THE OXFORD GROUP

A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF W. H. AUDEN, STEPHEN SPENDER, C. DAY LEWIS, AND LOUIS MACNEICE

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ABSTRACT

THE OXFORD GROUP
A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF W. H. AUDEN,
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by John Frederick Povey

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the poetry of the Oxford Group, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice, in order to establish their position in the body of twentieth century English poetry.

Critical opinion of these poems has changed markedly. In the early thirties when they began to write, they were received with acclaim. Readers approved equally of their bold contemporary technique and their championing of the proletarian utopia. Later critics scorned them as dated. They insisted that their technical experiments had proved largely sterile and their advocacy of left-wing causes was now irrelevent and misguided. To resolve this conflict one would have to assert that one or the other of the critical opinions is wrong or that there has been a marked deterioration of the poets' work. I conclude that the latter is the case.

If one reads the poetry of these writers one discovers a similar development in each. At first there are the experimental poems of the very early thirties. Auden was the predominating influence here but the poetry is highly eclectic. The poets borrowed from jazz rhythms and music hall songs. They incorporated terms from technology and information about

science and politics. In the middle thirties these stylistic tricks became subordinated to their urgent desire to arouse apathetic people. Their consciences were assaulted by the economic misery at home and the threat of the rising dictatorships abroad. Their poetry at this time was passionately idealistic. Because of its powerful humanity it remains the best work these poets were to achieve. The 1939-45 War, though fought for a cause they believed in, seemed to lack the honest simplicity of the Spanish Civil War. Evasion and compromise undermined their faith. Coupled with this was the growing realization that Communism was not the idealistic creed that they had believed it to be. The post-war writing of these poets is demonstrably weaker in technique and less assured in theme than their earlier writing. All four seem to have abdicated from their positions as spokesmen for the liberal conscience. They write now in tones of despair and regret. They have repudiated the dreams of the thirties and yet they seem to have been unable to find any acceptable substitute for their lost belief. This apathy and despair may be seen not only in the poetry which they do produce but also in the fact that they now write very little. They busy themselves on the fringes of letters lecturing, editing, and translating. This in itself seems a measure of their inability to produce further significant poetry.

This thesis attempts to demonstrate that the later poetry of the Oxford Group is inferior and that little more

significant poetry can be expected from these writers. My investigation also confirms, however, that the poetry of the thirties is moving and honest. It is as capable of asserting the humane truths of man in our day as it was in theirs.

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Table of Contents

FOREWORD

Years of excess have resulted in a general distrust of the English thesis which places its emphasis on the historical or sociological aspects of writing while it offers only meager and unilluminating comments on the quality and value. The reaction to this type of study is exemplified by the New Criticism with its insistence that literature be largely separated from its historical environment. This insistence in turn developed its own excess. After reading a good deal of this 'lemon squeezer' criticism, I began to feel something of the same resentment voiced by David Daiches:

> The New Criticism has no monopoly of poetic perception. We resent the assumption that they alone are really critics, all the others being merely scholars, historians, einfluss hunters, positivists or unprincipled impressionists.[1]

Anyone investigating the poetry of the thirties must be more aware of the historical and political background than narrow literary criticism would admit as necessary. The ground on which I choose to base my critical method is indicated by F. R. Leavis in an essay in his book, The Common Pursuit.

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[1]David Daiches, Literary Essays (London, 1956), p.168.

> If it is asked in such an enquiry whether it is principally sociological or literary it will be enough to answer that it represents the kind of sociological interest into which a real literary or critical interest in literature develops and correlatively the sociologist here will be a literary critic or nothing . . . . This is not to suggest that a serious interest in literature can confine itself to the intense local analysis associated with practical criticism, to the current scrutiny of words on the page in their minute relations, their effect as imaginary and so on; a real literary interest is an intense interest in man, society and civilization and its boundaries cannot be drawn.[2]

I realize that the danger in an historical approach is to regard literature as important chiefly for the light it throws on social and political history. This is not my intention in this dissertation. It is quite obvious that the past can be interpreted through its literature as much as its literature is to be interpreted through our fragmentary knowledge of the past. But both elements must be considered. Never more than in the thirties did the poetry grow out of the social and political circumstances, even while the poets were themselves altering and moulding the accepted views of contemporary history and society. The poets both reflected and created the intellectual beliefs of the age.

The writers whom my thesis concerns were intensely aware of the political events, and convinced that analysis and

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[2]F. R. Leavis, The Common Pursuit (London, 1952), p.200.

legislation could control social ills. In considering such writers therefore, a measure of what must be called the sociological approach is essential. The poetry of the thirties was 'engaged' poetry, and I do not think the term has to be perjorative. James T. Farrell stresses the necessity of employing such an approach in discussing these poets by remarking pertinently that one reason for their relative neglect and dismissal during the last decade has been that they do not lend themselves to a narrow critical approach that does not allow consideration of their social and historical position.

> During the thirties a sociological approach was highly popular. Today, the same type of approach is viewed with disdain and even with alarm ... Writers who were praised in terms of a sociological approach to literature during the thirties are now damned and judged out of date.[3]

In re-examing the work of these poets I wish to draw upon knowledge of social and political history, and yet combine such information with a close critical examination of their writing. Illumination of the wider sociological aspects of my material will reinforce literary analysis. Dr. L. Shucking insists upon this combination.

> No attempt to relate literary studies with the sociological will yield much profit, unless informed and controlled by a real and intelligent interest, a first-hand critical interest, in literature.[4]

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[3] James T. Farrell, Reflections at 50 (N.Y., 1954), p.180.
[4] Dr. L. Shucking, The Sociology of Literary Taste (London, 1934), p. 4.

My aim is similar to that of R. M. Charques who, in writing of the 1920's, faced the same issues and took his stand on the following rather general pronouncement:

> The method I have adopted has been to set off the general characteristics of post-war literature, and apparent trend of poetry ... against the background of social and political conditions in England.[5]

With historical and literary scholarship I want to demonstrate the influence of political and economic events on the poets of the thirties, but I must also consider how these poets created and voiced the received English view of the period. My intention is to interpret the age for the better understanding of the poetry, and, more importantly, to estimate the extent to which the moral and political problems of this decade extended the range and perception of the writing of these poets. The writers I am considering saw the dangers of Fascism and the inevitable war apparently long before the politicians, and their poetry, because of that, was often minatory and rhetorical.

In this thesis I wish to assert that the events of this time, and especially the Spanish Civil War, developed their poetic feeling in a way that demanded an extension of their emotional range and poetic technique. The poetry

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[5]R. M. Charques, Contemporary Literature and the Social Revolution (London, 1922) p. IX.

that they wrote in response to the appeals to their conscience made by events in England and in Europe in the mid-thirties is usually their best work. It is, I believe, qualitatively better in emotional strength and poetic force than all that they had published before this time. It is also superior to anything that they were to write subsequently when the urgency of events no longer spurred their spirits, and failure depressed their idealism. I hope to show that the poems that they wrote in the thirties with their passionate appeal for an honest, liberal and humanist ideology are as relevant to this age as they were thirty years ago, and just as capable of enlarging the moral vision by which we must judge political and social issues today.

THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE THIRTIES

The decade of the thirties was a significant watershed in European thought. The period spanned the time during which the new generation began to look towards a new war rather than backwards toward the last. There was a total division of sentiment between the rootless 'lost generation' of the twenties, and the politically committed intellectuals exemplified by the 'Pylon Poets' of the thirties. Domestic and international disasters had produced a profound sense of malaise. The Great Crash of 1929 began an economic depression so deep-rooted that on every side there was shameful evidence of its relentless power. At home the misery of this decade was shown in the unemployment, the hunger marches, the soup kitchens, and the means test. Atrophy settled on the business life of the country. Grass grew among the disused collieries. In the international field the weakness of the League of Nations, after American failure to ratify Wilson's post-war dream, was monotonously and depressingly exhibited. In Manchuria in 1931, in Abyssinia in 1935, in Germany's systematic and defiant breaking of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno, there was clear evidence that democratic liberalism and political morality were everywhere in retreat. Fascism began the militant expansion that only a world war was to halt.

In Spain in 1936 there seemed to be a momentary check to the rise of the dictatorships. A left-wing republican government was formed which, whatever its obvious faults, did appear to offer a genuine alternative to oligarchic rule. When the Franco revolt against this elected government was so openly supported by the Fascist powers there seemed, at last, a clear issue on which to challenge the defiant power of the expanding dictatorships. As Day Lewis wrote:

> The struggle in Spain is part of a conflict going on now all over the world. I look upon it as a battle between light and darkness of which only a blind man could be unaware.[1]

Not only did the issues seem clear, they had been obvious enough on other occasions of aggression, but now something could be done. Recruiting international volunteers to support the hard-pressed government forces in Spain offered Englishmen the opportunity to take action in substantiation of their moral beliefs. Over the remilitarization of the Rhineland, for instance, they could condemn as much as they wished, but their government's policy made acquiescence unavoidable. In Spain they were offered the choice of action. They could join the Internation Brigade and defend European liberalism outside the suburbs of Madrid. The tone of their vague but vehement determination may be gauged from Day Lewis's retort to Aldous Huxley, Huxley wrote a pacifist

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[1]C. Day Lewis, Authors Take Sides (London, 1937), p. 4.

pamphlet asking the intellectuals What Are You Going To Do About It? Day Lewis was the spokesman who answered, 'We're Not Going To Do Nothing'. He assumed that their decision mattered, and that it was capable of changing political events. If this belief in political decision distinguishes the thirties from the twenties, it is equally the key to the conflict of generations that makes the Angry Young Men of the fifties, however socially aware, despise the idealism and optimism of these poets. A spokesman of this group, John Wain, observed very scathingly in a review, that the thirties exhibited;

> A crushing sense, now extinct, of personal responsibility. It was the last age, consciously and feverishly the last, in which people had the feeling, that if they only took the trouble to join something, get a party card, wear a special shirt or organize meetings and bellow slogans, they could influence the course of events. Since 1946 nobody above the Jehovah Witness level has this attitude.[2]

The so-called 'gay twenties' tended to ignore the issues of social justice for a powerful, introverted frenzy, but the circumstances of the thirties forced people's attention back to the issues which demanded political and social choice. The typical literature of the thirties is writing of topical urgency. It communicates the feeling of stress at the consciousness of imminent disaster. Certain poets

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[2]John Wain, Review, Spectator (March 19, 1954).

seemed particularly responsive to this need for political action. Younger poets in the early years of the thirties found it impossible to imagine themselves standing apart from their society. They lived under a social system which seemed to acquiesce passively to events, as if mass unemployment and concentration camps were irremediable acts of some inscrutable deity. They chose to take sides. With the rejection of political apathy went a refusal to tolerate all that is implied by an 'Art for Art's Sake' philosophy. They angrily denied the whole assumption of the bland, country, escapism of the Georgian movement of the previous decade. They despised a literature that desired to retreat into a sentimental version of the past; that seemed content with a rhythm and diction that was obsolete; with themes that were irrelevant to contemporary issues.

To achieve a change, to make what Grierson called 'new poetry for the new world to be won by social revolution',[3] they sought a new technique to communicate their changed themes. Above all they desired a new and wider audience for their verses. If they were to be the militant spokesmen for the aroused conscience of the workers

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[3]H. Grierson, A Critical History of English Literature (London, 1946), p. 563.

they assumed that they should win the proletariat as an audience. With this in mind they attempted to introduce the conversational style of common speech. and symbols taken from every day experience. These things all reinforced their repudiation of the artificial poeticism of the immediate past. In reacting against the country images of the Georgian poets they eagerly embraced imagery derived from the new technology which, previously, had been regarded as non-poetic. It was this preoccupation with railways and generators which led to their receiving the title 'Pylon Poets'.

But the change was primarily personal and political rather than technical. The idea of the necessity of social reform was a background to everything they wrote. All concepts of the ivory tower spirit of poetry were rejected for a committed human and humanitarian idea. The poet was no longer to seek isolation but participation. MacNeice's definition of a poet makes a striking reversal of the conventional picture of the eccentric poetic genius with his head in the clouds.

> A poet should be able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.[4]

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[4]Louis MacNeice, Modern Poetry (London, 1938), p. 198.

This new emphasis led to a poetry in which the ideas fed on external social events rather than on introspective discovery. Emotions burned at the daily harrowing sights that assaulted the conscience of all men capable of being moved by human suffering. The horrifying human misery of the times seemed evidence that the entire capitalist structure had broken down. Many sincere men were driven towards the Communist Party as members, or at least as sympathizers. The faults of Communism were less obvious in the thirties when a visit to Russia was a rarity, and the distress of capitalism only too glaringly obvious to everyone. This is why Andre Gide's retraction of his Communist sympathies made such an impact. After a visit to Russia he published his Retour a l'URSS, which denounced the difference between the European vision and the Russian practice. But at first the Communist Party offered an alternative to economic decay. The slump fitted into the orthodox Marxist diagnosis of the inevitable contradictions which would ensure the destruction of the capitalist economic order. Not only was the Communist diagnosis apparently incontrovertible, but it appeared to offer a dynamic alternative which the moribund democracies lacked. The muddled pragmatic patching, which was the policy of the British and American governments, seemed trivially inadequate when set against the sweeping and authoritative reforms to

be initiated by a victorious Communist government when it assumed power. Besides its offer of domestic economic solutions, the Party could also be supported for the decisiveness of its foreign policy. It seemed the only effective and systematic opposition to Fascism available. Only Communist discipline and organization could challenge the dictatorial governments in Europe. Hence it was the Communists who took over power in the Madrid government, the Communists who rioted to resist the growing power of Oswald Mosley's blackshirts in England, and formed a major center of early defiance to Hitler in Germany. The acceptance of their views seemed unanswerable, and even such a mild and withdrawn figure as E. M. Forster could declare, 'No political creed except Communism offers an intelligent man any hope'[5]. But again it must be stressed that what was assumed to be Communism was not a very accurate or practical version of its policies. Spender's view of it may be taken as typical:

> Communism or Socialism in its completed form offers a just world, a world in which wealth is more equally distributed and grotesque accumulations of wealth by individuals is dispersed; in which nations have no interest in destroying each other in the manner of modern war, because the system of competitive trade controlled by internecine and opposed capitalist interests is abolished.[6]

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[5] E. M. Forster, Abinger Harvest (New York, 1936), p. 74.

[6] S. Spender, The Destructive Element (London, 1935), p. 228.

Looking back to this period Day Lewis observed wryly:

> We felt 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' to be concepts as inspiring as Christ's sayings in the Sermon on the Mount.[7]

One of the most revealing books which exemplified this attitude to Communism was The Mind in Chains which was edited by C. Day Lewis. In a series of essays it discusses the Communist stand on literature, education and so on. The introduction is typical.

> The Mind in Chains could never have been written were it not for the widespread belief of intellectual workers that the mind is really in chains today, that these chains have been forged by a dying social system, that they can and must be broken, and in the Soviet Union have been broken; and that we can only realize our strength by joining forces with the millions of workers who have nothing to lose but their chains and have a world to win.[8]

The view of the contributors may be indicated by the statements of Edward Upward and Rex Warner.

> No writer can write well unless he is an active member of the worker's movement.
>
> If some people don't like the word Marxist we must be prepared to say 'common sense'.
>
> No book written at the present time can be good unless it is written from the Marxist or near Marxist viewpoint.

Day Lewis makes a very similar declaration even more forcefully. The assumption behind the necessary revolution is

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[7]C. Day Lewis, The Buried Day (London, 1960), p. 208.
[8]C. Day Lewis, Edit., The Mind in Chains (London, 1937), p. 17.

revealing.

> The writers of our generation are interested in politics to an extent unequalled by English writers since the French Revolution. They feel that the old structure of society is incapable of dealing satisfactorily with the new development of life, and they are not convinced that the necessary revolution is the business of the politicians.[9]

Another very significant assertion of Communist belief was Christopher Caudwell's Illusion and Reality. Here support has become jargon.

> All bourgeois poetry is an expression of the movement of the bourgeois illusion according as the contradiction rooted in bourgeois economy emerges in the course of the development of capitalism.[10]

Other voices swelled the chorus. Robert Graves, though violently antagonistic to the left, is forced to accept that

> The future of English prosody depends on the political outcome of the class warfare now declared.[11]

Herbert Read, whose Marxism was so considerably less than orthodox, joins the attack on the capitalist side.

> Capitalism does not challenge poetry on principle - it merely treats it with ignorance, indifference and unconsdious cruelty.[12]

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[9] C. Day Lewis, Revolution In Writing (London, 1935), p. 10.

[10] C. Caudwell, Illusion and Reality (London, 1937), p. 67.

[11] Robert Graves, Common Asphodel (London, 1949), p.54.

[12] Herbert Read, Poetry and Anarchism (New York, 1939), p. 23.

In these paeans of the new revolution it was not always realized where such political support would direct the creativity of the writer as an individual. Arthur Koestler who had had considerable experience with Communist dialectics was in the best position to point out the absurd demands made upon the writer who attempted to demonstrate his intellectual solidarity with the proletariat. The official Party view was clear enough.

> A member of the intelligentsia could never become a real proletarian, but his duty was to become as nearly one as he could. The correct way was never to write or say, and above all never to think, anything which could not be understood by the dustman.[13]

Many writers, although generally sympathetic, had the good sense to avoid the more extreme strictures that followed from Lenin's dictum, 'Art must serve propaganda. Literature must be Party literature'. Others were prepared to immolate their muse on the altar of Party orthodoxy. Even if the dangers of Communist excess were perceived, it did not follow that solution lay in an indifference to political event. The commitment to social change had to be made; that was inescapable. Only after that could a poet protect, as far as possible, his artistic integrity and creativity in the face of demands that he become a

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[13]Arthur Koestler, The God That Failed (New York, 1949), p. 49.

propagandist for the cause. Few assumed that one could escape the obligation to support the views sympathetic to the workers. As MacNeice defines the situation of the poet:

> The writer today should not be so much the mouthpiece of the community...as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct.[14]

MacNiece's critical book Modern Poetry is probably the best statement of the moderate and reasonable commitment that the poets of his group undertook. His qualifications and hesitations are revealing in themselves.

> It is probably true that for the production nowadays of major literature ... a sympathy is required in the writer with the forces which at the moment make for progress.[15]

At the time the word 'progress' was less question-begging than it is now. But MacNeice, for all his left-wing sympathies, was trying to avoid the impasse that results from the insistence that a poet must be a propagandist, to be useful to the cause of the workers. He attempts a more general definition.

> I consider that the poet is a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer. He is not a legislator, nor yet essentially a prophet.[16]

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[14]MacNeice p. 111.

[15]MacNeice p. 194.

[16]macNeice p. 197.

Later he points up the difficulty of releasing poetry from its obligations to be propagandist by defining poetry itself.

> For poetry is not primarily an instrument of propaganda, or even of simple edification but a way of exploring and unifying what can be called in the widest sense, our moral experience. [17]

If this seems the merest truism today it needed to be reasserted in the thirties. Auden at this time would appear to subscribe to this position however much the hectoring and moralizing tone of some of his later writing demonstrates a falling off from the principles of his own declaration. In his introduction to The Poet's Tongue Auden declares:

> Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil. Perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent, its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.[18]

No one felt the dilemma more acutely than Spender because his style was totally unsuited to the didactic tuition demanded from sympathetic poets. It was Spender, struggling doggedly to balance social fervor and literary development, who saw that the fundamental dichotomy was "the problem of a liberal divided between his individual development and his social conscience."[19] Spender saw

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[17] MacNeice p. 198.

[18] W. H. Auden, Edit., The Poet's Tongue (London, 1935), p. IX.

[19] S. Spender, Poetry Since 1939 (London, 1946), p. 28.

too the obvious false premise on which poetry as propaganda is based; unexceptionable sentiments are not in themselves guarantees of significant poetry. John Press sets out this view which, if obvious, seems to demand reiteration.

> The presentation of a set of dogmas held even with complete sincerity can never be a substitute for this fused experience in which belief and doubt, passion and thought, memory and desire are so closely blended. The class-conscious writer is no better as a writer for championing the proletariat instead of the ruling class.[20]

This is obviously true, but it did not offer quite the solution that many poets in the thirties needed, for they were in varying degrees involved in the social struggle, domestic and international. How could they ignore the desolation and threat on every side? How could they avoid the dangers of such commitment to their writing?

The Spanish War seemed to offer a solution. It narrowed the writer's sincere but nebulous resistance against the abuses of the social order to a single point of choice. Even such a transparent hero as Hemingway's Robert Jordan in For Whom the Bell Tolls exhibits this sense of significant moral decision. Such acts are now forgotten or dismissed with sneers like Somerville's:

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[20] John Press, The Fire and the Fountain (London, 1956), p. 73.

> It was part of the left wing insanity of the period to pretend, and perhaps to believe, that there was a struggle between darkness and light, although it was a struggle between two rival gangs of terrorists whose aim and methods were equally abhorrent to British sentiment.[21]

In spite of such remarks it seems to me that the poets with whom I am concerned in this essay sought to achieve an amalgam in which poetic truth was substantiated rather than negated by their political concern. Obviously a great deal of inferior poetry was produced by those who had not effected this necessary synthesis; times of crisis always produce much hollow and meretricious writing. W. J. Stachan, for example, introducing a collection of modern French poetry written for the 1942 resistance movement, remarks:

> Inevitably during a war, or a time of national crisis, what the French have called poesie de circonstance gains an enhanced value. It has the topicality of much war art, tends overmuch to mere reportage or goes to the other extreme while free rein is given to the most deplorable facility and most hollow rhetoric.[22]

There is ample evidence of 'deplorable facility' and 'hollow rhetoric' in much of the writing of minor poets in the thirties. Nevertheless, my argument is that the major ones whom I am considering, had just such features sterilized out of their styles by the strength

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[21]D. C. Somerville, British Politics Since 1900 (London, 1953), p. 224.

[22]W. J. Strachen, Appolinaire to Aragon (London,1948) p. XV.

of their concern for the issues which challenged them. Provided they were able to resist becoming propagandists, the urgent appeal generated by the inter-war disasters gave substance to the theme of their writing. Before these poets became committed to the issues involved in their time, and especially to the moral demands of the Spanish War; before they undertook to express their humane concern; one notices that their interest often seems to be primarily in the surface patterns of their writing. The technical cleverness and verbal dexterity, the juggling with rhythms and experiments with forms, seem almost to be a separate concern as though technique could be detached from content. The demands of the Communist propagandists that subject be the chief consideration is the opposite but equally dangerous extreme. But when the poets are moved, as they were over the Spanish struggle, their technique, brilliant as it remains, is subservient to a more general poetic motive. These poets exhibited an increasing intensity and seriousness as the threat of the approaching major war grew more inescapable. It was remarked of Auden, but the relevence is wider, that the Spanish Civil War wiped the ironic smile off his face. Such circumstances do not permit detached posturing. They demand a commitment that is both political and poetic.

The naive effusions of the Communist Party hacks seem ludicrous today; stupid and dishonest in their rhetorical over-simplification. But those who supported the Left-wing case in the inter-war years, who allowed political allegiance to support poetic compassion, produced writing that has a relevance far wider than the issues of the social events of the thirties. They make assertions of the continuing situation of modern man. Their passionate appeal and diagnosis are both relevent, moving, and above all, valid in our own society at present.

THE OXFORD GROUP

By far the most significant writers who sought to record the burning social issues of the thirties were the so-called Oxford Group of young poets who were all students at Oxford University. The major figures in this group were W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice. It may be necessary now to defend the common assertion of their group identity since they may appear to have as many differences as similarities. It must be admitted at once that they never in any self-conscious way formed a literary movement. They published no group manifesto, nor did they join to offer any declaration of their poetic principles. C. Day Lewis' A Hope for Poetry expresses an admiration for the new poetry, and praises the work of Spender and Auden but not as a model for others who would join a school. Spender has made the slightly ingenuous disclaimer that it was not until 1949 at a Writer's Conference in Venice that the four were all together in one room for the first time. Nevertheless, there are several good reasons for regarding them as poets who may legitimately be grouped for comparison and analysis.[1]

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[1]Roy Campbell later gave them some group identification when he joined them together for abuse. He invented a composite guy Mac-Spaunday as a target for his spleen.

A significant fact that early led to these poets being grouped by critical opinion was that their work was first published together in two important new collections edited by Michael Roberts. These volumes, the famous New Signatures (1932) and New Country (1933) bound the poets together in the public mind. They have occasionally been called the 'New Country Poets'. There does appear to be a definite similarity of style and theme in the verse in these volumes. Clearly Michael Roberts, at least, intended the collection to be an interpretation and a declaration of a new poetic mode. New Signatures was not emphatically nor overtly political. Between the publication of the two collections, however, Hitler came to power in Germany, and this was sufficient to move Roberts to an unequivocably partisan position. The following lines are taken from his introduction to New Country.[2]

> If our sympathies turn towards revolutionary changes it is not because of our pity for the unemployed and the underpaid, but because we see at last that our interests are theirs, and that a system that permits exploitation for private profit, though it may abolish poverty, must retain in the hands of certain men the power to threaten the masses with starvation and dictate what men shall eat and drink and wear and think ... It's past the stage of sentimental pity for the poor, we're all in the same boat.

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[2]M. Roberts, Edit., New Country (London, 1933), p. 10.

The identification of the group was not, however, certainly established by this publication. These anthologies did not contain the work of Louis MacNeice, who was always somewhat a separate and tangential figure in the group. It did also include the work of several other significant left-wing writers of this time, John Lehmann and Rex Warner. Among other poets represented were the Cambridge poet, William Empson, and the South African, William Plomer, neither of whom can be connected with the poetry of social protest in the coming decade.

A factor that led to their sense of mutual identification must have been the similarities of their personal backgrounds. Each of them came from upper-middle class professional homes, and entered Oxford after being educated at superior public schools in England. Curiously enough their families all had close ties with the Church. Both Auden's grandfathers were ministers and the fathers of Day Lewis and MacNeice were clergymen. Spender's religious discovery seems to have derived largely from contact with a much loved Quaker grandmother. This is obviously only a coincidence, but it may have shaped the moral nature of their social vision. It also meant that in rejecting the political ideas of their parents they turned their backs on the Church. Only Auden subsequently returned to its fold.

Auden was born on 21st February, 1907. His father was a well-known physician. His mother was devoutly religious. These two elements, science and religion, have since warred constantly in his nature and in his poetry. In 1908 the family moved to Birmingham where his father was appointed Medical Officer and Professor of Public Health at Birmingham University. He was sent to St. Edmund's Preparatory School in 1915. Here he met Christopher Isherwood who remained an important friend throughout Auden's life. Their whole relationship is amusingly and vividly evoked in Isherwood's autobiographical novel Lions and Shadows (London, 1938). In 1920 he entered Gresham's School Holt, Norfolk, where he chose to study on the science side. He received an Exhibition to Christ Church College, Oxford in 1925,,and remained there for three years until he took his degree.

Spender was somewhat younger than Auden. He was born on the 28th of February, 1909. His father was a journalist and lecturer of some distinction, and his uncle, J. A. Spender, was a prominent historian. The maiden name of his mother was Schuster, and she had both German and Jewish strains in her ancestry. If the former gave Spender his passion for Germany, the latter produced anxiety and guilt in the years after he left Oxford. He was sent as a day student to the conveniently

situated University College School in London, where he felt constantly overshadowed by his more brilliant elder brother, Michael. He did enter Oxford but he left without completing his degree when the opportunities of travel and residence in Germany proved irresistably attractive.

Day Lewis and MacNeice were both Irish; Day Lewis was the oldest of the group. He was born in Ballintubber, Ireland, on the 27th of April, 1904. His father was in the clergy. Although his mother, like Spender's, died when he was young, she had traced her descent from Oliver Goldsmith and was a minor poetess herself. Day Lewis' intellectual brilliance showed itself when he took a scholarship to the high-ranking English public school, Sherbourne. Subsequently, he gained a scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford. His attention to his academic studies wandered somewhat under the exhilirating contacts he made at the University, and his final exams were passed with Fourth Class Honors - the Oxford equivalent of a D minus. His comment is the modest, 'It is a mystery to me why the examiners did not fail me altogether.'

MacNeice's parents were both Irish and his father was the Protestant Bishop of Down. He was born on September 17, 1907 in Belfast. Like Day Lewis he was sent to a renowned English School, Marlborough. From there in

1926 he went up to Merton College, Oxford. He had a reputation for great intellectual distinction and in his final exam he gained the coveted 'First'.

At Oxford these poets knew each other with varying degrees of intimacy. Day Lewis' room mate and most influential friend was actually Rex Warner, the Communist novelist. Auden's main confidant was Christopher Isherwood, who was not formally at the university at all as he had been firmly expelled from Cambridge. Spender knew Auden but the relationship was 'avuncular' rather than between equals. Even at Oxford then, these poets were not a homogenous or tight group. One polarizing factor was the dominating figure of Auden himself. If his account can be believed, Auden experienced surprising and dramatic conversion to the desire to write poetry. At the age of sixteen he suddenly saw his destiny.

> But indecision broke off with a clear cut end
> One afternoon in March at half-past three.
> When walking in a ploughed field with a friend;
> Kicking a little stone he turned to me
> And said 'Tell me do you write poetry?'
> I never had, and said so, but I knew
> That very moment what I wished to do.[3]

Interestingly enough the friend was Robert Medley who, with his influence with the Group Theatre, later got Auden to attempt dramatic writing. With the intention of becoming

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[3]W. H. Auden, Letters from Ireland (New York, 1937), p. 208.

a poet Auden spent his time at Oxford studying some subjects unexpectedly recondite for the conventional poet: psychology and biology. His erudition and air of knowingness seemed to make him famous. He appears virtually to have held court at Oxford. Spender mentioned with some amusement (in retrospect) the complex conditions by which he was prevented from meeting Auden until he had been adjudged worthy of notice. He observes:

> Calling on Auden was serious business. One made an appointment. If one arrived early one was liable to find the heavy outer door of his room, called 'the oak' sported as a sign that he was not to be disturbed. When with him one was liable to be dismissed suddenly and told the interview was at an end.[4]

Auden must have appeared a vital yet eccentric figure writing in his room with his green eye-shade; with the sackcloth curtains perpetually drawn, drinking innumerable cups of tea. He would sit in the room observing a rotting orange on the mantelpiece. This fruit was a constant reminder to him of the decline and corruption of the West. Day Lewis records his appearance at this period.

> Wystan was carrying a starting pistol and wearing an extraordinary black lay-reader's type of coat, frock coat, which came half-way down to his knees, and had been rescued by him from one of his mother's jumble sales.[5]

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[4]S. Spender, World Within World (London, 1951), p. 50.

[5]C. Day Lewis, The Buried Day (London, 1960), p. 177.

For many of the Oxford writers the political, if not the poetic solution was to become involved with the Communist Party. Rex Warner and another novelist from the group, Edward Upward, joined the Party as early as 1929. Day Lewis was an active member from 1933-38. Although Spender's actual membership was brief (a few weeks in 1936 after which his subscription lapsed) his sympathy was continuous even for some time after his experiences in Spain.

After Oxford Auden had a year's residence in Berlin where he became acquainted with the work of Bertold Brecht which was later to influence his attempts at drama. Then he returned to England and became a teacher briefly in Scotland, and later at the Downs School, Malvern. Day Lewis took a more humble preparatory school position until an opening at Cheltenham School came along. Spender passed his time rather haphazardly in Berlin in a spirited but confusing relationship with Isherwood that sounds exactly like one of Isherwood's Berlin stories. Only Mac Neice had sufficient paper qualifications to be offered a university lectureship, first at Birmingham, later at Bedford College, a minor school of London University.

None of them maintained their teaching connection for very long, and by the time war came they had already begun to support themselves largely by writing. Auden went on a

series of travels to Iceland, to Spain, to China and to the States, all of which became the subjects of longer poems.

In 1939 Auden settled in the United States and began his academic perambulations during which he taught in many American schools rather briefly. Among the best known are the University of Michigan (1941), Swarthmore (1942) and Bryn Mawr (1943). He became an American citizen in 1946. He returned to England temporarily when he was made Professor of Poetry at Oxford but he returned to live in New York. Besides his writing he is also now associated with the editorial board of one of the more pretentious book clubs.

Spender, after the failure of his first marriage, was connected with the foundation of the influential magazine Horizon. During the war he served in the Emergency Fire Service. In 1941 he married again. His second wife was Natasha Litvin, a well-known pianist to whom the Collected Poems are dedicated. His continuing association with Encounter began in 1953.

During the war Day Lewis was attached to the Ministry of Information in London (1941-46). In 1951 he was divorced and married Jill Balcon. If the Postscript to his autobiography can be accepted he seems to have chosen a rather placid literary retirement in the country.

MacNeice had one visit to the States when he lectured at Cornell in 1940, but when he returned to England the

following year he joined the staff of the British Broadcasting Corporation. With the exception of a year spent in Athens with the British Council he remained with the B.B.C. Besides his own highly praised writings for radio he did much to support the ambitiously intellectual 'Third Program' that was undertaken to appeal to a highbrow minority audience. His sadly early death was announced this year.

Any attempt to group these poets must clearly focus entirely on their earlier writing. The Oxford Group is delimited by time as well as by attitude and technique. When one looks back upon the writing of this quartet one is more apt to see difference than identity, though one is making implicit assertions of connection in the way one often considers the writing of one of them in terms of likeness or dissimilarity with another. Certainly their later development enables one to see the individuality of their talents which any attempt to group them overlooks and conceals. However, if one evaluates their styles not against each other, but backwards against the writing of the previous decade, the poetry of Bridges for example, one can clearly see the division of their writing and ideas from those of the earlier generation. There is a new use of modern imagery and the rhythms are complex and original. Although their writing owed much to the technical

revolution initiated by T. S. Eliot (the influence of The Waste Land was especially profound) they expanded his forms to wider, more explicitly social and political areas. Both in technique and theme they challenged the placid English assumptions about what poetry ought to be. For some, especially for Spender and Day Lewis, the problem of reconciling their ideas with their poetic development caused an agonizing sense of division. But there were issues in the thirties of sufficient moment that poetry and conscience fused into a powerful and authentic voice for the age. It is the examination of these moments of significance that is the reason for this dissertation.

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The bibliographies of the four poets discussed in this thesis are very complicated. So much so that in the case of Auden the subject has already received a book length study - Professor Beach's The Making of the Auden Canon. As my own selected bibliographic lists at the conclusion of this dissertation will indicate, each of these poets has published more than a dozen volumes of verse. Some are new books, others are collections culled for various purposes during their careers. These may include provisional collections, selections and reprints in various series to reach different parts of the book market. It is not always easy to decide which text may be regarded as the most certain and definitive. It cannot always be asserted as a general rule that either the first or the last publication will automatically be the best version. Some of the poetry was first printed in small editions that have become rare. At other times poems like Auden's Spain or Spender's Return to Vienna were published in a paper form so ephemeral that another printing must have been intended from the very first. It would appear perfectly legitimate in such cases to use the next publication, although a check proves that occasionally revisions are worthy of some comment. In a similar way Day Lewis as early as 1936 had Leonard and Virginia

Woolf publish at their Hogarth Press a volume of Collected Poems. This edition does not include his earlier inconsequential Georgian writings Beechen Vigil and Country Comets. It incorporated his three longer poems written from 1929-33, Transitional Poem, From Feathers to Iron and The Magnetic Mountain. Since this printing appears to be identical with the earlier publications it may be regarded as equally definitive and is readily available.

Auden's famous Poems (1930) was reprinted with some additions in London in 1933. When published in New York in 1934 it was enlarged by the addition of The Orators and The Dance of Death both of which had previously been separately published in England. In America the 1934 collection remains the best text from Auden's earlier poetry, though Monroe Spears lists four different collections of Auden's poetry before the controversial versions incorporated in the standard edition of the Collected Poetry (1945) and there have been several collections since.

The question of American publication can also add a note of confusion. In many cases there is no difficulty because the American edition followed the English publication a year later with an exact copy. Sometimes, however, it includes additional poems or, although it contains the same material, it is given a different title. Auden's 1936 volume Look Stranger (London) becomes in its 1937 New York

publication On This Island, although it is identical even down to the pagination. In a reverse way, when The Double Man was published in England it received the title New Year Letter. A further example of the difficulty of tracing the most satisfactory text is found in the 1945 American collection of C. Day Lewis. He called this collection of his 1939-43 poems Short is the Time. This volume combines in a convenient and accurate form his 1938 London Collection Overtures to Death, the 1943 volume Word Over All, and a selection of poems from a limited edition collection Poems in Wartime.

The problem would have purely technical interest if the view of the poets themselves on the propriety and validity of revision were acceptable, but this is not the case. When they came to make the formal collection of their poetry that was to establish the canon, to various degrees they chose to select, alter and eliminate poems for which there were established and acceptable texts. Their motives for this are questionable. For this reason the Collected Poetry texts cannot be the ones used as the basis for the argument which I make in this thesis.

In the preface to his large 1945 volume of Collected Poetry Auden describes the basis for his decision to select and eliminate as well as collect. John Mander calls the result 'the most misleading anthology of his own work ever issued by a poet'. Auden claims that if the poet

eliminates 'the rubbish' and 'the good ideas which his incompetence and impatience prevented from coming to much' this leaves

> The pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance; these must inevitably form the bulk of any collection since, were he to limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly grateful, his volume would be too depressingly thin.[1]

This seems reasonable enough until one examines the individual decisions with care. J. W. Beach makes, I believe, an unanswerable case which indicates that Auden's motives for improvement or deletion were not primarily poetic. There seems certain evidence that Auden revised in order to eliminate what was, in 1945, a disagreeable reminder of his earlier humanist and Communist beliefs. The Anglo-Catholic Auden seems to have attempted to remove themes which contradicted the theological convictions of his recent conversion, whatever effect this might have on the validity of some of his earlier poems. Perhaps his most significant decision was to arrange the poems in the alphabetical order of their first lines. This completely destroys the possibility of a reader discovering any sequential development through the accepted chronology of the poem's creation. Beach again asserts that this aids Auden's decision to eliminate the embarrassment of his earlier left-wing opinions. It is true that the other

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[1]W. H. Auden, Preface, Collected Poetry (New York, 1945).

poets with some explicable lapses do keep to the obvious chronological order.

> By discreet revision and eliminations in the poems of the thirties, and by throwing the poems of all periods together in a heap without regard to their temporal sequence, the author does his best to iron out the contradictions and incongruities.[2]

Monroe Spears, while admitting that such an arrangement is 'extremely unsatisfactory' defends the arrangement on the grounds that 'it is legitimate and useful to present poetry in complete separation from biography and history.'[3] I am not convinced by this argument.

Spender's introduction to his Collected Poems (New York, 1955) is longer, and on the surface, more openly explanatory. His work on the collection was clearly far more than merely a gathering of the texts.

> To collect and select these poems I copied them into a large notebook, then typed them out and tried to consider how each poem would best take its place in a single volume. In this way I have spent several months reconsidering and re-experiencing poems I have written over the past twenty years.[4]

Then he begins his explanation for the alterations.

> My aim has been to retrieve as many past mistakes and to make as many improvements as possible without 'cheating'.[4]

The quotation marks indicate the weight that has to be set

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[2]J. W. Beach, The Making of the Auden Canon (Minneapolis, 1957), p. 248.

