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A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates by Richard Yates; Blake Bailey

Review by: Daniel P. King

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In his final essay, "Is Life a Miracle?", he states hauntingly, "What is the coherence, the integrity, the consciousness, the intelligence, the spirit, the informing form that leaves the body when it dies?" Here we have one last example of the profound ideas Berry is capable of, in a prose that is as clear and enlightening as any I have ever read.

Marvin J. LaHood
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Collected Works

■ **Robert Lowell. *Collected Poems*.** Frank Bidart, David Gewanter, eds. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2003. xvii + 1,186 pages. \$45. ISBN 0-374-12617-8

IN HIS POEM "History," Robert Lowell (1917–77) wrote: "History has to live with what was here, / clutching and close to fumbling all we had— / it is so dull and gruesome how we die, / unlike writing, life never finishes." The sometimes tormented poet also wrote in "The Republic" that "There's a madness that is woe, / and there is a wisdom that is madness." I first began to read a lot of Lowell a few years ago, and I admired his wide thematic range and his contemplative language, which embraced nature, social life, history, and literature with nuance and wit, and I found the intensity of his commitments compelling. Lowell became part of a personal pantheon that includes Ai, Anna Akhmatova, Yehuda Amichai, W. H. Auden, Constantine Cavafy, Emily Dickinson, Robert Duncan, T. S. Eliot, David Ferry, Langston Hughes, June Jordan, John Koethe, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Octavio Paz, Adrienne Rich, Rainer Rilke, Walt Whitman, and C. K. Williams. However, personal memory is not the same as posterity; posterity is what a culture, not a single man, remembers. Lowell had been important and influential, but also controversial, for how his work used his life and emotional vulnerability as a reference point, a controversy rooted in concern for both craft and propriety. We sometimes prefer attitudes to emotions, especially in men. To speak, to act—almost at any cost—can seem better than to say or do nothing to people who believe themselves to have inherited passivity and silence, as many in the 1940s and 1950s did, but then when all of society begins to speak its secrets of conflict, pain, need, and sex, as happened in the 1960s and after, order and reticence become more appealing to people of discernment. The recent publication of Lowell's monumental *Collected Poems*, edited with extensive annotations by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, allows readers to reconsider (and probably dismiss) reservations about Lowell.

In a July 2003 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Frank Bidart quoted Lowell as saying, "I don't care what you write about me after I'm dead, as long as it's serious," and Lowell's collected poems have been published to serious attention. "In his poems and prose tributes, many of them to other writers, Lowell got more out of the mid-century American scene—literary, cultural, political—than anyone else," wrote William H. Pritchard in the *New York Times*. Describing Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour" in her review in the *Los Angeles Times*, Caroline Fraser wrote: "Rich with references, classical and popular—St. John of the Cross's 'Dark Night of the Soul,' Marlowe's Faustus, Milton's Satan, the blues song 'Careless Love'—the poem revisits ancient themes with American idiom and imagery." Fraser, while noting Lowell's formidable

New England family background and marital problems, looks carefully at several of his other poems, the kind of attention every poet wants. The summer 2003 issue of the *Boston Review* carried James Longenbach's review, which emphasized Lowell's embrace of diverse perspectives and constant rewriting, his tendency to remake his work and himself. "Lowell had the great misfortune of having created the taste by which he was judged," Longenbach wrote, but his *Collected Poems* "liberates the poetry from the poet we think we know."

It is hard to resist a poetry that is about seasons, holidays, neighborhoods, marriage, generational inheritances, great leaders and historical figures (Hannibal, Antony and Cleopatra, Peter the Great, Napoleon), war, mythic stories (Greek, Roman, and also biblical), Paris, Rome, Buenos Aires, legendary singers, Native Americans, Emerson, Thoreau, Beethoven, Rembrandt, Central Park, animals and insects, death and grief, alcohol, love, and references writers and thinkers as diverse as George Santayana, Hannah Arendt, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Hart Crane, Mary McCarthy, William Carlos Williams, and Delmore Schwartz, among other subjects. For me, the strongest, most engaging work collected here can be found in *Life Studies*, *For the Union Dead*, and *Day by Day*.

Lowell does not offer the tragedy of Akhmatova, the dark wit of Amichai, the scholarly bent of Auden, the lively common touch of Hughes, or the spiritual transcendence of Rilke. Lowell's intelligence—evaluative, truthful—meant that his work accepted no easy sentimentality. Too, his attention to detail subverted heaviness of thought, and his many subjects intrigued readers of all kinds. Comparisons are inevitable and usually imprecise, as they suppress knowledge of the uniqueness of a person or thing in order to look at attributes that are similar though unequal. Now that Lowell's *Collected Poems* is here, there is a lifetime of work to live with, and to live with in different moods, with different questions.

Daniel Garrett
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Biography

■ **Blake Bailey. *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*.** New York: Picador. 2003. xii + 671 pages. \$35. ISBN 0-312-28721-6

"HE DRANK TOO MUCH, he smoked too much, he was accident-prone, he led an itinerant life, but as a writer he was all in place." Richard Yates's friend and publisher, Sam Lawrence, aptly summed up this chronicler of disappointed lives. Yates's inspiration was F. Scott Fitzgerald and his life, like Fitzgerald's, was a self-destructive, tragicomic disaster.

Yates's life was a cliché of the twentieth-century American writer: his 1961 classic *Revolutionary Road*, several more good novels (notably *The Easter Parade*, *A Good School*, and *A Special Providence*), and some excellent short stories contrasted with wrecked marriages, severe alcoholism, bipolar disorder, and financial setbacks. Lacking a college education, Yates, nevertheless, taught at several universities, wrote speeches for Robert Kennedy, did screenwriting in Hollywood, and made money, albeit not much.

