RICHARD YATES:
THE THINGS THAT MATTER

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RESUMO – Este ensaio constitui-se de uma compilação comentada sobre os diversos fatores que impediram Richard Yates de alcançar apreciação plena, e de desfrutar de anuência da crítica e de reconhecimento popular. A relevância de Yates para a literatura mundial é abordada, assim como sua influência no cenário literário norte-americano. O texto também discute as repercussões e efeitos colaterais de escrever sobre valores universais e atemporais que ninguém quer ouvir, admitir ou se identificar; assim como fornecido pelas opiniões e argumentos que a crítica especializada oferece para consideração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Richard Yates; temas na literatura; crítica literária; identificação.

ABSTRACT – This essay is an annotated compilation of the various factors that have prevented Richard Yates of achieving full appreciation, and from enjoying critical acclaim and popular recognition. It acknowledges Yates’s relevance to world literature and his influence in the American literary scene. The text also discusses the repercussions and side-effects of writing about universal and timeless values no one wants to hear, admit, or identify; as provided by the opinions and arguments that specialized critics offered for consideration.

KEYWORDS – Richard Yates; themes in literature; literary criticism; identification.

Once in a while we find writers like him; brought back to life by a historical accident. The singular event that resuscitated this writer was the adaptation of his first book into a major truly-hollywoodian production, featuring no one less than Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet in their first role together since Titanic. Whether we like it or not, the movie must receive some sort of acknowledgement, if not but because it was responsible for breathing new life to a writer

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most undeserving of the corner - the corner of oblivion - where his once moderate fame and success unswervingly shriveled due to years of mothballing.

Through an essayistic-narrative format, the present text is an appreciation of Richard Yates’s literary feats, as well as an inquisitive search for the reasons that kept him not from achieving public or critical acclaim, but from maintaining them.

Many writers have attempted to find a way to speak a universal language that would appeal to timeless values. Most of them had their works understood, not rejected, by their contemporaries and/or by the following generations and the generations to come.

Different from what many writers have tried, Richard Yates perhaps tackled exactly in the universal and timeless values no one wanted to hear, or admit, or far worse, identify. And that is most certainly what happened. His literary talent and his photographic-realistic writing skills are not at stake here – as a matter of fact, they never were.

The problem was that, inadvertently or not, he wrote the truth that nobody wanted to read, or to see, let alone to see themselves in it. The problem was Yates was rather obstinate about it. He insisted in calling people’s attentions – which he eventually earned. He touched – deeper than anyone would care to admit - a certain kind of people, “people who move like dreamwalkers toward their sad destinies, who try to compensate through careers or sexual encounters for the absence of real human involvement” (WOLITZER, 1977, p.1). They wished those people were not them. That was what he did. That was his crime. He told the things that people must eventually realize, regardless if they wanted to or not.

For that matter, historically speaking, Yates was a consort of the first American Renaissance. He mirrored Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Strangely, he was also a consort of the second American Renaissance, and mirrored Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner.

Much of what Yates wrote shares common viewpoints with what lies in the pages of Walden – Henry David Thoreau’s 1854 ideological memoir - and reverberates in his words: “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (THOREAU, 2000, p. 688). The connection with the second generation mentioned finds its best description in the words of John Irving:

So we dream on. Thus we invent our lives. (…) We invent what we love, and what we fear. (…) We dream on and on: the best hotel, the perfect family, the
resort life. And our dreams escape us almost as vividly as we can imagine them. (In: ATLAS, 1981, p. 3).

This excerpt from the 1978 novel *The World According to Garp*, retells Yate’s ideological tale with bittersweet perfection. The consequence of the humdrum life is mirrored in the invention of a new one. A similar invention can be found in the annals of history, of literary history that is, on the lives of the most famous American expatriates – Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Stein – and their wish for finding something they obviously could not in their own country, or more specifically, in themselves.

