FROM SORROW TO TRAGIC JOY: THE TRAGIC AESTHETIC
OF W. B. YEATS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
May, 1976

One of the most important elements in Yeats' thought is his view of the tragic basis of art. This conception, which can best be called a tragic aesthetic, was developed shortly after 1900 in three prose works--certain fragments of the Samhain publication (1904), "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), and "The Tragic Theatre" (1910). The tragic view developed in these essays became the conceptual basis behind much of Yeats' poetry and therefore played a central role in the direction of his career. This thesis traces the lineaments of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in these early essays, determining its outline in the dreamy, often vague language in which it is expressed, and shows its impact on his poetry from 1904 to the end of his career in 1939.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The prose and poetry of William Butler Yeats are closely interrelated. Throughout his career, Yeats developed abstract ideas or principles of art in prose essays and then proceeded almost invariably to write poetry based on these ideas. These abstractions are therefore implicit in certain poems, but could never be fully apprehended without a knowledge of their conceptual basis in the essays. Thus any study of Yeats' poetry must include a firm grounding in his prose works or else run the hazard of losing the contextual thread of a particular poem.

One such complex of abstract ideas which must be studied in both prose and poetry in order to establish its overall shape is that of Yeats' view of the tragic basis of art. This conception, which can best be called a tragic aesthetic, was developed shortly after 1900 in three prose works—certain fragments of the *Samhain* publication (1904),¹ "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), and "The Tragic Theatre" (1910). The tragic view of art developed in these essays became the conceptual basis behind much of Yeats' poetry and therefore played

¹Throughout this study, all dates given for Yeats' works are dates of composition, whether exact or approximate.
a crucial role in the direction of his career. This thesis traces the lineaments of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in these early essays, locating its contours in the dreamy, often vague language in which it is expressed, and shows its impact on his poetry from 1904 to the end of career in 1939.

Briefly stated, the main ideas of Yeats' aesthetic are as follows:

1. The purpose of art (for Yeats, art based on a tragic view of existence) is to bring humanity together into a community based on the understanding of universal human qualities. The transpersonal quality of most concern to Yeats is "personality," a term that means that part of an individual which is archetypal, as opposed to what he calls "character," the singular, ephemeral part of a person. Personality is manifested as "passion," the paradigm of human emotion. Passion is quite important, for it is the artist's apprehension of passion during the act of contemplation which is the starting point of the imaginative process resulting in tragic art. This dichotomy of universal and particular qualities also provides the framework for Yeats' distinction between the two kinds of art--the "art of the flood" (tragic art) and "real art" (comedy, concerned with mundane particulars).

2. The purpose of tragic art is accomplished during a perfected moment of intensity, where "tragic joy"
is achieved, a dynamic fusion of opposites worked out within the soul of the artist and projected into the work of art. This interpenetration of opposites which produces tragic joy consists of the extreme sorrow found in the act of contemplation being transformed by the catalytic quality of the artist's innately joyous and affirmative imagination and its chief manifestation, artistic style. The artist achieves this state in the act of creation, displaces his vision into the work of art (where, for example, the player in a stage tragedy undergoes the moment of tragic joy), and then the perceiver of the work of art recreates the artist's vision within his own soul. Hence, the community of the race is complete about the axis of the work of tragic art. As each perceiver of art recreates the state of tragic joy for himself, the husk of character falls away and primal personality is released from bondage. Universality has been achieved from tragedy.

3. The artist's imagination, as the generative force behind this ameliorative function of tragic art, is man's most powerful instrument in the ancient struggle

2 The necessity for such opposition is an example of Yeats' dialectical turn of mind, where opposites or contraries confront one another, creating a tension which compels resolution, or, technically speaking, synthesis. Such oppositions occur throughout Yeats' works, most often symbolized by spatial metaphors such as the intersecting "gyres" of A Vision.
to achieve meaning in life, order amid chaos. To this task, the artist brings a sense of his place in a tradition of men like himself, and brings a quality which is part of that tradition—"recklessness," a kind of intuitive extravagance and boisterousness that is exemplified in the artifice of "style," the shaping finger of the artist. The sorrowful experience of life often produces psychic chaos; only the artist has the power to reorder this experience into coherence, transcending painful particulars by locating man in the universal realm of personality and passion. Yeats thus maintains the romantic tradition of the artist as seer and prophet which began in ancient Greece.

Yeats scholarship has paid little attention to this tragic strain in his thought. The two most extensive studies of Yeats' work, Richard Ellmann's The Identity of Yeats and Harold Bloom's Yeats, contain only random comments relating to Yeats' tragic view. Ellmann speaks only of Yeats' "affirmative capability," a somewhat general term which provides that poetry must center on "the struggle for affirmations," that "it must present a vision of reality." But affirmative

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5 Ellmann, p. 244.
capability is only postulated by Ellmann and never really worked out in detail. Bloom mentions that Yeats concentrates on the poet and the hero in his work and predicates their defeat: "Beyond Promethean quest, for him, there is only the cyclic renewal of quest, and the renewed necessity for heroic defeat." Bloom later derogates the idea of tragic joy (which he differentiates from "natural joy," a joy of "natural knowledge") as "inhumane nonsense," while warning the reader to be wary of the Yeatsian message of affirmation.

Neither of these critics, then, is of much help in evaluating the importance of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in his work. Both have to cover too much ground to give anything but random notice to this area of Yeats' thought.

The only full-length study of Yeats dealing expressly with his tragic view is B. L. Reid's *William Butler Yeats: The Lyric of Tragedy*. Reid relates Yeats' view of tragedy to traditional views dating back to the Greeks. He even breaks down Yeats' version to a sequence parallel to the classical sequence--Agon (Suffering), Pathos (Opposition), Threnos (Reconciliation), Anagnorisis (Transmutation), and Theophany (Transcendence). Reid suggests the thesis that the poems of Yeats as a whole "draw a design substantially

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identical to the design of the Dionysus-mystery which is the primitive original of tragedy."¹¹ A further parallel is to the satyr-play, the final peripeteia (from grief to joy) of the Dionysus ritual in the structure of the early Greek tragic tetralogies. In Reid's view, Yeats' Last Poems are a lyric equivalent of the satyr-play.¹² Reid's structuring of Yeats' concept of passion is also interesting. Following the traditional tragic sequence, he categorizes passion in the sequence of Defense, Joy, Innocence, and Apocalypse.¹³ Passion as Defense features "Prometheanism" (mentioned by Bloom), Passion as Joy features tragic joy, Passion as Innocence is a variant of the Aristotelian catharsis, an elevation into joy and peace, and Passion as Apocalypse is a wild ecstasy characterized by such poems as "High Talk."¹⁴ Reid's study is excellent in tracing almost every tragic reference in the poetry, while offering stimulating readings of poems based on his categorization of Yeats' thought. But because of the extensive categorization, one has the feeling that the book concerns Reid's ingenuity as much as Yeats' thought. The prose essays relating to Yeats' tragic aesthetic are only partially examined (Samhain: 1904, for instance, is not examined). In relating Yeats' ideas to traditional tragic views, Reid seems to be more interested in fitting Yeats into the pattern than in discovering what Yeats is actually saying.

¹¹Ibid., p. 245. ¹²Ibid., p. 248. ¹³Ibid., pp. 142-70 inclusive. ¹⁴Ibid.
Two other books deal with material relating closely to Yeats' tragic ideas, although not actually about them per se. The first of these is Alex Zwerdling's *Yeats and the Heroic Ideal*,\(^{15}\) which treats Yeats' view of heroism as a means of facing the terrors of life. Zwerdling identifies four types of Yeatsian heroes—the Irish mythical hero, the aristocrat, the public hero, and the visionary. The last type includes the artist, and is the area of Zwerdling's study which verges closest to Yeats' tragic aesthetic. In discussing the visionary hero, Zwerdling emphasizes the element of "heroic affirmation."\(^{16}\) Relating this affirmation to joy ("a kind of love"), he sees the joyous hero as becoming of supreme importance himself in a universe where ultimate reality is "unattainable except in rare and irregular moments of ecstatic communion."\(^{17}\) Arra M. Garab, in *Beyond Byzantium*,\(^{18}\) deals exclusively with the poetry written after 1930, and emphasizes Yeats' existential direction. Garab has an entire chapter devoted to "tragic gaiety," which brings about "the utmost degree of fulfillment both for man and for the fallen world forming the matrix of his art. . . . Not only does it integrate personality . . . but, manifesting itself


\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 176.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 178.

in the aesthetic urge, integrates in its shaping vision the chaotic world without."¹⁹ This description of tragic joy is accurate, but Garab is not concerned with its relationship to Yeats' overall tragic view (which is not his object), so the insight remains isolated. Garab's main deficiency is his inflated writing style, which almost obscures his occasional insights and merely adds tinsel to commonplace statements, such as the one which calls Yeats' late poems an "impassioned complexity of wonder and affirmation."²⁰

There are three other critical studies relating to Yeats' tragic aesthetic which have some importance. One is a chapter in a book about a broader subject, by Edward Engelberg.²¹ The chapter, "Passionate Reverie: The Tragic Correlative," is a revision of an earlier article. In a close analysis of Yeats' prose (including some of the material relating to his tragic view), Engelberg locates the "centre of the tragic conflict" in the tension between the desire to fulfill action and the contemplation of that desire.²² Engelberg has a very subtle description of the process in Yeats by which the hero in a tragedy (and, by extension, the artist in creation) achieves deliverance from tragic circumstance through "ecstasy" and "joy," which, in Engelberg's view, are slightly different.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 47. ²⁰Ibid., p. 22.
²²Ibid., p. 153.
In the state of conflict is the "intense centre of passion," from which the hero or artist enters a state of contemplative reverie called ecstasy. Wisdom beyond the action of struggle is the product of this state, which in turn produces joy or gaiety, a feeling of release. The result is an attainment of timelessness, of an art unified by the internal opposition of action and contemplation, the state Yeats called "Unity of Being." Engelberg's description of this process is brilliant, and offers an interesting contrast to the treatment of the same tragic process in Chapter II of this thesis. Unfortunately, Engelberg's excellent chapter deals only with this one aspect of Yeats' tragic perspective. Joyce Carol Oates, in a 1969 article, has some strange conclusions in an otherwise superb presentation, full of stylistic bravura. For one thing, she believes Unity of Being is "inexplicable" and a "rhetorical tautology," and that Yeats' deepest instinct is to reject it, while he yearns for it. The reason for this rejection, Oates feels, is that the "intellectual concept of unity is impossible to achieve, except at great cost to his art," that Yeats is

23 Ibid., pp. 160-66 inclusive.
25 Ibid., p. 1. The relationship of Unity of Being to Yeats' tragic aesthetic is discussed at length in Chapter II of this thesis.
27 Ibid.
a great poet because he refused "to make himself 'pure' . . . to dismiss the richness of pain and chaos for the articulation of a 'Unity of Being.'"\(^{28}\) She also has the curious view that tragic joy, one of Yeats' most intensely felt concepts, is contemplative and dispassionate, "forcing upon animate life a certain theoretic and ultimately epistemological shape,"\(^{29}\) part of an aesthetic, rather than humanistic, experience.\(^{30}\) Finally, there is a short article by Balachandra Rajan,\(^{31}\) written during the Yeats Centennial in 1965, which attempts to relate Yeats to that mid-twentieth century preoccupation, the absurd. His discussion of the absurd shows it to be quite close to a sense of tragedy, with perhaps only the existentialist label differentiating the two terms. The main attraction of Rajan's small-scaled study is its clarity of style, which gracefully expresses a rather commonplace point of view. For example, the usual declaration of Yeats' humanism (that is, his man-centered view) is well-written, without the excess of a Garab: "Yeats's typical position . . . is a sense of life, intense because it is both joyous and tragic; and its rhetoric is a defiant humanism, a ringing declaration of man as the measure."\(^{32}\) This passage is a good description

\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. 17.\(^{29}\)Ibid., p. 4.\(^{30}\)Among the critics discussed, only Bloom would agree with this position.\(^{31}\)Balachandra Rajan, "Yeats and the Absurd," *Tri-Quarterly Review*, 4 (1965), 130-37.\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 136.
of tragic joy and the affirmation of tragic art which lies at the heart of Yeats' tragic aesthetic.

This thesis offers, for the first time, a comprehensive analysis of each of the prose works which relate to Yeats' tragic view, elucidating the basic ideas, and discovering a coherent pattern to his thought in this area. Yeats' essays, especially the early ones, are romantic in tone, and steeped in poetic imagery. Only by a close reading of each pertinent essay, with cross-references to the same ideas in other essays, can one hope to find the patterns in Yeats' thought. Such a pattern of related ideas can be discerned in Samhain: 1904, "Poetry and Tradition," and "The Tragic Theatre." The result is a consistent aesthetic based on a tragic perspective, an aesthetic which lies at the center of Yeats' art.

