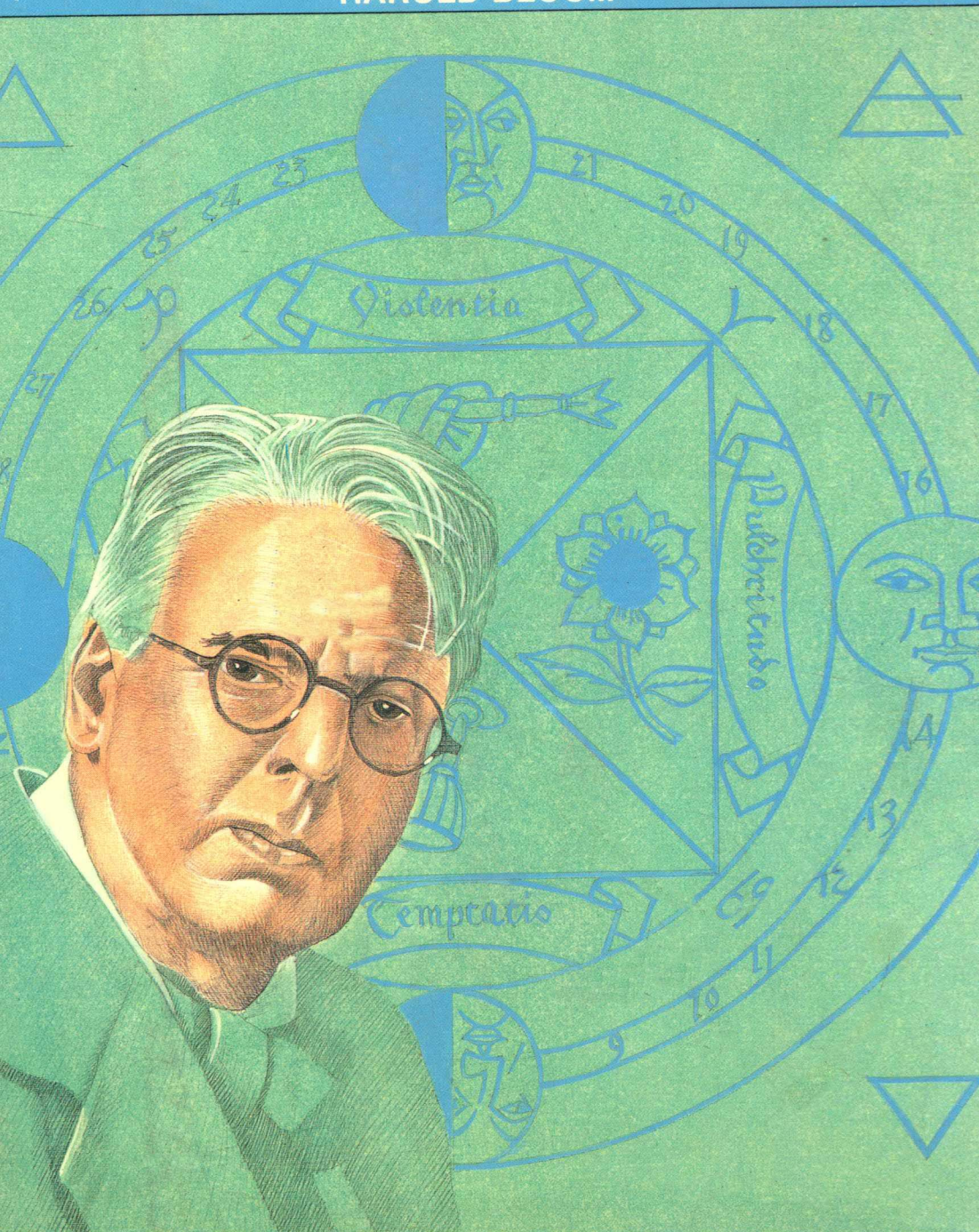
Modern Critical Views

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together what in its editor's judgment is the most useful criticism yet published on the writings of William Butler Yeats. The essays included are reprinted in the order of their original publication. I am grateful to Peter Childers for his labors in helping to locate and choose the commentaries presented here.

The editor's introduction is a revisionary overview of Yeats's achievement as a lyric poet, with an emphasis upon his overt Gnosticism, his authentic religion. Helen Vendler begins the chronological sequence of criticism with an informed analysis of *The Player Queen,* the most problematical of Yeats's dramas, and the most crucial for the entire development of all his diverse writings. An acute analysis of "Leda and the Swan" by Priscilla Washburn Shaw serves as a paradigm for the reading of the poet's strongest and most influential lyrics. With Thomas R. Whitaker's learned and sensitive exegesis of Yeats's deliberately Anglo-Irish poems, we enter the vexed area where modern Irish and modern European cultural politics meet and clash.

