CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

What has been said so far leads one to the inevitable conclusion that although the nineties have been generally neglected by critics and historians of English literature, there are justifiable and valid reasons to view them as precursors of modern literary forces. This study has followed the suggestions of critics like Hough, Kermode and Temple that for an accurate presentation of the impact of victorian aesthetics and criticism one must consider the contributions of the writers of the nineties. Standing at the turn of another century, when we look back, it becomes quite evident how the nineties in embodying their reactions to the values of an expansively materialistic and industrialised society nearly anticipated many of the modern responses in art and literature. I use the word 'nineties' advisedly; as I feel that any particular epithet —— decadent, aesthetic or impressionist —— would be quite inadequate to grasp the full range of reactions and experiences displayed by the diverse figures who characterised the period. Leaving aside writers like Shaw or Wells, even figures like Wilde, Arthur Symons, George Moore or Lionel Johnson could not be bracketed together to be described by any single label. They partook of qualities associated with all these literary labels.

One of the major features displayed by the writers commonly recognised as belonging to the nineties, was their attempt to assimilate the impulses of various arts; to synthesise the
foreign literary tradition especially that of France with the native tradition and to achieve interpenetration among the various literary and art movements. This attempt towards assimilation at different levels was obviously a sort of strategy undertaken with the principal purpose of proclaiming the autonomy of art and the sovereignty of the artist with all the vehemence and vigour. They tried to produce in literature the effects of the other plastic arts to emancipate literature from the bondage to representationalism, anecdotalism and victorian moral fervour. As early as 1890 this general attitude could be clearly articulated by Maurice Denys: "It must be recalled that a picture — before it is a picture of battle horse, nude woman or some anecdote — is essentially a plain surface covered by colours arranged in a certain order."\(^1\) Whistler in England was the most forceful advocate to assert the same principle in negative terms: "The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it is supposed to tell."\(^2\) The underlying assumption of an art independent of subject matters played a very significant role in the development of modern literary theory and practice. By the early years of the First World War we see Ezra pound emphasizing clear analogies between the painter's devotion to his materials and the poet's:

The painter should use his colour because he sees it or feels it. I don't much care whether he is representative or non-representative. He should depend, of course, on the creative not upon the mimetic or
representational part in his work. It is the same in writing poems, the author must use his image because he sees it or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics.³ [Emphasis mine].

What Pound says here against the mimetic or representational aspect of a work of art is fully in agreement with Whistler's ideas. Pound, of course, enlarged the representational element to include the poet's personal experience or feelings. In the visual arts the mimetic part of an artist's work is plainly the world of visible forms external to the artefact. In poetry, the mimetic or non-creative part of an artist's work, in Pound's opinion, is personal experience. Like natural forms in painting, personal experience was accidental to poetry. The painting or poem was not to be tested by its fidelity to natural form (realism) or to personal experience (sincerity); the art work was neither representational nor reminiscent. It was the emphasis on the second aspect that led Eliot to declare: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."⁴ It was often thought that Pound and Eliot were reacting to the excesses of the Aesthetic Movement, of Georgian poetry and of European symbolism. My contention here is that this reaction was basically initiated by the writers of the nineties themselves in their persistent rejection of the representational and anecdotal aspects of art and literature. The modernists' indebtedness to the nineties on this point is very real and vital.
The writers of the nineties absorbed the continental ideas and tendencies and attempted to achieve a complex grafting of these elements on to the native English tradition. What really tended to happen during the period was not just an imitation but a quick assimilation of cosmopolitan ideas into English literary tradition. That is why, the 1890s climate of aesthetic flamboyance and depravity, of the veil trembling on the brink of being torn, is not fully intelligible without reference to Huysmans, Verlaine and Mallarmé but it is equally incomprehensible without reference to Blake, Keats, Rossetti, Pater, Browning and the Irish folk-tradition. Indeed, a profoundly important aspect of the aesthetics of the decade that began with George Moore's *Impressions and Opinions* (1891) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and ended with Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), is the idea of a fruitful symbiosis of the cosmopolitan and the native ideals. It is because of this fruitful symbiosis that aestheticism in England ultimately ended as a constructive and socially respectable form of symbolism based on the imaginative grasp of reality and sympathy. It did not lose the moral content of art altogether, though qualifying it radically in the process of assimilation. The urge towards achieving a perfect authenticity of vision which guided the symbolist poets was carried to the extreme on the continent and threatened to end up as the radical and anarchic movements of Dadaism and Surrealism. But in England we see no remarkable manifestation of these ideas and the reasons must be attributed to the assimilation of these
radical ideas into the native tradition. The underlying current of the native English tradition was so strong that it was impossible for the succeeding generation of writers to completely outgrow this. Hence we notice residual thoughts of Victorian heritage in the critical pronouncements of Pater or Symons.