B. L. Reid, despite the extensive nature of his book, never explores systematically the development of this tragic view in Yeats' essays. Although Reid quotes long passages from "Poetry and Tradition" and "The Tragic Theatre," he does not go into either in depth, thus failing to show the integral nature of the main ideas of each essay. And, by his omission of Samhain: 1904 from any consideration, Reid misses the germinative stage of Yeats' tragic aesthetic altogether. Reid's elaborate structuring of the ideas he does discover comes from the mainstream of traditional views of tragedy and not from an abstraction of Yeats' own thought. By contrast, this study does not attempt to fit Yeats' ideas
into a prefabricated structure based on other views of tragedy, but seeks to discover exactly what Yeats says in each essay and how it relates to the ideas presented in the other essays, thus eliciting a consistent abstract model directly from Yeats himself. It is this inductive approach, then, which sets this study apart from all previous works on Yeats' tragic view of art. This systematic method is the basis of Chapter II, which examines the conceptual center of Yeats' tragic perspective.

The remaining chapters judge the impact of this prose-based view upon Yeats' poetry from 1904 to 1939. A study of selected poems clearly reveals the presence of both the key ideas and the affirmative spirit of his tragic aesthetic in the poetry. The poetic drama of Yeats is not examined, for, contrary to reasonable expectations, one does not find much in his plays illustrating the moment of tragic intensity Yeats so often pointed out in other dramatists, particularly in Shakespeare and Synge. This essentially lyric moment has its greatest expression in the body of Yeats' lyric poetry, especially in certain poems of his last decade. There the themes of life as sorrow and art as the means of transforming this sorrow into tragic joy are a major preoccupation of the aging, infirm poet. For Yeats in his seventies felt as he had thirty years before, when the essays on tragedy were written, that the arts had "nothing to give but that joy of
their which is the other side of sorrow,"\textsuperscript{33} and that this affirmation of tragic joy arises from the depths of a tragic recognition: "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy."\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{34}W. B. Yeats, "Four Years: 1887-1891," The Trembling of the Veil, in Autobiography, p. 128. Hereafter referred to as The Trembling of the Veil.
CHAPTER II

THE MAKING OF YEATS' TRAGIC AESTHETIC

Early in the twentieth century, Yeats became preoccupied with the subject of tragic art, particularly stage tragedy. The result of this intense interest was the development, over a period of several years, of what can best be called a tragic aesthetic. The growth of this viewpoint seems to have begun at least as early as 1904, in certain fragments of the Samhain publication. Two essays contained in the collection The Cutting of an Agate, "Poetry and Tradition" (1907) and "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), form the core of Yeats' fully developed tragic aesthetic.

The reasons for Yeats' preoccupation with tragic art are not given by Yeats himself, and only problematical evidence can be given in support of any conjecture about possible motives. The three most likely factors prompting Yeats to take such an interest in things tragic are his involvement in the direction of the Irish National Theatre (called the Abbey Theatre after 1904), his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche in 1902, and the marriage of Maud Gonne to John MacBride in 1903.¹

¹Yeats was the guiding presence of the Abbey Theatre during the period of the development of his tragic aesthetic.
Whatever the reasons for Yeats' developing an aesthetic of tragic art, its existence, and its importance to his subsequent poetic achievement, is manifest. This chapter studies the development of this aspect of Yeats' thought from its apparent beginnings in 1904 to its mature expression in 1907-1910. An ancillary development in Yeats' tragic view, his discussion of the "mask" as it relates to the creation of tragic art, found in "Anima Hominis" (1917), is also examined. An understanding of these essays provides a firm

Theoretically, the main ideas of this tragic view answered the requirements of the Irish theater outlined by Yeats in 1899: "Our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal" (W. B. Yeats, "The Theatre," Ideas of Good and Evil, in Essays and Introductions [New York: Macmillan, 1961], p. 166). The influence of Nietzsche on Yeats is a more complex matter, fully examined by the following writers: Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, pp. 91-98; Donald S. Thatcher, Nietzsche in England 1890-1914 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 139-73; and Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 330-47. Heller's study is especially valuable for its detailed examination of Yeats' annotations in the Thomas Common anthology of Nietzsche's work, which Yeats read in 1902. This anthology, lent to Yeats by his friend John Quinn, had a considerable impact upon him, as he told Lady Gregory in an August, 1902, letter: "I have read him [Nietzsche] so much that I have made my eyes bad again. I have not read anything with so much excitement since I got to love Morris's stories which have the same curious astringent joy" (quoted in Ellmann, p. 92). This "astringent joy"—Nietzsche's defiant affirmation in the face of tragic conflict—bears some resemblance to Yeats' declarations of affirmation in tragic art. Regarding the possibility of Maud Gonne's marriage as a motivation in Yeats' preoccupation with tragedy, see Reid, p. 59. Reid wonders whether the occasion of this marriage did not cause a crisis in Yeats' life, resulting in his having a deep personal sense that life is tragic, although Reid believes that this "tragic sense," as he calls it, was "never not there," and only became peculiarly Yeats' own at this time.
conceptual ground by which much of Yeats' work, both before and after 1910, can be seen in its proper tragic perspective.

The earliest expression of Yeats' tragic aesthetic is found in several 1904 issues of Samhain, an occasional publication connected with the Irish theater. The statements are somewhat fragmentary in nature, mere hints of what was to come, dropped here and there during discourse on other subjects. Yet these fragments contain virtually every key idea and sub-idea of Yeats' mature aesthetic. The universals of personality and passion are present. The intense moment of tragic art is mentioned, with the term "tragic joy" being used for the first time. The idea that opposition is necessary to produce this moment is present, although not yet fully worked out. Yeats stresses the importance of the artist and the artist's use of tradition and "recklessness" to produce the work of art. Finally, Yeats hints at the division of the arts into distinct categories, by speaking of a difference in quality between farce and tragedy on the stage, although at this time tragic art is not yet considered quite so superior to comedy as it will be in Yeats' mature thoughts on the subject in "The Tragic Theatre."

One essay from Samhain: 1904, appropriately entitled "First Principles," contains a section on passion and the intense moment associated with passion, expressing the necessity of opposition to achieve the requisite intensity. In this section of the essay, Yeats is speaking on the subject
of what attracts him to drama—the "moment of intense life," present in both farce and tragedy.\(^2\) In this moment, an action is isolated and reduced to as simple a form as possible without "losing the sense of its place in the world."\(^3\) Whether it be only bodily activity, as in the "less important kinds of drama" (presumably farce), or an activity of the characters' souls, as in the "more important kinds" (presumably tragedy), Yeats sees this action as "an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself."\(^4\) He is careful in insisting that the proper subject of drama is this decisive moment, the moment of passion:

If the subject of drama or any other art were a man himself, an eddy of momentary breath, we might desire the contemplation of perfect characters; but the subject of all art is passion, and a passion can only be contemplated when separated by itself, and aroused into perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law, that is the expression of the whole whether of Church or Nation or external nature. ... If we were not certain of law we would not feel the struggle, the drama, but the subject of art is not law, but the praise of life, and it has no commandments that are not positive.\(^5\)


\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 154.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 155. Compare Nietzsche's declaration in Section 821 of The Will to Power, a copy of which Yeats owned (see Thatcher, p. 157, for the list of titles in Yeats' library on Nietzsche): "Tragedy does not teach 'resignation'—To represent terrible and questionable things is in itself
Passion must have opposition to reach the requisite intensity, where it is pure and untainted by worldly concerns. The association of passion with the act of contemplation, to be worked out by Yeats in later essays, is here only suggested. Although Yeats does not yet directly link passion with tragedy alone, it is significant that his two examples in this section for the expression of passion are Coriolanus and Cleopatra, tragic figures in the midst of great internal struggle. The quote ends with Yeats expressing an overarching view of art as essentially affirmative and life-praising, a view that is essential to his tragic aesthetic.

In an earlier section of this same essay, Yeats discusses the role of the artist in producing this moment of passion. He distinguishes the artist by his "delight in beauty," which can only be conveyed in its highest form "after he has purified his mind with the great writers of the world." The emphasis on tradition in the artistic process is thus introduced. But this tradition—the example of previous art in all ages—must not be a crutch; it is meant to be only a preparation giving structure to the artist's own creative direction, else his art will not seem alive. Newness is the an instinct for power and magnificence in an artist; he does not fear them—There is no such thing as pessimistic art—Art affirms" (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; ed., with commentary, by Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random House, 1967], pp. 434-35).

Ibid., p. 152.  
7 Ibid.
key. If the artist is a dramatist, for instance, his characters must be new and immediate, Yeats says, for the "spirit of life is not in them in its fullness" if they could have existed before the day of their creation. To Yeats, art at its best is not "a deliberate creation, but the creation of intense feelings, of pure life; and every feeling is the child of all past ages and would be different if even a moment had been left out." Thus in "First Principles" passion is seen by Yeats as a pure essence living successively in the art of every age, primordial feeling given new life and context by each new work of art, and the proper subject of all art.

Another essay from *Samhain: 1904,* "The Play, the Player, and the Scene," introduces the crucial ideas of personality and tragic joy, as well as the important sub-idea of the recklessness of the artist. The soul, Yeats says, is the seat of ultimate reality, and it is here that the personality of a man is to be found: "We, who are believers, cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself, and seeing it there we cannot do other than rejoice in every energy, whether of gesture, or of action or of speech, coming out of the personality, the soul's image, even though the very laws of nature seem . . . unimportant in comparison. . . ."

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Personality is the eternal core of a person, the soul made visible, and is the source of passion, expressed as energy. Later in the development of his tragic aesthetic, Yeats introduces "character," the singular part of a person, his identifying mark, as the contrary to personality. In *Samhain: 1904*, Yeats seems to have no time to discuss ephemera, being so preoccupied with universals.

At this point in the essay, Yeats introduces his idea of recklessness, which repeatedly reappears in substance, if not always name, in his work, both prose and poetry. Speaking of the miserable state of theater art, Yeats insists there is nothing left for those like himself but "to rediscover an art of the theatre that shall be joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant, and altogether reckless."\textsuperscript{11} Yeats' emphasis on passion, the pure feeling that is the manifestation of personality, has pointed to a universality of the human condition which he now places in the specific province of tragedy, the reckless art he has prescribed, and its intense moment of tragic joy:

The arts are at their greatest when they seek for a life growing always more scornful of everything that is not itself and passing into its own fullness, as it were, ever more completely as all that is created out of the passing mode of society slips from it; and attaining that fullness, perfectly it may be—and from this is tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy—when the world itself has slipped away in death.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 169.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., pp. 169-70.
The oxymoron "tragic joy" appears here for the first time in Yeats' work, and is linked indissolubly with the perfect fullness of the universal order beyond the individual, where personality and passion are rooted in the ancestral earth. In tragedy at least, Yeats no longer requires the moment of intensity ("the eddy of life" mentioned in "First Principles") to keep its "sense of place in the world,"¹³ for here "the world itself has slipped away in death."

The key ideas and sub-ideas of Yeats' tragic aesthetic introduced in Samhain: 1904 are developed at greater length in the important essays "Poetry and Tradition" (1907) and "The Tragic Theatre" (1910). Together, these essays form the core of Yeats' mature tragic view.

"Poetry and Tradition" is Yeats' most important description of the artistic process, his outstanding treatment of the great power of the artist in the world of experience. His entire aesthetic rests on the foundation of this power. The precise nature of the opposing elements necessary for the creation of the moment of tragic joy—the great sorrow discovered during the act of contemplating worldly miseries, and the reckless, affirmative imagination of the artist manifested in the artifice of "style"—is an essential part of this essay, as is the fusion and triumphant reconciliation of the opposites (the actual act of creating this decisive moment).

Section II of "Poetry and Tradition" begins with Yeats' view of the affirmative nature of the artist, a nature featuring an "absence of fear," an ever-present sense of "gaiety," and the ability to produce "beauty." A poetical prologue to the section sets the tone of aggressive, fearless affirmation which prevails throughout the section (and, indeed, throughout Yeats' tragic aesthetic):

\begin{quote}
Him who trembles before the flame and the flood,
And the winds that blow through the starry ways,
Let the starry winds and the flame and the flood
Cover over and hide, for he has no part
With the proud, magestical multitude.\footnote{W. B. Yeats, "Poetry and Tradition," The Cutting of an Agate, in Essays and Introductions, p. 251. Hereafter referred to as "Poetry and Tradition."}
\end{quote}

Yeats quickly establishes the identity of the leaders of this proud multitude, those men responsible for "all beautiful things"—the aristocrats, producers of beautiful manners; the peasantry, who have made beautiful stories and beliefs; and the artists, who have created all other beauty because they are filled with recklessness.\footnote{Ibid.} In each case, the production of beauty is the result of an absence of fear—the aristocrats are unafraid because of their place in life, the peasants are unafraid because they have nothing to lose, and the artists, endowed with recklessness, are naturally without fear.\footnote{Ibid.}

Those people not attuned to beauty (not of the "proud, magestical multitude"), Yeats says, have little of intrinsic value, for they are tied to a belief that everything must have utility,
and prefer the functional stalk of a thing to its beautiful, useless flower. Above all, they fear the exuberant, uplifting extravagance of a producer of beauty such as the artist, whose reckless nature is well expressed in what Yeats calls "that commandment that we can do almost what we will, if we do it gaily. . . ." Thus "gaiety" (or joy) is linked with fearlessness as part of the artist's natural endowment, both by-products of his essential recklessness, that affirming quality necessary to the creation of beauty, and, as will become clear later in "Poetry and Tradition," especially essential to the production of tragic joy in tragic art.