Ian Fletcher, our leading scholar of the Nineties and of Edwardian literature, analyzes Yeats's artful *Autobiographies* as the grandly Paterian "Imaginary Portrait" that shrewd and beautiful book constitutes. The early lyric Yeats, who culminated in *The Wind among the Reeds,* is captured memorably in the poet Allen Grossman's portrayal of the Paterian "moods" that dominate those poems. This aspect of the early Yeats is finely caught also by Richard Ellmann, definitive biographer of both Yeats and Oscar Wilde, in his humorous and loving study of the way in which Yeats subsumed Wilde.

Yeats's overt System, his mythology, is outlined in its two separate formulations in two separate chapters from the editor's synoptic book on the poet. The first investigates Yeats's mythological alphabet, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae,* a marmoreal reverie in the mode of Sir Thomas Browne and of Walter Pater. This prelude to *A Vision* is seen here as a secret meditation upon

poetic influence, a meditation expanded and rendered into both psychology and cosmology in *A Vision*'s fascinating and exasperating interweavings of Yeats's two great *topoi,* the dead and history. Some of the same thematic obsessions are explored in Denis Donoghue's survey of Yeats's art as a dramatist, and in Herbert J. Levine's tracing of Yeats's relation to daimonic tradition.

The last two essays in this volume are both distinguished instances of the newest rhetorical criticism, Deconstruction, with its concerns for the epistemology of metaphor and the conceptual limits that poetry both suffers and evades. The first of them, by the late Paul de Man, though only recently published, is actually one of the critic's earliest ventures, yet uncannily prophesies his later advanced and subtle probings of conceptual rhetoric. His friend and colleague, J. Hillis Miller, properly closes this book with a strong attempt to reconcile the linguistic skepticism of Deconstruction with Yeats's aggressive faith that words alone are certain good. The world knows nothing because it has invented nothing, Yeats liked to observe, since he believed that the poets have invented everything. Deconstructive criticism can be said to explore some of the darker consequences of that inventiveness, while knowing always what Freud knew, that the poets have been there before us.

Contents

Introduction

The Valentinian Speculation chronicles the Fall of the Muse-principle, the Sophia, who in her leap forward found herself alone in the primal abyss, the Sacred Void, suffering a state that is called "ignorance" by the central Valentinian text, *The Gospel of Truth*:

> It was this ignorance concerning the Father which produced Anguish and Terror. Anguish became dense like a fog, so that no one could see. Therefore Error became fortified. It elaborated its own Matter in the Void.

Yeats was slyly fond of the epithet that the Neoplatonist Proclus bestowed upon Christianity; Proclus called it "the barbarian theosophy," and declined to distinguish it from Gnosticism. The classical scholar E. R. Dodds, rather more detachedly than Proclus or Yeats, concludes that the Gnostic tendency was strong in St. Paul, and agrees that it is impossible to divide sharply between Church and Gnosis.

Yeats is the most canonized poet of the twentieth century, more so even than Eliot, and most criticism of Yeats gives the impression of having been written while the critic was posturing upon his knees. Yeats was a supernaturalist (with much skepticism mixed in) and in some sense a religious poet, but the religion was a syncretic Gnosticism. In itself, of course, this is matter neither for praise nor for blame, but we ought to be clear about it. Canonical misreading provokes anticanonical misreading as a corrective, but since I published a 500-page commentary attempting just that, in 1970, I intend to devote this discourse on Yeats to a rather more sympathetic account of the Gnostic tendency in him. Yeats is safely in the canon, and nobody, myself included, wants him out, or could get him out even if that were desired. Himself a great revisionist, and so an unscrupulous distorter of Romantic tradition, Yeats has suffered and will go on suffering the weak misreadings that canon-formation affords. This hardly matters, and is pe-

culiarly inevitable anyway, because Yeats was deliberately an *antithetical* poet and interpreter. The dominant influences upon him were the antithetical fourfold: Shelley, Blake, Nietzsche, Pater, to whom as an *antithetical* theorist he added himself as a fifth.

