

Edward Clarke. *The Later Affluence of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens.*

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10124>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou, "Edward Clarke. *The Later Affluence of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens.* ", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2013-2, document 7, Online since 27 September 2013, connection on 12 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10124>

This text was automatically generated on 12 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Edward Clarke. *The Later Affluence of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens.*

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou

REFERENCES

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp 247 (Endnotes, Bibliography and Index included). ISBN 978-0-230-29668-8

- 1 Edward Clarke's book entitled *The Later Affluence of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens* (2012) constitutes an important addition to the scholarship that keeps on being steadily produced about W. B. Yeats' and Wallace Stevens' poetic practice. The uniqueness of Clarke's publication lies in the in-depth commentary it provides on particular poems by these two major poets in an attempt to highlight the inventiveness in their conception and philosophical depth as these poems converse with old verse forms and poetic traditions. In particular, Clarke mainly focuses in his book on the discussion of Yeats' "Cuchulain Comforted" and "The Black Tower" both of them written in 1939, and Stevens' "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" and "Of Mere Being" completed in 1954 and 1955 respectively. What is special about these poems is that they were written towards the end of both Yeats' and Stevens' life which offers an interesting insight into these two poets' way of thinking, as evidenced in the way language works in their writings. With references to other poems in addition to the main ones, Clarke's book attempts to draw links between Yeats' and Stevens' late and early poetic oeuvre so as to encourage readers to draw connections between the poets' writing and philosophy of being. What becomes apparent in the five chapters Clarke's book is comprised of is that Yeats' and Stevens' poetry is characterized by a distinct spiritual quality that emerges from the constant "struggle between meaning and form" (7) as well as from the numerous interpretative and creative possibilities that poetic writing and language generates.

- 2 Specifically, the first chapter starts with a discussion of Yeats' *The Tower* (1928) poems and the role irony plays in them, since its value rests in its ability to gradually lead readers to a much higher level of understanding and intellectual clarity as to the two-foldedness of language both as an experiential and spiritual mode of expression. This is achieved through the conversations the poet establishes with other poets, as is for example the case with William Wordsworth. As Clarke explains, this is not a mere case of influence but an opportunity – by contrasting the two poets' practices – to bring to the fore the temporal mechanisms that set Yeats' poems into motion. Clarke characteristically describes this practice as a “countering of life's current to apprehend man's substantial and immortal interiority” (49). However, it is this kind of interiority that, with the aid of irony or the symbols employed in the poems, revitalizes those memories which have long been buried into the unconscious, leading thus readers to another plain of comprehension. This is also, according to Clarke, what delineates Yeats' poetic doctrine, as noted in the poet's *Essays and Introductions* (1961), “that the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another” (63). What this clarifies is that for Yeats poetry writing does so much more than simply activate the readers' imagination or serve as a repository of knowledge. Actually, it aims at bringing outer and inner experience together so as to activate the thinking process as regards our reorientation in space and time.
- 3 According to Stevens, as presented in the second chapter of Clarke's book, this kind of reorientation can be achieved through “the being of language: the ‘moving soul’ of a poet's ‘long labour’” (73). By focusing on poems from Stevens' *Transport to Summer* (1947), Clarke highlights the essential role language plays in helping us to gain a sense of being in the world by drawing readers to the deepest recesses of existence, as these are revealed to us through the multiple interpretations and points of view language generates. By alluding to Martin Heidegger's philosophy, Clarke sheds light on what he considers to be the main feature of Stevens' writing, that of the evasiveness or the concealing potential of poetic language itself. Certainly this is where the moving force of language can be located in its ability to gradually implicate us into a process of thinking which, although it seems familiar, actually it is not. This constitutes a tricky point with regard to the reception of Steven's poetry, since readers can be easily carried away by what it appears to be suggesting. What makes it effective though relates to the multiple interpretations it can trigger which in turn contribute to the shaping of variable paths of thinking. Clarke notes that this is how “we begin to notice how alterations within thought might present itself, altering our perception of our place in the world” (79-80). He goes on then to support this observation by making use of particular examples that relate to the onomatopoeic effects Stevens' language creates or to the kind of verbs or even nouns he resorts to, as is the case, for instance, of his references to birds and water.
- 4 In the following third chapter, the analysis turns to Yeats' “Cuchulain Comforted” a poem characterized by Clarke as “polysemantic” or “manifold” if one considers the various traditions it draws from and the multiple readings its symbols, as those of the rose and linen, can evoke. Based on the Cuchulain myth, Yeats seems to be attracting his ideas from a repository of other writers and traditions such as William Blake, Dante, Homer or medieval biblical scripts. What is important though is that Yeats' poem, according to Clarke, sheds light on a different kind of thinking process, that of “stitching” or “sawing.” What this highlights, similarly to Stevens' writing, is a