At this point in his discussion, Yeats relates the gaiety of the artist to tradition. He believes the artist must go backward to the courts of the Renaissance to find those kindred souls "who understood that life is not lived, if not lived for contemplation or excitement," those to whom gaiety must always be an integral part of living, for only when one is gay over a thing can it be mastered, and the mind made "clear enough for strength." What Yeats has done thus far in Section II of "Poetry and Tradition" is to introduce the artistic personality, its imaginative recklessness, its gaiety and absence of fear in any circumstance. This affirmative power of the artist becomes, in Section III of the essay, the great transformational

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17 Ibid. 18 Ibid., p. 252. 19 Ibid. 20 Ibid.
power able to shape sorrow into tragic joy. But first Yeats must clearly define the opposites involved in the complex equation of this great moment of tragic art. This he does by introducing the opposite pole to the artist's power—the contemplation of great sorrowful things (what Yeats later calls "the great irremediable things")

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which at this point in the essay seem beyond the power of the artist to change in any way. Citing such things as "raging fire" and "destructive sword," an intense love like that of Tristan and Iseult, and noble death as examples of these great imponderables, Yeats says they are in the realm of sorrow and cannot be otherwise.

22 He then lists those things man can free himself from by living with gaiety—"sullen anger," "solemn virtue," "calculating anxiety," "gloomy suspicion," and "prevaricating hope."

23 Yeats sums up the difference between these two areas of existence and man's ability to cope with them in the last passage of Section II: "Because there is a submission in a pure sorrow, we should sorrow alone over what is greater than ourselves, nor too soon admit that greatness, but all that is less than we should stir us to some joy, for pure joy masters and impregnates; and so to world end, strength shall laugh and wisdom mourn."

24

Section II thus establishes the opposites involved in the creation of tragic joy, but in a form suggestive of a

21Ibid., p. 254.  
22Ibid., p. 252.  
23Ibid.  
24Ibid., pp. 252-53.
strict dichotomy incapable of resolution. The dichotomy consists of joy and "strength" on the one hand (the power of the artist), and sorrow and "wisdom" on the other, with the latter immune from the affirming power of the former. This idea that the joyous, reckless strength of the artist is limited seems to contradict the rhetoric of *Samhain: 1904*, where the arts seek a fullness, a universal purity in the tragic moment, the moment of "tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy." But it is only an apparent contradiction, for Yeats must establish a clear dichotomy to fully illustrate what is involved, just what the opposition, the tension, is, so that resolution of the opposites can be described in Section III of the essay. For in Section III Yeats shows the sorrow mastered by the joy of the artist, and the process results in the fusion of a higher joy--the tragic joy first described so vividly in *Samhain: 1904*.

Section III of "Poetry and Tradition" is perhaps the single most important element of Yeats' tragic aesthetic. It contains his most extensive description of the process of creating tragic art, featuring a discussion of the artist's use of style as the embodiment of the imagination. Style is seen as the catalyst in the production of tragic art, the bit of extravagance able to transmute the atoms of sorrow into a new pattern--tragic joy.

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Yeats begins the section with a significant statement about style, while again associating the arts with that Castiglione-type of aristocratic breeding he so much admires: "In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things, and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion or dullness." Style is the cutting edge of the artist's power to shape experience, Yeats is saying, and if it comes from a nature that is reckless, that recklessness is organized and coherent. Yeats assigns the writer a Shelleyan function in the use of style, for style is but high breeding in the written medium, and the writer is "the creator of the standards of manners in their subtlety, for he alone can know the ancient records and be like some mystic courtier who has stolen the keys from the girdle of time." This view of the artist-writer as keeper, like a high priest, of the sacred treasures of a culture, and legislator of manners, echoes Shelley and others of the Romantic poets in their general belief that the artist is the seer and prophet of a people. Along with James Joyce, Yeats is the greatest advocate of this view in the twentieth century, and it is at the root of his being throughout his career.

27 Ibid.
Yeats begins to define style more precisely as the section progresses. He regards style as the touch of extravagance, or irony, or surprise set to a work after all logical, necessary elements of the structure are accomplished, "that leaves one, not in the circling necessity, but caught up into the freedom of self-delight." Thus style is very much a manifestation of the artist's recklessness, yet is not excess, for, as Yeats has already said, it arises out of a deliberate shaping of things, and from never being swept away in confusion. It is nothing less than "a secret between a craftsman and his craft, and is so inseparable in his nature that he has it most of all amid overwhelming emotion, and in the face of death." That is to say, style answers the call of the artist at his time of greatest need, during the contemplation of overwhelming, seemingly imponderable circumstances in life, and the sorrowful state that results from such a meditation. Style, as Yeats soon makes clear, is the chief instrument of the artist's power over nature and circumstance, giving him the ability to shape the universal harmony of tragic joy from the fear and spiritual chaos of sorrow, to give coherence and focus to his own soul, and, by projection of his imagination, to the soul of the persona of the artwork during the intensity of the tragic moment.

Yeats now comes to the crux of "Poetry and Tradition"--the actual process of creating tragic art. Tragic joy is

28Ibid., p. 254. 29Ibid.
born from the interpenetration of the artist's sorrowful perception of existence and the exuberant shaping device of his reckless imagination. This process is described in one of Yeats' finest prose passages, one absolutely essential to his tragic aesthetic:

This joy, because it must be always making and mastering, remains in the hands and in the tongue of the artist, but with his eyes he enters upon a submissive, sorrowful contemplation of the great irremediable things, and he is known from other men by making all he handles like himself, and yet by the unlikeness to himself of all that comes before him in a pure contemplation. It may have been his enemy or his love or his cause that set him dreaming, and certainly the phoenix can but open her young wings in a flaming nest; and if his mistress brag of the song or his enemy fear it, it is not that either has its praise or blame, but that the twigs of the nest are not easily set afire. The verses may make his mistress famous as Helen or give a victory to his cause, not because he has been either's servant, but because men delight to honour and to remember all that have served contemplation.  

Yeats is saying that the crucible of tragic art is the act of contemplation, a submissive, even awesome meditation upon the imponderable circumstances of life, things beyond the power of art to alter or to eliminate completely. These "irremediable things" inevitably cause an intense groundswell of passion within the soul of the artist (usually sorrow, but Yeats later includes the possibility of other passions). The somewhat cryptic description that follows the word "things" seems to express the ability of the artist to shape painful stimuli into some form recognizably part of his own reckless

\[30\] Ibid., pp. 254-55.
nature, through the "making and mastering" joy of his style. The act of contemplation is like dreaming, where all strong emotions are removed from their contexts and dissolved into other forms, limited only by the imagination. The imagination of the artist--the phoenix with young wings--cannot effect the growth of beauty from the pain of impure emotion (here, sorrow) unless that emotion is present in the first place. Thus the necessity of opposition is again emphasized. The young wings of the phoenix can begin to flap only in a flaming nest, the fire of opposition, of tension, between the power of the artist's imagination and his object of sorrow, hate, or love. The "song" that follows (Yeats stresses the lyrical quality of the product) is not tied to praise of mistress, blame of enemy, or love of cause per se--the artist is ultimately bound only to his art--but is the mere tribute to "all that have served contemplation," an imaginative remembrance of the initial motivating force, which has been "shaped" in the image of the artist's controlling joy by his style.

Tragic joy results because of the artist's ability to master and shape painful, passionate states within himself, and to project this triumph into the work of art: "That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as had kept it were the emotion love or hate."31 The strength of the artist's

31Ibid., p. 255. This "shaping joy" of the artist, the dynamic of style that is the catalyst for the achievement of tragic joy, is best described by Yeats in a passage "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time," another essay in The
"shaping joy" (his affirmative imagination and its practical manifestation, style) has effectively refined the sorrow born of worldly pain into its pure, universal form, that fullness of passion described in *Samhain: 1904*, where the world has slipped away, and "tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy" is the result. Shakespeare's tragic figures, Yeats says, "speak out of an ecstasy that is one-half the self-surrender of sorrow, and one-half the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world." 32

Yeats offers Timon and Cleopatra as illustrations of this great moment of tragic art, saying that their words move us because their sorrow (a pure sorrow) is directed not at their own singular fates of tomb and asp, "but for all men's fate." 33 This universal quality of the moment of tragic joy reaffirms the transpersonal qualities of personality and passion first described in *Samhain: 1904*. The passion, the sorrow,

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Cutting of an Agate: "There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion" (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 322). Nietzsche also speaks on this subject in Section 852 of *The Will to Power*: "Those imposing artists who let a harmony sound forth from every conflict are those who bestow upon things their own power and self-redemption: they express their innermost experience in the symbolism of every work of art they produce—their creativity is gratitude for their existence" (Kaufmann, p. 451).


33 Ibid., p. 255.
is "pure" because it is not the circumstantial emotion of Timon or Cleopatra, an emotion that belongs to character, but part of that primordial stream of emotion running through all men from the reservoir of common human essence that Yeats calls personality. Thus the goal of tragic art, the community of all men at the level of personality, begins to be a constant idea of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in "Poetry and Tradition."

The passage following the example of Timon and Cleopatra contains some of Yeats' clearest thoughts about the moment of tragic joy, evocatively describing the universal implications of this highest state of art:

... The nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent imagery, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity.³⁴

An important implication of this passage is the essential relationship between tragic joy and the important concept Yeats would later call "Unity of Being."³⁵ In Yeats' work

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵There is some problem in precisely dating the term. A passage by Yeats in The Trembling of the Veil, p. 128, is the best source for what information is available on the subject. Yeats, writing in 1922, is speaking about his thoughts during the period 1887-1891: "... I delighted in every age where poet and artist confined themselves gladly to some inherited subject-matter known to the whole people, for I thought that in man and race alike there is something called 'Unity of Being,' using that term as Dante used it when he
there are two great moments in human life expressed through art—the moment of tragic joy, and the moment of the vision of Unity of Being (in the mature concept usually symbolized by an ideal image, a unified form, such as the dancer or the statue). For Yeats, Unity of Being is an absolute condition unattainable in life except for a brief visionary moment at the creation, and again during the appreciation, of a work of art36 (and, less significantly, during sexual passion).

compared beauty in the Convito to a perfectly proportioned human body. My father, from whom I had learned the term, preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly. The one firm fact in all this is that Yeats learned the term from his father. But when did he learn it and when did he formulate the concept for which the term "Unity of Being" is used? Yeats seems to imply, by his use of tense in the passage quoted, that he knew the concept during the years 1887-1891, and perhaps also that his father had taught him the term by then. The first implication seems plausible, for Yeats was seemingly always concerned with states of unity and harmony, for which he had such early symbols as the rose and the cross. The second is problematical, for if Yeats knew the term early he did not use it until much later. The use of the term in Yeats' writings seems to date from about the time he began assembling the material for A Vision, i.e., shortly after his marriage in 1917. But the concept itself certainly predates its name of Unity of Being.

36 In a note for the second edition of A Vision, Yeats says, " . . . [At] the point in the zodiac where the whirl becomes a sphere . . . [we enter] upon a state where all fuel has become flame, where there is nothing but the state itself. . . . We attain it always in the creation or enjoyment of a work of art . . ." (quoted in Ellmann, p. 221). This description of Unity of Being should be compared to a passage quoted earlier in "The Play, the Player, and the Scene," Samhain: 1904, pp. 169-70, where Yeats says, " . . . A passion can only be contemplated when separated by itself, purified of all but itself." The striking similarity of vocabulary in the two quotes underlines the proposition that the passionate state of tragic joy and the vision of perfect form, Unity of Being, are two aspects of the same moment.
A close comparison of passages describing the two moments indicates that the vocabulary used for both is the same, as is the dialectical process for achieving both moments (the reconciliation of opposites). Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the attainment of tragic joy and the vision of Unity of Being are really two aspects of the same moment, the moment of wisdom in tragic art. The structure of the tragic moment is perfect, a vision of the ideal, archetypal image; while the substance, the breath of life in this still point where all contraries are unified ("at the meeting of the two beams of the cross") is tragic joy, the intense expression of a pure passion (the "red rose" of the arts). The ideal form of the tragic moment (the vision of Unity of Being) is the skeleton of tragic art, and tragic joy is the flesh.

Yeats concludes Section III of "Poetry and Tradition" with a reference to the importance of tradition similar to that found in both *Samhain: 1904* and Section II of the present essay. Continuing with the images of the last passage quoted, Yeats believes that no new artist has ever plucked the "red rose" or found the "trysting-place" (which amounts to "the understanding of himself, to the mastery of unlocking words"37) who has not studied the masters, including "ancestral memory" of the tradition.38 Yet even the knowledge and

38Ibid.
instinct of tradition will be unavailing, Yeats says, unless the artist has recklessness, that catalyst of art.39

While "Poetry and Tradition" centers on the process of creating tragic art, and therefore on the importance of the artist himself, "The Tragic Theatre" (1910) concentrates on the work of art, in particular the tragedy of the stage.40 In this essay, Yeats develops his two categories of art based on the distinction between comedy and tragedy, with a corollary consideration of "character." Above all, he considers tragic art, with its universal concerns, as a communal art, binding all men together in the common source of personality, thus extending the theme of community introduced in "Poetry and Tradition" to its fullest expression in "The Tragic Theatre."

