

Yeats Looks Back

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ. By W. B. Yeats.
New York: The Macmillan Co. 1936.
\$2.50.

Reviewed by PADRAIC COLUM

W. B. YEATS'S prose—I am speaking now of his intellectual statements, of the memoirs he publishes from time to time, not of his sketches and stories and early literary essays—has been a disappointment to his admirers, not because it is faulty as writing, but because it is oddly meagre. These memoirs, no matter what title he gives a particular volume, are a comment upon his own work, and, like most comment, they are dry. The tone of the writer's voice is essential in prose: the tone of Yeats's voice is here, but it is his lecturer's voice. In "Dramatis Personæ" he is giving an account of his work, his friendships, and his enmities, with some of his reveries, from a platform, and we feel that placed as he is there is no chance for the revelation of anything else except his public or semi-public life.

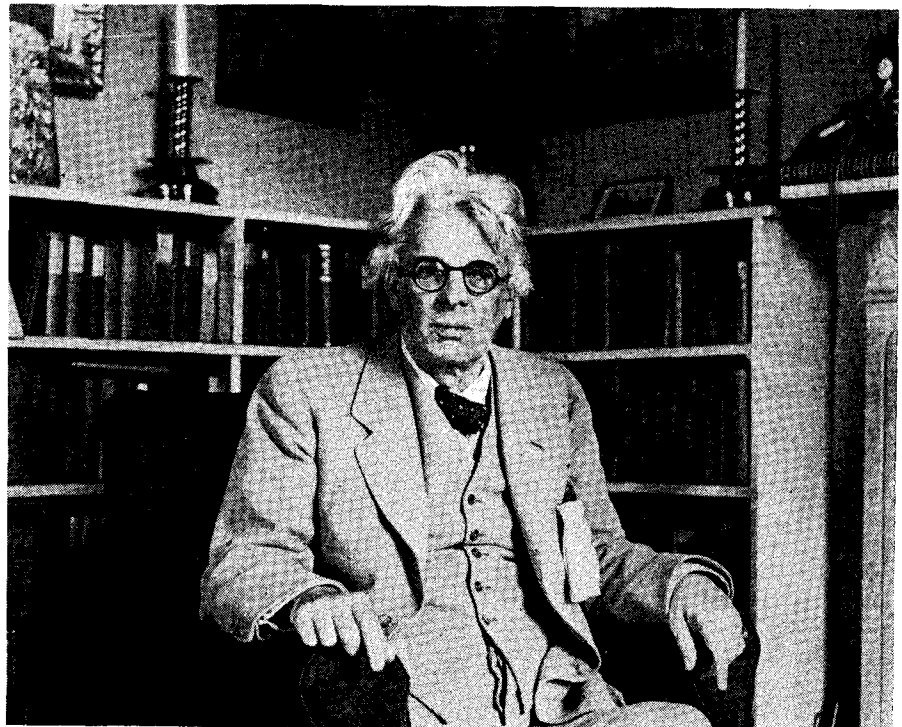
The title of the present volume suggests that the writer is going to tell us about people who had part in the drama of his life. The period put before us is a salient one. It is between 1896 and 1902 when the Irish Theatre was being founded and other cultural movements that have created the Ireland of today were beginning; there is a sort of appendix, "The Bounty of Sweden," which was produced by a more recent event. The men and women who are brought on the stage are Edward Martyn, Lady Gregory, George Moore, J. M. Synge, with Douglas Hyde and Standish O'Grady who are given walk-on parts. Synge is hero and Lady Gregory is heroine amongst the *Dramatis Personæ*. But even in his treatment of these leading characters we feel a disappointment. Yeats writes of Lady Gregory and Synge as a partisan would: he is determined to make the world recognize their virtue. And we do recognize it; we are heartily with him in everything, or in nearly everything, he says about them. Still we feel that he could present them as he does without feeling a great love for either of them; we get nothing of the flow of the blood or the beat of the heart when he speaks of Lady Gregory or J. M. Synge; what we are given is sympathy for admired and helpful colleagues.

Indeed, we are led to think that Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge were interesting to him because they represented attitudes that the poet wanted to make part of his life—opposite attitudes: the unconsciousness of Synge, the sense of duty that Lady Gregory had and that Yeats thinks had a feudal background. Of Synge he says, "He was the only man I have ever known incapable of a political

thought or of a humanitarian impulse." And of Lady Gregory he writes, "She was a type that only the superficial observer could identify with Victorian earnestness, for her point of view was founded, not on any modern habit but upon her sense of great literature, upon her own strange feudal, almost medieval youth." One side of Yeats would like to act with Synge's unconsciousness and another part of him would like to dwell in a great historic house where he "would think like a wise man, but express himself like the common people."

