



Yeats and Violence (Clarendon Lectures in English)

By Michael Wood

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Yeats and Violence (Clarendon Lectures in English) By Michael Wood

The night can sweat with terror as before

We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

W.B. Yeats, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'

This is a book about how poetry, seen through the instance of a single poem, seeks to make sense of a turbulent and dangerous world. Poetry must introduce order and shape where there is none, and also, in certain crucial cases, remain faithful to the disorder and shapelessness of experience. Many poems manage the first of these tasks; very few manage both. W.B. Yeats 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' (written and first published in 1921) is one of them. It is a work which asks what happens when what is taken to be civilization crumbles. What apocalyptic events wait in the wings? What are history's victims (and executors) to do except mock and mourn?

Successive chapters investigate the six parts of the poem, connecting them to Yeats' broader poetic practice, his interest in the occult and his changing vision of Irish nationalism; to the work of other poets (Irish, English, Russian German); and to Irish and European history between 1916 (the date of the Easter Uprising in Dublin) and 1923 (the date of the end of the Irish Civil War). Theoretical considerations of the shape and meaning of violence, both political and religious, link the chapters to each other.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Wood's criticism is exuberantly characterful, adventurous in its scholarship, and greedily, giddily speculative." - Leo Robson, *New Statesman*

"[Wood's] generosity in citing the opinions of other critics and poets is such that the reader is immersed in a range of lively arguments and counter-readings inspired by Yeats's work. The poem itself is so carefully examined...that the reader emerges from Wood's book convinced that the text has a life of its own, and deep mysteries to be revealed." --*The New Yorker*

"What Wood is especially good at is starting from the detail and directing his mind out in concentric circles of observance. The force at work is his sense of life, always magnanimous." --*Commonweal*

About the Author

Michael Wood was born and educated in England but has worked for much of his life in the United States, first at Columbia University and then at Princeton. He has written books on Luis Bunuel, Franz Kafka, Vladimir Nabokov, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as well as *The Road to Delphi*, a study of the ancient and continuing allure of oracles. Among his other works are *America in the Movies* and *Children of Silence*. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a member of the American Philosophical Society and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he is a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*. His most recent book is *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*. He is the editor of Edward Said's posthumous *Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (2006).

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