CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: AN ASSESSMENT

A panoptic glance over William Butler Yeats' critical œuvre reveals the mechanics of his visionary notions and his perception of poetics that governs literature. His critical writings present a treatise on his understanding of the nuances of literature, and his desire to reconcile it with culture, society and the nation at large. For Yeats, literature is not merely a body of work, but a way of thinking and expressing - an intellectual form, capable of evoking consciousness of the multiplicity of beliefs. His literary cerebration elucidates the quintessential spirit of literature which is to enrich the aesthetic experience of the reader. A celebrant of art and literature, Yeats' critical acuity spans over five decades and manifests in varied forms and genres - poetry, drama, critical essays, and polemic journalism. However, his persona as a poet eclipses his ingenuity as a literary critic. His protean sensibility, most profoundly influenced by the Symbolist movement, is widely accepted as a reaction against Naturalism and Realism. Nurtured by the cultural dilettantism of Pre-Raphaelitism, he took the advance of science as contravening to his fanciful thoughts, and the notion of traditional primitiveness. Intensely conscious of the conflict of imagination with the practical necessity, he insisted on the supremacy of the former in the true Romantic spirit. His foray into symbolism also owes much to the Romantics like Shelley and Rossetti, for his knowledge of French was too limited to allow him access to the French symbolists. Aspiring to reconcile theory with practice, Yeats tried to transform and transmute both, so that each may help elucidate and exemplify the other. Consequently, his poetics and literary works are intrinsically connected and cannot be studied in isolation. Besides, his critical thought and literary contribution is too vast and diverse; widely split between the practical and imaginative; and too expansive and complex to be either encapsulated in a single work or be compiled under a single banner.

In the absence of a constant philosophy or a definite system, Yeats' literary opus is marked by complexity of attitude, treatment and technique. His inconsistent theoretical views on poetics are strewn throughout the body of his correspondence, autobiographies, introductions to edited works and collections of essays. He also transcends, transforms and complicates his earlier views. Instead of following any well-knit, coherent or logical progression, he challenges the reader to delve into his varied writings to search out missing links, correlatives and connections, scattered over an array of disorderly and disjointed essays
and sketches. It is perhaps because of the fragmentary nature of his critical writings, which while lending a distinctive charm, make him a lesser known critic than a poet. Besides, although Yeats applies his theory of criticism to elucidate and expound the contemporary literary trends to critique other writers and to comment on literature in general, yet his critical writings are viewed primarily as condiments to augment, substantiate or explicate his poetics and poetry.

In the process, Yeats also emerges as a vacillating yet self-re-inventive critic for whom art was a revelation and not merely the criticism of life. Much of the complexity and obscurity which intersperses his intellectual excitement is an outcome of his antithetical thinking and ambivalent attitudes. As a critic, he dwells on incongruous entities - nature and art, youth and age, passion and wisdom, creative violence and order, revelation and civilization, and imagination and reality, to name only a few, and conceptualizes them as opposites. Within his critical vision, there is also a play of constant conflict and opposition between reason and emotion, imagination and reality, science and instinct, body and soul, and even power and knowledge. His contradictory self is also caught between ornamentation and experimentation with forms in search of his new-fangled notion of ‘Unity of Being.’

Antinomies abound in his critical thought and poetics principally because multifarious influences lead him often to meditate over issues variously. His association with the Art and Craft Movement, along with his growing insight into the tensions between the artist and the Irish audience, portrayed most potently and critically through his plays and poems, further colours his vision. Resultantly, there emerge contradictions and counter arguments between many of his valid ideas which he proposes, and the irrational conclusions he sometimes draws. His ambivalence and density of thought also stems from his passion for traditional symbols, images and metaphors. Straddling over various movements, he seems to share the ironic and satirical vision of Joyce, Mann, Proust, Kafka and Eliot. Moreover, despite digressions, contradictions, unexpected augmentations, sudden outbursts of decisive generalizations or occasional dramatizations, Yeats’ critical thoughts, written in a frank conversational tone, are powerful and passionate. They also engage our attention with their intrinsic casualness and anecdotal style. Furthermore, his observations in criticism are illuminating precisely because they are observations made not by a professional critic but by a practicing artist who conjoined image with image and idea to idea to formulate a structured and conceptual complexity of thought.
The present study titled "Yeats as a Literary Critic: A Study of His Poetic Beliefs" has been a modest attempt to undertake a comprehensive study of Yeats' perceptions as a literary critic. Endowed with astute technical and unparalleled prosaic talent, Yeats has dominated the literary and critical milieu for many decades. Exhibiting his prowess as a literary figure and a critic, he has explored varied genres including poetry, drama, novel, short-stories, prose, essays and introductions, reviews and polemic journalism. An insight into his critical writings clearly suggests that though Yeats' poetic genius has streaks of many literary movements of his times: the Romantic, the Victorian, the Aesthetic, and the Modernist, yet his Romanticism prevails over all others. A witness to the transition from Victorian Romanticism to the anti-Romantic Modernism; Yeats advocates Romanticism and endorses its quintessential emphasis on originality, inspiration, intuition, imagination and feelings as the guiding principles of literature.

