IN MY FIRST BOOK on Yeats (W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic) I examined the development of Yeats from juvenilia to his mature period, and in this book I consider the composition of the later poems, both the process of shaping and the finished construction of the artifact. I am concerned with the principles that motivated his writing, what he thought about poetry not only in general terms but in the detailed discriminations that he made in forming lines, qualifying imagery, distancing experience. Hence the book moves from principle to practice and back to principle, constantly checking general concept against particular
choices and rejections. The manuscripts in the hands of his widow, Mrs. W. B. Yeats, represent the most comprehensive record of the processes of poetic composition that I know, and from them, along with the finished poems and Yeats's prose writings, I have tried to establish Yeats's poetics. The chapter divisions accord with the basic elements of Yeats's poetry, the first two chapters treating primarily his lyric dramaturgy, the third his use of symbol and image, the fourth his sense of measure (prosody).

In the opening chapter I treat first Yeats's attitude toward modern art in general and the concept of personality entertained by Eliot and Pound in particular. Yeats, largely because his life spanned both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, participated in a wide range of attitudes toward the role of the person in poetry, and from this experience he formulated a lyric dramaturgy that is extremely inclusive and tough, an extension and critique of the dominant modern aesthetic. In considering his ideas I make extensive use of his Autobiography but also test the ideas extrapolated from his expository prose by analyzing his poetic composition. This analysis is further extended in the second chapter, which also foreshadows the detailed considerations of the succeeding chapters.

The third chapter, after an introductory analysis of the chief critical modes used in studies of Yeats's "symbolism," examines in detail the swan and the sun and moon as examples of Yeats's iconographic practice. I use the term "iconography," which is becoming the normal term in the vocabulary of Yeats's critics, because it has a wider connotation than either symbol or image
and can be used to include both. The main point of the chapter is that his iconographic use is conditioned and qualified by the dramatic motives of the poems so that any given icon, even those that have supernatural weight, may have varying reference and prestige from poem to poem. Yeats moves with ease and rapidity from allegory to simple image, with a large body of possible reference between those inert extremes. The chapter concludes with an examination of the outcome, in Last Poems, of his practice.

The fourth chapter treats primarily Yeats’s sense of linear measure, his prosodic idiom. The main modes of his prosody are either the stress line or the syllabic line; there is little reason for thinking that he wrote with a conscious sense of the foot. Since his prosodic choices were so affected by syntax, iconography, and dramaturgy, the necessarily detailed analyses of this chapter serve to resume the concepts developed in earlier chapters. The concluding chapter summarizes the main arguments of the book and suggests the relevance of Yeats’s poetics to current poetic problems.

The main thesis of the book is that Yeats’s poetry was largely determined by his dramatic sense. He thought of himself, even when composing lyric poetry, as answering to what he took to be the dramatic design of the universe. Attacking the problem of composition, he held in mind a wide range of poetic possibilities, dramatic, iconographic, and prosodic, and the complexity of his verse originates in his refusal to accept a mechanically simple set of solutions to any given poetic problem. His poems tend to grow away from their initial propositions, altering their motive as the opportunities
for extension or complication appeared in the prosodic or iconographic pattern, and changing too as the spokesman's role in the poem became clear. The dramatic element in the poem had a determining effect on tone and structure, and, as he came in his later years to accept more readily the roles suggested or even imposed by his experience, his sensibility was liberated. His recklessness of external judgment compelled his verse to depths and reaches that had not hitherto been possible, and so the poetic texture had to expand and deepen. He profited also from his long development that granted him a wide range of experience with different poetic modes, and he renovated traditional forms and subjects in accord with his own deeply original sense of experience.

The result was a poetics, embodied poetically rather than thought out in discursive prose, but still rational and inclusive. This poetics is a critique and elaboration of major concepts in modern poetic theory, and its corrective force seems to me potentially very great. I try to suggest its importance in the conclusion to the book, but its relevance to current poetic problems is implicit throughout the text.

My debt to other students of Yeats is indicated in the footnotes, but I do wish to acknowledge my debt to the basic bibliographical work of Allan Wade and the variorum edition of G. D. P. Allt and Russell Alspach. During the several years in which I worked on this book, I had the opportunity to study the manuscripts of Yeats's later poems, first in Dublin and—thanks to the generosity of Mrs. W. B. Yeats—in reproduction in London and in Berkeley. To Mrs. Yeats I have the same
Preface

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