Ostensibly, "The Tragic Theatre" begins as a reply to the printed criticism of John M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows (1910), which Yeats feels was judged by "dogmas," by the mechanical conventions of the theater necessary to the dramatic effect, what he calls "wheels and pulleys."41 To

39 Ibid.

40 Although Yeats concentrates on dramatic tragedy in this essay, the insights apply equally to all forms of tragic art, for he always speaks of all arts interchangeably: "The arts are but one Art" (W. B. Yeats, "The Theatre," Ideas of Good and Evil, in Essays and Introductions, p. 167).

Yeats, the critics missed the point about tragedy in general (one should remember Yeats' discussion about style as the touch of extravagance, or irony, or surprise beyond mere mechanical aspects of a work), and this play in particular, which he regards as a fine example of tragic art. Using *Deirdre* as a point of departure, Yeats speaks eloquently about tragic art in general, bringing his tragic aesthetic to full maturity in this essay.

Yeats selects a particular scene in Act III of *Deirdre* of the Sorrows as an example of the great moment of tragic art when the character achieves tragic joy, a scene paralleling those scenes of Shakespeare mentioned in "Poetry and Tradition." As was seen in that essay, the attainment of tragic joy by a character in a work of art is a paradigm of a similar achievement within the artist himself, a marvelous creative displacement of the sorrow of contemplation structured and transformed by the artistic imagination. The scene in Synge's play finds Deirdre and her lover returned to Ireland, to face nearly certain death in order to keep their love intact. At the edge of an open grave that is to serve for both of them, they quarrel, thereby losing the very bond they have been willing to die for. At this point, Deirdre cries, "Is it not a hard thing that we should miss the safety of the grave and we trampling its edge?" To Yeats, that

is her cry "at the outset of a reverie of passion that mounts and mounts till grief itself has carried her beyond grief into pure contemplation." The vocabulary Yeats is using is that of "Poetry and Tradition" raised to a higher pitch. Deirdre's grief, an impure passion because it is personal and circumstantial, becomes so overwhelming that she achieves the suspension from personal identity which is the state of "pure contemplation." There, face to face with the "irremediable things" of the previous essay, the impure, individual aspect of her grief falls away, and the feeling becomes a pure passion, an archetypal grief, the product of personality. The "shaping joy" of the artist brings the character of the drama to the fullness of tragic joy ("that tragic ecstasy"), the moment of wisdom (which is now transcendent, no longer tied to mourning as in Section II of "Poetry and Tradition"): Up to this the play had been a Master's unfinished work, monotonous and melancholy, ill-arranged, little more than a sketch of what it would have grown to, but now I listened breathless to sentences that may never pass away, and as they filled or dwindled in their civility of sorrow, the player, whose art had seemed clumsy and incomplete, like the writing itself, ascended into that tragic ecstasy which is the best that art—perhaps that life—can give. And at last when Deirdre, in the paroxysm before she took her life, touched with compassionate fingers him that had killed her lover, we knew that the player had become, if but for a moment, the creature of that noble mind [Synge's] . . . and we too were carried beyond time and Persons to where passion . . . becomes wisdom . . . .

43 Ibid., p. 239.

44 Ibid.
One of the dogmas of criticism mentioned earlier that especially irritates Yeats is that which says that a play has to contain definite character to work on a stage, and that the dramatic moment or climax must always be a contest of character with character.45 But great drama, Yeats says, operates at the level of personality, not character. Looking at the history of literature, he believes that the great periods of drama demonstrate a diminution of character, with a corresponding increase in lyric feeling.46 The implication is that any age which stresses the particularity of character (such as the present age with its stifling critical dogmas) is aesthetically degenerate. It is evident to Yeats that only in comedy is character continually present, whereas in tragedies, such as those by Corneille, Racine, and "that of Greece and Rome," the place of character is taken by universal intangibles such as passions and motives.47 In Samhain: 1904, Yeats had not clearly labeled bodily activity, or particularity, as part of comedy, merely saying that such an activity is part of a less important kind of drama. In "Poetry and Tradition," he focused entirely on tragic art, leaving only the implication that all that fell short of universality and tragic joy belonged to the art of comedy. Now, in "The Tragic Theatre," comedy and its chief quality, character, are examined and contrasted with tragic art.

45Ibid. 46Ibid. 47Ibid.
In this essay, Yeats makes his clearest distinction between the arts of tragedy and comedy by classifying them under new names. Tragedy becomes the "art of the flood," which is called poetical "because it takes delight in the moment of exaltation, of excitement, of dreaming." It is an "art of the flood" because it is always seeking to erase individual differences among men, to join all men together in a community of universal essence—personality. The flood imagery expresses this end of tragic art: "... Tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and ... it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house." Comedy, on the other hand, is "an art that we call real, because character can only express itself perfectly in a real world."

Comedy, the "real" art, the art of character and particularity, never penetrates to the ground of feeling where the individual becomes community. In Yeats' view, comedy can offer only the singular pathos of the individual, never the passion of the communal multitude. This limitation of comedy is mentioned by Yeats in a 1909 diary entry, written just after viewing the first performance of Deirdre of the Sorrows. The entry also serves as a gloss on Yeats' omnipresent term, passion. The entry begins as a review of the leading actress's

50 Ibid., p. 243.
performance, but quickly touches on the deeper subjects of comedy and passion:

Molly had personal charm, pathos, distinction even, fancy, beauty, but never passion. . . Pathos she has, the nearest to tragedy the comedian can come, for that is conscious of our presence and would have our pity. Passion she has not, for that looks beyond mankind and asks no pity, not even of God. It realizes, substantiates, attains, scorns, governs, and is most mighty when it passes from our sight. 51

Comedy can offer only pathos, a contrived emotional climate which consciously seeks pity from the audience, whereas tragedy contains passion, which draws the audience into a vital community.

The phenomenon of audience identification with the player on the stage is one example of the way tragic art achieves community. As Yeats says in "The Tragic Theatre," "It is always ourselves that we see upon the stage." 52 In a short reference in Samhain: 1905, Yeats had spoken of this same involvement between player and audience: "The greatest art symbolizes not those things we have observed so much as those things that we have experienced and when the imaginary saint or lover or hero moves us most deeply, it is the moment when he awakens within us for an instant our own heroism, our own sanctity, our own desire." 53 The displacement of the struggle within the artist's own soul to the work of art now goes one step further and works within the soul of the person

53 W. B. Yeats, Samhain: 1905, in Explorations, p. 196.
perceiving the work, who recreates the intensity of the passion and the attainment of tragic joy for himself. The common source of passion—personality—links artist and viewer together about the creative axis of the work of art.

Yeats concludes "The Tragic Theatre" with his most ambitious metaphors for tragedy and comedy (already called arts of the "flood" and the "real"), while emphasizing once more the universal quality of tragic art:

Certainly we have here the Tree of Life and that of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which is rooted in our interests, and if we have forgotten their differing virtues it is surely because we have taken delight in a confusion of crossing branches. Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greatness till they are humanity itself.54

Taken together, "Poetry and Tradition" and "The Tragic Theatre" form the core of Yeats' tragic aesthetic. The only subsequent addition that Yeats made to his tragic view after 1910 is the conception of the "mask" as it relates to the act of contemplation and the subsequent creation of tragic art by the artist. This conception changed nothing basic in Yeats' mind, representing merely a later variation of the opposition motif found in Samhain: 1904 and "Poetry and Tradition." The source for this relationship between the mask and tragic art is the "Anima Hominis" section of Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1917).

54 "The Tragic Theatre," p. 245.
Yeats' conception of the mask begins to appear in his writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, the same period in which his tragic aesthetic matures. Initially, the mask is a social self for the naturally shy Yeats, a defensive tool to avoid psychological pain, and, to a certain extent, as the opposite to the unsatisfactory natural self, is a noble ideal which one tries to live up to. By 1909, the mask assumes a more creative aspect: "I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself. . . ." By 1917, the date of "Anima Hominis," the mask is defined almost entirely by its creative aspect.

In "Anima Hominis," Yeats asserts the necessity of finding and shaping the mask (or the "anti-self" as he also calls it) if the creation of tragic art is to take place. As he says at the outset of Section V of the essay, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." Apparently, the mask has the function of providing the internal opposition, or tension, necessary for the creation of tragic art. In this respect,

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55 This early conception of the mask is discussed at length by Ellmann in Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1948), pp. 171-76.


the idea of the mask is a variation of Yeats' earlier, related ideas that a passion needs opposition by some other passion to achieve perfect intensity (*Samhain*: 1904), and that the presence of "irremediable things" during the act of contemplation produces the opposition necessary for the "shaping joy" of the artist to forge tragic joy ("Poetry and Tradition"). This antiself comes only to those who are undeceived and un-sentimental, "whose passion is reality." According to Yeats, only by facing the tempests of life can one find his mask or antiself: "He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling, unforeseen, wing-footed wanderer." Like Deirdre by the graveside, the artist can sing amid his uncertainty and triumph in the struggle only when he recognizes the futility of rationalization and self-delusion: "I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void grow fruitful when I understand I have nothing. . . ." The artist discovers and uses his mask for the creation of tragic art only in this context of sorrow: "The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat." When the artist finds his mask

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58 Ibid. This "reality," of course, is absolute, and not the mundane reality of so-called "real" art.

59 Ibid., p. 332.

60 Ibid.

in the contemplation of sorrow, he fashions from it "the revelation of reality" and "the greatest imaginable beauty," the moment of wisdom in tragic art where tragic joy and Unity of Being abide.

After 1917, Yeats ceased to write prose essays on the subject of tragic art. Preoccupied with the composition and revision of his "system" expounded in two editions of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937), and with the production of a large body of poetry and drama, Yeats' prose references to tragic art from 1917 to the end of his life are limited to several letters, a few sentences in the *Autobiography*, and scattered expressions in late introductions and essays on different topics. In any event, nothing new on the subject of tragic art was forthcoming after 1917. Yeats' tragic aesthetic was complete in its main ideas by 1910, and in its ideational variations by 1917. Nothing in Yeats' life or thought (including the arcane system in *A Vision*) changed it. Even in his last prose publication, *On the Boiler* (1939), one finds an expression that could easily have been written in the first decade of the century: "The arts are all the bridal chambers of joy. No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy."

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62 Ibid., p. 331.
63 Ibid., p. 332.
The impact of Yeats' prose ideas about tragic art upon his poetry from 1904 (the beginning date of the essays on tragedy) to 1939 is manifest. An examination of selected poems from this period clearly demonstrates that both the main ideas and the exultant spirit of Yeats' tragic aesthetic are present in much of his poetry, indicating that this tragic strain in his thought played a crucial role in the direction of his career.
CHAPTER III

THE IMPACT OF YEATS' TRAGIC AESTHETIC
UPON THE POETRY TO 1917

This is the first of two chapters studying the impact of Yeats' tragic aesthetic upon his poetry from the early years of the twentieth century until his death in 1939. Both the spirit and some of the main ideas of this conception are found in many of these poems, often in such an implicit form that a reader is unable to understand fully the meaning of certain poems without a thorough knowledge of the abstract principles contained in Yeats' tragic view of art. Chapter II provided this requisite conceptual framework through a close analysis of several prose essays written by Yeats in the period 1904-1917. This first chapter dealing with the poetry concentrates on selected poems written in the same period, in order to demonstrate the direct impact of the prose ideas upon the poetry during, and shortly after, the development of Yeats' tragic aesthetic (the main ideas of which, it will be remembered, were set by 1910).

This chapter also takes a brief look at selected poems of the 1880's and 1890's which may be considered examples of Yeats' "pre-tragic" period of pathos. The purpose of such a background study is to lend further perspective to
the tone and substance of Yeats' tragic view as it is found in the poetry of 1904-1917 by discovering the contrasting tone and substance of the poems of pathos, which feature yearnings for escape from worldly sorrow. This brief backward look demonstrates that while the perception of sorrow was apparently always a part of Yeats' nature, the desire to escape painful circumstance in these early poems is merely the pathos of undisciplined emotion and not the later insight of tragic recognition (a recognition that leads not to a fearful escape from sorrow into a bland pastoral setting but to a dynamic transmutation of sorrow into tragic joy).

