

Menon, Orwell and the Yeats Fascism Debate

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This paper argues, firstly, that V. K. Narayana Menon's The Development of William Butler Yeats (published in 1942, with the revised edition appearing in 1960) has been largely but somewhat unjustly overshadowed by Orwell's oft-cited review (Horizon, January 1943). Secondly, that Menon's book, therefore, merits increased recognition and appreciation, both as a sincere and insightful evaluation of Yeats as well as a key text in its own right, along with Orwell's distinctive and favourable review, in what has become a long-running debate over Yeats's alleged fascist leanings. Thirdly, and paradoxically, this paper argues that Orwell's review also merits increased recognition and appreciation for its perspicacity and power in seizing and elaborating upon Menon's alarm over Yeats's A Vision (dated 1925 but published in 1926, with the revised edition appearing in 1937). Lastly, it suggests that both Menon's book and Orwell's review deserve improved contextualisation, including attention to Orwell's little-known subsequent review (Time and Tide, April 1943) and the broader professional relationship between Orwell and Menon at the BBC.

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In *W. B. Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition* (1981), Grattan Freyer surveys the 'predominantly hostile' commentary on W. B. Yeats's politics following his death in 1939 (1981: 124). Freyer finds that Louis MacNeice was first, in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941), to factor in Yeats's reactionary views as a significant issue for scrutiny. MacNeice wrote, for instance, of Yeats having 'had a budding fascist inside himself' (1941: 132). Freyer clarifies, however, that MacNeice 'was more puzzled than disturbed by this' (1981: 124) and that, ultimately, MacNeice considered Yeats's views 'an example of zest' (1941: 232) and Yeats 'a special case' (ibid: 231). 'The first real salvo,' Freyer asserts, 'was fired by George Orwell' in the January 1943 *Horizon* (1981: 124). According to Freyer, Orwell 'was a dogmatic believer in precisely those democratic values of progress towards a more egalitarian society that Yeats rejected, so not unnaturally' (ibid: 124) he discovered in Yeats a 'rather sinister vision of life' (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 202). Freyer claims that Orwell

'did not really like Yeats' and, in common with 'most down-to-earth Englishmen, he found Yeats's whimsy and rhetorical posturing artificial and irritating' (1981: 124-125). Nevertheless, Freyer insists, Orwell 'was too honest a critic to ignore the greatness of the poetry, and he posed squarely the question raised by the fact' (ibid: 125) that 'the best writers of our time have been reactionary in tendency' (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 207). This, Freyer adds, 'has continued to trouble posterity' (1981: 125).

Oddly, however, it is only towards the end of his account that Freyer sees fit to mention, in brackets and in passing, that Orwell was, in fact, reviewing V. K. Narayana Menon's book *The Development of William Butler Yeats* (1942 – not 1933 as dated in Freyer's text). Having quoted Orwell's conclusion that Yeats 'had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route' (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 204), Freyer cites Orwell's quotation of Menon in reference to Yeats's philosophical treatise *A Vision* (1926, 1937): 'And if the greatest poet of our times is exultantly ringing in an era of Fascism, it seems a somewhat disturbing symptom' (Menon 1942: 93). 'Orwell agrees,' adds Freyer, 'and points out that Yeats's case was not an isolated one' (1981: 125). Orwell's conclusion is consistent, however, with Menon's analysis: Yeats's 'aristocratic bias ... seen even in his early poetry' is highlighted almost immediately in the book and traced throughout his career by Menon (1942: 3). In addition, it is Menon who points out not only, for instance, Yeats's 'exultant acceptance of authoritarianism as the only solution' but also that Yeats was not an isolated case (ibid: 91). As Orwell also quotes from Menon: 'One did not quite realise where he was heading. And those who did, like Pound and perhaps Eliot, approved of the stand that he finally took' (1942: 92).

Oddly, too, Freyer cuts Menon out of the equation at the end of his account by selectively quoting a portion (not the whole, as it might seem to anyone not familiar with the original text) of Orwell's memorable final sentence where he affirms that 'a writer's political and religious beliefs are not excrescences to be laughed away, but something that will leave their mark even on the smallest detail of his work' (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 207). Orwell's final sentence actually begins by lauding Menon's expertise, in the context of Orwell's reflection that the 'relationship between Fascism and the literary intelligentsia badly needs investigating, and Yeats might well be the starting-point' (ibid). Orwell writes: 'He is best studied by someone like Mr Menon, who can approach a poet primarily as a poet, but who also knows that a writer's political and religious beliefs are not excrescences to be laughed away...' (ibid). This is high praise, indeed, for Menon from Orwell but one could hardly have guessed its existence from reading Freyer's account.

Curiously, then, the critical importance of Menon and his book, which casts Yeats and *A Vision* in an ominously fascist light and provides considerable ammunition for Orwell's 'salvo', is largely overlooked by Freyer. Moreover, Freyer's account is, in fact, a prime example of a prevailing tendency to prioritise Orwell's review at the expense of Menon's book in the longstanding scholarly debate over Yeats's alleged fascist sympathies. A recent example is Daniel Tompsett's note 132 of his Introduction, covering the debate historically, in *Unlocking the Poetry of W. B. Yeats: Heart Mysteries* (2018). Tompsett leaps from MacNeice's 'disapproval of Yeats's politics but endorsement of him as a poet' to 'George Orwell's more pointed cry of [Yeats's] Fascism', effectively airbrushing Menon completely out of the picture (2018: 26). A general neglect of Menon's book as a result of almost or entirely exclusive attention to Orwell's review has never been adequately addressed in the scholarship relating to the debate. This remains somewhat unjust to Menon primarily but also to Orwell whose review, on the whole, is very favourably disposed towards Menon and his book. Orwell quotes generously from it (having, by his own admission, never read *A Vision*) and he expressly credits Menon in various ways, not least in the final sentence as we have seen but also, for instance, maintaining Menon's centrality to the core contention of the review that 'Yeats's philosophy has some very sinister implications, as Mr Menon points out. Translated into political terms, Yeats's tendency is Fascist' (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 204).