Again, it was because of this synthesis of the foreign ideals with the native tradition that the divergent movements of the period displayed a peculiar tendency to converge and coalesce in England. Most of the ideas associated with the different movements underwent strange mutations on the cross-channel ferry and lost part of their rigidity of features. It is on account of this development that we can perceive instances of interpenetration and cross-fertilization among the different art movements of the period. This interpenetration obviously underlines the massive nature of the Victorian moral fervour. The need to come out of the shackles of Victorian moral approach was so strong that even contradictory developments like naturalism and symbolism could unite in England. Both could assert in unison the predominance of aesthetic values over moral values and the freedom of the artist to express whatever experience he wants to communicate to his audience. I have examined the writings of George Moore as embodying the merger of the aesthetic-symbolist ideas and the naturalist predilections. His long aesthetic journey — rolling on from camp to camp — is an interesting account to realise the pressure of the late-nineteenth century cultural milieu. He carried the dual allegiance to an exhaustive naturalism on the one hand and a complex form of aestheticism on the other. And in doing this he anticipated what James Joyce
realised afterwards: that the function of the literary artist was to be "the mediator between the world of reality and the world of dreams".  

The strategies of assimilation led to the emancipation of artistic reality from empirical or objective reality. Art came to be recognised as requiring no other justification except its own integrity of form and aesthetic effectiveness; a shift of emphasis from message to the code, i.e., to the conventions of art. The quest for a new orientation to reality (in the place of empirical reality) is to be viewed in the background of the collapse of all accepted framework of values in the later part of the nineteenth century. The predominant intellectual response to this crisis of faith was the development of scepticism which is largely responsible for the growth of impressionistic art and criticism in the period. The writers of the age did not press for finalities in life or in art; rather they resorted to vivid impressionism, seeking to convey the various angles of vision. Each individual was perceived to be isolated in the chamber of his mind, a victim of his own succession or series of impressions of the world. And to overcome this isolation emphasis was laid on the intensity and heterogeneity of experiences. Experiences of art were supposed to be both more intense and more real than the day-to-day experiences of life. Besides, through the aesthetic experience alone, one can move out of one's own circumscribed self and participate in an experience that has no apparent connection with that self. The insistence on the intensity of experience also presupposes a kind revelatory potentiality of the
moment, the evanescent 'now'. This led in a significant way to the development of symbolism in art. Arthur Symons took special note of the Pre-Raphaelites' interest in the significant moments of life. Rossetti, according to Symons, lived in his own interior world an imaginative life in which he might hope at every moment for some new revelation of love or beauty. Symons himself always tried to immortalise in his art the most vivid moments he had ever lived or experienced. This concern to arrest in art the significant moments in all their fleeting impressions led to the exploration of sexuality and the glorification of conscious craftsmanship in art. The presentation of sexual themes and the cultivation of the sense of style represent a quickening of the personality, a deeper sense of self-awareness. Both of these achieved a greater feeling of immediacy into art and literature. To all the writers of the period, a formal pursuit of beauty was an all-absorbing passion; all other considerations were secondary to it. This intensely self-conscious preoccupation with style was a new note in the history of English literature. This led to the search for purified language and the cult of art as an impersonal artefact in the twentieth century. In Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) we see how the words seem to acquire an ontological status — a thing in itself, independent of the particular mind that entertains them. But more significant than the stylistic indulgence was their search for ever-new and curious sensations. It was this search for curious sensations which impelled these writers to take the entire domain of human experience as the proper province of art. Consequently, the
period saw the widening of the scope of literature in different directions. We have already referred to the growth of the literature of sexuality; there was also the development of urban poetry, the poetry of the cities. After 1890 the portrayal of the life in the modern city became an important element in the texture of modernism. In the field of criticism they asserted the supremacy of aesthetic values over moral values in asserting that ethics and aesthetics were independent fields of study. Morality, for them, was a relative norm and the morality of a work of art could be measured only through its artistic integrity, that is, by the intensity of effect achieved by the artist.