April Wheeler, the wife of the protagonist couple in Yates’s novel *Revolutionary Road* does the same. She invents a new life for her and for her husband Frank: “Her plan, the idea born of her sorrow and of her missing him all day (...) was an elaborate new program for going to Europe ‘for good’ in the Fall” (YATES, 2009, p.147). Even for her Europe is the preferred destination. She therefore invents Europe. Her husband says yes and, at that moment, she (re)invents him, saying: “you’re the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You’re a man” (YATES, 2009, p.157). Throughout the novel, Frank and April Wheeler search for the experience that will expectedly redeem their flat, uneventful lives.

A somewhat similar psychological event happens with the protagonist couple of Henry James’ short story *The Beast in the Jungle*. Comparatively, the couples from both stories share a common longing for a life-fulfilling experience that will eventually redeem their otherwise humdrum existences. Both couples sense a vague uneasiness, interpretable as a symptom, an uncomfortable evidence of the fear of triviality in their lives.

In *Revolutionary Road*’s story plot, Frank Wheeler tries to compensate his dull life by clutching to a duller – notwithstanding high-paying and image-sustaining - job in the city. Reporter Jane Morris, while comparing the Wheelers with characters in John Updike’s novels, claims that “the self-assured exterior masks a creeping frustration at their inability to feel fulfilled in their relationships or careers” (2001, p.1). Frank works in a lifeless job he rightfully finds boring, whereas April is an involuntary housewife who mourns her defunct amateur acting career. Though I have absolutely no intention of quoting statistics here, how different Frank and April’s lives are from many couples we may know around us today?

The story takes place in the 1950s. It would not be without risk to inquire as to how much has changed. A fine answer is Morris’s claim that Yates “(...) weaves a tale that is at once a
fascinating period piece and a prescient anticipation of the way we live now” (2001, p.1). In this sense Yates is like Janus, i.e., he looks back and forward at the same time. She goes on to say that, even though the story takes place in the 1950s, “the quiet desperation at thwarted dreams reverberates as much now as it did years ago” (MORRIS, 2001, p.1).

His work is just as prescient. His first novel, Revolutionary Road (henceforth RR), published in 1961, was, at the same time doomed and blessed from the beginning – its titles-to-be were Losers, Nectar in a Sieve, The Fiasco or The Big Nothing – as we can infer through the novel’s reviews as summarized in the New Yorker magazine; according to it, RR is roughly about: “meaningless characters leading meaningless lives” (In: MASLIN, 2003, p.1). To New York Times critic Charles McGrath, RR “is among the bleakest books ever written” (2008, p.1). McGrath justifies his opinion by explaining that the end is gruesome and gloomy and that neither of the protagonists is entirely likable to begin with. Another New York Times critic, Manohla Dargis, called RR “a furiously unsentimental novel by Richard Yates about an unhappy marriage (2008, p.1); she justified her opinion by saying that nothing much happens in the story except that two ordinary lives come apart at the seams.

One could argue that the book is outdated. Surely there are cultural idiosyncrasies that belong to the Revolutionary Road’s 1950s that would not appropriately portray our society in our time, but being fairly reasonable, one cannot argue with the glimpse of some (quaintly dated?) early-evening cocktails, or illicit lunch-breaks with the secretary or perhaps spanking the ‘missus’ whenever she is out of order or especially when she speaks the truth:

Do you think I’ve forgotten the time you hit me in the face because I said I wouldn’t forgive you? Oh, I’ve always known I had to be your conscience and your guts—and your punching bag (YATES, 2009, p. 37).

Those were April Wheeler’s justifiably harsh words on Frank. Yet another cultural item worthy of our attention is the idea of an abortion – homemade or otherwise – that perhaps does not command the same moral damnation today it did half a century ago. Reading audiences must have been quite shocked, quite astounded with the novel’s finale.

All in all, with everything considered, one might say that food has changed, health and environmental concerns have changed, childbearing and rearing issues have changed. Mostly. Hopefully.
The continuous appraisal by great names of our - and of the author’s - contemporary literary scenario, nevertheless, reinforce the idea that RR still generates moral resonance even nowadays, for an early twenty-first century readership.