[3]Monroe K. Spears, The Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York, 1962), p. 201.

[4]S. Spender, Collected Poems (New York, 1955), p. XV.

on that 'cheating'. He indicates several guide lines he has followed. He has included poems like The Pylons because of 'an obligation to own up ... they have a slight historic interest which, I feel, ought to be represented'. He admits an obligation 'to stick roughly to the order in which the poems were written', but in practice he has 'improved this order by relating it to the autobiographical development behind the poetry'. I am not entirely convinced by the argument for this improvement, but at least one may assume a rough chronology in the arrangement of texts. Spender insists that he has decided 'not to alter drastically those poems which are, I think, fairly well known'. But there are apparently 'several less known poems which have remained as it were malleable'. I am not sure how Spender can justify including the heavily revised Spanish War Poems under the 'malleable' heading. He continues:

> A temptation I have guarded against is the making of more than a discreet and almost unnoticeable minimum of technical tidyings up. Nothing seems easier when one is older, than to correct a rhyme or rhythm which eluded one's youthful incompetence.[5]

This is entirely proper, yet there are numerous occasions where, as I demonstrate, his guard relaxes and just such 'tidyings up' occur. Again this shows most clearly in The Still Centre collection which I discuss in some detail

5S. Spender, Collected Poems (New York, 1955), p. XV.

in the text. Spender's assertions cannot always be supported by a close examination of several poems in their original and Collected Poems form.

Both MacNeice and Day Lewis resist more effectively than the other two the temptation to revise their work, although MacNeice's Preface to his Collected Poems makes several equivocal statements. There is a slight conflict between the assertion and the practice. He announces for example:

> While resisting the temptation to 'collect' only what I most admire, I have omitted certain poems which I now dislike.[6]

He continues:

> In preparing this book for the press I have also resisted the temptation to make many revisions, since I feel that after three or four years from the date of writing, a poet should leave not-so-well alone. Within that time limit I have to some extent revised.[7]

This distinction in the poems that may receive revision has at least preserved his earlier and war-time poems from the alterations of hindsight. Poems from this period are precisely those that have received the heaviest and most detrimental re-working from Auden and Spender. This is of particular importance in this thesis since my argument

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[6] L. MacNeice, Collected Poems (London, 1949) p. 7.

[7] MacNeice, p. 17.

is based on an assertation of the significance of the poetry as it was first conceived in the thirties.

Day Lewis comes closest to making his Collected Poems a complete and unchanged gathering of his work. His decision to present his work unaltered is not essentially one of dispassionate principle, but of regretted poetic limitation. In his Preface he remarks:

> Some poets can re-write and improve their early work years later. I wish I could do so. But the selves who wrote those poems are strangers to me and I cannot resume their identities or go back into the world where they lived ... I could no more reconstruct an old poem than I could reassemble the self out of whom it was constructed.[8]

If Day Lewis resists 'improvement' he also decides against altering the emphasis of his writing by elimination.

> Where re-writing is impossible, selection seems desirable. But this involves criticism ... in principle I think a Collected Poems should offer everything one has written. In practice I have excluded ...[9]

and he lists a few minor exclusions. As a matter of fact, these include his renowned and embarrassing poem beginning, "Why do we seeing a Red feel small."

I have described the bibliographic problem in some detail not because I feel that this begins to constitute a

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[8]C. Day Lewis, Collected Poems (London, 1949), p. 9

[9]C. Day Lewis, p. 9.

study of the topic; such an investigation would be a thesis in itself. I am indicating the basis for my choice of immediate reference source for the poetry I quote in the body of this thesis. With many poets the final form they conceive for their poem may justly be considered the conclusive and established one. The Collected Poems of these writers cannot be taken as the most valid version of any poem. It may be representative of the writer's last thoughts and revisions, but the motives and the results of such changes must often be questioned. The latest version is certainly not always the most desirable or significant poetically. My argument, therefore, is always based on the poem in the form in which it was first published. This presumably represents the poet's original, considered form. It has not seemed necessary to make any general distinction in choosing the American or the English collections where the texts are the same. Where they have several identical versions in print, I have made a somewhat arbitrary choice between the earliest one, and the volume that would be most readily available to any reader who wishes to check my references. For example, Day Lewis' Collected Poems of 1936 is generally accepted as the standard source for Transitional Poem. Since it is identical with the rare 1929 original volume, and is found in many good libraries, it would seem somewhat pedantic to insist on the earlier version for one's reference.

Where it is of special interest I have noted in the discussion or in footnotes the nature of the revisions made by these poets in their Collected Poems. I have not done this rigorously since there is little point in making constant and detailed references to minor changes. Such consideration would take this thesis into areas that were not strictly concerned with its central argument. If alterations are significant enough to lend further support to my assertion that the original form is usually more urgent and vital than the revision, then they are noted. Examples of such alterations are observed at some length when I discuss Auden's Spain, and comment on Spender's Spanish War poems.

I have tried to select in each case bibliographic references that most conveniently present the original and authentic contemporary version of the poems which these writers published. I hope my selection combines scholarly exactitude with a common-sense view of availability.

W. H. AUDEN

Auden is the most decisive and influential poet of this decade. So total and pronounced is his influence that the other three poets are sometimes assumed to be satellites round the planet of his pervasive voice. Attracted by his multivarious skills, his sense of certainty and intellectual control, Spender, Day Lewis and MacNeice occasionally lapse into copying the confident Auden styles. Undoubtedly, for all his exasperating flippancy and his excessive production, Auden is the major poet of this group. Even his obvious faults have a certain attractive panache. In his work can be seen most clearly the spirit of the thirties, and the poetic decline that affected all these poets after the 1939-45 war. Auden by his range and technical skill extended the nature of English poetry.

In spite of the apparent revolution the influence of his verse created on others, his own poetic style seems often a compendium of influences that have affected him. One can easily trace the impact of the early writing of T. S. Eliot. Nevil Coghill, Auden's tutor at Oxford records the following amusing and revealing anecdote:

> One morning Mr. Wystan Auden, then an undergraduate at Christ Church, blew in to Exeter College for his tutorial hour with me saying:

> 'I have torn up all my poems.'
> 'Indeed! Why?'
> 'Because they were no good. Based on Wordsworth. No good nowadays.'
> 'Oh...?'
> 'You ought to read Eliot. I've been reading Eliot. I see now the way I want to write.'[1]

Another significant influence was G. M. Hopkins. There is clear evidence of an admiring emulation of Hopkins' form in

> Me, March, you do with your movements master and rock
> With wing whirl, whale wallow, silent budding cell.
> (New Country,) p. 214.

These lines appear a deliberate copy. The following lines indicate the same influence but now assimilated. The stress of the sprung rhythm and the alliteration is clear, but there is less sense of parody.

> Doom is dark and deeper, than any sea dingle
> Upon what man it fall. (Poems, 1930), p. 43

Perhaps through his reading of Hopkins he learned to admire Anglo-Saxon verse and the Icelandic sagas. In this connection it is interesting to note that he was inordinately proud of the Icelandic heredity of his family. The Saxon alliteration and sonorous tone echo in many of Auden's early lines:

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[1]Nevil Coghill, "Sweeney Agonistes", in T. S. Eliot, A Symposium edit. R. March (London, 1948), p. 82.

Shot answered shot, bullets screamed
Guns shook hot in hand
Fighters lay groaning on ground. (Poems,1934), p. 67.

Or similarily:

With labelled luggage we alight at last
Joining, joking at the junction on the moon. (Poems, 1934), p. 162.

Large sections even of such a late poem as The Age of Anxiety (1946) use this style.

Our long convoy
Turned away northward as tireless gulls
Wove over water webs of brightness
and sad sound, The insensible ocean,
Miles without mind, moaned all around our
Limited laughter. (The Age of Anxiety), p. 15.

Besides these stylistic influences there are the non-poetic studies which engorged his "sponge-like imagination." When Auden went up to Christ Church, Oxford in 1927, besides literature, he studied psychology and biology. While his poetry incorporated these scientific interests his thought seemed to combine the disparate theories of Freud, Groddeck and Marx. A further unusual interest that shows in his writing is in light and comic verse and songs. Auden delighted in Music Hall songs, the rhythm of jazz and popular night club lyrics. It is this interest that gave his work its air of topicality. Sometimes his verse comes dangerously close to appearing as a mere patchwork of borrowed styles. Philip Henderson talks rather rudely of Auden's "magpie mind."[2]

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[2]Philip Henderson, The Poet and Society (London, 1939), p. 226.

Beach suggests "chameleon" as an appropriate comparison. It is the very fertility of his imagination that creates the sense of bewilderment when one tries to read his work in bulk. Beach notes the doubts created by such overwhelming variety.

> We are more impressed as we go on with the amazing versatility of this writer, with the 'infinite variety' of the parts into which he can throw himself, and the skill, the authority, with which he puts them on. But we do begin to wonder how it is possible for one serious poet to be so many men and with some concern seek out the essential man behind the actor.[3]

The apparently motley list of influences above does, however, clearly suggest two predominant channels in Auden's verse. He absorbed, expanded, and sometimes vulgarized, the technical and linguistic revolt which Eliot and Pound had initiated against the whole ethos of Bridges and his contemporaries. This technical change was coupled with a similar extension of theme. More emphatically than Eliot, Auden affirmed in his writing the contention that all subjects were the proper concern of poetry. Partly as a result of this he voiced a sharp awareness of his own historical and sociological position. These dual elements, the proliferation of contemporary style and subject, gave Auden his appearance of modernity. Sometimes,

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[3]J. W. Beach, The Making of the Auden Canon (Minneapolis, 1957), p. 110.

however, this even became a fault, since these virtues now serve to "date" much of his less impressive verse.

Auden's apparent first-hand familiarity with science and the economic and political issues of his age won him the championship of his generation. That much of this approval was facile is obvious, and Dr. Leavis observes with an unnecessary sneer.

> There it was flattering, modern and sophisticated, offering an intellectual and powerful profundity that didn't challenge them to any painful effort or discipline, and assuring them that in wearing a modish leftishness, they could hold up their heads in guaranteed rightness.[4]

"Modish leftishness" is a problem throughout this decade, but Leavis' criticism is intolerably biased. The surface glitter is there indeed, and sometimes the brilliance of the virtuosity merely dazzles. Yet if such shiny veneer has been overpraised one does not restore a critical balance by condemning it for existing. In Auden's idiomatic colloquialisms and his esoteric experiments with private names and symbols, it is obvious that adroitness can often lapse into carelessness. The maddening ellipsis of what Day Lewis called Auden's "telegraphese" is another cause of obscurity. This obscurity sometimes arose, ironically enough, from his conscious search for a language that would

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[4]F. R. Leavis, The Common Pursuit (London, 1952), p. 294.

free poetry from its cliquish, "egg-head" associations. Scarfe asserts that this style is the result of "the cheapness, the slang, the easy thrills, the disrespect and the slovenliness of a muddled age."[5] But it hardly seems possible to blame only the times, and avoid laying some blame on Auden too.

Clearly in a collected opus of shorter poems, which by 1945 stretched to a selection of 466 pages, the standard is likely to be uneven, to say the least. Especially does this strike the attention since his Collected Poetry is arranged in the maddening inconsequence of the poems' alphabetical not chronological order. Yet even in this swollen and motley collection few poems have no redeeming verse or idea, though many must be judged as failures. The bewildering extremes of the reader's response is well recorded by Hoggart:

> The reader who plunges directly into Auden's work may well recoil from the variety and force of the impressions he derives. He will find competence and virtuosity, carelessness, cliquishness and obscurity; interest in people, anxiety to reform and concern over the fate of society; impersonality, clinical analysis and drum beating; he will meet boyishness succeeding maturity, the formal laced with the idiomatic, brilliant diagnosis succeeded by the slapstick of a buffoon, controlled exposition contrasting with the slipshod.[6]

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[5] F. Scarfe, Auden and After (London, 1942), p. 38.

[6] R. Hoggart, Auden (London, 1950), p. 13.

The particular failure where a brilliant diagnosis may be followed by buffoon slapstick is a valid condemnation of the clowning that is often Auden's undoing. It reveals a fundamental error of taste. Consider, for example, the parody of the old song, Frankie and Johnny. One of Auden's verses is this:

> Victor looked up at the sunset
> As he stood there all alone
> Cried, "Are you in Heaven, Father?"
> But the sky said "Address unknown." (Another Time) p. 72.

That last line seems merely crudely silly, without its contemporary reference adding anything to the serious issue of God's absence. The ending of this poem finds Victor made lunatic by his wife's infidelity, and the last line is both absurd and even blasphemous in its context:

> They tapped Victor on the shoulder,
> They took him away in a van
> He sat as quiet as a lump of moss
> Saying, "I am the Son of Man." (Another Time), p. 74.

In particular one has difficulty in analyzing Auden's attitude to all this. The oscillations between the jeer and the sense of compassion mesh together very awkwardly. Yet the poem simply entitled Song seems to me an effective example of the way in which Auden could wrench the song jingle into sudden poetic impact. The poem attempts to balance the conflicting views of love as eternal, joyous youth and the destructive threat of approaching age:

"Oh let not Time deceive you - - you cannot conquer Time."

The following are typical verses.

> I'll love you dear, I'll love you
> 'Till China and Africa meet
> And the river jumps into the mountain
> And the salmon sing in the street. (Another Time), p. 42.

> I'll love you till the ocean
> Is folded and hung up to dry
> And the seven stars go squawking
> Like geese about the sky.

This cheerful, brash, nursery-rhyme stuff appears completely trivial, but it is part of a "softening-up" process. Suddenly there is a sharply ironic twist which, while maintaining the same jingling rhythm of the song makes a savagely penetrating comment; the thrust the more effective for its unexpectedness among such trivia.

> O plunge your hands in the water
> Plunge them up to the wrist
> Stare, stare in the basin
> And wonder what you've missed. (Another Time), p. 43.

> O look, look in the mirror
> O look in your distress
> Life remains a blessing
> Although you cannot bless.

The flat, dry tone with its underlying bitterness records Auden's shrewd observation of that time of introspection in the washroom. Here, for a moment, the daily humdrum tasks do not act as an opiate to spiritual dissatisfaction. Staring pensively into the basin one is face to face with the reflection which returns a vision of the self's pointless ness. The looking glass above the basin mirrors only

human distress. The superficiality of the tripping rhythm proves to act as a device, disarming the reader for the assault of the bleak vision of this mood. A further verse reinforces this poetic statement. When the contrast is made on the theme of love one has to juxtapose the jaunty "I'll love you till the ocean is folded and hung up to dry" with the arid pessimism of

> O stand, stand at the window
> As the tears scald and start;
> You shall love your crooked neighbour
> With your crooked heart. (Another Time), p. 43.

Auden repeatedly uses the adjective "crooked" to suggest the physical deformity of the heart which has no capacity to love. Self and neighbour are linked in their crookedness, and this limitation of love receives the effective counterpoint of scalding tears.

These verses begin to exemplify Auden's detachment; that aspect of his verse which has often been called "clinical". The standing-aside implied by his constant preference for "you" and "they" rather than "I" sometimes gives a sense of objective comprehension, the perception based on non-involvement. At other times one simply feels the cold indifference of Auden's view, his emotion is dispassionate to the point where it evaporates into disinterest. Wyndham Lewis once sharply called him "all ice and wooden-faced acrobatics." Auden appears to have sought this cold isolation, for Spender reminisces about

conversations with him at Oxford.

> Auden's early poetry also gives the impression of an intellectual game -- a game to which the name clinical detachment might be given. It is a game of impartial objectivity to ... all the forces that move through human lives.[7]

This element of detachment is a commonplace in comments about Auden, yet less regularly is a contrasting style pointed out: a sensitive lyricism which might have developed further if his social conscience had not obliged him to develop a rational harsh style to record his historical indignation. Two examples of this inherent lyricism are comparatively well-known, Song and Madrigal.

> Lay your sleeping head my love
> Human on my faithless arm,
> Time and Fevers burn away
> Individual beauty from
> Thoughtful children, and the grave
> Proves the child ephemeral.
> But in my arms till break of day
> Let the living creature lie
> Mortal, guilty, but to me
> The entirely beautiful. (Another Time), p. 30.

A reading of this poem provokes two thoughts. First, one perceives the unexpected tenderness of feeling which flecks the more characteristic irony of this love poem. Secondly, at the technical level one becomes aware of the way this mood is reinforced by the rhythmic control. The

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[7] S. Spender, World Within World (London, 1951), p. 54.

technique shows in the casual skill with which the run-on lines and half-rhymes are used, but more significantly and subtly in the rhythm. For example, "The entirely beautiful" can rattle out at speed as if under eager emotional pressure after the broken, halting rhythm of "mortal, guilty" has suggested the hesitation at love's limitations. This poem also records very honestly that sense of detachment that exists in the heart of love. Even at the moment of embrace the arm is "faithless". This knowledge is not based on the potential individual adultery; it is rather the reminder that all loves with their implied promise of forever can never achieve that eternal fidelity. The time in which this promise can be kept is only "til break of day." Love is tragically at the mercy of change and "time and fevers burn away individual beauty." Men unlike other animals must also suffer because they are "thoughtful children." Their self-awareness and sense of the future makes them suffer the truth that "the grave proves the child ephemeral." It is this experience that lends the urgency in which the poet records his anxious embrace by the breathless rhythm of "entirely beautiful." That the lovers are subject to time and fevers, that their love may remain only till break of day, serves only to intensify the

eager tension of this passion and in no way lessens its significance. If the feelings are "mortal" and "guilty" they remain "entirely beautiful." Their love can be total without pretending to be eternal.

A further example of Auden's lyric tenderness is found in the equally famous Madrigal. This verse originated as a song in Auden's script for a government documentary film, Coal Face. The music was by Benjamin Britten, who later collaborated with Auden several times.

> O lurcher loving collier black as night
> Follow your love across the smokeless hill,
> Your lamp is out and all the cages still.
> Course for her heart and do not miss
> For Sunday is soon past and, Kate, fly not so fast,
> For Monday comes when none may kiss.
> Be marble to his soot and to his black be white.
> (Another Time), p. 80.

Again here the reader has an immediate appreciation of the rhythm; the balanced lilt of the opening lines with their alliterating "l" and the controlled hesitations of "and, Kate, fly not so fast." Again too, there is the sensuous mood and the overall tenderness of tone. The title indicates the Elizabethan connection of the poem. One perceives the Shakesperian pun of "course for her heart" where the pun on "heart" allows the hunting metaphor to suggest love's capture. But with a typical Auden "double" level of meaning, the pastoral tone is used as an ironic counterpoint to conditions in the industrial areas. If

this contrast indicates on the one hand the contemporary inappropriateness of the pastoral love ideals, it also suggests powerfully that the restrictions on human beings imposed by the industrial system are more violently a repudiation of natural life. In this poem the shepherd lover is a miner, given a single day's respite while "the lamp is out and all the cages still." He can temporarily find a "smokeless hill" which may recall the countryside before its sooty defacement. What will part the lovers from this brief dalliance is the prosaic demand of Monday morning's pit siren announcing the start of a working week when "none may kiss." The last line may be perceived at the purely sensory level; the colour contrast of soot and marble, of blackened body against fair white one. The miner's dark body is literally sooty as the coal dust works deep under the skin. The primary sense must be that the ugly manual work has soiled a body that would in happier conditions be marble. Marble, perhaps a little facilely, recalls the Greek sculptures and their respect for the body's beauty. The miner's dirtied and defiled body is a reminder of the disregard of the Greek concept of man's physical nobility in the pits of Yorkshire and Wales. This brief day becomes the only time when the sooty body can find some temporary identity with the marble ideal and the woman is invited to offer him assurance that a world of marble exists amongst

a life of soot if she will "to his black be white." Love, even limited to a Sunday, is the reminder that there is an alternative to a life of lamps and cages.

Where the verse exhibits none of this compassion there is an ashen, sardonic tone. Thanks to the alphabetical arrangement, immediately after Lay Your Sleeping Head one is shocked by a poem called The Ballad of Miss Gee. This poem uses the ballad form for a story in which satire approaches the sadistic. Spender rather moderately calls this Auden's "callous ballad." It begins in the traditional story way.

> Let me tell you a little story
> About Miss Edith Gee
> She lived at Cleveland Terrace
> At Number eighty-three. (Another Time), p. 60.

Miss Gee is an unfortunate, deformed creature -

> She'd a slight squint in her left eye
> Her lips were thin and small
> She had narrow sloping shoulders
> And she had no bust at all. (Another Time), p. 60.

One notices at once the absence of the slightest quality of human sympathy. It has the same cruelty as of a child jeering in the street. Miss Gee had her dreams of escaping from her bedsitting room, and her "one hundred pounds a year" to a glamourous ball at which she is the Queen of France. Her prayers that the Lord "make me a good girl please" propitiate nightly her erotic and Freudian visions of a bull which "with the face of the Vicar was charging

with lowered horn." She develops cancer of the womb. This is announced by the doctor at dinner while he is "rolling his bread into pellets." The internal growth is chosen to make a specific reference to her failure to produce a child; her sterile barrenness is contrasted with the eager fertility of the tumor in her womb. The doctor's wife's admonition "Don't be so morbid, dear" is ignored by Auden as he continues his tale with Miss Gee in the hospital.

> They took Miss Gee to the hospital,
> She lay there a total wreck,
> Lay in the ward for women
> With the bed clothes right up to her neck.
>
> They laid her on the table
> The students began to laugh,
> And Mr. Ross the surgeon
> He cut Miss Gee in half. (Another Time), p. 63.

This reads rather like Belloc's Cautionary Tales, but the difference is that this lacks the nightmare enormity that gives them their farcical humor. Auden presumably is not trying to be extravagantly comic; he appears to be laughing at the woman, and inviting the reader to join in this urchin glee at her misfortune. How can one explain the tone of the last verse except as comically sadistic.

> They hung her from the ceiling
> Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;
> And a couple of Oxford Groupers
> Carefully dissected her knee. (Another Time), p. 63.

Perhaps from the viewpoint of Auden's poetry we should be more concerned with his total error of taste than the possibility of his perverse sadism.

A very similar tone is found in the narrative of James Honeyman that was deleted from the Collected Poems. The Honeyman story (the sarcastic name pun is obvious) describes in ballad style an earnest, plodding scientist who has ambition without moral responsibility. He is nice, and potentially lethal.

> Said, Lewisite in its day
> Was pretty decent stuff
> But under modern conditions
> It's not nearly strong enough.
>
> His tutor sipped his port,
> Said, "I think it's clear
> That young James Honeyman's
> The most brilliant man of his year." (Another Time), p. 164

Honeyman's situation is similar to the other inventor who deplores his line of research while he continues to develop savage weapons.

> The expert designing the long-range gun
> To exterminate everyone under the sun
> Would like to get out but could only mutter
> What can I do? It's my bread and butter. (Look, Stranger!), p. 47.

In the happy family contentment of Honeyman's suburban home his wife, in equal ignorance, shares the ambitions of her husband's research.

> Said, "I'm looking for a gas dear,
> A whiff will kill a man.
>
> I'm going to find it
> That's what I'm going to do!"
> Doreen squeezed his hand and said,
> "Jim, I believe in you." (Another Time), p. 164.

In these lines even the tripping ballad rhythm has largely broken down. The inevitable happens. War is declared and enemy bombers inexplicably carrying Honeyman's new gas drop their bombs on his own family villa. As the daughter chokes on the virulent new poison she cries,

> Oh kiss me mother, kiss me,
> And tuck me up in bed
> For Daddy's invention
> Is going to choke me dead. (Another Time), p. 165.

Auden's narrating voice is heard expostulating in the last stanza.

> Oh you can't hide in the mountain
> Oh you can't drown in the sea.
> And you must die and you know why
> By Honeyman's N.P.C. (Another Time), p. 165.

The tone here is too crudely and unrelievedly sarcastic, and the issues are presented in oversimplified black and white. Auden's criticism is legitimate, it is doubly relevant today, but I am not convinced that "you must die and you know why" answers any reasonable question. The guilt is too general and obvious. In this case one warmly agrees with Auden's decision to exclude this poem from his Collected Poetry.

It is possible to see these poems as an attack on the inherent cruelty of existence, but Auden's moral neutrality makes such a denunciation oblique at best. Beach declares,

> The reader's revulsion against the
> gratuitous cruelty of the poet's attitude

> towards suffering and insanity prevents him from falling in wholeheartedly with the comic (the clinical) view of human nature.[8]

There are occasions when Auden can use the ballad form with entire success, when its theme is infused with concern and indignation. In a poem about Jewish refugees the traditional form is made ironic and compassionate in contrast with the vindictive jeer of the other examples. Under the decisive condemnation of these lines one hears the lilting rhythm of the blues.

> The counsul banged the table and said,
> If you've got no passport you're officially dead.
> But we are still alive my dear, but we are still alive.
> (Another Time), p. 85.

The comic "You're officially dead" becomes a powerful denunciation of bureaucratic indifference. Later the song rhythm becomes more pronouncedly syncopated.

> Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin
> Saw a door opened and a cat let in
> But they weren't German Jews my dear, but they
> weren't German Jews. (Another Time), p. 85.

Political concern has broken through the detached clinical approach, and the description takes on a tone of nightmare hallucination that touches the imagination to the quick.

> Stood on a great plain in the falling snow
> The thousand soldiers marched to and fro
> Looking for you and me my dear, looking for
> you and me. (Another Time), p. 86.

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[8] Beach, p. 250.

Such political awareness and social criticism based on a knowledge of economic and psychological theories, were the ideas which Auden shaped into the material of his new poetry. Auden was more consciously aware of political events than any other poet in his century. He seemed able to write political verse with less strain and less damage to his poetic style than unfortunate writers such as Spender and Day Lewis, who found the obligation to record the social concerns of their age painfully at odds with the instinctive lyricism of their natural poetic voice. On Auden the mantel of the preacher-orator set a little more easily, and did less violence to his developing style. Often indeed the themes he felt impelled to record in his verse gave bite and urgency to his fertile talent. When he is successful the very savagery of his tone gives his work its sardonic detachment which contrasts notably with Spender's occasional mushiness of emotion. He was aware of the omnipresence of the political pressures, and again and again in his verse the history of the thirties makes an essential counterpoint to his themes. Even when he writes poetry which appears to have conventional subjects, the political overtones of this era are always made explicit. Two stanzas of <u>A Bride in the Thirties</u> demonstrate this juxtaposition of love and history:

Summoned by such music from our time
Such images to audience come
As vanity cannot dispel nor bless;
Hunger and love in their variations,
Grouped invalids watching the flight of the birds,
And single assassins,

Ten million of the desperate marching by,
Five feet, six feet, seven feet high,
Hitler and Mussolini in their wooing poses,
Churchill acknowledging the voters' greeting,
Roosevelt at the microphone, Van der Lubbe laughing,
And our first meeting.[9]

The "music of our time" was the marching feet of the ever more powerful emanations of man's violence and the shouting adulation of the leaders who are to change the "single assassins" into national armies. Against this advancing disaster is set the wry aside of their discovered love.

But if the present day historical perspective sees the rise of the European dictatorships as the central evil of this decade at the time, the first vital issue seemed to be the economic catastrophe, for the crash of 1929 had lengthened into the merciless depression which lasted throughout the thirties. The depression caused the immediate suffering which was in evidence everywhere in the industrial areas of England. The misery of the unemployed seemed to haunt the imagination. A belief that the economic system had totally collapsed pervaded the decade with a sense of hopelessness. Only in Marxist

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[9]This meeting incidentally was with Thomas Mann's daughter, Erika, to whom this volume of poems is dedicated. She later became Auden's wife.

theory was such a phenomenon explicable and controllable. Like other intellectuals of this time Auden embraced Marxism. It seemed a solution to economic problems. With this political system they absolved their consciences by disassociating themselves from their own bourgeois class which appeared indifferent to suffering. Yet, although this was a temporary decision, it was perhaps a more serious and sincere one than is sometimes supposed by critics today.

Not even Spender with his deep individual sensitivity recorded the scene of the depression with a more certain passion than Auden. His world constantly intruded evidence of its disintegration. He describes,

> Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
> Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,
> Rounding the corners coming suddenly on water.
> (On This Island), p. 22.

Auden's accurate eye and bitter tongue caught in his verse the devastation society had wrought. His generation had to live,

> By silted harbors, derelict works
> In strangled orchards and the silent comb
> Where dogs have worried or a bird was shot.
> (Poems 33), p. 87.

This sense of physical decay seemed not to reflect a mere Keynesian depression, but the death of an industrial society, and perhaps a nation. On another occasion he described the same desolation:

> I see barns falling, fences broken
> Pasture not ploughland, weeds not wheat
> The great houses remain but only half are inhabited.
> Dusty the gunroom and the stable clocks stationary.
> Some have been turned into prep-schools where the diet is in the hands of an experienced matron.
> (Dog Beneath the Skin), p. 12.

"What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?" asks Auden, and in his famous prophetic lines of rhetoric he sketches the scene, echoing the anxious vision of Tennyson's Locksley Hall.

> Get there if you can and see the land you were once proud to own
> Though roads have almost vanished and expresses never run,
> Smokeless chimneys damaged bridges, rotting wharves and choked canals
> Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on their sides across the rails
> Power stations locked, deserted since they drew the boiler fires
> Pylons fallen or subsiding, trailing dead high tension wires
> Head-gears gaunt on grass grown pit banks, seems abandoned years ago. (Poems 33), p. 75.
> Drop a stone and listen for its splash in the cold dark below.

This is not only stagnation but regression. The engineered roads "have almost vanished", and if the expresses "never run" the trams never will, for they are "smashed ... lying on their sides across the rails." The waterlogged mines are permanently abandoned and the dropping of the stone seems to suggest the same wondering tourist trick encouraged by guides when visitors inspect some

ancient building of unknown use. So much engineering effort to so little purpose. The visitor scratches his name, throws a stone and goes away musing upon some remote folly. Destruction has turned upon itself. The rhythm reinforces this description, its slightly off-beat lilt acts as an ironic undertone seeming to stress the deadness of the scene by contrasting economic dissolution with its lively stress. In spite of being so well known, these lines were firmly excised from the Collected Poetry. Beach, in his analysis of Auden's later selection of poems for collection points to the reason for its dismissal.

> It is easy to see why in 1945 it was enemy Number One among Auden's early productions. It is the most slam-bang fighting manifesto in the gang war-fare between his own party of Oxford radical and assorted types representing the decadent bourgeoisie.[10]

It was not only the economic system that attracted his angry criticism. Like Spender, Auden observed the destruction that social despair brought to the industrial population. Sadly he observes the scene.

> Only the homeless and the really humbled
> Seem to be sure exactly where they are
> And in their misery are all assimilated. (Another Time), p. 17.

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[10]Beach, p. 65.

"The history of man" seems reduced to the dull glance of invitation in a shop doorway. Mercenary sex is seen as the only way to purchase a moment's escape from the frigidity of the heartless city. Sickened by the realization Auden snaps,

> The behaving of man is a world of horror,
> A sedentary Sodom and a slick Gomorrah.[11]
> (Another Time), p. 14.

The adjectives "sedentary" and "slick" do not allow even sin to assume any significance. He realizes too that the danger is not in the major, violent sins, but in the failure of such nice people; the aimiable, hardworking suburbanites. They adjust themselves so happily to lives which seem to demonstrate no awareness of the appalling limitations of their existence. They live in mindless ignorance of the evil that stands at the borders of their life. These kindly, good, earnest, industrious people seem culpable for all their efforts to understand a world remote from their honest but limited virtues. The Healthy Spot describes them. This poem

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[11] It is incidental to my discussion at this point but I argue later that the sharp precision of Auden's lines become vague and diffuse in his later verse. One example is his use of the Sodom and Gomorrah reference again in the Age of Anxiety, (p. 21). Note how the extension destroys the impact achieved in his earlier lines above.

> Our Zion is
> A doomed Sodom dancing its heart out
> To tricky dukes, a tired Gomorrah
> Infatuated with her former self ...

was first published in the Collected Poetry so it is not clear when it was written. It makes a definitely social criticism. It is interesting to see the same comfortable adjusters later (1944) condemned from a specifically religious viewpoint.

> Joseph and Mary pray for all
> The proper and the conventional
> Of whom the world approves. (For the Time Being), p. 87.

The Healthy Spot gives suburbia ironic praise.

> They're nice - one would never dream of going over
> Any contract of theirs with a magnifying
> Glass, or of locking up one's letters - also
> Kind and efficient - one gets what one asks for.
> Just what is wrong then, that, living among them
> One is constantly struck by the number of
> Happy marriages and unhappy people?
> They attend all the lectures on Post-War Problems,
> For they do mind, they honestly want to help; yet
> As they notice the earth in their morning papers,
> What sense do they make of its folly and horror
> Who have never, one is convinced, felt a sudden
> Desire to torture the cat or do a strip-tease
> In a public place? Have they ever, one wonders,
> Wanted so much to see a unicorn, even a dead one?
> Probably. But they won't say so,
> Ignoring by tacit consent our hunger for eternal life
> that caged, rebuked, question
> Occasionally let out at clambakes or
> College reunions, and which the smokeroom story
> Alone ironically enough stands up for.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 134.

As a poem this is rather flat. There is a prosiness about the diction and awkward rhythm that can only be explained by suggesting Auden has not assimilated the theme. His mood is slightly equivocal. The poem is fundamentally an appeal for awareness; a reminder that

the homely virtues are not enough. As he had indicated earlier the avoidance of the knowledge of evil amounts to acquiescence. The more penetrating and honest saw even in the thirties that their freedoms and comforts were purchased at the cost of ignoring "what violence is done." Those "English picnics" are paid for by others' sufferings.

> And gentle do not care to know
> Where Poland draws her Eastern bow,
> What violence is done;
> Nor ask what doubtful act allows
> Our freedom in this English house
> Our picnics in the sun.[12] (On This Island), p. 13.

But in The Healthy Spot his view begs the obvious question, does one have to do a strip tease or torture a cat in order to understand "Post-War Problems," and the sneer in those capital letters is surely unjust. Yet he is right to point out the dangers in the comfortable apathy that ignores "our hunger for eternal life", and amusingly shrewd to remind one that the cheerful gatherings of men are the only outlets for people caught in the rigorous social fetters of suburbia. That 'caged,

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[12] Although Auden can literally refer to the English houses here, it may be compared with Spender's symbolic use in "O Young Men, O Comrades", "the houses your fathers built."

rebuked question" is urgent enough, but I doubt whether it can best be explored in Auden's superior condescension. The tone is one that Auden came to exhibit too often, as I shall demonstrate later.

Auden saw, as did the other poets of his group, that the new technology, which was supposed to introduce the millenium once the capitalist follies had been corrected by state planning, was itself a threat. Although associated with the socialist cause, they realized, as Orwell did, the implicit dangers in state control, the destruction of the humanist virtues that they as poets sought so anxiously to assert. The forces that best challenged the economic despair of the thirties were equally dangerous to the human heart. MacNeice explored this situation in his impassioned Prayer Before Birth. Auden with a sharper, more acid tone approaches the same theme. The contrast between the titles of these two similar poems makes a comment on the different natures of the two poets. MacNeice's is an appeal, Auden's exhibits hard sarcasm; The Unknown Citizen JS/07/M/378. This poem concerns the citizen who finally achieves the virtue of becoming the ideal norm, the perfect statistical average. In none of his actions or views did he step beyond his established position of worker, consumer, parent. He may be highly praised because he was a man

against whom there was no official complaint, "He wasn't odd in his views" and "he paid his dues". As the virtues pile up the tone is rather unrelievedly sarcastic. He holds "the proper opinions", "when there was peace he was for peace; when there was war, he went." He is a man who precisely fits the desires of psychologists, social workers and eugenicists. Clearly the poem is built towards a rather obvious angry last denunciation, but when it comes, although expected, it has all the rhythmic bite of Auden at his best.

> Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd;
> Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (Another Time), p. 83.

The absurd uncomprehending enquiries of the bureaucrats reverse in our mind to the only virtues worth seeking, freedom and happiness. Both are regarded as comic deviations from the social norms of these "brave new world" governments.

The themes of this poem and the Healthy Spot reinforce each other, because if the statements of the former seem a little distant and exaggerated, those of the latter observe the same situation being brought about for the best possible motives amongst the nicest people today. Loss of human individuality is the danger that permeates our age, and warning notes sounded repeatedly in the writings of these English poets.

One further aspect in Auden's poetry which is regularly successful in extending the reader's perception, is his sense of geography. He uses his knowledge to indicate how geography and history merge to give an area its contemporary significance. The politics are explained in terms of the geography. Nowhere is this technique used more effectively than in Spain but it may be seen in other poems. In Macao the pictorial description is deepened by the sense of the historical perspective that underlies the town's existence.

> A weed from Catholic Europe it took root
> Between the yellow mountains and the sea,
> And bore these gay stone houses like a fruit,
> And grew on China imperceptibly.
>
> Rococco images of Saint and Saviour
> Promise her gamblers fortunes when they die;
> Churches besides brothels testify
> That faith can pardon natural behaviour.
> (Journey to a War), p. 22.

The simile of the European town planted on alien soil is effective, especially with the associations of Auden's observation that in the political context this is a weed unwanted but ineffaceable. Hong Kong, Goa and Singapore are similar towns where Europe has tried to plant a footing on this antagonistic continent. Though they have expanded they grow "imperceptibly" alien and insecure. Europe has brought its morality, its religion and its sins. The "weeds" flourish with the church and gambling.

Brothels stand beside the church both in physical proximity and in their Western spiritual juxtaposition. Gambling and brothels are the degrading source of income for all the free ports that perch on the fringes of this continent. There is further ironic criticism in the word "Rococco" which describes those fearsomely writhing blood-smeared Christs in the more primitive churches. One notes that such a figure as an idol would have more appeal than the abstract morality it represents. It is, in fact, this image, not the church, that will "promise", and so the irony of that promise is further developed. The two stanzas link and one sees that this church within its garish trappings is just as much an impermanent weed "between the mountains and the sea" as are the commercial cities. Neither can approach beyond the mountain where spiritual rejection by Asia's unyielding territory is exemplified by the geographic mountain boundary. That range limits penetration from the sea, the element dominated by the west. The last line contains a treble barb: that the churches accept the brothels, assuming that they are "natural"; that the natural has to be pardoned; and that both church and brothel emanate from the same alien western society. In every aspect it is an indictment of European folly.

The scene does not have to be so exotic and foreign to draw upon this geography. In his impressive poem, Look, Stranger! Auden describes his own English coast. The scene is a cliff's edge presumably somewhere along the chalk headlands of Kent or Sussex.

> Here at the small fields ending, pause
> Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
> Oppose the pluck
> And knock of the tide
>
> And the shingle scrambles after the sucking surf
> And the gull lodges
> A moment on its sheer side. (Look, Stranger!), p. 19.

The technique here lends vivid immediacy to the scene. The word "pause" standing at the end of the line communicates the abrupt edge as field gives place to the sheer drop of cliff. The onamatapoeic affect, although rather commonplace in the style of Tennyson, is evocative. The repeated "cks" in "pluck" and "knock" suggest the sound as the waves hammer at the eroded cliff foot. The description is continued in the reiterated "s" sounds of "the shingle scrambles after the sucking surf" which aurally reminds the ear of the sound of the rolling beach pebbles. After the scurrying wave movement there is the moment of stasis in the image of the soaring gull apparently fixed in the sky, and this silent picture is balanced by the slow syllables of "where the gull lodges."

