REVIEW ESSAY

THE FASCINATION OF WHAT’S ACCURATE

by Neil Mann


Although textual scholarship underlies the whole study of literature, it generally receives less direct attention than the readings that are built upon the texts that it makes possible. Wayne K. Chapman’s *Yeats’s Poetry in the Making: Sing Whatever Is Well Made* brings many aspects to the fore: the editorial side that seeks to establish a (relatively) stable text, the scholarship that examines the variants and changes in printed versions, and genetic studies of the evolution and development of drafts and precursors. These are all tied together with questions of biography, interpersonal relationships, and the business of publishing and performance. In all of these areas, W. B. Yeats provides rich fields of enquiry and Chapman proves an able tiller of those fields and a perceptive guide through the often unexpected twists and turns involved in the histories of Yeats’s works. Though his book is mainly for the specialist, as it benefits greatly from a background knowledge of Yeats, his work and circle, Ireland, and the period, there is much for those who are interested in the process of creation and publication, without a deep knowledge of the context. Indeed, genetic studies are often a way of opening our eyes to writers we have not fully appreciated before and of giving a new perspective on history through detail.

Chapman’s survey comprises nine chapters that are interlinked by theme, concerns, and approach, but are discrete and separate in their focus. The first essay, “Poetic Themes Are Plants That Grow: The Process of Making and Remaking Verse,” sets out, by way of introduction, the case for textual and particularly genetic study, whether of printed or manuscript material. Tactfully setting itself in opposition to the “new orthodoxies” of the theoreticians that proclaim the death of the author, it looks at how texts grow by the writer’s hand, transmuting from the germ of an idea through various forms, sometimes published, but subject still to further alteration and amendment. Its scope embraces poems from “a macabre love poem of 1891, A Dream of Death” to “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” and Yeats’s struggles with the creative process in 1937 and 1938, at the end of his life. Though some of the other essays also cover many years, they are ordered roughly according to the chronology of the works they focus on. The interaction of text, performance, public, and publication lies at center of the second chapter on “‘Countess Cathleen Row’ of 1899, Later Revisions, and Poems (1901–1929).” The third, “The Annotated Responsibilities: Errors in the Variorum Edition and a New Reading of the Genesis of Two Poems, ‘On those that hated The Playboy of the Western World,’ 1907’ and ‘The New Faces,’” takes on the concept of what constitutes an imprint, an edition, and the attendant variants, and also tackles the inspiration for the central image of the epigram on the Playboy riots and Yeats’s tact—or lack of it—in dealing with Augusta Gregory. Her reactions are central to the following essay on “Yeats’s Displaced Rebellion Poems
and the Great War: The Case of The Wild Swans at Coole and Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” given that the publication of “Easter 1916” and “Sixteen Dead Men” was tied up with the campaign to reclaim Hugh Lane’s pictures for Ireland. Her distaste for the poem “Reprisals,” where the spirit of Robert Gregory is evoked to express horror at the Black-and-Tans’ atrocities, kept it unpublished during Yeats’s lifetime. She felt it was not sincere and implied that Yeats was perhaps not quite the gentleman for using a comment supposedly made in confidence by George Bernard Shaw.

Focusing on a play that exists only in fragmentary drafts in prose and verse, “Guardians of the Tower and Stream: Yeats’s Unfinished Fifth Play for Dancers, 1918–1923” is the fifth essay and Chapman gives a complete transcription of the fragments in an appendix. This Noh-inspired play of thwarted love is mentioned by Birgit Bjer-sby, who mistook the heroine’s goatherding as being “in charge of all the ghosts on the hill”—only the combination of Yeats’s notoriously bad handwriting and his occult interests could make such a misreading even remotely plausible. The play is connected with Yeats’s mythification of Thoor Ballylee, Anthony Raftery, and the storied beauty of Mary Hynes. It is also bound up with the period when Yeats was discovering a new source of inspiration in his wife’s automatic script, a process that also partly informs the sixth essay, “The Miltonic Crux of ‘The Phases of the Moon’ and ‘News for the Delphic Oracle.’” Chapman undertakes a complex analysis of “The Phases of the Moon,” its connections with Milton’s “Il Penseroso” (with associated illustrations) and The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, earlier versions of Yeats’s poem as a dialogue between Aengus and Cuchulain, and also links “News for the Delphic Oracle” to a preliminary sketch in a volume of Milton’s poetry and to the silencing of the oracles in “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.”