The early poetry of Yeats generally establishes a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, and does not attempt to reconcile these opposites but merely prefers the latter to the former, usually in the manner of the cruel mortal world of suffering being left behind for a timeless pastoral realm of spirituality. The chorus of "The Stolen Child" (1886) expresses this preoccupation of the early poetry:

Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping  
than you can understand.1

The same theme is presented more elaborately in Yeats' early

narrative poem, The Wanderings of Oisin (1889). In Book I of this poem, Niamh promises to take Oisin to a place "Where men have heaped no burial grounds, / And the days pass by like a wayward tune."² Once in this realm, Oisin sees a beautiful young man holding up a flashing scepter as he implores the denizens of this enchanted place to live with joy and "mock at Death and Time,"³ for

here there is nor Change nor Death
But only kind and merry breath
For joy is God and God is joy.⁴

As early as 1888, Yeats himself saw the problem of this kind of plaintive longing. He wrote to Katherine Tynan, on March 14, 1888, that in the process of correcting his poems he had noticed something about his poetry he had not noticed before, that it was

almost a flight into fairyland from the real world. . . . The Chorus to the "Stolen Child" [quoted above] sums it up—that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge.⁵

Shortly after this letter, in lines from a poem first published complete in 1889, "Quatrains and Aphorisms," Yeats achieves a first step in the desired direction of "insight and knowledge." In the seventh quatrain of the poem, probably written after The Wanderings of Oisin, and certainly written

²Ibid., p. 8. ³Ibid., p. 19. ⁴Ibid.

after "The Stolen Child," Yeats shows an insight into the possible reconciliation of sorrow and joy (irreconcilable opposites in the universe of The Wanderings of Oisin) which foreshadows the more complex conception of tragic joy:

The heart of noon folds silence and folds sleep,  
For noon and midnight from each other borrow,  
And Joy, in growing deeper and more deep,  
Walks in the vesture of her sister Sorrow.  

Unfortunately, Yeats very soon relapsed into the old themes of "longing and complaint." Throughout the poetry of the 1890's, especially in such poems as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" (1891), "The White Birds" (1892), and "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897), the old desire to escape mortal sorrow is ever-present. Although the poetry continually improves in quality during this period, the theme of escape does not generally give way to that of transforming affirmation. Only in "To His Heart, Bidding It Have No Fear" (1896) does Yeats look forward to the fearless affirmation of his tragic view:

Be you still, be you still, trembling heart;  
Remember the wisdom out of the old days:  
Who trembles before the flame and the flood,  
And the winds blowing through the starry ways,  
And blowing us evil and good;  
Let the starry winds and the flame and the flood  
Cover over and hide, for he has no part  
With the lonely, proud, winged multitude.  

6 The Variorum Poems, p. 735.

7 Ibid., p. 158. The original version of the poem is quoted. A slightly altered version of the last six lines (omitting line five and changing several words) was used.
Yeats' early poetry thus deals with the same existential facts as does his later tragic poetry--man's lot in life is suffering; he must be tossed about by the vagaries of love and fortune; and he must grow old and die. But the early poems (with the two notable exceptions given above) seek an escape from the realities of life into "faery" bliss, fearing a direct gaze into the soul. It was only after Yeats became preoccupied with the nature of tragic art in the early years of the twentieth century that he dared to stare directly at the source of his fears and thereby transform those fears into the affirmation of tragic art, with its characteristic quality of a joy fashioned from sorrow, not in an escape from it. Yeats' poetry after 1904 reflects this new emphasis on affirmation. He would no longer write poetry of "longing and complaint."

The Shadowy Waters, a long dramatic poem published in a revised form in 1906, is the first significant example of just how much Yeats' then-developing thoughts on tragic art affected his poetry of the same period. This poem had been first published in 1900, but was so extensively revised by Yeats that the 1906 version bears little resemblance to the

later by Yeats as the poetic prelude to Section II of "Poetry and Tradition," one of the cornerstones of his tragic aesthetic. The last six lines of the original poem are Yeats' adaptation of a phrase from the initiation ritual of the Order of the Golden Dawn (the Rosicrucian society to which Yeats belonged at the time), according to A. Norman Jeffares, in A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 65.
earlier version save in the general contours of the plot. The difference between the two versions is essentially the difference between the pathos of Yeats' early poetry and the recognition and affirmation of his tragic aesthetic. The early poetry features a spiritual reality sought externally in escape from sorrow into a pastoral realm of innocent joy, while the tragic aesthetic concerns a spiritual reality sought internally by the transmutation of sorrow into tragic joy during a moment of perfect intensity. Thus the 1900 version of *The Shadowy Waters* looks backward to the early poetry, whereas the 1906 version keynotes a poetry reflecting the ideas and spirit of Yeats' tragic view.

*The Shadowy Waters* concerns the efforts of one Forgael to find spiritual reality—symbolically a land beyond time, very much like that found in *The Wanderings of Oisin*—by sailing a ship into unknown waters. A comparison of the imagery used in the two versions of the poem to describe this realm demonstrates Yeats' shift in the spatial projection of ultimate reality from the external plane in the early poetry of pathos to the internal plane in the poetry of tragedy. In 1900, spiritual reality is external; the description of the realm beyond time is in concrete, pastoral images out of Irish mythology:

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Wander for ever
Among the winds and waters; and when they pass
The mountain of the gods, the unappeasable gods
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Cover their faces with their hair and weep.
They lure us to the streams where the world ends. 8

In 1906, spiritual reality is internalized; Yeats' description of this realm is no longer that of a land of milk and honey but that of an abstraction—the universal essence of the human race, where personality manifests pure passion:

Where the world ends
The mind is made unchanging, for it finds
Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible hope,
The flagstone under all, the fire of fires,
The roots of the world. 9

A later speech in the poem reaffirms this more abstract conception of absolute reality, as the concept of passion found in Samhain: 1904 (which was written during the very period of the revision of The Shadowy Waters) pervades Forgael's further description of the place "where the world ends":

I shall find a woman,
One of the Ever-living, as I think--
One of the Laughing People--and she and I
Shall light upon a place in the world's core,
Where passion grows to a changeless thing,
Like charmed apples made of chrysoprase,
Or chrisoberyl, or beryl, or chrysolite;
And there, in juggleries of sight and sense,
Become one movement, energy, delight, 10
Until the overburthened moon is dead.

In addition to the abstract, internalized conception of an ultimate, spiritual reality where universal human essence is located, another important idea from Yeats' tragic aesthetic found in The Shadowy Waters is that of the act

8 The Variorum Poems, p. 764.
9 Ibid., p. 227.
10 Ibid., p. 231.
of contemplation as the beginning point in finding passion. This idea is first mentioned by Yeats in *Samhain: 1904*, and later much expanded in "Poetry and Tradition," where the artist's pure contemplation of "irremediable things" becomes the first step in the creation of tragic joy and, hence, tragic art. It should be remembered that Yeats in "Poetry and Tradition" calls this act of contemplation a dream state, where impure emotions are mastered by the mind, removed from their contexts, and dissolved into new forms, subject only to the limitation of the artist's imagination—"All hate and hope vanishes in the dream." This characterization of the act of contemplation as a dream state seems to be the context of certain lines spoken by Forgae in *The Shadowy Waters*, where dreams are seen as the means of attaining ultimate reality:

> All would be well
> Could we but give us wholly to the dreams,
> And get into their world that to the sense
> Is shadow, and not linger wretchedly
> Among substantial things; for it is dreams
> That lift us to the flowing, changing world
> That the heart longs for.

Thus the evolution of Yeats' thought from a pathetic to a tragic dimension, as evidenced in his early contributions to his new tragic aesthetic, the prose essays *Samhain: 1904* and "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), is manifestly the reason why the two versions of *The Shadowy Waters* are so different,

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perhaps even the reason why Yeats felt the need to revise the poem in the first place. In any event, the poem is the first significant example of the influence of Yeats' prose ideas of tragic art upon his poetry. As a result of this influence, Yeats finally put to rest, almost twenty years after his letter to Katherine Tynan, the old poetry of "longing and complaint" in favor of poetry of "insight and knowledge." The amorphous emotions of pathos had now become the disciplined, affirmative emotions of tragic recognition and reconciliation.

A short poem written in 1910, "The Coming of Wisdom with Time," further demonstrates this new direction in Yeats' poetry. This poem contains in very concise poetic form the essence of Yeats' idea of "wisdom," which lies at the heart of his tragic view. In Chapter II, "The Tragic Theatre" was closely examined and was found to contain Yeats' most vivid description of that great moment in tragic art when the dramatic figure achieves tragic joy and individual "character" is dissolved into the communal "personality" of the race, "where passion . . . becomes wisdom."

Wisdom is thus a later name for the moment of tragic reconciliation, when sorrow becomes tragic joy and the ultimate, universal essence of man is perceived. "The Coming of Wisdom with Time" moves back one step in the artistic process from the work to the

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\[13\] "The Tragic Theatre," p. 239.
artist himself, who, like his own creation (the dramatic persona), attains this moment of wisdom, during the creation of the work of art. In the poem, Yeats sees the stylistic excesses of his early poetry of pathos as irrelevant to truth, and realizes that the expression of truth is simple and coherent upon attaining wisdom, for the poet can draw from the wellspring of universal human essence:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;  
Now I may wither into the truth.14

With the achievement of wisdom within himself at the moment of the conceiving vision of tragic art, the artist simultaneously sets in motion the dynamic process discussed in Chapter II, where the artist projects his own achieved state into the work of art, and the perceiver of this work recreates the moment of perfection for himself as he explores and experiences the artist’s vision. It is thus that the community of men—the ultimate purpose of tragic art in Yeats’ view—is accomplished, with the work of art serving as a kind of creative axis around which the artist and the viewers of art are united.

As was already stated in the section of this chapter dealing with The Shadowy Waters, Yeats sees the pure contemplation of great sorrow as the necessary beginning act in the tragic process. This act of contemplation, a dream or trance

14 The Variorum Poems, p. 261.
state, is the crucible of tragic art, where the artist's agonies of sorrow and defeat are transformed from base substances into the radiance of tragic joy by his innately affirmative imagination. The lines quoted earlier from *The Shadowy Waters* on the subject of dreams as the means of achieving the ideal state for which the heart yearns were seen as a simple foreshadowing of the more complex description of the contemplative act in "Poetry and Tradition." But in a later poem, "The Cold Heaven" (1912), Yeats deals with the fully-developed concept of the act of contemplation found in the prose essay.

"The Cold Heaven" is a superb poem, again demonstrating Yeats' ability to concentrate great feeling and much meaning into relatively few lines. Yeats is speaking of his own life in this poem, about the anguish of his great love for Maud Gonne, now a searing memory triggered by the sight of a strange winter sky "that seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice."15 Yeats' description of what happens after looking at the sky is his finest passage on the nature of the contemplative state and of the great pain that accrues from confronting "irremediable things":

And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light.16

15Ibid., p. 316.  
16Ibid.
Apparently, the act of contemplation can occur spontaneously as well as meditatively, with the implication that the artist might as well decide to face the actuality of sorrow, for otherwise it will descend upon him with redoubled impact when he least expects it. With memories flooding in, Yeats takes all the blame for his sorrows, unreasonably it would seem, but with the result that by carrying the weight of his own soul on his shoulders the tragic process is more decisively (and courageously) set in motion, eventually becoming the coherence of wisdom (although "The Cold Heaven" never proceeds past the initial step of the act of contemplation). The poet is left "riddled with light"; not yet the light of wisdom, but the light of tragic recognition by which sorrow is confronted, not run from. And that light will continue to grow towards the joy of tragic reconciliation as sorrow is mastered by the imagination.

The poetry immediately following the maturation of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in 1910 often contains the spirit of affirmation so pervasive in his view of tragic art, if not always one of the specific ideas of the process of creating tragic art. A good example of a poem existing within the general affirmative context of Yeats' tragic view without being a vehicle for one of its key ideas is the graceful "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing" (1913). This poem, addressed to Lady Gregory, Yeats' longtime friend and benefactor, urges the use of the aristocrat's traditional
quality of manners (such as Yeats mentioned in "Poetry and Tradition") instead of the natural reaction of petty enmity in the face of disappointment:

Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.\(^{17}\)

As Yeats explains it in "Poetry and Tradition," the aristocrat is of great importance in the life of a culture. He shares three qualities with the artist—he is a producer of beauty (specifically, "beautiful manners"\(^{18}\)), is part of a tradition of beauty, and is fearless in the face of adversity. Yeats thus implies that the aristocrat is analogous to the artist; both demonstrate, in the face of inevitable sorrow, a magnificent quality emanating from their apprehension of universal essence in the moment of wisdom—the artist creates tragic art, and the aristocrat uses beautiful manners (becoming, in effect, a work of art). And these manners, like tragic art itself, are exultant and affirmative.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 291. Yeats used the same metaphor of a string in a 1902 annotation in Common's anthology of Nietzsche: "A sacred book is a book written by a man whose self has been so exalted (not by denial but by an intensity like that of the vibrating string) that it becomes one with the race" (quoted in Zwerdling, p. 22). This annotation, it might be added, also strongly suggests the idea of a community of men sharing a universal essence so important later in Yeats' tragic aesthetic.

Another poem of about the same time, "The Peacock" (1914), expresses this same affirmative quality, this time firmly associated with the joy of the artist in creating tragic art. The poem manifests the pervasive recklessness of the artist's imagination, so often mentioned by Yeats in "Poetry and Tradition":

What's riches to him  
That has made a great peacock  
With the pride of his eye?  
The wind-beaten, stone grey,  
And desolate Three Rock  
Would nourish his whim.  
Live he or die  
Amid wet rocks and heather,  
His ghost will be gay  
Adding feather to feather  
For the pride of his eye.  

A third poem of a slightly later date, "Her Courage" (1917), part of a series called "Upon a Dying Lady" which commemorates a courageous friend, contains yet another perspective on the affirmative spirit of Yeats' tragic aesthetic. The exuberant, joyous tone of this poem perfectly matches its theme--tragic joy. Yeats pays his friend the highest honor he can bestow by placing her in the company of heroes who have transformed sorrow into tragic joy and have become one with personality:

When her soul flies to the predestined dancing-place  
(I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made  
Amid the dreams of youth) let her come face to face,  
Amid that first astonishment, with Grania's shade,  
All but the terrors of the woodland flight forgot  
That made her Diarmuid dear, and some old cardinal

19 The Variorum Poems, p. 310.
Pacing with half-closed eyelids in a sunny spot
Who had murmured of Giorgione at his latest breath—
Aye, and Achilles, Timor, Babar, Barhaim, all
Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death. 20

Yeats apologizes rather humorously for having to use again
the imagery of escape found in his early poetry in order to
convey the impression of ultimate reality beyond death. The
use of such imagery seems a parody of the early poetry, but
humor is not out of place in such a joyous poem.

The final poem to be considered concerning the impact
of Yeats' tragic aesthetic upon the poetry to 1917 is "Ego
Dominus Tuus," an important work that states poetically the
concept of the mask found in the essay "Anima Hominis" (1917).
As was related in Chapter II, the concept of the mask or
antiself should be considered a later variation of one of
the key ideas of Yeats' tragic view, that concerning the
necessity of an opposition to create the internal tension
required for the creation of tragic art to take place.

The mask relates to that oft-mentioned first step in
the tragic process—the act of contemplation, where the pole
of sorrow is apprehended (later to be transformed by the
other pole of the opposition—the joyous, affirmative imagi-
nation of the artist). It is during contemplation that the
artist finds his mask or opposing self, as Yeats makes clear
in "Anima Hominis." Actually, "Ego Dominus Tuus" predates
"Anima Hominis" by two years, having been written in 1915,

20Ibid., pp. 365-66.
although not published until 1917.\footnote{Jeffares (p. 195) says the poem was written by October 5, 1915, though a second manuscript has a December 5 date. It was not published until October, 1917.} The usual sequence of Yeats' prose influencing his poetry appears reversed in this case, but, in a larger sense, the normal sequence holds. For "Ego Dominus Tuus" is a poem profoundly influenced by the ideas in *Samhain: 1904, "Poetry and Tradition,"* and *"The Tragic Theatre."* The later ideational variation of the mask happened to blossom in a poem already influenced by these essays, and then required further elaboration in *"Anima Hominis."* An examination of "Ego Dominus Tuus" demonstrates its intimate relationship to Yeats' ideas of the tragic process and shows how Yeats developed the creative aspect of his concept of the mask naturally out of the earlier idea of opposition.\footnote{It is well to remember that Yeats had already briefly mentioned the creative aspect of the mask in 1909 in a passage already quoted in Chapter II and repeated here: "I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself . . ." ("The Death of Synge," p. 340).}

The setting of "Ego Dominus Tuus" is the land around Yeats' cherished Norman tower, Thoor Ballylee; the form of the poem is a dialogue between one Hic, representing the objective, practical aspect of man, and Ille, representing the subjective, artistic aspect (and, as such, is the spokesman for Yeats' viewpoint). The theme of the mask or antiseelf
is introduced early in the poem, when Ille says, "By the help of an image / I call to my own opposite." The practical Hic answers, "And I would find myself and not an image." Ille's rejoinder expresses Yeats' view that such an objective approach is the reason why art in the modern age lacks that vital, reckless affirmation of tragic art, why sprezzatura has given way to timidity:

That is our modern hope, and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed. . . .

The problem with such a pallid acceptance of one's "self," in Yeats' view, is that there is no dynamic tension between opposites at work in the soul, no tragic recognition, which, after all, requires such an opposition. In this poem, the opposition within the soul of the artist necessary for the creation of tragic art is expressed in terms of self and antself, the man and the mask, a variation of earlier ideas of opposition found in Samhain: 1904 and "Poetry and Tradition." Finding one's opposite can take place only in sorrow and defeat; only at the nadir of fortune is the artist able to find his antself and shape from it the beauty of tragic art, that Unity of Being which comes as a vision at the attainment of

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23 The Variorum Poems, p. 367.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 368.
tragic joy (the moment of wisdom in Yeats' tragic aesthetic). This is the meaning of Ille's description of Dante as the paradigm of the tragic artist. Dante, by seeking his opposite, by having "A hunger for the apple on the bough / Most out of reach," is able to achieve that perfection of tragic art which comes from the reconciliation of mighty opposites within the artist's soul:

He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,
Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by man.

Two passages in "Anima Hominis" amplify this point: "The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment . . ." (p. 337) and "He can only create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs . . ." (p. 332).

The Variorum Poems, p. 368.

Ibid., p. 369. In The Trembling of the Veil, p. 183, Yeats elaborates on Dante's (and Francois Villon's) achieving the triumph of tragic art from disappointment and defeat. Yeats emphasizes the absolute necessity of the recognition of inevitable sorrow in life, what he calls the "Vision of Evil," to any creation of tragic art:

Such masters--Villon and Dante, let us say--would not, when they speak through their art, change their luck; yet they mirrored in all the suffering of desire. The two halves of their nature are so completely joined that they seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens, being at the same instant predestinate and free, creation's very self. We gaze at such men in awe, because we gaze not at a work of art, but at the re-creation of the man through that art, the birth of a new species of man, and it may seem that the hairs of our heads stand up, because that birth, that re-creation, is from terror. Had not Dante and Villon understood that their fate wrecked what life could not rebuild, had they lacked their Vision of Evil, had they cherished any species of optimism, they could not but have found
Hic interjects the thought that there surely must be men who create art "out of no tragic war," \textsuperscript{29} who are impulsive "lovers of life" \textsuperscript{30} seeking happiness and singing out when they have found it. Ille's reply reiterates Yeats' cardinal idea that only tragic art, grounded in sorrow, has validity:

> those that love the world serve it in action,  
> Grow rich, popular and full of influence,  
> And should they paint or write, still it is action:  
> The struggle of the fly in the marmalade.  
> The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,  
> The sentimentalist himself; while art  
> Is but a vision of reality.  
> What portion in the world can the artist have  
> Who has awakened from the common dream  
> But dissipation and despair? \textsuperscript{31}

The artist, at the sacrifice of his life's happiness, takes on the burden of the universe in his work so that the path to wisdom and universal human essence will not be forgotten. It is this choice between life or work that each man must make, Yeats insists in "Ego Dominus Tuus." For the artist, of course, there is only one course; he must stare unflinchingly into the storm of life's sorrow and, through his work, forge the harmony of tragic joy and light the way to personality. The work of tragic art magically triumphs

\[ \text{a false beauty, or some momentary instinctive beauty,} \]
\[ \text{and suffered no change at all}. \ldots \]

It goes without saying that this long passage serves as an excellent summary of many of the main ideas of Yeats' tragic aesthetic.

\textsuperscript{29}The Variorum Poems, p. 369. \textsuperscript{30}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31}Ibid. The above quote in note 28 is germane to these lines.
over the chaos of existence and gathers all men who perceive this art into a community.

"Ego Dominus Tuus" is the culmination of the poetry which shows the impact of Yeats' tragic aesthetic during the period 1904-1917. In its depiction of the tragic artist working within the heart of sorrow and, by the reconciliation of his self and its opposite (the mask or antiself), shaping this sorrow into the perfection of beauty that is the fruit of the resultant tragic joy, "Ego Dominus Tuus" epitomizes Yeats' view of the tragic process.

The poems selected for examination in this chapter have provided conclusive evidence that the impact of Yeats' tragic aesthetic upon his poetry in the period 1904-1917 was considerable. Time and again the poetry of this middle period of Yeats' career exhibits a kind of affirmative spirit that could have come only from his tragic view. In several instances, poems contain specific ideas originally expounded by Yeats in the prose essays on tragedy, such as that of the act of contemplating sorrow as the beginning step in the creation of tragic art, the concept of the mask or antiself as it relates to the contemplative state and development of an internal opposition leading to reconciliation, and the idea of that reconciliation itself—tragic joy and wisdom. But, then, this middle period of poetry corresponds exactly to the period of the development, maturation, and modification of Yeats' ideas on tragic art and thus could be expected to
show an influence. What about the later poetry? How can it show the influence of ideas so many years after their formulation and in light of Yeats' preoccupation with his cosmic "system" expounded in A Vision? The fourth chapter of this study demonstrates that Yeats' tragic aesthetic continued to have an impact upon his poetry throughout the poet's career. Indeed, the influence of Yeats' tragic view upon the poetry of his last decade is shown to be especially intense, for the aging and infirm poet found great strength in the affirmative spirit of tragic art as death approached.
CHAPTER IV

THE IMPACT OF YEATS' TRAGIC AESTHETIC
UPON THE POETRY 1917-1939

The impact of Yeats' tragic aesthetic upon his poetry after 1917 remained pervasive, despite the presence after this date of a countervailing influence in the poetry from his metaphysical "system" described in A Vision (1925 and 1937). An examination of this final stage of Yeats' poetic career reveals an alternating domination in influence between these two modes of thought and feeling, relecting a vacillation within Yeats' own being between a concentration on ultimate reality per se (the preoccupation of the saint) and a concentration on the tragic process leading to ultimate reality (the preoccupation of the artist).¹

One part of Yeats always desired to make the leap past experience and suffering and land directly in the realm of

¹Yeats himself speaks of this difference between the saint and the artist in 1906: "If it be true that God is a circle, whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and the artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him . . . but [must] be content to find his pleasure in all that is forever passing away that it may come again . . ." (W. B. Yeats, "Discoveries," The Cutting of an Agate, in Essays and Introductions, p. 287). This contrast is developed further by Yeats in his two later poems dealing with a dialogue between the points of view of saint and artist--"A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927) and "Vacillation" (1931-32).
spiritual perfection. This aspect of his being can be seen in the early poetry of pathos and escape described in the last chapter. It is present again in a modified form in the system found in *A Vision*, where the point of view is cosmic and spiritual, even coldly supernatural. The other part of Yeats, the artist with his feet firmly touching the ground of experience, has as a goal this same perfect state, but emphasizes the quest itself: the tragic process wherein the artist transforms sorrow into tragic joy and thus achieves in his work a visionary abstraction of Unity of Being or ultimate reality. This chapter examines the continuing impact of this latter aspect of Yeats' being upon his poetry after 1917, showing when it is the dominant influence and when it is secondary to the influence of his system. Speaking generally, the system can be seen as the chief influence in the poetry of 1917-1927, whereas the tragic aesthetic, dominant in the poetry of 1904-1917, is of secondary influence in 1917-1927 but becomes dominant again from 1927 until the end of Yeats' life.

The greatest portion of the chapter concerns the poetry of the 1930's, which includes two specific periods when Yeats emphasized, perhaps as never before, the torturous process of tragic art. The years 1930-1932 comprise the first such period, culminating in "Vacillation" and the "Crazy Jane" poems. After a brief return to the spiritual point of view of his system, centered about the mystical *Supernatural Songs*
(1934), Yeats returned to the view of his tragic aesthetic for good about 1935. The poetry of this last dynamic period embodies the affirmative spirit and main ideas of his tragic view with great vigor—indeed, with consummate recklessness, as Yeats himself might put it. Such poems as "Lapis Lazuli" and "High Talk" are among Yeats' noblest expressions of the great task of the artist in the world.

Beginning in 1917 with his new wife's "communication" with the spirit world (on which his system is supposedly based), Yeats began to construct the system describing his symbolical view of ultimate reality. Although composed in vague language and evidencing much arcana yet undeciphered, the system is clearly a symbolic theory concerning both the movements of history and the different types of human personality, each movement and type being correlated in mystical ways to a different phase of the moon. In a broad sense, this complex system of phases and swirling "gyres" is Yeats' greatest statement about Unity of Being\(^2\) or ultimate reality, an aspect of which was described in Chapter II as an ephemeral, visionary abstraction of the perfect image of art achieved by the artist during the decisive moment of the

\(^2\)Speaking of Unity of Being in 1937, Yeats said, "Subconscious preoccupation with this theme brought me A Vision, its harsh geometry an incomplete interpretation" (W. B. Yeats, "A General Introduction for My Work," Essays and Introductions, p. 518). It is interesting to note that this quote does not mention the spirit world as having virtually dictated the system of A Vision, as Yeats earlier insisted.
tragic process (the moment of wisdom). Thus Yeats' tragic aesthetic and his symbolic system express different perspectives about the same thing. The difference, as has already been stated, is chiefly that of emphasis or viewpoint. The system seems to look out from the center of Unity of Being, emphasizing the overall spiritual reality behind natural manifestations or processes, whereas Yeats' tragic view emphasizes the complex process of artistic amelioration, beginning at the experiential level of sorrow and proceeding transmutatively to the ideal of spiritual reality.

