

A Yeats Excursion with Claude Rawson, Summer 1974

Marjorie Perloff

Bio/Abstract: Marjorie Perloff, Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities Emerita at Stanford University and the Florence R. Scott Professor of English Emerita at the University of Southern California, author of many influential works of literary criticism, a highly-regarded translation of the private notebooks of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and a moving memoir, *The Vienna Paradox*, died in March 2024. She had intended to contribute a substantive essay to this volume, but became too ill to do so. In the weeks before her death she wrote this short memoir recalling memorable events in her fifty-year friendship with Claude Rawson.

Keywords: Claude Rawson; W. B. Yeats

I first met Claude Rawson in 1973. I was giving a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) and he was a visiting professor there that year. I must confess I had never heard of him, but my friend Shirley Kenny, whose field was eighteenth-century English literature, had told me he was very important. My talk was on Frank O'Hara, whose gay pop aura can hardly have interested Claude. But at the cocktail party afterwards a big portly man with black curls and beard came up to me and started giving me good hints about Rimbaud and other possible background details for my paper. That was Claude and we became great friends. I remember a few days after my lecture he called and took my husband and me to a performance of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, performed on campus.

My husband had just become the Chair of Cardiology at Penn, and so we had moved from Washington DC which had been home for a long time. I was teaching at the University of Maryland. Since I was a commuting Professor, I couldn't do much in the department, but I took on the role of running the guest lecture program. So, I invited Claude to Maryland and drove him down from Philadelphia, and I recall that he gave an excellent lecture on Ford Madox Ford's style in *Parade's End*, in relation to eighteenth-century fictional style. Claude's mind was very wide-ranging and he could talk on many different subjects, which made him very popular. After the lecture I drove back home but he stayed on in Washington and had a good dinner with his old friends.

Shortly after that, as I recall, Claude went back to England. He had five children so I could never understand how he could stay away so long. The following year, 1974, Joseph my husband and I were travelling and spent a week in London. During that week Claude invited us to visit the University of Warwick and gave us a beautiful little duplex room to stay in in the college and took us out for a wonderful dinner with the Bernard Bergonzis. Bernard was a distinguished Modernist scholar whom I was happy to meet. And I also met Claude's wonderful wife Judy, an Italian Professor at Warwick.

One morning later that week Claude called at the hotel and asked if I would like to go somewhere in South London to do a joint recording on the poetry of W. B. Yeats. I had just finished my dissertation on rhyme and meaning in the poetry of Yeats and so was eager to go. We met at the subway station and set forth. The trip was much longer than we had anticipated and then we got totally lost walking from the station to the little house where the recording was to take place. Audio Learning, as it was called, was a fairly new outfit, and remember that poetry recordings were then in their infancy. The equipment often didn't work and there was a lot of background noise. Anyway, we finally got everything going and Claude would ask questions which I would try to answer. It was not easy because we had very different views of Yeats's work. Claude was interested in large questions about country houses or Yeats's politics whereas I was much more of a formalist, then and now. I was busy analyzing this or that rhyme or rhythmic group whereas Claude was busy talking about Yeats and Ireland or Yeats's relationship to various eighteenth-century figures.

But it worked out fairly well, and at the end of the afternoon we had made an audio-cassette that I still have. It sounds a bit screamy in places but is really quite fine! We laughed on the way home because our hosts had what we considered such bad accents, and we didn't quite like the way they commented on Yeats. But, in any case, it was remarkable how much Claude knew about Yeats, a poet not at all in his area of study. And to this day I am struck by Claude's enormous knowledge base. And when he had read a given book, he seemed to remember every word of it.

Not that there were no lacunae in his training, the great one being American literature. In those days at Oxford, one didn't really study American literature in any kind of meaningful way. Students may have read Melville and Hawthorne and Mark Twain, but Claude had never read Henry James in any kind of serious way, and he knew no Faulkner at all. For years he didn't so much as try either one, but he is now very well read in James if not in Faulkner or related modern fiction writers like Flannery O'Connor or Carson McCullers.

Certainly, Claude's knowledge of the poetry of Yeats and T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens must have helped him to get so many writing assignments from the *Times Literary Supplement* and later the *London Review of Books*. These journals knew they could count on him, just as the Chinese literary world learned to count on him after 2010. Claude was a natural ally for Professor Nie!

And so I am so happy we are celebrating him today in the name of ethical criticism. Many many happy returns of the day and many more fine birthdays, dear Claude!

With love from Margie (Marjorie Perloff).