The seventh chapter, “Blake, Swedenborg, and A Vision: A Case for Recombinate Influence,” returns to Yeats’s collaboration with Edwin Ellis on the Works of William Blake, their readings of Blake and Swedenborg, the story of errant volumes, borrowed and stolen, and these older writers’ proleptic influence on A Vision. “‘The Municipal Gallery Re-visited’ and Its Writing,” the eighth chapter, looks at the occasion of this poem’s inspiration and complex genesis, as well as its far less distinguished companion, “Dedication.” The last essay, “W. B. and George Yeats: The Writing, Editing, and Dating of Yeats’s Poems of the Mid-1920s and 1930s,” pays particular tribute to George’s stalwart work as Yeats’s archivist and as guide to the first generation of biographers and critics. An appendix gives a complete chronology for the composition of Yeats’s poems, as far as is possible, by bringing together all the material that can be adduced for dating from George Yeats’s lists, as well as from Richard Ellmann’s and A. Norman Jeffares’s work. As mentioned earlier, a second appendix gives a transcription of the drafts of the untitled work that Chapman tentatively and sensitively names “Guardians of the Tower and Stream.”

This brief summary of the essays, though, gives no idea of their density, the detail, connections, and excursuses that they contain. They are often like mosaics, made up of sections that interrelate to create a whole but do not necessarily depend upon each other. Thus the Miltonic theme, for instance, will bring together a group of related researches, in turn linked to other elements that may be examined, without at the end forming a single big idea, but creating an intricate and compelling sense of the many, interconnected elements that inform different aspects of these works. Chapman continually argues for
accuracy and for meticulous care with detail, as without these, the bigger picture is all too often skewed and even wrong.

The essays in turn are themselves works of detail, to be read carefully and savored; many of the notes contain further lines of enquiry and often enough substance to constitute another essay in miniature. For example, the essay covering the history of publication of Yeats's poems about the Easter Rising is particularly valuable and helps clarify an important nexus of personal, textual, and printing history, illuminating poems that are significant in political, national, and literary terms, including what A. G. Stock judged in 1961 as “perhaps the most remarkable poem of our time upon a public event,” “Easter 1916.” Additionally, the essay on the unpublished play for dancers makes clear, despite the play's inchoate forms, its place among the other plays for dancers, both in the elements it shares with them and in the very different way that it brings in the particular landscape of Ballylee and the symbolic importance of tower and river, treated through a conventional tale of thwarted love of the kind that served as plots for Italian operas in the nineteenth century. The chapter on Blake, Swedenborg, and A Vision traces a complex set of relationships between Yeats, Ellis, and their edition of Blake, the influence of Swedenborg on Blake and on Yeats both through Blake and directly, and some of the serendipities involved in the lives of books and people. It also looks at the crucial place occupied by Blake's “Mental Traveller,” which continues to puzzle and fascinate in equal measure, despite Yeats's claims that the student of A Vision would understand it.