With this various and competent technique developed during his early work Auden faced the political issues of the 1930s. He learned his control with severe difficulty as he demonstrates, when he later asks, "Can't I learn to suffer without saying something ironic or funny about suffering?"[13] Now he felt that the love he had expressed in his occasional lyric verse was temporarily irrelevant to the challenge that faced his generation.

> We know, we know that love
> Needs more than the admiring excitement of union.
> Needs death, death of the grain, our death,
> Death of the old gang. (Poems 30), p. 66.

The choice of violence is now deliberate and inescapable, and yet if Auden accepts this revolutionary necessity he does not pretend to share the enthusiasm of the young revolutionaries. As a poet he sees too sadly how little such violence can prove.

> Walking home late I listened to a friend
> Talking excitedly of final war
> Of proletariat against police ...
> Till I was angry, said I was pleased. (Poems 30), p. 62.

The mask between belief and word is in place, and the sense of isolation is paramount:

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[13] For the Time Being (London, 1945), p. 15.

> The blood moves also by crooked and furtive inches,
> Asks all our questions. Where is homage?
> When shall justice be done? O who is against me?
> Why am I always alone? (Letters from Iceland), p. 25.

The loneliness also arises from the separation from love that political issues appear to force upon him. Even where love lingers, circumstances have made it inexpressible. In lines that make one recall his earlier apostrophes to his love lying by his faithless arm, he observes the mutual solitude. In a similar way he accepts the necessary guilt but records a sad tenderness.

> The matter of corrupt mankind
> Resistant to the dream that makes it ill,
> Not by our choice but our consent: beloved pray
> That love, to whom necessity is play,
> Do what we must yet cannot do alone
> And lay your solitude beside my own.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 45.

The issues raised by the phrase "not by our choice but our consent" were to be further developed in Auden's later poetry where religion replaces politics as a means of diagnosing man's ails. For the moment my concern is more for the sense of lonely concern as Auden faced contemporary Europe and the coming total war.

> If nothing can upset but total war
> The massive fancy of the heathen will
> That solitude is something you can kill

> If we are right to choose our suffering
> And be tormented by an either-or
> The right to fail that is worth fighting for.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 32.

The final war of proletariat against police may be a subject for anger, but the issues are now clarified to the point where something, albeit as nebulous but precious as "the right to fail", is now "worth fighting for."

At this time the revolution in Spain broke out. To Auden, as the other English poets, the issues seemed challengingly clear. He volunteered for service, joining an ambulance brigade, and while there he wrote one of his major poems, Spain. In this poem the technique forged by such varied and sometimes inexplicable experiments in his earlier poetry was used to express a subject so immense that the gimmicks fall away, leaving only a superbly forged and tempered idiom. Technique was harnessed to an impassioned sense of the significance of the Spanish struggle. This poem, as much as any single work, focussed and expressed the attitude of the enraged intellectuals to the struggle in Europe. At no time was Auden closer to the Communist Party, but the theme of this poem moves more widely than party-line politics into an interpretation of the malaise of the age. The poem embraces the moods of Day Lewis' showy heroism, Spender's powerful compassion, and MacNeice's quick reportage and adds that intellectual comprehension which forms Auden's own authoritative tone. History and geography

merge in an analysis of the issues unequalled in this time.

In Spain Auden attempts to cope with the whole background of human history, his attention widening across past and future and focussing suddenly at the intervening present. He exhibits his ability to hold history momentarily still. As he explained in his Birthday Poem for Christopher Isherwood he wanted to seize

> the dangerous flood
> Of history, that never sleeps or dies
> And held one moment burns the hand. (On This Island), p. 63.

History is translated into human terms, political and psychological. Once the pattern has been established, Auden links it to Spain, seeing the fighting there as the heart of contemporary history. The theme moves beyond Spain to the future, but the poem ends back in 1937 with the frightening prospect of Munich and September, 1938 reinforced by the experience of the Civil War.

The first six verses attempt a compression of history, fact and fiction, combining in ironic generalization.

> Yesterday all the past. The language of size
> Spreading to China along the trade routes; the
> diffusion of the counting - frame and the
> cromlech;
> Yesterday the shadow reckoning in the sunny climates.

> Yesterday the assessment of insurance by cards,
> The divination of water; yesterday the invention
> Of cart-wheels and clocks, the taming of
> Horses; yesterday the bustling world of navigators.

Yesterday the abolition of fairies and giants;
The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley,
The chapel built in the forest;
Yesterday the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles.

The trial of heretics among the columns of stone;
Yesterday the theological feuds in the taverns
And the miraculous cure at the fountain
Yesterday the Sabbath of Witches; but today the struggle. (Spain), p. 7.

The invention of "shadow reckoning in the sunny climates" not only clearly begins the recorded history with the Middle East civilizations, but indicates that preoccupation with time which is the basis of history and the theme of this poem. The idea is repeated in "the invention of cartwheels and clocks" where time is coupled with industry and the expanding of peoples. "The taming of horses" led to major migrations, and this movement was further extended by the discoveries of Renaissance Europe. The speed of "the bustling world of navigators" contrasts with the earlier movements creeping slowly, "spreading to China along the trade routes." At first the next two stanzas appear to go back to medieval times, but it is clear that they record another aspect of history. If the first two stanzas describe a world of action, of applied ideas, the second two concern religion and morality. The legendary "fairies and giants" beloved by the medievalist give place to the religious symbolism

of "angels and alarming gargoyles". There is an underlying irony here in the contrasting pairs, reminding us perhaps of the way Christianity accepted the myths of the age with the good fairies becoming angels and the wicked giants the devils. Yet the fortress on the rock "like a motionless eagle" (Auden's renowned "hawk" symbol again) represents the predatory power of military order. It is offset by the chapel "in the forest". The chapel is not only away from the source of temporal power and among the people, but draws strength from its natural surroundings. The rise of religion was not only a benign challenge to secular power, it brings its own hierachic authority. Along with the beneficent "miraculous cures at the fountain" embracing all the Lourdes-type inexplicable faith cures, went the persecutions as Christianity applied its rigid orthodoxy. The new theology provoked the pointless debates of the "theological feuds", the persecution after the "Sabbath of Witches". Behind all these stands the authority of the Inquisition and its "trial of heretics." At this point, to remind the reader of the swift ranging of history, Auden for the first time makes the flat assertation which is to gain force from its ominous repetition, "But today the struggle." Whatever history has decreed in other ages the present duty is made clear and unqualified.

The next two stanzas are an evocation of the history of the nineteenth century.

> Yesterday the installation of dynamos and turbines;
> The construction of railways in the colonial desert;
> Yesterday the classic lecture
> On the origin of Mankind. But today the struggle.
>
> Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
> The fall of the curtain upon the death of the hero;
> Yesterday the prayer to the sunset,
> And the adoration of madmen. But today the struggle.
> (Spain), p. 7.

Auden compresses the development of the Industrial Revolution; "the installation of dynamos and turbines" and its subsequent economic-motivated grab for Africa and the Middle East-"the construction of railways in the colonial desert." This was one element in the change of accepted outlook caused by the pragmatic materialism of the century. Intellectually it was only "yesterday" that "the classic lecture" and the acceptance of Greek was defended as a necessary part of all education. The force of "the adoration of madmen" is not clear, for if ever there was an age in which this accusation could be made it was the inter-war years far more than the past.

The aim of this summary is to develop the view of the continuity and inevitability of history. As the traders, supported by Christianity and developing industrialization, led to the struggle for colonial markets and the 1914 war, so too this war directly initiated the rise of Fascism and the outbreak of the fighting in Spain, which is now the

focus of history.

Auden at this point turns to the human figures of his time and shows the age through the views of the poet, the scientist, and the ordinary man.

> As the poet whispers, startled among the pines,
> Or, where the loose waterfall sings, compact, or upright
> On the crag by the leaning tower:
> 'O my vision, O send me the luck of the sailor.'
>
> And the investigator peers through his instruments
> At the inhuman provinces, the virile bacillus
> Or enormous Jupiter finished:
> 'But the lives of my friends. I inquire. I inquire.'
>
> And the poor in their fireless lodgings, dropping the sheets
> Of the evening paper: 'Our day is our loss. O show us
> History the operator, the
> Organizer, Time the refreshing river.' (Spain), p.8.

The poet is an anxious Keatsian figure "among the pines" asking only for "luck". The images are of the common romantic nature type, but his vision may be ominous and it seems clear he will need his luck for the dangerous scientist "peers through his instrument at ... the virile bacillus." Whether the "virile" merely suggests the presence of a killing disease or refers to germ warfare is not explicit but his studies are "inhuman." The poet with his perception of human values can only ask plaintively the unanswered question about the total effect of these experiments, "But the lives of my friends I inquire?" As always it is the poor who feel the

greatest deprivation in their "fireless lodgings." The dropping of the newspaper suggests, in a phrase, their indifference and boredom in the face of world events that threaten them, and the untidy squalor in which they live. They pray only for "History the operator, the organizer", for some slick, determined solution to their frustration; a prayer which led to the otherwise inexplicable growth of Fascism in Europe. Auden sees the violence of nations as the result of their peoples's crude demands.

> And the nations combine each cry, invoking the life
> That shapes the individual belly and orders
> The private nocturnal terror:
> 'Did you not found once the city state of the sponge,
> Raise the vast military empires of the shark
> And the tiger, establish the robin's plucky canton?' (Spain), p. 9.

There is scorn implied in the visceral demands of the belly. From such urges states are formed; either the "vast empires of the shark and the tiger" with their savage power, or the smaller areas of "the robin's plucky canton." Both reflect the urge for an order that will quell "private, nocturnal terror."

At this point there arises a classic example of Auden's anti-climax, the failure of judgment that produces pathos; the casual writing at the most critical moment. Life or God is asked to intervene to solve the

perplexing issues of this time.

> 'Intervene. O descend as a dove or
> A furious papa or a mild engineer; but descend.'
>
> And the life, if it answers at all, replies from the heart
> And the eyes and the lungs, from the shops and the squares of the city:
> 'O no, I am not the Mover;
> Not today, not to you. To you I'm the
>
> 'Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped;
> I am whatever you do. I am your vow to be Good, your humorous story;
> I am your business voice. I am your marriage.
>
> 'What's your proposal? To build the just city? I will.
> I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic Death? Very well, I accept, for
> I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.'
> (Spain), p. 9.

Whatever logical explanation one draws from the furious papa, and the mild engineer, nothing can diminish the flat foolishness of the first impact of the image. Under some circumstances such a phrase could be wonderfully ironic and absurd. One could imagine it used successfully in a different context. But there is no evidence of ironic intention here. It just seems ridiculous and inappropriate. But after this lapse begins the powerful rhetoric of the middle section. Life "if it answers at all" denies that it can or will supply the quick, ready-made solution. Human responsibility cannot be thus absolved and from the very visceral centers from which the belly cry first came, from "the eyes and lungs" it answers that it is all things to all men. It meets every demand from the need

for the acquiescent listener to the innermost longings of the self. "To you I'm the yes-man, the bar companion ... I am whatever you do. I am your marriage." This section runs the gamut of moods, the mock-heroic irony, the humorous, the pretentious, authority of the last statement, "I am Spain." One has observed life finding itself in every area of human need; now for this time, it identifies itself with the Spanish struggle, and in so doing, links all its associations with Spain. If Life is "your choice and your decision" then so too is Spain, for in this struggle one makes a choice. Whether one believes that in Spain it is possible to found the Communist utopian vision of the "just city"[14] or whether it appears nothing more than a Quixotic decision of suicidal romantic heroism, makes no difference. At this time Spain can be both of these things for like life it offers everything. This is the nature of its call to Europe in 1937.

The poem develops a rhythmic rhetorical lilt as Auden announces the appeal of Spain's call to arms.

> Many have heard it on remote peninsulars,
> On sleepy plains, in the aberrant fishermen's islands,
> In the corrupt heart of the city;
> Have heard and migrated like gulls or the seeds of a flower.

---

[14]That Auden supplies ironic capitals to this "Just City" concept in his Collected Poetry version (p. 183) is typical of the alteration of tone he achieves by minor emendations.

They clung like burrs to the long expresses that lurch
Through the unjust lands, through the night, through the alpine tunnel;
They floated over the oceans;
They walked the passes. All presented their lives.
(Spain), p. 10.

The men who were to form the International Brigade were gathered from across Europe. Even the city's "corrupt" heart seemed moved by this call to a crusade. The images that mark the decision to come to this fight are images of life not of death. The gulls' migration, the movement of the flowers' seeds (continued in the "burr" comparison) are parts of a positive cycle of natural growth. They suggest the same inevitability and the same fruitfulness will motivate the soldiers' support of the cause. If the rhetoric becomes a little artificial here; if the repeated balance of the "through" phrases seems a contrived orator's trick and the last clause, as sentimental as Brooke at his weakest; I can only plead the circumstances which redeemed the sentiment by the sacrifice. The repetitive phrases also serve to render the repetitive clackings of the trains over the rails, which from all directions bring men to Spain, making it the geographical as well as historical cynosure.

This geographic focus that makes Spain the center of the routes across Europe brings Auden, in the next stanza, to express the geographic significance of Spain using the

technique that makes such an effective poem of Macao.

> On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from
> hot Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe;
> On that tableland scored by rivers,
> Our thoughts have bodies. (Spain), p. 10.

In describing the physical shape of the country Auden can demonstrate the intermediate position of Spain, linked to Africa by its Moorish connections and yet part of Europe. In a developed image derived from metallurgy he calls Spain "that fragment nipped off from hot Africa." This visual image describes its narrowed shape to the South-west where it appears the welders' pincers cut through at Gibraltar. Besides continuing the metal-working image in the suggestion of metal heated before being wrought, it tells of the climatic link between Southern Spain and the desert heat of North Africa. This fragment is soldered (the word extends the metal's working metaphor) to Europe, and this is done "crudely" which produces two levels of information. The idea of the awkward botched join reminds one of the physical configuration of the jagged Pyranées which marks the dividing boundary with France, and reinforces our knowledge of the lack of racial amalgam caused by the roughness of this join. The link is "to inventive Europe" and the adjective is important. At first it appears to mean only a continuation of the theme of the historical stanzas; the spread of

European techniques and industry into Africa. But clearly Auden is also thinking of the ideologies which Europe is so fertile in creating. These invertive policies are the Fascist and Communist creeds that surmount the crude mountain barrier and come to Spain for their trial in battle, brought into the country by the men on both sides who have "migrated like gulls." In Spain the theories are made active and real for in Spain "our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive." The "fever" of change that rages in the blood of Europe is Auden's description of the violence of the thirties. As a fever patient often has hallucinations and dreams, so too these horrors of European international events might have been thought to be sick fancies of the diseased. Now the nightmare is fact, for what were the "fevered shapes" of apparent delusion are no longer nebulous but "precise and alive" in Spain.

This last line was rewritten for Collected Poetry in order to cut out two of the most crucial stanzas of the poem. Clearly Auden felt that his response was too crudely left-wing and political to suit his post-war Christian synthesis. There seems no possible reason for the elimination of these stanzas on poetic or stylistic grounds. They show some of Auden's rather glib catalogues, and the rhetoric is a little sentimental, but these are not faults that have bothered him unduly elsewhere. Obviously it is

that direct assertion of the "people's army" with its suggestion of working class communist militancy that is to be firmly excised.

> On that table-land scored by rivers,
> Our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever.[15]
>
> Are precise and alive. For the fears which made us respond
> To the medicine ad, and the brochure of winter cruises
> Have become invading battalions;
> And our faces, the institute face, the chain store, the ruin
>
> Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb.
> Madrid is the heart. Our moments of tenderness blossom
> As the ambulance and the sandbag;
> Our hours of friendship into a people's army.
> (Spain), p. 10.

In this version Auden links the issues in Spain more clearly with the social follies of the time. The panaceas of patent medicine and dream escapes on exotic tours are both representative of the false search for release from the obligations of the times. The standardized conformity of personality and economics, deplored by Auden in his The Healthy Spot, is accused of being the cause of the Spanish horrors of "firing squad and the bomb". They are the result of the preoccupations and disinterest that allowed the rise of Fascism in Europe, for they show the consequence of putting immediate greed before future safety. But if the greed appears

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[15]These two lines had to be reworded to cover the hiatus caused by their excision in the Collected Poetry version.

as the firing squad, in contrast the true self-sacrifice, "our moments of tenderness" create the other side of the Spanish events. They demonstrate the generosity and sacrifice that sent Auden and Spender into the ambulance corps in Spain, and sent Wintringham, Fox, Cornford, and Caudwell to their deaths in "a people's army". But for both extremes "Madrid is the heart", the center of all feeling.

From this fighting in Spain one can perhaps see the shape of the future envisaged by "our fever". At this point Auden begins to look forward as he talks of tomorrow, beginning diffidently and anxiously with "Tomorrow, perhaps, the future".

> Tomorrow, perhaps, the future. The research on fatigue
> And the movements of packers; the gradual exploring of all the
> Octaves of radiation
> Tomorrow the enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing.
>
> Tomorrow the rediscovery of romantic love,
> The photographing of ravens; all the fun under
> Liberty's masterful shadow;
> Tomorrow the hour of the pageant - master and the musician.
>
> The beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome;
> Tomorrow the exchanging of tips on the breeding of terriers,
> The eager election of chairmen
> By the sudden forest of hands. But today the struggle.[16]

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[16]This stanza too was excised from the later version of of the poem. There may be some poetic justification because it is dreary and repetitous in a weak section. But the meeting is hardly democratic with its open ballot by show of hands. It recalls a soviet, or a controlled trade union rather than a democratic utopian system. Auden may again have deleted a too openly Marxist incident.

Tomorrow for the young, the poets exploding like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;
Tomorrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings: but today the struggle.
(Spain), p. 11

As Auden's generalization had covered the past, he now makes a series of evocative guesses about the future. Somehow these stanzas are less successful. The vision of domesticated utopia seems harder to sustain than the powerful political rhetoric earlier. Perhaps it is simply that perfection always seems a rather dreary and moral prospect. There are elements in Auden's vision which are characteristically arrogant, foreshadowing later views. First there is the scientific development, "the research on fatigue", and the motivational research of large scale economics in the packaging industry. Neither of these, one would imagine, would gratify humanist Auden as a vision of the future. The development of spiritual control presumably by some form of yoga is an experiment that has appealed to many; Aldous Huxley for example. In the mouth of Auden one is forced to conclude that he is paying casual lip-service to such an idea, or that there is an underlying irony in his vision. Such a conclusion, although tempting would totally undermine the tone of the rest of this poem. It is really hard to take his vision

straight. It does not even show the heroic happiness envisioned by the crude party hacks. This question of tone also becomes more suspect in the "fun under Liberty's masterful shadow". The "masterful" is a curiously authoritative adjective. The raven photography seems totally inexplicable, and the pageant master and the musician call to mind only a child's festival. It is a curious list, and the associations of "fun" ring strangely. If on the one hand the young can look forward to the resurrected pleasures of "romantic love" and "perfect communion", there is also a future of bicycle races. I am very unhappy about this element. It may be merely a lapse into homey cheeriness; it sounds a good healthy proletarian sort of activity that would be illustrated in "social realism" art. Without meaning to be trivial, Auden pedaling in a cycle race is a somewhat comic picture, and if this is his version of a socialist future one yearns for some capitalist decadence. This society allows the poets to explode "like bombs" but whether this absurd simile suggests an eruption of creative brilliance is hardly clear. These stanzas seem to be Auden at his weakest, the hollowness shows, and the surface confidence will not conceal the silly emptiness of the idea. It is only a short stage better than his earlier vision of a hygenic utopia described in the following doggerel lines:

We shall build tomorrow
A new clean town
With no more sorrow
Where lovely people walk up and down,
We shall all be strong,
We shall all be young. (The Dance of Death), p. 9,

But from this boring vision of Communist paradise Auden snaps from reveries to the sharp reminder that "today the struggle". This shelves the question of future society by demanding action. The last three stanzas are a reassertion of the issues in Spain, demonstrated with that powerful confidence that can be so effective when Auden is involved in the situation as he never was in those bicycle races.

Today the deliberate[17] increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in necessary[17] murder;
Today the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

Today the makeshift consolations - the shared cigarette,
The cards in the candle-lit barn, and the scraping concert,
The masculine jokes; today the
Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

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[17]In the revised version the increasing chances of death are "inevitable" rather than "deliberate", and "the necessary murder" becomes "the fact of murder". Both of these alterations back away from the principles of Marxist morality by substituting more bland and acceptable wording for the overtly Communist fact. Orwell's criticism obviously applies better to the earlier version. Auden's second version is another example of his evasion of his original acceptance of Marxist ideas. He does not challenge; he merely tidies up.

> The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
> We are left alone with our day, and the time is
> short, and
> History to the defeated
> May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon. (Spain), p. 12.

The first stanza here can refer to events in Spain, or to the reactions of sympathetic intellectuals at home who would be busily producing the "ephemeral pamphlet" and speaking in the "boring meeting". But the acceptance of guilt seems to suggest a more personal association with the fighting than a nominal determination to overlook some of the more obvious atrocities of the Republican soldiers. Orwell chooses to assault Auden and the other intellectuals with an attack on this stanza which exhibits all of his engaging passion and bias.

> The (second) stanza is intended as a sort of thumb nail sketch of a day in the life of a good party man. In the morning a couple of political murders, a ten-minute interlude to stifle "bourgeois remorse" and then a hurried luncheon and a busy afternoon and evening chalking walls and distributing leaflets. All very edifying ... Mr. Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled.[18]

This is unjust to Auden, who had managed, as often as Orwell, to be "where things happen". It is also a misinterpretation of the poem. Rather, Auden is carefully listing exactly what the present must be if this cause is not to be the defeated. He is managing to avoid the concern about means and ends at this point. The next stanza shows a very clear personal experience of the front line of this war. Auden

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[18] George Orwell, Such Such were the Joys (New York), 1953, p. 184.

records the cheerfulness and the friendliness that so often appear to be among the most vivid memories of troops in combat. The sense of brotherhood was doubly strong in this volunteer army so international in its recruitment. The simple soldierly sense of comradeship was found in "the shared cigarette ... the masculine jokes." Even in the face of this temporary friendship Auden can see no real hope. The final verse is sympathetic, even compassionate, but it is bitterly realistic. "The stars are dead ... we are left alone." God has withdrawn and man faces History which owes allegiance to no ideals, it merely records impartially the success of bad or good. We may deplore the downfall of Greece or Rome; future generations may be more appalled at the success of Fascism, but History is indifferent. History is not a record of constant progress and it cannot change any regression which it observes. If History appears sympathetic it cannot participate, "History to the defeated may say Alas, but cannot help or pardon." The defeated remain the underlings no matter the rightness of their cause. The strong win and History cannot release the defeated from their punishment.

It is interesting to observe in view of the fact that this is the climax to the poem, that such a statement would be anathema to orthodox Communist theory. It appears to deny the principle of the historical inevitability,

of the victory of the Marxist proletariat in the class struggle. History is supposed to be clearly on the side of the working classes - anything but neutral.

Perhaps this verse is more pessimistic in retrospect for one knows that History did not pardon and Fascist armies were victorious. At the time the poem stood as a warning of the need for action, but it avoids any heroics, any illusive hope. Auden has seen the issues with scrupulous detachment. But in this poem, such is the degree of Auden's concern for the issues, the detachment does not suggest in any way the icy indifference to human fate that one deplored in his earlier ballads. Rather such a position enables him to achieve a more comprehensive viewpoint. Auden was in Spain, but in some sense this fact is irrelevant to his verse of the time in contrast to Spender's poetry on Spain. Spender had to be there to share the experience which he recorded in his compassionate verses, Auden extracted from the situation the vision of history. Spender when he praised the quality of Auden's Spain remarked:

> The poem is the outstanding example of political poetry written in the 1930s. It is a serious attempt to conform to a political orthodoxy. Yet the poetic logic of the writer's thought brings him to a point which he obviously finds untenable, from which he retreats immediately, and which he has never returned to.[19]

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[19] Stephen Spender, The Creative Element (London, 1953), p. 150.

Some of the most perceptive criticism of this poem is found in an essay by R. Mason. He supports my view that besides its merits as a poem it is crucial in any examination of Auden's poetry, and in its capacity to focus the ideology of his decade. Mason writes:

> When Auden wrote Spain in 1937, he achieved in one considerable utterance the stature of an important poet with the power to give arresting artistic form to the instinctive apprehension of his generation.[20]

My argument is that the Spanish War was such a significant event that it purged away the verbosity and false cleverness of Auden's writing, leaving only a trained, experienced technique, harnessed to a great social concern. Meaning controlled technique in a way it had too rarely done in Auden's earlier writing. As Mason continues:

> Before 1937, Auden's embittered social conscience lacked adequate roots. Spain refined away from his art the expansion and irritating wooliness. It gives evidence in every line that his poetry was at last being inspired by the condition of men rather than the condition of Auden.[20]

This last sentence seems to me particularly perceptive. It is the weakness of Auden's development that soon this new humane perception was to be ignored. In 1939 there was the escape to America, and with it the return to the anxious exploration of "the state of Auden". The change was further emphasized by his preoccupation with his

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[20]R. Mason, "Auden," Writers of Today, D. V. Baker, edit. (London, 1950), p. 28.

newly discovered religious beliefs. The new spirit re-exposed the weakness inherent in Auden's poetry; the redundancy, technique as an end in itself, the glibness and the avoidance of feeling. But none of the doubts that one may have to express in estimating the quality of his later poetry can alter both the historical and literary impact of Spain, 1937.

Before he left for America Auden wrote a number of significant and passionate poems in which he endeavored to warn an indifferent population of the dangers of their myopia in the face of contemporary history. Perhaps more than any other poet Auden expressed that sense of götterdammerung that hung like a cloud over Europe. He had a nightmare vision of the totality of human emnity.

> In the nightmare of the dark
> All the dogs of Europe bark
> And the living nations wait
> Each sequestered in its hate.
>
> Intellectual disgrace
> Stares from every human face
> And the seas of pity lie
> Locked and frozen in each eye. (Another Time), p.93.

He translated this emotional horror into imagery that was personal, and even apparently trivial, and yet his gift was that he could make this individual routine awareness universally significant. In The Witnesses for example, he uses the images of cloud over garden and the threat of rain which are in themselves very commonplace, but he suffuses such metaphors with a sense of ominous

threat.

> We've been watching over the garden wall
> For hours
> The sky is darkening like a stain;
> Something is going to fall like rain
> And it won't be flowers. (Dog Beneath the Skin), p.18.

That "we" should have included everybody but it refers predominantly to the intellectuals, for so many tried to ignore the dark sky in the passive hope that it would somehow pass by if they did. Again and again Auden attempted to strike through this shell of protective apathy to warn.

> Seekers after happiness, all who follow
> The convolutions of your simple wish
> It is later than you think, nearer that day
> Far other than that distant afternoon
> Amid the rustle of frocks and stamping feet
> They gave the prizes to the ruined boys. (Poems 33), p.88.

"It is later than you think." is rather a truism but it is linked with peculiarly English concerns. The prospects for the future so pompously orated at Speech Days in the snob schools are "far other" than was anticipated, and the "ruined boys" have to meet issues that contradict their training. Those who saw the future in terms of a search for happiness now find other prospects and ones that, however unpleasant, are somehow caused by this desire. "The convolutions of your simple wish." is a reminder of the complexity of issues. Auden makes quite clear that the selfish desire for a personal

happiness is not so simple and becomes dangerous in this decade of responsibility. Again Auden links the middle-class environment to the international scene. Earlier I noted the country house garden wall and then the prize-giving at the Public School; now it is the snug sea-side resort that is over-shadowed by approaching war.

> It is time for the destruction of error
> The chairs are being brought in from the garden
> The summer talk stopped on that savage coast
> Before the storms, after the guests and birds.
> In sanatoriums they laughless, and less
> Less certain of cure; and the loud madmen
> Smile now into a more terrible calm. (Poems 33), p.65.

Here the political decisions of preparing for war are deliberately humanized into the preparation for the storms of winter. "The chairs are brought in from the garden." The chairs become a symbol of the casual happiness and freedom of the summer days and "summer talk". Guests migrate like birds, others have to face the storms that are to come. The country, diseased with economic and social failure, is a sanatorium and with war approaching people are "less certain of cure", and "the loud madmen" the megalomaniac leaders, "smile", the raison d'etre of their regimes is approaching. The tranquility of their calm is "more terrible" than the screaming and ranting of the lunatic rages in which they had so often threatened the peace. There is, too, a less specific association here. The world of sane men is contemplating such madness that the

mad smile to see it, knowing they cannot equal its lunatic folly.

The warning note comes too often for it to remain pure and direct. Inevitably, some of Auden's less attractive features crept in the hectoring tone and the failure of taste: Lines such as

> They're all in a funk but they daren't do a bunk.
> (Orators), p. 94.

or

> Drop those priggish ways forever, stop behaving like a stone
> Throw the bath-chairs right away and learn to leave yourself alone.
> (Poems 33), p. 16.

How one would like to tell Auden to "drop those priggish ways forever." Here is everything that is poor in his writing: the unpleasant gusto and the scoutmasterish tone. The adolescent desire to shock in "leave yourself alone" is sadly obvious. But with the same rather tripping rhythm he goes on to write the following powerful lines that seem to haunt the memory of 1938, and echo powerfully to us today.

> If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try
> If we don't it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die. (Poems 33), p. 76.

"It doesn't matter" is a piece of mere bravado. As Auden demonstrated by his action over Spain, the choice mattered

very greatly, and if such issues can hardly be reduced to this absurd simplicity of alternatives, no subtlety can alter their fundamental accuracy. A choice could still be made and it is important that Auden should insist on this blatant fact. He may perceive the complexity of moral issues; he can be cynical in the face of fuzzy idealism, but he asserts that there is good and bad. Not all ideas can be blurred by the prevarications of the theorists with their pretense at seeing all sides of the question:

> But ideas can be true, although men die
> And we can watch a thousand faces made active by one lie
> And maps can really point to places
> Where life is evil now;
> Nanking; Dachau. (Journey to a War), p.274.

It was on this truth that the poets of the thirties took their stand. It was not an argument to be discussed as an intellectual abstraction but the insistence that certain political ideas were not just theoretically undesirable but produced actual "places where life is evil now." The abstractions of the maps do not conceal that the horrors of Dachau do exist. The "lies" of these regimes cannot only be challenged by an intellectual assertion of their falsity, for each lie is supported by "a thousand faces"; not men, one notes, just faces, the nameless armies who lend power to the abstraction

called a state. One recalls MacNeice's zombie vision of "a lethal automaton, a thing with one face" in Prayer Before Birth.

Auden saw this world and he saw it justly. He saw the cowardice and indifference of the era. He saw the contrast between the triviality and the horrors. He asks us to remember.

> Think in this year what pleased the dancers best
> When Austria died and China was forsaken,
> Shanghai in flames and Teruel retaken.
> France put her case before the world "Partout
> Il y de la joie". America addressed
> The earth, "Do you love me as I love you."
> (Journey to a War), p.280.

The scornful tone of this is created by the juxtaposition of the heartbreaking and the trivial. Its anger is perhaps negative, but Auden was able to make one positive assertion of his views before he left to take up residence in the United States. It is one of his most famous verses. Nothing could be more revealing of Auden's new intellectual dishonesty than that when he came to offer his Collected Poetry this crucial stanza, a dramatic plea and a glorious declaration was simply dropped without comment or apology.

On September 1, 1939, the day on which the invasion of Poland marked the beginning of World War II, Auden wrote the following lines:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie
The Romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man in the street,
And the lie of authority
Whose buildings grope the sky.
There is no such thing as the state
And no one exists alone
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police
We must love one another or die. (Another Time), p.100.

This is the summary of a decade and the poet's final realization that "all I have is a voice." With this voice Auden has to attack the multiple concealed lies of his era. Perhaps one should make this assertion in the past tense for Auden's departure for America announced that he was abdicating from the position of spokesman he had held for a decade. With the metaphor of "the folded lie" Auden suggests the way the lie is concealed inside a more prepossessing exterior, and whether this lie is the Romantic one that man is only totally an individual, or the lie that supports the state's authority by averring that man is only a social animal, is irrelevent. Both must be equally challenged. This brings the poet to the supreme paradox which he juxtaposes, "There is no such thing as the state, and no one exists alone." We are all part of the human race but to call this the state, to suggest that the state, as in Germany, has a reality above the individuals who compose it and is an entity which can demand service and sacrifice

is dishonest. This is the lie of authority. "Hunger allows no choice", and whether we interpret this as the pressure of populations on inadequate resources in poor countries, or see it rather in its wider meaning of all the multiple hungers of man is irrelevant for the choice is clear. Citizens and police which Auden uses to suggest all the ramifications of relationships which compose rulers and ruled, whether within a community or internationally, both have to realize that their survival depends on identity and unity. We must "love one another or die", and never has this declaration seemed more applicable than now.

This was Auden's valediction as he left for the States at this crucial time in England's history. John Lehmann indicates that Auden had apparently made this decision when he had visited the United States while returning from China with Christopher Isherwood.[21] But to many he appeared to be fleeing from the cyclone which he had predicted for so long. His departure for America brought howls of defamation from the overwrought emotions of an England poised at the brink of war. Auden was a coward leaving to escape the war; he was letting the side down. Auden had written earlier:

> To throw away the key and walk away
> Not abrupt exile, the neighbors asking why,
> But following a line with left and right

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[21]John Lehmann, The Whispering Gallery (London, 1955), p. 308.

> An altered gradient at another rate
> Learns more than maps upon the whitewashed wall
> The hand put up to ask; and makes us well
> Without confession of the ill. (Poems 30), p.26.

He seems to assert here the necessity for a decisive separation and it confirms that his escape was not away from the frustration and potential danger of the European War; it was a deliberate and definite decision based on a poetic determination, a desire to extend his writing on the lines of his chosen ambitions. His coming to America was not a negative escape, but a positive choice. He wished to free himself from the literary set-up which his influence had done as much as anything to create. He had anticipated this discovery when from Iceland he had written:

> For Europe is absent: this is an island
> and therefore a refuge, where the fast
> affections of its dead may be bought.
> (Letters from Iceland), p.8.

Cyril Connolly records a conversation he had with Auden in 1947.

> He reverts always to the same argument, that a writer needs complete anonymity, he must break away from the European literary happy family ... in an anonymous metroland such as New York isolation is a position from which one can observe and yet not be caught up.[22]

He had talked in exactly the same manner to MacNeice.

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[22] C. Connolly, "Introduction", Horizon XVI (October, 1947), p. 14.

> The explanation he gave me seems reasonable enough, that an artist ought either to live where he has roots, or where he has no roots at all; that in England today the artist feels essentially lonely, twisted in dying roots, always in opposition to a group: that in America he is just as lonely, but so, says Auden, is everybody else. With 140 million lonelies walking round him he need not waste time either in conforming or rebelling.[23]

The old Auden wish for "clinical detachment" is still sought and this is thought to be no longer possible in England. As he later remarked:

> The attractiveness of America to a writer is its openness, the lack of tradition - in a way it's frightening. You are forced to live here as everyone else will be forced to live. There is no past, no traditions, no roots - that is in the European sense ... But what is happening here is happening everywhere.[24]

His view makes an interesting contrast with the search in England, by T. S. Eliot, for a tradition that his native America lacked. But Auden sought his inspiration in "this raw untidy continent where the commuter can't forget the Pioneer." Perhaps a little pontifically he writes again of his view of the importance of America to his writing:

> More even than in Europe, here,
> The choice of patterns is made clear

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[23]L. MacNeice, "American Letter," Horizon I (June, 1940), p. 464.

[24]Quoted by Benjamin Appel in "The Exiled Writers," Sat. Review of Literature, October 19, 1940.

Which the machine imposes, what
Is possible and what is not
To what conditions we must bow
In building the Just City now. (New Year Letter), p. 68.

Putting aside temporarily one's doubts about the wooliness of Auden's Just City, this is an important assertion of "what the machine imposes." This "machine" is not only the technology of society, though this is included, but the whole ideologies by which we live. We live in an Americanized world, where Europe, Australia and even Japan measure their prosperity by the degree to which they have achieved their own anxious parody of the American style of living. It is in America that Auden searches for the undiluted essence of the social issues that must be faced and solved. Not that he expects anything as facile as a solution; rather an attempt to discover the precise limits of the "conditions we must bow". Yet at first his response to America seems to be despair, a despair extended by the events of the last ten years. Immediately after his arrival he wrote in loneliness:

I sit in one of the dives
On 52nd Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
On a low dishonest decade. (Another Time), p.98.

This retrospection is doubly poignant, for the "clever hopes" (the adjective has become totally ironic) which expired on September 1, 1939, were his own.

Soon after his arrival he took the opportunity while reviewing a new volume of Rilke's poetry for the New Republic, to defend himself again against the attacks to which he had been subjected in England. With a detachment verging near indifference, he attempts his self-justification.

> [This is] not a denial of the importance of political action, but rather the realization that if the writer is not to harm both others and himself, he must consider and very much more humbly and patiently than he has been doing, what kind of person he is and what may be his real function. When the ship catches fire it seems only natural to rush importantly to the pumps, but perhaps one is only adding to the general confusion and panic. To sit still and pray seems selfish and unheroic, but it may be the wisest and most helpful course.[25]

What a contrast and even repudiation of the attitude he propounded those few years ago when he had gone to Spain and China. This renunciation was part of his loss, and the geographical distance makes England seem so remote that it appears distant in time too, recalled only as a memory of childhood; far from his present maturity.

> England to me is my own tongue,
> And what I did when I was young. (New Year Letter), p. 54.

But it is impossible to repudiate consciously heritage, and his English origin and background remained the roots onto which he grafted his new American experience. Constantly

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[25] W. H. Auden, "Poet in Wartime," New Republic (July 8, 1940), p. 59.

England remains the touchstone:

> I can but think our talk in terms
> Of images that I have seen,
> And England tells me what we mean. (New Year Letter), p. 54.

And again:

> Whenever I begin to think
> About the human creature we
> Must nurse to sense and decency
> An English area comes to mind
> I see the native of my kind
> As a locality I love. (New Year Letter), p. 55.

Such affection remained in spite of his decision to cut himself from these roots, and America brought its own problems. With a direct personal tone, all the more heart-rending since it is in such contrast to Auden's usual air of brash self-confidence, he reveals illuminatingly how his first months in the States were affecting him:

> Some think they're strong, some think they're smart
> Like butterflies they're pulled apart,
> America can break your heart
> You don't know all sir, you don't know all.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 203.

If butterflies suggest, a little romantically, the gilded transient beauty of poetry, the "pulled apart" with its description of the spoilt child tearing off the wings of the insect in thoughtless cruelty defines the result of American anti-intellectualism on the poet in exile. Perhaps he saw some similarity between his state and Voltaire's industrious cultivating of his garden. There seems an appropriate identity in a stanza of Voltaire at Ferney.

Both the humor and the self-belittlement seem relevent to Auden's situation.