The book has been many times compared to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, mainly due to the fact that both novels convey, with brilliant erudition, the exact cost, and the inevitable consequences, of chasing the American Dream. In his 1961 review of the novel, Kurt Vonnegut calls Revolutionary Road “The Great Gatsby of our time” - the very same Vonnegut that would give lectures with Yates during the 1970s about how to survive in that decade as a young amateur career-oriented writer (HAYMAN et al., 1977). Yates has also been compared to Hemingway (SIEGEL, 2001), and at times to Flannery O’Connor and J.D. Salinger (SCHNEIDER, 2005).

According to renowned New York Times critic Michico Kakutani (2001), Yates’s own distinctive virtues as a writer created a potent legacy, that is: “providing a bridge from the naturalism of Dreiser to the latter day realism practiced by writers like Raymond Carver, Richard Ford and Richard Russo” (p.1).

Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and short story writer Richard Ford, an admirer of Yates, once said that the mere mention of Revolutionary Road serves as a reference that “enacts a sort of cultural-literary handshake among its devotees” (In: MASLIN, 2003, p.1). A year after its publication, RR was a finalist for the National Book Award, competing with Walker Percy's The Moviegoer, which won, Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and J.D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey. The book deserved the indication for many reasons. One of them was the depth of its characters. Anthony Quinn, film critic for The Independent in London, wrote that “most of Yates's characters are chronic sufferers” (2001, p.1). Interestingly, whenever Yates writes about writers, they seem to be the saddest of all his characters, often due to their refusal to admit their failure; their embarrassing secret fantasies of fame and honor; their vain, impotent hopes of being the next Hemingway or Fitzgerald; their bluster about "moving to Paris to write” (RUSSO, 2001).

He is his own severest critic, though, and for “as hard as he is on writers in general, Yates spares himself least of all” (RUSSO, 2001, p.1). According to critic Manohla Dargis:

No one gets off the hook in “Revolutionary Road,” least of all its author, whose insistence on stripping his characters down to the marrow is so
In the stories that the author more recognizably uses autobiographical elements, he is “at his fiercest and most devastating” (RUSSO, 2001, p.1). It is not surprising he was referred to as the “bard of disintegrating marriages and deluded artists”. To Kakutani (2001) many of Yates’s characters see themselves whether as “counterfeit F. Scott Fitzgeralds” or as “failed would-be Hemingways” (p.1).

In *The Easter Parade*, Yates’s fifth novel, published in 1976, he retells the chronicle of foreseen doom. The book starts during the childhood of the two sisters, the protagonists, and little by little, the readers are conducted through a path in which they cannot but simply watch helplessly the lives of these two sisters roam out of control and into disaster. The whole book spans a period of over forty years, from the Second World War to the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s. It warns readers in the very first line: “Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life (...)” (YATES, 2001, p.3). Much like in *Revolutionary Road*, readers are lead to nurture a hope, even if a fool’s hope, that the story and the characters they have grown to care for be met with a gentle ending. Interestingly the characters themselves do not seem to share that optimism as they wander, seemingly lost, through their lives and, in a way, refuse to resume the brittle course they have initially taken. Pretty much the same can be argued about the characters of *RR*: “there was no room to hope that the characters might genuinely change, choose other fates” (MISHAN, 2009, p.1). Recently Applehead Pictures bought the rights to produce *The Easter Parade* as a motion picture, with script by George Barkin (FLEMING, 2005; MESSING et al., 2006). In 2005, the production was supposedly set in motion. More than five years have passed and there is no sign of the movie as yet.

Though hard on himself, Yates never admittedly wrote an openly declared history of his life. Biographer Blake Bailey did; and proved unquestionably passionate about his subject, though he has clearly not written a hagiography. The 671 page book was published in 2003 and, in it, Yates was not portrayed as a saint in any way, shape or form. The title of his biography is *A Tragic Honesty*, and it was really well chosen; for unfortunate reasons, though. It undeniably tells a life story which was tragic – as it was honest – in so many ways. Let us see some examples. Of all the short stories he wrote and submitted to the magazine *The New Yorker*, not one, not one was ever deemed acceptable. At another instance, upon publication of his short story collection *Liars*
in Love (1981), he arrived in Boston to give a lecture and simply no one showed up. No one. Bailey wrote that Yates “sat in the silent lecture hall while his two sponsors gazed at their watches (…). Finally Yates suggested they adjourn to a bar. He didn't seem particularly surprised” (In: MASLIN, 2003, p.1). When Bailey wrote that, Yates had already been through a bruising childhood, heavy alcoholism, impaired health (thanks to, among many other things, a tuberculosis problem he acquired at age 24 during military service), mind-numbing employment in the corporate world, a failed suburban marriage and a couple of breakdowns. It is not hard to discern how much of Yates’s real life experiences were actually transmuted into Revolutionary Road and his other sort of as-autobiographical-as-it-gets fiction. When he was three years old his parents divorced and his mother, a striving average artist – a sculptor – that used him as nude model for practice, became a representation of everything he hated about alcoholism and failing frustrated artists. She understandably is seen in RR’s character April Wheeler, who, by the way, like Yates’s first wife, Sheila, had theatrical aspirations; not surprisingly. His biography also tells of details one cannot be really proud of, such as bouts of terrifying mental instability, complete with straitjackets and institutionalizations. Bailey wrote in A Tragic Honesty that there were times Yates feared he would physically harm his beloved daughters - a mirror of RR’s character Frank Wheeler. Bailey was right on the mark when, thinking about the readers of RR and referring to the Wheelers, he wrote “most people don't like reading about, much less identifying with, mediocre people who evade the truth until it rolls over them” (In: MASLIN, 2003, p.1).

Despite personal and professional woes – and an official death in 1992 – Yates survives. There has been a turn in the tide and the era for the Yates revival is yet at dawn.

In 1999, a review written by Stuart O’Nan entitled The Lost World of Richard Yates was published in the October/November issue of Boston Review and breathed new life into Yates’s literary life. The text has ever since become the most often quoted material on current academic research on Yates; whether critical, journalistic or historiographic in nature. Thanks to O’Nan, readers are now enjoying a “long-overdue critical re-appreciation” of Richard Yates (EIBEN, 2003, p.1).

The year of 2001 seemed to mark a special moment in Yates’s revival. In January, he finally had a work of his published in the New Yorker – for the very first time -, the magazine everyone from his time wished to see their work published on and which had always refused Yates’s stories throughout his entire life time. The short story published was actually taken from a
book which was as yet to be published that same year, *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*. The release of this collection was a success, tainted with justice and injustice: “Thanks to this, his stories are now getting the mass readership they never got while he was alive. Sales have been so good, in fact, that several of Yates’s out-of-print books are being rushed back into print” (JOHNSON, 2001, p.1). Macmillan Picador Editors reissued *The Easter Parade* in May and *A Good School* in December of that same year. *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*, with an introduction by Richard Russo, was published by the same editor, Macmillan Picador, in May of the following year, 2002. The book received mixed criticism. *Salon.com*’s Maria Russo reviewed it as “27 short works with scarcely an uplifting, encouraging or life-affirming moment in them” (RUSSO, 2001, p.1). She praised Richard Russo’s introductory text, though, calling it ‘heartfelt’. Dan Schneider, an American poet, critic, essayist, and fiction writer scolded the very same introductory text by calling it a “mind-numbingly bad 'Politically Correct' introduction” (2005, p.1).

Overall, Maria Russo’s review on the book was not entirely negative, quite the contrary, she considered it contemporary, justifying that although the stories are mostly set in the 1940s and 1950s they are a perfect reading for our present moment (2001). Not every critic reacted the same way, though. According to *New York Times*’s Michiko Kakutani (2001), complete collections of short stories can be a risky proposition, as they can fare well, as did the *The Stories of John Cheever* in 1978, or they can fail miserably, as in *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*. To Kakutani, the latter did “underscore the narrowness of an author’s fictional world, the repetitiveness of his themes and characters and moods (p.1).