Wayne Chapman acknowledges his debt to earlier writers and researchers, while at the same time setting them right here and there, modifying earlier comments, refining and adding to them, building on them. He looks to his precursors such as Curtis Bradford and Jon Stallworthy in approach, with their precise transcriptions of the manuscripts, while also referring extensively to the work of the Cornell Manuscripts series, where his work as an editor of two volumes in the series gives him both insight into and appreciation for the nature of diplomatic transcription. He has incorporated into his own practice many elements of the Cornell style of diplomatic transcription established by Stephen Parrish and his team, though necessarily without their great advantage of facsimiles. The photographic reproductions in the Cornell series are of variable quality and legibility, but the best are very good and all of them give some idea of the physiognomy of what is being transcribed, so that readers are now perhaps a little spoilt. Chapman includes a fair number of reproductions, though the publisher seems to have been a little grudging with space and many feel somewhat cramped, meaning that examples such as the drafts and revisions of “Solomon and the Witch” are more illustrations to show layout than originals for consultation (22–23). Elsewhere, on several occasions, I felt the lack of even an illustration to check against: in some cases that simply means going to a library to consult the relevant Cornell volume, which is not convenient but not onerous, but in a good number of cases it would entail going to the original manuscript. Photographic support is, of course, not always practical for a variety of reasons—including space, reprographic costs, and rights—but it is natural for readers to be curious at least. Where copyright is not a problem, it is to be hoped that online resources may supply some of the lack—for instance, that the British Library will photograph and put online more annotated pages from Blake's copy of Swedenborg’s Angelic Wisdom, including those that Chapman discusses.
Chapman is often amending the misreadings of others in transcription, a valuable and important corrective, as some can change the meaning of a passage significantly and can all too easily gain currency. Chapman gives an example of one reader finding “thus” where others, himself included, find “not”: concerning “Easter 1916,” Yeats tells Clement Shorter, “Please be very careful with the Rebellion poem. Lady Gregory asked me not to send it you until we had finished our dispute with the authorities about the Lane pictures. She was afraid of it getting about & damaging us & she is not timid” (YPM 84). When David Pierce discerns “thus timid,” it creates a completely different reading of her character, as well as Yeats’s sense of her and the situation (YPM 309 n.13). Pierce’s argument is based upon syntax, that the word “not” “could only make sense if ‘she’ were emphasised,” and his reading of Augusta Gregory’s character: “In other situations (as over ‘Reprisals’), she did show herself timid when it came to bad publicity; Yeats was typically more cavalier. To my eye the word is either ‘this’ or, more likely, ‘thus.”’2 Looking at the actual manuscript (see below), simple comparison with the word “not” three lines earlier makes “this” or “thus” highly unlikely and reminds us that, whatever Lady Gregory thought, Yeats was sending the poem.

Postscript to W. B. Yeats’s letter to Clement Shorter, March 28, [1917], courtesy of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

In a similar fashion, dealing with Blake’s annotations to Swedenborg’s Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom, Chapman takes issue with Keynes’s and Erdman’s readings of the flyleaf, along with those of Yeats, Ellis, and Bentley. Yeats and Ellis can make out only “‘There is no good will. Will is always evil,’” noting that “The rest is illegible having been rubbed out, probably, by heresy-hating Tatham, in whose possession the book was originally” (WWB1 240, cited 172). Thus any further material will have no real bearing on Yeats’s own understanding of Blake, though Chapman gives a full and helpful reinterpretation of the annotation that differs from those in currency from Keynes and from Erdman (without the image, enhanced or not by ultraviolet, our judgment remains somewhat uncertain).

Chapman makes clear how scholarship involves many contributions, working by accumulation and refinement of ideas, so that a truer picture emerges in a process that is almost scientific in its testing and recalibration. If Chapman is correcting others, he is also correcting himself, and it is valuable that he updates earlier work to include others’
advances. In the essay on “The Phases of the Moon,” Chapman comments on how his reading of some early manuscripts has improved since his first essay on them in Yeats Annual 8 (1991; Y48), having benefited particularly from Stephen Parrish’s work on The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials (1994; WSAC)—which no doubt consulted Chapman’s reading in turn. Looking at the Yeats Annual version, one can see how the transcription has developed and evolved: expanding, as new material is found and its relationships are recognized; refining, as readings are considered further; changing in presentation. The earliest form of the dialogue was transcribed in an appendix in Yeats Annual 8, without a fragment that has been discovered since (see YPM 133–35) and punctuated with square brackets to supply the letters that Yeats’s hand so often elides. Taking a short sample passage from the first page of dialogue, between Aengus and Cuchulain (13r; L14r in Y48), the text is substantially the same, but a few changes make better sense and a full line is added.

There is still room for disagreement, and Chapman has not adopted Parrish’s reading. Parrish chooses to refer to the hero as “Cuclan,” gives “standing” without brackets, prefers “till” over “til,” sees a cancelled quotation mark for Chapman’s possible ampersand, reads “these shapes” rather than “their shapes,” gives “do not rail” rather than “did not rail,” is dubious about “[?him/?her],” sees “all that lives” in both the cancelled text and the insertion, and “the perfect moon” rather than “this perfect moon.” Almost every line has a difference, though none of them is major.