> Cajoling, scolding, scheming, cleverest of them all,
> He'd led the other children in a holy war
> Against the infamous grown-ups. (Another Time), p. 22.

In the last stanza he describes Voltaire thinking in old age of the need for his satiric verses to offer the solution of rational truth.

> So like a sentinel he could not sleep. The night was full of wrong
> Earthquakes and executions. Soon he would be dead.
> And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses
> Itching to boil their children. Only his verses
> Perhaps could stop them: he must go on working.
> Overhead the uncomplaining stars composed their lucid song.

Nothing could be closer to the old sentinel Auden with his acute and horrifying vision of Europe and the belief that "all I have is a voice." But alas his withdrawal was more fundamental, more of an avoidance of "earthquakes and executions" than Voltaire's exile. Auden did not choose to offer his verse in an attempt to "stop them." Rather he preferred to remain safely cut off from the fallen world by the protective window. He chose the role of an interested spectator at an aquarium; attentive but unwilling to intervene.

> I have watched through a window a World that is fallen,
> The matins and malice of men and beasts,
> The corporate greed of quiet vegetation,

And the homesick little obstinate sobs
of things thrown into being.
I would gladly forget. (Age of Anxiety), p.81.

The last sentence echoes across Auden's American writing when he is forced to contemplate the past he once served.

But from America, before the degeneration of his style into polysyllabic verbosity, and his beliefs into religious quasi-mysticism, there was one more major poem. It was New Year's Eve and Auden had been away from Europe exactly three months. Inevitably there was a moment of retrospection as he reconsidered and evaluated the decade that had been so reflected in his writing. In what may be the swan-song of Auden the liberal humanist, he wrote in New Year Letter, "Tonight a scrambling decade ends."

Who, thinking of the last ten years
Does not hear howling in his ears
The Asiatic cry of pain
The shots of executing Spain
See stumbling through his outraged mind
The Abyssinian blistered blind,
The dazed uncomprehending stare
Of the Danubian despair
The Jew wrecked in the German cell
Flat Poland frozen into hell,
The silent clumps of unemployed
Whose arete has been destroyed
And will not feel blind anger? (New Year Letter), p. 26.

Here is a summary of the crimes ofthis decade: Japan's attack on Manchuria: the Spanish War: the Italian

assault with mustard gas on the Abyssinians: Austrian suppression; Nazi Jew-baiting and the last attack on Poland which created hell, the international war. Recalling these events Auden feels "blind anger" and this should be our own response, but the adjective is significantly chosen. When one feels "blind anger" the reason and logic are taking second place, one is committed to action. There is the clear assertion that the issues are no longer intellectual ones; in the face of war one recalls Auden's assertion, "We are conscripts to our age / simply by being born."

The agony of Europe's immediate past continues to oppress him, made more painful by being linked to his own sense of failure.

> Upon each English conscience lie
> Two decades of hypocrisy,
> And not a German can be proud
> Of what his apathy allowed. (New Year Letter), p. 26.

But Auden makes clear in this poem that he now sees the cause of events, not in the Marxist concepts of unchallengable currents of history, but in the apathetic and acquiescent hearts of men.

> The great Erotic on the cross
> Of Science, crucified by fools
> Who sit all day on office stools
> Are fairly faithful to their wives
> And play for safety all their lives. (New Year Letter) p. 60.

These mediocre pathetic figures are flagellated by Auden's scorn, and yet he knows that the system does

much to make them so defeated. On every side he sees the paucity of fulfillment offered by the economic system. If war-time boom has released the unemployed from their enforced idleness the "machine imposes" its own ruthless discipline. The sight of "man captured by his liberty" is clear to every glance.

> Boys trained by factories for leading
> Unusual lives as nurses, feeding
> Helpless machines, girls married off
> To typewriters, old men in love
> With prices they can never get. (New Year Letter), p. 61.

There is extra irony in the imagery here. Auden associates the ideas of nursing, marriage, love with the actual facts: factories, typewriters and prices. In this juxtaposition he shows the sterile falsifications of noble impulses, distorted by the economic system. But again Auden returns to the inescapable assertion of individual responsibility. He condemns those on the side of the rulers who

> Protect their privileges still
> And safely keep the living dead
> Entombed, hilarious and fed. (New Year Letter), p. 62.

The ruled however, complement the bosses' urge for power. These from "the wrong side of the tracks" are satisfied with their oppressed state for they are;

> Poisoned by reasonable hate,
> Are symptoms of one common fate
> All in their morning mirrors face
> A member of the governed race. (New Year Letter), p. 62.

The class battle implied by the rulers arguing "at cocktail parties as to which technique is most effective in enforcing labor discipline" is reciprocated by the resentment of the employed, both being driven by the fear "of all that has to be obeyed." Both groups are also united in their individual arrogance, their consciousness of superiority:

> But still each private citizen
> Thanks God he's not as other men.
> O all too easily we blame
> The politicians for our shame
> And hired officers of state
> For all the customs that frustrate
> Our own intention to fulfill. (New Year Letter), p. 62.

The condemnation is clear, for events are only the reflection of the individual will and the political governors are themselves the governed for they are "impotent if we decline responsibility," Auden sees that even the most ferocious power-seekers merely gratify the yearnings of the common man:

> The politicians we condemn
> Are nothing but our L.C.M.
> The average of the average man
> Becomes the dread Leviathan. (New Year Letter), p. 63.

Auden had previously often suggested the obvious connection between the apathy of individuals and the horrifying violence developing in Europe, but he was moving beyond a general admonition to act against looming

international disaster. Now he changes his standpoint to assert that this evil is not only, nor even primarily, the result of the economic or political system but is found in the individual heart of man.

In this poem it seems to me are some of the first evidences of a viewpoint that arises from Auden's conversion to a strictly Christian theology. Above all he asserts the inherent sense of defect which extends through man's acts. In his poem to Freud he makes a similar reference.

> And showed us what evil is: not as we thought
> Deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith.
> Not our equipment all the time
> Extends the area of the crime
> Until the fruit is everywhere. (Another Time), p. 102.

The left-wing sympathies which motivated much of his better poetry between the wars, are being replaced by a more orthodox theology. As Hoggart puts it:

> The most striking characteristic of the considerable body of work which Auden has produced in America is that in all of it, whether in poems, general essays, critical articles, reviews or lectures, and whatever his ostensible subject, he discusses religious belief. His most important creditors - as important as Freud or Marx earlier - have been Kierkegaard and Niebuhr. 26

A change of spirit which becomes predominant in his later poetry is foreshadowed here. Lines such as these that

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26 Hoggart, p. 143.

follow could never have been written by Auden even three years before 1940.

> How hard it is to set aside
> Terror concupiscence and pride
> Learn who and where and how we are
> The children of a modest star,
> Frail, backward, clinging to the granite
> Skirts of a sensible old planet. (New Year Letter), p. 29.

Or,

> We're free to will
> Ourselves to Purgatory still,
> Consenting parties to our lives
> To love them like attractive wives
> Whom we adore but do not trust. (New Year Letter), p. 49.

And again,

> In time we sin
> But time is sin and can forgive
> Time is the life in which we live. (New Year Letter), p. 49.

In spite of the obvious difference one might almost be forgiven for muttering "Eliot?" as one reads these lines. There is the same repetition of theological terms, the preoccupation with sin and time, the concern with free will and Purgatory. Of course, there is still Auden in the jaunty "granite skirts" and the wry humor of the simile of the attractive wives, but a clear intellectual change has been effected. It is doubly important to note it here in its early stage because it is a preview of what is to be the predominating theme of Auden's later verse. One might compare the above quotations with, for

example, these lines from The Age of Anxiety which exhibit the same spiritual condemnation:

> We would rather be ruined than changed.
> We would rather die in our dread
> Than climb the cross of the moment
> And let our illusions die. (The Age of Anxiety), p. 134.

It would not be unfair to consider New Year Letter as the last note in Auden's liberalism. The course of events has cut back into the very material of poetry itself and he feels only doubt:

> This language may be useless, for
> No words of mine can stop the war
> Or measure up the relief of it
> Or its immeasurable grief. (New Year Letter), p.27.

Poetry is "useless" for its failure to be politically effective. And he faces the future with fear and horror.

> The evil and armed draw near
> The weather smells of hate
> And the houses smell our fear
> Death has opened his white eye
> And the black hole calls the thief
> As the evil and armed draw near. (For the Time Being), p. 59.

As "the evil and armed draw near," Auden attends to the reform of his soul.

A similar note of moral despair had pervaded the long poem, In Time of War, published in his 1939 volume on China, Journey to a War. In this poem the theme is the same dismay and concern. The material exhibits the denunciation of conditions, but the tone is pessimistic

and despairing for there seem no alternatives to the folly.

> History exposes its grief to our buoyant song:
> The Good Place has not been; our star has warmed to birth
> A race of promise that has never proved its worth.
> (Journey to a War), p. 271.

The pre-war hope is lost in the face of universal disaster and the despair has cut across even the temporary achievement of the past for the human race has "never proved its worth." This is a deliberate reversal of the implied praise of the Spanish War volunteers to the International Brigade. Now the pessimism veers back into the past, denigrating even that achievement with its despair. Auden sees the issues are the same at this point as they were ten years before. If this is true and nothing had been achieved, much was attempted. Who can estimate the effect of the efforts of those who strove in Day Lewis' humble words, only to "defend the bad against the worse?" Auden seems to be ready to withdraw from the struggle unless he can find the comfort of an arbitrary cause that allows him to measure good against bad in satisfying inflexibility. Thus even when, as in the following lines, the diagnosis remains as characteristically assured as ever, the assertion that the issues are still the same seems to fill Auden with an apathy from which he can express his feelings in no more violent terms than disappointment.

> The issues are the same. Some uniforms are new,
> Some have changed sides; but the campaign continues.
> Still unachieved is Jen, the truly human.
>
> This is the epoch of the Third Great Disappointment
> The First was the collapse of that slave-owning empire
> Whose yawning magistrate asked, "What is truth?"
> (Journey to a War), p. 292.

That series of capital letters is suggestive of the strain of false emphasis but the figure of yawning Pilate, bored in his minor colonial appointment is vividly concrete. But, if "the issues are the same," clearly Auden's response is not. He sees the sick decline of his world and sees it characteristically in the powerful drive of history; the development of science that challenged the very heart of religion. When Rome declined

> Upon its ruins rose the plainly visible Churches
> Men camped like tourists under their tremendous shadows,
> United by a common sense of human failure.
>
> Their certain knowledge only of the timeless fields
> Where the Unchanging Happiness received the faithful,
> And the eternal Nightmare waited to devour the doubters.
> (Journey to a War), p. 292.

This certain, unchanging authoritarianism was destroyed by the curiosity of enquiring minds

> In which a host of workers, famous and obscure,
> Meaning to do no more than use their eyes,
> Not knowing what they did, then sapped belief.
> (Journey to a War), p. 292.

> Put in its place a neutral dying star,
> Where Justice could not visit.

Good and evil have now become neutrality. Morality cannot stand against the dying planet of which "Galileo muttered to himself 'sed movet'." In a world maintaining neither belief nor justice the result can only be a frustration the more total because of the apparent liveliness by which it is motivated.

> Never before was the intelligence so fertile,
> The Heart more stunted. The human field became
> Hostile to brotherhood and feeling like a forest.
> (Journey to a War), p. 293.

The stunted heart in the fertile intelligence is a sharp penetration into the nature of our society for these issues have not changed though "some uniforms are new." Life becomes only a brittle pointless quest for satisfaction:

> We wander on the earth or err from bed to bed
> In search of love, and fail and weep for the
> lost ages.
> (Journey to a War), p. 293.

They all lived in a moment of history when from all countries there was the appeal to man's savage instincts.

> On every side they make their brazen offer
> Now in that Catholic country with the shape
> of Cornwall
> Where Europe first became a term of pride.
>
> North of the Alps where dark hair turns to blonde,
> In Germany now loudest, land without a centre
> Where the sad plains are like a sounding rostrum.
> (Journey to a War), p. 294.

They exist in a world where "only the man behind the rifle had free will." The corruption is both national and

individual for it erodes the hearts of all men.

> Behind each sociable home-loving eye
> The private massacres are taking place
> All Women, Jews, the Rich, the Human Race.
> (Journey to a War), p. 273.

The compound of the individual violence is the armies that stand committed to attack, an inescapable threat to all idealism.

> Far off, no matter what good they intended,
> The armies waited for a verbal error
> With all the instruments for causing pain.
> (Journey to a War), p. 270.

The only certain knowledge is that the cataclysm will come, and that it will cause human misery.

> Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky
> Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;
> The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
> The little natures that will make us cry.
> (Journey to a War), p. 273.

In their world they "carry terror with them like a purse," fixed in "the Present's unopened sorrow." But Auden moves beyond the mere assertion of inevitability. His lines pile up as an indictment of the very possibility of a human solution.

> Nothing is given we must find our law ...
> We have no destiny assigned to us ...
> We are articled to error ...
> And will never be perfect. (Journey to a War), p. 279-281.

The last lines are pessimistic and helpless. Lost love, oppression, error, pain, these are the lot of man who "will never be perfect." Even if this belief has to be acknowledged Auden chooses to make it the basis for a

moral passivity which will destroy the very will to change. Concern moves its point of focus from external event to the corruption of the inner heart. It implicitly suggests that the evil of political events can only be solved in the individual soul rather than in society. Auden moves further towards a vision of the world and human spirit anticipated in an earlier prayer.

> Not Father do prolong
> Our necessary defeat.
> Spare us the numbing zero hour
> The desert long retreat. (Poems 33), p. 110.

One source of this abdication is the acceptance that the only alternative to Fascism is the admission of a purely Christian determinism. In New Year Letter, (Page 52), he had already pointed out the necessity of choice. "As out of Europe comes a voice compelling all to make a choice." In a new poem printed in Collected Poetry Auden describes the pressure of events on the heart and the choice that is offered. But he presents the choice in such a way that it allows no hesitation if one admits his antithesis.

> And winds of terror force us to confess...
> We are reduced to our true nakedness:
> Either we serve the Unconditional,
> Or some Hitlerian monster will supply
> An iron convention to do evil by. (Collected Poems), p. 120.

One's chief concern is the partial identity in the unquestioned allegiance demanded by the Unconditional and the Hitlerian Monster.

Auden's later poems, besides demonstrating a change of style, continue to exhibit his change of spirit too. As Philip Rahv observes:

> Auden neglecting his splendid gifts as satirist and observer of the external world, has gone to school to Kierkegaard and Barth only to emerge as an exponent of stylized anxiety.[27]

Typical of the more vicious wording of a similar attack is Thompson's version:

> Auden had surrendered to negation and despair. He emerged in 1945 as a sort of unauthorized literary amanuensis of a Kierkegaardian. The courageous individual flame burning in despite of a seemingly incomprehensible and evil world, has become an acquiescent prayer.[28]

Auden seems to move away from his previous humanism to a kind of theological fascism. One hesitates to use such a crude term which has been misused to the point where it is virtually nothing but a form of abuse, but there seems no better word to designate some of the less attractive features of Auden's ideas. Even in his earlier poetry there were certain unpleasant tones; I am thinking of his "scoutmasterish" bossiness, his air of superior knowingness and all the slick arrogance of

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[27] Image and Ideas (New York, 1957), p. 179.
[28] E. P. Thompson, Out of Apathy (London, 1960), p. 153.

his writing. Much of this spirit is contained in the revealingly constant repetition of images of the hawk, the eagle and the airman.[29] These symbols all suggest superiority; their independent freedom in an environment unhindered by the earth's limitations. They are literally above and beyond other men.

One can select examples at random from his earlier poetry.

> Consider this and in our time
> As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman.
> (Poems 33), p. 87.

And,

> Overthrown now, in for an hour from the desert
> A hawk looks down on us all; he is not in this,
> Our kindness is hid from the eye of the vivid
> creature. (On This Island),
> p. 38.

One observes that kindness is invisible to Auden's hawk. The hawk / leader identification becomes more specific as a theme in the following lines:

> From stars where kestrels hover
> The leader looking over
> Into the happy valley. (Poems 34), p. 44.

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[29] His preoccupation with the airman had produced the absurd "Airman's Alphabet" in The Orators, (pp. 48-51). In twenty-six verses we are regaled with such information as,

> Engine -- Darling of designers
> and dirty dragon
> and revolving roarer.
> Joystick - Pivot of power
> and responder to pressure
> and grip for glove.

The leader figure is indicative and in the next extract these figures are joined with the plutocrats.

> Engines bear them through the sky
> And isolate like the very rich
> And savants. (Journey to a War), p. 273.

The collection becomes ominous with its connection of the leader, the military man of action, the pilot, the plutocrats and the intellectuals. These vague suggestions become concrete in the repeated request for a leader, the unquestioned commander, who will lead his devoted followers. Aspects of this view seem to have been held at bay since the political events of the thirties so clearly demanded a compassionate and decisive liberalism. After his experience in Spain, traumatic but vague, Auden seems to have given up the struggle to retain humane sympathy, and his natural intellectual arrogance is given free rein. When one thinks of the compassionate liberalism that made the thirties tolerable, the following lines are deplorable, and no explanation of them as meaningless song jingle can negate the very explicit subject matter of these jigging skeltonics.

> And see what they're at - our proletariat ...
> Dyers and Bakers
> And boiler-tube makers
> Poop and ponces
> All of them dunces
> Those over thirty
> Ugly and dirty. (Orators), p. 94.

If this has any meaning it is a sneering attack implying the contemptible nature of ordinary men. This is carried on in the repeated appeal for a leader in the lines,

> Who will save?
> Who will teach us how to behave? (Orators), p.95.

It is possible to trace elements of this incipient fascism in much earlier and supposedly left-wing writings. It has been commented that the plot in the famous Orators is more like a fascist coup organized by schoolboys than a communist revolution. Note the odd mixture of silliness and schoolboy toughness in the following typical instance.

> A penetrating bombardment by obscene telephone messages ..
> Shock troops equipped with wire cutters ...
> Spanner and stink bombs penetrating the houses by
> infiltration, silence all alarm clocks, screw
> down the bathroom taps and remove plugs and paper
> from the lavatories ...
> All who fail to obtain 99% make the supreme sacrifice. (Orators), p. 72.

Now the all-powerful leader myth gets tied to a less schoolboy view of policies. Although there is clear irony intended in sections of Commentary beginning "The state is real, the individual is wicked," it is largely the sarcastic capitalization of the theme words that makes us so certain of the ironic tone of lines like

> Leave Truth to the police and us; we know the Good;

We build the Perfect City time shall never alter.
(Journey to a War), p. 294.

Auden's new theology would find a place for sentiments such as these.

Auden's conversion is said to have been started by some of the things he witnessed in Spain in 1937. Spender says that Auden went to Spain to offer his services as a stretcher bearer with an ambulance unit and returned home after a very short visit of which he never spoke.[30] But in his essay for Modern Canterbury Pilgrims,[31] Auden insists that part of his shock was caused by the sight of the churches closed by the Republican government.[32] This awoke him to the discovery of his own religious feeling. He was reminded that his home atmosphere had been strongly Anglo-Catholic and his childhood religious memories remained fresh. Even the writers who influenced him during his agnostic years after Oxford, Lawrence, Freud, Marx were, he insists, Christian heresies. At this moment of religious discovery he met

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[30]Stephen Spender, World Within World, p. 247.

[31]Edit. J. Pike, New York, 1956.

[32]Roy Campbell, incidentally, though scarcely a reliable witness, claims Auden spent his time playing ping pong in a hotel at Malaga. Quoted by John Mander, The Writer and the Commitment (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 27.

Charles Williams who reinforced his feeling by a "personal sanctity" which made Auden "ashamed of my shortcomings." This Christian conversion was also supported by his loss of confidence in the efficiency of his previous belief in liberal humanism. He charges it, rather unfairly, for the inter-war political and social failure.

> We assumed that there was only one outlook on life conceivable among civilized people, liberal humanism ... However, the liberal humanism of the past had failed to produce the universal peace and prosperity it had promised. Failed even to prevent a World War. What had it overlooked?[33]

This argument puts the roots of his conversion back to 1937, and even then asserts that it is a return to religion rather than a a new discovery. Be this as it may, conversion as with Eliot weakened and undermined his poetry, and in exactly the same way. Besides any expected change of belief there is deterioration at the technical level. His later poetry is marked by a verbosity and the lack of brilliance and significant "bite" in his imagery. Both Auden and Eliot, once rivalling only each other in the concrete immediacy of their images, now write a kind of woolly meandering as an ineffective substitute. In Auden's case consider the immediate impact and subsequent ramifications of meaning in such an image found repeatedly in his earlier

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[33] Modern Canterbury Pilgrims, Edit. J. Pike, New York, 1956.

work:

"The rigid promise fractured in the garden." Compare this in image with a few lines from the first poem Prime in one of his later collections Homes. The opening stanza, which also, rather revealingly, happens to be a single complex sentence, reads as follows:

> Simultaneously, as soundlessly,
> Spontaneously, suddenly
> As, at the vault of the dawn, the mind
> Gates of the body fly open
> To its world beyond, the gates of the mind,
> The horn gate and the ivory gate
> Swing to, swing shut, instantaneously
> Quell the nocturnal rummage
> Of its rebellious fronde, ill-favoured,
> Ill-natured and second-rate,
> Disenfranchised, widowed and orphaned
> By an historical mistake:
> Recalled from the shades to be a seeing being,
> From absence to be on display,
> Without a name or history I wake
> Between my body and the day. (Homes), p. 11.

I wish I could believe that this says much more than that he woke up. It is charitable to call this style "ornamental baroque" with all the associative suggestions of the declension of a once clear and direct style into ornamental excess. If one knew less about Auden it might suggest that his style was following a certain postwar tide of reaction to the realistic imagery of the thirties initiated by such poets as Dylan Thomas, Gascoyne, Barker and Laurie Lee. However, Auden very pointedly defends this new subtlety of expression and redundancies of language in another of his later poems in which he instructs

a new young poet.

> Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever
> And do not listen to those critics ever
> Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books
> Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks.
> (Homes), p. 12.

I search in vain in these lines for the redeeming tone of sarcasm. Rather the advice he proffers seems first to have been accepted by himself.

Perhaps I could begin to substantiate my judgment of the decline in Auden's later writing by a further examination of some poems from Homes. In order to avoid the obvious criticism that I have made a biassed and unrepresentative selection I have chosen to discuss three poems which follow immediately after one another in this volume. If three contiguous poems all expose a similar decline in poetic force extra support is lent to my argument. The three poems are entitled Pleasure Island, In Schrafft's and The Fall of Rome.

The first of these reverts to some of the features of Auden's earlier ballads though it lacks their jaunty rhythm and bright vulgarity of tone and succeeds in being only dreary:

> Miss Lovely, life and soul of the party,
> Wakes with a dreadful start,
> Sure that whatever - O God - she is in for
> Is about to begin,
>
> Or hearing, beyond the hushabye noises
> Of sea and Me, just a voice
> Ask, as one might the time or a trifle
> Extra, her money and her life. (Homes), p. 30.

The awkward rhythm and the tired cleverness of the renewed cliché "her money and her life" seem to combine a poverty of technique and of meaning allowing little merit to remain.

The next poem is entitled In Schrafft's. It begins with a description of a woman having lunch in this New York restaurant:

> Having finished the Blue-plate special
> And reached the coffee stage,
> Stirring her cup she sat,
> A somewhat shapeless figure
> Of indeterminate age
> In an undistinguished hat. (Nones), p. 31.

The tone here can best be described as tired, seen in the indifferently vague word choice of "shapeless", "indeterminate" and "undistinguished". There is a boredom that arises from the scene and communicates itself through the very format of the individual lines with their series of end-stopped terminations and stresses. Each line could be a point of conclusion at the description, and each time the poet rouses himself with a weary sigh for another phrase-line. The theme that this poem develops is that she seems indifferent to "our globular furore, our international rout," these things were "not being bothered about." One can only ask the question as to why this "shapeless figure" is being bothered about.

The next poem in Nones is The Fall of Rome which seems to consist of a parody of the significance of the decline

of Rome obtained by juxtaposing fatuous modern happenings with a comic version of some Roman activity. This creates a dual reference of the human relationship between these two eras which serves to offer a comic counterpart to each other. There are some hints of Eliot's Sweeney poems, but their jazzy slickness and cheerfulness is lost and no extra quality of meaning seems to be substituted. Stanzas such as these are typical:

> Cerebrotonic Cato may
> Extoll the Ancient Disciplines,
> But the muscle-bound Marines
> Mutiny for food and pay.
>
> Caesar's double bed is warm
> As an unimportant clerk
> Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK
> On a pink official form. (Nones), p. 32.

I suspect that to wrestle with such lines to tease out some possible meaning would be supplying to the poem ideas that it could hardly pretend to have on its own.

At the risk of belabouring the point I might merely record the opening stanzas of the next two poems in this collection.

Music Ho begins with a double entendre.

> The Emperor's favorite concubine
> Was in the Eunuch's pay
> The Wardens of the Marches turned
> Their spears the other way. (Nones), p. 34.

The next poem is aptly called a Nursery Rhyme and opens with the following pair of cheerful nonsense couplets:

Their learned kings bent down to chat with frogs;
This was until the Battle of the Bogs.
The key that opens is the key that rusts.

Their cheerful kings made toffee on their stoves;
This was until the Rotting of the Loaves,
The robins vanish when the ravens come. (Nones), p. 35.

One notices how he revives the old forms in the music hall rhythms of the song-like poem.

Give me a doctor partridge-plump,
Short in the leg and broad in the rump,
An endomorph with gentle hands
Who'll never make absurd demands. (Nones), p. 63.

In a later poem Footnotes to Dr. Sheldon Auden asks us to observe a display of trivial prowess:

Behold the manly mesomorph
Showing his splendid biceps off. (Nones), p. 63.

The analogy made seems rather appropriate for Auden's comic posturing here. He almost seems to be demonstrating with how little one can make a poem; such a juggling of trivia and vaguely comic observations. At this point I feel like "the loveliest girls" in the poem who declare that they "do not care for him much."

But along with this technical deterioration, the substitution of an automatic habit of cleverness for real creativity and poetic insight, goes a change of moral standpoint. The liberal ideals of the previous decade are discarded for a cruder if more efficient morality based on an orthodox acceptance of the doctrine of Original Sin, and a deterministic view about eternity. In Time

of War he wrote:

> Men are not innocent as beasts and never can be
> Man can improve himself but never be perfect.
> (Journey to a War), p. 297.

There is a clear theological sense in which this pessimistic remark is true, but it seems that any wide plan of social reform has to base its amelioration on some sense of perfectability even as an ultimate aim. Such a belief is the basis for all socialist ideals. Auden's new determination is more clearly stressed in lines such as these from For The Time Being:

> We know very well that we are not unlucky but evil
> That the dream of a perfect state or no state at all
> To which we fly for refuge is our punishment.
> Let us therefore be contrite but without anxiety,
> For powers and times are not evils but mortal gifts
> from God. (For the Time Being), p.90.

Here the Christian sense of guilt supercedes the visions of political Utopias and visions of "a perfect state" are in themselves part of human punishment; an agonizing mirage at best. There seems only a gentle concern to replace the fiery resentment of the poems in which Auden denounced the England of the depression years. The sense of hope that makes the point of indignation has been replaced by a sense of contrition at man's sin. And even when Auden writes a new love poem his appeal is not for love but for redemption, his concern is not with human passion but with divine commands.

> We my darling, for our sins,
> Suffer in each other's woe

Read in injured eyes and hands
How we broke divine commands

And served the Devil.
Who is passionate enough
When the punishment begins?
O my love, O my love,
For the right of fire and snow
Save me from evil. (Collected Poetry), p. 232.

Some change in viewpoint may be found simply in the process of growing older. Age sets the poet into the camp of the middle-aged and costs him that eager ardor of youthful revolution. The zeal for reform, seeing the world in simplified terms as capable of improvement and amelioration by edict, may be an immature vision though it is compulsive and satisfying. One might therefore expect a pathos in the realization of aging. Auden, his views moving ahead of his chronology, seems only to find a sense of respite in growing old. If he fears death there are the compensations of seeing the world with the blood calm and the emotions cool. In A walk After Dark Auden looks at the stars and seeks a comfort in their maturity, not in their challenging infinity.

Now unready to die
But already at the stage
When one starts to dislike the young
I am glad those points in the sky
May also be counted among
The creatures of middle age. (Nones), p. 71.

The middle-aged are perfectly entitled to "dislike the young" but there is a sense of abdication in such an assertion, a pose, like Eliot's smug senility.

But the hints of the old Auden remain in this last poem where he looks again at the last "low, dishonest decade." The present clearly still requires the denouncing tongue that castigated the apathy and folly of England between the wars. The diagnosis has been made and it is as viable now as it was at first. Auden can look glumly and angrily at the present with its repeated permutations of past folly.

> For the present stalks abroad
> Like the past and its wronged again
> Whimper and are ignored
> And the truth cannot be hid;
> Somebody chose their pain,
> What needn't have happened did. (Nones), p. 71.

The last line echos the despair and his earlier indictment of policies which led so inevitably to the war. Here Auden sounds the same note that rang in his powerful lines of compassionate understanding, "We must love one another or die." But now his vision of the world is jaundiced; tired rather than dispassionate. In his middle-aged vision the city appears only dreary.

> The clockwork spectacle is
> Impressive in a slightly boring
> Eighteenth century way. (Nones), p. 71.

The superiority, the cultivated aridity of taste, the blasé intellectualism combine to make a distasteful tone here. When Auden gets to his last stanza in which one searches for some comment on these "present wrongs," some poetically valid assertion that marked the theme in his earlier verse, one discovers the following placid lines:

But the stars burn on overhead,
Unconscious of final ends,
As I walk home to bed,
Asking what judgment waits
My person, all my friends
And these United States. (Nones), p. 71.

As "the present stalks abroad," Auden makes for the safe contentment of his bed idly curious about the fate that awaits his acquaintances and the entire country. The remarkable thing is, of course, the peculiar placidity, the indifference to the situation. What would once have called forth his most powerful rhetoric causes him to share the indifference of the distant stars. Besides this withdrawal there is the trivial sentimentality of the benediction of the last lines; a hymn-like final close made the more obvious by being the last words in this collection of Auden's verse.

After this there was one more recent book of poems published in England under the title Homage to Clio. Eagerly one bought it, for a new volume by Auden is still potentially a major poetic event. As one glanced through it there came only a sinking of heart as one's worst fears were too readily confirmed. The elements that characterized Nones were equally obvious and prevalent in the newer book; the joyless wit, the arch cleverness, the apparent assumption that his most trivial exercise is worthy of preservation for an eager posterity. These poems range from three pages dedicated to discussing the problems and implications of Installing an American Kitchen in Lower Austria to the

motto-quality four lined Parable that runs as follows in the manner of Ogden Nash:

> The watch upon my wrist
> Would soon forget that I exist,
> If it were not reminded
> By days when I forget to wind it. (Homage to Clio), p.37.

T the Great is a mock heroic parable of the decline of the great hero - possibly Tamburlaine, and consists of a series of couplets introducing a meaningless burlesque biography of this type:

> Begot like other children he
> Was known among his kin as T. (Homage to Clio), p. 32.

Some Bathtub Thoughts and a five lined History of the Boudoir follow. After this barrel scraping most of the rest of the space is taken up with an Addendum of Academic Graffiti which range from the almost total pointlessness of rhymes like

> Louis Pasteur
> So his colleagues aver,
> Lived on excellent terms
> With most of his germs. (Homage to Clio), p.89.

to the rare note of shrewd, slightly bitchy, wit of his comments on Yeats:

> To get the Last Poems of Yeats
> You need not mug up on dates;
> All the reader requires
> Is some knowledge of gyres
> And the sort of people he hates. (Homage to Clio), p. 90.

The only other long work in this collection is an Interlude: Dichtung and Wahrheit which is a series of prose observations on a poem that did not get written. It makes

some curious comments on love, but concludes with the pessimistic assertions:

> This poem I wished to write was to have expressed exactly what I mean when I think of the words, I love you, but I cannot know exactly what I mean ... So this poem will remain unwritten. That doesn't matter. (Homage to Clio), p. 51.

That last clause seems a rather strange observation for a major poet to make. It is not only defeatist but seems to accept the poetic restriction with extraordinary placidity. If the absence of a poem "doesn't matter" what more can a critic say?

It may be that the struggle that engages Auden at present is a more general battle that is being fought out in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, themselves disenchanted with the leftist principals that seemed so righteous in the thirties. Many have not taken Auden's step into the comfortable security of the Church, but his concerns and preoccupations are theirs too. As Hoggart observes of Auden's significance in this respect:

> Auden is at the frontiers of this anxiety-torn world. He is one of those who play out in themselves with unusual and revealing clarity, struggles to which, whether we recognize it or not, we are all committed.[34]

It might be then that Auden has not so much avoided the commitment, has perhaps indicated, as Eliot has done, that our true preoccupation must be with spiritual, rather than socio-political issues. If this is true it does not seem to me that it can be supported by his poetry. The

[34]Hoggart, p. 219.

later anxious, fuzzy investigations are slender accomplishments for the maturity of a poet whose earlier voice was so strong and sure; so challenging in its compassion and ardour.

Whatever doubts one has to express about his later work, no one would attempt to deny his predominant influence on younger poets. This aspect of Auden's significance is stressed by Geoffrey Grigson when he evaluates his place in a broader cultural context.

> Auden has affected the kind of poems that are written, the sounds they make, the shape they assume. He assimilates the fashions and regurgitates, in the manner of Stravinsky and Picasso, blending the poetic cultures discrete in time and contemporaneous in their nature, cultivates past and present and of different languages, refined and restricted and popular.[35]

His influence is dramatic indeed, yet I do not think that Auden has to be explained as one of those writers more influential than personally significant. His quality as a poet rests solidly on his earlier verse and especially Poems 1930, the crucial Spain 1937 and the wry perception of New Year Letter. When one re-reads these works and tastes again the sharp concentration of his imagery one can continually aver Auden's achievement and personal quality, not as a stimulating influence but as a poet. But too often his mature work, which should be the culmination of experience both of life and of technique fails in both elements. In considering Auden's major writing

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[35]Gr. Grigson, Poetry of the Present (London, 1949), p. 6.

one is driven to talk of the past, and as the poet seems to fade the Man of Letters takes his place. Auden is a busy entrepreneur of letters, on the committee of a book club, he is a popular and expensive lecturer, a reviewer. In a manner similar to that of Spender or Day Lewis he dissipates his remarkable talent in the sidelines of poetry. This is not the cause, I suspect, but the result of a slackening of the poetic impulse. Recent work shows verbosity taking the place of his earlier sharp precision; pessimism and apathy replacing his confident and compassionate hope. Yet Auden is still a writer who could replenish the form of his poetry. All the old skills are there and the authentic voice sounds through occasionally in even his later writing albeit dimly. Surely no other poet still stands so close to the heart of an age which needs his comprehension and awareness.

Although Spender based his ideas on solidarity with the working classes his personal contacts were even more limited than those of his three "comrades." His intense personal diffidence precluded even the casual meetings that might have been made at pubs or sports events. His feeling towards the workers had to be one of sympathy from the outside. Intellectually he may have hated with all his heart the class barriers that restricted him, but he could only reach across them in compassion. His social origin, his superior Oxford education, and his inherent shyness did not allow him to make any natural class-free approaches to the workers for whom he suffered. The following section from a New Verse article by Idris Davis, a true worker / comrade by birth, makes the kind of arrogant and spiteful attack which must have reinforced Spender's sense of division.

> Auden, Allott, MacNeice and Spender - it is like a refrain. When these people and perhaps yourself were learning their Latin verbs in cushy places, I had to do my job in the coal mine. Since then, however, I have done a little Latin myself ... But it is the Allotts and the Spenders who talk so glibly about experience.[1]

This is a very unfair attack, although one appreciates the source of the indignation. One might flippantly suggest that the English public school "cushy places" in

[1] Idris Davis, New Verse, No. 1, Jan. 1939, p. 30.

Orwell's description for example,[2] make the coal mine seem a restful alternative. It is simply incorrect to suggest that Spender talks "glibly about experience." Spender has major weaknesses as a poet, but they do not stem from glibness. That charge can so much more appropriately be leveled at Auden. Sympathy and anger are the basis of the writing of all these four poets, but in Spender's case there is none of the jeering satire and confident exposition that marked Auden's verse.

Spender is the first to admit the important influence that Auden exerted upon him. He remarks in his autobiography:

> Doubtless Auden influenced me at this time. I absorbed many of his remarks and attitudes which impressed me even more deeply than I was aware of then.[3]

But in spite of this influence Spender's emotions were more personal and tender, and were expressed in lyrical writing. His sensitivity led to involvement, not detachment. He sympathized as he exposed the social disaster, seeing its human misery. Such feeling shows in his technique too. In his poems there is rarely evidence of tricks of verbal dexterity; that surface complexity for its own

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[2]See the horrifying description of boarding school life in "Such Such Were the Joys." George Orwell, A Collection of Essays (New York, 1954), p. 9ff.

[3]Stephen Spender, World Within World (London, 1951), p. 52.

sake that marred so much of the poetry of this period. In spite of his admission above, better than the other two poets he resisted Auden's cynical tone which tended to freeze any personal sentiment at source.

If his clever certainty gave Auden his essential strength; his sardonic penetration, it warred with the spirit of both Day Lewis and Spender. Spender's simpler tenderness may be understood by noting that he was called (not entirely with kindly intentions) "the Rupert Brooke of the Depression." He responded with idealistic sympathy; he suffered rather than analyzed.

Politically Spender felt drawn to the Communist Party as were so many intellectuals of this time. For a few weeks he was even a party member. His declared reason for breaking with the party was as much poetic as political.[4] He insisted that a poet could not create while he was involved with such a movement.

> For the poets to forsake poetic truth would be a betrayal not only of themselves, but of society ... I must admit that I believe the policy of insisting on a rigid Marxist orthodoxy to be perhaps laudable but mistaken.[5]

Though obvious, this is somewhat of a surprising assertion coming from Spender when one considers his disinclination

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[4]His brief membership of the Party seemed only undertaken at the instigation of the British Communist leader, Harry Pollit. He convinced Spender that it was a necessary demonstration of purpose before he set off for Spain. World Within World, pp. 210-211.

[5]S. Spender, Forward From Liberalism (New York, 1937), p. 186.

to seek the advantages of detachment, and his urge to identify himself by a totalemotional commitment. But he realized that party-line propaganda could not be called poetry, and that his work could not develop in the strait-jacket of Marxist dogma. His independence of outlook made him an object of suspicion to the party. His early play, Trial of a Judge[6] was regarded as heretically bourgeois by the Communist critics, for its questioning of specious arguments for the relativity of truth.

His antagonism to the restrictions of a rigid political standpoint was strengthened because, more than any other poet of his time, Spender was divided by the effort to reconcile his social conscience with its demand for commitment and his need for a personal freedom for poetic development. His intellect realized that a controlled socialist system would offer more hope to the starving and neglected unemployed. He also understood that such a society by its very nature would condition poetry. This would be especially dangerous in his own case for his writing, more even than Day Lewis' tended to the lyric rather than the didactic.

