



George Mills Harper, ed. Yeats and the Occult. Macmillan of Canada, 1975. \$20.00. Yeats Studies Series

The Yeats Studies Series has undertaken a risky project: any collection of critical papers by various hands is apt to seem like a book written by a committee. Yeats and the Occult escapes this danger all but completely, maintaining an unusually high standard of informative scholarship throughout its three-hundred-odd pages of specialized discussion. The collection is edited with the same authority that informed Harper's important study, Yeats's Golden Dawn. While not all the topics are of equal interest, still, nowhere does the reader sense that the critic is evading essential questions, or that he knows less than he ought about the subject at hand. In fact, the amount of sheer information contained here is sometimes dazzling, and seems the most valuable quality of the volume — information not only for its own sake, but for bringing the reader as close as possible to concerns that Yeats himself distanced with veils of diffidence or irony. The experience is unsettling in the way that only the best scholarship can be.

The collection is certainly a work for specialists: foot-notes proliferate, and few pages are graced with lines of verse. The volume contains little direct reference to the poems and, amazingly, even less to the plays. But the subject is the centre of Yeats's thought. The contributors, most of them drawing on Yeats's private papers (inventoried by the editor in the first of the sixteen items), illuminate this subject from different angles. Four of the items are painstakingly annotated essays by Yeats, only one of which has been printed before (the discarded third section of 'Symbolism in Painting', dealing with the illustrations of William Thomas Horton). The rest include a pair of essays on Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, one on parallels between Yeats and Jung, a note on the text of A Vision, a piece of straightforward exegesis, several detailed studies of biographical marginalia (the most valuable on MacGregor Mathers and Lily Yeats), and finally what should perhaps be called an 'exhortation' by Kathleen Raine. In addition, the volume offers a number of remarkable photographs from the collection of Senator Michael B. Yeats.

Not surprisingly, the most interesting pages are by Yeats himself. One item prints a couple of segments rejected from A Vision. In the piece on Horton's drawings, Yeats balances the claims of technique and subject matter in art so as to try to please a friend who disagreed with him (in vain, as it turned out). But two most remarkable essays reveal Yeats in the unfamiliar role of scientific reporter, examining supernatural phenomena with something of the spirit of Dr. Johnson and the Cock-Lane Ghost — wanting very much to believe, but refusing to buck the evidence. In one, Yeats travels to southern France to see a 'bleeding' portrait of Christ: he rejects the miracle when laboratory tests show the blood to be an animal's. In the other, Yeats accepts a case of automatic writing as genuine, but only after exhaustive inquiry that at times seems deliberately to parody a philologist's textual introduction ('Eta is made like an Upsilon, a form that went out of use in the first century when the control claimed to have lived'). Most impressive here are Yeats's sincere efforts to remain objective (using the tools of science to explode the conclusions of science), and his willingness to subject his beliefs to scrutiny. Discussing phrases in several languages that appeared in the writings, for example, he recognizes some as 'quotations from Greek and Latin grammars': they are 'appropriate only as a quotation can be.' Concerning some facts about the life of a communicating spirit, Yeats reports that he 'was not impressed, for the Dictionary of National Biography is not a difficult source.' But the research leads him (according to Harper's note) to the Death Registry at Somerset House and to other tools of scholarly detective work in unpinning

of generalized reference to Yeats's studies could reproduce so well the passionate energy witnessed in these pages.

