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## The Poet's Life

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family sojourn among the middle-classes in a suburban Dublin semi-detached house.

I have always been uncomfortable with claims that purport to lay bare the "political unconscious" of any writer. McCormack is on firmer ground dealing with Yeats's conscious connections with an extended "blood kindred," that included many unsavory characters from the murky world of fascist politics: his support for L'Action française in the 1920's, the flirtation with O'Duffy and the Blue Shirts, the virulent anti-Semitism of Iseult Gonne and Francis Stewart, and the various Nazis who populated his circle in the 1930's.

At the heart of this reflective study of Yeats's life, his attitude towards family and death, and his politics, was the presentation to Yeats in 1934 of the Goethe-Plakette award by Nazi Germany. A few months earlier *The Countess Cathleen* was staged in Frankfurt and produced by a member of the Nazi SS, Untersturmführer Friedrich Bethge. According to McCormack, Yeats approved of the

alterations that allowed an interpretation that was "explicitly anti-Semitic." At the same time Yeats was rushing his ballads written in support of the Irish fascist Blue Shirts into print and his letters at that time are full of "hate-filled utterances." In 1938 the poet publicly commended Nazi legislation that appropriated Jewish homes in Germany. Among the essays that Yeats's widow prepared for publication after his death in 1939 one finds "the bluntest endorsement of biologist eugenics, enthusiastic anticipations of war, and an utter contempt for democracy." Despite these views, Yeats was never a member of any fascist party. While McCormack establishes the Nazi credentials of those behind the Goethe-Plakette honor, he is however, less successful in linking Yeats directly to the Nazis.

This was always going to be an argumentative and controversial book; even McCormack acknowledges that his attempt to tie Yeats in with Nazi elements and the "manoeuvres of a petty criminal" would

outrage admirers of Yeats and his work. But this contentious biography manages to cut across claims by Roy Forster and others that Yeats acceptance of the 1934 Frankfurt prize is "entirely rebuttable."

More questionable is McCormack's assertion that if a man of Yeats standing had spoken out he might have influenced Irish policy on the issue of sanctuary for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. At other times he over-ices the cake such as his description of a "physio-psychic link" between Yeats and the Nazi Budina brothers of Co. Wicklow.

While McCormack is skeptical of the postcolonial theorists adoption of Yeats, he utilizes Edward Said's concept of "late style" to critically examine Yeats's output during his final years. After a fallow period following the death of Lady Gregory in 1932, Yeats threw himself into what was left of his life in a final outburst of poetry, plays and prose. McCormack draws attention to the way that the inspiration for many of these works

stems from Yeats engagement with fascism.

McCormack prefers to ask whether Yeats was fascist, rather than, whether Yeats was a fascist, a subtle but important distinction that privileges the adjective rather than the noun. He answers that for him Yeats was on "too many occasions." *Blood Kindred* is not a demolition job on Yeats, but rather an exploration of a complex and contradictory man. McCormack's attempt to settle scores with sections of academia is not of great interest to the general reader, but the issues he raises demand investigation in any future assessment of Yeats. McCormack may not have demolished Roy Forster's monumental work, but he has chipped away at the pedestal on which Yeats personal reputation stands. McCormack believes that Yeats was the greatest poet of the twentieth century and among the greatest of all time. For him, Yeats engagement with fascism diminishes the man, but not the poetry. •

—Dublin

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JOHN MONTAGUE

*The Pear is Ripe: A Memoir*  
Liberties Press, 2008, €25.00

Reviewed by  
TYLER FARRELL

**T**HE AIM OF MEMOIR has always been rooted in truthful and mostly believable memory. However, any autobiography that attempts to be absolute truth will ultimately fail. Therefore, even though most writers are aware of the slippery slope of autobiography many also insist on attempting some form of life writing. Often the real challenge of self-reflection becomes a question of how a writer keeps his autobiography from being his secondary work or a secondary thought.

Poets, for example, are often motivated, enlivened by the very notion of telling a humorous, profound or honest story from the perspective of personal truth. Luckily, the newly fashionable memoir world has aided this truthful intrigue. One reason poets feel compelled to write memoir is the utility of a different kind of omniscient narrator, one where historical control is livelier than in any other genre, but also seemingly similar to the poetic voice versus the voice in, say, fiction or drama. John Montague's new memoir, *The Pear is Ripe*, is no exception. It uses memory to not only convey the poet's version of the truth, but also to explore believability and perspective, attempt to speak as the voice of an important twentieth-century poet while feeding fans with more anecdotes of literary times from Montague's busy poet schedule.