A persuasive representative of the age of disintegration of belief, Yeats initially, tried to find a substitute for religion in Symbolist poetry followed by Irish Literature and culture. However, he settled for Romanticism to exhibit and to propagate the Celtic literature amongst the English by embodying the beautiful idyllic world of fantasy through an emotionally surcharged evocative diction and syntax. Yeats' Romanticism is an offshoot of his total rejection and rebellion against the Victorian Utilitarianism and externality. He exhibits no patience for the Victorian moralization, their predilection for extraneous details of nature and scientific discursiveness. Consequently, his critical writings seldom mention the Victorians appreciably. In fact, he only makes a passing reference to most of them in his prose, preferring to ignore them as insignificant. Similarly, the poetics of the modernists leaves him confounded. Except for its youthful vigour and verve, literary modernism does not hold any inherent attraction for him. Rather, he displays and appreciates with aplomb the late Romantic urge to exhibit and eulogize the picturesque rather than the intense and the dramatic.

The gamut of Yeats' critical writings reveals a man driven more by idealism and instinctive judgement than reason or scientific temperament. Through his multifarious critical writings enshrined in essays, letters, collections, introductions, autobiographical essays or even his poetry, he comes across as an astute and committed critic for whom poetic theory and practice forms a continuum, each influencing the other. Consequently, his critical thought is intrinsically connected with his literary oeuvre and cannot be separated from it. Marked by
his distinctive provinciality and prolixity, his critical output comes across as anti-realistic, personal Romantic vision of a man for whom literary imagination inspired by the glorious past traditions is indispensible to literature and other art forms. Loving theatre unconditionally, he contributed zealously in the setting up the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, so as to provide a platform to promote literature among the masses. In fact, he approves of the Romantic imaginative streak and incorporates mysticism, Celtic folklores and esoteric subjects into his experimental drama making it mystic, unrealistic yet inimitably appealing. Fervently advocating the adherence of directness and simplicity in literature, he promulgates the same for dramaturgy as well. In fact, his avowed aim at experimentation in this genre is to purge it of superfluous conventions so as to simplify drama, and to bring it closer to the audience. Paradoxically, his personal experimentation with stage setting, Noh plays, and highly convoluted concepts of Anima Mundi, Masks, and anti-self vexed his craft as a dramatist, and his innovations further added to the complexity of his poetics of drama.

Concomitantly, Yeats's stance in his reviews is also typically Romantic, for he gazes at writers and their works through the prism of Romantic ideology, giving prominence to imagination and subjectivity over realism and objectivity. Even his Autobiographies displays similar traces, for he randomly collects and weaves together characters and incidents, deliberately blurs time and adopts the anecdotal style of presentation to lend his creativity an aura which mystifies and romanticizes his life further. His essays also exhibit his illuminating perceptions on poets and their poetry, novelists and their novels, dramatists and their drama, and the nuances of literature in general. Works embedded with visions, prophesies, primitive myths and legends or nostalgia for the bygone magnificent past enamour the critic in Yeats. Apart from exploring a poet's vision and his role within the social milieu, he also deliberates upon the notion of poetry, its elements and pragmatic dynamics by illustrating them with apposite examples from his own oeuvre and that of others.

