CHAPTER SEVEN
The Order of the Poems

The most controversial aspect of the revised edition of *The Poems* has been, and perhaps always will be, the matter of the order of the poems. That is, should the poems be presented in the quasi-chronological scheme of the 1932 proofs for the Edition de Luxe, or in the two-part division of “Lyrical” and “Narrative and Dramatic” of the 1933 *Collected Poems*? Essentially, those who favour the quasi-chronological arrangement argue that since the *Collected Poems* was intended for the “ordinary reader”, Yeats did not hesitate to publish it in an inferior format, monetary reward being his primary concern.\(^1\) The Edition de Luxe, on the other hand, was designed as a “canonical edition”, and thus Yeats reserved the proper order for its exclusive use. As for the Scribner Edition, well, that was only for “American collectors”, and who cared about those types anyway? In short, to use the elegant phrasing of the co-champion of the Edition de Luxeites, the *Collected Poems* was a “pot-boiler”,\(^2\) the true Sacred Book being the collaborative edition prepared by Mrs. Yeats and Thomas Mark, *Poems* (1949).

As with most of the problems we have discussed in this volume, this dispute does not admit of an *absolute* resolution: no “smoking gun” which might resolve the issue once and for all has yet

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\(^1\) This view was first argued by A. Norman Jeffares in *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984) pp. vii–x. Jeffares drew both on his own research, including conversations with Mrs. Yeats, and correspondence with Warwick Gould. Gould then presented this position in a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 1984, pp. 731–33, though one must wonder about his own sense of chronology when he writes that Jeffares “accepts my view” (p. 731). Several other reviewers also agreed with Jeffares, though none offered any significant evidence.

For fuller citation than will be offered in this chapter of the errors and misstatements by Jeffares and Gould, see Richard J. Finneran, “The Order of Yeats’s Poems”, *Irish University Review*, 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1984) 165–76.

surfaced. However, the preponderance of the documentary evidence clearly favours the two-part division of the *Collected Poems*. Let us turn first to the genesis of the 1933 collection.

I The Collected Poems (1933)

As we saw in Chapter 2, the arrangements for the *Collected Poems* had been completed by 13 March 1933, when Macmillan informed Watt that “I now wish to proceed with the project for the complete edition of Mr. Yeats’s poems in one volume” and that “we should propose to follow the contents that have already been agreed upon for the Edition de Luxe”. Macmillan also reminded Watt, “I do not know whether Mr. Yeats wishes to see a specimen page or whether he has any views about the arrangement . . .” (BL 55738/97). Watt passed on these queries to Yeats. Yeats replied directly to Macmillan on 17 March, in a letter to have a significant effect on the later history of the text of his poems. After explaining that he need not see a specimen page but that he would require proofs, Yeats asked an important question:

Would you advise me, or ask the accomplished reader of yours to advise me on one point. In Vol I of the Edition de Luxe I think I included the dramatic poem “The Shadowy Waters” on the ground that it is not a stage-play but a poem (there is a stage version among my dramatic works), should it be included in the present book? This question decided one way or the other please follow the contents of Vol I of the edition de luxe. I probably put some sentence in a preface or note to account for the presence of the dramatic poem. If “The Shadowy Waters” is left out I will of course alter this. (BL 55003/140)

Yeats had perhaps anticipated the “one or two points about the arrangement of the poems” which were already in his publisher’s mind. Macmillan replied on 30 March 1933. After apologising for the delay, he made the following suggestion:

As regards the contents of the volume, I share our reader’s view that it would be a pity to omit “The Shadowy Waters”. There is, however, one departure from the arrangement of the