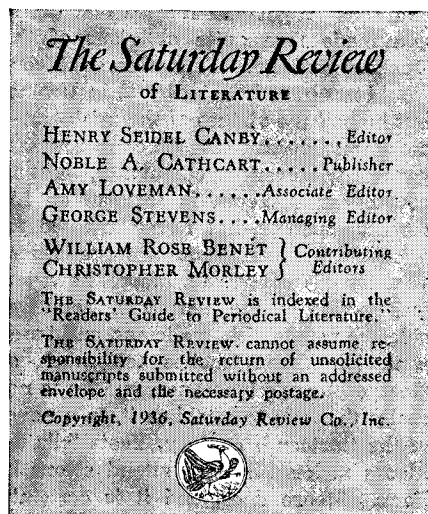
The book has a villain, and that villain is George Moore. Now George Moore committed an offense when he made Yeats and Lady Gregory in "Hail and Farewell" comedy figures. But what can Yeats or anybody else do about that now? "Hail and Farewell" exists in its own right; its historic justice or reality is something that readers of the future will trouble themselves very little about. Yeats's counter-attack in "Dramatis Personæ" does not show good generalship. He does not attempt to outflank the gigantic line of "Hail and Farewell"—instead he attacks a little salient and the attack is not very well organized. He informs us that George Moore was not really an aristocrat, that he had a coarse palate, that he didn't know French accurately. Now George Moore was really an aristocrat though he was not Yeats's idea of one. Yeats has always confounded the courtier with the aristocrat, and his ideal of the aristocratic life was that of the court of Urbino under its learned Duchess. But the real aristocrats of the place

and time fought and hunted and drank and made love quite oblivious of the Duchess and her court. George Moore would not have been at home in Urbino, but he had the virtues of the aristocrat—disinterestedness (at times), courage, generosity, even magnanimity, and a courtesy that Yeats, in spite of all his ceremoniousness, has never attained to, a courtesy founded on a forgetfulness (occasional) of himself. Moore, however, was spoiled by the literary life, and besides he was foolish, malicious, and ignorant. But Yeats makes too much of George Moore's ignorance, and he is not really the man to establish it. In a novel of the thirteenth century, Yeats tells us, Moore makes his hero attend salons in Paris. Moore does, and it is certainly a howler. But Yeats tells us, too, that in his last novel, the scene of which is laid in Homeric Greece, Moore makes his people read books. Now George Moore's last novel was not about Homeric Greece, it was about Periclean Greece, and people did read books at the time. And what about a sentence of this kind that occurs in "Dramatis Personæ"? "Was not the Bhavagad Gita the 'scenario' from which the Gospels were made?" It is not George Moore who writes this, but William Butler Yeats: he assumes that the Bhavagad Gita was composed before the Gospels, but it wasn't. All I want to say is that imaginative writers who want to manipulate the facts of cultural history had better leave each other alone. This review reads as if "Dramatis Personæ" was not an important book. But it is important as every book that Yeats writes is important; it reveals the mind of a man for whom the things of the mind were the main things; it is a purification to read such a book in the present age.



WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Irish Times



Prizes

DO literary prizes accomplish anything, when all is said? Authors who get them cannot be expected to share this skepticism, but plenty of readers, some publishers, and a good many writers are dubious as to their real value, either for art or society. We are doubtful ourselves as to what the battery of prizes now available for American writers has actually accomplished, but we do not doubt its potential usefulness—and for definite reasons.

It has often been noted that an equivalent of our modern system of cash fellowships, prizes, and subventions began to flourish in the Roman civilization at just the time when classic literature was declining into stereotype and imitation. But those who use this as an argument by analogy join together the wrong cause and effect. Writers were subsidized in the later Roman empire for precisely the same set of reasons that prevails today. The classic world had become an intricate mass civilization where it was no longer possible for a poet or essayist to live by farming or soldiering or the support of his chief. Costs for the civilized man had gone up. In order to keep his place in the educated world he needed more than oil and lentils. But this was the least of the good reasons for subsidizing his work. Literature is the great educator. Good literature is indispensable to a civilized state. Augustus may have been the first, but was not the last, to realize that society has a stake in the standards of its writers.