Moreover, while establishing an inextricable correlation between the arduous process of creation and its product — the creation itself, Yeats displays his ambivalence in his perception on form and content in literature. Consequently, he does not clearly specify his preferences, although undeniably it is the search for an appropriate content more than form which intrigues him as a critic. Consequently, he censures the Modernists for the implicit monotony in structure and form and displays a definite proclivity towards Romantic subjects in literature. In fact, the Romantic forms and themes template his poetics. His critical and
literary master-plan is, indeed, woven with the thread of Romanticism which runs across the entire literary and critical oeuvre. Beginning as a pre-Raphaelite, he imbibed the tenets of Romanticism and Symbolism, before replacing transcendentalism with writings about contemporary political issues, the Uprising and the Nationalistic cause of Ireland. On the way, he assimilated the major elements of the 19th century culture and literary trends and became conscious of the ensuing Modernism. Partaking from these influences, Yeats has redefined and refurbished his critical ideology. Still, Romanticism continues to be a predominant influence which has shaped his critical writings throughout.

In the post-World War I scenario, when Modernism emerged as a movement, there appeared a radical shift from the romantic, sentimental and picturesque perception of art and literature to a more intense and concentrated aestheticism. The Modern exponents - T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Franz Kafka - endorsed investigation; experimentation and innovation as against the tenets of Romanticism. Contrarily, a votary of the latter school, Yeats promulgated tradition, direct connect with experience, and reconciliation of emotion and reason. Similarly, while the Modernists aimed to project panoramically the pessimistic vision of disarray, apathy and disintegration of societal and moral relativism, Yeats disapproved of the Modernist content or the subversion of the prevalent poetic and prose conformism of the former. The Modernists also promoted use of free verse, breaking up the narrative, and the syntactical flow of poetry to introduce fragmentary utterances. Similarly, Stream of Consciousness, Interior Monologue, and other modes were integrated to violate the traditional syntax and to disrupt coherence and cohesion. However, Yeats could never adapt to such an insurrection against the established Romantic tradition.

Moreover, while Modernism upholds individualism to renegade tradition, Yeats was a committed propagandist for tradition over individualism. An exponent of the Irish Renaissance and a devotee of Irish past, Yeats prefers the Gaelic and Celtic themes and literature, thereby resisting the all-pervasive appeal of modernist forms and contents, in both letter and spirit. He may have experimented with dramatic and poetic forms but he does not embrace the Modernist tenet of disconnecting from the past to build a new epoch based on innovation in artistic expression. While Pound propagates the dictum: "Make it new". Yeats never ascribes to this convolution of form and content. Nor does he adjust with the modernist neglect of the metaphor in poetry which he deems vital to the fibre of
versification. Moreover, as opposed to the Modernists' emphasis on craft, Yeats concentrates on communication. He follows the Romantic canon with its intrinsic simplicity and directness of expression of subjective emotions, although in the later works his acceptance of objectivity as an essential feature of literature may be read as his growth towards modernism. Nevertheless, Romanticism which Yeats supported and promoted was diametrically opposite to Modernism in its predilection for tradition over innovation, the rural over the urban, the subjective over the objective and the glorification of lost golden past over any aspiration to build a new one. Consequently, despite his growing association with the modernists, he never eschews his Romanticism to embrace open-form Modernism.

Sensitive to the developments around him, be it the turmoil in Ireland, the aftermath of World War or the holocaust, Yeats distanced himself from poeticism and verbose to write in a plain, and harsh tone on the vagaries of life. His later poetry and his recommendations of using direct, firm diction and terse and succinct expressions in poetry and plays display his quintessential receptivity to novel notions. However, to equate him with the moderns would be misleading because he fails to match the Modernists like Eliot and Pound in their strikingly innovative and polished expressions, taut diction and complexity of thought and expression. Besides he debunks the triviality and the incomprehensibility of the modern poetry and dismisses it as a degenerate mess. In fact, Yeats interrogates the paradigm of colonialism, national identity and modernity in his critical writings.