My own personal interest in the problems of formulating an *antithetical* practical criticism, founded on a view of poetic influence as misprision and revisionism, started with the difficulties I encountered in trying to write a book upon Yeats's relationship to his precursors, a book that found itself compelled first to center upon Yeats's systematic treatise, *A Vision,* and ultimately upon the far more beautiful and suggestive tractate by Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae,* now easily available in the collection of Yeats's prose called *Mythologies.* From 1902 on, Yeats was a steady reader of Nietzsche. I suggest that the crucial influences upon a poet must come early in his development, even as Shelley, Blake, and Pater affected Yeats early on. That Nietzsche, whom he read after he turned thirty-seven, influenced Yeats so strongly is due to Nietzsche's reinforcement of the earlier influences. Yeats himself associated Nietzsche with Blake, saying that "Nietzsche completes Blake and has the same roots." He might have said, more accurately, that Nietzsche was allied to Pater, but then the Yeatsian misprision soon compounded Nietzschean elements with aspects of Shelley, Blake, and Pater into one composite *antithetical* precursor anyway.

The term "antithetical" Yeats took from the Third Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals,* where Nietzsche asked for the antagonist of the ascetic ideal to come forward: "Where do we find an antithetical will expressing itself in an antithetical ideal?" In *The Will to Power,* no. 884, Nietzsche speaks of "the *strong* German type" as "existing blithely among antithesis, full of that supple strength that guards against convictions and doctrines by employing one against the other and reserving freedom for itself." Denis Donoghue is accurate in locating Nietzsche as the origin of Yeats's concept of the hero; as Donoghue says: "The hero is an antithetical fiction; his idiom is power, will; his sense of life dynamic, theatrical." In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae,* Yeats first stated his formula of the *antithetical:* "The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality."

From Plutarch and the Gnostics and Neoplatonists, Yeats took the notion of the Daimon as the proper figure for the *antithetical.* The evolution of the Daimon in Yeats is curious. In *Per Amica,* it is clearly a father or precursor-figure, "an illustrious dead man," but Yeats insists that "the Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts." "The Daimon is our

destiny," Yeats says, thinking he cites Heraclitus, but Heraclitus actually said that character or *ethos* was fate or the *daimon,* whereas Yeats's remark is a powerful tautology. The tautology suits Yeatsian solipsism, with its drive towards the ultimate suprarealism that Yeats, following Shelley and Pater, called the Condition of Fire. At the center of *Per Amica* is Yeats's Gnostic version of what I have called the Scene of Instruction, the state of heightened demand that carries a new poet from his origins into his first strong representations. Yeats mediates his Scene of Instruction through the agency of the Daimon, which we can translate here simply as "precursor":

> The Daimon, by using his mediatorial shades, brings man again and again to the place of choice, heightening temptation that the choice may be as final as possible, imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever among works not impossible is the most difficult.

In *A Vision,* the double cone or vortex or gyre is the dominant image, with the subjective cone "called that of the *antithetical tincture* because it is achieved and *defended* by continual conflict with its opposite." This image in turn is made coherent through a more complex and advanced doctrine of the Daimon, which I have expounded at some length in my commentary upon *A Vision,* but briefly the Daimon for Yeats is now both the Muse-principle and the self-destructive principle that expresses itself in passionate heterosexual love. Neither of these meanings is wholly traditional, and Yeats's transformation of the daemonic is therefore worth some explanation. E. R. Dodds observes that for the second and third centuries A.D. the daemonic simply meant what the unconscious means now. By using the daemonic in his special senses, Yeats relates the term to repression, both to the aesthetic repression that gives poetry, and to the mode of repression we call or miscall sexual "love." But the traditional meaning of the daemonic, as Dodds shows, is ultimately the Platonic one: the daemonic interprets the gods to men, and men to the gods, which means that the daemonic is the channel between divine will and mortal wish, or simply constitutes the whole basis of Eros.

Freud's essay in the daemonic is his striking investigation of the *Unheimlich* or "Uncanny" of 1919, which relates the uncanny or daemonic to repetition-compulsion:

> Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human

> beings, and by the narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes (such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, the magical practices based upon this belief, the carefully proportioned distribution of magical powers or "mana" among various outside persons and things), as well as by all those other figments of the imagination with which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to withstand the inexorable laws of reality. It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be re-activated, and that everything which now strikes us as "uncanny" fulfills the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression.

