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Some heroic discipline: William Butler Yeats and the Oxford Book of Modern Verse

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SOME HEROIC DISCIPLINE
William Butler Yeats and the Oxford Book of Modern Verse

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Department of English and Comparative Literature

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Abstract

This project explores William Butler Yeats's work as editor of the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse, with emphasis on Yeats's sense of his own place among the poets of his day. The study considers all of the 379 poems by the ninety-seven writers included in the anthology (as well as notable omissions) in the context of Yeats's critical writings and correspondence; where possible, it identifies the sources consulted by Yeats for his selections, and the circumstances of publication. It also examines the degree to which Yeats saw the anthology as a way to influence the emerging literary consensus of the mid-1930s. Finally, it argues that the anthology offers the same essentially neo-Romantic critique of modernity that can be found in Yeats's own poems -- a sense that to be modern is to wrestle with an impulse to believe, despite circumstances that weaken the basis for such belief. Chapter I relates the details of the book's conception, gestation, and publication. Chapter II addresses the late-Victorian poets, including both avant-garde decadents with whom he identified

and late-Victorian mainstream poets against whom he reacted. Chapter III explores Yeats's selections from contemporaries among the Edwardian-era writers, including those whose modern sensibility separated them from the Victorians. Chapter IV considers the many Irish poets that Yeats included in the anthology, and the ways in which the Irish experience embodied the modern problem for him. Chapter V addresses his reaction to the Georgian-era writers and war poets whose sensibility was shaped before the First World War, but whose best-known work appeared during and after it. Finally, Chapter VI considers the modernist poets inspired by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, whom he answered with a more idiosyncratic version of what it meant to be modern.

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interesting introductory essay starts from the proposition that the poets included should be all the 'good' ones (implicitly the field is Anglo-Irish poetry, though notably a few Indian poets are there) active since Tennyson's death. In fact the poets chosen by Yeats are notable as an idiosyncratic selection to represent modern verse. The Victorians are William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature. A pillar of both the Irish and British literary establishments, in his later years he served as an Irish Senator for two terms. Yeats was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival and, along with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and others, founded the Abbey Theatre, where he served as its chief during its early years. He studied poetry in his youth and from an early age was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. Those topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. Heaney, Seamus, 'William Butler Yeats', *Field Day Anthology II*, 790. Heaney, , 'Yeats as an Example?', *Preoccupations* (London: Faber, 1980), 109. Toomey, Deirdre, 'Moran's Collar', 45–83; Edna Longley, 'Introductory Reflections', *Yeats Annual* 12, 10. Schuchard, Ronald, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxiii and CW4 12–24. Levenson, Michael, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Aldington, Richard, *Collected Poems, 1915–1923* (London: Allen &Unwin, 1929), 20. Vendler, Helen, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 111. Yeats's Poems, ed. A new floor had been put into some ecclesiastical building and the light from a great mullioned window, cut off at the middle, fell aslant upon rows of clean and seemingly happy children. The play professed to tell of the heroic life of ancient Ireland, but was really full of sedentary refinement and the spirituality of cities. I had brought the visitors' book of the hotel, to turn over its pages while waiting for my bacon and eggs, and found several pages full of obscenities, scrawled there some two or three weeks before, by Dublin visitors, it seemed, for a notorious Dublin street was mentioned. A wise theatre might make a training in strong and beautiful life the fashion, teaching before all else the heroic discipline of the looking-glass, for is not beauty, even William Butler Yeats is widely considered to be one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He belonged to the Protestant Anglo-Irish

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