This raises the question: what possible reasons could there be for the marginalisation of Menon in the scholarship for so many years? The simple answer, perhaps, is Orwell's fame as a journalist, essayist and novelist. As Peter Davison highlights in Volume XIV of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, entitled *Keeping Our Little Corner Clean: 1942-1943* (2001 [1998b]), although the review was published in *Horizon* it sparked '[c]onsiderable comment and correspondence' in *The Times Literary Supplement*. This included responses from Orwell to an accusation by Charles Morgan (subsequently identified) that his review was evidence of an aberrational 'political itch' (ibid: 284) and a claim by Lord David Cecil that he was 'a word-snob' (2001 [1998]: 286). While much of the comment was negative (including from Lord Alfred Douglas, on similar grounds to Lord Cecil), it was indicative of Orwell's prominence as a journalist in literary circles by the early 1940s. Notably, the correspondence shows it was Orwell who was personally targeted. Menon is not explicitly mentioned by name in any of the relevant correspondence reproduced in Volume XIV. Orwell's heightened reputation and stature internationally since his death in 1950 have also intensified scholarly interest in his works. In the context of Orwell's high profile, it is readily understandable that the review has received far greater attention than Menon's book.

This does not, however, satisfactorily justify or explain critical mistreatment of Menon's book as peripheral or irrelevant to Orwell's review. The extent to which such disregard may relate, for instance, to the issue of race, historically and systemically, has never been considered. To scholars who have read Menon's book, it would be clear that the vantage point arising from his Indian heritage, combined with the sincerity and integrity of his approach, is what makes his evaluation of Yeats so insightful and pungent. Certainly, Menon's strangely subordinate status as a critic cannot be deemed a result of lower quality or topicality of his book in comparison to Orwell's review. Besides Orwell's praise, Menon's book received several noteworthy endorsements. On the cover of the second edition, Menon is described as 'a literary scholar of distinction' and his book as 'first-class' by E. M. Forster (Menon 1960 [1942]). Also on the cover, Menon's book is described as 'excellent' by Edwin Muir, who adds that Menon's 'intimacy of understanding' of Yeats 'is really astonishing' coming from someone 'brought up in a civilisation very remote from ours' (ibid). Menon's 'study of Yeats's poetry', Muir says, 'is probably the best that has yet appeared in English' (ibid). Moreover, Herbert J. C. Grierson discloses in his Preface that Yeats himself 'respected in Mr Menon his knowledge not only of English literature but of the poetry of his own country' (Menon 1942: xiv).

ENDURING RELEVANCE

The main purpose of this paper is, therefore, to highlight and begin to redress the imbalance, and apparent disconnect, between Orwell's review and Menon's book within the scholarship. In doing so, this paper calls for enhanced recognition and appreciation of both writers as key instigators of, and contributors to, what is still, many decades later, a continuing debate concerning Yeats and fascism. Paradoxically, while Menon's book warrants increased attention, it is also true that, for its part, Orwell's 'salvo' has never received, beyond acknowledgment of its notable initial impact, due recognition for its lasting influence on the scholarship relating to Yeats's politics. The enduring relevance of Orwell's review – and therefore, underpinning this, of Menon's book – is obscured in part in Freyer's account by seemingly contradictory yet valid statements. Despite his admission of the significance of Orwell's 'salvo' in highlighting the reactionary tendency of the best writers of the time 'which has continued to trouble posterity' (1981: 125), Freyer proceeds to suggest the review is all too brief and thus inherently limited: 'Orwell did little more than broach the problem, which is indeed a complex one' (ibid). However, Menon's more elaborate book-length study identifies the reactionary problem in the context of Yeats's oeuvre and this can be seen, in Grierson's Preface, to immediately spark debate: 'The drift of [Yeats's] thought towards authoritarianism [Menon] deplores. I cannot believe that the aristocratic bent of Yeats's mind would ever have accepted

with equanimity the rule of such vulgar, brutal tyrants as Hitler and his crew' (1942: xiv). Grierson avoids the broader reactionary problem raised in part, for instance, by Menon's assertions that the infamously fascist Ezra Pound 'had a remarkable hold on Yeats' (1942: 49) and 'Yeats's elegant packet for Ezra Pound [in the revised version of *A Vision*, 1937] was very significant' in relation to Pound's conception of fascism (1942: 92). Grierson's defence of Yeats in the Preface, then, suffices to underline that Orwell's 'salvo' marks also the timely arrival of the cavalry, so to speak, in support of Menon.

While the scholarship has tended to favour Orwell's review at the expense of Menon's book, the review strongly reinforces and ultimately seeks to advance Menon's position. In this vein, Orwell deserves increased recognition and appreciation for his perspicacity and power in seizing and expanding upon Menon's alarm over Yeats's politics and *A Vision*, including in relation to renowned modernist writers like Pound and Eliot and with high regard, too, for their literary excellence. The considerable reaction to the review can be explained in part as an outcome of Orwell's command of journalism geared towards a literary readership. He duly capitalises on the obvious potential for controversy presented by Menon's stance on Yeats's politics (as Grierson's Preface indicates) and his own approval, in perceiving an interconnection between the 'literary' and the 'political', of Menon's analysis of Yeats. Utilising his gifts of keen discernment, judicious quote selection, compelling and provocative argumentation, and inimitable writing style, Orwell leverages the authority of the reviewer role to back Menon and suggest, emphatically, that Menon is best placed to keep going along the trajectory established in his book, i.e. to further analysis of the relationship between fascism and the literary intelligentsia of the time. Orwell's chief criticism, after all, is that Menon 'leaves it at that' with Yeats; and Orwell resorts to recommending, beyond the book being reviewed, that Menon pick up 'where this one leaves off' by pursuing inquiry into the political leanings of other famous writers, too (Orwell 2016 [1943]: 207).

Orwell's effort to advance Menon's position underscores, however, the limitations of both texts. The review consists merely of several pages and Orwell ultimately looks to Menon to move the investigation forward again, beyond solely Yeats to encompass the wider literary intelligentsia; whereas in the book, although Menon signals his great disquiet over Yeats's politics and the esoteric philosophy of *A Vision* in the course of examining Yeats's development, he really only turns fully in the Conclusion, of just a few pages, to a discussion of an ominously fascist Yeats. It is not surprising that Menon never produced a sequel since he explicitly confesses in the Conclusion to not wanting, and being 'a little afraid' to 'discuss the whole set of complicated relationships which exist between

art and politics' (1942: 93). Nevertheless, these limitations do not negate the compressed, explosive power of the contents, and lasting influence and value, of both texts in connection with the much-disputed nature of Yeats's politics. It remains the case, today, that Menon and Orwell do, indeed, continue to trouble posterity through having foregrounded, with such acuity in the early 1940s, the complex problem that the tendency of the best writers of the time such as Yeats, Pound and Eliot was reactionary. Moreover, even as Menon's book has been unfairly overshadowed by Orwell's review, the latter has been at times quite superficially criticised or evaded by some of the foremost critics and biographers in the history of Yeats scholarship. Orwell, therefore, deserves increased recognition and appreciation, too, for his troubling of posterity by drawing upon and expertly amplifying Menon's thesis: the seminal impact, particular long-term effects and enduring relevance of his 'salvo' – greatly out of proportion to its brevity – ensure that not only he continues but, by extension, that Menon also continues, with Orwell, to haunt the scholarly debate over Yeats's alleged fascist sympathies.

FLAWED COUNTER-THESIS

The evidences of Orwell's troubling of the subsequent scholarship can be detected, for instance, in the highly controversial 'Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats' (1965) by Conor Cruise O'Brien, in which it might have been expected that Orwell and Menon would be acknowledged as forerunners and prove helpful to O'Brien in his portrayal of an 'aristocratic', 'distinctly and exultantly pro-Fascist' Yeats (1988 [1965]: 45). As Freyer says, the long essay is 'the most celebrated critique in this field' and constitutes 'a broadside attack on two fronts': firstly, 'that the poet was a political opportunist'; and secondly, that 'in his political involvements, Yeats was explicitly pro-fascist' (1981: 125-126). Oddly, however, O'Brien distances himself from Orwell, and neglects to mention Menon at all, in what could possibly be seen as a version, for criticism, of the '*Clinamen*' in Harold Bloom's famous 'anxiety of influence' theory for poetry whereby one 'swerves away' from one's precursor to whom one is indebted (Bloom 1975 [1973]: 14). This manifests as 'a corrective movement' implying the precursor 'went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction' that one is moving (ibid).

O'Brien takes issue with two aspects of Orwell's review, the first being Orwell's speculation that there must be 'some kind of connection between [Yeats's] wayward, even tortured style of writing and his rather sinister vision of life' (2016 [1943]: 202). O'Brien reports that Orwell 'finds this connection, as far as he finds it at all, in Yeats's archaisms, affectations and "quaintness"' but he argues that Orwell's thesis 'does not fit very well, for the "quaintness" was at its height in the 1890s, when Yeats's vision

of life was, from either an Orwellian or a Marxist point of view, at its least sinister' (1988 [1965]: 18-19). Dismissively, O'Brien adds: 'Unfortunately for Orwell's thesis, it was precisely at the moment – after the turning-point of 1903 – when Yeats's vision of life began to turn 'sinister' – aristocratic and proto-Fascist – that he began to purge his style of quaintness, and his greatest poetry was written near the end of his life when his ideas were at their most sinister' (1988 [1965]: 19).

Astonishingly, however, while O'Brien displays a sound sense of Yeats's development across his oeuvre, he does not appear to have checked (or had access to the resources to check) the publication dates of the poems Orwell quotes, apparently from memory (with some minor variations), in positing his thesis. The verifiable publication dates of these verses, in chronological order, are: 'On those that hated *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907' in *The Irish Review*, December 1911' (Allt and Alspach 1957: 294); the First Musician's opening lyric in the play *The Only Jealousy of Emer* in 'a Cuala Press edition of January 1919' (Jeffares and Knowland 1975: 106) or 'Poetry (Chicago) January 1919' (Allt and Alspach 1957: 784); and 'An Acre of Grass' in '*The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1938' (ibid: 575). Therefore, Orwell's examples in support of his thesis fit perfectly, in fact, into O'Brien's chronology of the emergence and zenith of a 'sinister' Yeats.