Critic Dan Schneider (2005) shares the same opinion. According to him: “the uncollected stories should, for the most part, have stayed uncollected. There is a reason writers or musicians don’t include everything they create in their ‘official’ works (p.1).

Perhaps what prompted the not-so-positive impressions of both critics – to call them mildly - is that, theoretically speaking, the compressed nature of the short story tends to “heighten the depressive, claustrophobic mood of these tales - tales that suffer from a certain sameness and limited emotional vocabulary when read, one after the other” (KAKUTANI, 2001, p.1). I guess there is poetic justice just as much as there is poetic injustice, but despite some bad criticism, Yates’s revival seems to be in full bloom.

In 2008, a movie version of *Revolutionary Road* was released on December 26. The week before the release, the book which the movie was based hit “the list for the first time ever this
week, at No. 20 on the trade paperback list” (SCHUESSLER, 2008, p.1). According to Schuessler, the stars Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio on the front cover of the tie-in edition succeeded where Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Ford’s blurbs failed (2008). Interestingly, approximately 12 weeks prior to the premiere, New York Post reporter Liz Smith had referred to Revolutionary Road as Yates’s “acclaimed but little-known novel” (2008, p.1). Approximately 4 months after the release of the film, RR rated 15th on the USA Today’s Best-Selling Books list (DeBARROS et al., 2009). By 2010, RR featured in the list of Top 40 Bad Books elaborated by American Book Review. Historical contradictions continue to loom large in literary history – like art, like life. University of La Verne Professor Sean Bernard explains why the book is on this list. He claims it is because Revolutionary Road teaches the reader that 1950s suburban America had limited outlets for the creatively inclined, that conformity was rampant, that people who lie to themselves are unhappy and that people who feel superior to their surroundings are frustrated. His conclusion is that RR is bad because “it’s tricked so many into thinking it’s good” (BERNARD, 2010, p. 3). Surely it is a matter of opinion and of the comings-and-goings of the canon. The same list of bad books by American Book Review includes Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (gasp!), Ian Fleming’s Casino Royale and Cormac McCarthy's National Book Award-winning All the Pretty Horses.

At any rate, the important is that Yates is now being introduced to a whole new generation of readers that will hopefully do him justice. It is also worth to mention that in 1990 Yates had a character based on him on top rated television sitcom Seinfeld. Actor Lawrence Tierney played the part of Alton Benes, Elaine’s father, who was a bitter old man as well as a great but neglected writer – you know who. The show’s producer Larry David actually dated Monica, Yates’s daughter and created a small part of the episode “The Jacket” based on his actual encounter with his - then – scary father-in-law.

To conclude, there are still questions which deserve, even if tentative, answers. So far we have seen several reasons as to why Yates did not receive public recognition in his life time. Others have also struggled to answer that. According to The New York Times’s reporter and critic Anthony Quinn (2001) “it is this unflinching focus on human weakness -- our endless moral infirmities and compromises – that perhaps explains why Yates’s work never achieved great popularity in his lifetime, and indeed spent some years out of print” (p.1). Quinn’s New York Times colleague Manohla Dargis contributes to the dilemma arguing that Yates’s characters “aren’t especially likeable and because pessimism without obvious redemption is a tough sell”
Her punctilious remark on commercial reality raises even more interesting questions, such as who is Yates's ideal public, anyway. Our own author's daughter, Monica, gave what, in my opinion, seems to be the best reply. She answered that those who can best appreciate her father's work are "those whose pleasure in great, unflinching art outweighs the discomfort that it causes" (In: MASLIN, 2003, p.2). Such discomfort was perceptively approached also by Richard Russo in his 2001 introduction to the *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*. He attempted to answer the question of what is the pleasure in reading Yates. He said that the excitement in reading Yates's stories is in "the exhilaration of encountering, recognizing and embracing the truth. It's not a pretty truth? Too bad. That we recognize ourselves in the blindness, the neediness, the loneliness, even the cruelty of Yates's people, will have to suffice" (In: RUSSO, 2001, p.1.). Tough sell, indeed.

REFERENCES


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