Parrish’s transcription faces a good-quality photograph of the manuscript, so is more a help to decipherment: effectively it can say “this is the best reading of a seasoned expert, but you can disagree.” The Cornell series enables us all to become a little bit of an expert on the shoulders of the editors, who do the heavy lifting of the main transcriptions. It is inevitably a different matter when transcriptions are given on their own: it is an expert reading and the reader has no way of reaching an informed assessment. In this context, there is an important honesty in indicating what has been supplied or conjectured, so a heavier use of brackets is largely justified. Though Chapman uses more brackets than Parrish, the transcriptions in Yeats’s Poetry in the Making show a more relaxed approach than his earlier practice in supplying letters and punctuation in brackets. This makes the text more readable and, in a strange way, is probably more accurate, as it reflects how handwriting (especially such as Yeats’s) sometimes approaches shorthand, so that it is often difficult to be sure which letters are missing [looking at the photograph of the word at the end of the first full line quoted above [WSAC 346], it is clear that there are letters between “ans” and “d,” and the context indicates “answered,” but whether Yeats wrote the “we,” the “er,” or some other combination is moot). It is also worth noting that certain of Yeats’s
capital letters are so close to lower case that it is frequently impossible to tell one from the other except by context. Though I sometimes find Chapman’s supplied punctuation fussy—unnecessary periods in list items and commas that are matters of personal style—it always aims to help a more complete reading. Similarly, the supplied letters here clarify the identity of “Cuclan” or indicate that the letters really are not sufficient to give a definite reading. They can also indicate how a line that Chapman earlier read as “The[?] would that make decis[?] from the Nest’s” (YPM 71) may in fact be closer to “The world that make dreams from the Rest’s” (YPM 132).

While acknowledging Parrish’s work, Chapman does not draw attention to his disagreements over the transcription of “The Phases of the Moon” and that is perfectly understandable, as they are minor and it is not the question in hand. Slightly perplexing, however, is the attribution of his own reading to others in the case of the dedication at the front of Lady Gregory’s copy of The Works of William Blake. This is referenced to the editors of the Collected Letters, while differing from their reading in some significant details.

PS. The book was written in this way. I wrote a life of Blake about as long as any life of him in the Muses Library Book, an account of The Symbolic system as a whole, & a short interpretative argument of each prophetic book. Ellis expanded, or rather completely rewrote the life into its present form; he accepted with some additions & modifications the chapter on the symbolic system, & expanded the short arguments to ten times their original length; & wrote a number of the chapters. The critical interpretation of the philosophy, which is contained in both his work & mine[,] was made out absolutely togeather [sic]. His mind was far more minute than mine, but less synthetic, & had a tendency to make generalization on imperfect foundations, & was to remain content with [detected?] discoveries…. (YPM 158–59, attributed to CL2 469)

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When it comes to the assessment of character, again, the difference in readings is small but significant, and the question eventually boils down to whether a squiggle is an ampersand or an “I.” Rhetorical balance and a certain logic seems to put the tendency “to make generalization(s) on imperfect foundations” together with the “synthetic” mind, and the “minute” mind with a tendency “to remain content with detached [or detected] discoveries,” but both balance and logic can be unreliable guides when it comes to spontaneous writing. For those of us spoilt by the Cornell Yeats I supply a photograph, and I see why Chapman has diverged from the editors of the Collected Letters and, in a few places, agree with him, though in general I prefer their reading, and the crucial mark seems closer to the “I” of “I wrote a life” than to the ampersand of “his work & mine.”