We are in a like world today, a mass world where everyone can read, but few can read well;—a society which rewards immensely those who can satisfy the desires of the masses, but has itself become so complex and so expensive that its original thinkers, its pioneers in the creative imagination, its makers of the best for the best, can have little assurance of adequate financial support while they are alive and need it.

The story of what a competent novelist or poet or essayist, whose work is too meaty for the masses, too intricate for

the movies, too specialized for even general literate consumption, can expect per annum by way of income has been too often told to need repetition. Even without prizes, subventions, fellowships, it is still probable that the genius will break through and make his way. Indeed, it is possible that too much financing, as in the case of Finley Peter Dunne, may put the brakes on creative talent. Nevertheless, that favorable literary climate out of which important literature comes is not the east wind of hunger and worry, or the south wind of lowered ambition which softly pushes toward more profitable careers.

But there has been perhaps too much of this pleading *ad hominem*. What justifies our series of bounties available for the arts is the need of society more than the necessities of the individual. It is time to begin to think of literature—good literature—as a social necessity. This argument has been recently advanced by John Erskine for music. It is as strong for literature. The laissez-faire system for poetry and the finer creative work generally is well enough in a primitive society. It will not work in a complex civilization; it ought not to be allowed to work without support and qualification. Good literature is just as deserving of support as good education. It is a social utility whose standards cannot and will not be safeguarded by the profit and loss system of commerce. Any publisher will tell you that he could make more money in a given year by printing only the current coin of widest popularity. Any publisher would add that his “back log” by this policy would soon rot to dust. It is the books that keep on selling which make the precarious business of publishing something more than a speculation. And these books in an extraordinary number of instances have been written by men and women who have had to struggle to make their way to success. Struggle is good for them! Undoubtedly, but so is a not too-long deferred support.

And it is the good writers—who by no means are always or often identical with the easily selling authors—who are important in the education of society. By this no sneer is intended for the mechanical best seller manufactured to give pleasure and giving it. That is a public utility too. But if no civilization can endure without sound education and without sound literature—and this we believe—then the subsidizing of writers who in the opinion of good judges deserve well of their culture, foster it, vitalize it, put imagination into it, whether or not the millions on first impact will read them, whether or not their potential circulation will ever go beyond the thousands in a given generation—then a reasonable financing of such authors is abundantly justified, is as defensible as the school tax or the university endowment.

How to do it most wisely is another question. We are not writing here of the

wisdom or the success of the present prize system as it is and as it works. That deserves separate discussion. But the idea behind it can and should be defended.

Spengler If it was Houston Chamberlain who first spread through Germany the idea that the Teutonic Aryan should be supreme over lesser breeds of men, it was Oswald Spengler who first impressively expressed the defeatism of the post-war period, a defeatism that has colored the best minds in the most advanced nations ever since.

The history of “The Decline of the West” has been much discredited, in spite of its extraordinary load of erudition. Spengler’s phases in the growth and decline of nations prove to be but oversimplified and often philosophically unsound generalizations upon the rise-and-fall rhythm of all peoples. The rhythm exists, but the causes are much more circumstantial, much less necessitarian than Spengler asserted. It is generally agreed now that there was no necessary reason why the Roman civilization should not have gone on—and in Constantinople, where it did go on, society was by no means so static as earlier historians supposed.

But other generalizations of Spengler have been accepted, such as his theory that every era has definite characteristics belonging only to it and discoverable even in the most diverse aspects of culture and civilization; and also his underlying thesis that the European is worn out. That this latter has been proved we do not for an instant believe. But it has been accepted—and by men who have never heard of Spengler. And it has been a factor both in the pessimism of the democracies and the hysteria of the dictatorships.

Ten Years Ago

The *Saturday Review* of May 15, 1926, noted that the *Bookman’s Journal* had listed the following ten English authors as being those whose first editions were most in demand: Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens, Sir Rider Haggard, Henry James, George Gissing, Norman Douglas, Sir James M. Barrie, Sir Hugh Clifford, Joseph Conrad, and Anthony Trollope.

Today

The Weekly Book Exchange of *The Publishers’ Weekly* indicates present collecting trends among English authors to be as follows (the list is given alphabetically, since any attempt at a statistical rating would be misleading): Lewis Carroll, Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, James Hilton, Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, T. E. Lawrence, Charles Morgan, Bernard Shaw, and Mary Webb.