Along this trajectory, it also seems peculiar that O'Brien never relates Orwell's attention to *A Vision* (1926, 1937), which is so central to the review via Menon, to his time-frames of Yeats's ideas becoming 'most sinister'. O'Brien never expressly considers anywhere in his essay Orwell's series of bombshell statements, for instance, that: 'Yeats's philosophy [in *A Vision*] has some very sinister implications, as Mr Menon points out'; 'Translated into political terms, Yeats's tendency is Fascist. Throughout most of his life, and long before Fascism was ever heard of, he had had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route'; and 'He is a great hater of democracy, of the modern world, science, machinery, the concept of progress – above all, the idea of human equality' (2016 [1943]: 204). Strangely, too, it appears generations of scholars have also not checked the dates of Yeats's poems selected by Orwell, in the context of O'Brien's dismissal; or noted the absence of Orwell's attention to *A Vision* from O'Brien's chronology of a 'sinister' Yeats. This attack on Orwell by O'Brien on the basis of a flawed counter-thesis has never been questioned and called out, it seems, within the scholarship concerning Yeats's alleged fascist leanings.

O'Brien later returns to Orwell only to dismiss him again, and permanently from the essay, albeit with an initial compliment: 'George Orwell, though critical, and up to a point percipient, about Yeats's tendencies, thought that Yeats misunderstood what

an authoritarian society would be like' (1988 [1965]: 42). O'Brien is referring to Orwell's argument that 'the new authoritarian civilisation, if it arrives, will not be aristocratic, or what [Yeats] means by aristocratic' as it will 'not be ruled by noblemen with Van Dyck faces, but by anonymous millionaires, shiny-bottomed bureaucrats and murdering gangsters' (2016 [1943]: 205). O'Brien objects to what he sees as Orwell's implication of 'a degree of innocence in Yeats which cannot reasonably be postulated' (1988 [1965]: 42) and an additional implication that 'the sensitive nature of the poet would necessarily be revolted by the methods of rule of an authoritarian state' (ibid: 43). O'Brien builds a persuasive case that Yeats's 'considerable experience of practical politics' and as a public figure meant he was far from naïve and could certainly countenance and even admire rule with an iron fist (ibid). O'Brien highlights Yeats's links in Ireland to, for instance, 'strongman' politician Kevin O'Higgins, who infamously signed off seventy-seven executions (see White 1966); the leader of the fascist paramilitary movement known as the Blueshirts, Eoin O'Duffy (see McGarry 2005); and fellow members of the Senate.

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Oddly, however, in singling out this small portion of Orwell's review for criticism, Orwell's argument is decontextualised by O'Brien from the bigger picture of Orwell's attention to *A Vision*. Orwell first quotes, via Menon, from *A Vision* to show that Yeats 'appears to welcome the coming age' of an aristocratic civilisation 'which is 'to be "hierarchical, masculine, harsh, surgical", and he is influenced both by Ezra Pound and by various Italian Fascist writers' (2016 [1943]: 205). Again, Orwell's attention to *A Vision* via Menon might have been expected to serve O'Brien's conception and chronology of a 'sinister' Yeats. Instead, O'Brien appears to perform a species of Bloom's '*Clinamen*', having asserted that Orwell was only 'up to a point percipient'. Yet the considerable extent to which O'Brien's treatment of Orwell remains unsatisfactory can be gauged in part from the only explicit reference to *A Vision* in his long essay, which comes, in fact, in a quotation from Yeats's letter to the novelist and playwright, Olivia Shakespear, dated 23 July 1933 about meeting Blueshirts leader O'Duffy for the first time. This reference to *A Vision* by Yeats is not commented upon by O'Brien: 'I was ready [to meet and 'talk my anti-democratic philosophy' with the Blueshirts leader], for I had just re-written for the seventh time the part of *A Vision* that deals with the future' (Wade 1954: 812). Given that a key overall argument of O'Brien's essay is that Yeats's politics 'were, in his maturity and old age, generally pro-Fascist in tendency and Fascist in practice on the single occasion when opportunity arose' (1988 [1965]: 50), i.e. Yeats's initial support for O'Duffy's Blueshirts, Orwell's review based on Menon's findings regarding *A Vision* could hardly be more pertinent.

O'Brien's two brief and relatively minor criticisms amount to a notably superficial and largely evasive response to Orwell's review. Yet this is more than can be said for the most celebrated defence of Yeats against the charge of fascist leanings: Elizabeth Cullingford's *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (1981). Just as it might have been expected that Orwell and Menon, as precursors, would be acknowledged by O'Brien and serve to aid his representation of Yeats as 'pro-fascist', so too might it have been expected that Cullingford would acknowledge and endeavour to rise to the challenge posed by Orwell and Menon to her view that Yeats was not a fascist but a (Burkean) liberal, chiefly, in politics and that Yeats's 'fantasies have been taken for his convictions' (1984 [1981]: 234). Instead, Cullingford's emphasis, as it turns out, is on seeking to refute O'Brien, primarily, on a blow-by-blow basis. Perhaps partly as a consequence of O'Brien's meagre attention to Orwell, without reference to Menon, in his essay, both Orwell and Menon are oddly consigned in Cullingford's book to the small-print listings in the Selected Bibliography rather than taken on substantively.

