CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

The dramatic works of the Romantic poets are so various in nature, conception, and technique that they cannot be considered together, or brought under any single categorical head. The critical tendency is towards grouping them together. The critics and scholars in general seem to have lost sight of the variety of these works, and looked upon them as closet dramas. The failure to recognise their variety has resulted mainly in two things: (a) their under-estimation as dramas, and (b) a general prejudice against the dramatic abilities of their authors.

These dramas have often been described as "poetic plays," or "closet dramas," and regarded, as it were, as an isolated dramatic phenomenon - a sort of works of their authors' playful mood and poetic imagination, having little merit to deserve serious attention as dramas. It is also obvious that the terms - "poetic plays" and "closet dramas" have, more or less, been used synonymously to describe the plays of the Romantics. Poetic plays are not necessarily "closet" dramas; Shakespeare's plays are also poetic plays, and no one can say that they are closet. The use of the term as a common descriptive label of the
Romantics' dramatic works show, that these works have been regarded more as poems, than as dramas, and that the positive merits of some of these works as theatrical pieces have been overlooked. In a word, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, it seems, has been made to stand, more or less, as a representative work capable of indicating the basic nature, tendency and worth of whatever the Romantics did as dramatists. This is generally the spirit in which most of the critics dispose of their business with the dramas of the Romantic poets. Our contention is that, to look upon these dramas with only *Prometheus Unbound* in mind will surely mislead (as it has misled) the critical opinion still further, and lead the critical endeavour into a false or partial appraisement of the true worth and position of these works. For as there is lyrical rhapsody like *Prometheus Unbound*, so also there is moving and theatrically successful drama, like *The Cenci*, or *Sardanapalus*; as there is drama like *Zapolya*, or *Remorse*, or *Otho The Great*, echoing Elizabethan dramatic tradition, so there is drama like *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, or *Sardanapalus*, following the new theory, the new conception and the new approach, borrowed from none of England, but followed by a few others later. These varieties of the Romantics' dramas must be taken into account before a judgment on them is passed; and if this is done, it will at once be clear why these works call for fresh assessment.

The Romantic dramas are at once traditional and unconventional. When we call them traditional, we especially bear in mind the Romantics' debt to the Elizabethan dramatic
tradition with special reference to Shakespeare, to the Gothic melodramatic tradition, to the foreign dramatists - Alfieri, Calderon, Goethe, Schiller, and the ancient Greek tragedians, especially, Aeschylus. They fall in line with the tradition in so far as the surface mannerism, dramatic machinery, partial conception of character, blank-verse style, and the like are concerned.

The Romantic poet-dramatists have also broken away from the tradition. The peculiarly poetic character of Prometheus Unbound, Helen, Heaven and Earth, and the like suggests perhaps, no dramatic heritage behind them. They are lyrical dramas based on some robust poetic visions, or metaphysical conceptions and speculations, and bear the unmistakable mark of the individual idiosyncrasy of the poets and the spirit of the age - in other words, the romantic temperament. On the poet-dramatists of the Victorian period can be traced the influence of the Romantics. The poetic dramas written by Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold and A.C. Swinburne indicate the continuation of that dramatic tradition established in the early years of the nineteenth century by the Romantic poets. Professor Anniah Gowda is very correct when he maintains:

"The Victorian dramatists, Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne, had continued their efforts in the tradition of the Romantics."  

Indirectly, the dramatic historians like Allardyce Nicoll and George Rowell also suggest the same thing when they speak of the dramatic success and failure of the Romantic and the Victorian poets. They seem to have noticed the family-likeness of their dramatic works, but are not dogmatic on this point. We find that the dramatic tradition set up by the Romantics not only influenced the Victorian poets, but also has influenced the modern. It will not be unjust to say, that this tradition remains as a hereditary force behind the verse drama of the twentieth century. Apparently, this claim of heritage may be considered unreasonable. But if we deeply investigate, we do not fail to detect the spirit of this tradition working through various forms and guises of the twentieth-century verse drama.

