises by implication the question whether Yeats is not, for the very reasons which have contributed to his neglect, more self-consciously and more consistently the poet-critic than almost any other writer in recent literary history.

The prime claim of the artist turned critic on our attention, it seems to me, should be in respect of what he can tell us of the nature and problems of his art rather than his judgements on his fellows (if the two can at all be separated). The chief concern of this study accordingly is to outline Yeats's account of the arts of poetry and of drama which he practised and of

their relation to society. In so far as the order of the discussion reflects broadly the shift in Yeats's preoccupation with poetry and with popular literature during the nineties to theatre and drama in the first decade of the century, and with the relation of the arts to society during his final phase, it suggests the general direction of his thought without restricting itself to a rigid chronology. Speaking of the need to see Shakespeare in the context of his times, T. S. Eliot was to note that an excessive concern with a writer's sources could become self-defeating, for it could distract attention from his essential unity. In examining Yeats as a critic it has been this inner unity which has been my prime concern. I may from time to time return to his relationship with some predecessor or contemporary, but I do so less as a contribution to *Quellenforschung*, than as a means for bringing out the individual cast of his mind. It was by way of Eliot that I first came to Yeats the critic. In trying to bring out his profound relevance, I inevitably turn to Eliot from time to time as a sort of point of reference; at least Eliot the critic has never been in danger of neglect in spite of his standing as a poet.

In pursuing my study I have drawn freely on various Yeats scholars and have duly acknowledged my indebtedness. There are some debts, however, which call for special acknowledgement. Thus, though I make only very limited use of biographical material, Joseph Hone's and A. Norman Jeffares' literary biographies of Yeats have been quite invaluable for me. I may mention too that the late Una Ellis-Fermor, Graham Hough and the late T. R. Henn were the first and, for many years, the only critics I read on Yeats, and their books have helped to make him a writer of abiding interest for me. It has, therefore, been doubly a privilege to discuss this study at every point with two of them, and I would like to record my special gratitude to Professor Graham Hough for his faith and his suggestions during its writing and to Dr. Henn for being the meticulous and indefatigable critic.

I would also like to express here my indebtedness to several friends: to Professor and Mrs. L. C. Knights for much encouragement and the use of some rare first editions, to John Kelly and to Mrs. Katherine Armitage for help in procuring microfilm and xerox material from Dublin and Ann Arbor,

to Mrinal Miri and to Jan Malocsay for generous assistance during the typing of the first draft, and to Mrs. Joan Fitch for her infinite patience in reading the typescript and making numerous corrections. Facilities for research in English literature are severely limited in India, and the award of a Commonwealth Scholarship at Queens' College, Cambridge, followed by an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Pittsburgh, made it easier for me to pursue the present study to its completion. For these I am indebted, respectively, to the U.K. Commonwealth Scholarships Commission and to the University of Pittsburgh. Some of the material included here has already appeared in the pages of *Modern Drama*, *The Dublin Magazine*, *The Literary Criterion* and *Quest*, and I would like to make grateful acknowledgement to their editors.

Acknowledgements are also due to Senator Michael Yeats and The Macmillan Company for permission to quote from the writings of William Butler Yeats, and to Mr. Romilly John and The Tate Gallery, London, for permission to reproduce the sketch of the two heads of W. B. Yeats by Augustus John.

Finally, a bibliographical note. As a measure of convenience I have, as far as possible, included the references in the text—and a key to the abbreviations used is also provided. In the notes shortened references have been used and for details of publication the reader may refer to the Bibliography.

University of Delhi
January 1980

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Abbreviations

[Unless otherwise stated, titles listed here are by W. B. Yeats, and are published from London.]

- Au.* *Autobiographies*, 1956.
EI. *Essays and Introductions*, 1961.
Ex. *Explorations*, 1962.
Gwynn. Stephen Gwynn (ed.), *Scattering Branches: Tributes to the Memory of W. B. Yeats*, 1940.
H. Arthur Henry Hallam, *The Writings of*, T. H. Vail Motter (ed.), London and New York, 1943.
Hone. Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939*, 1962.
II. Lady I. A. Gregory (ed.), *Ideals in Ireland*, 1901.
L. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Allan Wade (ed.), 1954.
LDW. *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, 1964.
LII. J. Eglinton, *W. B. Yeats et al., Literary Ideals in Ireland*, London and Dublin, 1899.
LNI. *Letters to the New Island*, H. Reynolds (ed.), Cambridge, Mass., 1934.
LSM. *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge-Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901-1937*, Ursula Bridge (ed.), 1953.
M. *Mythologies*, 1959.
MA. Matthew Arnold, *Poetry and Prose*, J. Bryson (ed.), 1954.
NA. E. Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *'Noh' or Accomplishment*, 1916.
OB. *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, W. B. Yeats (ed.), Oxford, 1936.
SS. *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, D. R. Pearce (ed.), 1961.
UP. *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats, I: 1886-1896*, J. P. Frayne (ed.), 1970.
V. *A Vision*, 1962 (reprint of 1937 edn.).
VP. *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, P. Allt and R. K. Alspach (eds.), New York, 1957.
VPl. *Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, R. K. Alspach (ed.), 1966.
WB. *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical*, I. E. J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats (eds.), 1893.

It would be a wholly new event in the history of the arts if a critic were to turn himself into a poet, a reversal of every psychic law, a monstrosity; on the other hand all great poets become naturally, inevitably, critics. I pity the poets who are guided solely by instinct; they seem to me incomplete. In the spiritual life of the former there must come a crisis when they would think out their art, discover the obscure laws in consequence of which they have produced, and draw from this study a series of precepts whose divine purpose is infallibility in poetic production. It would be prodigious for a critic to become a poet, but it is impossible for a poet not to contain a critic.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE