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## ***The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats Volume V: 1908–1910*, edited by John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard**

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**A REVIEW OF *THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF*  
*W. B. YEATS VOLUME V: 1908–1910***

John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, eds. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats Volume V: 1908–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), cxi + 1179 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-812688-1.

*Reviewed by Maria Rita Drumond Viana*

On January 12, 1909 Yeats wrote to John Quinn, who was then receiving his own (multiple) copies of the long-awaited *Collected Works* in eight volumes and declared that “one never really understands one’s own writings till they have been beautifully printed” (CL5 394). This collected edition of 1908, printed by A. H. Bullen at the Shakespeare Head Press, can be seen as one of the biggest personal achievements of the very busy three-year period covered in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats Volume V*, edited by John Kelly and Ron Schuchard—the latest installment in another long-going collected works project, this time with Oxford University Press (OUP). I can only imagine that these modern editors, and Kelly in particular as the general editor for the whole project, must feel the same way whenever a new volume comes out. As a reader and a scholar especially interested in letters I am evidently attached to the materiality of paper and ink, but in the case of Yeats’s correspondence it could be argued that, with the *InteLex Past Masters English Letters* database of all the extant letters, the content of the letters themselves is reasonably well-known to subscribers and thus the frisson caused by each newly published volume would be lessened.

This assumption is wrong on at least two counts: firstly, it takes for granted that every university library can afford to subscribe to *InteLex* and other such databases—something that may be true for many European and North American universities but is definitely not the case in developing countries such as my own (Brazil). As individual subscriptions are often too expensive or simply unavailable, the promise of widespread online access remains just a promise. Secondly, and more in tune with Yeats’s own realization as reported to Quinn, there are connections that can only be seen when beautifully printed. As with the 1908 *Collected Works*, this beauty refers to a lot more than just the quality of the paper, binding, and type, and includes organization (the ordering of parts being a particularly salient point in the Yeats-Bullen negotiations) and, very importantly, standardization—the effect of which is a sense of visual unity, so dear to Yeats. These have been qualities of the *Collected Letters* project from the start, and the passage of time seems to have made the editors ever more sensitive to it.

Of course, some of the editorial practices adopted are part of OUP's (as well as other major academic presses') mandates for similar projects. Nevertheless, a simple comparison with the *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by Alan G. Hill (also for OUP) and finished around the same time the Yeats project started, reveals a big difference in editorial practices: the sheer amount of paratext (understood here as anything-but-the-letters) that Kelly and the other editors make available in each volume is unrivalled, and has in fact reached an all-time high in this fifth installment. While most of the elements have been present since Volume I, including the chronologies (expanded for each period considered—and also published in a separate volume that reads almost like an appointment diary of Yeats's activities, meetings, travels, writings, and even dreams), the volume introductions serve as biographical essays that, if collected and printed, could rival Roy Foster's magisterial two-volume biography—in size, if not in scope. Though always anchored in the letters, with specific reference to relevant pages, these introductions do more than contextualize them or make thematic and chronological sense of this mass of materials—no mean feat in itself.

I have chosen to highlight the impressive scholarly achievement of volume V in particular—the bulkiest in the series thus far despite covering only a period of three years—in an attempt to account for the thirteen-year gap since volume IV appeared. I confess, I shared the impatience of many, even if some of the texts included here can be found and are annotated not only in *L* but also in *UP*. That these texts appear in the latter volume as stand-alone prose pieces highlights the characteristic of the letter as / not a genre—to borrow from the brilliant article by Margareta Jolly and Liz Stanley. Kelly's expansive definition of what constitutes a letter is notable and considers the communicative and reciprocal aspects of the epistolary act. In addition to various materials in the form of enclosures (such as draft proposals), it has been the editors' practice to include "ghost-letters" that, though lost or untraced, are made present in the book from "references in replies, memoirs, diaries, and so on" (*CL5* xlvi). More interestingly, for me, is the decision to "reproduce printed dedications to books when *cast in epistolary form*" (*CL5* xlvi, emphasis added). Though the specifics of the form are not made explicit, from the examples found throughout the collection I gather that it includes the usual triad of addressee(s), some more or less definite dating, and the signature(s), indicating audience, occasion and author respectively. The editors also recognize changes in function, stating that "[o]n occasion, his letters were sub-edited into the form of articles, and we have included any item for which there is internal or external evidence that this has

occurred" (CL5 xlvi). This is true for some of the pieces that appear in UP1 and UP2, sometimes with no mention of their epistolary origin.

