Review

W. J. McCormack. *We Irish* in Europe: *Yeats, Berkeley, and Joseph Hone.*
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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,1 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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1 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 honours 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 McCormack’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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