In spite of the lyric style, it was Spender, surprisingly enough, who was responsible for the verse Pylons whose title created the term, "The Pylon Poets" which was a catch-phrase label for the Auden group in the thirties.

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[6]S. Spender, Trial of a Judge (London, 1938).

Surveying the changes brought about by the continuing industrialization of Britain, he wrote these famous lines reprinted reluctantly in his Collected Poems only "for the record" with the sense of an "obligation to own up."

> The secret of these hills was stone and cottage
> Of that stone made,
> And crumbling roads
> That turned on sudden hidden villages.
>
> Now over these small hills they have built the concrete
> That trails black wire;
> Pylons, those pillars
> Bare, like nude giant girls that have no secret.
> (Poems), p. 57.

The change that Eliot brought into poetry has been further extended in this and similar poems. Eliot, especially in his earlier poetry, demonstrated that no subject could properly be considered as unsuitable for poetry. The ugliness of urban sprawl and slum areas could prove as fecund in poetic inspiration as was Wordsworth's Lake District, or Byron's Greece of an earlier era. The "damp souls of housemaids" were as valid an emotional reality as the ardours of any tragic heroine. The "Pylon Poets" carried this assumption a stage further. Not only were these subjects permissable, but they became essential; the demonstration of a drive to embrace modernity; an escape from the pre-1914 Georgian attitudes to poetry.[7]

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[7]One notes how impressed Spender was with the posing paradox of the assertion Auden made to him at the University. "Auden insisted that the most beautiful walk in Oxford was that along the canal and past the gasworks. After this I began writing poems containing references to gasworks, factories and slums." World Within World, p. 92.

The acceptance of these themes had both a poetic and a political basis, for as Spender observed the surface features dictated the nature of their contemporary world.

> The face of the landscape is a mask
> Of bone and iron lines where time
> Has ploughed its character. (Still Centre), p.16.

The unexpected and indeed impressive thing about Spender is the way in which he can couple the sensitivity of a Romantic poet with "pylon" imagery and the modern techniques of irregular rhythm and assonance. This combination allows Spender to write of an aeroplane in so lyrical a fashion that one has the impression that, apart from the subject, in tone and imagery the poem could have been written fifty years before.

> More beautiful and soft than any moth
> With blurry furred antennae feeling its huge path
> Through dusk. The airliner with shut off engines
> Glides over the suburbs and the sleeves set trailing tall
> To point the wind. Gently, broadly, she falls
> Scarcely disturbing charted currents of air.
> (Poems), p. 55.

This poem, in its slightly fanciful way, is successful in developing a mood, but the conflict between realism of subject and the instinctive poeticism of Spender's vision can produce a conflict as absurd as,

> I must have love enough to run a factory on
> Or give a city power, or drive a train. (Poems), p. 15.

Compare similarily the image from Trial of a Judge, (p.22.):

> If there is love or any dancer's art
> To restore symmetry now, it must be stronger
> Than small brass wheels. I must have cranes
> To lift stone weights or love
> Powerful enough to run a country on.

The Midland Express also exposes the false energy and the glib ardour to which this style leans.

> Muscular virtuoso!
> Once again you take the centre of the stage ...
> All England lies beneath you like a woman
> With limbs ravished. (Still Centre), p. 47.

Here is crude rhetoric and the image shows a childish desire to shock, but in this poem Spender records his awareness of dependence on industrial stimuli as he writes, "Beneath my lines I read your iron lines."

The railway subject was used again more successfully in The Express. The mechanical subject is now more successfully absorbed, the excitement and elation are more firmly translated into effective imagery. With a rhythmic emphasis owing something to Hopkins' "sprung rhythm" Spender writes:

> After the first powerful plain manifesto
> The black statement of the pistons, without more fuss
> But gliding like a queen she leaves the station ...
>
> Beyond the town, there lies the open country
> Where, gathering speed, she acquires mystery
> The luminous self-possession of ships on ocean.
> It is now she begins to sing -- at first quite low
> Then loud and at last with a jazzy madness. (Poems), p.53.

One's first response to such a poem today is likely to be "So what?" The element of shock and novelty which made such verses "manifestoes" (the use of that word here is revealing) has gone. What is left? Is this just a

clever description, the verbal equivalent of the music-hall entertainer who imitates a train by making huffing and screeching sounds with his distorted lips? There is something in this view. It is a concert piece. But a phrase like "she acquires mystery" gives evidence that Spender has found some personal significance in this scene which would not exist if this poem were merely a cadenza. The train symbol expands in the poet's mind until all the excitement of technological beauty and power floods his vision and becomes a new aspect of the loveliness for which poets have eternally searched. In lines that clearly echo Hopkins' pervasive technique Spender proclaims the new beauty.

> Ah like a comet through flame she moves entranced
> Wrapped in her music, no bird song, no, nor bough
> Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.
> (Poems), p. 54.

Spender's confident delight in the potentialities of this industrial development is more difficult to share in our time, when the dangers and complexities of technological progress are discussed ad nauseum in the columns of even the most trivial journalists. It seemed in the thirties that it might be possible for science to conquer poverty, misery and social despair. This was the foundation of the age's optimism and, paradoxically enough, the thirties were a time of hope. In the face of the greatest economic depression the world has ever seen, the retreat of liberalism on all fronts, the rise of continental

dictatorships and approaching war, there seemed to be a hope that something could and would be done. This hope, however nebulous and ironically misapplied, saved the thirties from the apathy about the value of personal decision that marks our present decade. Their vague but significant optimism was the basis for the literature of protest.

In the thirties everywhere Spender looked he saw evidence of the misery and despair that the war and the uncontrolled forces of capitalism had brought about. His sensitive nature responded intensely to the suffering of others. In his autobiography he describes his hallucinatory desire for painful punishment even as a child. The following lines tell us much about the almost masochistic intensity of feeling Spender brings into his poetry.

> I often regretted that there were no great causes left to fight for; that I could not be crucified, nor go on a crusade, nor choose to defend the cause of St. Joan against the wicked English ... I thirsted for great injustices ... There were times when I regretted not having my arms extended on a cross with rusty nails driven through my hands.
> (World Within World), p. 2.

Such sensitivity may perhaps have been heightened by the knowledge that his family had inherited both Jewish and German strain. His later guilt in this heredity was the more intense because his family rather significantly chose to conceal these Jewish antecedents from him when he was young. Even as a child there was a separateness which

left Spender "outside", wanting to be a part of all that intense working-class life which his upbringing disqualified him from knowing. In an interesting poem of childhood impressions he writes:

> My parents kept me from children who were rough,
> And who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.
> Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street
> And climbed cliffs and stripped by country streams.
> (Poems), p. 22.

Spender's alienation originated early, with parental training reinforcing a natural shyness of disposition, and a shrinking fear of the bruises caused by "words like stones." It was this instinctive withdrawal that he had to fight when he tried to share the experiences and feelings of his comrades of the working class. He notes the mixture of horror and admiration with which he responded to these street urchins.

> I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron
> And their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.
> I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys
> Who copied my lisp behind me on the road. (Poems), p. 22.

Spender's position to get their "knees tight on his arms" is the humiliated prone posture as the triumphant victorious boy wrestler kneels on him. To Spender schoolboy fighting becomes synonymous with this defeat. "Salt" suggests the physical sense of the pain he felt as they mimicked him, and perhaps recalls too, the taste of his own tears running down his cheeks. There is no evidence

of the length of time between his experience and the writing of these lines, yet the memory has seared in and his slight impediment of speech is remembered as a fact that further set him apart from the casual conformity of these boys. The third stanza shows his envy of these healthy young animals, undernourished and neglected as they undoubtably were.

> They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges
> Like dogs to bark at our[8] world. They threw
> mud while I looked the other way, pretending to
> smile, I longed to forgive them, yet they never
> smiled. (Poems), p. 22.

There are two especially revealing features in these lines. The dogs that "bark at our world" indicate Spender's shame of his middle-class background because it seemed in some way a sham; limited and narrow, compared with the colorful violence of working-class life. This was particularly true because he so early felt a strong sense of responsibility, even guilt, that none of his relations seemed to share. Stoically he maintained the facade "pretending to smile", but how revealing is his observation, "I longed to forgive them" closely followed by "they never smiled." The urge to approach, to be accepted was strong, but they would not allow him to join them on his terms. They would not give him the chance to act the morally superior St. Francis part that he longed to play in his physical weakness.

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[8]"our" is emended into the less class-conscious, more personal, "my" world in the Collected Poems.

This poem seems to me extremely important for an understanding of Spender's later feelings. It shows his intense sense of pity, his envy for that unthinking acceptance of the world that can never be known by the self-conscious intellectual. It hints too, at that faint tone of priggish attitudinizing which arose when he tried to face the social gulf that no conscious act of his could narrow. Suggestively he remarked in 1937, "Perhaps the revolution responds to some need in me which I have felt since I was a child."[9]

His conscience would never let him withdraw from the attempt to bridge this class barrier. His poetic sensibility was employed to express the truths that demanded utterance in the economic waste land that was all about him. Yet sometimes this urge to enforce the economic facts, wars with his instinctive poetic sensibility even within a single poem. When at the coast he sees the country beauty of The Marginal Field. He begins with direct description:

> On the chalk cliff edge struggles the final field
> Of barley smutted with tares and marbled
> With veins of rusted poppy as though the plough
> had bled. (Still Centre), p. 41.

The sharp effectiveness of the simile of the bleeding plough, and the compression gained from the unusual verbs "smutted" and "marbled" demonstrate the development of Spender's poetic style. These virtues are lost in diffuse indignation as he seeks to explain the economic abuse in

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[9]S. Spender, Forward from Liberalism (New York, 1937), p. 171.

such a farm where "the wage of the labourer (is) sheeted in sweat."

> Here the price and the cost cross on a chart
> At a point fixed on the margin of profit
> Which opens out in the golden fields. (Still Centre), p.41.

The contrived note as Spender attempts the scientific tone of graphs and charts is in obvious contrast with the quality of the earlier lines. Spender has to force himself to make the sort of cross reference that came so easily to Auden and MacNeice. There is always a sense of strain when he attempts to follow their pattern, which resists his natural poetic skill.

At whatever cost to the natural development of his poetry, he could not avoid the economic issues of the period, for, wherever he looked his conscience was stirred by human distress. He observed cripples "with limbs shaped like questions", and the pictorial appropriateness of the comparison with the twisted legs is extended by our knowledge that these people by their damaged existence are asking a question of all feeling men in their society. His image includes the social challenge he faced, and being Spender he feels "the pulverous grief melting the bones with pity." Auden might have avoided such a question at the personal level by a sharp and emphatic diagnosis; Spender is aware more of the nature of his own response; his theme is the distress created by his discovery and the attack those question limbs make on his conditioned assumptions. The poem

continues:

> What I expected was
> Thunder, fighting,
> Long struggles with men
> And climbing ...
>
> What I had not forseen
> Was the gradual day
> Weakening the will
> Leaking the brightness away,
> The lack of good to touch
> The failing of body and soul. (Poems), p.25.

This is a pessimistic poem, for clearly Spender's discovery of the physical facts of damaged limbs has militated against his idealistic, theoretical concepts of social reformation.

> For I had expected always
> Some brightness to hold in trust,
> Some final innocence
> To save from dust.[10] (Poems), p. 26.

The contorted limbs question the honesty of his vision as well as the social wrongs they suffer.

But if these are realities which attack his idealization, their appeal to his compassion is direct and inescapable.

> To the hanging despair of eyes in the street offer
> Your making hands and your liver on skewers of pity.
> (Still Centre), p. 30.

The agony of the skewered pity may seem excessively butcherish, but it may not be over-strong to express Spender's

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[10]Again there is a revealing emendation in the Collected Poems version. "To save" with its suggestion of positive action becomes "exempt" which is purely passive, the decision outside the hands of the speaker. Poems, p. 26.

visceral compassion. He sought love, knowing that the times all but precluded its healing tenderness. When love could be fleetingly achieved it had to be snatched in "improbable places."

> We'll tear love
> Between the slogans of comrades.
> We forced love--
> To grow in improbable places
> Under the street doorways
> The yawning railway arches. (Trial of a Judge), p. 55.

In a famous poem of this period Spender describes a typical enough scene but with a new vehemence; a desperation that gives it life through his knowledge and involvement.

> Moving through the silent crowd
> Who stand behind dull cigarettes
> These men who idle in the road,
> I have a sense of falling light.
>
> They lounge at corners of the street
> And greet friends with a shrug of shoulder
> And turn their empty pockets out,
> The cynical gestures of the poor.
>
> Now they've no work, like better men
> Who sit at desks and take much pay,.
> They sleep long nights and rise at ten
> To watch the hours that drain away. (Poems), p. 30.

He sees the apathy that falls on the unemployed. Even the cigarettes, which must be precious, are dull, smoked indifferently without relishing puffs. There is no revolutionary fervor here; perhaps even that would be more desirable, for it would indicate the continuing fire of human determination. "The shrug of shoulder" and the "cynical gestures," these expose the hollowness

of industrial society more effectively than strikes and riots. Spender can never escape from these haunting figures, their despair is always with him:

> In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic,
> They beg, their eyes made big by empty staring
> And only measuring Time, like the blank clock.
> (Poems), p. 61.

He responds with an aching pity, but he remains even now, as much the envious outsider as he was with the young children in the road.

> I'm jealous of the weeping hours
> They stare through with such longing eyes,
> I'm haunted by these images,
> I'm haunted by their emptiness. (Poems), p.30.

He is well-fed and comfortable, but revealingly he is "jealous" because he can only observe, not share, their world. It is also an interesting comment on his writing at this time that while his spirit is haunted by the "emptiness" his writing is haunted by the intrusive "images" of industrial dislocation.

The sense of compassion pervades all his writing, and constantly contrasts with the satiric harshness of his contemporaries as he declares, "I claim fulfillment in the fact of loving." His love extends to any areas of social neglect. For the prisoners he sees in a jail, his feeling is only a tender love.

> Their time is almost Death. The silted flow
> Of years and years
> Is marked by dawns
> As faint as cracks on mud-flats of despair.

My pity moves amongst them like a breeze
On walls of stone
Fretting for summer leaves, or like a tune
On ears of stone. (Poems), p. 37.

The poem gains part of its effect by the repeated points of comparison between the landscapes that Spender loved so well, and the spiritual comfort that these prisoners are denied. Pity is the breeze or the leaves, their imprisonment silts up the river-like flow of their lives. With captive years ahead of them the individual dawns both literal and spiritual are faint, too faint to break "the mud flats of despair" that continues the silt metaphor in its dismal denial of fruition or escape. At last with a fierceness of rhetoric he concludes with a fervent,

No, no, no
It is too late for anger,
Nothing prevails
But pity for the grief they cannot feel. (Poems), p.38.

"Nothing prevails but pity" could become the leit-motif of all of Spender's early writing. It echoes the words of the admired Wilfred Owen, "The Poetry is in the pity." Another similarity to Owen's spirit may be seen in Spender's repudiation of anger. As a humanist his emotions should be inflamed by such suffering, but anger is too easy, too inadequate a response to the contemporary scene. Owen found Sasson's apparently satisfying indignation hollow as he contemplated disaster. Spender also chooses pity before rage.

The image of freedom appearing as the call of the breeze and the summer leaves is only incidental in the previous poem, but it becomes the central aspect of the well-known poem An Elementary Classroom in a Slum. Here the country-side is seen as an avenue of escape that will allow children to flee from the restrictions of their ugly urban environment. This poem was considerably revised after its first publication, but it is one of the few poems which show an appreciable improvement in its revision. I speculate that the early version in a Faber collection[11a] was a premature publication. The first printing in the Spender canon was in The Still Centre, (London, 1939). In this volume the date when the individual poems were written is not indicated, but the collection consists of shorter poems written since the 1934 edition of Poems. The Faber version did not satisfy Spender. In his Foreword to The Still Centre (p. 9) he lists certain poems, including An Elementary Classroom as ones that had needed entire re-writing. The result is far more satisfactory than in other instances in The Still Centre where he attempted to tidy up the poems.

First Spender describes poignantly the classroom scene:

> The tall girl with her weighed down head. The-
> seeming boy with the rat's eyes. The stunted
> unlucky heir.

[11b] The Faber Book of Modern Verse, Michael Roberts, edit., (London, 1938), p. 303.

Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease
His lesson from his desk. (Still Centre), p.28.

The skinny girl with her stringy neck inadequately supporting a gaunt, bony skull, and the "paper-seeming boy," thin, white and transparently fragile, are diseased from birth, inheriting and repeating the genetic inadequacies of their parents in a sequence of social neglect. These are the raw material of the future society which the poet now so indignantly sees condemned to this classroom cage with "sour cream walls." That "sour" doubles the effect of the non-descript khaki of the gloomy school walls, and one's own disgusted response to the whole scene. On one wall is the "open-handed map awarding the world its world."[11b] In this era of rickety children and niggardly schoolboards, the map seems shamelessly generous, ostentatiously offering the glories of the world to the imagination, and suggesting that there are other places where this kind of misery is not the inevitable concomitant of existence. The implication of this map leads Spender into direct criticism of the social system that condemns these children to the unjust conflict between their world and the open hands of the maps. For them the map cannot offer any escape.

And yet for these
Children, these windows, not this world are world

[11b] The compressed paradox of this line was both confused and over explicit in the Faber version: "open handed map/awarding the explicit world of every name but here."

Where all their future's painted with a fog,
A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky.
Far, far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.[12]

The child's reality is so bleak that Spender ironically suggests that it would be more bearable to stunt their imagination at source, to conceal the heartbreaking promise of alternatives that are denied them. "So blot their maps with slums as big as doom." In the circumstances to which they must become reconciled,

Surely Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal.
For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night?

If they are to be industrial "hands" should we let them get a dangerous glimpse of the full status of life, Spender asks sarcastically. It will be easier for them and safer for society if they assume their own world is the norm. Such a view denies any valid attitude to humane life and Spender rather calls for action, and in lines of impassioned rhetoric which are not dishonest for all their trumpet flamboyance he demands that the children be allowed an escape.

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[12]Instead of this continuing significant pun on "world" the Faber version offers the awkward, unrhythmical inversion of the following dull sentence.

For these young lives guilty and dangerous
Is fantasy of travel.

[13]Again the Faber version seems remarkably weaker. The concrete references to ships and sun were replaced by the didactic explanation of,

Surely Shakespeare is wicked
To lives that wryly turn, under the structural Lie,
Towards smiles or hate?

The abstraction and capitalization of "the structural Lie", add nothing to the bleak, concrete vision of the children living "in their cramped holes."

> Break, O Break open till they break the town
> And show the children to the fields and all their world,
> Azure on their sands, to let their tongues
> Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open.
> History theirs whose language is the sun.[14]

This poem indicates that Spender's pity was no longer a static thing as it had appeared when he observed the unemployed. His was now a voice to shout this shame:

> But let the wrong cry out as raw as wounds
> This time forgets and never heals, far less transcends. (Poems), p. 61.

It is the sense of wrong, the absence of love that tears at Spender's emotions. He asks:

> What cross draws out our arms,
> Heaves up our bodies towards the wind
> And hammers us between the mirrored lights? (Poems), p. 12

He is approaching here an almost masochistic self-martyrdom far from Auden's confident exposition. When Spender looks at the social decay and misery around him he feels compassion so much more than easy anger. His empathy makes him merge himself with the suffering of others:

> This century chokes me under roots of night,
> I suffer like history in Dark Ages, where
> Truth lies in dungeon too deep for whisper.
> (Poems), p. 41.

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[14]This exciting and exotic paean takes the place of the following original lines of pedestrian explanation.

> O that beauty has words and works which break
> Through coloured walls and towers. The children stand
> As in a climbing mountain train. This lesson illustrates the world green in their many valleys beneath: The total summer heavy with their flowers. Still Centre, p. 29.

Choking he may be, but the writings of these poets were beginning to raise the whisper to a shout that no dungeons could restrain. Yet as Spender "suffers like history" he is also aware of the dangers of this feeling, perhaps sensing his own weakness. It was Spender who pointed out the element of masochism that underlay Owen's totality of pity.[15] The warning in the next lines must be for himself, an assertion of "the destructive element" in his own self-flagellating compassion.

> remember
> Revenge and despair are prisoned in your bowels.
> Life cannot pardon the ideal without scruple
> The enemy of flesh, the angel and destroyer
> Creator of self-martyrdom, serene but horrible.
> (Poems), p. 43.

One way of escaping from this nullifying excess was to sound a call to action demanding that others join in forming a new society. He calls the youth demanding that they see the urgency of rebuilding the crumbling values which the previous generation had bequeathed their children. With a rhetoric which has an earnest force, however much it is based on a rather naive Communist view, he charges:

> oh young men, oh young comrades
> it is too late now to stay in those houses
> your fathers built where they built you to
> build to breed
> money on money. it is too late
> to make or even count what has been made. (Poems), p. 44.

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[15] See S. Spender, The Destructive Element (London, 1935), p. 218. "Pity is not an adequate emotion in poetry. It tends to become negative, exhausting, sentimental, masochistic."

The young of this era were more than usually skeptical of the past. They had to form a new synthesis to meet world conflict. They might have inherited the secure world of the Edwardian age, ("those houses your fathers built" are symbolic as well as literal) but both had been shattered by the war, and the subsequent economic disaster. Elsewhere Spender repeats the theme of this assertion:

> This only what I tell;
> It is too late for rare accumulation
> For family pride, for beauty's filtered dusts;
> I say, stamping the words with emphasis,
> Drink from here energy and only energy,
> As from the electric charge of a battery,
> To will this Time's change. (Poems), p. 68.

This generation must leave the areas haunted by the past, "the great homes where the ghosts are prisoned." It is too late to retrieve this distant world of the past. They can only count on their own strength, the positive things, certain, measurable, owing nothing to history.

> Count rather these fabulous possessions
> which begin with your body and your fiery soul ...
> Count your eyes as jewels and your valued sex
> then count the sun and the innumerable coined light
> sparkling on waves and spangled under trees
> It is too late now to stay in great houses where
> ghosts are prisoned. (Poems), p. 44.

Perhaps it is only Spender's intense concern that saves this from being another record of "the best things in life are free." He goes on from this to demand a fresh start based only on the unchallengeable and certain evidence of the senses. The lines make clear his belief that the social system is discredited, but perhaps they also imply that he was beginning to doubt whether another system

would be much more efficacious. Here he is already becoming divided from the realpolitik of the Marxists, though his mission remains an idealization of their promises:

> No man
> Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.
> Our goal which shall compel: Man shall be man.
> (Poems), p.69.

He invokes the ardour of youth when he demands that they

> advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill
> advance to rebel and remember what you have
> no ghost ever had, immured in his hall. (Poems), p.44.

One reason for the demand from change was the general acceptance of the inadequacy and folly of the professional diplomats. Spender describes this world of political cynicism and intrigue with a newsreel technique. Using a series of isolated scenes he describes contemporary events; the Reichstag for example, burned by the Nazis themselves and used by them to justify the unconstitutional assault on the German Communist Party. It is indicative that Spender joins in the plural of "Our Party."

> the chancellor clutching his shot arm (and that
> was perhaps a put up job for his own photographers)
> the parliament their own side set afire
> and then Our Party banned. (Poems), p.49.

The underlying futility in the political manoeuvering made even the most important of international conferences suspect. Even the League of Nations assemblies are reduced sadly yet accurately, to the catalogue of

> motor-cycles, wires, aeroplanes, cars, trains
> converging at that one town Geneva.
> top hats, talking at the edge of silk-blue lake,
> then the mountains. (Poems), p. 49.

The series of abortive conferences and humiliating retractions of agreements scars the history of the thirties. Spender asserts that this moral degeneration between nations could be avoided by concerned and aroused individuals. He again calls upon youth and rallies them with the cry,

> O comrades, let not those who follow after
> The beautiful generations that shall spring from our sides --
> Let them not wonder how, after the failure of banks
> The failure of cathedrals and the declared insanity of our rulers
> We lacked the spring-like resources of the tiger.
> (Poems), p. 48.

One notes here that Spender directs his attack on the three great forces which seemed to be responsible for the chaos and misery of this age: the banks, whose folly over the gold-standard caused almost as much misery as the war; the rulers, not satisfied with one great war seemed by their policies to be courting a second; and religion, its drive deadened by complacent traditional ritual seeming to offer no crusade to rouse dissatisfied youth. Spender and the other poets asserted the need to act and they were both the spokesmen and the intellectual leaders of their generation. Their sense of personal responsibility contrasts with today's fatalistic apathy. Spender posed the question they all

sought to answer:

> Who live under the shadow of war
> What can I do that matters? (Poems), p. 31.

By seeking a solution in decision they tried to escape from historical determination; sought an alternative to the constrictions of their personal world. They wanted release from the limitations imposed by

> A network of railways, money, words words words,
> Meals, papers, exchanges, debates.
> Cinema, wireless. (Still Centre), p. 18.

In an untitled poem Spender called this historical necessity.

> that line
> Traced on our graphs through History, where the
> oppressor
> Starves and deprives the poor. (Poems), p. 61.

This poem describes again the unemployed, but some suggestive comments on Spender's own writing are included.

> In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic,
> They beg, their eyes made big by empty staring
> And only measuring Time, like the blank clock.
>
> No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
> To make them birds upon my singing-tree:
> Time merely drives these lives which do not live
> As tides push rotten stuff along the shore.
>
> ---There is no consolation, no, none,
> In the curving beauty of that line
> Traced on our graphs through history, where the
> oppressor
> Starves and deprives the poor.
>
> Paint here no draped despairs, no saddening clouds
> Where the soul rests, proclaims eternity.
> But let the wrong cry out as raw as wounds
> This Time forgets and never heals, far less transcends.
> (Poems), p. 61.

One notes the express denial of the "tracery of pen ornament." Poetry cannot now be satisfied with transient prettiness. Verse now acts as the mouthpiece for the suffering and its lines will let "the wrongs cry out."

European politics seemed to show more clearly the savage outlines of the social power struggle. At home, the class divisions remained muffled by the instinctive conservatism and private charity of British customs..The attack by troops on the workers' housing quarter in Vienna in 1934 was one incident prior to the Spanish Civil War, that exemplified the power struggle. It provoked an outraged response from the left-wing intellectuals who were to support the government forces in Spain two years later.

The attack was organized by Chancellor Dolfuss himself. In alliance with Major Fey and Prince Von Starhemberg, the army was directed to put down a major strike and, at the same time smash the center of the Socialist opposition inside Austria by capturing and executing its leaders. Their organization took its strength from the Viennese proletariat district. Chancellor Dolfuss appeared to imagine that such an attack would be a gratifying display of loyalty to Mussolini. With a misvaluation common at the time, Dolfuss thought Mussolini would

be an adequate counter to balance Germany's growing demands for annexation. He was successful enough at least in crushing the workers and cruelly punishing their leaders. Hitler was sufficiently annoyed by his flirtation with Mussolini to have him assassinated a few months later.

Here was one of the first of many incidents where the forces of oppression and reaction seemed clearly ranged on one side against the heroic determination of the revolutionary socialists who resisted with freedom and equality as their watchword. Spender wrote his first long poem, Vienna[16] on this subject; his indignations fired to the extent of having this poem in print by November of 1934. As a poem it seems to demonstrate his proper angry concern rather than any mature poetic achievement.

In Vienna there is a sense of strain throughout, particularly where political orthodoxy and the conventional leftish pose destroy the human insight which Spender needed to cherish. The danger he faced always was that political conviction would swamp and destroy his lyric gift. But in this age there was always the complementary danger that to ignore politics and seek only to preserve the inner flame of lyric verse would cut him from the main source of humanist idealism. Political belief would give social strength to the individualism and emotion of his verse and save him from the equally

[16] S. Spender, Vienna, (London, 1934).

unsatisfactory possibility that he would produce nothing but escapist or dilettante writing. In some of the poems he wrote while in Spain during the war, I hope to demonstrate that he successfully absorbed political awareness into verse that remained poetically honest. In Vienna the political and the poetic aspects do not mesh; they are juxtaposed and seem to discredit rather than reinforce each other. The use of various styles seems to suggest an attempt to create a synthesis that this is not successful. As a whole the poem leans heavily on the structure of Eliot's Waste Land, and the speeches of Auden's plays.

The poem has, as dedication, two pessimistic lines of Wilfred Owen. These are at least suggestive of Spender's awakening interest in a much neglected poet who was to be a vital spiritual, if not technical, influence on him.

> They will be swift with the swiftness of the tigress
> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

Vienna begins with lines that read like a parody of Eliot at his repetitious worst:

> Whether the man living or the man dying
> Whether this man's dead life, or that man's life dying...
> (Vienna), p. 13.

It continues with some sections of social gossip in the Waste Land manner:

> How much how much did that tie cost?
> How much how much do you think I lost?
> What do you earn?... Well if you know Latin
> You'll comprehend these festivities, penis in
> cicensem...
> I know she's a bitch but quite my type. (Vienna), p.14.

Throughout a couple of pages of lines like these there is the constant repetition of

> Whether the man alive, or the man dying

and,

> Whether the man living or the man dying. (Vienna), p. 17.

Obviously the repetition is supposed to create a rhetorical tension; in fact, it becomes merely tiresome.

The Eliot influence is obvious and touches of Auden can be found throughout the poem. Lines like the following show an approval of Auden's poker-faced toughness that masks very awkwardly Spender's responsive expression of compassion.

> Therefore, therefore the moulding of History
> Invests truth. Murder is necessary.
> A scalpel excellently reduces
> Warts, rebels. Even miracles
> Have been performed, as the elimination of voices
> That contradict official faces. (Vienna), p. 22.

Such nuggets stand out the more when they are interspersed with Spender's occasional defiant lyricism. Spender soon learned it was not in his nature to talk as Auden did of "the necessary murder." He learned in Spain the agony concealed behind the smooth arrangements for "reducing" and "eliminating".

Some lines have the exotic passion of his unleashed sensual excitement which in their own way mark the other extreme of Spender's writing. The pedestrian propaganda and the passionate lyric mark, as it were, the extreme

[illegible] with political [illegible] into poetry that finds an individual tongue, avoiding commonplace and yet largely inappropriate conventions of concrete such as,

> A word, a drink, like the first uttered love.
> Near the pulsing target coming the hot tiger,
> Instantly released, in joy and sorrow they fall,
> Freeing the whole world, the concrete world of one,
> Writing a new world with their figure 8.
> (Vienna), p. 16.

or,

> Memory of a sky as blue as women's veins
> But with veins of red, sky blue and yellow
> Rejoicing with them, and the blood flows strong,
> The crowd grows for lovers' pillow. (Vienna),
> p. 18.

These theme are the sections which carry [illegible] the most connective rather fully:

> Let no one disgrace let Poland
> Pay, Germanies, the whole bloody lot
> Appear frequently, making hundred street corners
> Looking like the resultness of their photographs.
> (Vienna), p. 19.

The actual incidents are described in the section called "The Death of Europe", and become proper the indignation, however without the general satire's ambiguous wit, one is hardly convinced by the poetry [illegible],

> Also, the failure of leaders the intellectuals,
> Of scientists, silenced before the world of
> Hungry: [illegible] given to [illegible] to stay
> Dreaming Do Nothing: [illegible] of the [illegible]
> Until it stop, asking [illegible]. (Vienna), p. [illegible].

This gives way to concrete [illegible] poetry by [illegible] division only,

> 'I turned and spoke to my son. He said "Listen,
> "The howitzers begin." "No. That is Fey's joke
> "Making his big thud into February
> "When the ice echoes so." It was no joke to hear
> 'And see my son lie dead." (Vienna), p. 29.

After this the poem continues from prose verse to avowed prose. The section which describes the situation after the defeat of the workers is the most blatant political propaganda that Spender was ever to write. Even the most servile of party hacks would have been satisfied with the stock situation of the solidarity of the workers against the bosses in lines such as the following. One of Fey's hatchet men is overwhelmed with self-reproach for fighting against the socialist revolutionaries:

> One of Fey's boys left them and shouted 'For two years
> 'I forsook the workers to kill the workers because
> 'I was fed by these traitors. Now kill me.'
> And an old man, one who had lost his son,
> Embraced him. 'Here is a rifle, you know whom to
> shoot.' (Vienna), p. 31.

The false calm and spurious integrity of the old man was a sentimentality that became the worst type of cliche amongst the Communist poets in Spain. (Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls lapses into such scenes on occasion.) The value of such lines to Spender's work is that they demonstrate the dangers that lurked for him when he allowed his political affiliations to dominate the honesty of his writing. He was usually successful in resisting such influence when he came to write about the Spanish War. Similar in tone are the following lines equally sentimental, partially

perhaps redeemed by the acknowledged historic heroic of Wallisch's death.

> Dollfuss, Dollfuss said 'Hang him low.'
> Wallisch stood on the platform and before he died
> 'Live Socialism' and 'Hail Freedom', he said.
> The word 'Freedom' was choked by the rope.
> (Vienna), p. 34.

In other sections Spender is too often content with the old themes, the unemployed, the economic suffering which can obviously only be significant to a poet if they are the stimulus to specifically poetic creativity. In this poem one gets the impression that Spender imagines that the mere mention of such issues will stimulate the appropriate response however little such themes have been developed into poetry.

> Ask the unemployed
> At pavement's edge, at brink of river
> Why do you stare at us with the same indifference
> As at the main road of wheels and legs and feet
> Birth, death, and the inexplicable irrelevance
> Of lust. (Vienna), p. 20.

The anxious question "Why do you stare at us?" is a typical Spender concern, but these imperatives of "birth, death and ... lust" seem rather stock words. They assume a kind of automatic link with eternal significance which is suspiciously shallow. These lines indicate one aspect of the old problem of combining poetry and economics which I mentioned in my comment about The Marginal Field. Only Auden got near to synthesizing this awkward combination into poetry. For example, the necessity for Spender to write lines like the following

is not primarily a poetic, but a social, obligation. Such poetry of indignant economics is dangerously capable of exerting its own momentum:

> Huddled on benches ...
> They do not watch what we show.
> Their eyes are fixed upon their economic margin
> Where the corn's starved by trees, where fluid grass
> Trickles through the rotted floors of senseless mills,
> Where railway crossings with feeling ... (<u>Vienna</u>), p. 12.

The "pylon" observations are back with a rush.

But there are at least two points where Spender's compassion is touched so much to the quick that the political stance is momentarily forgotten. His own flow of love moves irresistibly to those who exist without affection. Again his heart moves to the lost, the outcast.

> Those who hang about
> At jaws of lavatories, advertising their want of love
> Illoried by their open failure: whose eyes are still innocent.
> (<u>Vienna</u>), p. 41.

What others could so easily find grotesque, even disgusting, Spender finds the cause for compassion. He sees not to condemn, but to approach with pity all men who "advertise their want of love." These are the lost and the empty people to whom he pours out his tenderness.

There is one other section worthy of remark. In it Spender has again returned to the topic of love that possesses his heart and he analyzes his own emotions in

the face of the fighting in Vienna.

> There is no question more of not forgiving
> Forgiveness become my only feeling
> To understand their lack of understanding
> Has absorbed my entire loving,
> Yet sometimes I wish that I were loud and angry
> Without this human mind like a doomed sky
> That loves, as it must enclose, all. (Vienna),
> p. 38.

One notices the apparent passivity of Spender's position. He seeks only "to understand their lack of understanding." And he now shrewdly sees the dichotomy between the two aspects of his mind. On the one hand there is the necessary condemning anger, on the other, the irresistible and instinctive love. Here for a moment in the face of this social cruelty of the reprisals in Vienna he longs for the political voice; powerful, angry, effective in its trumpet denunciation. But he knows that this is not his real nature for he has a "mind ... that loves ... all." There could hardly be a more beautiful assertion of his spirit than these lines. Later he found in his Spanish poems that his human love could be as effective as any "loud and angry" verses in denouncing the inhumanity of the Fascist powers in Europe. Then the stewired division between anger and compassion, that had warred in a similar way in the poems of Wilfred Owen, were reconciled into a higher morality of suffering compassion, more significant than glib rage.

In Vienna Spender has not achieved any poetic synthesis, but perhaps its value lies less in what he achieved than in what he learned from these Austrian experiences.

When he went to Spain in 1936 such experiments and doubts as to his true tone were behind him. Poems like *Two Armies* and *The Coward* owe something to this comparative failure. Spender himself saw this poem as a failure largely because it was unsuccessful in fusing experience and poetry.

> The poem fails because it does not fuse the two halves of a split situation and attain a unity where the inner passion becomes separated from the outer one. Perhaps the world in which I was living was too terrible for this fusion to take place: the only people who attained it were the murderers and the murdered. Throughout these years I always had a sense of living on the circumference of a circle at whose centre I could never be.[17]

Perhaps in Spain he was able to move into this very centre. It can hardly be accidental that the title of his very next collection of poems from Spain was *The Still Centre*.

The workers' battle in Vienna had not caught Spender's imagination. His conscience was concerned, but the poetic fervor seems uninvolved. A more important issue was needed to fuse this developing poetic skill with the social issues that were the sources of his belief. Too often there had been the awkward division between style and theme, between technique and ideology. The revolution in Spain supplied precisely that stimulus to creation that his poetry needed. Indignation and pity welds his poetic diction into a controlled and powerful

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[17] *World Within World* (London, 1951) p. 198.

implacent to record his perception of the issues. Spender took his stand as did so many of the European writers and intellectuals of the time, in defending the Republican government in Madrid against the Franco-led insurrection. From our present vantage point it is now impossible to see the event in the violently emotional black/white terms in which it appeared to those who took sides with such partisan fervor. This, however, is hardly the point. The important thing is the intensity and consequence of the belief, rather than the justness of its promise. Beliefs outdated or even demonstrably absurd, can form the basis for the most significant poetry.

Spender saw Spain as the clarification and the epitome of the social conflicts he had observed and condemned in England. Suddenly the nebulous and anonymous forces that seemed to have created the misery and distress around him were personified; actualized in a definite time and place. The forces of economic folly and social reaction were now in the open and could be challenged to battle. If such a description of the issues sounds rather superficial and smug in the face of so much noble idealism at this time, it at least explains the way the malaise of the intellectuals becomes translated into action. It appeared that with the utmost will and determination, the intellectuals could do nothing in the face of the cumulative catastrophe

of poverty and unemployment. In Spain they were now able to point to a definite enemy who represented the oppression they hated. In the battle for Madrid it was liberal idealism fighting cruel theories of capitalist economics and government persecution. Fighting in Spain appeared to represent the action that many had wanted to undertake in England. In England the enemies were forces which seemed almost cosmic in their gigantic, uncontrollable and inhuman oppression. In Spain the issues were maliciously human and open challenge could be accepted.

Spain produced some of Spender's finest poetry. Although he was in Spain for a time he did not become involved in the fighting. In a recent conversation with me he said that the Communists were more interested in "name" martyrs to raise international indignation than mere assistance.[13] Such a discovery of Communist tactics destroyed any illusions he might have had that he could combine his social compassion with Leninist opportunism, as he discusses in his essay for The God That Failed. He felt it was pointless to serve in Spain unless one had some qualifications that would aid the cause of the Republic. Continually the demands of his poetry caused him to stand aside, observing, sympathizing, suffering for others and yet not part of the

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[13] His rather reluctant period of actual membership in the Party lasted only a few weeks. Certainly it had no effect on his feelings towards Communism; approving sympathy for its concerns on one hand, and suspicious resistance to its methods on the other.

international army, however decisively he had chosen sides.

The Still Centre is the volume in which most of his poems devoted to the Spanish War were first published. They are of somewhat varied quality but they have many features in common. They strike no heroic poses; they assert no propaganda; they do not take sides; they describe only, with an infinite tenderness, the suffering and distress that war brings. The Communists found these poems totally unsatisfactory as material for party apologetics because of their emphasis on the personal agony of children, deserters, cowards. His whole vision of the war undermined the assertion that it was a crusade with all the emotional overtones such a view engenders. In his introduction to The Still Centre he argues that in choosing such subjects, he is being true to his own experience. Such an assertion obviously begs its own question, but he explains:

> As I have decidedly supported one side, the Republican, in that conflict, perhaps I should explain why I do not strike a more heroic note. My reason is that a poet can write only about what is true to his own experience, and not about what he would like to be true to his own experience.[10]

Spender's experience is obviously true and serves as a desirable antidote to the raving excesses of false heroics that filled the lines of Party hacks, but it is fair to

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[10] The Still Centre, p. 10.

ask why his experience did not include any of the extreme heroism that demonstrably occurred.

In these poems Spender's tone comes close to the later poems of Wilfred Owen. Owen was certainly a more significant poet than Spender, but his poetry arose out of a similar spirit. They both face that moment "in thoughts where pity is the same as cruelty."[20] War is horrifying, degrading, monstrous and cruel, and the justness or importance of its cause in no way modifies this fact. War may sometimes be a brutal necessity, but it can never be honestly glamorized by heroic poses and propaganda. The individual is greater than society, and war expressly aims at destroying the individual. This is why the sympathy of Owen is always with the common soldier and his suffering. In Spender's verse there is the same sympathy even for those who are emotionally shattered by the strains of war. The fact that intellectually and politically Spender accepted the rightness of the aims of this war, as Owen could never do of 1914, does not allow him to condemn those who retreat from its horror with ignominy. Although politically partisan, his compassion embraces the soldiers of both sides who are caught in this struggle. His compassion, which stretches so much farther than party or national lines, separates his work from the false rhetoric and heroic posturing of

[20] The Still Centre, p. 31.

the orthodox supporters of either side. It is low measure of the greater quality of his Spanish writing compared with the poems of the committed versifiers, that his themes are human, humane and universal in their sympathy. They are relevant to all wars at any time, not only to the incidents on the Spanish plateau.

The poem Thoughts During an Air Raid probably records an early experience after Spender first arrived in Spain. It is one of the poorest of his Spanish poems attempting something of Auden's rock-humorous tone, but showing none of his sardonic wit. There is a triviality here, though perhaps one's response is colored by the fact that what was a frightening novelty at this time was to become commonplace, endured nightly with something approaching indifference. He does indicate the source of this endurance:

> Of course, the entire effort is to put myself
> Outside the ordinary range
> Of what are called statistics. A hundred are killed
> In the outer suburbs. Well, well, I carry on.
> (The Still Centre), p. 43.

This may be reasonable advice but the tone grows less acceptable later:

> Yet supposing that a bomb should dive
> Its nose right through this bed with me upon it.
> The thought is obscene. Still there are many
> For whom my death would only be a name
> One figure in a column.[21]

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[21] In this poem as in War Photographer (q.v.) when Spender revised for Collected Poems he preferred the detachment of the third person form, "One" and "he" to the self-instrusive "I" of the Still Centre version. This alteration shows his later attempt

This tricky mixture of the humorous and the expeditory was never Spender's forte. His work is at its best when he is personally involved with the stations generated by an incident. His writing is apt to be more successful when he does not "put myself outside the ordinary range", but when he participates in the experience. This he does in Ultima Ratio Regum in which he succeeds in uniting lyrical pathos with a wry and witty scorn. For all it lightness it is a passionately angry and moving analysis of the death of a single young Spanish boy. It was through such immediate and personal knowledge that Spender could approach and expound upon the folly and tragedy of this war. From the agony of the individual he could form his generalized attack. In this poem Spender's irony sterilizes the verse from the excess of sentiment to which his intense feeling rode him dangerously prone.

The first lines are a declaration and a judgment on the origin of this war:

> The guns spell money's ultimate reason
> In letters of lead on the Spring hillside.
> (Still Centre), p. 57.

This is an exposition of the standard socialist concept that internationally competitive capitalism with its greedy struggle for markets brought war. But in this

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21 (continued)
to resist the intimate nature of his response. "My death" becomes not only the safer detachment of "one" but "death" itself is replaced by the cooler abstraction of "loss".

case there is irony. The "Ultimate reason" of money is not the shattering of an empire or the defeat of a nation, but only "the boy lying dead under the olive trees." A boy who

> Was too young and too silly
> To have been notable to the important eye.
> He was a better target for a kiss.
>
> When he lived, tall factory hooters never summoned him,
> Nor did restaurant plate glass doors revolve to wave him in.
> His name never appeared in the papers. (Still Centre), p. 57.

Alive he would have been of very little importance, and yet this clash of forces has singled him out for death. The boy's life was transient and insignificant. It was -- the simile has a heavy sarcasm -- as "intangible as a stock exchange rumor." Not for him the importance of expensive restaurants and newspapers reports. Spender tries to maintain a tone of contrived detachment while the anger surges within him. There is the pretended calm of

> Consider his life which was valueless
> In terms of employment, hotel ledgers, news files.
> (Still Centre), p. 58.

And then the sarcasm is angrily flaunted:

> Consider, one bullet in ten thousand kills a man.
> Ask, Was so much expenditure justified
> On the death of one so young and so silly
> Lying under the olive trees, O world, O death?
> (Still Centre), p. 58.

The angry word "expenditure" sums up the tone of this poem. Spender is asserting that if you must measure life

in terms of criminal economic theories, even by their inhumane, amoral standards the death of "one so young and so silly" is not exactly a bargain for ten thousand shots; especially a life so "valueless" in the standards capitalists accept, the "ledgers and news files." Obviously Spender's indignant view is that there are other values and standards by which this "valueless" death, so pointless and so futile, is of greater significance than the issues for which the soldiers are fighting. But if there is an underlying anger in this poem, the affection for the helpless, silly boy, the total folly of war swamps that feeling, as it did so often in the poems of Wilfred Owen. One cannot make a stand of heroic indignation for someone "so young and so silly." This death is irrelevent at every level except the humanely moral one which really counts. It is in such an accidental triviality that the devastation of war can be seen more clearly than in a ruined city.

As Spender travelled in Spain he saw the scene with a poet's penetration. On every side he saw destruction and decay. In <u>Fall of the City</u> he notices:

> All the posters on the walls
> All the leaflets in the streets
> Are mutilated, destroyed or run in rain
> Their words blotted out with tears.
> Skins peeling from their bodies
> In the victorious hurricane. (<u>Still Centre</u>), p. 65.

The calls to revolution, the heroic rhetoric of the concealed presses, the campaigns of lies and challenges, are

all destroyed now. The war and the weather do not consider the validity or nature of their claims. The words are "blotted with tears." The tears are the rain-drops but one is forced to remember the actual tears of the bereaved who have lost relations who die fighting for the words on posters and leaflets. Such dead are already forgotten for

> All the names of heroes in the hall
> Where the feet thundered and the bronze throats roared
> Fox and Loren claimed as history on the walls
> Are now angrily deleted.
> Or to dust surrender their dust. (Still Centre), p. 85.

In the death of the city the heroes die too, and as the man is killed the issues and politics that spurred him on are cast aside. The men become "refuse," dismissed carelessly as "human sacks."

> All the badges and salutes
> Torn from lapels and from hands
> Or thrown away with human sacks they wore.
> (Still Centre), p. 85.

The destruction has embraced the idealism too. The war has imposed its own hard standards. This should have been remembered as the reality of other, past wars, but under the stimulus of dreams of false glory were:

> All lessons learned unlearnt,
> The young, who learned to read, now blind
> Their eyes with an archaic film. (Still Centre), p. .

In another town, Port Bou, Spender meets the first Spanish Republican troops, anxious and friendly. First he describes the harbor itself pictorially, with an

unusual and vivid image.

> As a child holds a pot
> Arm's stretching but with hands that do not join
> And the coiled animal watches the gap
> To enter freedom in full flair,
> So the earth-red-rock flesh arms of this harbour
> Embrace but do not enclose the sea
> Which, through a gap vibrates to the open air.
> (Still Centre), p. 71.

This image may be a little protracted, even perhaps laborious, but what it lacks in immediacy it gains in the aptness of the analogy of the surrounding cliffs of the bay and the child's stretched fingers. If it analogy is nothing more than a visual one it does have a tender effectiveness. Perhaps he is still searching for the precise style to include his Spanish experience because there is a strangely miserly attitude apparent in his exploration of his writing at this moment.

> Because I search for an image
> And seeing an image I count out the coined words
> To remember the childish headlands of the harbour.
> (Still Centre), p. 71.

He becomes more cheerfully anecdotal as he meets the government troops, seeing "the warm, downwards-looking faces of the militia men" who come by in a truck.

> A lorry halts beside me with creaking brakes
> And I look up at warm, waving, flag-like faces
> Of militia - men staring down at my French news-
> paper.
> 'How do they speak of our struggle over the
> frontier?'
> I hold out the paper, but they refuse it.
> They did not ask for anything so precious,
> But only for friendly words and to offer me
> cigarettes.

> In their waving and smiling faces the war finds
> peace, the furnished mouths
> Of rusty carbines brush against their trousers
> Almost as fragilely as reeds.
> And wrapped in cloth-oil mother iron stand-
> The terrible machine-gun reeds.[22]

One might point out the implied bravado of the flag faces and the odd contrast between the implication of such a word compared with the assertion that these are faces of peace. There is a similar awkwardness in the rifles which are observed having hungry mouths eager to kill, and yet are likened to the idyllic helpless [illegible] of slender reeds. But this is not really the point here; in this poem Spender tries to establish that personal connection that is essential to the sympathy on which his poetry is based. In the gestures of friendliness towards the Spanish troops, and their response when "they shout, salute back as the truck jerks forward," he feels the emotional basis of his commitment to Spain.

When he saw the scene of fighting at the front he perceived the hardship, despair and human misery. His compassion extended even beyond the forces of the side his intellect supported, and he wrote with anguish of all men's suffering. He loved men too much to pretend

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[22] The revision of this poem in the Collected Poems is considerable in quantity but minor in intention e.g. "horn against their knees" becomes "brush against their trousers." Second thoughts have it, however, that the soldiers' motive in refusing his knapsack was not because it was precious, but because they cannot read it.

that the justice of the cause would lend glamour to man's misery. In a poem which is extraordinarily close to Owen's poetry in theme and in moral tone he wrote a threnody to the soldiers of both sides entitled simply, Two Armies. Here Spender looks beyond the partisan fervor of the civil schism in this country to the identity and brotherhood of all men. The description in this poem probably arose out of the very brief visit that Spender paid the front line fighting in Spain. He recounts his feeling that

> Suddenly the front seemed to me like a love relationship between the two sides, locked here in their opposite trenches, committed to one another unto death, unable to separate and for a visitor to intervene in their deadly orgasm seemed a terrible frivolity.[23]

Only Spender, I think, would choose to describe the front line of war in terms of a love orgasm.

He begins by describing the two front lines; the soldiers anxiously facing their enemy across the no man's land between the trenches.

> Deep in the winter plain, two armies
> Dig their machinery, to destroy each other.
> Men freeze and hunger. No, one is given leave
> On either side, except the dead, and wounded.
> There have their leave; while new battalions wait
> On time at last to bring them violent peace.
> (Still Centre), p. 55.

Besides the inescapable misery as war reinforces the hardship of the elements, there is the sense of being trapped. No one escapes as a casualty, so that even the

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[23] World Within World, p. 223.

[illegible], illusion of freedom formed in belief he was in [illegible] by denial. Both sides are committed to this [illegible], and the deadlock [illegible] continuous and decisive as the grip the winter holds on the frozen earth around them. Mortal men are held tightly in the grip of overall [illegible] forces, for the war is an irresistible and [illegible] as the season's revenge. In this fixed and intolerable stasis even the elements of battle are irrelevant; much more so than any of the beliefs that drove men to this battle-line confrontation. The only casualty noted is the ironic one of a young boy who is shot in the wrist by one of his own side while attempting to make a military salute. The inconsequence of war cannot be stretched much further. There is also the oblique assertion that those young novices who are still full enough of youthful idealism to make the ritual gestures of military formality get hurt. There is no place for such parade-ground nonsense in the perceptions gained from the bitter front-line experience with its clear repudiation of military glory. If the poor novice had survived a little longer he would have learned too the professional scorn for such dishonest follies. It is not absolutely clear whether the shot was a haphazard accident. It could be interpreted as a soldier's deliberate response to the political posture that brought armies to this battlefront.

> Once a boy hummed a popular marching song,
> Once a novice hand flapped the salute;
> The voice was choked, the lifted hand fell,
> Shot through the wrist by those of his own side.[24]

Spender in these lines is reiterating Owen's profound conclusion that in these awful gramblings with cold and fear and pain and misery, the motives for the battle, the political or national divisions are forgotten just as they were in 1914 when the war seemed to have some malevolent life of its own beyond the ability of man to control. The physical difficulties control the emotional feelings and anger against the war seems stronger than the claims of social justice which brought them to the battlefield. The anger they feel is directed not against the other army, that is suffering as much as they are, but against the war, and those who brought them to it and perpetuated it. This view was an intellectual's truism about the 1914-18 war, but I think only Spender re-discovered its eternal verity in Spain.[25] Other

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[24] Still Centre, p. 55. In the Collected Poems version (p.[illegible]) it has become "the hand flapped their salute." The fine neutrality of the earlier version has been forsaken to establish that such a thing could only happen on "their" side. Such a distinction wars against the theme of this poem of the identical suffering of both sides; the brotherhood between enemies.

[25] Even Spender was not always publicly as impartial as one might wish. Spender admits his realization in The God That Failed (New York, 1950) p. 257. Only later does he describe the honest position.

> Unless I cared about every murdered child
> impartially
> I did not really care about children being
> murdered at all.

observers were too deeply committed to the party issues; to the impassioned rhetoric of political and ideological propaganda to suggest that in this war of just principal and liberating intention soldiers could feel as they did in fighting a despicable capitalist war for profits and empire on the Eastern Front. Spender does not allow this naive or dishonest conclusion. The soldiers' lot is misery and hardship, and there is not room in their hearts for the cheap nationalistic anger of the civilians and their jingoism.

> All have become so nervous and so cold
> That each man hates the cause, and distant words
> That brought him here more terribly than bullets.
> (Still Centre), p. 55.

The anger as Sassoon so repeatedly asserted twenty years before, was directed, not across the front lines, but backwards towards the headquarters. Its acid hatred corrodes idealism even in this army nominally of volunteers. In the identity of their emotions of fear and rage they are proclaiming another more certain identity with all humanity; one more close and fundamental than the separation dictated by contrasting flags and "isms". If this is obvious to all soldiers it seems to escape

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25 (continued)
Though I admit that previously when I saw photographs
Of children murdered by the Fascists I felt a furious pity.
When the supporters of Franco talked of Red atrocities
I merely felt indignant that people should tell such lies.
In the first case I saw corpses, in the second only words.

[illegible] the [illegible] the [illegible] position of rigid discipline the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible].

> From their [illegible] harvest, all well fed, [illegible]
> For discipline drills [illegible] in an iron school [illegible]
> [illegible] at the point of the bayonet.
> Yet when they clash, the fingers of hate
> Bite white through horses of steel
> [illegible] [illegible] in [illegible] of [illegible].

[illegible] [illegible] [illegible] to be the spokesman for the suffering, inarticulate [illegible]. Their "tempered [illegible]" become companions to lines such as those in [illegible]'s collection.

At this point the poet articulates the soldier's feelings when [illegible] gives place to a stoic acquiescence:

> Finally they cease to hate, for although hate
> [illegible] the [illegible] life [illegible]
> Or pour it up in fountains to normal [illegible],
> And although hundreds fall, who can connect
> The [illegible] of the guns
> With the [illegible] of these tempered minds.
> (Still Center), p. [illegible].

The war creates a universal hate so much more violent and vindictive than any human emotion that man's hate seems puny and irrelevant in comparison. Yet at night there is a peace that lies over both sides, for Nature offers

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[26] The Still Center version "would" is more clearly peripatetic than the Collected Poems substitution "might" which indicates not certainty but only a possibility.

[27] There seems no reason to make this so specific but it may refer to the deplorable but documented cases when malingering members of the International Brigade were shot at the front to "maintain morale."

[illegible] Spender's poem, the pastoral scene:

> Sleep silence keeps at night, when little owls
> Divide the sleeping valley, each
> Huddles in line cover by [illegible] hands. (Still Centre),
> p. [illegible].

As this poem advances both armies, their natural sympathy unites them with each other in unexpected union:

> When the machine-guns stilled, a sense suffering
> Uniting the air with breath and sighs both are
> As though these soldiers slept in each other's arms.
> (Still Centre), p. 5[illegible].

One notes that it is the machines that break this union, for only when they are "stilled" can the soldiers escape the anxiety which arises when the potential of technology is [illegible].

Without the years of bitter experience that Wilfred Owen had to undergo, Spender is able to proclaim the same truth. In fact Spender's [illegible][28] echoes the sentiment and even the tone of Owen's [illegible], though Spender's sensitive lines are somewhat exposed if stood in too close a proximity to what is Owen at his greatest.

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[28] In Collected Poems (p. 83) the last three stanzas are published separately as a brief lyric called In No Man's Land. The Collected Poems version again characteristically alters the emphasizing letting of the pronoun first person e.g. "his corpse" is substituted for "my corpse." It also deletes the revealing identification in the following stanza.

> I am that funeral which the sun regards
> The flat and revered second on which time looks,
> My corpse a photograph taken by fate.

An example of purely poetic worsening in the revision may be found in the way the compression of "through skin's silent drum" is expanded to the diffuse obviousness of "through his skin as through a drum."

> Only the well [illegible], and then it takes
> [illegible] the one [illegible] [illegible] of [illegible] soon
> [illegible] [illegible] continual [illegible].
>
> The [illegible] will grow its [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible]
> Of [illegible] melt the [illegible] chamber
> Where [illegible] lie dead in an iron dream.
>
> My corpse to commend with the [illegible] December
> And roots reach through this silent dream
> When the [illegible] and fields forget, but the [illegible]
> [illegible] remember. (Still [illegible]), p. [illegible].

It is no [illegible] part of my argument to hold for Spender with Owen's achievement but in the back of a reader's mind, as in Spender's own, there must have been memories of:

> Or whether you like thin and sallow food
> Confused more and more with the low mould,
> Nine hair being one with the grey grass
> And finished flesh of mutters that were old.
> (Collected Poems), p. [illegible].

The last line echoes directly Owen's lines from the poem, Strange.

> For many hearts with equal love charmed
> Alike for remember. (Collected Poems), p. [illegible].

If Spender learned Owen's lesson, for him it was the lesson of a sudden and shocking reversal. Unlike Owen he did not have to grapple with incomprehensible horrors and forge a new poetic to encompass the terrifying flood of experience that resulted every conception of his earlier years. Spender's experience in the decade before the Spanish War had permitted him to see that this fighting was only another facet of the constant, unrelenting martyrdom of man. In Spain Spender proclaims the same truth, preaching again the message that he felt

so intensely in London among the unemployed and in the workers' suburbs of Vienna. The only hope is in the idea of the total brotherhood of man, and the only source of this belief is understanding and compassion. Spender could never create the flashy propaganda that was often demanded of him, his own experience always put the individual before the principle. Just as in previous years his sense of burning injustice had focused on the unemployed man rather than the economic theory that had caused him, in Spain he is concerned with the suffering soldier before the political issues that created this war. For the defeated and the disregarded Spender always offered nothing but sympathy, and it is understandable that one of his most moving war poems concerns not the valerous nor victorious soldier but the coward, a despised figure who can tap all the flooding compassion he feels.

When Spender had described his own first experience under fire in Port Bou he had already felt the unrelenting fear, and had called himself "the coward of cowards" because of his instinctive recoil when the bullets started.

> And my body seems a cloth which the machine-gun stitches
> Like a sewing machine, neatly with cotton from a reel;
> And the military, irregular, thin, "puffs" from the airlines
> Drawn on long needles white threads through my navel.[22]

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[22] Still Centre, p. 73. The revised version in

Actually the developed image of the stitching gets a little more easily with Rodelice than Spender, but the unique interpretation is typically Spender's. His experience only prepared him for a deeper concern and further identification with the soldier whose nerve failed, who knew "the nerve's nameless chase."

> Under the olive trees, from the ground
> Grows this flower, which is a wound.
> It is easier to ignore
> Than the hero's sunset fire ...
> A man was killed, not like a soldier
> With lead, but with rings of terror.
> To him, that instant was the birth
> Of the final hidden truth:
>
> When he saw the flagship at the quay,
> The mother's eyes, the lover's kiss,
> The fluttering handkerchiefs of spray
> All led to the bullet and to this.[30]

This is another demonstration of the contradiction between

---

29 continued

Collected Poems (p.94) rehashes these lines without demonstrating any obvious improvement. It is only briefer by omission rather than by concentration.

> The machine gun stitches
> My intestines with a needle back and forth;
> The solitary neurotic white puffs from the cartridges
> Drew form in white threads back and forth through my body.

30 This poem has been more extensively rewritten than any other of Spender's war poems. The revised version, in general, is smoother and more efficient in its technique. This to some extent weakens the halting honesty of the original in which the feeling shows through the occasional awkwardness of style. The clear precision of the earlier version seems much closer to the experience. For example the blunt statement of "A man was killed" becomes the passive "Here one died". The broader application of "the mother" and "the lover" has been narrowed to the traditional "his". On the other hand, the rather crude shock of "guts" seems properly modified to the calm observation of "under the olive trees."

the myth of war and the actual experience. All the hopes and loving wishes that rallied him to the war evaporate under the overall form which costs him his life. Hence the death is the self-imposed that the war has so brutally forced upon him.

> Flesh bone, muscle, eyes,
> Assembled on a tower of lies
> Were scattered on the icy breeze
> When the deceiving mist betrayed
> All their perceptions in one instant
> And his true state, the sum of present
> Saw his guts lie beneath the trees. (Still Centre), p. 50.

The sympathy is inherent here in the concern of the "tower of lies", and the ease with which its assumptions are shattered by an "icy breeze." In "one instant" of fearful awareness the deception of the "deceiving mist" is gone. The problem of glory and heroism are reduced to his new "true state." The whole "sum of present" is his guts under the trees. Truth allows no more. The illusion is lost but since life is also destroyed there can be no redemption. Death has made the instant of cowardice eternal. His grave is marked forever on the site of a disgrace that the coward can never change. One frightened instant has been fixed for ever.

Spender's response to this incident is one of compassion, and in spite of Roy Campbell's sneer about the intellectuals instinctively siding with the underdog in Spain, his feeling is supremely relevant. There is no posturing. There is naturally no condemnation. Equally

there is no attempt to ignore or dismiss what has happened, for honesty is more important than any desire to explain away such an incident. In some ways an apologetic explanation would in itself be a type of condemnation, for it would insist upon the proper norm to which this soldier failed to measure up. In this way one would be accepting the implications of that "tower of lies." The poet's understanding is clear, but his compassion is boundless. The original version is more tender, more personally committed than the lines in Collected Poetry.[31]

> Who grasps his world of loneliness
> Sliding into empty space;
> I gather all my life and pour
> Out its love and comfort here.
> To populate his loneliness,
> And to bring his ghost release,
> My love and pity shall not cease
> For a lifetime at least. (Still Centre), p. 60.

> There's no excuse here for excuse.
> Nothing can count but love, to pour
> Out its useless comfort here.
> To populate his loneliness
> And to bring his ghost release
> Love and pity dare not cease
> For a lifetime, at the least. (Collected Poetry), p. 90.

---

[31]The distinction between these two stanzas shows in the elimination of the personal pronoun on later reflection. In the first version he writes "I gather" and it is "my love." The insertion of "the" in the last line makes the corrected rhythm rather too obviously regular in its stress. The opening lines of the revised form, however, seem powerful and suggestive compared with the exploratory hesitation of the Still Centre version.

There is "[illegible] ... for [illegible]:" [illegible] to [illegible] the [illegible] propaganda [illegible] [illegible], [illegible] [illegible], "nothing [illegible] but love."
This is Spender's final [illegible] [illegible] the Spanish War, but it would not be an inappropriate summary of the belief he has lived by during the previous years in England. Although he realizes that in this case and for so many other pointless deaths it must be a "useless effort", the effort must be made "for a lifetime at the least." The value of this generous outpouring of compassion is not measured by its usefulness. He knows that even victory for the righteous cause of the Spanish Government cannot in any real sense replace what has been lost in this war. There can be no comfort that will make such devastation [illegible] or tolerable. Again one hears the ironizing note struck by Wilfred Owen in his last poem <u>Strange Meeting</u>. There is the [illegible] understanding that love is the only counter to "the sons of war." Yet the hatreds engendered by war kill that emotion, when it might relieve those who are forced to fight.

This is Spender's final, mature assessment of the Spanish Civil War. It does not allow place to the propagandists or party hacks of either side. It seeks rather to explore issues that are both human and eternal and his final tone if sad to the point of despair is not negative nor entirely pessimistic. Even in the battles on the Spanish plateau Spender finds the opportunity to reaffirm

the human ideals upon which any valid morality must be based. If in the minds of England he was more concerned with sympathy than political action, in Spain he became more aware of suffering than the military and social issues that was fought for. In both cases his mentally sensitive conscience loved beyond the glib contemporary solutions into a reconsideration of the relationship of man to man. He insisted on the need for a new moment of giving and love. These can be supplied by no amount of social reform, however philanthropic or noble its concept.

After the defeat of the government forces when Franco's victory was assured in spite of so much heroism, Spender found the frustration and fear in that was felt by so many of the intellectuals of this time. In his journal at the time, quoted in his autobiography, he wrote:

> I felt as though I could not write again. Words seem to freeze in my mind like stiches when I put them on paper. (<u>World Within World</u>), p. [illegible].

Spain's followed crisis in Europe and not even the most optimistic could pretend that war was not inevitable. Spender "stared out of the window on the emptiness of a world exploding." The poets' humanitarian appeals had been disregarded and they had the extra anguish of seeing their warnings turn to reality; understood too late for any effective action to be taken. Spender felt particularly the collapse of the liberal ideal symbolized by the Popular Front in Spain and he was on every side now only <u>The Unpopular Poet</u>. He records this bitter vision.

[illegible] of [illegible]
[illegible],
[illegible] of the present ...

[illegible] of [illegible],
[illegible]
[illegible] in circles on the plain.[32]

[illegible], "[illegible]," [illegible] no longer [illegible] of [illegible], [illegible],
[illegible]:

All I [illegible] now -- and I shall learn --
[illegible] all [illegible],
Your [illegible] into [illegible].[33]

[illegible] "[illegible] of [illegible], nullification of [illegible] treaty" he is the [illegible] of [illegible] event.

[illegible] shoot up. Rockets, rockets,
[illegible]
[illegible].
[illegible] in the tide of billows, [illegible]
[illegible]!
[illegible] and gutters overflowing blood
O visions of a faltering will --
Inventing violent patterns!
History rushes.[34]

---

[32] "Power" becomes more specifically "war" in the hindsight allowed in the Collected Poems (p. 5?).

[33] Again the knowledge of later history allows the Collected Poems correction to be more explicit, "[illegible] war."

[34] Here, along with minor changes ("burning" substituted for "flaring") Spender somewhat neutralizes his assertion. The positive "inventing violent patterns" becomes the passive merely descriptive "disintegrating patterns" as though their form owed nothing to human will.

The future is seen now as the direct cause of their faltering "faltering will." He has lost that time future generation to which he had appealed with such ardor and optimism earlier would now see only the error and failure of the liberal intellectuals of this time. In <u>The Double Image</u> he expresses his personal agony as he struggles with the realization that "you must live through the time when everything hurts."

> You must live through the time when everything hurts
> When the music of the nine, loaded afternoon
> Impends to a landscape of white hot fences
> And trees are watched down with hearts of stone
> And green stones to go where you stare alone,
> And the walking over three filthy continents,
> And the words which carry most knives are the blind
> Phrases promising to be kind. (<u>Poems and Visions</u>), p. 15

One moment has the self-loathing of the young Creeley caused by the children in the street as he again shrinks from the cut of knife words with similar intense over-sensitivity. It stimulates another introspective surly in as he sees the imagined fingers pointing at him.[35]

> Set in the mind of their sort, they assume
> Their tragic sulking with your trivial despair
> And they have fingers which accuse
> You of the double way of thinks.
> At first you did not love enough
> And afterwards you loved too much
> And you lacked the confidence to choose
> And you have only yourself to blame.[35]

---

[35]It is likely that these lines were written after the shattering break up of his first marriage, but this would not invalidate my argument that they have a wider reference.

[illegible] Spender realized his personal sense of guilt which was the response to the personal level of the guilt of his generation. They had appeared to have a choice, but perhaps the choice had never had to have only total failure with no guilt.

Lewis gives these lines have a more personal interpretation too. He had failed to repay the suffering in England and his compassion in Spain had been too responsive to support useful political action and, in an hasty flight of intervention, had fused the opposing sides. Auden offers a brief sanctuary to the retreat to the dual haven of neutral America and the Church. Neither of these rather easy consolations were possible to Spender but he seemed unable to express the importance of his decision to stay in England in his poetry. Here might have been a place for his honest conscience. Instead the 1939-41 war found his writing part of a gradually degenerating quality.

All the intensity of his feelings about Spain, which had given bite and intensity to his rather diffuse emotions and style, were lost. To Spender Spain had been the true war. The fact that the 1939 European war was based on so little clear morality and so much political gambling and opportunism haunted the poets who had seen the battle outside Madrid as an idealized struggle between right and wrong.

Such feelings must be part of the reason why the

poetry of the first war was so much poorer than that that was written in 1914. This war could hardly have been expected to produce the sentimentality of a Rupert Brooke; in the circumstances idealism was a little out of place. The young were not likely to be taken in again by the myth of heroic war as seen after their fathers had died in "the war to end war" on Flanders Fields. Out of memory the war Owen, Sassoon and the whole pitiful legacy of a Graves to express the true sentiments and the misery of this war? It seems as if after 1918 all motives were suspect, idealism had been explicitly faced down, and this new war was approached in a mood of practical necessity that provided no poetry. In the poems written at this time there that were "involved" were ironical (c.f. General Wavell's Desert Army collection, Other Men's Flowers); the latter were just as rather indifferent to the war. The first thirty of the poems of Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece or Sidney Keyes were written during a major war; some in certain way to be irrelevant to the finished work; a very chronological coincidence. Spender himself, far from that sense of inevitability towards war which I have tried to have shown in the Spanish poems, saw in the 1939 war in a mixture of mixed, irrelevant motives. I suggest that this inconsistency is called by the nature of the subject. It is a sign of strain, an attempt to make multiple theologies take the place of that poetic inevitability,

which would continue its own necessary form. I consider of one place right now that indicate the kind of pictures that is found in Spender's war-time poems.

One poem entitled <u>The Use of God</u> is an unattractive mixture of Isaiah and Authorized Version prose and T. S. Eliot at his pontifical worst.

> Why support the use of God,
> Know not, foolish,
> Fool, done deserved?
> Did the wheat be divided?
> And the soldiers part home?
> And the Christians turn down?
> And the enemies forgiven?
> Not there is no retribution? (<u>Poems of Vision</u>),
> p. [illegible].

The stark, brutally phrased and the unlyrical listing of painfully [illegible] the practice [illegible] and contrast with the exquisite appeal of the first lines of <u>The Express</u>.

Later Spender drifts back into the old "pylon" imagery which he had left behind when his earlier experiments were tempered by his interior feelings. Now the device is used purely descriptively without even the excited fascination of their earlier symbolism. In <u>The Air Raid Across the Bay</u> the following lines are now simply a photographic record:

> Delicate aluminum girders
> Project phantom aerial roots
> Swaying cranes and derrick
> Above the dens just lifting back. (<u>Collected Poems</u>),
> p. 117.

He returns again to the use of the slick pseudo-scientific images that delighted MacNeice [illegible] the [illegible]. He describes

the [illegible] with such phrases as "proving the hypothesis of death" which try to sound portentous when they are rather simply empty. Here is a typical stanza from this poem:

> Triangles, parallels, parallelograms,
> Experimental [illegible] hypothesis
> On the [illegible] [illegible] day.
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> To [illegible] [illegible].[37]

The air of portentousness in that poem and the attempt to borrow the solemnity of that Biblical kind of [illegible] [illegible] [illegible].

Even more pretentious are the last lines of this poem:

> In the fields the corn
> [illegible] with metallic [illegible].
> [illegible] [illegible] in [illegible]
> High on the [illegible]. (Collected Poems), p. 118.

One obvious piece of evidence of the strain even at the technical level is the disjointed stance of the "click," "[illegible]" rhythm.

The variety of [illegible] other inept styles is especially revealing in the work of such a [illegible] poem.

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[37] Collected Poems, p. 117. I have used the Collected Poems version of this, following the [illegible] of the process of decline. The "clevernesses" that [illegible] offensive in these lines is the result of careful reworking. The original version in Poems and Visions (p. 34) is similar but [illegible] [illegible].

> They slide triangles and parallels
> Of experimental theorems,
> Proving the hypothesis
> Of death, on [illegible] surfaces
> Of accumulated black [illegible].

[illegible] at this time. Thus, it is only natural to
[illegible] in his work. There are [illegible] cases where
of the [illegible] to keep working, even by reviving
old discarded techniques. This, perhaps, was the result when
he must admit that the [illegible] and motivation of his
writing has gone. The [illegible] of the old political beliefs
[illegible] his, and his dabbling with different
styles at this stage in his career serves only to expose
more mentally the hollow reality that there is now
nothing more for him to say. The style [illegible] reveal-
ing [illegible] of a [illegible] dignified personal
and emotional level. Nothing [illegible] this fact more
clearly than the following poem with its distant echo of
the old Indian jingle. It is [illegible] to say [illegible] out of
[illegible]. Quite [illegible] the style in his earlier
years though there are many examples of this kind of play
in the early poems of Auden and Day Lewis at their
influenced best. Now as a mature poet Spender borrows
the discarded techniques of a less serious decade and pro-
duces the following poem and that he is not even [illegible] gaiety
to cover up it:

> Rats and they were cities
> Where they lingered on the shore
> Mingling with the action
> Who d need an City there
> --- With no Sergeant Hans core

To what is in the sun.[37]

Realizing this failure to find an opportunity for personal involvement was mortuin, this creativity, Spender may be seen as attempting to turn his back on the war altogether, seeking to find some personal interpretive classification for development. He takes, for example, an apparently trivial title like June 1940 and gives a list which evokes the English summer countryside effectively enough but in a way which makes the implicit assumption that the war is extraneous and irrelevant. He observes:

> Beyond the hot red roofs, the flag
> Part on day roses in the hedges,
> The meadows heighed with cowslips hanging
> Youths with girls and bicycles at evening
> Round the wide Elizabethan of Villages. (Spender and Williams), p. 40.

With the same overcritical eye he sees the sea beyond:

> Beyond the calm sea, with lines
> Engraved by winds and keels on glass dunes,
> Perpetually moving and disappearing still
> Tiring the eye with a permanent rest. (Spender and Williams), p. 41.

---

[37] Collected Poetry, p. 122. As in the revised version by his poetry, failure makes explicit the weakness of the original stanza. Without even rhythm to recommend it, it is simply feeble.

> Where and Where were the city
> Where they lingered on the shore
> To dandle with the beauty
> Of the girls; they're still there --
> Where no murkness nor darkness
> Upends hence fall nor bar. (Spender and Williams), p. 53.

These repetitive pictures begin a poem which ends with an extraordinary rambling complete about an subtle use of the word of Kipling.

> While we forgot, and the sun seemed to forgive,
> Those bitter children were alive
> Their hatred never forgot to thrive. (Spain and Winter), p. 41.

The rhyth in Collected Poems is more wholly inept for any serious poet, and he goes on with a complete [illegible] - gaudy heart, on the petition of a Kipling-like prince-giving:

> Hell, hell, the greater grief, not meet
> Tomorrow with a worldfoot. (Spain and Winter), p. 42.

The falsely generous or an note becomes more predominant in the awkward lines which continue. The Collected Poems version again exaggerates the inept into the impossible.

> Not the Ear nor Eye but the Will
> In the organ which alone can make us whole.
> Man's world is no more Nature. It is hell
> Made by Man-self of which Man must grow well.
> (Collected Poems), p. 100.

Yet towards the end of this poem the speaker, apparently a soldier killed in battle in the 1914 war suddenly, unexpectedly, and I believe unconsciously, voices the feeling of emptiness with which Spender was struggling. Intentionally or not, its lines seem very relevent to the poet's emotional predicament.

> I lay down dead like a world alone
> In a sky without faith or aim
> And nothing to believe in,
> Yet an endless empty need to atone. (Spain and Winter), p. 47.

Then after the war he returned to visit Vienna, the city which he had celebrated in an earlier poem. Already the questions it raised in him took "Sorgenfrei".

> Why did I ever come back to these ruins
> [illegible]
> [illegible] of forgotten sorrows
> [illegible] and is irrecoverable [illegible].[33]

Faced with the double consciousness of memory of pleasure and pain that cannot be forgotten, one is forced to remember that the body usually returns to its world with a [illegible] rather quickly [illegible].

In Vienna his conclusion is [illegible] ironically one of [illegible] guilt.

> The [illegible] of what I suffer now
> That I lived my life among these land
> I did not live purely, but [illegible] I loved
> Among the [illegible] I did not love enough. (Sect. VII)

The earlier lines "At first you did not love enough" echo with the same regret-filled tone for past failure. Yet on reflection the way the present determines to go back and specifically destroy the past. It is not that Spender now feels, with some regret, that the idealism of his youth has been replaced with a middle-aged caution, rather that his present returns under his realize that the old Spender "knew not". The idealist is not old and but simply sublimated. No one could have offered love more unstintingly than Spender, yet he concludes on a note of despair among the ruins of his ideals.

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[33] S. Spender, Returning to Vienna (New York, 1947), Sect. VII (This poem is not dated.).

> All I can do today in this table,
> Raised Vienna like our ruined world. (Sect. IX.)

The song in that sonnet [illegible] given [illegible] conflict between [illegible] the [illegible] of a later poem called "[illegible]."

> Of what use is my loving?
> It does not [illegible]
> To put out the strongly [illegible] cells
> In the [illegible] of [illegible].
> It was only [illegible]
> That [illegible] of love
> [illegible] beyond the flash to [illegible]
> Holding in the [illegible].[39]

The primary concern here was actually with the failure of applied science, for this lecture part of a long interwoven elegy on the death of Margaret Spender. The poem is in fact incorporated into Elegy for Margaret in Poems of Reflection.[40] But I do not think it too false extension of content to find the relevance of this section on far broader than the specific incident that focused it. The mood rather enhanced the despair of Spender's age. The poets were also unable to find a remedy for the social ills which they inherited and this sense of failure, this acknowledgment of impotence to act, seemed to destroy

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[39] In the Collected Poems version the last couplet with its [illegible] shows a more conscious contrivance which is less successful.

> Resist the Arctic Pole of the white cone,
> Where [illegible] fills our knights all night alone.
> (p. 1[illegible])

[40] S. Spender, Poems of Reflection (London, 1[illegible]).

[illegible] conflicts [illegible] with. The [illegible] question which [illegible] the impulsive poem of Spenser's passionate youth; "Or what [illegible] living, [illegible]?"

In [illegible] this long poem, [illegible], [illegible] to consider a highly significant [illegible] consideration of Spenser's [illegible] poem. [illegible] in 1595 [illegible] Spenser [illegible] [illegible] and lingering illness. In his elegy to his Spenser's [illegible], [illegible] attempting to reconcile his [illegible] to the [illegible] of his [illegible] death [illegible] [illegible] [illegible].

> [illegible]
> [illegible].

He [illegible] the [illegible] of the [illegible] which,

> [illegible] on the [illegible] of your flesh,
> [illegible] [illegible], [illegible] in
> [illegible] that [illegible] of [illegible]
> [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] life.
> (_[illegible]_), p. 11.

He [illegible] at first [illegible] comprehensive understanding with love and death both hold together in his heart as the inexpressible consummitants of humanity.

> So, to be honest, I must [illegible] your death
> Next to my heart, where others [illegible] their love.
> Indeed it is my love, my life with life
> My word of life being knowledge of such death.
> My dying lord because of your own live,
> [illegible] with your death, this life upon [illegible] death.
> (_[illegible]_), p. 11

Now the love that haunted his heart in the [illegible] of Northern England and on the plateau of Spain is [illegible] and a [illegible] more personal thing than the old [illegible] tendency. [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] of

[illegible], [illegible], [illegible] [illegible].

[illegible]

[illegible], [illegible] fruit
[illegible],
[illegible]
[illegible]. (_Poems of Dedication_),
p. [illegible]

No longer do the images of love [illegible] appropriate; he seeks to describe the [illegible] of [illegible], the "[illegible]." [illegible] "lived in [illegible] of pity."

The last section of this long poem is specifically dedicated to his brother, J. H. Spender, [illegible] to comfort him in his particular feeling. He has often [illegible] profound [illegible] that it is no longer necessary to use this [illegible] as requiring any [illegible] in the discovered confidence of his profound reconciliation. He begins with a direct approach to his brother's grief:

Dearest and nearest brother,
No words can turn to day
The freezing night of silence. (_Poems of Dedication_),
p. 1[illegible]

But the comprehension of this fact also includes the understanding that in this despair there is hope, and in this apparent end of love is the beginning of love.. The tone has the same intensity as the last stanza of _The [illegible]_.

> I bring no consolation
> Of the weighty kind
> Those final dignities, jewel plated
> All amiss in the world's power:
> You must stick the tiger that worries
> Day, night, hour after hour.
>
> Yet to accept the world
> Finally to arrive
> Here in the world with the force
> Of the tiger, lion or stone
> And hurts almost last, at last
> Are glad to be alive. (<u>Poems of Dedication</u>), p. 13.

But [illegible] ultimately seems to make a valuable statement that is true to Spender's own possibilities in his experience of contemporary history. To be at the bottom is to be at the point from which one's condition can be crucial. Out of this time of personal endurance Spender can feel that he will survive. He has the powerful confidence that having lived through a "time when everything hurt" he is "at last glad to be alive."

This need is both complicated and developed in both Spender's last two collections of published poems, <u>Poems of Dedication</u> (1947) and <u>Poems 1950-54</u> (1955). In these poems a near neurotical disorder occurs in his poetry which during the war had seemed virtually sterile. In the first of these volumes he continues to move beyond the frustration of his sense of historical and social failure into a new, ethically and aesthetically fertile maturity. At last he seems able to grapple directly with his sense of despair and guilt. He does not deny

the oppressive [illegible] of these emotions, but he had now perceived the debilitating influence that arises from dwelling on them. To know, to accept and then to move forward were the truths which Spengler had to struggle to grasp and to understand. I have suggested above that in the painful death of Margaret Spengler and the attempt to form an emotional harmony out of the personal sorrow Spengler learned the basis for a wider application of controlled reconciliation. *The fundament* became [illegible] elements of Spengler's social vision at this point in his life.

This discovery of [illegible] capacity to [illegible] brought him to the point of spiritual [illegible] which he investigated in a series of poems called, significantly enough, *Spiritual Adaptation*. It is highly [illegible] to note that in these poems Spengler employs the rigorous form of the formal sonnet. It [illegible] if [illegible] the control [illegible] gradually rebuilt his poetic [illegible]. Within the strict limitation of [illegible] Spengler concentrates on [illegible] crumbling spiritual life. In accepting, [illegible], [illegible] might in its employment, he is able to build [illegible] of personal choice and [illegible] his historic position. In this sense [illegible] nature of his failure [illegible] poetry, [illegible] turning point. The spirit must [illegible] control the might [illegible] of "myth, form, spirit."

Within [illegible] still flows a historic stream
Of [illegible], [illegible], [illegible], that [illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible] living the [illegible] of their past [illegible].
(*Spiritual Explorations*), No. IV.

Furthermore at last, [illegible] the first line, he begins to feel able to free himself from the dictates of historical necessity, and [illegible] to emotions [illegible] to the internal and instinctive poetic voice, no longer "the voice of their past fears."

The [illegible] in the [illegible] (related to [illegible] Latin interestingly enough) is the littleness of man in a largely hostile universe. This is hardly an original topic in itself, and indeed the conception of such oppressive forces is inherent in the conjunction of Spender's earlier poems. It is, however, a theme that comes closer to religious orthodoxy, although Spender had no highly political conventions [illegible] did. [illegible] discovery [illegible] to contradict [illegible] of the [illegible] assumptions of left-wing thought [illegible] in the fervor of the thirties. The liberal [illegible] social reform through willed control of the political environment, saw the world as man-centered and ultimately perfectible. Such assumptions now contrast with Spender's apprehension of the total limitations imposed on man's spirit. He sees first the nullity of [illegible]:

Within our nakedness, nakedness still
Is the naked mind. [illegible] and [illegible] show
Through the coloured bones. The [illegible]

[illegible] ....
(Collected Poems), p. 130.

Little are, "[illegible]" in Spender's term, from only [illegible] and the [illegible] of this in the [illegible] of [illegible]:

[illegible], [illegible] blood and breath,
[illegible] in [illegible], [illegible]
For the [illegible] journey to no [illegible] date,
[illegible], [illegible] [illegible], [illegible]
[illegible], all [illegible] nothing, who [illegible]
The [illegible] [illegible] of death.
(Collected Poems), p. 170.

Painfully he struggles with the limiting concept [illegible] of,

Since we [illegible] what we are, don't [illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible] and [illegible], [illegible], to [illegible]
[illegible] for the [illegible].
[illegible] and [illegible], [illegible] infinite,
[illegible] claims on stone, except to [illegible]
In the [illegible] of the [illegible] city
Ourselves, our breath, our death, our love.
(Collected Poems), p. 116.

Besides the difference, not only of theme but in the whole area of concern, there are other changes in this poetry. The [illegible] by the repetitions and reduplications is evidence of the struggle for expression of this experience. "[illegible]" Spender searches for a foothold [illegible] the [illegible] lattice [illegible] Parallel Poems. [illegible] in nothing from the better [illegible] and also [illegible] beyond his vision is not of [illegible] or object of society, exploited or [illegible] triumphant, but of the precious, single, [illegible] of the individual soul. In the deep being [illegible] there is [illegible] in the [illegible] there is the love; the [illegible] includes "our breath, our death, our love." It is the

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Solitude, [illegible], O life, O death. ([illegible]), p. 1[illegible]0.

[illegible] *[illegible]*:

[illegible],
[illegible] of Reason's [illegible];
[illegible]
The spirit [illegible].
([illegible]), p. [illegible].

"The [illegible]" [illegible] it [illegible]. [illegible] [illegible] the very best [illegible] literature. There is something painful in the attempt to express th[illegible] [illegible] through the oblique effect of irony [illegible] though the [illegible], [illegible] too [illegible] [illegible]. [illegible] of "solitude, [illegible]" [illegible] in a self-protecting way by being lightly called "[illegible]." But if these two emotions are the preoccupation of [illegible], this is only another way of saying that they are every man's preoccupation everywhere. In Spender's own [illegible] the truth [illegible] to be [illegible] by the will and the intelligence, not by the simpler tendency of the instinct.

The process of self-discovery is [illegible] and recorded in each of these [illegible], but the final declaration is the [illegible] of the [illegible] and the [illegible] of [illegible] spirit in man. He has discovered and accepted this:

> The Immortal Spirit is that single ghost
> Of every thing the moments in one time
> Which to [illegible] its [illegible]
> Our bodies all in our pulse [illegible].
> Without that ghost within, our lives are lost
> [illegible] turning the earth's [illegible].
> Unless we kill it live, that God [illegible],
> Dead in our lives; its life, our death, the end.
> (*Collected Poems*), p. 141.

There is, it must be admitted, a great difference between the spirit of these [illegible] and the final theology with which Eliot and Auden [illegible] their entry into the religious convictions of the Anglican church. This must

so I think because Spender is more indulgent to himself and his vision. The route self-exploration is a far cry from Auden's ironic alienation and new austerness. Spender has not had to defend the less comfortable elements in an orthodox theology and so, there is less sense of the battle waged between the lines; fewer of those unspoken questions that lower at the edges of even the most assertive and confident of Auden's recent stanzas. Spender has quite literally won his own salvation and done it too, in and through his poetry. The distinction is, to cut it crudely, between Spender's discovery of an emotional philosophy which at the same time determines his new poetic and Auden's willingness to chop off his poetic arms to make his work fit a little more tidily into the orthodoxy he has willed himself to accept.

Another personal event at this time had a profound effect on Spender's writing and continued to direct his poetic feelings into the lines hesitatingly set down in his book for Mary and his spiritual peace. His second wife, Natasha, became pregnant, and all the general affection of Spender's warm nature became focused in the surprising tenderness of his feeling and a new outpouring of his love. With intimate joy he records his proud affection. One brief lyric is called <u>The Dream</u>. The title has a reference to the starting point of this poem, "You dream," he said, "because of the child asleep in the nest of your body, who dreams ..."

[illegible] I think one can see a more general application of his [illegible]. He long [illegible] political order or [illegible] of [illegible] pastoral, but the [illegible] [illegible] fully realized after the nightmare years of the [illegible]. [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] denied and substituted for the other, and he turns again inward not only in single self-introspection, but with the dual union of love.

> He laid his head, wearied with a thought
> Of the play of her lips. They looked
> Within the lens of their entrance
> They watched the life their lives had wrought.
> (Poems of Dedication), p. [illegible].

It is at this time that Spender wrote a love poem, concerned again with the problem of individuality and the unity of love. He calls it appropriately One.

> Here then
> She lies
> Her hair a scroll along
> The grooved white page
> Her lips half-meeting on a smile
> Something almost unspeaking
> Calling
> I word this word my love upon the white
> Linen
> As though I wrote her name out on this page.
>
> My concentration on her quietness
> Intensifies like light singed from this lamp
> That throws its halo upward on the ceiling.
>
> Here we
> Are one
> Here where my walking walks upon her sleep
> One within the
> Bed dumbly pacing in the hidden cell.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 158.

[illegible] attention has practical [illegible] just and the tightly structured sonnets of Donne's [illegible]. The first lines give a sense of breathless, [illegible] delicacy; a wondering exploring of a new, fragile world that must not be too coldly [illegible] with the poetic form. This is a series of [illegible] times, like the eye of the [illegible] [illegible] with several isolated observations, each [illegible] evidence and yet a reinforcement of the previous moment. After these introductory lines Spender finally writes "O life," and we perceive that this is not now a declaration but a whispered and delighted [illegible], and [illegible] of the "one within one" of the child [illegible].

Then his daughter is [illegible] in loving affection [illegible] poems he records the [illegible] beauty of his [illegible] love. His affection leads such a delight that the [illegible] touch of gesture now seem moving and important. In [illegible] he writes with simple but not naive paternal love unconsciously perhaps borrowing Donne's familiar image of the bracelet. But unlike Donne his concern is with young life, not death.

> Bright clasp of her whole hand around my finger,
> My daughter, as we walk together now.
> All my life I'll feel a ring invisibly
> Circle this bone with shining: when the hair grows
> Far from today as her eyes are far already.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 186.

The open, lovely gaze of this child attracts his [illegible], and he describes the child intently on his [illegible] lap. The

[illegible] poem that [illegible]

[illegible] poetic from this new joy. In [illegible] [illegible] he specifies an incident with love.

> The door, in a green dream,
> Opened; In my daughter's face
> Her eyes [illegible] those [illegible],
> The round face of her childhood [illegible]
> Write on the air [illegible] in the glass
> Or on a white page, a white page.
> The room [illegible] around her [illegible].
> (Collected Poems), p. 187.

Her gaze is like a white, and therefore innocent, page. The identification between subject and course, between [illegible] finished art is now explicit and love is felt deeply and personally felt, while at the same time it is the motive for his poetic expression.

One longer poem called [illegible], one of the last poems collected in his 1954 volume, also concerns his daughter but here is a change and another significant step forward into a deeper, more universal feeling. In this poem after the gap, he begins to return to a political and social theme. The argument that led him through compassion to sympathy to involvement in the thirties begins to work again, but in a different, more certain way. Instead of arguing from a generalized love into a demand for social justice he reverses the elements and discovers, in this single intense love, the need for all love, for the continuance of social compassion. His personal love remains more specific than had been his generalized compassion but it broadens to include all people who face

[illegible],

> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible] (Collected Poems), p. 1[illegible].

In Keats's [illegible] to the night owls, [illegible] [illegible] the lamp [illegible], he comprehends the pitiful [illegible] of all the evils of the [illegible] of the loneliness of the world. The two parents listen to the child [illegible], begin to say:

> [illegible]
> [illegible] at the night. Their hearts
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible] between them. (Collected Poems), p. 189.

As they listen the love that fills both their hearts for this child goes out to her:

> This child's eye
> Send rays of a father's pain through pulses dark;
> And the hole prayers of their loving
> [illegible]
> Of all love's [illegible]. (Collected Poems), p. 189.

In this personal moment, we see the center of the [illegible] throughout Sandburg's life; the unclearness of his perception, the repeated question "of what use is my weeping," the search to [illegible] to love's capacity to [illegible] and to aid. His attempt to prove [illegible] in the traditional [illegible] brought him under attack from both sides. He was [illegible] by those who thought [illegible] more [illegible] than love to the lost and helpless in [illegible].

[illegible]

> [illegible]
> (_[illegible]_), p. 192.

[illegible] "[illegible]" [illegible] lines are, to crucify the conviction that was the [illegible] of Spender's own life. It is not by chance that he calls "[illegible]" [illegible] the poem here. This is the personal discovery which his own life proved. Such universal [illegible], from [illegible] the [illegible] horror of the child's cry, for [illegible] that [illegible] can only "to fill the [illegible] of pain with consolation." The beauty of this belief is the more marked when one [illegible] it to the [illegible] political [illegible] of what [illegible] that were handled about so [illegible] strongly by self-[illegible] reformers in that black decade of the thirties. "[illegible] love should love the feet of the victim" is close to the

[illegible] Spain, also [illegible] St. Francis and his spiritual [illegible] revolutions, but I could not trace the [illegible] into [illegible] Middle.

> [illegible]
> [illegible] To [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible] illegible
> [illegible] the [illegible]
> [illegible] family, for [illegible] and [illegible],
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible] fly between [illegible] and [illegible] [illegible].
> [illegible] took [illegible] to let [illegible]
> That would make the [illegible] of [illegible]
> [illegible] and [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible];
> [illegible] all [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] all.
> (Collected Poems), p. 180.

The poets at Bergen their individual [illegible] of [illegible] fanatic love and the [illegible] contemporary [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] to [illegible] their [illegible] love but [illegible] [illegible]. [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] free of the local [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] the local lovers. The child cries piteously, for the [illegible] of love, but [illegible] involved in a world of [illegible] and [illegible] "the [illegible] of [illegible] dividing peoples." The soldier that [illegible] begun the [illegible] in Spain, that brought about the [illegible] are [illegible] still [illegible] human [illegible], and [illegible] some responsibility. All are committed to their own [illegible] policy of [illegible] retaliation. The [illegible] and [illegible] of national hate and individual love [illegible] to be [illegible].

> That [illegible] sent out the pilot to [illegible]
> [illegible] the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]
> [illegible] to kill their [illegible]. [illegible]
> [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]
> [illegible] [illegible]. [illegible] [illegible]

[illegible] (Hall of Testing), p. 102.

It is deliberately ironic to force so much [illegible] on their personal affection and ignore the international hate. They [illegible] to "drift their glances" and see not only the threat of destruction from abroad but realize that they too look outward with fear and hate, rather than inward with warm, personal love, that links them to their child. The denunciation is not found in "other eyes" alone but "also theirs." They must have the overall confirmation that "All would destroy the new-born innocent," even the couple whose hearts need not be over-flowing with a total love that there would be no room for any hate.

If this realization is true, it might appear to undermine the validity and value of their narrow, selfish love. In the face of cosmic potential for annihilation what is the point of their love? Spender is reconciling his mind to the painful discovery of the universal responsibility that may not be denied or avoided. He returns to a re-assertion of his old humanist beliefs, strengthened and renewed by his democratic explorations in the last years. He bases his views on the belief that the true values are still the humanisms that the liberal idealists of the thirties defended with such desperation. These truths allow him to answer those who cynically ridicule individual love in a world edging towards a [illegible]-prevented death. The

confident or apathetic group in society may mock or ignore Spender's assertion but he insists again with calm certainty, now, that the views that led men in the suffering thirties to fight in Spain and condemn the totalitarian atrocities are the true and morally eternal ones. He ends this poem with a declaration both lucid and honest; realistic yet hopeful.

> Turning their daughters' [illegible] which in the
> gold
> Of [illegible] life,
> They [illegible] the [illegible] is filled with the [illegible]
> [illegible]' plots to murder children. They know the
> No [illegible] is just unless it grows the innocent
> [illegible] truth: no truth but that
> Which [illegible] this child's [illegible].
> (*Collected Poems*), p. 1[illegible].

Here is the humanist's argument to all causes which call on men to sacrifice their humanity for some specious social goal. This is the reply to concentration camps, and the "rectification of frontiers" or "elimination of unreliable elements" or whatever other verbal hypocrisies are used to conceal the human suffering caused by dictatorial theories of the supremacy of the state. Against all the brutal arguments that men must serve the state, that the state is more significant than the welfare of the individual; against all the calls to sacrifice honor, justice and compassion for some nebulous and distant end, Spender asserts the humane truth of these lines. They supremely insist on what must be the first assumptions of a society which pretends to be civilized. No cause no matter how efficient, how appealing in its [illegible]

solutions to social ills, can be defended with integrity "before it sounds the innocent." For there is only one truth, the one " that reckons this child's terms as urgent." He could plead political and national policy can be just as acceptable if it ensures that the despair of the sick, the helpless and the frightened can be avoid, ignored by the tough, self-lost pluralist. The terms are the first argument, they are sent in words must be divided. In a world of so much toughness the hate the evil of a child, hurt child must be set in the series against all the social plans. Therapists are only to be honestly implemented if they take the terms as evidence of the need for a single reform; to eliminate, as far as is within human powers, the despair and individual anguish in the world.

This seems to sum up, as of Spender's great view of the eternal need for offering to the outcasts of humanity a flow of compassionate love; but Spender is not here simply repeating the diluted and left-over platitudes of the thirties, he is also making a new beginning with rebuilt foundations. He has passed through a time of spiritual agnosticism when he doubted all that had been the basic tenets of his beliefs. Only after various years of introspection and emotional self-questioning and stylistic experiment in his poetry can he now return to a reassertion of the earlier truths.

[illegible] the possibility that he [illegible] to [illegible] the source of his poetic inspiration [illegible] certainly. He has not written much to substantiate this hopeful development. The promising hints which I have elicited from his later work are already [illegible] all [illegible] I write. A reputation, that in the thirties seemed so firmly founded, has had little added to it since. A biography, a history of the fire service during the war, his work as editor of Encounter, [illegible], several lecture tours in the States, the gathering and correction of his poetry into a collected edition, these have been the terms of [illegible] which [illegible] the disappointment of [illegible] in his poetic maturity. But the few later poems I have [illegible] upon seem to suggest, for all the [illegible] of mind that he wrote after the [illegible] in Spain, that Spender still might write significant poetry. He still appears to be the one poet who could [illegible] the humanitarian ideals which might help to [illegible] that ill mixture of anger and apathy that [illegible] the regulation tone of so many writers of this decade.

With the other poets in their thirties I conclude on a note of pessimism. Nothing in their later work [illegible] any likelihood of their emerging poetry as significant as that they were writing in the thirties when their consciences and their hearts were moved by the

[illegible] hope of an age. [illegible] poetry [illegible] to [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] future poetic production will be lost. His latest work like that of Dylan Thomas had indicated [illegible] he was "written out." In general this judgment could also be applied only to Spender, but in his work there [illegible] to be this faint light of hope. I [illegible] that this hope is based only on a few glimpses in a period of writing that has lasted more than twenty years. [illegible] through the thought that this [illegible] moral, [illegible], [illegible], [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] in Spender's [illegible] [illegible] weighing heavily in the total [illegible]. [illegible] contemporary poet has [illegible] expressed the loving [illegible] one could feel for Spender's [illegible]. [illegible] [illegible] "To [illegible] Spender" [illegible] [illegible]:

> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> [illegible]
> (Collected Poems), p. 17[illegible].

[illegible] to Parker's rhetorical question is that the [illegible] very nearly blinded Spender in just that way, but perhaps his sight returns to perceive the continuing [illegible],

CECIL DAY LEWIS

Cecil Day Lewis, like the other three poets I am considering, had to face the conflict between his upper-class birth and education, and the liberal sympathies based on socialist theory that his conscience dictated. He was, in fact, more dedicated to the Communist ideas than the others, for he was a politically active member of the Party from 1933-38. But he knew that at Oxford, where he had studied the classics with great distinction, he had acquired "the uniform of a class, of a way of thinking or of not thinking." He wanted to achieve contact with the workers, believing in the Communist vision of an egalitarian world, yet he knew that his own poetry, literary, cerebal, could only be a source of bewilderment to any "worker" who might try to grapple with its cryptic literary form. The sense of being cut off from the audience for whom this new socialist millenium was to be created, was a source of frustration to all these poets. This feeling was aggravated by a conscious guilt; for they were not ill-educated, diseased, suffering from malnutrition and unemployment. These poets faced the paradox that although they felt a sympathy for the masses, they could not express the complexities of their own feelings in words whose

simplicity or directness could gain them the wider audience they sought. They never did solve the problem of translating their intellectual compassion into the cruder rhetoric of popular verse, but they did succeed in salvaging poetry from the sloppy repetition of earlier nineteenth century platitudes which the Georgians had considered the appropriate voice for English verse.

Since the poets I am considering had so much in common they are often seen in terms of one another. Deutsch has summed up Day Lewis as "like Spender in his attitude, like Auden in his technique." Like most generalizations this one has only a grain of truth. The lyric quality found so often in Day Lewis' verse is more exotic and vivid than Spender's quiet tenderness. One can admittedly find evidence of Auden's technical influence in some of the tricks he borrows, but such evidence is usually the mark of an inferior poem. In Lewis' more significant work he exhibits a style that is totally individual. In spirit he does seem closer to Spender's nature. More than once in his autobiography, The Buried Day, he records experiences that exhibit the same anxious self-doubt that possessed Spender so markedly during his early years. Day Lewis records being made to go to school in hated

eccentric leggings. "For the first time in my life I got a full taste of what it is to be an Outsider. I have never liked the taste."[1] And a little later, "I was only eight or nine when it occurred, a sense of failure had begun to set in."[2] Even more significantly he recalls seeing a boy persecuted at school; made the butt of all teasing and torment. His concern leading to a general condemnation of God and the whole system is akin to Spender's agonized compassion. Day Lewis at this time felt the tug of sympathy, the urge to approach, but he did not go to the boy's aid in any way. His failure to do so remains a prick upon his conscience.

> To have made friends with this dismally unattractive boy would have been the equivalent of kissing a leper's sores- - and I was not a saint. But to think that God or whatever means the Good should make room in the scheme of things for even one such scapegoat, one example of such unrelived, unmerited wretchedness, seemed reason enough later for me to follow Alyosha Karamazov and return the ticket. 3

Lewis began his career by writing poems in a lyric but highly derivative style as early as 1925 with Beechen Vigil. He no longer chooses to make juvenile fancies available but they are no worse, or

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[1] C. Day Lewis, The Buried Day (London, 1960) p. 75.

[2] Ibid, p. 80.

[3] Ibid, p. 116.

even very different, from the usual writing of a sensitive, literate young man more perceptive of books than experience. His second slender volume Country Comets is a collection of the poems he wrote between 1925 and 1927. By 1927 he mentions in his foreword that he is already working on his next book which was to have the indicative title, Transitional Poem. Country Comets seems a residual collection of the last poems in his pre-Auden style. A stanza taken at random demonstrates the type of poetry he was writing at this time, and its quality. It seems to be an odd compound of the influences of Shelley and Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam.

> I'll brook no comfort watering down desire
> Yet I cannot think my love a document
> That one hand clasp will, when the paper is spent,
> Scrawl "finis" and toss upon the fire.
> (Country Comets,) p. 20.

Transitional Poem is Day Lewis' first serious poem in the new idiom. In this poem he debates at length the conflict which preoccupied the other poets too. He owed one loyalty to his class and upbringing, he owed another, often conflicting one, to his conscience and his belief in the necessity of social reform. To be a Marxist was to attack the principles of his family, but to be neutral was a spiritual impossibility. In fact the poem demonstrates that the stylistic transi-

tion has already taken place. In contrast with his earlier rather langorous views of the English countryside, he begins to describe with passion and accuracy the devastation of the economic system in England in the years immediately after the Great Strike.[4] In lines that, like Auden's, make a strange prophecy about the slump that hit England in the early thirties, he records the evidence of physical decay that he sees on every side, the apparent death of a system.

> And now I passed by a forbidding coast
> Where ironworks rust
> On each headland, goats crop the salted grass
> Steam oozes out of the mud. Earth has
> No promise for the proprietors. (Collected Poems), p. 52.

This scene was not an isolated one; a single demonstration of failure, but representative of a time of political and social metamorphosis. This was not a lull but an ending.

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[4]Compare for example the description of the "forbidding coast" with his Country Comets view of England, (p. 5).

> Here is green lacquer
> Spread by the willows
> On glossy water,
> Where the ballet of minnows
> Moving together
> In lithe sarabande ...

> You above all who have come to the far end,
> Victims of a run-down machine, who can bear
> it no longer,
> Whether in easy chairs chafing at impotence
> Or against hunger, bullies and spies,
> Preserving the nerve for action, the spark
> of indignation,
> Need fight in the dark no more, you know your
> enemies
> You shall be leaders when zero hour is signalled
> Wielders of power and welders of a new world.
> (Collected Poems), p. 151.

The "new world" the idea that dominated the thirties now seemed possible. The artisan "welders" shows which side the poet is on. The new industrial workers will now be triumphant because the economic collapse has exposed the "enemies." Those who had waited now see the truth. "In the dark no more" they are to lead the attack on the vested interests who had oppressed them. And the poets would be the mouth-pieces; leaders of indignant youth.

> We learn to speak for all
> Whose hearts here are not at home.
> All who march to a better time
> And breed the world for which they burn.
> (A Time To Dance), p. 7.

Day Lewis saw evidence of the coming revolution on every side:

> Towns there are choked with desperate men
> Scrap iron gluts the sidings here
> Iron and men they mould for war.
> (Overtures to Death), p.21.

He feels a sense of dismayed shame, for every scene that catches his attention seems a degenerate contrast to

the beauty that England had once known. The anger is just as intense when he clothes it in the sarcastic parody of the beautiful old children's carol. The rhythm and very clause structure are so close to the well known hymn that its words intrude on the memory commenting on this new version of the holy scene.

> The hooters are blowing,
> No heed let him take;
> When baby is hungry
> 'Tis best not to wake.
> Thy mother is crying,
> Thy dad's on the dole:
> Two shillings a week is
> The price of a soul. (Time to Dance), p.55.

In Magic Mountain his bitter diagnosis is more acute than the hope symbolized throughout the poem by the mountain itself. There is sadness and humiliation behind the anger of such lines as these:

> Come for a walk in our pleasant land
> We must wake up early if we want to
> understand.
> The length and breadth and depth of
> our decay
> Has corrupted our vowels and clogged
> our bowels
> Impaired our breathing, eaten our
> pride away. (Collected Poems), p. 151.

It is easier to mutter Auden. One observes the commonplace tricks; the tripping rhythm, the internal rhymes, the heavy end rhyme and the brash, cheap attempt to shock in the line about the vowels and bowels but the difference is surely on another level, it is in the tone. Day Lewis openly cares about it. Not

for him Auden's cool detachment, he knows that as an intellectual he shares part of the blame for this situation:

> Our holy intellectuals what are they at?
> Filling in hard times with literary chat
> Laying down the law where no one listens.
> (Collected Poetry), p. 152.

He is prepared to share the blame, but he knows clearly where most of it really lies, on the heads of those glib and incompetent politicians who offer "what seems a bargain but in the long run will cost you your honor, your crops and your son." In a flood of vehement rhetoric, echoing Auden's style he attacks the whole bunch of them:

> What do they believe in these yellow
> yes men
> Pansies, politicians, prelates and
> pressmen
> Boneless wonders, unburstable bouncers
> Backslappers, cheerleaders, bribed
> announcers
> Broadcasting the all-clear as the raiders
> draw near;
> Would mend a burst dam with sticking
> plaster
> And hide with shocked hand the yawn of
> disaster. (Collected Poetry), p. 151.

Poetically this is not satisfactory. The slick alliteration of the first four lines suggests a contrived cleverness; a use of words for their convenient sounds rather than their meanings. The issue is too serious for the tasteless humor of the "unburstable bouncers." The metaphor of the last line is impressive though,

coupling the idea of the superficial social etiquette of the concealed yawn with the implied imminence of the "yawning" horror that looms ahead. It suggests well the way those in power went through the polite social ritual of a dozen conference failures, while behind their posturings disaster appeared.

Auden's influence, however, permeated this decade, and Day Lewis is as willing as any of the poets to emulate the style of the Auden jingle. As Day Lewis confesses,

> Although I had certain half-conscious reservations about him I willingly became his disciple where poetry was concerned. . . all this proved so infectious that my own verse became for a time pastiche Auden.
> (The Buried Day), p. 177.

Consider the borrowed middle rhymes and the driving brash cockiness of the following lines:

> Then don't blame me when you're up a tree,
> No trains coming through and you're feeling blue,
> When you're left high and dry and you want to cry
> When you're in the cart and you've got a weak heart
> When you're up a pole and you can't find your soul. (Collected Poems), p. 110.

What can one say about such stupid futilities? This kind of hack writing could be continued indefinitely, unrestrained by a need for meaning. There are many other examples of this unhappy emulation. One can

observe the jazz rhythms of the following lines where the lilting couplets barely make sense at all:

> Make no mistake this is where you get off,
> Sue with her suckling, Cyril with his cough
> Bert with a blazer and a safety razor,
> Old John Braddlebum and Terence the Toff.
> (Collected Poems), p. 109.

Even when the syncopated lines make sense there is a vulgar hectoring tone ill becoming a lyric poet.

> Fireman and farmer, father and flapper
> I'm speaking to you sir, please drop
> that paper;
> Don't you know its poison? Have you
> lost all hope?
> Aren't you ashamed ma'm to be taking
> dope? (Collected Poems), p. 132.

Clearly the excesses of Auden's influence had to be resisted if Day Lewis were to develop as a poet. He had two significant individual qualities which allowed him to find alternatives to such extreme stylistic faults and lapses of taste. These qualities were a sense of human unity and the experience of love, especially a deep love of England. These emotions could be expressed with an instinctive and sometimes dazzling lyricism.

Lewis's affection for England lay deeper than an easy patriotism and did not preclude his questioning the whole accepted ethos under which he had been brought up. From his own experience of life at Sherbourne he was highly suspicious of the pre-suppositions under

which British public schools educated a ruling colonial elite. He doubted the present relevance of the tough regime of cold baths, fagging and the cane which reinforced conformity and destroyed the natural human being by aiming to form the narrow, minor vice of "the cool cad."

> White hopes of England here
> Are taught to rule by learning to obey
> Bend over before vested interests
> Kiss the rod; salute the quarter deck.
> Here is no savage discipline
> Of peregrine swooping, of fire destroying
> But a civil code; no capital offender
> But the cool cad. (Collected Poems), p. 132.

This is not major poetry and one questions what Auden's famous hawk symbol (here disguised as a peregrine) is doing, but it is honest, concerned verse. He has begun to re-think the relevance of the values that he had been forced to accept in his youth. Britain had to face the rising power of totalitarian government with ideas which, when not hypocritical, were ossified. The playing fields of Eton were demonstrably not going to win the next Waterloo. The high-moralled intellectuals were to learn that the next war would be fought under less gallant rules:

> But will it suffice
> To wear a scrum cap against the falling skies?
> "Play the game"--but supposing the other chap kicks
> You'd like to have learnt some rough house tricks.
> It boils down to this, do you really want

> to win
> Or prefer the fine gesture of giving in?
> Are you going to keep, or to make the rules
> Die with the fighters or be dead with fools.
> (Collected Poems), p. 119.

These deliberately conversational lines are slightly pedestrian, but Day Lewis is seriously questioning accepted ideas, and the issue is as important today as then. To what extent do powers that deny your values deserve to be treated by the standards in which you believe? Can one retain a political morality and still compete with those who accept treachery and dishonesty as natural tools? If you give up your morality are you any better than those who contemptuously deny it? Clearly Lewis is addressing the wavering moralists and pacifists of the upper-class left. "Scrum-cap" is a snob item of sports equipment which further identifies his public school audience.

However much Day Lewis is forced to record the decay in the landscape about him, and question the standards Britain now accepted, he looks forward always from the decay of the present to a different future. In From Feathers to Iron, while observing some disused mines he expresses his hope:

> But we seek a new world through old workings
> Whose hope lies like seed in the bones
> of the earth. (Collected Poems), p.76.

The poem develops to a climax of lyrical power as Lewis

praises the loveliness of the English countryside.

> You that love England, who have an ear
> for her music
> The slow movement of chords in benediction
> Clear arias of light thrilling over her
> uplands
> Over the chords of summer sustained peace-
> fully.
> Ceaseless the leave's counterpoint in a
> west wind lively,
> Blossom and river rippling loveliest
> allegro. (Collected Poems), p.150.

The music metaphor does not seem obtrusive or strained here in spite of its lengthy development. The long, slow syllables have a sustained lyric beauty. Here is the other Day Lewis, a poet with an ear attuned to grace and loveliness.

Spender had attempted to combine his instinctive lyric style with the imagery of the materialist technology that was developing round him, and Day Lewis also sought for a reconciliation in the extremes of his nature by deriving his imagery from this contemporary experience. Too often the two elements remain defiantly separate; their only connection is in their temporary juxtaposition in the poem. I believe the lines below demonstrate one of the failures of this attempt. The method is to contrast the new "gasworks" image with a conventionally poetic one. The device here, invalidates any last element of response the tired lyric element might produce but does not add

anything new in itself. Note how the reference to "bud" is deflated by the absurd "gasometer."

> Look here the gasometer rises
> And here bough swells to bud.
> (Collected Poems), p.78.

In other verses he employs the train metaphor which seemed to fascinate the group. As in Spender's "Express" the attempt is made to make technology motivate emotional participation. The following examples suggest simply that Lewis assumes that if he employs this kind of image, his poem will automatically become up to date and important. Obviously however, the mere utilization of a train metaphor does not fill the void where there is a lack of original meaning. Consider the following lines selected virtually at random from the numerous poems that use this symbol.

> The tracks of love and fear
> Lead back till I disappear
> Into the ample terminus
> From which all trains draw out.
> (Collected Poems), p.35.

> Here is love's junction, no terminus,
> He arrives at girl or boy.
> Signal a clear line.
> (Collected Poems), p.68.

> As a train that travels underground track
> Feels current flashed from far off dynamos
> Our wheels whirling with impetus elsewhere
> Generated we run, are ruled by rails.
> (Collected Poems), p.76.

> Let us be off! Our steam
> Is deafening the dome

The needle in the gauge
Points to a long-banked rage.
(Collected Poems), p.111.

Sometimes it is car engines that appeal:

...and then life's pistons
Pounding into their secret cylinder
Begin to tickle the most anchorite ear.
(Collected Poems) p. 25.

The following "electrical" image is probably used ironically, but it is an extreme example of the problem with which the poet was grappling.

God is an electrician
And they that worship him must worship him
In ampere and volt.[5]
(Collected Poems), p. 134.

It appears he was seeking to exchange his natural sense of beauty for the shining prize of modernity and the slick contemporary touch. His determination to mould his lyric style into the cerebal control of Auden is implied, I think, in the following lines. He declares his need for the hard formal shape in life and, by extension, in his verse.

It is certain we shall attain
No life till we stamp on all
Life the tetragonal
Pure symmetry of brain.
(Collected Poems), p.9.

[5]The next stanza is similar:

God is a statistician;
Offer him all the data; tell him your dreams,
What is your lucky number?

Luckily his poetry vigorously resisted that "tetragonal" mould.

He saw that beauty did still exist but its cause and origin had been extended. The poetic beauty was no longer found only in the Georgian poets' countryside, it appeared in new and unexpected places. It was new in form, but the old rapture could still be experienced.

> Beauty breaks ground, oh in strange places
> Seen after cloudburst down the boundary
> water course,
> In Texas a great gusher, a grain
> Elevator in the Ukraine plain
> To a new generation turns new faces.
> (Collected Poems), p.92.

The "new faces" were sought with a fresh excitement and poets realized that even the apparently ugly thing acquired its own beauty.

> This glum canal will ...
> Show that beauty is
> A motion of the mind
> By its own caprice
> Directed or confined.
> (Collected Poems), p.49.

In the dank canals and swollen gasometers they sought their new experience.

Many times Day Lewis avoided the "pylon" imagery altogether, and then his verse is flooded with a conventional but shining beauty. Sometimes in his love poems the lyricism is calm and cool; gently loving

verses such as these:

> Now she is like the white tree rose
> That takes a blessing from the sun;
> Summer has filled her veins with light
> And her warm heart is washed with noon.
> (Collected Poems), p.70.

Or,

> My love is so happy you might well say
> One of Hellenes summers had lost its way
> And taken shelter underneath her breast.
> (Collected Poems), p.36.

Here the mood of calm love expresses itself in the common images of roses and summer, and yet they seem revived and appropriate; avoiding the stock response by the sincerity of their tone and the real affection they express.