Cullingford is able to effectively bypass, then, Menon and Orwell as O'Brien's forerunners in presenting what Freyer deems the 'most valuable part' of her book: a 'detailed analysis of the two versions and some unpublished drafts of *A Vision*, which expound Yeats's view of history, leading, as she rightly suggests, to his exploring the possibility that fascism might be the ethos to which world history in its twentieth-century context was tending' (1981:129-130). Cullingford's combative response to O'Brien (rather than Menon and Orwell, too) also shapes what Freyer deems the 'weakest part' of her book: 'where wishful thinking leads her to gloss over Yeats's very real admiration for Mussolini's Italy as a possible model for the new state he hoped Ireland might build on the *tabula rasa* created by the British withdrawal following the 1921 Treaty' (1981: 130). It is striking, however, that Cullingford's final sentence reads almost like a repurposing of Orwell's ending to his review, where he affirms that the politics will leave its mark on the smallest details of a writer's work, to ratify her own opposite position: '[Yeats's] opinions, though not those of a social democrat, were nevertheless seldom inhumane. Since Yeats was essentially and not incidentally a political writer, and since a political substructure is apparent even in poems not overtly concerned with political themes, this fact is of the utmost importance to a student of his work' (1984 [1981]: 235). Notably, too, whereas Orwell's Yeats 'is too big a man to share the illusions of Liberalism' (2016 [1943]: 205), Cullingford's Yeats is of all political stances, 'probably closest to that of Burke's Old Whigs: an aristocratic liberalism that combined love of individual freedom with respect for the ties of the organic social group. But modern Liberals, identified as they were with *laissez-faire* capitalism, had little appeal' (1984 [1981]: 235). Cullingford's book practically spoils for, but falls short of, head-on confrontation with Orwell's

review, and has also somehow escaped direct comparison, it appears, within the scholarship concerning the debate over Yeats's alleged fascist leanings.

'IRRATIONAL VIOLENCE'

However, perhaps the most surprising example of the failure to bring Menon and Orwell properly into consideration of Yeats's politics and *A Vision*, and to expressly situate their critical contributions among those of other key writers in this regard, is the second volume of R. F. Foster's acclaimed biography entitled *W.B. Yeats: A Life, Vol. II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (2003). This is all the more puzzling in the context of what was already, well before 2003, a highly developed and still far from settled debate over Yeats's alleged fascist sympathies, in which O'Brien and Cullingford had long since occupied diametrically opposed positions. To his credit though, Foster does not shy away from the fascism issue in his accounts of both versions of *A Vision*. For instance, he highlights Yeats's revision of the climactic instalment, Part IV, of Book III 'Dove or Swan' for the 1937 version and speculates that a reason might be that the original text (completed by Yeats on Capri in February 1925) is 'deeply affected by contemporary European upheavals, and categorically questions the utility of democratic forms of government' (2003: 290). Significantly, too, Yeats's historical mapping of civilisation includes, in the original Part IV, what Foster describes as 'a literary reflection on what was not yet called "modernism"' (ibid: 289). The final sentence of Foster's quotation of this reflection reads: 'It is as though myth and fact, united until the exhaustion of the Renaissance, have now fallen so far apart that man understands for the first time the rigidity of fact, and calls up, by that very recognition, myth – the *Mask* – which now but gropes its way out of the mind's dark but will shortly pursue and terrify' (Yeats 2008 [1926]: 175). According to Foster, this 'last phrase betrays the political dimension behind all this' (2003: 290). Yet Orwell's foregrounding of the issue of the relation between fascism and the wider literary intelligentsia (i.e. modernists like Pound and Eliot), based on Menon's findings regarding *A Vision*, could hardly be more pertinent here.

Foster later employs the word 'sinister' (reminiscent of Orwell's repeated usage of it in reference to Yeats and *A Vision* on the basis of Menon's book, as well as O'Brien's usage of it to describe Yeats's political ideas in the poet's maturity and late life) in confirming that Yeats's immersion in the ideological currents of fascism should not be overlooked, not least in relation to *A Vision*:

The fact that he was writing in the Italy of Mussolini, whose sinister rallying-cry about trampling on the decomposing body of the Goddess of Liberty WBY had himself quoted a year before, cannot be ignored: nor can his simultaneous plunge

into reading seminal works of the Fascist movement. He was also discussing with Joseph Hone the formation of a distinctly undemocratic political party in Ireland. The message of *A Vision* may be aristocratic as much as determinist, but it certainly expects 'irrational violence' and totalitarian government to replace a decadent democracy. ... Democratic art had been rejected long ago by WBY; democratic politics were now condemned by association (2003:291).

As pointed out in relation to O'Brien's essay, Orwell quotes from *A Vision*, via Menon, before arguing that Yeats 'fails to see that the new authoritarian civilisation, if it arrives, will not be aristocratic, or what he means by aristocratic' (2016 [1943]: 205) – which, according to O'Brien, erroneously implies 'a degree of innocence in Yeats' politically (1988 [1965]:42). Specifically, however, Orwell quotes from 'Dove or Swan' (i.e. the same section Foster draws special attention to) where Yeats 'describes the new civilization which he hopes and believes will arrive' (2016 [1943]: 205). Yeats writes that this is to be 'an *antithetical* aristocratic civilisation in its completed form, every detail of life hierarchical, every great man's door crowded at dawn by petitioners, great wealth everywhere in a few men's hands, all dependent upon a few, up to the Emperor himself who is a God dependent on a greater God, and everywhere in Court, in the family, an inequality made law...' (1990 [1937]: 266). These lines, with minor variations from Orwell's quotation, appear in 'Dove or Swan' in both versions of *A Vision* (in Part IV of the 1937 version and Part III of the original – see also p.157 of the original, listed in the References below). In Part XVII of Book IV 'The Great Year of the Ancients' which precedes 'Dove or Swan' in the 1937 version, Yeats explains that 'an *antithetical* dispensation obeys imminent power, is expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical' (1990 [1937]: 256). Such passages inform Orwell's view, via Menon, that Yeats 'appears to welcome the coming age, which is to be 'hierarchical, masculine, harsh, surgical', and he is influenced both by Ezra Pound and by various Italian Fascist writers' (2016 [1943]: 205).

