

## Review

W. J. McCormack. *'We Irish' in Europe: Yeats, Berkeley, and Joseph Hone*.  
 Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010. x + 211 pp.  
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This is a book of wide ambitions. Its first aim is to show that W. B. Yeats held a specific view of George Berkeley, a view mediated by Joseph Hone and Mario Manlio Rossi. Hone (and Rossi) overemphasize the readings of Berkeley by Gentile and other right-wing commentators in their mediation of the early twentieth-century Italian reception of Berkeley back in Ireland. This mediated Berkeley, McCormack contends, was a subjective idealist whose work was of use in forming an idealist ethics of sacrifice to the State. McCormack is opposed to the political outlook expressed in this version of Berkeley. The second aim of his book is to suggest that a refusal to confront Yeats's interest in fascism has resulted in an episode of lapsed knowledge in Irish literary studies, in which the complicity of literary nationalism with a theory of the State based on sacrifice (and—in a rather audacious leap—therefore also with fascism) is alleged. This second aim is only partially related to Berkeley, so will not be extensively treated in this review.

McCormack contends, then, that Hone was an intermediary for and proponent of a certain interpretation of Berkeley. The book's provocation is "that Berkeley is reconceived, misbegotten and generally deformed in the 'mind' of Italian idealism swaddled by fascism" (8-9). McCormack approaches Berkeley as a proponent of subjective idealism, at least in the works of the heroic period (34). Idealism is the context in which Giovanni Gentile writes on Berkeley, and also the context in which Gentile works to integrate his ethical philosophy with his politics: "Gentile's grand concept of the State as actualist perceptual creation may be the canonical authority to be recognized by well-informed *fascisti*. But the particular emphasis on interiority parallels what its author traced in the development of Berkeley's philosophy, with mind as the location of the real and as the prerequisite of a morality for the state" (75). This Italian reading of Berkeley is what associates him with early twentieth-century right-wing nationalism in Yeats's mind (64). Joseph Hone's writings,<sup>1</sup> and more significantly, his friendship with Yeats, are the main conduits for this vision of Berkeley reaching the poet.

McCormack is keen to emphasize how prone Yeats may have been to proto-fascistic interpretations of a philosopher who could be claimed for the Irish nation. Evidence is cited that Yeats received a literary prize in Frankfurt after the accession of the National Socialists, that he met the German ambassador in Dublin, and endorsed the Nuremberg laws (23, and then partially or wholly repeated 43, 47, 50). Yeats is, more or less, scolded for being a right-wing nationalist (83). Hone's not mentioning the translation by Giovanni Amendola of the *New Theory of Vision* is taken as part of a concerted strategy of occluding the liberal or centrist reception of Berkeley in Italy in the first decades of the

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly "Berkeley in Italy," *New Statesman* 27 (2 October 1926), 593-602; and "Bishop Berkeley, Ireland's great philosopher, his fame in Italy," *Irish Times*, 10 March 1928.

twentieth century (84). And McCormack seems willing to defend the idea that Yeats could not have developed the ideology he is alleged to hold (with sacrifice for the nation at its center) without having had access to the proto-fascistic appropriation of Berkeley that is sketched in this book. This contention, like others in the book—for example, that it might have been the Jewishness of Adorno, Benjamin, Berlin and Husserl that prevented Yeats from taking an active interest in them, 49-50—is of a highly conjectural kind.

The book explicitly defers to another occasion various matters that one would have thought central to a study of Yeats, Hone and Berkeley: “The manner in which the bishop’s thought influenced Yeats’s later poetry awaits further investigation” (32); “That Hone shared title-page honors with the Italian philosopher Mario Rossi is a bibliographical teaser to be resolved on another occasion” (63). There are likewise some assertions about what is or is not the case in Berkeley’s *oeuvre*, or in Berkeley studies, with which readers may take issue. It is said to be urgent that Berkeley’s thought is put in its context (151). Berman’s *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* is cited several times, and so McCormack must be aware of at least some attempts to contextualize Berkeley’s philosophy. There is, however, a much wider literature that might have been addressed on this subject. The assertion that “Berkeley’s writings (well-styled in themselves) gave no hint of a theory of literature or culture. . . . Indeed, Berkeley is scarcely concerned with notions of the past, ancient or recent” (27), seems highly questionable. After all, the Italian journals, *Querist*, *Alciphron*, and *Siris* demonstrate great interest in culture and the ancient past.

Perhaps the most worrying assertion is that it is an obscure question whether Berkeley had an ethical theory (165). If sustained consideration of the bases for determining an individual’s course of action in relation to other people passes as an ethical theory, Berkeley of course has one, and it has been the subject of more than one book. When raising this “obscure” question, McCormack just mentions *Passive Obedience* (156), one text in which Berkeley considers ethical matters. But McCormack does not cite or write about *Passive Obedience* beyond briefly noting that Yeats wanted to see its politics as high Tory or Jacobite (35), even though one of his subjects is the interest early twentieth-century writers took in Berkeley’s politics (28-29). McCormack does not state what he believes Berkeley’s politics to be. There was surely an opportunity to discuss the categorical rejection of rebellion in *Passive Obedience* (W 6: 28), and the ways in which an early twentieth-century Irish nationalist, just as an early eighteenth-century Jacobite, might have seized on the recognition, in the final stages of Berkeley’s text, that there are occasions on which the seat of supreme power is not clear and that people must be allowed to follow their conscience in those cases (W 6: 45-46). The tension between condemnation of rebellion, endorsement of the disciplinary power of the State, and this closing hint of exceptional circumstances would have been a very productive textual basis on which McCormack could have developed his case.

But there is little substantial engagement with Berkeley’s texts at all in this book. No attention is paid to the *Maxims on Patriotism*, nor the remarks on patriotism in *Alciphron*. Crito and Alciphron dispute the correct manner in which to be philo-Hellenic. Alciphron promotes the Greeks as pagans; Crito responds that the Greeks and other nations who

have “made the greatest figure in the world” do so on account of “a peculiar reverence for their respective laws and institutions, which inspired them with steadiness and courage, and that hearty generous love of their country, by which they did not merely understand a certain language or tribe of men, much less a particular spot of earth, but included a certain system of manners, customs, notions, rites, and laws civil and religious” (W 3: 193). Here is a patriotism that does not lend itself very easily to proto-fascistic political philosophies, amounting to a rational preference for a particular mode of life rather than a sentimental preference for an indefinite idea of cultural distinctiveness. To make any convincing connection between Berkeley and Irish literary and more broadly cultural nationalism (the second, and perhaps just as controversial, concern of Mc Cormack’s study) would have required this more direct textual analysis. The later chapters of the book reconsider some major texts of twentieth-century Irish literature with an eye to the occluded history of Yeats’s interest in fascism, with its (pseudo?) Berkeleian element. But, without an explicit basis in Berkeley’s texts and their mediation through Gentile and Hone, it is hard to derive much of a contribution to a reception history of Berkeley’s writings from this book.

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