Introduction

Defining or developing a theory for Romanticism has been a constantly contentious issue in the history of literary criticism. In English Literature, debates have touched on the problems of periodization and the discrimination of Romantic poets with the aim of establishing common paradigms suited to the discussion of Romantic literature even with the more popular English Romantic poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron and John Keats.

Contemporary debates about Romanticism's character began with Réne Wellek's attack on Arthur O. Lovejoy's argument that there is a multiplicity of Romanticisms with distinct thought-complexes. Wellek went on to formulate a theory of Romanticism which highlighted the "imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style" (161).[1] From 1948, Wellek's proposition became the hallmark for the discussion of Romantic poetry until Jerome McGann later dismissed it on grounds that Wellek paid more attention to the perspective of culture and society rather than to the poetic imagination, and further that his theory of Romanticism is inadequately categorized and the synthesis "too abstract and conceptual" (739). Although Morse Peckham attempts to reconcile the conflicting theoretical positions by synthesising the ideas of Lovejoy and Wellek through the

introduction of the concepts of organicism, dynamism, and diversification (11), McGann further claims that Byron does not fit easily into Wellek's criteria for Romanticism and that he (Byron) cannot simply be removed from the historical phenomena. McGann however, traces important distinctions between different Romantic ideas of the imagination as expressed by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge (738-739).

The issue is even more complicated when one attempts to apply Romantic phenomena to a poet like William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) who is better known as a modernist poet. The tendency most often is to limit Yeats's Romanticism to his early poetry and consider every other poem beginning from "A Coat" to be modern because he indulges in a highly esoteric, symbolic, experimental and philosophical poetic style which suits the taste of the modernist critic. Some prominent scholars on the Romantic imagination and the poetry of vision like G. Wilson Knight and Maurice Bowra go further to treat Yeats somehow iniquitously by categorically subjecting the definition of Romanticism to a historical context. These critics consider Yeats as some kind of a decadent Romantic poet despite the rich and insightful qualities of the Romantic imagination evident in his poetry. G. Wilson Knight, for example, has done elaborate studies on the poetry of vision in *The Starlit Dome,* dwelling exclusively on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. He hardly says anything about Yeats from whom he borrows the expression that forms the title of his book, an expression that is located in the core of not just the poet's second "Byzantium" poem but also in his overall experience as a Romantic poet: "A starlit or moonlit dome disdains/All that man is,/All mere complexities" (Yeats: *Collected Poems*, 280).

Furthermore, in a comprehensive analysis of the Romantic imagination, Maurice Bowra in *The Romantic Imagination*

concludes that, "Within this period and afterwards there were no other poets whose conception of the imagination was quite this and who though they may have much in common with the great five are not in agreement on the essential point…." The period mentioned above is definitely the Romantic period (1798-1832) and the "essential point" which Bowra states in a preceding discussion is that,

> …the five major poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, in spite of their differences agreed on the major point that the creative imagination is closely connected with a peculiar insight into the unseen order behind visible things…. (271)

Knight and Bowra seem to overlook the fact that although Yeats wrote mainly in the twentieth century, his poetry is invested with similarly rich and spiritually-profound values which urged and fashioned the imagination of the poets of the Romantic tradition. If "the peculiar insight into the unseen order behind visible things" becomes the paradigm for judging the Romantic poetry, then Yeats, more than any Romantic poet, fits appropriately within it. The persona in Yeats's poems demonstrates a wonderful ability to use the imagination to penetrate the "unseen order behind visible things" in search of ideal reality within the natural environment, in myth and visionary experiences.

George Bornstein is perhaps the critic who has most clearly brought out Yeats's full potential as a Romantic poet by effectively showing the strong link between Romanticism and modernism in his poetry. In his book, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens*, Bornstein underscores the "critical recognition" (Bornstein iv) of Romanticism's importance to modernism by examining pro-romantic Yeats and Stevens as well as anti-Romantic Eliot. He counters the subtle

objection to Romanticism's link with modernism by two principal critics, J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality* and Monroe K. Spears in *Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth Century Poetry,* by arguing that modernism is a "development of and from Romanticism" stating further that "at its birth, modernism is often a transformation of Romanticism" (19). The extent to which one can separate Yeats's early Romantic poetry from his later modernist verse is therefore only in terms of the poet's revolutionary poetic techniques. But as Bornstein further states, "pro-Romantic Yeats and Stevens as well as anti-Romantic Eliot all used the Romantic schema to formulate their own poetic strategies and stances" (23).