It is important to note, of course, that Menon and Orwell were deeply disturbed by the revised 1937 text even though it was, as Foster explains, toned down from the original: 'Selectively quoted, and read in retrospect, "Dove or Swan" is an ominous text. That its readership was both limited and bewildered may have been to the advantage of the author's reputation, and so was his decision to drop its conclusion from the later version' (2003: 291). Foster subsequently reiterates, in his account of the revised treatise, that 'Dove or Swan' has 'some alterations, with the assertions of 1925 turned, more gingerly, into questions in 1937' (2003: 603). While neither Menon nor Orwell is likely to have been any less alarmed by 'Dove or Swan' on this account, as indicated by Orwell's view

that 'the tendency of the passage [from 'Dove or Swan'] I have quoted above is obvious, and its complete throwing overboard of whatever good the past two thousand years have achieved is a disquieting symptom', the evidence of some toning down by Yeats could nevertheless be seen as potential support for Orwell's warning that 'one ought not to assume that Yeats, if he had lived longer, would necessarily have followed his friend Pound, even in sympathy' (2016 [1943]: 205).

Perhaps most striking, however, is Orwell's relevance to Foster's examination of Yeats's infamous (albeit short-lived) association with the Irish fascist movement led by Eoin O'Duffy, the so-called Blueshirts – not least Yeats's composition of 'Three Marching Songs' for the movement in late 1933 and early 1934. As we have seen in relation to O'Brien's essay, Yeats wrote a letter to Olivia Shakespear dated 23 July 1933 in which he expressed his readiness to meet the Blueshirts leader after having 'just re-written for the seventh time the part of *A Vision* that deals with the future' (Wade 1954: 812). Orwell refers to Yeats's association with the Blueshirts in his response to Charles Morgan's accusation in *The Times Literary Supplement* that 'now and then, the political itch overcomes' Orwell in the review (Davison 2001 [1998]: 284). Orwell writes: 'But apart from these quotations [from *A Vision*], the facts are notorious. Did not Yeats write a "marching song" for O'Duffy's Blueshirts?' (2001 [1998]: 285-286). The third song as it was first published, for instance, clearly has parallels with 'Dove or Swan' in its depiction of hierarchy and inequality, although the connection between these two texts is not explicitly shown by Orwell and Foster:

'Soldiers take pride in saluting their Captain,
The devotee proffers a knee to his Lord,
Some take delight in adorning a woman.
What's equality – Muck in the yard:

Historic Nations grow

From above to below' (Foster 2003: 478).

As we have seen, O'Brien takes issue with Orwell's speculation that 'there must be some kind of connection between [Yeats's] wayward, even tortured style of writing and his rather sinister vision of life' (2016 [1943]: 202). Notably, Foster argues that Yeats's interest in fascism was 'partly a question of cultivating a furious style *pour épater* the Irish bourgeoisie' (2003: 482); and Foster's ending, which readily brings Orwell's speculation on Yeats's style to mind, might be purposely allusive: 'To an extent perhaps unrecognized, WBY's affinity with Fascism (not National Socialism) was a matter of rhetorical style; and the achievement of style, as he himself had decreed long before, was closely connected to shock tactics'

(2003: 483). As W. J. McCormack observes in *Blood Kindred: W. B. Yeats – The Life, The Death, The Politics* (2005), Foster's position is not, of course, the same as Orwell's. McCormack comments disapprovingly of Foster that the 'difference between Orwell and Foster is more real than apparent'. He adds: 'The former holds that the poet's politics could (ideally at least) be understood through an analysis of his style. The latter suggests that the style (understood as a superficial end-in-itself) is all that the politics amounts to' (ibid: 431).

UNANSWERED CHALLENGE

As this stinging criticism of Foster indicates, McCormack's book is noteworthy for its recognition of the enduring relevance of Orwell's review to scholarship concerning Yeats's politics. McCormack's book is also significant, however, for its explicit acknowledgement of the continuing importance of Menon's book, too. Although McCormack deals with Menon's book to a lesser degree, his positive representation of both Menon's book and Orwell's review, in conjunction, marks a departure from the prevailing scholarship. McCormack turns approvingly at times to both writers (whereas he takes issue with others, including Foster and Cullingford) in the course of reinvigorating the profile of a 'sinister' Yeats who, McCormack concludes, 'was fascist on (for me) too many occasions' (2005: 433). Unusually, for instance, McCormack refers to Menon and Orwell on equal footing and in chronological order (albeit incorrectly stating that publication of Menon's book occurred in 1943, when it was in fact 1942, and reducing Yeats's forenames to initials in the title): 'Publishing in 1943, the biographer-scholar V. K. N. Menon noted the sinister side to Yeats's visionary philosophy, and an Indian commentator might be allowed some insight into the poet's appropriation of Asian wisdom. Certainly George Orwell thought so, reviewing *The Development of W.B. Yeats* for *Horizon* (2005: 24). Later, he turns the spotlight on Orwell's review of what he calls 'a study from remoter parts' (2005: 380) by Menon, focusing in particular on Orwell's speculation on a possible link between Yeats's 'wayward, even tortured style of writing and his rather sinister vision of life' (2016 [1943]: 202). Highlighting that Orwell's review still haunts the scholarship, McCormack argues that this aspect 'remains as unanswered as it is unavoidable' and he asserts that 'its challenge surely begs an answer' (2005: 380). Although O'Brien is repeatedly referred to throughout McCormack's book, O'Brien's response, as we have seen, to Orwell on this issue is evidently disregarded by McCormack without comment.