*The Pear is Ripe* comes nearly seven years after Montague's first foray into autobiography, *Company: A Chosen Life* (Duckworth 2001), and with more maturity, more poetic and personal form. It succeeds gracefully giving a seemingly accurate portrayal in an unassuming narrative voice; a Montague trademark. His memories know about the life of a young poet in new lands and the adventures he procured, the people whom he surrounded himself. The times were different in 60s Berkeley, Paris and Ireland and Montague had the good fortune to be in

all places and highly aware at crucial times with the memory of a writer and without as many war wounds as the average devotee of arts, sexual activity and of course, all things poetry.

But Montague was not all things to all people and his memoir uses skillful language to peel back layers of this changing and "ready to pluck" pear. His recurring theme of change is reflected in the places and state of mind he lived. He witnessed the Bay Area poetry and protest scene, the Parisian expatriates with their new ideas and devotion only to parties and the written word, and many days in Dublin or Northern Ireland. Wherever Montague was there were always writers, readings, lectures and classrooms.

John also loved to teach and to create an atmosphere where students could learn about being an artist, could surround themselves with similar people, people who they respected and admired. Montague was the moral poet, one of the devoted, always in awe of some of his poetic compatriots: Snyder, Duncan, Rexroth, Spicer, Ginsberg, Sartre, and Beckett to name just a few. These writers helped to shape Montague, but his voice is still his own person, his thoughts often filtered through an Ulster Catholic viewpoint and handed to us through the art of memory. This art is what James Liddy calls Montague's "final great art of redemption" ("Interview with John Montague" *Cream City Review*, 1979) the ability to recall one's own past through poetry, or in this case, the memoirs of a poet.

Simultaneously, Montague creates a twentieth-century poetic world, one in which many poets know about, but not nearly as intimately. Proof of this seems to be the memoir's exhaustive amount of anecdotes that include almost worldly advice for young writers of another generation. Montague desires to pass on some wisdom. However, while the parties and the poetry are only one aspect of the work, the teachings seem to leak onto the page and hinge ideas together like an older and much wiser guru giving knowledge to a generation of nearly deaf ears, a generation whose comprehension of such mighty poetic matters may be only cursory. In regards

to memory, his lesson is quite clear and told through the learning curve of his poetry.

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academic and writing jobs, the lack of both regular sex and major drug use, the muse of the north, the stories involving other writers and notables. One of my favorites is a brief tryst about Sylvia Beach at age seventy who was invited to a Montague party in West Bank Paris and showed up with a bottle of champagne under her coat, walking up the cobblestone path looking "as frail as a figurine" (60). This was right around the time of the creation of the Joyce Museum at the Martello Tower in Sandycove and Montague

interjects his tale because it seems that every good Irishman knows a story involving someone who was oft mentioned in the same breath as James Joyce.

And why wouldn't Montague want to include every story worth telling? This is memoir after all. He has seen so very much of interest to the Irish and American literary world and conveys an attitude toward life and literature relayed with a tone and language like a poet's: instinctive and memorable. Perhaps the theme that comes across best in this new installment is how Montague has been such a champion of poetry, a young believer of art whose travelogue on two continents of poetic morality, emotion, and observation could rival most poets of the latter twentieth century, and often does.

We receive many trademark mentions of Montague love, history, and the self in *The Pear is Ripe*. We see his attitude towards life and how he is often "keen" on poets. And with the help of his current wife his technique of "revelation by anecdote" (7) takes shape, starts with realistic times and places. He writes about the past in a rather fluid way and attempts to bring new life to stories that we may have read before. One, in particular, is the John Berryman reading in Dublin where Patrick Kavanagh makes a very public exit. Montague's other version of this story is also contained in his book of essays, *The Figure in the Cave*, but with less detail. These newly fleshed out stories often pack a literary punch as we wander through Montague's world aware of his influence, mindful of his teachings.

The primary reason to read this memoir is that *The Pear is Ripe* is still the poet's life, a part of memory that is a necessary study for any fans and scholars of the Irish literary community. I often wonder if Montague will write the third installment of his life as projected in *Company*, and tell us more truth, more self, more lessons to the next poetic generation. Luckily, for now, we are able to use this chapter as a model to secure our own memories and to see the life of a poet blessed by John's honest and memorable words. •

—University of Dubuque

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