The glorification of the element of conscious craftsmanship in art hangs in well together with the cult of artificiality in the period. The dandyism of the intellect manifested itself in art in the form of posing, attitudinizing and speaking through masks. In some cases the mask was assumed simply as a form of social pretension; while in other cases it was a way of multiplying one's selves so as to enable one to participate in a multiplicity of experiences —— spiritual or sensual, religious or secular. This development is to be viewed against the backdrop of the Victorian insistence on 'sincerity' which the writers of the nineties rejected as an ethical attitude having little relevance to aesthetic values. The assumption of the mask also helped the writers in the period to conceal an emotional turbulence within and to face the world with a deliberate form of outward composure. Lionel Johnson's literary criticism pledging his allegiance to the traditional values of art sprang directly
from his reaction against the kind of life that he lived. His public front of aloofness and isolation also served as a mask hiding the degradation of alcoholism. The persona again came to be used very effectively both as a sword to strike at the bourgeois values of the triumphant commercial society and as a protective shell for the inherent shyness of the temperament. One of the major difficulties in arriving at a proper evaluation of the apparently flamboyant utterances and deliberate masqueradings of Oscar Wilde and George Moore, is our lack of awareness of this aspect. It is our habit of accepting their utterances on their face-value that leads us to express shock at the outrageous nature of their morals. Once we gain the proper perspective, much of the absurdity of their extravagant utterances evaporates.

The mask was really a very significant mode of self-expression for some of the most serious writers of the age. Symons found in the mask a possible source of escape from the dull pressures of the actualities of life. To W.B.Yeats, the mask offered an opportunity for achieving the much-desired 'Unity of Being'. Through the adoption of the mask an artist could transcend the limits of his own narrow self and get united with a tradition outside himself. The concept of the mask also proved to be very helpful as a means of maintaining the right sort of aesthetic distance between the artist and his art. The point will be clearer if we compare Yeats's observations on two of his contemporary poets in The Boston Pilot, April 23, 1897. Referring to John Davidson, Yeats said:
The din and glitter one feels were far too near the writer. He has not been able to cast them back into imaginative dimness and distance.  

Whereas when Yeats referred to Mr. Symons, he said:

> Of Mr. Symons's method . . . I have but seen stray poems and judge from them that, despite most manifest triumphs from time to time, he will sometimes fail through gaining too easily that very dimness and distance I have spoken of. He will perhaps prove to be too far from, as Mr. Davidson is too near to, his subject.

In other words, Yeats felt that neither Davidson nor Symons could achieve the right kind of aesthetic distance between the poem and the poet. One, i.e. Davidson came too close to his subject; while the other, i.e. Symons went too far from his subject. The perfect distance can be achieved by the assumption of the masks alone.  