Unusually, too, McCormack interrogates the finer meanings of Orwell's language and speculation: 'Yet what does he mean by "tendency"? Does he mean an inbuilt, ever-present bias... or does he mean something more active and less given, a thing responsive and changing...?' (2005: 380). McCormack adds that Orwell

'takes us further along a path of his unanswered questions', and then quotes Orwell's bombshell statements which, as we have also seen, are avoided by O'Brien: 'Translated into political terms, Yeats's tendency is Fascist. Throughout most of his life, and long before Fascism was ever heard of, he had had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route' (2016 [1943]: 204). This leads into a rare critical reflection on the value and nature of Orwell's engagement with Menon's book:

Given that Menon's endeavour was to gauge 'the great poetry of Yeats's last days' against *A Vision*, Orwell has most usefully turned the argument into a historical direction. Yeats's tendency preceded fascism, he says, without quite committing himself to the extreme view that the poet was a fascist *avant la lettre*. Instead, he discriminates between the various routes to fascism, Yeats having travelled on or close to the aristocratic one. Again, Orwell's caution is evident in his choice of words. For Yeats was no aristocrat, and could only have travelled *in the style* of one (2005: 380-381).

PAPER

Although McCormack rightly discerns some caution in Orwell's approach in the *Horizon* review, this caution is less evident, as we shall see, in Orwell's subsequent *Time and Tide* review (April 1943) where he states matter-of-factly that Yeats had fascist sympathies. Moreover, McCormack's point on 'historical direction' is not quite fair to Menon, whose endeavour (as the book title indicates) was to study the development of Yeats across his oeuvre. The historical direction Menon sets up, in fact, in regard to Yeats's preceding aristocratic bias, germane to Yeats's later fascist leanings, is reaffirmed in the Conclusion to his book through his immense disquiet over Yeats's authoritarian attitude (under the influence of Pound in particular); his recognition that 'in a long-term objective analysis, poetry has played a great and necessary part in human history and the integration of human relationships' (1942: 93); his sense that judgment of 'such a towering figure as Yeats' should be easier after the war when 'the immediate problems which confront us are solved and our sense of values reintegrated' (*ibid*); and his consciously interim position pending the verdict of posterity:

Until then one can only repeat the well-worn words that he was the last poet in the aristocratic tradition, and say that in his last days, with the bottom knocked out of his moral code, and unable to fully grasp the historical process, he fell back upon the pride and strength of the individual will, harping always on the type of nobility and greatness he had been brought up to accept. But his imaginative intensity never flagged, and everywhere his character and his personality stood out. Whatever the verdict of the future, his work will remain for ever the greatest personal document of our times (*ibid*).

McCormack later revisits the issue of a possible link between 'political tendency and literary style' (2005: 401). He provocatively draws a parallel between 'Yeats's staged decapitations and the brutalities of closed prison-camps' in the 1930s, and asserts: 'The challenge posed by Orwell and V. K. N. Menon remains unmet' (ibid). However, although McCormack rightly underscores both Orwell and Menon's enduring relevance to scrutiny of Yeats's politics, his engagement throughout is almost exclusively with the text of Orwell's review rather than Menon's book, too. Still, despite this shortcoming, the fact that he readily acknowledges Menon's seminal contribution (including highlighting Menon's Indian heritage as particularly beneficial to criticism of Yeats) and does not downplay or sever the connection between Orwell's review and Menon's book, could be seen to point towards a renewed sense of the importance of contextualisation in future scholarship. After all, while Menon's identity as the author of the Yeats book reviewed by Orwell is obviously no secret, and descriptions of him such as those by McCormack (for example, 'biographer-scholar' and 'Indian commentator') are sufficiently accurate, it remains that so little is widely known of who Menon was (in biographical and professional detail) whereas Orwell's life and works have been extensively covered by generations of biographers and critics. This huge disparity is not helped by quotation from Menon's book, if it occurs at all, tending to be via quotation from Orwell's review. Two issues are, therefore, sorely in need of scholarly attention: firstly, the lack of direct engagement with the text of Menon's book; and secondly, the lack of proper contextualisation of these two texts and writers, including reference to Orwell's subsequent review of Menon's book (in *Time and Tide*) and his broader professional relationship with Menon at the BBC.

A REMARKABLE MAN

As several volumes of *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (under the general editorship of Peter Davison) indicate in periodic fragments, the professional association between Orwell and Menon both predates and post-dates Orwell's first review of Menon's book (in *Horizon*, January 1943) by some time and is quite extensive. Volume XV, entitled *Two Wasted Years 1943* (1998), shows that there was even a role reversal. *Talking to India* (November 1943), 'which was published by George Allen & Unwin' and which Orwell 'edited and contributed to' (Davison 1998c: 320), was reviewed by Menon (*Tribune*, 26 May 1944) 'who had broadcast frequently for Orwell' (1998c: 324) at the BBC. Menon is also explicitly mentioned by Orwell in relation to the target audience in the Introduction, where he refers to 'a respectable number of Indian novelists and essayists (Ahmed Ali, Mulk Raj Anand, Cedric Dover and Narayana Menon, to name only four) who prefer to write in English' (1998c: 322). E. M. Forster, who endorsed Menon's book, was among the contributors: 'Author of *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*,

etc' (1998c: 323). Although too copious to detail here, Orwell's BBC Indian Service-related correspondence includes, from 25 April 1942, dealing with frequent broadcast talks on literary and cultural topics and musical selections handled by Menon (who was a musician descended from musicians, as Grierson discloses in the Preface to Menon's book) as well as contracts for and payments to Menon for his broadcast contributions. In his note to Orwell's letter to 'Mr. Menon' dated 25 April 1942, in Volume XIII entitled *All Propaganda is Lies 1941-1942* (1998), Davison mentions that Menon later 'arranged Indian music (with S. Sinha) at the "Indian Demonstration" on 31 January 1943 at the London Coliseum' (2001 [1998a]: 285).

