Something Borrowed, Something Dead

The Psychic Love Story of Mrs. W. B. Yeats and Her Automatic Script’s Place In the Tradition of Modernist L’écriture Féminine

A SURF Grant project by Audrey Robinovitz

When famed Irish Modernist W.B. Yeats married an Englishwoman nearly 30 years his junior named George Hyde-Lees, the arranged date was hardly by happenstance. The pair had, consulting each of their astrological charts, found the day and even the year that would prove most auspicious for their union. The rest of their marriage followed suit. The two were, even before meeting each other, each members of the secret occult society known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Thusly when on the fourth day of their marriage, George famously surprised her groom on their honeymoon by attempting automatic writing, her actions were not without precedent. From that day on, however, the two would begin to delve deeper into the practice as a means of communing with spirits form beyond the veil. George wrote daily: acting as Yeats’s medium for personal matters and providing the source material for both the philosophies of his obscure manifesto A Vision (1925) and the metaphors for his most widely known later poems like ‘The Second Coming’ (1919) and ‘The Tower’ (1928). While Yeats has gone down in history, George has largely been overlooked. This exclusion hurts not only the inclusivity of English criticism, but its quality. Through her lifelong collaboration with Yeats, George Hyde Lees was one of the most innovative and experimental artists of the Modernist period – her work speaking to themes of domestic constriction, the multiplicitous nature of the self, feminine anger, and the delusionary mental and spiritual contradictions of 20th century wifehood.

“she finds the words we send the wave and she as it were catches it in a box”

(‘Sleeps’ of Oct and Sept, 1921)

How then, do we read texts not meant to be read?

Indeed no one was more instrumental in effacing George Hyde-Lees’ legacy than George herself. She was an intensely private person, and in many ways sought to hide behind her husbands public image. The textual resources of mediumistic manuscripts, however, are themselves artifacts of not only women’s creative impulses but their self-censorship. Women’s writing – or L’écriture Féminine as the critical idea became known in the French universities of its birth – is inherently burdened not only by societal organization but interpersonal and internalized socialization towards valuing commonly patriarchal art forms as the most dignified and intellectual form of expression. Looking at George’s automatic writings, both as a biographical and a literary text, in and of itself challenges previous ideas of what makes a ‘great’ novelist. My work follows scholars who sought to prove “many of the symbols or concepts (or even turns of phrase) we have come to think of as specifically Yeatsian are in fact not the product of his brain alone” (65) but consulting rare editions of George’s automatic script housed in the National Library of Ireland, posits the existence of ideas George conceived of that could never have been understood or adapted by her husband.