The poetry of 1917-1927, on the whole, seems to focus on the state of unity itself and not, as does "Ego Dominus Tuus," on the process leading to the state. The earliest part of this period features poems which are concerned with nothing but the phases of personality of the system—"The Cat and the Moon" (1917), "The Phases of the Moon" (1918), and "The Saint and the Hunchback" (1918). Another poem of this time, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (1919), foreshadows Yeats' later preoccupation with symbols of Unity of Being in the middle 1920's by presenting a dancer whose "body perfection brought."3 "Among School Children" (1926) also features a dancer in the famous concluding stanza, and "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926) describes another symbol of achieved Unity of Being—the fabulous mechanical bird of gold

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3The Variorum Poems, p. 383.
singing out its perfect music in "the artifice of eternity."\textsuperscript{4}

The struggle of the tragic process is missing in these poems of transfixion before the ideal image.

This concentration on the spiritual point of view in the poetry of 1917-1927 is relieved occasionally in a few poems which contain references to the tragic process, indicating that the influence of Yeats' tragic aesthetic is not dead during this period. An example is the third poem in the sequence entitled "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

This poem, "My Table" (1922), concerns a 550 year-old Japanese sword given to Yeats in 1920 by Junzo Sato.\textsuperscript{5} The sword reappears in two later poems, "The Symbols" (1927) and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927), where it becomes Yeats' symbol of life and experience. But here it is the "changeless sword,"\textsuperscript{6} symbol of perfection in art, like the dancer and the golden bird. Unlike the other, more famous poems, however, "My Table" does not forget the tragic process. Yeats clearly touches on the experiential ground of art when he declares that "only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art."\textsuperscript{7} He also speaks of the characteristically calm and graceful demeanor which comes from the reconciliation of tragic joy, shared by artist and aristocratic owner of art.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 408.
\textsuperscript{5}The information about the sword is found in Jeffares, pp. 269-70.
\textsuperscript{6}The Variorum Poems, p. 421.  \textsuperscript{7}Ibid.
alike. The owners of the sword throughout the ages (now including Yeats himself, of course) well represent this cultural ideal:

Soul's beauty being most adored,  
Men and their business took  
The soul's unchanging look;  
For the most rich inheritor,  
Knowing that none could pass Heaven's door  
That loved inferior art,  
Had such an aching heart  
That he, although a country's talk  
For silken clothes and stately walk,  
Had waking wits; it seemed  
Juno's peacock screamed.  

Perhaps Yeats' most radical departure from the spiritual point of view of his system during the period of its dominance in 1917-1927 comes in the great third section of "The Tower" (1925). As one reads this poem, marveling at the beauty of the imagery and at the noble spirit of an old man remembering his life and reconstructing his heritage, suddenly one is struck at line 145 by Yeats' unexpected but magnificent statement on the omnipotence of the human imagination, exceeding anything which has come before in his work:

And I declare my faith:  
I mock Plotinus' thought

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8 Ibid., pp. 421-22. The cry of Juno's peacock is linked to the revelation of tragic joy, as Yeats explains: "A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this is like some great tragic person, some Niobe who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes towards the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation—the scream of Juno's peacock" (A Vision, p. 268). The fact that such thought appears in A Vision demonstrates the interpenetration of all Yeats' concepts at certain key points.
And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.  

This is such a radical utterance that it seems certain that Yeats, always the believer in a Platonic kind of ultimate reality, always the noumenalist, is reversing himself. But it is only a momentary change. Yeats, caught up in the affirmative spirit of his tragic view of art, in man's ability to reorder experience and transform the bitter into the profound, is content to celebrate the artistic imagination for the moment, free of any universal context. He ignores, in the heady moment of exultation, the purpose of tragic art—to bring men into the transpersonal essence of ultimate reality. Of all Yeats' poems, only "High Talk" (1938) rivals "The Tower" in its claims for the power of the human imagination.

An important 1927 poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," characterizes the internal debate in Yeats' mind between the conflicting viewpoints of saint and artist, state and process. As late as 1926, in "Among School Children" and "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats had followed his general practice of the period 1917-1927 in giving primacy to the view of the saint.

9The Variorum Poems, pp. 414-15.
But in this instance, "Self" (spokesman for the imagination, and thus for the tragic process) has the last word in the dialogue.

At the beginning of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "Soul" (spokesman for the spiritual, absolute view) implores Self to put aside Sato's sword (symbolizing experience and its inevitable sorrow—"Emblematical of love and war") and climb into the pure form of the spiritual realm; to become, as it were, the perfect golden bird singing for a Byzantine emperor:

Think of ancestral night that can,  
If but imagination scorn the earth  
And intellect its wandering  
To this and that and t'other thing,  
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

These lines spoken by Soul express the basic theme of Yeats' _The Tower_ collection (published in 1928), which dominates the period 1917-1927, when the influence of his system is paramount. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," although written in 1927, only a year after the latest poems in _The Tower_, was not published until 1933, in _The Winding Stair_ collection. This volume emphasizes the tragic process rather than the perfect spiritual state. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," then, must be seen as the turning point in Yeats' poetic direction from the spiritual to the natural, from poetry primarily influenced by the system in _A Vision_ to that primarily

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10 Ibid., p. 478.  
11 Ibid.
influenced by the tragic aesthetic. This becomes clear when one reads Self's answer to Soul's desire to live in timeless perfection. Yeats devotes the entire second half of the poem to Self's presentation of the case for tragic process. Self, aware that perfection is bought dearly by the imagination in the artist's transmutation of sorrow, would not lose this link to the imperfect source from which tragic art springs: "I am content to live it all again." The last stanza of the poem gives the definitive reply to Soul's earlier statement that "only the dead can be forgiven." For forgiveness of a man's transgressions against himself and others begins within himself, and that is the road to tragic joy, a state which celebrates universality but does not wish to forget its rich source in experience:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

The other poems contained in The Winding Stair reaffirm Yeats' new preoccupation with the life-based process of tragic

12Ibid., p. 479.  
13Ibid.

14Ibid. Yeats stresses this condition of "blessedness" in a letter to Ethel Mannin in 1935. Referring to the artist, he says, "Our traditions only permit us to bless, for the arts are an extension of the beatitudes. Blessed be heroic death (Shakespeare's tragedies), blessed be heroic life (Cervantes), blessed be the wise (Balzac) . . ." (Letters, p. 831).
art illustrated in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." In many ways, some of these poems seem to be a conscious corrective to the unbalanced emphasis on the spiritual found so often in the poetry of The Tower. The new emphasis is the same as that of 1904-1917--on the process of tragic art, which focuses as much on the fecund ditches from which art arises as on the perfect end product of art.

In "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915), Yeats had expressed a conviction that a man must choose between a life of action or a life of imaginative work, and that if he chooses the latter his lot will be a lonely apprehension of "dissipation and despair."¹⁵ This same idea is stated very directly in "The Choice" (1931). Yeats would have all illusions dispelled concerning the process of creating tragic art, for the artist's rigors and sacrifices are monumental:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.¹⁶

The artist cannot lay down his burden and bask in his occasional visions of perfection; he cannot be the twirling dancer in a timeless realm, or the golden bird singing on the bough. Each attainment of tragic joy and vision of Unity of Being must pass, and the whole process must begin again--in sorrow. As long as he lives, the artist must always battle

¹⁵The Variorum Poems, p. 369.
¹⁶Ibid., p. 495.
new griefs, achieve new triumphs. For Yeats, there could be no more climbing into ascetic towers, no more resting in "heavenly mansions." Now the aged poet would accept and celebrate each part of life as it comes, like his old, mad creation—Crazy Jane.

In the greatest of the "Crazy Jane poems," "Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop" (1931), the Bishop advises the old woman to "live in a heavenly mansion, / Not in some foul sty." After replying that "fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul," Crazy Jane soon expresses a cardinal Yeatsian truth by succinctly characterizing the transformational process of tragic art:

Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.

The most significant poem in The Winding Stair from the standpoint of the tragic process is "Vacillation" (1931-32). This rather long work poses an early question relating to life and art to which the rest of the poem offers answers. This question goes to the heart of life's riddle, as Yeats sees it:

Between extremities
Man runs his course;
A brand, or flaming breath,

17Ibid., p. 513. 18Ibid. 19Ibid.

20The reader is referred to Ellmann's brilliant analysis of this poem on pp. 268-74 of The Identity of Yeats for a slightly different interpretation of its meaning.
Comes to destroy
All those antinomies
Of day and night;
The body calls it death,
The heart remorse.
But if these be right
What is joy?21

If death destroys all contrast and differentiation, and if the heart (in this poem, the symbol for Self or the imagination) must suffer over the errors of a lifetime at the threshold of death, then what constitutes the worth of the life venture, what are the grounds for joy?

Section II begins the poem's answers to this question. By equating the artist at work with the devoted priest in the ancient festival of Attis, a vegetation god, Yeats implies the joy of artistic creation:

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;
And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew,
And he that Attis' image hangs between
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.22

The tree is a Welsh symbol from the Mabinogion,23 and represents the basic antinomies of existence—soul and body, the spiritual and the physical, state and process, being and becoming. As the priest castrated himself to serve Attis, so

21 The Variorum Poems, pp. 499-500.
22 Ibid., p. 500.
23 Yeats describes this tree in "The Celtic Element in Literature," Essays and Introductions, p. 176.
does the artist sacrifice normal life experience for his work. Only thus can he reconcile the opposition of the tree's two sides by "hanging" his work—the mask of Attis—between the two sides. The result is a transpersonal ecstatic condition—the tragic joy so different from ordinary joy. The more exultant aspect of tragic joy is the theme of Section III of "Vacillation," where Yeats sees the onset of age increasing the necessity for the coherence of tragic art:

No longer in Lethean foliage caught
Begin the preparation for your death
And from the fortieth winter by that thought
Test every work of intellect or faith,
And everything that your own hands have wrought,
And call those works extravagance of breath
That are not suited for such men as come
Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb.

Section IV of the poem describes, in a remarkable fashion, the tragic joy of the artist as it is recreated by the perceiver of the work of art in his own soul (the process spoken of in Chapter II):

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;

Yeats wrote about this peculiar "not-grief" kind of joy in a 1909 diary entry: "A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men. It has not joy, as we understand that word, but ecstasy, which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen, perhaps, by all those that still live . . ." (W. B. Yeats, "Estrangement," Autobiography, p. 319).

The Variorum Poems, pp. 500-01.
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless. 26

The close relationship of this state of mind to that described in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is obvious. What is not obvious is that Yeats is referring to the recreation of the artist's original state of tragic joy by the perceiver of art—in this case, the book of verse is perceived and the ecstatic state follows. Yeats is describing in concentrated images an actual occurrence in his own life during World War I, 27 and elaborated upon in "Anima Mundi" (the second part of Per Amica Silentia Lunae):

At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened some book of verse. Sometimes it is my own verse when, instead of discovering new technical flaws, I read with all the excitement of the first writing. Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant, the open book beside me, or closed, my excitement having over-brimmed the page. I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them: everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs; I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end. It seems as if the vehicle [the poem just read] has suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that the images from Anima Mundi, embodied there and drunk with that sweetness, would ... burn up time. 28

After a less than exultant section describing the heart's remorse, Yeats begins to tie the threads of thought in the

26 Ibid., p. 501.

27 Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 269.

poem together. In Section VI, he comes to the realization that the aspects of tragic joy he has described in previous sections are impossible without the very sorrow he has felt in Section V. Now he knows that only art founded in some sorrow like remorse is suited for those men who come "laughing to the tomb" (Section III). The tree of antinomies where the mask of Attis is hung can only grow in the soil of life's sorrowful experience:

From man's blood-sodden heart are sprung
Those branches of the night and day
Where the gaudy moon is hung.29

The last two sections of "Vacillation," VII and VIII, reaffirm this insight about the origin of tragic art. In VII, "Heart" and "Soul" have a dialogue along the same lines as that in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." The gist of the dialogue is contained in the first exchange:

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?30

That is, art cannot exist without the concrete experience of life. The goal of art is universality and perfection leading to community; but unlike the saint, who can move directly to perfection from a position of innocence, the artist must move towards perfection through experience. That is the meaning of Heart's final statement: "What theme had Homer but original sin?"31

29 Ibid., p. 502.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
The last section of "Vacillation" shows the reason for the poem's title. Using the Catholic mystic Frierich Von Hügel as an example of the spiritual point of view, Yeats admits some affinities with him, including an acceptance of the idea of miracles, but declares that they must part ways because an artist cannot forsake life experience. The artist has a traditional role to play in the creation of meaning and coherence from the suffering and chaos of life, and must therefore renounce the saint's path to spiritual wholeness—but not without vacillation:

I—though
heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb—play a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has the scripture said?  

The images of the lion and the honeycomb come from Judges 14: 5-18 and are part of the perfect parable to describe the transmutative process of tragic art. Samson saw bees making honey in the carcass of a lion he had killed—sweetness had come from carrion. In Yeats' analogy, the artist similarly creates beauty and tragic joy from sorrow. That is the artist's mission since Homer, and it is a lonely business. But the result can light the world.