Yet this can also be true of the aforementioned dedications, an example of which is a letter of dedication of volumes one and two of *Plays for an Irish Theatre* to Lady Gregory, which appeared in the May 1903 edition of *Where There is Nothing* and was subsequently included in VPI (232). This is one of the more public recognitions of Gregory's creative role in the writing of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*—"We turned my dream into the little play" (CL3 322, emphasis added)—an example of a public letter which, despite being open and visible to others, reinforces the bond between sender and addressee, and can be understood within Marcel Mauss's "the system of the gift."

More than ever, and particularly after the cerebral hemorrhage she suffered on February 2, 1909, Lady Gregory appears as someone who truly had "been more to me than father or mother or friend, a second self. The only person in the world to whom I could tell every thought" (CL5 413). A quick glance at the excellent resource that is the list of recipients (presented in alphabetical order of addressee with page numbers and, more helpfully, separate from the general index—a care not always taken in many letter collections) clearly reveals Augusta Gregory as the main node of Yeats's correspondence network—despite the fact that he still spent a considerable amount of time in Coole and would not, during these periods, be required to write to his friend.

Of course, we mostly get Yeats's side of it—"mostly" because the copious notes (in the *belles notes* tradition) very often reproduce excerpts from letters to Yeats, particularly when they're alluded to in the main letters. In Yeats's case we are, fortunately, blessed with a veritable cornucopia of printed sources and my survey of the various interests and editorial principles reveals both differences in market appeal and changes in academic practices, coupled with questions of etiquette and the complicated copyright status of the missives themselves. If the practice of a family returning the letters kept by a deceased member to their original senders has faded alongside the popularity of letter-writing itself, it was never an uncomplicated matter, as the recently revealed correspondence between T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale has made painfully clear.

A culture of celebrity, sometimes more than mere interest in history-writing, also explains why some letters by famous figures are kept—and published. In Yeats's case, two friends, to whom he wrote extensively in different periods of his life, published from his letters when he was still alive and in the same year, to very different effects. The first was Katharine Tynan, whose *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (1913) included unauthorized transcriptions of their correspondence and was met with

ire; the second was Lady Gregory herself, whose *Our Irish Theatre* (1913) alluded to the many missives exchanged, and whose later *Hugh Lane's Life and Achievement, with some Account of the Dublin Galleries* (1921) included direct transcriptions of letters from Yeats, who widely supported both ventures.

It is more common, however, to find letters published after the person's death, sometimes hot on its heels, as is the case of Dorothy Wellesley's *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, written in 1939 and published in 1940. Despite the misleading name, this is in fact an example of crossed correspondence, since it contains letters from both writers, as well as notes and reflections by Wellesley herself. A contemporary volume of crossed correspondence that is as thorough as the *CL* but whose purpose is closer to Wellesley is Ann Saddlemeyer's *W. B. Yeats and George Yeats: The Letters* (YGYL). Showing all sides of the conversation (in fact not limited to W. B. and George), it also shows a relationship based on many common interests, and not just poetry.

The third kind of edited volume is the passive correspondence, best represented by Richard Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy's two-volume *Letters to W. B. Yeats* (1977). *The Donne-Yeats Letters*, edited by Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares (*G-YL*), could also be included under this category of passive correspondence in spite of the title, which effectively suggests a crossed-correspondence. The choice is justified by the presence not only of many fewer messages from the Yeats side of the conversation (30 against 372), but also because those are from a much later period and do not exactly configure a dialogue with the other letters present.

I can only imagine how many more volumes of passive correspondence the editors of the *CL* would have filled had they been given the opportunity to edit the materials they evidently have consulted for the notes. The expansiveness of volume V certainly suggests that they see their remit as being much more than simple organizers of materials, and while the inclusion of J. M. Synge's last will and testament may seem a bit much, I cannot deny it is a wonderful resource to have in the appendix. But how soon can I get hold of volume VI?

## NOTES

1. Alan G. Hill, ed., *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–1993).
2. Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, "Letters as / not a genre," *LifeWriting* 1, no. 2 (2005): 1–18.

3. See Alan T. McKenzie, *Sent as Gift: Eight Correspondences from the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 3.
4. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1954).
5. Maria Cramer, "The Love Letters of T. S. Eliot: New Clues into his Most Mysterious Relationship," *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2020.
6. Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1913); Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Knickerbocker Press, 1913); Lady Gregory, *Hugh Lane's Life and Achievement, with Some Account of the Dublin Galleries* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1921).
7. Dorothy Wellesley, ed., *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940).
8. Richard Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy, eds., *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1977).