Even with studies like Bornstein's, which tend to melt down the wax separating Romanticism from modernism and other literary movements, John Paul Riquelme is of the opinion that there is still "no critical census about Romanticism's character" (6). However, whatever directions the debates have taken, either considering Romanticism as a general characteristic of mind and art in all periods and cultures, or as an attribute of a specific historical period in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it could be argued that in the core of Romantic poetry, is the imagination. This is possibly what Bornstein refers to as "mental action", stressing that "Chief among mental powers, whether as Lord (to Blake) or *primum inter pares* (to Wordsworth) is imagination" (8).

Based on Bowra's theoretical stance which emphasizes the prominence of the imagination in Romantic poetry, this book attempts to trace the submerged Romanticism in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and explore the complexities and ambiguities of his imagination and his changing consciousnesses within the traumatic experience of the early twentieth century Europe.

It is generally understood that all poetry is the product of the imagination. However, theories on the Romantic imagination distinguish between the ordinary and the creative imagination which we can qualify further as the poetic and the philosophic imagination. The ordinary or poetic imagination refers to the use of figurative language to create poetry and the creative or philosophic imagination is the subject matter of the poems. The philosophic imagination employs the poetic image as a device for philosophical speculations about life and this is evident in the imagination's quest for esoteric values in a world beyond real experience, what Bowra, as already stated, describes as "a peculiar insight into the unseen order behind visible things". The interplay between the poetic and philosophic imagination therefore, culminates in what may be referred to as the Romantic imagination.

The pioneering emphasis on the importance of the imagination in Romantic poetry is Coleridge's. The Romantic imagination, as he explains, identifies the creative power with the imagination and considers it "the highest faculty of man" that "synthesizes raw materials into concrete images." He writes in *Biographia Literaria*:

> The IMAGINATION, then, I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition of the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. (167)

By distinguishing between the "primary" and "secondary" imagination Coleridge carried his philosophic speculations upon

imagination into the realm of transcendentalism. Since the imagination is the "prime agent of all human perception" and is involved in the eternal activity of creation, Coleridge therefore, likens it to God or some transcendental reality. Like other poets, Coleridge considers the imagination not only as an instrument for poetry but as its subject-matter, and he illustrates this by animating through poetry an otherwise lifeless and cold world of scientific and Christian ethics.

Many critics on the Romantic imagination often lay stress on the imagination as the principal device for art. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, the imagination remains the most important gift to poets because it enables them to re-enact the transcendental or even the godly. The imagination in their opinion enables man to come into contact with ultimate reality and to attain an understanding of the oneness of things. In other words, it is the very source of spiritual energy, which makes Romanticism, to use Marc Redfield's expression, to "remain a fundamentally ambiguous event in which we seem fated to participate as political and ethical beings" (100).

William Blake shares the same view with Coleridge and Wordsworth, but his perception of this faculty is apocalyptic. In other words, his idea of the imagination is more of an elaboration of Christian doctrines of Heaven and Hell. He does not attempt the creation of new supernatural values as Wordsworth or Coleridge does. Blake considers that the imagination is divine, the very source of spiritual energy:

> This world of the Imagination is the World of Eternity; it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of the Imagination is Infinite & Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & Temporal. (407)

Yeats evidently subscribes to this view of Blake and that of the other major Romantics who claim that the imagination is the only means by which one can attain transcendental reality. It is a faculty which takes one into a world which is infinite and eternal, the realm in which the beauty absent in the real world is possible. He, however, differs from the other Romantic poets in terms of approach. The six Romantic poets approach the imagination from a doctrinal point of view, preaching more often about the existence of such a faculty, and the fact that it links man with the ultimate reality. But they do not state clearly enough what forces or conditions compel or inspire a poet to acquire it. This seems to suggest that the imagination is an instrument, or an activity with which one can voluntarily engage to attain the realm of a higher consciousness where all is divine and eternal and attainable through the awareness of its existence.

For Yeats, however, the imagination is a state in which one involuntarily finds oneself. Unhappy with the flaws of social conventions and the artificiality of moral doctrines and philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the persona in Yeats's poems searches for an ideal and a more permanent reality from one realm of the imagination to the other. Therefore, the imagination to Yeats becomes a means of emancipating oneself from any form of life that is traumatising and frustrating. It is possible then, to view his experimentation in poetic forms and techniques especially in his later poetry as the hallmark of modernism necessitated by the imagination's quest for the reality that lies beyond ordinary human understanding. This would in fact not make him a repudiator of Romanticism, but sometimes unconsciously, a belated follower of Romantic traditions.