On this view, the daemonic is the survival of an archaic narcissism, which is defined as our faith that mind can triumph over matter. Let us, as readers of poetry, be very wary about what Freud is saying, for he is destroying the whole enterprise of literary Romanticism, if we give him our entire allegiance, as surely we do not. He is coming to us here as the greatest of reductionists, wiping away moonlight like mud. It is painful to see Sigmund Freud as Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, but it would be more painful still to abandon the mount of vision. The central formula of Coleridgean Romanticism, of which Yeats, Stevens, Hart Crane may have been the last Sublime representatives, is "the power of mind over the universe of death," in which the mind's power means the Imagination, and the universe of death means all of the object-world. This formula, Freud is telling us, is only a survival, a trace returned from the repression of an archaic narcissism. The daemonic or Sublime is thus merely another evasion of the unacceptable necessity of dying. But Freud is harsher even than this, and his analysis of the uncanny takes us even farther into the problematics of repression:

> In the first place, if psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which *recurs*. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect. In the second place, if this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why the usage of speech has

> extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite *das Unheimliche;* for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.

On Freud's view, we cannot distinguish the daemonic, or uncanny, or Sublime, from a particular variant of repetition-compulsion, whose affect is morbid anxiety. Translated into Yeatsian terms, early or late, this means that awareness of the precursor, or of the presence of the Muse, or of sexual love, are all compulsive repetitions of an obsessional anxiety. Here I have no quarrel with Freud, though I wish I did. But Yeats had such a quarrel, as would have had the entire tradition of the daemonic in poetry, from Homer through Goethe. Here is Goethe on the daemonic, as recorded by Eckermann:

> I cannot rid myself of the notion that the daemons, who enjoy teasing us and joy at our pain, set up individuals so alluring that everyone aspires towards them, yet so great that no one can reach them. So they set up Raphael . . . Mozart . . . Shakespeare . . .

The daemonic, Goethe added at a later time, was not present in his Mephistopheles, for the daemonic had nothing in it of the spirit that denies, being positive and efficacious, as in Goethe himself. The argument between poetry and Freud, I would judge, reduces to this: can there be, as Goethe thought, a daemonic without morbid anxiety, or is the daemonic only an archaic and narcissistic survival?

I think that this argument, between Freud and the daemonic poets, is an ancient one, and could be traced back through different versions until we reached the quarrel between Plotinus and the Gnostics. Plotinus, unlike his later followers, finally evolved into an Hellenic rationalist, and his great essay against the Gnostics marked the crucial point of this evolution. Let us venture the following formula: the conflict here, whether between Plotinus and the Gnostics, or Descartes and Vico, or Freud and the poets, is between two views of the human condition as flawed or fallen. The more rational dualisms—Plotinian, Cartesian, or Freudian—accept as natural and inevitable the separation between body and consciousness, as well as the continued association of the two entities. So even Plotinus speaks of a descent of the soul into the body as being an instinctual necessity. The less rational dual-

isms—Gnostic, Vichian, and poetic-daemonic—maintain not only the prestige of monistic origins but assign a particular prestige to the phenomenon of the uncanny, that Freud analyzes as being marked always by evidences of acute anxiety. What Freud sees as archaic narcissism is seen by Gnosticism as the call to salvation, by Vico as Poetic Wisdom, and by Yeats as the *antithetical* imagination.

I do not believe that this argument between Freud and a permanent element in poetic tradition can or should be reconciled or explained away. There is, as I have indicated previously, no fully articulated Freudian view of art, because Freud in his final phase never got round to working one out, but he would have had grave difficulties in persuading himself that the strongest art represented a sublimation of human instinctual drives, whether sexual, or whether aggressively directed towards death. I am not inclined however to blame Freud for what is now called psychoanalytic literary criticism, since none of it that I have read merits being called either psychoanalysis or literary criticism.

Yeats's Gnosticism was in small part a consequence of his reading Gnostic texts, though generally in dubious versions or misleading contexts, but primarily I think that Yeats's Gnosticism was inherent in him, temperamentally and spiritually. Yeats's various occultisms, including his own System, with its often bizarre ventures into philosophy of history, Yeats himself took rather dialectically. He was invariably skeptical of his own credulity but also impatient with his own skepticism. There was also a fair amount of posturing in his stances, particularly in his Nietzscheanism, which was essentially theatrical. But his Gnosticism seems to me his natural religion: sincere, consistent, thoroughgoing, and finally a considerable aid to his poetry, however dubious it may seem in its human or social consequences. I hope to be clear on this; I am *not* saying that Yeats was a Gnostic adept, in the same way that he did become an Hermeticist, a quasi-Kabbalist, a member of the theosophical Order of the Golden Dawn. I *am* saying that the actual religion of Yeats's poetry seems to me closer to the Valentinian Speculation than to any other organized, historical faith of which I have knowledge. Like the Valentinian entity called Error, Yeats elaborated his own matter in the void, and like his masters Pater and Nietzsche he came to regard that void as being in itself partly sacred.