regenerative poetic process that does not comply with a linear but an acausal mode of narration. This brings to the fore, as highlighted by the techniques of alliteration, enjambment, parallelism, epanalepsis, and sibilance that Stevens resorts to, the dynamics of a transformative poetic vision that is driven not by divine intervention but by the constant shifts in the readers' standpoints every time they read the poetic text. In this case, the poem's myths are constantly reinvented, as testified by the narrative gyres Yeats constructs, in an attempt to match the ongoing confusion and renewed tension the modern individual experiences.

- 5 In the fourth chapter, the whole argument moves a step further when Clarke concentrates on the way Stevens tackles time in his poem "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." With the poem taking place in March at daylight, Stevens attempts to present temporal abstraction and concreteness as being two co-existing facets of experience. This is also enhanced by the "scrawny cry" that marks another contradiction in the poem: the crying sound that comes from the outside which could also be a crying sound of the mind. This apparent clash of perspectives, as Clarke argues, denotes a constantly unfolding rather than a contradictory relation to reality. This is also highlighted by the evasive way language works in Stevens' poem, marking at the same time a different conceptualization of time not as something fixed but as something conversant with experience itself, as this is understood and shaped by the readers themselves. Additionally, this affects the way the poem is read in conjunction with the other poems contained in Stevens' *Collected Poems* which respond to different time periods of Stevens' writing career. As a result, time can be both factual and fictional, objective and subjective, relative and tangible.
- 6 This is also the case with Yeats' last poem "The Black Tower," as is argued in Clarke's fifth and final chapter, which defies any kind of fixity, since it heavily relies on the explications its readers are willing to delve into. For this reason, this poem has often been characterized as cryptic or even occult if one also takes into consideration the fact that it was written just a few days before Yeats' death. Although the tower stands in the poem as a symbol of epic proportions, it also generates an air of mystery and ambivalence which is intensified by the use of the word "Say" in its very first line. "Is it we who are to say, or is the poet taking dictation?" (185), Clarke asks in his effort to highlight that the poem's intensity derives from what remains unsaid or is foreshadowed. The same applies to Stevens' final poem "Of Mere Being," whose apparent simplicity prompts readers to gain a much deeper understanding of being as this is geared up by the willingness of the spirit, according to Clarke, "to make a disciplined step beyond reason before we can experience the world afresh" (214). By tracing the affinities that these two poems build with other practitioners, such as Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Shakespeare, Clarke underlines the multiplicity of perspectives they open up to and the network of allusions they construct. This brings on the surface the basic feature of Yeats' and Stevens' poetry that is its ever-expanding knowledge that leads readers to a much greater sense of inner self.
- 7 Through his dense at times commentary, Clarke manages to gradually lead readers deeper and deeper into the philosophical core of the two poets' writing. Even though his book appears to be quite demanding at first, it actually succeeds through its numerous citations from primary and secondary sources in enlightening readers as to how Yeats' and Stevens' poetry works. What becomes clear though throughout the book is that Yeats' and Stevens' poems can energize multiple readings which are

facilitated by the suppleness or evasive nature of language itself. Clarke effectively shows that it is by drawing on what appears to be tangible or material that poetry leads to a better understanding of human existence. In the case of Yeats' and Stevens' last poems, it is a transformative process that is enacted that begins and ends on earth, in other words in our own mere being.

AUTHOR

TATIANI G. RAPATZIKOU

Assistant Professor Aristotle University of Thessaloniki