Yeats's poetry illustrates that his indulgence in the imagination by which he creates and fashions new worlds where ideal reality is possible was imposed on him by increasing complexity, tensions, and frustrations during his lifetime. The world in which he lived was getting increasingly uglier. The drama of political struggle which plunged man into the catastrophic First World War, the horrors and conflicts which were fiercely alive in the Ireland of his day and his despair concerning his unfulfilled love for Maud Gonne, the woman to whom he gave his soul and "loved in misery", were among the factors that spurred the poet to explore the recesses of his imagination in search of greater values than the actual world could provide. Besides, developments in the field of philosophy were disturbing. Writers also concentrated more and more on psychological rather than surface realism. These tendencies therefore, called for an orientation toward something that could inspire poets to create meaning out of the emptiness of the supposed modern civilization, since Christianity which was the religion of the civilised West, in the opinion of Harry Blamires, was increasingly seen as unable to fulfil this role (5).

Yeats's Romanticism as well as his modernist experimentation therefore, can be read as unconscious or semiconscious attempts to penetrate the psyche as well as the metaphysical with the imagination in order to provide answers to the essential question which has always been at the centre of humanity's dilemma: Towards what direction can humanity seek salvation in the face of impending despair, trauma, helplessness and decline? Yeats, like most poets in the first half of the twentieth century, wrestled with the imagination to provide answers to this question. This explains why much of his poetry reflects a world different from the ordinary one. The poet

explains this tendency within himself in a letter to a friend, Katharine Tynan [2]:

> I have noticed something about my poetry…that it is all a flight into the faeryland from the real world; and a summons to that flight. The chorus of "The Stolen Child" sums it up – that it is not poetry of insight and knowledge but of longing and complaint. (Yeats: *Letters to Katharine Tynan,* 47)

In his early as well as his later poetry, the poet reveals an absurd human experience characterized by "the times bitter floods", with "love's bitter mystery" and with anarchy "loosed upon the world". Faced with the adversity of corporal experience, the persona in Yeats's poems struggles to liberate himself by dreaming of more ideal worlds where "peace comes dropping slow", where "lies eternity" and where the "mystical brotherhood…work out their will". But could Yeats escape the realities of the modern world entirely through his imagination? What motivated him to write poetry which is all "a flight into the faeryland?" There is substantial evidence in Yeats's poems to suggest that as a result of the traumatic experiences of the early twentieth century, the poet was in search of a spiritual order through which he could attain ideal reality. Equipped with the poetic imagination, the poet gets into contact with the "unseen order behind visible things", that transcendental reality in the "moonlit or starlit dome" of Byzantium, what Blake has called "Jerusalem" (187) and Keats "Elysium".

Yeats's imagination essentially occupies four realms which are coherently linked to one another. The four realms – reality, Nature, myth and vision – form the basic structure of this book. The first chapter examines the poet's perception and imagistic projection of reality. This is the first realm of Yeats's imagination which is characterized by the tensions and frustrations of

personal as well as general life in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. A discussion on the mystical concept of nature follows, with the aim of assessing the extent to which the poet's imagination explores the moral, psychological and spiritual nature of being; the imagination's perception of things outside reality; and the complicated relationships between feelings, human consciousness, and ideas with the landscape and the external universe. The next focus is on the imagination's quest in myths which are exploited as romantic symbols for the expression of spiritual essence behind visible experience. In the next chapter, on the dome of the visionary, the analysis shows how the imagination probes into higher values for ideal existence including the universality of being, eternity, spiritual consciousness, and the sublime nature of art. As a way of conclusion, the chapter titled "Modernist Romanticism" assesses Yeats's contribution to the Romantic Imagination as well as modernist poetry.

NOTES

1. Réne Wellek's attack on Lovejoy is based on the latter's article: "On the Discrimination of Romanticism" first published in PMLA XXIX in 1924 and in "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas", published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas II* published in 1941. "On the Discrimination of Romanticism" was later published in 1975 in *English Romantic Poets,* a collection of critical essays on the major Romantic poets edited by M.H. Abrams.
2. Katharine Tynan (1861-1931) was a poet and novelist born in Dublin. She was life-long friends with William Butler Yeats.