The verse dramas of the Edwardians are, as a matter of fact, technically and conceptually not very different from the poetic plays of the Romantics and the Victorians. When T.S. Eliot took up the leadership of the poetic dramatic movement, we come across a mass of poetic plays different in style, conception and technique from the Edwardian. But even then, Eliot's theory of poetic drama is not completely different from the dramatic tradition established, especially by Byron. G. Wilson Knight admits the fact when he maintains, that Byron's theory of drama "shows certain affinity to the Classical Theories of Mr. T.S. Eliot." Moreover, when Professor Knight says that —

"Byron is, indeed, the one all-important link between the dramatic consciousness of the seventeenth century and our own."\(^3\)

He also reminds us of the same force of dramatic tradition linking the poetic dramas of the twentieth century with those of the early nineteenth.

No one can deny that there is a gulf of difference between the poetic dramas of the Romantics and those written by the twentieth-century poets, like T.S. Eliot,\(^7\) W.B. Yeats and others; the difference lies mainly in the dramatic structure and technique, in poetic imagery and diction, in theme and treatment, in conception and conduct. Modern poetic drama of the Eliotian school is more a thing of technique and form, like the modern poetry. The protagonists of this specialized dramatic form have advocated the requirements of both technical and conceptual deviation from the dramatic tradition of the past. But the basic nature of the modern poetic drama remains the same as that of the poetic dramas of the Romantic poets; the thing that remains unchanged is that, both the Romantic and the modern poetic dramas seek to give poetic treatment to the theme in order to achieve the deepest emotional effect; they are equally introspective, as their focus of attention is psychological. In other words, the same poetic spirit remains unchanged in all of them, and it is this poetic spirit which may be thought to represent the

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3Ibid.
force of tradition, sustaining the modern poetic drama in
soite of its claim to total deviation. When T.S. Eliot says -

"It seems to me that if we are to have a poetic drama,
it is more likely to come from poets learning how to
write plays, than from skilful prose dramatists
learning to write poetry." 4

he goes to lay stress on the same poetic spirit which is only
likely to come from a poet.

The Romantics' dramas in general are Interesting,
chiefly for their serious tone, personal elements, poetic
character, dramatic qualities, psychological depth, reformatory
character and tone, and historical interest. Dramas of the
Romantic poets are serious in theme and tone. Almost all of them
are tragedies written in a serious mood. Guilt-and-remonse
theme is often found in them; comic relief being forbidden, they
maintain almost a uniform tragic strain from the beginning to
the end.

These dramas are often subjective, and the personal
elements are easily detected. Sometimes, some pet notions or
ideas of their authors are found to have been ojected in
their dramas.

The Romantics' dramas have a dual character - poetic
as well as dramatic. When a balanced stress on the both are
given, they become both literature and good theatre capable of

satisfying both the mind, as well as the eyes and ears of the audience. Remorse. The Cenci. Marino Faliero and Sardanapalus are the best examples of this kind. The verbal part of the dramas of the Romantics has distinct poetic and literary merit. And this aspect has probably misled a host of critics to overlook the dramatic power displayed in them. Where the dramatic power is poorly displayed and the work cannot interest us as a drama, their literary merit stands as a saving grace. The examples of their authors' disproportionate stress either on the poetic, or the dramatic aspect are also found in some of them; and because of this, some of the dramas have become either purely literary, or poorly theatrical, or vice versa, as Werner. Werner is good as a theatrical piece, but bad as literature. But whether or not they are equally poetic and dramatic, the dramas of the Romantic poets are, in general, introspective; they are thought-provoking.

A peculiar characteristic of these dramas is that, they are, almost all, psychologically rich. The real beauty of them lies in the dramatic display of the psychic development of the heroes through stress and strain of external surroundings. The Romantics with the exception of Scott, are more or less "subtle-souled psychologists," and their dramas have deep psychological interest even for the modern readers and spectators.

