



Yeats: The Man and the Masks

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One of the most influential poets of his age, W.B. Yeats eluded the grasp of many who sought to explain him. His life was complex in both its outer and inner events. Yeats's mystical concerns, such as his involvement with spiritualism and construction of a transcendental world system in *A Vision*, coexisted and occasionally clashed with his active involvement in public affairs. In this classic critical examination of the poet, Richard Ellmann strips away the masks of his subject: occultist, senator of the Irish Free State, libidinous old man, and Nobel Prize winner.

Yeats: The Man and the Masks Details

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From Reader Review Yeats: The Man and the Masks for online ebook

Matt says

Useful for understanding a little bit more about the *human* Yeats, rather than the august mage or dreamy star-gazer we see in so many other guises, both of his creation and by the free assumption of others.

It's also extremely good for the soul to see an artist one admires being kind of a drip: over-analytical and somewhat pathetic (his love for Maud Gonne didn't work out so well, even when it was kind of working), self-important verging on pretentious, an anguished wuss who valroized the "man of action" to his own regret, initially naieve and unlettered, etc.

Gives quite a bit of background on John Yeats, the artist father, and his eccentric, frenetic, earnest dabbling in all kinds of kooky mysticism and how this effected Yeats's intellectual development.

The Yeateses were an interesting family: you've got the notably talented paterfamilias, W.B., his brother Jack who was also a painter (and quite a good one, I saw a few of his paintings in Dublin and really loved them) and the sisters Lilly and Lolly who attained a certain eminence in their own respect. Ellmann gets into that but doesn't dwell on it much. It's interesting and noteworthy stuff if you're a fan.

Orwell was surely right when he said that biography was not to be trusted unless it disclosed something shameful.

Ellmann doesn't necessarily shame the poor sad bastard, but he definitely tries to see him soberly, all-in-all.

ALWAYS does my heart good to see that the writers I love aren't brilliantly articulate and piercingly thoughtful 100% of the time, let alone even MOST of the time.

This little study isn't of the eminence of Ellmann's massive and canonical life of Joyce (and how could it be?) but interesting and valuable in and of itself.

Elaine Campbell says

This biography is not up to par with the author's biographical work on Joyce, considered to be one of the best biographies ever written, and with which I concur.

One of the reasons for this is that this book was written when Richard Ellman was much younger, and while he did have some funding in order to gather information worldwide, it was not near that which he received to write his work on James Joyce. Also, he had matured when the latter book was written; and had become more perceptive.

What is not to be found in this book are comprehensive accounts of Yeats's personal life. Even his own

mother is dismissed in a sentence or two. The reader never gets to know her. His active love life is merely skirted around and even many of his friendships, especially those with Ezra Pound and James Joyce, are not even mentioned.

We do get a better look at his artist father, who seems to have raised Yeats rather severely (his mother died when he was young) and Yeats struggled for years to overcome feelings of incompetence, unworthiness and inferiority. All his life he fought his problem with timidity and lack of self-confidence.

We the readers do learn a lot about his artistic path that was always parallel to extensive seeking up to the end of his life for higher truth and reality, and the mastery thereof through the vehicles of Tibetan Buddhism (under Madame Blavatsky who eventually kicked him out of her organization), symbolism in the Golden Dawn (he was a lifelong member), occultism, psychic research and spiritualism (his wife was a medium), besides living a very active outer life as theatre manager, politician and involvement in nationalistic movements.

Yeats was always developing, altering and changing his personal philosophy. I found his writings about this subject in the book to become quite tedious. So did his wife who wouldn't read them because she said they were boring. She urged him instead to concentrate on his poetry. Still, even at the very end of his life when he knew he was dying because his health was fading so fast, he continued to reconstruct and reinvent his own philosophy wherein he finally came to believe (but no doubt had he lived longer, this would have even been altered) that it is necessary for symbolic and outer reality to unite.

There are important insights in the book that make it well worth reading. But I would have liked to have learned much more about Yeats's personal life and relationships than I did.

Cáitlín says

The late Professor Ellmann's brief biography of Yeats does not quite merit the appellation "definitive"--the "definitive" biographer of this most complex poet, playwright, politician, lover, father, occultist, true believer and skeptic, is Roy Foster. Ellmann's book focuses primarily upon 'Yeats the Poet', his dictum "myself I must remake", his poetic processes and evolution, and Ellmann thoroughly understands and explains them as no other literary critic does.

