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Becoming, Not Being: Yeats the Survivor

DAVID PIERCE, *Yeats Revisited: The Continuing Legacy*.
Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2022.
£75.00, \$95.99 hardcover; £42.50, \$53.40 ebook.

Adam Roberts

With the abounding scholarship on an author as monumental as W.B. Yeats, how does one revisit him without merely retracing well-trodden paths to echo over 100 years of critical voices? And how do we “return” with fresh ideas to this writer who never previously went out of style? David Pierce’s *Yeats Revisited: The Continuing Legacy* acknowledges the necessity of the former to accomplish the latter: updating by way of refreshing. Scholars of any experience should certainly find it daunting to sift through the plentiful scholarship on Yeats, but Pierce’s book provides a handy guide for this task. By first revisiting the archives, *Yeats Revisited* traces and outlines the scholarly discussion from the first book-length study on Yeats in 1915 through the contemporary books and essays of 2020. The book is not merely a compendium of previous scholarship, though; supplementing its overview are chapters that provide critical assessments of Yeats’s works and career that incorporates the scholarship both old and new.

The book is divided into five chapters: an introduction, two annotated bibliographies (one spanning 1915–1989 and another spanning 1990–2020), a critical analysis that “paraphrases” Yeats’s “Among School Children,” and a final chapter that questions Yeats’s place in modernist studies. Following the chapters are two appendices (one a list of topics and another a chronology of Yeats’s life). The book’s structure makes it at once a useful reference source and an enlightening monograph. Furthermore, Pierce’s dynamic and engaging writing makes the book an enjoyable read.

In his introduction, Pierce highlights a seeming irony of “revisiting” Yeats in 2022. Yeats feared slipping into oblivion both before and after his death, and some critics of his own day even predicted as much. John Middleton Murry in 1919, for instance, saw Yeats’s work as too phantasmagoric and abstract, thus forecasting his obscurity soon after. Murry was only one of many to miscalculate Yeats’s reception. But, as Pierce points out, in the two decades following Murry’s review, “the creative imagination of the survivor” thrived (5). Yeats easily acclimated to shifting artistic and intellectual environments throughout his career, and while many critics of his day misunderstood this evolution, his fluidity is precisely why he continues to “survive.”

Throughout the featured annotated bibliographies, Pierce highlights how Yeats scholarship over the past century has equally changed with the times. He points out that neither of the two included bibliographies are meant to be an exhaustive overview, but rather a healthy sampling of the diverse array of scholarship. Topics include gender, mysticism and the occult, politics, folklore, modernism, Yeats and Nietzsche, and postcolonialism. A particularly influential essay emphasized is Conor Cruise O’Brien’s 1965 “Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W.B. Yeats,” which, Pierce notes, “offers a suspicious reading of Yeats’s pro-fascist” sympathies (36). While “suspicious” and potentially dubious, the essay nonetheless instigated a debate still ongoing: how seriously should we take Yeats’s flirtation with certain fascist ideas?

Pierce himself urges caution: quoting Roy Foster in 2010, he suggests that “Yeats’s understanding of what he sometimes called ‘Fashism’ was as idiosyncratic as his spelling of it” (14).

And Pierce agrees, arguing that the debate might forever be confined to speculation. But important for Pierce is that the fact of speculation should not quell the discussion because, “in Yeats studies, not everything can be neatly tied down” (15). His book’s two annotated bibliographies certainly reflect this. The topics covered are not only diverse, but they are also often contentious, the debates shifting alongside critical trends.

In Chapter Four, Pierce offers a “paraphrasing” of “Among School Children” and questions whether one even *can* understand the poem without a supplementary guide of this sort. However, heeding the warnings of New Critic Cleanth Brooks, who once decried the “heresy of paraphrase,” Pierce expresses the value of at least attempting to read the poem *without* much background context. (In fact, a footnote in the book’s introduction states that this New Critical approach has rendered the poem invaluable in Pierce’s own classroom [18]). At the same time, though, Pierce highlights a number of oversights with Brooks’s position—in particular, he recalls linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s contention that “we cannot divorce function from history, the synchronic field from the diachronic, the ‘with’ from the ‘through’” (101). For Pierce, literature thus “requires attending to the hinterland and association of words which almost without fail carry the imprint of history” (101).

Pierce’s reading of the poem is balanced between these two positions. Sometimes he concentrates on single words, exploring their many possible meanings when isolated from biographical or historical context. For instance, he examines the connotations of the simple preposition “among” (rather than “surrounded by,” “in association with,” or even “amongst,” the latter which could imply “dispersion” or “a shifting position” [102]). At other times, though, he argues that the poem assumes certain knowledge of its reader, such as John Locke’s brand of empiricism, which the poem aims to destabilize—or, more prevalently, the poem’s expectation of its readers’ thorough grasp of neo-Platonism (103). Such assumptions obviously pose interpretive problems. Pierce thus supplements his New Critical close reading with the poem’s backstory: a visit to St. Otteran’s School. Pierce accesses the details of this visit through a letter written by Yeats’s wife George (Georgie Hyde-Lees). The letter helps explain some of the poem’s more obscure references, such as the speaker referring to himself as a “public man” (Yeats was a senator at the time of composition) and its allusions to the Montessori method (a relatively new educational program at the time, which Yeats observed in practice during the visit). By examining the poem from multiple angles, this chapter can serve as a useful guide for the interested reader and especially the educator.

The final chapter of *Yeats Revisited* begins by stating that “Modernism is easier to characterise than define” (135). This claim could not be more true. Yet, throughout the chapter, Pierce attempts to locate Yeats within and without modernism; or, as he puts it, he aims to “explore rather than settle the particular subject of Yeats and modernism” (136). After surveying certain traditional approaches, Pierce asks whether any of this even matters any more, as the New Modernist studies have expanded the field to multiple modernisms that are each one narrower in scope: queer modernism, race and modernism, African modernism, Gothic modernism, and many more. Where does Yeats fit within this arguably postmodern reinterpretation of modernism? In which meta-narrative does he reside? Pierce suggests perhaps Irish modernism, but then proceeds to problematize even that category: “Calling Yeats an Irish modernist might imply that his ethnic identity trumps any other kind of identity” (157). And the deeper one delves into the debate, the more slippery it gets. For Pierce, it is therefore best to avoid conclusions: “Yeats is an enigma, modernism’s outlier, the honoured guest who refused the invitation” (170).

My criticism of *Yeats Revisited* is singular: while the book surveys the scholarly field through 2020, most of Pierce’s own critical engagement is with the older rather than newer scholarship. In fact, the more argumentative sections of the book are mostly in dialogue with the mid to late twentieth century. Pierce argues that the contemporary scholarship is fresh and innovative; thus, it

might have been worthwhile to more thoroughly address these newer voices on the scene. Beyond that, the book's overview is nonetheless thorough, and its revisitation of some of the lasting debates makes it a useful reference guide for not only newer scholars looking to enter the conversation, but also for the established scholar seeking to refresh and update. And, as mentioned above, it is as practical as it is pleasurable to read. I recommend *Yeats Revisited* to anyone, scholarly and unscholarly alike, interested in exploring how this great writer's work continues to adapt and survive.

—*University of Alabama*