Richard Yates was truly a man of contrasts. Usually attired in a Brooks Brothers suit with foulard tie, this "gentleman of the old

school," constantly hounded by creditors, liked to say, "The most important thing is not to tell or live a lie." A man of both charm and integrity, his writing mirrored his own life. He wrote of exploded 1950s suburban dreams, setting the tone and examining the hypocrisies of the post-World War II age. He exposed the "quiet desperation" of the American middle class.

As his drinking and mental illness progressed, Yates became more suspicious and anxious about the future. He was consumed with self-loathing over his work and began to believe that the world was conspiring against him. His ex-wife, Martha, said of him, "Dick had to be recognized for his talent, to be one of the literary elite—anything else amounted to failure."

In a private letter, Yates wrote of these feelings: "A popular writer, a writer who gains a broad and sustained contemporary audience, I guess, like any other writer wants to know he's good, and the bestseller lists and talk shows and his annual income all repay whatever faith it was that sat him down in front of his typewriter in the first place. But if he's a serious writer that's got to come second. . . . Much more common, and I think the case is mine, [is when] the good work is its own reward and you share it with as many readers as you can and it stays alive, and has some hard-won clarity and richness, some distillation of human investment, that continues to claim some kind of permanent interest no matter what angles fashion may dispose new readers towards."

In his 1999 essay "The Lost World of Richard Yates," Stewart O'Nan wrote: "To write well and then to be forgotten is a terrifying legacy." But, he predicted, "eventually the books will make it back in print, just as Faulkner's and Fitzgerald's did, and Yates will take his place in the American canon."

Although Yates's books dropped out of print after his death in 1992, Random House resurrected *Revolutionary Road* in 2000. Harvard Book Store listed it as one of "100 Favorite Titles" among college students. The 2001 UK edition prompted the *Times* of London to note that "finally the British reading public will be given the opportunity to discover America's finest forgotten writer." New editions of *The Easter Parade*, *A Good School*, and *A Special Providence* have followed.

Blake Bailey's exhaustive biography will, I predict, move Yates closer toward his recognition as a great American writer. This first biography celebrates the life of a writer forgotten in his final years. It will please his admirers and introduce Yates's accomplishments to a new generation of readers.

Daniel P. King
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■
R. F. Foster. *The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939*. Vol. 2 of *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2003. xxiv + 798 pages + 32 plates. \$45. ISBN 0-19-818465-4

THE SECOND VOLUME of Roy Foster's massive biography is longer than the first, but devotees of Yeats will find it even more absorbing. Though it cannot replace Yeats's own masterful *Autobiography* and his posthumous *Memoirs*, this exhaustive scholarly biography is essential for understanding the personalities that inspired or irritated him so profoundly that he immortalized them in his poetry. Since he became one of the greatest poets who

ever lived, Yeats's life story is naturally compelling, and Foster has documented it with a thoroughness that supersedes all other biographies, though many good ones have been written in the more than six decades since his death.

Foster's first volume, subtitled *The Apprentice Mage*, was an account of Yeats's formative years, leading up to the publication of *Responsibilities* in 1914, which made "The Later Yeats" a poet of increasing mastery and range—Irish as before but a world poet as well—honoring the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 as much as it honored him, a dominant influence not only on his contemporaries but on the most original poets of a younger generation. Ezra Pound, the brash young American, was foremost among them, and he is central to Yeats's life and career as this volume begins—his friend, his editor, his personal secretary, and the best man at his wedding. In fact, if Yeats was most inspired by the liberated and literate women he knew best—his idol Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult, his mistress Olivia Shakespear, his patroness Lady Gregory, and his young wife Georgie Hyde-Lees—Pound had the most influence on his literary career, because of his uncanny ability to recognize genius in others and his willingness to encourage, publicize, even collaborate with it. Yeats and Pound spent the winters from 1913 to 1916 at Stone Cottage in Sussex, reading and writing together. As Foster is quick to acknowledge, "Above all, at Stone Cottage and in Pound's company he could write the kind of poetry which had been announced in *Responsibilities*: at once personal, lofty, and colloquial."

The other great influence on his later career was his wife, who began transmitting messages from unknown spirits as soon as they married in 1917, he at fifty-two and she at a mere twenty-four. She was ready for her role, being unusually intelligent and well versed in spiritualism, initiated by Yeats himself into the Order of the Golden Dawn. Responding to dream voices who guided her in automatic writing, she made a faithful record of all the "Instructors" told her, and Foster quotes a number of illuminating passages from her notebooks to show how vital these communications were to Yeats's major prose works, especially *A Vision*, and to the magnificent poems he wrote in his later years. Foster is convinced that "George," a nickname Pound gave her that Yeats adopted, was not inventing metaphysical games but was trying to help him understand himself and his age, in the shared conviction that unseen presences, wiser than they were, wanted to give him what he called "metaphors for poetry." Mysterious as the process was, the eventual result was the most complex symbolic synthesis of history and human destiny produced by a major poet in modern times, and Yeats was so persuaded of its truth that he incorporated his symbolic system into some of his finest lyric poems, which are fully understandable only to readers willing to tackle not just difficult poems but highly complicated prose. In his case, the effort is worth it.

Foster's completed biography contains many essential facts about the stormy history of Ireland, along with many revelations about Yeats and the people he knew best. The senator of the new Irish Free State shocked Irish readers with the "passionate metaphysics" of his later poetry: "Who am I," he once asked, "that I should not make a fool of myself?" If Foster is more historian than literary critic, he answers most of the questions any serious reader of Yeats might ask, and he answers them with authority.

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