These dramas have also some historical interest. It is almost a peculiarity of the Romantic poet-dramatists, that they all, more or less, preferred historical theme. Sometimes history
is interpreted in terms of their own and contemporary ideas. Dramas of the Romantics are, therefore, intellectual and scholastic in so far as this characteristic is concerned. Generally speaking, these dramas are, in a way, a research in the past.

The dramas of Byron have especially one important aspect in addition. They bear the mark of Byron's conscious experiment in the process of his search for an appropriate dramatic form "to re-establish poetic-drama on a workable contemporary basis, and not merely as an archaic survival." Byron's historical tragedies are the dramas written to bring about dramatic reform; they were written in adherence to the rules of unities, and are the result of Byron's serious attempt at following his own theory of drama. Apart from their dramatic vigour and beauty, these plays of Lord Byron have their originality and novelty. William Ruddick also recognises the same, when he says:

"But there is real originality in the way he uses 'regular English drama's to create 'a mental theatre' of a psychologically and poetically novel sort."6

Dramas of the Romantic poets do not deserve to be looked upon as something of a common character. Their importance and significance to the modern age are as great as the poetry of the

5Joseph, M.K., op. cit. p.112.
6Ruddick, op. cit. p.35.
Romantics. For they are also the product of the same creative minds and geniuses that have enriched the poetry of England. To us their interests are mainly of four different kinds - dramatic, biographical, ideational and literary.

It is not to claim too much for these works to say that they have some universal appeal and permanent value. Some of the dramas of the Romantics deal with some fundamental problems of universal interest; they deal with the subjects, neither local or temporal - but higher issues of life and the universe, and all these constitute their positive and permanent value as literature, though not necessarily so much as dramas. In other words, it is, after all, the idea, not the art, that chiefly constitutes the perennial interest and permanent value of these works, for which the world will not, or should not let them willingly die in oblivion. When we say this, we bear in mind, especially Prometheus Unbound, Cain, and a few others. Chew's comment on the Byronic dramas needs to support the view.

"Study of Byron's plays has shown, I think, that their value is both absolute and relative. They offer a serious consideration and reflection of life, of man in relation to his fellows, to nature, and to the mystery that is before him and behind that wraps him round."7

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7Chew, cit. p.164.
Of the six major Romantic poets, credit does not go equally to all as dramatists. The first generation of the Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Scott are not so important in so far as their dramatic achievements are concerned, as their juniors - Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Dramatic originality and seriousness of purpose are to be found in the younger Romantics, of whom Byron is the most outstanding. Byron alone is sufficient to prove, contrary to the prejudicial notion of the critics, scholars, and literary historians, that the Romantics did not completely fail as dramatists, and that they had dramatic talent. Some of the dramas written by them bear the unmistakable signature of their authors' superb dramatic talent; and these plays are Coleridge's Remorse, Shelley's The Cenci, Byron's Marino Faliero and Sardanapalus. Besides, Shelley's Charles The First and Keats's King Stephen (though fragmentary), also deserve serious critical attention for showing their authors' dramatic potentiality and promise. These dramas undisputedly claim for the Romantics a place of honour, and urge upon us to review the whole question of these poets' achievements in the field of drama. They are actually a vigorous protest against the way in which they have so long been looked upon with prejudice.

The Romantics' aloofness from the living theatre alone cannot be a sufficient reason for denying them a place among the dramatists of England. The dramatic power and potentiality of these poets, as revealed by their works (whether staged or not, in their own time) should be the actual basis of any judgment on
whatever they have done as dramatists. And our examination of their dramatic works makes us think that these poets cannot be ignored as playwrights, and that they had undoubtedly dramatic abilities. For these poet-dramatists, the time was out of joint; the dramatic spirit of the time was against them, and the premature death of the younger generation nipped in the bud the possibilities that could have found greater expression in their future works. They have only shown the morning of their dramatic career, and this morning does hold up the promise of a brighter day.