Indubitably, straddling over Victorian Romanticism and Modernism at the turn of the century, and driven by a child-like inquisitiveness, Yeats garnered a confluence of influences and knowledge to augment his own literary and critical thought. Taking cognizance of the changing sensibilities and preferences in literature, he also tried to unify them all with his esoteric erudition, to formulate his own distinctive aesthetic milieu. It is perhaps because of this glad acceptance of the modernist tenets that Yeats is inadvertently associated with the Modernist movement. Actually, it is primarily through his analytical opposition of the literary trends of the modern era, apparent more radically in his critical writings, that he allies himself more closely with the Romantics rather than the Modern writers. In his critical intellection, Yeats focuses more on the nature and purpose of his critical writings than his judgmental opinion about his predecessors or contemporaries. Strongly traditional in his approach towards aesthetics and politics, he displays a paradigmatic maturity and vitality as a seasoned critic.
In fact, the ingenuity of Yeats' inclusive critical mind permeates through time to bridge the gap between varied dichotomies: sensibility and intellect, science and tradition and most prominently, Romanticism and Modernism. He merges the polarities, accepts them and adapts himself to the changing demands and predilections. In a way, Yeats defies all attempts at establishing his adherence to a particular school of thought – the Classicist, the Romantic or the Modernist. The complexity of this issue is heightened by the fact that he partakes of the features of all these and many more, and moulds them to suit his purpose. There may be some visible signs of the influence of modernism on Yeats' later works, yet to canonize him as a Modernist would be a fallacy. It can be said with conviction that his poetics and critical credo exhibit more of Romanticism than Modernism in his approach, treatment and verbalization of literature primarily because of all the influences, his adherence to the Romantic ideology has been most sustainable. The fact that the principle traits of Romanticism, namely – imagination, spirituality, divinity and spontaneity are found in profundity in his craft further vindicates this assertion. However, Yeats does not follow it blindly rather he goes beyond these basic tenets to revitalize and revivify them and present them afresh. Hence unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, he is certain that poetry cannot be a product of spontaneity although it must give the semblance of one. Thus, while remaining essentially Romantic, he is not averse to experimenting with the modern language and forms. Conversely, while Eliot and Pound did not subscribe to the idea of connecting with the common man, Yeats thought like a philosopher, but wrote like a common man.

Those who claim that Yeats coheres with Pound, Eliot and Auden in the later years to purge himself of the Romantic urge to engage only with the past and to express his concern for the present forget that Yeats never disassociated himself from his Romantic moorings. Rather he juxtaposes the present with the past to underscore the glory of the past. In fact, he slams the Modernists for their sloppiness of expression which he laments as being out of shape and form. Many a times he has expressed his dislike for Ezra, Eliot, Auden school often disparagingly questioning their worth. Moreover, he was disenchanted with the hostility of the modern audience towards the experimental theatre he supported. Thus by interpreting the world imaginatively and judging it in terms of a value system based on passion, honour and lofty ideals which he found wanting in the modern world, he clinches the matter in favour of his Romantic proclivity. Concomitantly, his penchant for mythology, anti-utilitarian and anti-materialistic values and his incessant romanticizing of Ireland and the Celtic Renaissance establish him most firmly as a Romantic. Furthermore, Yeats' treatment of the
modernists is basically a neo-Romantic stance against the complexity and pace of modern life. His restlessness at the turn of the century, impelled by his disillusionment with the developments in Irish politics, is often misread as his foray into Modernist mode of literature. Undoubtedly, his association with Modernists such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce makes him aware of the Modernist sensibilities, yet he remains at the margins, merely testing the waters, and never really taking the plunge.

As a critic of literature, Yeats believes that an artist must blend his experience of life with his art. Concretizing his own life as an experiment in shaping, forging and reinventing themes, plots and sensibilities, Yeats embodies an internal monologue and an internal tension, dialectics of which form the crux and the catalysts of his poetic beliefs. In fact, this introspective strife with his own ideas and perceptions lead Yeats to posit and re-posit, argue and counter-argue, and most importantly, write and re-write. This lack of conclusiveness markedly visible in his critical writings, and a distinguishing feature of his critical output, may be attributed to his innate centrifugal sensibilities which proscribe him from holding on to a given centre for long. His relentless experimentation and fusion, coupled with his shifting fancies and mediations, impedes any attempts to ascribe his absolute commitment to a particular movement. However, it may be asserted that despite all influences, currents and counter-currents, Romanticism forms the immediate backdrop and matrix of his poetics. Consequently, his definite Romantic leanings which govern the major part of his literary oeuvre establish him more as ‘the Last Romantic’ than even a Marginal Modernist.