Chapman states that approximately “60 percent of [the book] appeared in Yeats Annual between 1988 and 2007” (x), and it would actually be quite helpful to have a list of the earlier publications. This might prove almost as complex as some of the genealogies
that Chapman traces, as parts of the essay “The Miltonic Crux of ‘The Phases of the Moon’ and ‘News for the Delphic Oracle’” have appeared now four times—here and in Yeats Annual 8, in a chapter of Yeats and English Renaissance Literature (1991), and an essay in Yeats’s “A Vision”: Explications and Contexts (2012). Each time a common element on “The Phases of the Moon” and The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce has been accompanied by different tesserae of mosaic, to create different wholes with shifting emphases. This recombination and revision points to an approach that accumulates and juxtaposes, usually without having a strong arc of argument beyond the drive to greater accuracy and deeper knowledge.

The slight repetition is largely welcome, as it means that we have the whole argument in front of us, but it is frustrating on occasions when Chapman gives a nodding reference to an earlier work, whether his own or someone else’s, without further details. References can be brief to the point of opacity, as when a book is referred to solely by its number in the printed catalog of Yeats’s library, without title or indication of why it is relevant, or even mention of Chapman’s own, more readily available and complete, online short-title catalog (for instance in the passage cited on p. 167). It is possible that such brevity is a trace of earlier incarnations of the essays—which may also explain the unglossed use of the adjective “Jonsonian,” which seems to hark back to Chapman’s book on Yeats and the Renaissance, or the use of an “ibid.” without a precedent. This last occurs in the chapter on “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” and refers to work by Helen Vendler in Yeats, Sligo and Ireland (1980), while there is no reference to Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form (2007) and her comments on the poem in her chapter on “The Renaissance Aura: Ottava Rima Poems,” as would seem natural in the context.

There is also the odd slip from earlier publication that has persisted into the present form. A volume on Rilke, which Yeats claimed inspired the final lines of “Under Ben Bulben,” is referred to as a “bilingual essay anthology Rainer Maria Rilke: Some Aspects of His Mind and Poetry” (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1938). With a new introduction by Stefan Zweig, an essay on Rilke’s correspondence by Houston, and two essays in German by C. W. Bowrs [sic] and E. L. Stahl, Rose’s irritating essay (“Rilke and the conception of death”) was practically all that Yeats could have read (YPM 227). The passage has been adapted from an earlier version by capitalizing the subtitle and bringing the publication data from the endnote (see YA15 227), but the title in question does not contain the word “Some” and the anthology is bilingual only insofar as all the essays are written in English but quote Rilke’s work in German, Rose’s just as much as those of C. M. Bowra and E. L. Stahl, making it no more or less engaging—except that Rose had presented Yeats with the book. Since Yeats’s first encounter with his wife had been her help with some Goethe material in automatic script and in the late 1920s he had been able to gain a good idea of Frobenius’s Paideuma which was only available in German, his focus on Rose’s essay was not quite so constrained as Chapman suggests.

I’ve picked up on a few details out of the wealth of material here and, lest these criticisms appear captious, it is because Chapman’s commitment to precision and detail is contagious, and in this he is a wonderful teacher by example. Those embarking on graduate studies in literature should be required to read at least a few of these essays to understand what textual scholarship involves—I’d particularly recommend the publication history of the rebellion poems and the essay on Blake and Swedenborg—these students
could pick up some useful habits. As much as anything, there is a vein of anecdotal hints about the value of the unexpected and of just checking through: manuscripts vaguely labeled, mislabeled, and misfiled, so that some unrelated study can turn up “missing material,” such as important poetic drafts (YPM 293–94 n.23). Just as scientists occasionally make important discoveries when investigating something entirely separate and need to be open to that unexpected possibility, so archival research can sometimes reward those who notice what they are not looking for as well as what they are.

This is a rich book and a valuable contribution to Yeats studies, textual studies, and genetic research. It shows the fascination of this difficult and painstaking work, of seeking and gaining a deeper understanding of the creative process, and of pushing towards an ever-fuller picture and ever-greater accuracy.

Notes


Abbreviations

- YA Yeats Annual.
- YPM Wayne K. Chapman, Yeats’s Poetry in the Making (the subject of this review essay).

DENNIS SALEH

Redoubt

More words assail my peace.
But they are about nothing.
They have no authority.
They are not in the least, “poetic.” I shall muster calm, and confidence, and withstand them. My paper is virginal, inviolate. I am unrelenting in my tedium. My boredom is my castle.