Ellmann's own style makes this particular book extraordinarily accessible to the lay reader, and for that reason alone it will always remain the "classic" biography of W.B. Yeats. No other 20th-century literary critic understood the major Irish modernists--Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett--as well as Richard Ellmann. So if you are interested the the writers who verily created both "Modernism" and "Post-Modernism", you should read this book, and read it as a prelude to Ellman's other works, for "Yeats: The Man and The Masks" intended to introduce the world to the literary explosion that occurred in Ireland in the late 19th century. And something extraordinary did indeed happen here in Ireland because of W.B. Yeats

Charlotte says

This was pretty amazing. Published in 1948, Ellmann's dissertation on Yeats reworked. I learned so much, but the best thing was that the writing was lucid and comprehensible. Oh Yeats! Your wacky occult

obsessions were more weighty than I thought! Also, you were wrong about fascism but right about a lot of other things that mattered more instead. I have a recording of Yeats reading "The Lake Isle Of Innisfree" and it is just about the best thing ever.

Jack says

My Yeats obsession continues with Ellmann's book, first published in 1947 in close consultation with Yeats's widow George. The book was updated and reissued in 1982. Ellmann describes Yeats's life but is more interested in his work as a poet. Early Yeats is pictured as a Symbolist heavily influenced by Blake. This is placed in the context of his work on Irish folklore and how tales of fairies and leprechauns reinforced Yeats's interest in the occult. He felt that ancient Irish lore, still widely circulated in the west of Ireland, offered access to the same kind of ancient wisdom that lay at the foundation of organized religion. Ellmann traces Yeats's growth into a modernist poet as his fame and influence spread. The concept of the 'mask' is central to Yeats because he believed the self was always prone to adopting other identities that must be carefully presented to others. Ellmann was a master of literary criticism who studied both Yeats and James Joyce in depth. Yeats's poems can be read by themselves although some are quite difficult but a book like this one can really increase your appreciation of the many layers of style and meaning that went into Yeats's best poems.

Markus Whittaker says

LOVE IT. Got an old edition from Cooks Hill Books years ago when I was doing the HSC. My ex's Dad was heaps into Yeats and I guess I wanted to impress her and him. I've been slowly working my way through ever since. Obviously slower after we broke up. Irish poetry at its best. England was so boring and dour in the late 1800s. This book made me realise how big a part the Irish and American's played in keeping the art of poetry alive, after the romantics all kinda died off young and dumb and full of syphilis infested cum.

Bruce says

As in his later biographies of Wilde and Joyce, here too Ellmann uses his preferred approach of marrying biography to psychology in an attempt to discern and communicate Yeats' motivations and thus his life trajectory. Such an approach is to some extent always required of a biographer, but one must also be aware that the psychological paradigms to which the biographer adheres must of necessity influence the conclusions that he reaches. The reader must always keep this in mind as he evaluates the author's conclusions. In the present instance, Ellmann quite clearly is convinced that social masks can hide some sort of core identity of the subject. Since other authors might question whether there is any core identity separate from our social identities, Ellmann's stance is arguable but also arbitrary. The resulting picture and understanding of Yeats thus might be very different depending on different perspectives of different authors. In summary, I think Ellmann is a bit too ready to assume that there is "someone who we really are" independent of the personae we project to ourselves and the world, when in fact there may be no such core independent reality.

But all this may to some extent be beside the point, and perhaps I have overstressed it. What comes across most strongly in this biography is Yeats' multifaceted mind, the various and often conflicted and conflicting tendencies and aspirations that possessed him and which he was ever at pains to reconcile. His interests

ranged from lyric poetry to drama, from nationalism to mysticism, from aestheticism to sensuality, all in uneasy relationship, equilibrium achieved only with difficulty if ever. Ellmann skillfully and convincingly traces these issues through Yeats' writings, especially his poetry, having had access to more than 50,000 pages of unpublished material. The result is both fascinating and illuminating, making me want to return to the poetry anew and with fresh insight, reading his works with the knowledge of when each was written during his life. It is the extent to which Yeats speaks for us all, articulating our own unspoken insights and convictions, that makes him so important and so relevant.

Friedrick says

Ellmann's advantage is that he is no sycophant. He is not in love with his subject.

Mattia Ravasi says

A must-read for any Yeats' aficionado and a good biography that's never too factual, though it's too heavily based on the bogus theory that Yeats' poetry pre-1917 is mediocre and plain.

... That's his best stuff, people!

Mike says

Of the three biographies that I have now read by Mr. Ellmann (James Joyce, Oscar Wilde), this is probably the most interesting in that it shows the artist and his vision in constant evolution. Perhaps that was the nature of Yeats' life and work.

Furthermore, the book is more concise and less anecdotal. Once again, this is probably due to the life of Yeats in opposition to the more flamboyant Joyce and Wilde. Whatever the reason, this makes for a more precise study of an artist's vision and evolution.

I was much less familiar with Yeats' plays than his poetry so I found this aspect very informative. It is a rare feat not to spend too much time on hagiography and to put almost all the emphasis on a great author's constant shifts in vision and ideals. Too often, authors are portrayed as born invested with their vision and mission. Ellmann succeeds in presenting Yeats as an artist on a lifelong quest for a coherent vision. I suspect that this is the case for most of our great writers

Kathleen says

Yeats says gyre with a hard g. Sailing to Byzantium ("This is no country for old men...") is all about a bird. Byzantium, the other poem, is a description of how it is to make a poem. ("Those images that yet/Fresh images beget...") Yeats was miserable with love for Maud Gonne, who refused to marry him over and over. Thankfully, Yeats finally found a happy marriage and had two children. He lived in a refurbished castle, was

enmeshed in the theater and politics and what seems to me today as crazy mysticism. Besides being a Nobel Prize winner, he was a Hermetic Student of the Golden Dawn; much of his poetry is an effort to express mystics' magic. I share their impossible reach when I read his poetry.

Must read this again, because there's much more to absorb. I'm the yokel who used to think his name was William Buster Yeats. Maybe I should re-read it more than once.

Grady Ormsby says

After reading **Yeats: The Man and the Masks** by Richard Ellmann I think I better understand the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Mostly, though, I better understand why the poetry of William Butler Yeats is so difficult to understand. As I read, I kept handy a copy of **The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats** edited by Richard J. Finneran. Whenever a poem was referred to in the biography, I'd read it from the collection. I also had my laptop at the ready to look up a wide range of political, mythological, historical and literary references. Obviously the reading went slowly but I was rewarded by frequent "aha moments" as the some of the clouds of obscurity were lifted. Yeats' poetry is a reflection of the poet, complex and multi-dimensional. I'm glad I took the time to take a closer look at this literary giant and his powerful work.

Rob says

some angel unloaded this and "Eminent Domain" at Spoonbill. Do you have any idea how long I've yearned for cheap reading copies of these two? No, you don't, but this adolescent fave holds up brilliantly even if the 1959 Faber edition I got has a green cover instead of the one where he looks like Morrissey in a black cape. Even if you haven't read any of Yeats's poetry, I can't imagine you wouldn't find every chapter fascinating, especially when Oscar Wilde invites him to Christmas dinner 1888 and Yeats spoils it by wearing yellow shoes.

Kristin says

I wanted to learn more about Yeats and his work...this was touted as perhaps his best biography..an in-depth analysis of the psychology/life experiences/complexities that drove Yeats' writing through his lifetime. Very academic/interesting.

Katie Marquette says

Richard Ellmann's biography of Yeats was very readable and well researched. I was fascinated by Yeats's troubled childhood, his relationship with his father, and his lifelong interest in the occult. Yeats's tragic, unrequited love for the actress Maude Gonne is also explored in detail. Ellmann focuses primarily on the development of Yeats's style and how his understanding of 'the mask' and the 'double man' shaped his poetry, prose, and plays. Although I sometimes wished Ellmann had gone into a bit more detail in regard to some of Yeats's personal relationships, I found this biography to be a thoroughly entertaining and informative read. I

really loved learning more about one of the 20th century's most influential voices.

Two of my favorite quotes in the book come from people other than W.B. Yeats:

"A work of art is the social act of a solitary man."

-John Butler Yeats

"The first duty in life is to assume a pose; what the second is no one yet has found out."

-Oscar Wilde