"Vacillation" should be ranked with the much earlier "Ego Dominus Tuus" as a classic expression of Yeats' tragic

32 Ibid., p. 503.
aesthetic. A later poem, "Lapis Lazuli" (1936), is another such important work. But the years between the composition of "Vacillation" and "Lapis Lazuli" (1932-1936) were not marked by a clear, direct route along the lines of Yeats' tragic view. Vacillation again dominated his mind, as personal experiences muddled his creativity and doubt attended constant poor health. For a time, Yeats wondered whether Lady Gregory's death in 1932 and the subsequent closing of her estate at Coole did not symbolize the end of his own imaginative life. But by the next year an interest in verse followed his intense new political activities (such as the flirtation with O'Duffy's fascist blueshirt movement). This was followed in turn by a reawakened interest in A Vision, an interest which produced the enigmatic and aptly named Supernatural Songs (1934), twelve metaphysical poems expressing the same spiritual point of view associated with the Soul and Von Hügel in "Vacillation." Thus in 1934, the vacillation between the saint's and the artist's path to the same ultimate reality had temporarily shifted back to a position favoring the former. However, several letters written

33 The biographical information in this paragraph was taken from Jeffares, pp. xviii and 399.

34 The ending lines of "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" (1931) express this feeling:

But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.
(The Variorum Poems, p. 492)
in 1935 to Ethel Mannin and Dorothy Wellesley indicate that
Yeats very soon returned to an emphasis on the role of the
artist in the process of tragic art. It was to remain his
emphasis until his death. Beginning in 1936, the Last Poems
never waver from the artist's path to wisdom, and "Lapis Laz-
uli" best expresses this preoccupation with tragic process
and exultation which marks Yeats' last few years.

"Lapis Lazuli" is above all a poem about tragic joy.
Each of its last three stanzas depicts tragic joy from a
different perspective. The second stanza, for instance,
deals with the nature of the decisive moment in dramatic
tragedy when the tragic figure achieves tragic joy—the imag-
inative displacement of the artist's own similar achievement
within himself. Speaking of the actors who play the great
tragic roles in Shakespeare, Yeats insists that they must
not display the histrionics of sorrow in the great scenes,
that they must realize the essential joy attained by the
tragic hero in the moment of universality and wisdom:

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;

For example, Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley on
July 26, 1935 that to him "the supreme aim is an act of
faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy"
(Letters, p. 838).
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
All men have aimed at, found and lost;
Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.36

These lines, save for the greater precision in expression by
the older Yeats, could have been written in the early years
of the century, for the subject matter is that found in the
prose essays on tragic art. In both "Poetry and Tradition"
and "The Tragic Theatre," it will be remembered, Yeats shows
Synge's Deirdre and Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Timon expe-
riencing just such a moment. Yeats often thought of the tragic
heroes of Shakespeare in the moment of tragic joy, not only
at the time he was conceptualizing his tragic aesthetic, but
also at the end of his life, in poetry and prose. In "A Gen-
eral Introduction for My Work" (1937), he speaks of the
Shakespearian tragic hero in this way: "The heroes of Shake-
speare convey to us through their looks, or through the
metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement
of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death. . . ."37
This is Yeats' emphasis in "Lapis Lazuli." The actor need
not embellish; tragic joy is inherently a part of the deci-
sive moment in Shakespeare, as it is in all tragic art.

In the third stanza of "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats brings one
aspect of his system into congruence with the tragic process.

36 The Variorum Poems, pp. 565-66.
Essays and Introductions, p. 522.
The idea of ephemerality which is the basis of the historical cycles in *A Vision* is made grounds for tragic joy. If "old civilisations put to the sword"\(^{38}\) (including the great art produced by those cultures) is part of life's rhythm of sorrow, then the building of new civilizations—largely an artistic endeavor—is cause for great joy:

All things fall and are built again,
And those that build them again are gay.\(^{39}\)

The concluding stanza is possibly Yeats' most nearly perfect expression of the "peace that passeth understanding" which is part of tragic joy and which he described earlier in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation." Looking at a piece of lapis lazuli containing a Chinese scene, Yeats, like Keats in "Ode On a Grecian Urn," constructs a living universe from the images depicted. In their glorious natural setting, the two Chinese with their serving man are shown by Yeats to embody the perfect joy and peace that comes from tragic reconciliation:

There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.\(^{40}\)

\(^{38}\) *The Variorum Poems*, p. 566. \(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 567. The actual piece of sculpture by a Chinese artist was given to Yeats by Harry Clifton (Jeffares, p. 443). Yeats describes the piece and makes a pertinent comment about it in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, dated July 6, 1935: "Someone has sent me a present of a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a
Another of the *Last Poems* written in 1936, "The Gyres," also has as its theme the triumph of tragic joy. As in the second stanza of "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats merges his idea of historical cycles or gyres with the tragic process. Once again the death of civilizations and their artistic cultures is the subject, this time presented with the same immediacy and language as in "The Second Coming" (1919). For Yeats is speaking of his own age, when "numb nightmare ride[s] on top, / And blood and mire the sensitive body stain." But the very fact of this general chaos and despair furnishes the basis for tragic joy. The artist in such a time can only triumph: "We that look on but laugh in tragic joy." The artist will build again from the ruins of modern life. It will be a magnificent effort, so filling his being that there will be no time to lament the passing of former glories:

Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,
A greater, a more gracious time has gone;
For painted forms or boxes of make-up
In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again;
What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice,
And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice!"

mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry" (*Letters*, p. 836). A year later, when he wrote "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats apparently changed his mind again and decided that the east does know tragedy, for the final stanza of the poem speaks of "the tragic scene."

41The Variorum Poems, p. 564.
42Ibid.
43Ibid., pp. 564-65.
As Yeats neared the end of his life, he became almost obsessed with the idea of creative activity. To him, the artist must work ceaselessly in the midst of the darkness falling about him. New torments and sorrows must be faced without rest, especially so in old age, when the mind and heart can best offer a coherent tragic perspective based on a lifetime of accumulated experience. The necessity of an artist avoiding the easy content of an old age free of sensual torments is the theme of "An Acre of Grass" (1936), where the old Yeats asks only for the reckless imagination of the tragic artist:

My temptation is quiet.  
Here at life's end  
Neither loose imagination,  
Nor the mill of the mind  
Consuming its rag and bone,  
Can make the truth known.

Grant me an old man's frenzy,  
Myself I must remake  
Till I am Timon and Lear  
Or that William Blake  
Who beat upon the wall  
Till truth obeyed his call. . . 44

The need for this "old man's frenzy" is explained by Yeats in "The Apparitions" (1938):

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44 Ibid., pp. 575-76. Yeats seems to have anticipated the first of these two stanzas in "Anima Hominis" (p. 342), where he emphasizes the avoidance of easy content: "A poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment. . . . Then he will remember Wordsworth withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted, and climb to some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth, some bitter crust."
When a man grows old his joy
Grows more deep day after day,
His empty heart is full at length,
But he has need of all that strength
Because of the increasing Night
That opens her mystery and fright. 45

The very nearness of death—the greatest sorrow of all—will only increase the pitch of tragic joy if the artist has the requisite reckless imagination to effect the transformation.

Two poems written in the last full year of Yeats' life (1938), "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and "High Talk," concern themselves with the power of the artist's transmutative imagination in the process of tragic art. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" describes in picturesque detail the concrete material on which tragic art is based. Yeats' description of his own career as a poet ends in a stanza dealing with the sources of his poetic metaphors. This passage is justifiably famous and is one of the finest expressions of the tragic process:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old Kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. 46

The uniform expression of the key points of the tragic process from its conceptual beginning in Samhain: 1904 and "Poetry and Tradition" to the end of Yeats' life is remarkable, and

is especially apparent in these lines. For example, "personality" and "passion," his early terms for universal human essence, are implicit in the term "pure mind." The artist achieves pure passion during the act of contemplation, and the vision of the perfect image of art (Unity of Being)—"Those [complete] masterful images"—grows out of this passion or "pure mind" where tragic joy reigns. But out of what did the perfect image of art (in this case, metaphors for poetry) derive? What was it that the artist had to contemplate? The answer is the same as Crazy Jane's description of love pitching his mansion in the "place of excrement."47 Art begins in the contemplation of life's woes and absurdities, which the artist shapes and changes into coherence and beauty. And the old poet, constantly on guard against self-relaxation, knows he must face this "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" undeluded, with the creative frenzy of a Crazy Jane. Only Yeats seems to feel that "my ladder's gone," that the inspiration which produced his greatest images has run dry. He was soon to believe otherwise; for in "High Talk" the missing ladder of poetic image-making becomes the high stilts of the active tragic artist, whose power to transform the world seems unlimited.

"High Talk" is a remarkable, generally unread example of the idea which is so much a part of Yeats' tragic view--

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47 Ibid., p. 513.
the power of the artistic imagination. Perhaps in no other poem does Yeats so fully express the exhilaration which accompanies this power, the vaulting, reckless joy that can transform man's perception of existence:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.
All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose
Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks loose;
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.48

At seventy-three, after long, agonizing experience with the bloody birth of a new Ireland, with the bitter memory of a long-disappointed love in his youth and middle age still fresh, Yeats is able to look beyond the personal sorrow of "character" to the purity of tragic joy and "personality."
Having chosen perfection of the work (as is always the choice of men like Yeats), he celebrates the "terrible novelty of light" which art brings forth from the dark night of existence. As Malachi Stilt-Jack, Yeats embodies in "High Talk" the purpose of tragic art he would very soon express in "Under Ben Bulben" (1938):

```plaintext
there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind;
Profane perfection of mankind.49
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48 Ibid., p. 623.
49 Ibid., p. 639.
Yeats used most of his last decade hammering home what he saw as the urgent importance of tragic art as the chief means of retrieving meaning from the chaos of experience. In some of the last poems he ever wrote, especially "High Talk," Yeats left the unmistakable impression that he regarded the tragic artist as the greatest force for truth in the world. One must conclude that Yeats went to the tomb with a twinkle in his ancient, glittering eye.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One of the central conceptions of Yeats' thought is his view that the finest art is grounded in a tragic matrix. The term used in this study to characterize this tragic view is "tragic aesthetic," an inclusive phrase containing the main ideas outlined in brief form in the introduction, and examined in great detail in Chapter II: that the goal of art is to bring all men together into a community based on the apprehension of archetypal human qualities, that this universalization of perception is achieved during the state of "tragic joy," and that the artist's imagination, as the creative force behind this function of tragic art, is the most powerful instrument in man's age-old struggle to achieve meaning in life.

These key ideas are found in the prose essays written by Yeats between 1904 and 1910—"First Principles" and "The Play, the Player, and the Scene" in Samhain: 1904, and "Poetry and Tradition" (1907) and "The Tragic Theatre" (1910) from the collection The Cutting of an Agate, which were studied at length in Chapter II. Yeats' tragic aesthetic was shown to develop from fragmentary beginnings in Samhain into maturity in "Poetry and Tradition" (containing Yeats'
chief description of the artistic process and the power of the artist in the world) and "The Tragic Theatre" (concentrating on the finished work of tragic art and its ability to bring men into a community). Chapter II concluded with a look at Yeats' conception of the "mask," which was shown to be a later variation of the opposition aspect present in the process of creating tragic art.

A guiding premise of this study has been that Yeats developed abstract ideas in his prose and then proceeded to write poems based on these ideas. Thus the poetry, unless the reader has a knowledge of the prose ideas behind it, is often ambiguous and sometimes opaque. Chapter III, by showing the presence of the main ideas and spirit of Yeats' tragic aesthetic in the poetry to 1917, proved the premise correct, thus clarifying many poems written at the time of the development, maturation, and modification of Yeats' tragic view. This chapter also examined the poetry preceding the beginning of the prose ideas in 1904, lending contrast and perspective to the tone and substance found in the poetry of 1904-1917. These early poems were shown to exemplify undisciplined pathos and escapism, and not the discipline and affirmation inherent in Yeats' later view.

Chapter IV demonstrated the continued impact of Yeats' tragic aesthetic upon the poetry from 1917 to 1939. The contrasting influence of Yeats' metaphysical "system" beginning in 1917 was also examined and was shown to supersede
the influence of his tragic view during the period 1917-1927. But it was made clear that even during this period when the spiritual point of view of the system dominated the poetry, the idea of the process of tragic art (grounded in experience) and the role of the artist in this process was occasionally as important to Yeats as it had been in the poetry before 1917. With the return to his tragic aesthetic as the dominant influence in 1927-1932 and 1935-1939, especially in the triumphant Last Poems of the latter period, Yeats used most of the remaining years of his life exulting in experience and heralding the importance of tragic art as the primary means by which man shapes order from the chaos of life. In these poems, Yeats completed his vision of tragedy and the power of artistic truth begun in 1904.

Together, the prose essays on tragic art and much of the poetry of 1904-1939 form an artistic whole, a complex of intellect and emotion which played a major role in the direction of Yeats' career. It is impossible to appreciate his depth as a poet without understanding the pervasiveness of this tragic strain in his thought. It is the generative force behind many of Yeats' finest poems. And it enabled the aging, sickly poet to face his own death with strength and affirmation. In his final years, Yeats epitomized the tragic artist, fashioning beauty from sorrow and trumpeting joy to a troubled humanity.
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