Yeats is hardly unique in his modern Gnosticism. Indeed, it could be argued that a form of Gnosticism is endemic in Romantic tradition without, however, dominating that tradition, or even that Gnosticism is the implicit, inevitable religion that frequently informs aspects of post-Enlightenment

poetry, even where that poetry has seemed to be primarily a late phase of Protestantism. I am in no position to condemn Gnosticism anyway, as the kind of criticism I am attempting to develop takes a later Kabbalistic view of textuality and influence as its paradigm, and later Kabbalah relies ultimately upon Gnostic models of catastrophe-creation. Yeats is the representative of more than his own choices, and any reservations I have expressed before or will make now about his Gnostic tendencies have to do with certain consequences he deduced from those tendencies, and not with the tendencies themselves.

Various attempts have been made to account for both ancient and modern Gnosticism, in terms of supposed psychological and social causations, but these have satisfied very few scholars, including those who have formulated them. E. R. Dodds disposes of Erich Fromm on Gnostic and Christian origins by showing that Gnosticism and Gnostic tendencies in early Christianity all came into being in the Antonine period, the last phase of peace and prosperity in the Roman Empire, rather than during the third-century time-of-troubles that Fromm posited as the context in which doctrines of despair arose. Indeed, as Dodds shows, Gnosticism was a prophecy of trouble to come, rather than a reaction to a declining world:

> When Marcus Aurelius came to the throne no bell rang to warn the world that the *pax Romana* was about to be succeeded by an age of barbarian invasions, bloody civil wars, recurrent epidemics, galloping inflation and extreme personal insecurity.

Whatever its historical causations, ancient or modern, Gnosticism is a highly distinctive religion or religious tendency. A brief summary of its salient characteristics may be misleading, but some such summary seems necessary if I am to explore its relevances to Yeats's poetry. Gnosis, as the word itself indicates, means a kind of "knowledge," rather than a mode of thought. This "knowledge" is itself the form that salvation takes, because the "knower" is made Divine in such a "knowing," the "known" being "the alien God." This kind of "knowledge" is anything but what the West has meant by rational "knowledge," from the Greeks until our time, but it is precisely what Yeats means by "knowledge" in his poetry. It is also *not* what normative Judaism and orthodox Christianity have meant by any human "knowledge" of God, for Gnostic "knowledge" transforms man *into* God.

Gnosticism is a doubly radical dualism, a dualism between man and nature, and also between nature and God. Here is a usefully brief summary of the essentials of Gnostic doctrine by Hans Jonas:

> In its theological aspect this doctrine states that the Divine is alien to the world and has neither part nor concern in the physical universe; that the true god, strictly transmundane, is not revealed or even indicated by the world, and is therefore the Unknown, the totally Other, unknowable in terms of any worldly analogies. Correspondingly, in its cosmological aspect it states that the world is the creation not of God but of some inferior principle whose law it executes; and, in its anthropological aspect, that man's inner self, the *pneuma* ("spirit" in contrast to "soul" = psyche) is not part of the world, of nature's creation and domain, but is, within that world, as totally transcendent and as unknown by all worldly categories as is its transmundane counterpart, the unknown God without.

It is what Jonas calls the "anthropological aspect" of Gnosticism that is prominent in Yeats, since Yeats's characteristic poem tends to be a dramatic lyric, frequently turning upon the distinction between what Yeats calls the *antithetical* self and the *primary* soul, which are precisely the *pneuma* and the *psyche,* respectively, of Gnostic formulation. The place of the Gnostic alien or transmundane true God in Yeats is taken, alternately, by death or by the imagination, which in Yeats is closer to Gnostic transcendence than it is to the Romantic Sublime. What Jonas says of the Gnostic alien God is true also of the Yeatsian imagination; it "does not stand in any positive relation to the sensible world. It is not the essence or the cause of the sensible world, but rather the negation and cancellation" of nature. I think that these similarities of Yeats and the Gnosis account for Yeats's obsession with transmigration, since only Yeats and the Gnosis, so far as I know, make a causal connection between libertinism and reincarnation. The following is the account given of the Cainite Gnostics by Irenaeus (as cited by Jonas), but it could come out of several contexts in Yeats's systematic treatise, *A Vision:*

> The souls in their transmigrations through bodies must pass through every kind of life and every kind of action, unless somebody has in one coming acted everything at once . . . their souls before departing must have made use of every mode of life and must have left no remainder of any sort still to be performed: lest they must again be sent into another body because there is still something lacking to their freedom.

This Gnostic notion of "freedom" as meaning an absolute *completion* of every human impulse, however destructive, is strikingly Yeatsian. But the