The biographical contributions too are valuable chiefly for recapturing the reality of Yeats's occultist sense of life. It is hard to define this value any more precisely, but it is undeniable. No one could read the Autobiographies without wanting to know more about that curious figure MacGregor Mathers, studied here by Laurence W. Fennelly. Arnold Goldman brings together facts about the history of psychical research, setting Yeats's activities in their proper context. William M. Murphy reveals that while Yeats was cultivating psychic experiences in himself, his sister Lily (always a shadowy figure) was having them spontaneously. And William H. O'Donnell, probing the neglected terrain of Yeats's prose fiction, outlines the demands made on one who aspires, like the poet, to become a Magus. Add to these essays a glance at Yeats's visits to one Mr. Watkins' bookstore (written by Mr. Watkins' son), and we have — well, what? Perhaps Professor O'Donnell puts it best: 'Certainly it requires considerable imaginative effort for an academic (or even a non-academic) to recognize that the seemingly interminable rituals, the often dreary texts full of pentacles, some of which were to be drawn with bat's blood, and all the other magical paraphernalia are tools for gaining the breath-taking excitement that comes with even a momentary glimpse into a supernal world of spirits who possess incredible powers and wisdom.'

Of the critical pieces, Michael J. Sidnell's study of the Michael Robartes persona seems the most valuable. Sidnell traces Robartes from his sources through an intricate reading of the last six poems of Wild Swans at Coole, through Michael Robartes and the Dancer (in its original form), and into the first edition on A Vision. The essay, a skillful blend of scholarship and critical reading, reminds us that Yeats did not conceive his system all in one stroke; and it emphasizes that the poems of this period are dialectical structures balancing two viewpoints (throwing a poem like 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' into an unconventional perspective). Warwick Gould's study of Owen Aherne is equally useful scholarship, but leads less successfully back into the poetry. Stuart Hirschberg's commentary on 'The Spirit Medium' is helpful, though the poem still strikes me as mediocre. James Olney's speculations on Yeats and Jung promise what ought to be an expert study.

For all its virtues, Yeats and the Occult shows two trends in recent Yeats criticism that I find somewhat disturbing. One of these is inherent in the anthology format, the continued fragmentation of Yeats studies into smaller and smaller pieces. This process is bound to continue, I suppose, until every shred containing the poet's handwriting is edited and made public. Only then, the scholar insists, will definitive work be produced. The time is just not right for sorting the pieces, putting them together, allowing them due proportion, and finding patterns that make sense of the whole. But meanwhile, this goal should not be forgotten.

Another tendency is hinted in Professor Sidnell's idea that 'Yeats in his last phase becomes a religious rather than a tragic poet.' This seems very like the choice Yeats set himself many times in poems like 'Vacillation', only his characteristic stance is to subordinate the religious alternative ('So get thee gone, Von Hügel, though with blessings on thy head'). Quibbling over labels is pointless, of course: Yeats comprehends the whole dialectic. But this shift in emphasis, which emerges at several points in this volume, reaches an extreme in Kathleen Raine's polemic, whose point is that 'if Eliot was the last great poet of European Christendom, Yeats looked towards the uncharted New Age of which his two earliest masters, Swedenborg and Blake, had declared themselves prophets.' 'Too much has been made,' she argues, 'of the spirits' rejection of Yeats's offer to spend "what remained of life in explaining and piecing together these scattered sentences".' (Their answer: 'we have come to

give you metaphors for poetry.') This position is stated with unusual candor. Yeats's symbols are, we are admonished, 'not such things as literary critics discuss.' Now personally, while I am ready to believe that Yeats shares more of religious truth than, say, Bertrand Russell, I am not ready to swallow Yeats's mythology whole, and not ready to be told to do so. One mistrusts criticism that proselytises. The danger, of course, is that such special pleading will obscure the reasons why Yeats succeeds as a poet of the spiritual even for 'non-believers'. These reasons are already, I think (pace Miss Haine), well established by the critics, who can hardly be said to have ignored Yeats's occultism. It may be unsettling to be brought as close to the particulars of Yeats's occult world as this volume brings us. We may be grateful for a more vivid sense of that world. But though the details are sharper, the larger outlines remain essentially unchanged.

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Other books received

- James Reaney. Selected Longer Poems. Toronto: Musson Book Co., 1976. \$3.95
 Richard B. Wright. Farthing's Fortune. Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1976. \$10.95
 W. David Shaw. Tennyson's Style. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.
 \$12.50