For the space of one poem the poet may commit his energy to the holding of a gesture of one particular character against the flux of time; the poem does not commit the poet to the holding of the gesture as a man but as a persona only. Eliot and Pound were greatly influenced by this concept of the mask. They got in the theory of the mask one of the most effective weapons to cut down the subjective element in art and lay the stress on the autonomy of the art-object freed from the artist's personality. But Yeats's use of the persona differs from that of Eliot in one important aspect. In a poem by Yeats the voice of the persona is one that Yeats himself listens to with respect whereas the voice
of a 'Prufrock' or a 'Gerotion' is one that Eliot hears with reservations and irony. Eliot seems literally to dehumanize his characters by keeping them away from the minimal human dignity so that his personae are not only less than Eliot, but deficient human beings. In Yeats's poems the personae may become inhuman but they do so because of his strained efforts to simplify them into superhumanity. Crazy Jane is deficient because of her excesses and extravagances and her point of view is to be seen as partial, but admirable not absolutely separate from the affirmations of the poet. The theory of the mask thus helped Yeats to be both "intimate and impersonal" at the same time. This is one of the means of connecting the subjective and the objective. And we have already seen how the men of the nineties, because of their vaunted contempt for mid-victorian values, worked hard to make the self as different from the world as possible, namely, as much like a persona as possible. They also tried to assume different masks to enjoy the whole range of human experiences. For whatsoever reason it may be, there is no doubt that they hinted at one of the most crucial aspects of modern poetic theory.

Finally, the men of the nineties influenced the future course of poetry by strongly asserting that a poet could write well only by flouting public opinion or, at least, by disappointing public expectations. This was an extreme form of reaction against the victorian tradition of offering the public a reflection of its generalized emotions. It is true that in their reaction against the victorian tradition of pleasing the public
by resorting to all sorts of 'exteriorities' they went to the other extreme of proclaiming that "all art is quite useless." But this attitude was simply an aesthetic pose, deliberately taken up in a particular social and political context. However melodramatic it may seem, it is right, I think to view these men as martyrs to a cause—a sense of honesty in intellectual matters. The exaggeration of some of their gestures has to be viewed against the background of philistinism and industrial squalor of the Victorian age. It is when we judge their works keeping in mind the proper perspective that we recognise the note of individual candour and honest perception that the Victorian period had so often smothered in its fear of the abyss which free thinking had opened at its feet. The nineties in their scrupulous fidelity to the precise features of the picture within, released the forces in literature which tried to objectify the subjective, to make audible or perceptible the mind's inaudible conversations. With this emphasis on introspection they anticipated the course along which modern literature was to develop and grow. Tom Gibbon in an article compares Symons's aesthetic ideas with those of Ezra Pound and comes to the conclusion that Pound's celebrated definition of the Image, which obscures his essentially subjectivist view of poetry, needs to be completed as follows: "An Image is that which presents to the soul of the reader an intellectual and emotional complex in the soul of the poet, in an instant of time." Mr. Gibbon is of the opinion that Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex", stripped of its scientific jargon, does not amount to more than saying that the image projects the
subjectivity of the poet into the reader. Indeed, the direct treatment of the subject which the Imagists emphasized so much was simply a non-descriptive evocation of the subject and the subject is, in fact, the poet's subjectivity. In his essay on Whistler, Symons summed up a central aspiration of the impressionist imagist movement in a single word: 'telepathy'. What Symons suggested by this was the transmission in the reader's mind a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer. That the ideas of Pound and his fellow Imagists have so much in common with those of Symons is not at all surprising. Indeed, it has been my feeling in the course of this study on the nineties that Symons's work on the French symbolists, because of its acknowledged impact on Eliot, Pound and Yeats has overshadowed his criticism of English Literature, which, if systematically analysed, might reveal that his influence in this field was also equally deep and abiding. In so doing, we must, however, concentrate on the substantial body of work that Symons did before 1908 because the erratic nature of his work in his post-illness career has traditionally encouraged critics to dismiss him as only the member of a literary clique.

The conclusion of this study, therefore, suggests that the nineties was a period of vigorous experimentation that represent a turning-point in the evolution of the modern arts. In defining 'the name and nature of modernism', Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane go inevitably back to the nineties: "And if, finally, one were to seek precisely the defining event, the supremely symbolical point, one would surely turn back to the nineties."
Notes and References to Chapter VI


5. Quoted in Edwardians and Late Victorians, p. 25.


7. Ibid., p. 147.


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SECTION III

UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS


