CHAPTER IV

William Butler Yeats has a distinct place among the Romantic poets of the twentieth century, as he typifies in himself the transformation in Romanticism witnessed in the modern context. And unlike some of his distinguished contemporaries, he did not fight shy of acknowledging his debt to the Romantic tradition.

There has indeed been universal agreement among critics on the Romantic affinities of Yeats, though many of them have found Romanticism only in his earlier poems. A note of dissent in this regard has, however, been struck by a few. Allen Tate, for example, says:

While it is true that Yeats, like every poet in English since the end of the eighteenth century, began with a romantic use of language in the early poems, he ended up very differently, and he is no more to be fixed as a romantic than Shakespeare as a Senecan because he wrote passages of Senecan rhetoric. If one of the historic marks of romanticism is the division between sensibility and intellect, Yeats's career may be seen as unromantic (I do not know the opposite term) because he closed the gap. His critics would, then be the romantics .... Yeats had a more inclusive mind than any of his critics has had.¹

It may not be difficult to appreciate the generous intention that prompted Allen Tate to take such a stand in regard to Yeats's affinities. The tenor of his argument suggests an exalted opinion of Yeats and his attempt perhaps is to place the latter on a par with Shakespeare. And, he was apparently irked by the tendency of critics (represented by Edmund Wilson and Louis MacNeice to brand Yeats as an escapist. In any case, the vehemence with which Harold Bloom has reacted to Tate's comments appears uncalled for.

Allen Tate's view may have to be seen in the context of the anti-romantic upsurge of the present century. The distortion in the conception of romanticism occasioned by the abuse of romantic modes by the Decadents and the common run of the Georgians may account for it. The gap between sensibility and intellect referred to by Tate was certainly not characteristic of the works of the great Romantics. While Yeats's contribution towards closing that gap has doubtless been commendable, it may not make his career unromantic as maintained by Tate. The aggressive bid made by the Modernists in the same direction was anticipated by Yeats, when he insisted on blood, imagination and intellect running together.

While Yeats himself has never expressed any doubt regarding his affiliation to the Romantic tradition, it is perhaps odd that his critics should find it a bone of contention. In fact, we have reason to believe that he nearly gloried in the thought of being reckoned as a Romantic:

We were the last romantics — chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood. 5

It was in the mood of depression that prevailed in the last lap of his life that Yeats said this. The lump in his throat was perhaps slightly relieved by the memory of his proud past as a Romantic.

The credit for introducing Yeats to the Romantic tradition should go to his father. He impressed on the poet that 'getting on' in the world should not be the primary concern of a gentleman. The young William was also made to share his father's partiality for the dramatic form, though he found it rather cumbersome for his purposes.

Yeats's early dramatic poems, written under the influence of Spenser, Shelley, Rossetti and Morris, reveal great relish

for the distant and the dreamy. The fairy-world also enchanted him. Yet, Yeats was too complex a person to find lasting peace in such worlds. His interest in packing the fairy-world of *The Wanderings of Oisin* with secret significances, as he confessed in a letter to Katharine Tynan, provides a hint of that complexity. He was able to cure himself of his escapist tendencies soon enough. His feeling for the past of Ireland, however, remained in tact all through his life. The intensity of it perhaps had certain unwholesome implications. The great Romantics were seldom guilty of such infatuations. As pointed out by Graham Hough, they had visited history as spectators, intelligent tourists, and not as exiles from a lost paradise. The obsession is obviously symptomatic of Yeats's lack of humanistic concerns, and want of sympathy with the dominant trends of his times.

Walter Pater had obviously wielded considerable influence on the early Yeats. What J.B. Yeats had told his son on the function of art was largely in consonance with the views of Pater. Of course, as has been pointed out by Frank Kermode, Pater's conception of art was a glaring perversion of the


original Romantic view.8 Surely the great Romantics had not conceived of a divorce between art and life. Yet, thanks to a misreading of the Keatsian aesthetic, Pater stressed the intensity of emotions and the purity of art. Oscar Wilde and the Decadents drew inspiration from his thesis. Though Yeats was much moved by the plight of the Decadents, judging from his feeling references to them as poets of the Tragic Generation, their influence on his poetry was perhaps only marginal. For, he was too hard to indulge himself in a feeling of defeat. He had the inner potential to make a victory of any defeat. As noted by Pinto, their devotion to their art was something that he admired and absorbed in himself.9 His acquaintance with the French Symbolists was helped on by the translations of Arthur Symons from French. The French influence apparently intensified his aversion for life. The conception of art as an escape from life, however, did not impress him long. He rose in revolt against that conception and asserted that art was what we tried to escape from. That new thesis must have helped him to re dedicate himself to his art without losing sight of the facts of life.

In his early phase Yeats had produced a good number of poems scrupulously adhering to the Romantic modes. But his

emphasis on the formal aspects of Romanticism at that stage was to the extent of rendering the Romantic strain in his poetry pitifully thin. Love to him was then a vague, easy and unfelt emotion, yielding little evidence of any cerebral activity. His Rossettian obsession with the theme of love was obviously not backed up by the Rossettian experience as a lover. The note of melancholy in the poems of that phase was very nearly a fashion. The Romantic epithets and situations borrowed from his distinguished predecessors did not mend matters. It was his varied experience as a lover and man of action, as well as his abiding interest in the hitherto unexplored Irish mythology and legend that remedied the situation to a large extent. The former provided him with original feelings and the latter with fresh and lively symbols. His poetry thus gained a new verve. All the same, it also gave scope for a new obscurity, thanks to his deliberate bid to pack multiple significances into his poems. When he addresses the Rose in "To the Rose upon the Hood of Time", for instance, identifying it with a perplexing variety of things including Ireland, his patriotic readers could hardly have guessed that it had anything to do with their beloved land. The cold realities of the present seem to hold no charms for him. His interest in the poor, foolish things of the present has an air of condescension. His love for them appears to be in proportion to their capacity to manifest Eternal Beauty, as the Rose does.

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10. WBYCP., p.35.
While tracing the influence of Shelley on the early poetry of Yeats, George Bornstein has pointed out how Yeats's flight from reality in his imitations of Shelley in the eighties matured into a flight from the everyday world toward an ideal one of Intellectual Beauty. Bornstein has maintained that Shelley's poetry, in Yeats's interpretation, gave both authority and encouragement to his effort to move "upwards out of life" rather than "downwards upon life." 11

The mention of the rood in the title of the present poem is apt to arouse the curiosity of Yeats's Christian readers, though they are not likely to be particularly impressed by the contents of the poem. The poetic use Yeats made of religious symbols was obviously of little significance, as he lacked faith in Christianity. Indeed he was too dynamic and sceptical to hold fast to the concepts of a conventional religion. The Rose here may well be identified with the Virgin Mary or the Muse, though neither of them apparently mattered much in Yeats's scheme of things.

Yeats's request to the Rose not to come too close to him may yield varying interpretations.

According to George Bornstein, if Yeats were to be absorbed by the Rose, he could no longer sing of lesser subjects, for "he would then be using a tongue men do not know". 12 The view amounts to crediting Yeats with an abiding


12. Ibid., p.53.
concern for the problems of humanity, and may be contrary to facts as we have known them.

Harold Bloom says that the poet here demonstrates the "struggle between his hunger for La Belle Dame's faery food, and a sceptical fear of the natural starvation the hunger brings as it did to Keats's quester." He calls it a characteristic pattern of vacillation. And, according to him, "a little space" is needed "for the natural odour of less occult roses to pervade." Such an interpretation might be unwarranted in the context. The Rose-breath referred to could after all be the breath of the same Rose and not necessarily of lesser ones. Of course, we are aware that Yeats was capable of looking for lesser roses, while professing a single-minded passion for a greater one. But the vacillation in the present case would seem suggestive of a strength rather than a weakness. Perhaps it speaks of the robust commonsense that guarded Yeats against being swept off his feet in all weathers. It is perhaps this strain of toughness that makes him a Romantic with a difference. A part of his being was capable of looking askance at a thing believed ardently by another part. We may associate this toughness with a scepticism characteristically modern. It is apparently the same strain of toughness that enabled him to be a man of action while being a Romantic at another level. His flair for self-drama-

seeming weakness obviously helped in the invigoration of his poetry, too, through detecting its foibles and devising the means of remediating them without detriment to its essential affiliation to the Romantic tradition.

George Bornstein has pointed out how "To the Rose upon the Road of Time" falls short of M.H. Abrams's idea of greater Romantic lyric. He rightly finds it lacking in "mental action". For, while invoking the rose to come near him he refuses to visualise a union with it and himself stands in the way of the poem's progression towards becoming a greater Romantic lyric with the "out-in-out" pattern referred to by Abrams. If the failure involved could be traced to the early Yeats's lack of proper maturity as a Romantic poet, a wholesome awareness of the depressing realities concerning his relations with Maud Gonne might also have come in the way of a more satisfactory treatment of the theme. The poem also suggests that Yeats was probably aware of the risk of his losing the scent of the Rose and ceasing to be a singer of songs, in the event of Maud Gonne's getting too close to him. Yet he would fain have thrown all caution to the winds and married her at any cost, if only she had nodded in his favour. But it was not to be. Perhaps, we

must give Maud Gonne the credit for a true understanding of Yeats's nature as of the importance of his contribution as a poet. A marriage with her might well have proved a calamity, as it was likely to result in the drying up of a perennial source of poetic inspiration.

The modification made by Yeats in the Shelleyan conception of Intellectual Beauty seems significant. The fact that Maud Gonne was left suffering in the midst of others could probably have made him imagine Intellectual Beauty as a thing suffering with other men and not as something pursued from afar and symbolised by the Shelleyan star. Yeats's choice of the earthly rose in preference to the heavenly star may also be ascribed to the same fact.

Having taken to the lyrical form without heeding the warning of his father, Yeats was hard put to the task of finding some ways of curbing his emotional and egotistical tendencies. He tries to regulate his emotions through singling out certain aspects of his personality and giving them names and tongues. It was thus symbolic figures like Hamrahan, Michael Robartes and Aedh came into being. The way in which Yeats could leave them out later on, proved that they had no life of their own. He also tried certain masks with a similar end in view.

The assumption of poetic masks by Yeats has rendered his sincerity suspect to many, as it gave scope for contradictory
assertions. But Yeats, as noted by David Perkin, obviously felt that "the self always involves the anti-self, and thus contradictory assertions may be equally sincere" in such cases.\textsuperscript{16} J.B. Beer has assumed, on the authority of Keats's letters, that Keats himself would gradually have come to mask his identity as Yeats did for saving it from submersion. He says:

> The adoption of a 'mask' in such circumstances is not an act of hypocrisy; it is simply the adoption of one interpretation of the universe as a framework for art, the poet accepting the structuring of vision with which for the time being he will look at the world, as continuing to live within these self-imposed limitations, until he finds that he has worked his way beyond them.\textsuperscript{17}

It is akin to T.S. Eliot's attempt at depersonalisation, as it helps the poet to detach himself from the subject. The Yeatsian talent revealed in this respect may differ from Keats's negative capability not so much in kind as in degree.

Yeats had a low opinion of Wordsworth because of the latter's inability to wear a mask and imagine himself as different from what he was. He evidently regarded the wearing of masks as an exercise in self-discipline. Yet surely, not all people could be expected to have a fancy for it. Moreover, Wordsworth obviously lacked the Yeatsian flair for self-dramatisation. He set greater store by sincerity and


spontaneity as the terms were understood in the common parlance. 18

While the impact of the French symbolists promoted purity in Yeats's poetry the fresh symbols drawn from the Irish folklore, mythology and legend enlivened it. But the most for the occult lore that suggested a bid on the part of Yeats to make up what had been missed because of his lack of formal education has done more harm than good to his poetry.

The influence of Maud Gonne on the poetry of Yeats was perhaps unique in certain respects. For one thing, it was refreshingly free from sensuality. That gap, however, was sought to be filled by Yeats's experiences with Diana Vernon. The credit for bringing the Yeatsian Romanticism down to earth was partly hers too.

Yeats's romantic thoughts involving Maud Gonne thus revealed a sort of sublimity. The factors that lifted it out of the common plane of vulgarity had obviously rendered his personal life pathetic for long.

Yeats's attitude towards nature also had something unique about it. He did not care for the physical aspects of things even as much as William Blake, not to mention either Wordsworth or Walter de la Mare. The symbolist preoccupation need not, after all, have obscured his physical

18. A recent tendency has been to regard the Wordsworthian sincerity itself as a mask.
vision as much as it did. His poor eye-sight had perhaps something to do with it.

Yeats's early poems often present a sense of dichotomy between man and nature. David Daiches has commended the manner in which he implicitly criticized the "falsity and sentimentality" of a conventional Romantic attitude towards nature. He cites "The Sad Shepherd" and "The Madness of King Golli" as instances from Yeats's early poetry. But it seems doubtful whether Yeats's intention in presenting such a sense of dichotomy could be construed to mean so much. For, we also find him using nature for mood-creation in certain other poems of the same period, as noted by Daiches himself. "Ephemera" and "Falling of the Leaves" provide examples. It is likely that Yeats found the sense of dichotomy more fruitful poetically. Yeats, as acknowledged by Daiches again, always evinced a special interest in presenting contraries, partly at least because of the influence of Blake. "The Two Trees", for instance, tells us of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death, which are largely Blakean in conception, though the impact of the Cabalistic tree on the imagery cannot also be ruled out.

20. WBUP, p.9.
22. In Exulted Reverie, p.50.
23. WBUP, pp.16-17.
24. Ibid., p.16.
25. In Exulted Reverie., p.50.
26. Ibid., p.55.
If Yeats got nearly lost in the superficialities of Romanticism in his early phase, it may be unfair to blame him overmuch for it. It perhaps marks an important stage of a poetic development that helped him to find his anchors. Yeats's endeavour at the stage obviously was not so much to give expression to his genuine feelings as to exercise a proper check on them. The influence of his father on him in this respect was certainly salutary, though it appeared to inhibit him initially. His Romanticism had to gain substance from his experiences. Those experiences also brought a new note of sincerity to his poetry. That note, however, was to remain implicit for some time, thanks largely to the subtlety and complexity of his symbolist method. The delight that he soon found in walking naked did much to impart a new authenticity to his poetry. Though the note of sincerity in Yeats's poetry once again got obscured in his later phase, when he felt constrained to wear a new series of masks, it remained an essential aspect of his poetry all through his life.

While Yeats's achievements as a man of action and his interest in nakedness might create an impression of his having turned a realist, the realities he valued were distinct from those affecting the common run of men and women.

C.H. Sismon probably means as much when he says that "Yeats never entirely moves into a world which is continuous
with the world of prose." If Yeats looked for reality, it was "on his own terms", as mentioned by Arthur Misener, and the main requirement of these terms was intensity of feeling. His early inclination to define truth as "the dramatically appropriate" mentioned by Vivienne Koch remained with him throughout.

P.R. Lewis was one of the earliest critics to point out how Yeats's plays "repudiate the actual world as essentially as his incantatory lyrics and his esoteric prose repudiate it." His political stances were also far from realistic. David Perkins has rightly called his political activity "a kind of wooing." And, when it failed to yield the desired fruit, his pathetic attachment to the past must have got reinforced. The realities he cherished could be perceived only in his moments of heightened awareness. We may call them higher realities. This attitude evidently forms the core of the Yeatsian Romanticism.

If it was Ireland that rescued Yeats from imitative Romanticism, the credit for modernising his poetic technique

should be entirely his own. But his remark that "by 1900 everybody got down off his stilts" hints at a general awakening in the matter. Had it been real, the revolution in poetic technique attempted by the Modernists later on might have become wholly superfluous. We may safely assume that the new awakening was largely Yeats's own. He realised that "we lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man", partly from "lack of that spoken word which knits us to the normal man." Possibly, he also repented having ignored his father's sage counsel that poetry had to be an "idealisation of speech." The sentimentality that afflicted his early verse also disturbed him. He knew that it had sprung from lack of thought. His assumption that Donne could be devoid of such sentimental sensuality "because he was being permitted to say what he pleased" seems, despite a severe approximation, suggestive of much regarding his own work, both earlier and later. Yet, for the time being, he successfully shook off all constraints on his poetic expression and began to speak with a wholesome integrity like a free, full man.

32. Yeats, W.B., OMY, Introduction, p.XI.
33. Quoted in New Bearings, p.47.
34. Perkins, David, HMD, p.568.
35. Quoted in The Last Romantics, p.208.
The conventional Romantic features that Yeats zealously clung to could be safely discarded, when his Romanticism acquired greater substance. What had happened was apparently an assertion of authenticity over strategy. Indeed we are aware how strategy regained an upperhand in Yeats's poetry in the concluding phase of his life. The manner in which the intensity of the emotions expressed in his poems remained intact inspite of it may be a unique aspect of the Yeatsian achievement.