Mr or Dr Menon, as Orwell (or rather, Eric Blair) usually refers to him in the correspondence, was clearly a remarkable man: highly talented and competent, more than willing to co-operate with and assist Orwell, prepared to tackle diverse subjects (including at short notice), and duly described in glowing terms by Orwell to other correspondents – as 'gifted', for example, in a letter to Alex Comfort dated 13 July 1943 (Davison 1998c: 169). Some of the more notable events, in the context of their mutual interest in Yeats, were: a broadcast talk booked for Menon 'on the anti-Fascist Youth Rally' and 'Signed: Z. A. Bokhari' (Davison 2001 [1998b]: 29) in September 1942; a letter from Orwell to E. M. Forster about Menon's book in November 1942, suggesting it 'will, I think, be suitable to mention in your next talk' (Davison 2001 [1998b]: 182); and in December 1942, Menon's participation with, among others, Orwell and T. S. Eliot in the *Voice* radio magazine programme on the theme 'Oriental Influence on English Literature' (Davison 2001 [1998b]: 211), which featured several poems by Yeats.

Furthermore, Orwell saw fit to review Menon's book a second time. His lesser known review for *Time and Tide* (17 April 1943) adopts a more straightforward and conversational approach (including a humorous reference to Yeats's occult beliefs as 'yogey-bogey') and comes across as more admiring of Yeats the poet despite being highly critical, again, of Yeats's occult preoccupations and political leanings (Orwell 1998 [1943]: 71). Orwell commences by focusing on the 'three main phases' of Yeats's development and works up to an excoriating portrayal of Yeats's hatred 'of the modern world', 'the democratic, rationalistic outlook' and 'the concept of human equality', highlighting the occult elements and ominous implications of *A Vision* (1998 [1943]: 70). Orwell states matter-of-factly that Yeats was 'sympathetic towards Fascism, at least the Italian version of it', reiterating the influence on Yeats of 'Ezra Pound and various Italian thinkers' but also that Yeats might not have followed, ultimately, in the direction of Pound (*ibid*). Nevertheless, Orwell discharges a highly explosive statement: Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (1920) does not imply disapproval,

he says, even though ‘the rise of the Nazis seems to be foretold’ (ibid). Notably, Orwell distinguishes to a greater degree between Yeats’s politics and literary achievement: ‘As Mr Menon rightly says, Yeats’s acceptance of Fascism is a “disquieting symptom”, but it in no way detracts from the interest of his literary development’ (1998 [1943]: 70-71). As a result, Orwell concludes with high praise for – rather than, as in the first review, a chilling warning about – Yeats’s writings, and once again approves of Menon’s study: ‘[Yeats’s] life was devoted to poetry with a completeness that has been very rare among the English-speaking peoples, and the results justified it. In spite of some patches of absurdity it is an impressive story, and Mr Menon retells it with great delicacy and acuteness’ (1998 [1943]: 71).

The overall relation between Orwell and Menon, then, is much broader in its scope and more complex in its details than scholars, in the main, have cared to research and report. Instead, for many years, Orwell’s first review has been largely prioritised at the expense of Menon’s book in regard to the debate over Yeats’s alleged fascist leanings. Therefore, this paper calls for a change to this unsatisfactory state of affairs through reinstatement of Menon’s book to its due level of importance as both the precursor to and subject of Orwell’s reviews. This level of importance Orwell himself clearly respected. It is incumbent on scholars to rebalance critical treatment of, and thus to reconnect, these texts through enhanced contextualisation in a suitably unified rather than fragmentary manner. This will require greater recognition and appreciation of both writers as a) key instigators of, and contributors to, what is still an ongoing debate concerning Yeats and fascism, and b) professional associates at the BBC.

Moreover, hopefully further biographical and professional details could be ascertained beyond Menon’s work with Orwell for the BBC and Menon’s book on Yeats (in which he is referred to, on the title page, as ‘Senior Carnegie Scholar in English at the University of Edinburgh’ and which, according to Davison on p. 289 of Volume XIV, is the only book by Menon listed in the British Library). While images of Orwell have proliferated in the scholarship and, in the 21st century, on social media, many scholars are likely to have never seen an image of Menon to know what he even looked like. A BBC blog by Professor James Procter, entitled ‘The Empire Scripts Back’ and dated 26 October 2018, contains a shadowy black-and-white BBC group photograph from December 1942 which includes ‘BBC music producer Narayana Menon’ (Procter 2018), amusingly on the far right, as well as Orwell and T. S. Eliot. As Menon’s side profile and obscured features seem aptly to suggest, there was certainly more to the mysterious Dr Menon than meets the eye. Scholarship that expressly illuminates, so to speak, who Menon was and what he achieved in his life and career would be a long overdue and, surely, welcome development in Orwell studies.

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