At other times his lyrics have a sudden exotic intensity which flares and dazzles. One finds this in such a breathtaking phrase as "When honeysuckle and summer suffocate the lane." "Suffocate" suggests the wild growth of the plants but also our breathless reaction to such a surfeit of beauty. Brilliance of color can be maintained for a whole poem. No other poet in this decade could have produced the rhapsodic lines of Maple and Sumach. It begins with the sudden pictorial impact of "Trees spend a year of sunsets in their pride," and then develops to the exultant thrill of:

> Your leaves drenched with the life-blood
> of the year
> What flamingo dawns have waved from the east
> What eves have crimsoned to their toppling
> crest
> To give the flame and transience you wear?
> (Overture to Death), p.13.

One's first impression may be surprise that the poet can write these slightly extravagant lines without any self-consciousness. The eager rhythm has a rhetorical certainty that denies any sense of pastiche. The "life-blood of the year" image combining blood color with the idea of death in the Fall of the year is not original, but I do not know where it has been more colorfully developed. "Flamingo" with its indication of the delicate pink of the bird's color against the blue sky is an evocative presentment of the first pinkness of the rising sun and dawn skies. The sun "topples" as it sets in the evening and both the pink and the crimson are combined in the flaming beauty of the trees' autumnal colors. Perhaps there is a hint of the scarlet crest of the cock in the use of "crest" to describe the peak of the evening's color.

This kind of writing seems to show a strong instinctive voice of Day Lewis although one may perhaps detect a tint of Hopkins' lush richness. Hopkins' style was already a strong influence in this decade; it battled against the harsh precision of Eliot's

influence had begun to wane, when after The Waste Land his verse had become so woolly and diffuse. These lines are clearly a deliberate copy of Hopkins' rhythm and alliterative style:

> If anywhere, love lips, flower flaunt,
> crimson of cloud crest
> With flames impassioned told of the
> pacing shadows....
> (Overtures), p.29.

But to point out Hopkins' possible influence does not constitute an explanation of Day Lewis' work, and his own sense of the romantic scene is inherent throughout much of his poetry. Even as late as the middle of the war a poem such as Night Piece contains the same sense of beauty in its imagery, when he describes the lovers:

> They are laid in the grass and above
> Their limbs a syringa blossoms
> In brief and bridal white
> Under whose arch of moonshine
> The impotent is made straight.
> (Overture to Death), p.54.

The description of that "arch of moonshine," is as lovely as those earlier "flamingo dawns," but the words create a mood as much as a picture. A conflicting element intrudes in the last two lines with their awkwardly suggestive phallic symbolism.

Now that the poet's vision had been freed from the restriction of unnatural emulation he began to

develop a very characteristic kind of image. It clearly owes something to the metaphysical poets who were so highly regarded in this era. There is that unexpected linking of two highly dissimilar and unexpected things which form a triumphant amalgam when the device is successful. The contrasts Day Lewis creates combine the conventionally poetic and the everyday thing which is unexpected in this context. I have already indicated the false start in this style which Lewis made in such comparisons as the gasometer and the bough. Now the comparisons are more certain; their effect more poetically controlled. Reality decides the choice of the metaphor rather than the decision to pay lip service to "pylon" tricks. Sometimes the image had a jaunty bravado, which flaunts its unusual comparison:

> Admiral earth breaks out his colours
> Bright at the forepeak of the day.
> (Collected Poems), p.73.

This is a little hearty perhaps, but its cheerfulness is very suitable in its context and the metaphor bears a closer examination of its contrast. "Breaks," for example, combines the technical term for raising the flags with the idea of day-break, and "forepeak" suggests not only the forward mast but the first indication of day's dawning.

In other examples the technique is more subtle. Consider:

> Dawn like a greyhound leapt the hill tops.
> (Collected Poems), p. 116.

Here dawn is compared with the dog because of its color, its speed and perhaps the shape of its thin line as it first appears on the horizon. The image is unusual but not eccentric, and after the mind, stopped by its originality, has inspected its implications it is seen to be successful, because it alters and extends our vision of the scene. In a similar way the charming image of the child's game creates a new view of a conventional sea description.

> Once I watched a young ocean laugh and shake
> With spillikins of aspen light.
> (Poems), p.25.

The Victorian game "spillikins" is a fancier version of the American game "pick-up-sticks." The spillikins make a pile of slender, colored splints like aspen needles. The ocean is young and its ripples remind the poet of the giggling child trying to maintain a steady hand. The light reflected from these ripples is also like the spillikins; slender shafts, jumbled without form into a muddle of varied colors. At first this image may seem too cute, then it appears colorfully appropriate.

The simile in the next line is also effective. Now the poet is observing the urban scene rather than conventional nature. He moves,

> Down wet streets gleaming like patent leather. (Short Is The Time), p.59.

The comparison is effective in its color and texture, but there is more, I think, implied. Patent leather is cheaply glossy and highly artificial, and the poet is making a similar assertion about the streets of this town.

The similes extend until they include the poet's own work. With sudden self-doubt he sees his verse as

> Our words like poppies love the maturing field
> But form no harvest.
> (Short Is The Time), p.67.

Here the idea of a flower beautiful, but virtually a weed in a field which produces other useful, not merely ornamental, crops again demonstrates that symbolic usage which is becoming a controlled and effective feature of Day Lewis's verse.

One further example will indicate the growing compression the poet is achieving. The simile has given place to the greater compression of the metaphor.

> Between cast-iron past and plastic future.
> (Poems 43), p.48.

At one level this is a clever piece of compressed history. The Industrial Revolution which created the

environment in which these writers lived was the era of cast iron. In the thirties the first of the new plastics such as celluloid were being marketed. But the line allows two further relevent assumptions. Cast iron is solid and permanent, admirably hard and long lasting. Plastic is often cheap, temporary and gimcrack. These materials are considered as epitomizing the values of their ages. A third assertion may be made. While the past is now cast and unchangeable, the future is plastic, softly malleable, its shape resting in the hands of those who live in this age. This complexity of meanings underlying and reinforcing each other is the mark of the most mature poetry.

If the single image became more surely handled as Day Lewis' style developed, he also utilized the long developed metaphor with increasing confidence. I have indicated the technique earlier when I described the music image in the poem beginning <u>You who love England</u>. It is a device that the poet handles with increasing skill, particularly when he avoids the constant comparisons with engines and trains. One can find an early example of this technique in <u>Desire is a Witch</u>. This is not a very effective poem because again Lewis takes a voice that is not his own. Influenced probably by Eliot's experiments with the new jazz

rhythms he produces the following lines which could well be the words for a popular hit song.[6] That comment, I suppose, is simultaneously a praise and a criticism of their effectiveness.

> Desire is a witch
> And runs against the clock
> It can unstitch
> The decent hem
> Where space tacks on to time.
> It can unlock
> Pandora's provinces.[7]

This is a little crude, but in the development of the metaphor of sewing through "unstitching", "hem", and "tacking" there is an early hint of the way in which Day Lewis will be successful. The idea of desire unstitching the shrouding cover of decency and establishing its own standards of place and time is interesting if not entirely convincing. More successful is the following example of a similar device, the single

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[6]He does in fact, like Auden, take a delight in the syncopated rhythms of the night club song. Nothing really divides the following verse from the "ppp"lyric.

> Love's my distraction,
> I'd have you know.
> Each little word, each fit of action--
> Love says no, love says go,
> Love says wait a bit and time will show.

[7]Collected Poems 1936, pg.26.
Peculiarly enough this innocuous verse was considered "extremely, excessively sexual." So much so that it led to the demand for his resignation from his teaching position at Sherbourne.
(The Buried Day p.197).

image rationally extended over a number of lines, each adding to the effectiveness of its original impact.

> This is the interregnum of my year.
> All the Spring except the leaf is here
> All the Winter but the cold
> Bandage of snow for the first time unrolled
> Lays bear the wounds given when any fate
> And most men's company could humiliate
> Sterilized man. Yet still they prick
> And pulse beneath the skin. (Collected Poems), p. 53.

Here the conventional idea of the white snow coming like a bandage to cover the earth wounded by its autumnal dying, is carried forward. The spring thaw removes the bandage and life, only temporarily frozen, warms and revives, feeling its tortured body as the winter's anaesthetic wears off. The poet identifies himself with this experience. The winter had also made him "sterilized" but now the spring has revived the old dismaying "wounds" that still "prick".

Day Lewis uses this development very effectively in his love poetry too. Here the comparison is made between the loved woman and a rock.

> You, first, who ground my lust to love upon
> Your gritty, humourous virginity
> Then yielding to its temper suddenly

Proved what a Danube can be struck from stone.[8] The image describes the grindstone wearing away and cutting off baser material and the damaged exterior until it polishes the beautiful heart of the gem; the sparkling core of love. Only the imaginative eye can see what beauty exists within the stone before the grinding wheel had given it lustre and polish. The woman can recognize the potential fineness of his crude passion, and is the means to create its refinement. "Gritty" continues the geological metaphor of abrasion, yet because it hints at the slang meaning of grit, determination and integrity, we begin to see the quality of this woman. The "humourous" is high praise, for without that virginity could only be retained by priggishness of too rigid morality. The "rock" image continues in the idea of the struck stone, and one recalls Moses in the desert. Now the water flow is not a drinking spring, though the idea of refreshment is present, it is a whole gushing river of passion as huge as the Danube. The river is not only the largest in

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[8]Collected Poems, p. 18. A similar metaphor is used on another occasion, p. 27.

Embrace and ultimate bone between
Always have interposed
Strata undiagnosed
In love's geology.

Europe but has traditionally been associated with lovers.

One could magnify the number of examples but I think I have offered sufficient to support my case that when Day Lewis could avoid the emulation of Auden's worst stylistic tricks he could write in an original and confident tone which links itself to an harmonious tradition of English poetry deeper and stronger than the sometimes facile experiments of the poetry of the thirties. But even when the mature voice seems achieved there are regular and repeated lapses into the very worst fatuities of Auden's false over-heartiness; what has been aptly called his "scoutmasterish" tone. It is usually rather feeble and inappropriate in Auden; it is made so much worse in Day Lewis by being so consciously affected, so deliberately second-hand.

> You'll be leaving soon and it's up to you boys
> Which shall it be? You must make your choice
> There's a war on you know. (Collected Poems), p. 118.

That this is false is clear since the phrase "There's a war on" was a catch-phrase of English comedians always worth a belly laugh.

He also employs the knowing first-names with which Auden used to amuse the clique audience for whom he sometimes wrote.[9]

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[9]Compare Auden's Orators (p.102)

> Off to tell Francis and Rex you are come
> With a greeting from me and Derek my chum.

Or,

> Here is a voice saying Wystan, Stephen, Christopher all of you - Read of your losses. (p. 81).

Then I'll hit the trail for that promising land
May catch up with Wystan and Rex my friend.
(Collected Poems), p. 111.

Another feature of Auden's verse was the constant repetition of two images which became a kind of trade mark. They were the airman and the eagle. Both obviously suggest something above the world, existing in an untrammelled environment. Obviously these images could be highly effective though they were overworked. Day Lewis uses them to pay absurd flattery to Auden by insisting that he was both the eagle and the airman.[10]

Look west Wystan, lone flyer, birdman, my bully boy!
...No wing room for Wystan, no joke for kestrel joy.

Gain altitude Auden, then let the base beware
Migrate chaste my kestrel, you need a change of air.
(Collected Poems), p.128.

The crudity of these lines can be measured by the lapses in the vocabulary, and there is no evidence, alas, of self-conscious parody or joke. Even "bully boy", and "change of air" are tired old phrases that do not appear to be used ironically.

So the old dangers were always near, constantly threatening to swamp the clear natural voice with lines and even whole poems of triviality and vulgarity. Such problems of tone were so foreign to Day Lewis's true

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[10]Compare the opening lines of Magnetic Mountain. They exhibit again that odd amalgam of influence; Auden and Hopkins.

Now be with you elate, unshared
My kestrel joy, O Hoverer in the wind.
(Collected Poems), p. 107.

nature as a poet that they had to be borrowed to exist at all and they were used in his weaker moments without being digested. What is a little disconcerting is to find the two styles co-existing within a single long poem, as though Day Lewis did not perceive the immediate superiority of writing in his own idiom. He seems too dazzled with the "patent leather" sheen of some slick verse which he admired and emulated. He apparently believes its surface gloss was the shine of poetic significance.

History did not allow the poet to cultivate his garden. European politics seemed to have created a machine that was carrying everyone to an obvious but inescapable disaster. For once the commonplace couplets seem to be justified by the concern; there is no room for cleverness in the face of disaster.

> And now may I ask have you made any plans?
> You can't go further along these lines;
> Positively this is the end of the track
> It's rather late and there's no turn back.
> (Collected Poems), p. 109

The poet is arguing from frustration, trying to insist that people must meet their responsibilities. In the face of the defiance of the League of Nations and the shameful intentions of the Hoare-Laval agreement, Day Lewis felt a sense of hopelessness. He found himself part of a generation who could not enforce a decision or make a choice,

a generation
Whose only faith is the piling of fact on fact in the hope that
Someday a road may be built of them and may lead somewhere.

The slump and the international failure seemed to be undermining their capacity for creative change, although when Huxley had come out with his scathing attack on the politics of the intellectuals What are You Going to do about it?, it was Day Lewis who was the spokesman in an angry reply called We are not going to do nothing. The opportunity to do something was presented by the Spanish Civil War. Suddenly a choice was possible.[11] No longer did the committed intellectuals have to accept the rising power of totalitarianism passively.. They could refuse to suffer the abdications of responsibility forced upon them by the failures of their leaders at the conference table. Now there seemed an issue which was clear-cut, and a way was clear for taking action. Spain offered the chance for a crusade that might redeem the age while it liberated the land.

Day Lewis wrote only two poems specifically about the

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[11] In the Buried Day though now seeing the issues less emotionally he still accepts the general correctness of the diagnosis.

> But though I doubt if any cause was ever "righteous" enough to justify the pain, misery and evil which war brings with it, and though I admire the courage of the pure pacifist no less (and no more) than I admire the courage of front line soldier, I could not myself opt out of the human condition as to some degree the pacifist must do. I believe a poet should be involved as far as his nature and circumstances allow it, in the main stream of human experience. (P. 86).

Spanish war but they are both very significant. They are The Volunteer dedicated to the International Brigade, and The Nabara which concerns a naval battle.

The Volunteer is a lyric describing the motives involved in making the decision to fight in Spain. Day Lewis appears to identify himself so closely with the idealistic vision that caused men to join the Brigade that it is rather regrettable to have to record that he did not himself volunteer in spite of the pressures of conscience. The motives for his refusal were only those of self-preservation.

> I had a heavier weight on my conscience: the International Brigade was formed, and I believed that I ought to volunteer for it, but I lacked the courage to do so. (Buried Day), p. 219.

It would be improper however, to belabour this moving poem with the biographical facts of Lewis' own limitations. The poem remains a deeply felt assertion of eternal moral values. It makes a sublime credo for a generation which is so often accused of apathy and cynicism. It has the nobility of Rupert Brooke's war poetry, but it avoids his sentimentality. It is Brooke with open eyes, for after 1918 there could not be the same kind of instinctive idealism and unthinking, though sincere bravado. For this generation twenty years after, the decision had to be carefully thought out. If the resulting determination was to fight it would be coolly honest and totally rational rather than fervent and instinctive. They regretted the necessity of war but

they did not doubt its significance. In this respect, with the possible exception of Spender, the poets avoided the implication of Wilfred Owen's universal compassion in the face of the war's malignant pointlessness. The Spanish War was not inexplicable, and victory for one side or the other would make a difference. If the Republicans won the dictators and all they stood for would be defeated. If the Government lost then Europe too would be lost: swamped under the rising tide of totalitarian power. This belief, however much history has demonstrated its exaggeration, caused them to volunteer for this war even while they retained a profound intellectual certainty concerning the pointlessness of the previous European War. They continued to condemn the victors' failure to preserve any worthwhile peace. The strong pacifism amongst intellectuals based on international cynicism vanished when the Spanish War seemed to be caused by issues in which they could believe more confidently than the discredited partiotism of 1914. Because the War in Spain appeared so clearly a battle for ideology rather than territory or concessions, it seemed possible to fight with a clear sense of faith; a belief that more worthwhile issues than national prestige were at stake. They could make the assumption that victory would bring some devoutly desired change.

In The Volunteer there is none of that pompous and

ersatz dedication of Binyon; none of the hymns of pride or the unctuous rendering of "Lest we forget." It is the sincerest declaration of the crusading spirit. It is both noble and profoundly honest, and this was an age when the two could rarely go together. Cynicism and despair had debunked the pretensions of idealistic sacrifice. Soldiers had been caught once too often.

> Tell them in England if they ask
> What brought us to these wars
> To this plateau beneath night's
> Grave manifold of stars.
>
> It was not fraud or foolishness,
> Glory, revenge or pay
> We came because our open eyes
> Could see no other way.
>
> There was no other way to keep
> Man's flickering truth alight,
> These stars will witness that our course
> Burned briefer not less bright.
>
> Beyond the wasted olive groves
> The furthest lift of land
> There calls a country that was ours
> And here shall be regained.
>
> Shine to us memoried and real
> Green water, silken meads
> Rivers of home refresh our path
> Whom here your influence leads.
>
> Here in a parched and stranger place
> We fight for England free
> The good our fathers won for her
> The land they hoped to see. (Overtures to Death), p. 40.

The first thing one observes is the quality of the rhythm. The poem uses very regular iambics but the lines seem so natural that they appear to have an almost conversational simplicity and a flexible, easy strength. The

tone is throughout gentle, simple, with a quiet lyric sincerity. The theme of these verses is the moral significance of the decision of the soldiers of the International Brigade to fight, far from their own countries, for the defense of the Spanish Republican Government. The honesty of Day Lewis' feelings is exemplified by the almost prosaic avoidance of any excess poeticisms in the natural colloquial explanation of the opening lines. Conversationally he begins, "Tell them in England if they ask.." This slips easily into the description of the brilliance of the stars in the rarefied air of the Spanish plateau, as the soldier lies looking up at "the night's grave manifold of stars." The slow stress of these syllables, the powerful associations occasioned by "manifold" and the solemnity of "grave" create a hush before a moment of revelation. This feeling is supported by the para-rhyme of "wars" and "stars" which adds to the sense of hesitancy. Then comes the strong rhythmic sweep of the second stanza as Day Lewis offers his explanation. He begins with a list of the elements which have, in the past, been the cause of a soldier fighting. Each in turn is explicitly rejected. The soldiers in this international army did not come for glory. After the battles of 1916 that word had little appeal to a soldier; the glamour of war had been decisively overwhelmed by a knowledge of its misery. They were not bribed by an impoverished Spanish government to form a new army of looting mercenaries. They did not demand revenge

against the Fascists. Many of the battle groups from Britain, France, U.S.A. and Canada had had no personal contact with the Fascists at all. They came because, observing their world from the standpoint of moral justice, they "could see no other way." They had to fight this Fascist ideology where it had at last shown itself in open battle rather than through the inner subversion which was so much harder to challenge. With their "open eyes," which were not dazzled by the thrill of war, it seemed to them the only choice they could make.

The third stanza is perhaps the least effective. The rhythm becomes obtrusive. "Man's flickering truth" sounds clicheic and is awkwardly developed in the words "burned briefer" which presumably must refer rather to the soldiers' lives than mankind's truth. As if the poet had realized the tension was weakening at this point he changes the tone slightly, and the next two stanzas are more consciously lyric, moving with a serene but stronger lilt. The poet begins to justify the importance of the Spanish War even to a man such as Day Lewis himself, who felt such a firm prior patriotism for England. Spain "calls" him because it now presents a double opportunity, to regain a legitimate government for Spain, and to redeem the reputation of England whose politicians had so often crassly temporized in its international respconsibilities.

Victory would re-establish the idealism that Lewis believed once existed in England. England is still deeply in his mind and the next stanza, which envisions that England the loved, is pastorally beautiful. The repeated "m" and "s" sound seem to create a sense of country peace. His vision includes both the "memoried" and the "real." The contrast between the direct description of "green water" and the Keatsian tone of "silken meads" indicates the extremes, for his present vision includes the actual memory and the romantic exaggeration. ~~Both of~~ these are precious to him, and both combine in his response to the contrast between England and Spain. As he thinks of the "rivers of home" a yearning note arises, for he now views only Spain's contrasting "parched" plateau. Yet the rivers seem also to symbolize English life, constant, steady, refreshing; representing a truth which creates the sense of values that brings him to this war. Paradoxically it is his English patriotism that causes him to reject the parochial and leads him to fight for a country other than his own. Spain is strange to him but although the description makes an obvious contrast between the refreshing rivers of England and this desert plateau, the two share an identity of spirit and here, paradoxically, "We fight for England free." They are defending the ideals which they had inherited from their fathers who had also struggled for the same beliefs in England. Now the sons fight for

liberalism and human dignity on this plateau. The history of the last two lines is obvious. Their fathers fought for ideals in England which they did not live to see achieved. The volunteer now enjoying that land "they hoped to see" fights the same battle in Spain. They wish to extend their own fortune to another country. They also know that defeat here will bring about the destruction of free England too and all that their fathers struggled for. Their decision to fight becomes both practical and idealistic. It is not only noble self-sacrifice, but also the clearest self-interest. There are few images in this poem and the main one of the "flickering torch" is notable primarily for its ineffectiveness. The tone the poet wishes to achieve in this poem precludes the complexity and compression which he has elsewhere achieved with his imagery. This lyric verse tender and restrained directly records an attitude that seems, even today when we can look back on its failure, fine and noble. The value and significance of their decision cannot be judged in terms of success and failure. The International Brigade was disbanded, Franco remains triumphant, but their decision was right then and looking back there is still no other that could have been made. More than any other poem these verses with their tender lyricism and restrained explanations express the real choice that was offered to these men. When such selfless decisions are made the world is ennobled by them.

Demonstrating his wide technical range Day Lewis chose as the subject of his second poem concerning the Spanish struggle a long narrative sea poem which in form recalls the conventional nineteenth century. It is called The Nabara. Day Lewis had previously attempted such a narrative in a lengthy section of A Time to Dance. This poem concerned the pioneering flight of Parer and M'Intosh to Australia, which was a heroic feat considering the difficulty of the route and the shoddiness of the aged plane which they used, "a craft of obsolete design, a condemned D. H. 9." It is really a strangely unattractive and pointless poem. It seems to have three levels, the prosaic offering of technical or geographic information, clicheic similes and poeticisms, and lines of oddly excessive rhetoric like a speech at Commencement. It is hardly worthy of much detailed consideration, but I will illustrate my judgments so that I can establish a critical foundation to begin comments on the more successful poem The Nabara.

In the first place the ordinary explanation which admittedly must make part of a consecutive narrative is needlessly flat. The folbwing may be considered typical examples:

> At Lyons the petrol pump failed again. (A Time to Dance) p. 34.
>
> Over Italy's shores
> A reverse, the oil ran out. p. 35.

... the plane had been bumped,
Buffeted, thrashed by the air almost beyond repair.
p. 37.

Baghdad renewed a a propeller damaged in desert.
p. 40.

The cliches are found sometimes in actual phrases, sometimes in the second-hand response created by some sections. One could not challenge the occasional commonplace phrase but here their number suggests a casual manipulation of appropriate counters rather than an original composition. Some will perhaps appear unexceptionable but the many individual doubts build up to make a case that demands critical judgment. "Kissed England goodbye;" "we rubbed our sleepy eyes;" "time hung heavy on hand;" "the panting engine;" "the going was good;" "they chafed to be off." These examples are all culled from the first page of this poem.

The style includes debased Hopkins in the contrived word play of:

For no silver posh
Plane was their pigeon, no dandy dancer quick-
stepping through heaven. (A Time to Dance), p. 36.

Or,

Over, side-slipped away -- a trick for an ace, a race
And running duel with death. (A Time to Dance), p.36.

Then there is the strained crescendo of such a line as:

Their element, their lover, their angel antagonist.
(A Time to Dance), p. 34.

Or the more prosaic listing of:

> A patch, brittle as matchstick, a bubble, a lift
> for a ghost. (A Time to Dance), p.37.

But these features of the style are the result, as much as the cause, of the failure of this poem. The failure is not at the technical level but in the lack of control and shape in the theme. Striving for the poetic to relieve the aridity of the story Day Lewis calls a landing "alighting on sward." The maddening and common omission of the article presumably aims at suggesting universality, like the commentators in "Yesterday's Newsreel." Or he approaches allegory with " the powers of hell rallied their legions." Note the supposedly poetic inversions of the following lines:

> Feats for a hundred flights, they were prodigal of;
> a fairest
> Now to tell -- how they foiled death when the engine
> failed. (A Time to Death), p. 40.

Throughout there is a sense of strain and perhaps of indifference, for half way through he commands his flagging pen "Orchestrate this theme artificer poet. Imagine the roll, crackling percussion, quickening tempo of engine for a start."[12] Worst of all is the failure to let the bravery appear in itself as we learn of the actions. Our noses are too often rubbed in the hectoring assertions of courage.

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[12] A Time to Dance, p. 39.

> (they) shirked not the odds, the deaths that lurked
> A million to one on their tail. (A Time to Dance), p. 42.

The exaggeration goes beyond the absurd in such lines as:

> Till they came at last to a land whose dynasties of sand
> Had seen Alexander, Napoleon, many a stradling invader
> But never none like these. p. 37.

I have discussed this inauspicious poem at perhaps excessive length to indicate the failure of Lewis' handling of this form before he experienced the Spanish fighting. With The Nabara he is more successful.

This poem rather naturally recalls such battle narratives of the last century as Henry Newbolt's The Revenge. It describes an incident which is told in G. L. Steer's novel, The Tree of Gernika. The story in Steer's book concerns the daring but hopeless attempt of the government trawler "Nabara" to give battle to the rebel warship "Canarias." This poem has received high praise as a new example of an important tradition, but I find that I have some reservations about its value, although there is much to admire. It seems sincere and gives no impression of being a mere pastiche, and yet it fits just a little too comfortably within the structure of the conventional form. There is little evidence of that "splitting at the seams" which marks an art form extended to a greater validity by new usage. Yet on the positive side there is no posing, little of the phony under-statement of the British traditional sea epic. There is little heroics though sometimes the

rhetoric is slightly over-anxious, a shade too eager. Unlike its nineteenth century counterparts this poem does show considerable technical dexterity. The rhythm is varied and flexible, the rhyme scheme often employs the device of para-rhyme which Day Lewis had appropriated from the poems of Wilfred Owen, whom he greatly admired. Above all the difference shows in the political earnestness which saves it from any Jack the Giant Killer message, and gives point and value to the heroism which ends in defeat. Day Lewis sees the action in terms of ideology as well as patriotism. Satisfactory as much of the narrative is, it is probably significant to note that the best sections of this poem are found in the beginning and the end outside the incident of the sea-fight proper. In these sections the poet examines the nature and meaning of the sacrifice the fishermen made in fighting till death against such absurd odds.

The poem begins with a discussion of the importance of freedom.

> Freedom is more than a word, more than the base coinage
> Of statesmen, the tyrant's dishonoured cheque, or the dreamer's mad
> Inflated currency. (Overtures to Death), p. 41.

This is typical of Day Lewis's handling of the extended metaphor as I have discussed earlier. Clearly freedom is refined gold, valuable and pure, and it is contrasted with the failure of statesmen, tyrant and dreamer to

utilize this currency, for by them the coinage is belittled. The statesmen debase it, the adulteration of a coin with an inferior metal suggests the politicians' compromises undermining and weakening freedom. The tyrant does not even use a base form of freedom's currency, he will use a "cheque" which purports to be a promise to pay in the gold of freedom, but it has already been "dishonoured;" the double meaning is very clear. The third group are the wild visionaries who promise so much, a utopia with the streets paved with "gold" but their promises do not offer the true currency of freedom, but a cheap and depreciating substitute weakened by excessive promises and over-usage. These lines seem to me effective and meaningful. One could search through Lewis's description of the Australian flight without finding a single example as interesting as this. The next verse also begins with a similar image.

> I see man's heart two-edged, keen both for death and creation.
> As a sculptor rejoices, stabbing and mutilating the stone
> Into shapelier life, and the two joys make one-
> So man is wrought in his hour of agony and elation
> To efface the flesh to reveal the crying need of his bone.
>
> (Overtures to Death), p. 41.

Here the image elucidates the fact that achievement in many fields may necessitate a prior destruction. Just as the sculptor's stone must be "stabbed" and "mutilated" to form a more beautiful thing, so sometines man must be destroyed to achieve the fulfillment of his dream vision. The dying which will "efface the flesh" only allows the "crying need" to be seen more clearly. At this point the description

of the incident begins.

The events of this poem concern a battle between a rebel cruiser and the four government trawlers Nabara, Guipuzkoa, Bizkaya and Donostia, which were on escort duty

> escorting across blockaded seas
> Goldames with her cargo of nickel and refugees
> From Bayonne to Bilbao. (Overtures to Death), p. 42

Unfortunately they ran into fog, and had to go ahead "threading the weird fog maze that coiled their funnels and bleared day's eye." This threw them off course and suddenly they sighted

> an isle thrown up volcanic and smoking
> A giant in metal astride their path. p. 42.

This was the 10,000 ton rebel cruiser Canarias which was taking to port a captured prize, an Estonian freighter which was carrying a cargo of arms for the Republican government. There is a sudden moment of silence:

> A hush, the first qualms of conflict falls on the
> cruiser's burnished
> Turrets, the trawler's grimy decks. p. 43.

The implied comparison between the naval efficiency of "burnished" and the casual indifference of "grimy" stresses the difference between these ships as they wait for action, the "qualms" affecting the nerves and stomachs of both crews. After this hush there is the first crash of battle.

> The sound of the first salvo skimmed the ocean
> and thumped
> Cape Machinaco's granite ribs; it rebounded where

> The salt-sprayed trees grow tough from wrestling
> the wind. (Overtures to
> Death), p. 44.

The arid rock of the land along this sea swept coast is well described in that last line, and clearly also implies the spare toughness of these fishermen. At the sound of the shellfire the refugee women, who had been "inert as bags of rags, a mere deck cargo" demonstrated a total lack of stoicism and wildly stormed the bridge of the Goldames and forced the captain to run up the white flag of surrender. The Canarias too confidently steamed over to take possession of the ship with its valuable cargo of ore and in so doing she neglected to guard the Estonian freighter. Then, (the rhetoric is slightly forced) she saw the Nabara attempt to recapture the freighter.

> (She) witnessed a bold maneuver, a move of genius
> never
> In naval history told.

These lines recall the failure of that earlier plane flight, but the strain is avoided when Day Lewis continues with a bright and picturesque metaphor taken from the Spanish bull--fight.

> Her signal flags soon flutter like banderillas,
> straight
> Towards the Estonian speeding, a young bull over
> the spacious
> And foam distraught arena. (Overtures to Death,) p.45.

The Canarias turns on her angrily her "German gunlayers go about death's business." "Business" is an assertion of the calm professionalism of the German volunteers, but

there is something over-rhetorical about the phrase. The salvos shatter the smaller ship.

> But still they fought on into the sunless afternoon
> Fought on-four guns against the best of the rebel navy.
> (Overtures to Death), p. 45.

Again the tone is a little too heavy. The repetition of "fought on" is too crudely pulling out the stops. At last the other small ships are put out of the fight and the Nabara is left alone to challenge the cruiser, and she "cried a fresh defiance down" although "honour was satisfied long since."

Now begins the descriptions of the single combat between the two ships when "the gallant Nabara was left in the ring alone." This is described with the common but successful device of using sibillants to suggest sea movement.

> The distempered sea sank to the crisis
> Shell-shocked the sea tossed and hissed in rebellious
> heat. (Overtures to Death), p. 48.

Although the ship is burning fore and aft the crew decide to fight on. This they announce in an unsatisfactory swagger that sounds like a parody of Drake and his bowls:

> We're going to finish this game of pelota.
> The heroic principles for which they fight are reiterated:
> Familiar to them from childhood, the shapes of a life
> still dear
> But dearer still to see
> Those shores insured for life from the shadow of tyranny.
> (Overtures to Death), p. 51.

Nothing could be more proper than these sentiments but somehow here, the awkward rhythm and that crude rhyme of "see" and "tyranny" makes even such ideals seem slightly unnatural. The grip here has sadly relaxed. But if the poet fails, the actual bravery is maintained. They fought on "while the Nabara beneath their feet was turned to a heap of smouldering scrap-

iron." When they are finally forced to abandon ship they take to the boat. They are pursued by the cruiser's launch and in spite of the attempt to hold it off with flung grenades they are overpowered while "Nabara sank by the stern in the hushed Cantabrian Sea." In spite of all the heroism the bully has achieved his inevitable victory.

It is at this point that Day Lewis begins his summing up, tying his ending to the analysis with which he began this poem. Firstly he makes clear that they had not fought with any expectation of a David and Goliath ending:

> They bore no charmed life. They went
> into battle forseeing
> Probable loss and they lost.
> (Overtures to Death), p.52.

If they had this realistic appraisal of the outcome why then did they fight? Unlike the diplomats and politicians they judged acts by their integrity rather than their expediency for,

> They loved its familiar ways so well
> that they preferred
> In the rudeness of their heart to die
> rather than surrender.
> (Overtures to Death), p.52.

One notes the irony of "rudeness". To die was not a very clever thing to do. Any rational man who calculated the odds would have pointed out the need for giving up, but "rude" means simplicity and strength.

This integrity made them make their choice more from honesty than from wiser and more selfish calculations. This innocent honesty brings Day Lewis to the inevitable comparison and condemnation of the politicians at a dozen shameful conferences, and he cuts through the screen of platitudes and evasions that marked the policies of this era.

> Freedom was more than a word, more than the base coinage
> Of Politicians who, hiding behind the skirts of peace
> They had all defiled, gave up that country to rack and carnage.
> For whom, indelibly stamped with history's contempt
> Remain but to haunt the blackened shell of their policies.
> (Overtures), p.52.

"Hiding behind the skirts" reminds one of the shy child sheltering behind its mother but in this case the woman, peace, has been defiled by their policies and one recalls the journalist phrase, "the rape of Austria." Combined, one has the unlovely picture of the politicians using the assaulted to protect themselves. This is the clearest possible summary of the British policy of throwing other small countries to the German lion to gain their own safety by a brief appeasement of its appetite. "Indelibly stamped with history's contempt." What better final judgment can be laid upon the appeasers of the 30s who disgraced every country with failure

and hypocrisy. Not even the recent spate of formal histories which have attempted to evaluate these years dispassionately, has been able to apply any whitewash to these reputations, nor reduce the fervent condemnation of the times. Their only monument is the "blackened shell" and this clearly refers to the whole destruction caused by the war's devastation of Europe. But "for these I have told you of, freedom was flesh and blood," and so it was for the poets who cried Cassandra-like in the inter-war years.

Spain supplied no solution, it only marked a further failure for the democracies and added to the sense of guilt that was felt by so many liberal intellectuals.[11] In the face of Franco's obvious success and the debacle at Munich, Day Lewis published a new book of poems prophetically entitled Overtures to Death. The dual meaning of "overtures" makes a pessimistic assertion and an accusation. In this volume the imagery becomes more engaged, deliberately borrowed from contemporary fears. In describing the

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[11]It was at this time that Day Lewis' five year membership in the Communist Party came to an end with the abruptness of a revelation. He recalls how he was speaking at a Party rally at Queens Hall in 1938. Suddenly his inner voice spoke to him saying, "It won't do. It just won't do." At this simple whisper Day Lewis repudiated his years of Party service.
(The Buried Day, p.223).

color of the sky he sees it as,

> Gray as the skin
> Of long-imprisoned men
> The sky, and holds a poisoned
> thought within.
> (Overtures to Death), p.14.

Even in such a scene the memory is drawn to the thought of those who remained interned in Europe. And when he describes the spring again with characteristic flair and color the images are of war.

> Let the masked batteries of spring
> flash out
> From ridge and copse and flowers like
> shrapnel burst
> Along the lanes and all her landmines
> sprout.
> (Time to Dance), p.50.

In spite of the apparent excess of this idea I do not find that it appears as contrived as some of his earlier "pylon" imagery. Here the repetition rather seems to make a constant assertion of the reality of this time. Everything had to be seen in terms of the overwhelming fact of war. No thought and no poem could ignore its proximity. The expectation of war and the fear of being coerced into a treachery to his deepest beliefs were constantly in the poet's mind, and on every hand he saw the threats to his ideals and the demand that he compromise. With an echo of the old lilting songs, now the more effective for sounding almost nostalgic, he writes:

> They came to us with charity
> They came to us with whips,
> They came with chains behind their backs
> And freedom on their lips.
> (Overtures to Death), p.35.

Sometimes for a moment he can escape the imminence of disaster, and he returns to the countryside of the England that he loved. Now, however, he sees it in all its beauty and finely recreates the scene in his verse; but in the circumstances this loveliness can no longer be a reality, to him it seems the greatest of all illusions.

> But look the old illusion still returns
> Walking a field path where the succory burns
> Like summer's eye, blue lustre drops of noon
> And the heart follows it and freshly yearns.
> (Short Is The Time), p.64.

Nothing can kill this hope or the way the heart "freshly yearns." Even the acceptance of his conscious knowledge that this too is "illusion" cannot change the hope in the heart.

If he yearned to accept this illusion, the reality was very well understood. The destruction of war was always near. Day Lewis describes the threat of the power of Bombers (then only imagined).

> Black as vermin, crawling in echelon
> Beneath the cloud floor, the bombers come
> The heavy angels carrying harm in
> Their wombs that ache to be rid of death.
> (Overtures to Death), p.15.

The idea of the bombers as vermin, developed through

the words "crawling" and "floor", dangerous but worthy only of extermination is important because it is the deepest despised vermin which will do the extermination. These sky-born monsters are ironically called "angels" but ones defiled by a violent pregnancy. This idea is made more powerful By the emotional "ache" as if these inanimate things long to destroy. It is true that the metaphor of the bombers' womb seemed to become hackneyed almost as soon as it was invented, but here the obviousness of the idea at least paves the way for the development of the image in a characteristic and successful fashion. The bomb in the womb is linked to the idea of the child yet to be born, and the continuation of the seed image that also ironically compares the dangerous fertility of the growth.

> This is the seed that grows for ruin,
> The iron embryo conceived in fear.
> Soon or late its need must be answered
> In fear delivered in ssbreeching fire.
> (Overtures to Death), p.15.

The "iron embryo conceived in fear" will bring to birth the destructive force that will destroy the other loved human child embryo.

> Choose between your child and this fatal embryo
> Shall your guilt bear arms and the children you want
> Be condemned to die by the powers you paid for
> And haunt the houses you never built?
> (Overtures to Death), p.15.

Here is the demand in that imperative "choose", that people face "the powers you paid for." Far more is implied here than the mere purchase of arms for war. People have bought with their apathy the whole ethos of appeasement which became a direct cause of the war. "Child" and "embryo" stress the ironic choice that is offered. They can choose the next generation or this war. Just as the verb "paid for" serves at both the actual cash and the symbolic level, so those "houses you never built" have a double force. They imply the waste of national resources on armaments rather than the needed housing projects, but they symbolize more than this. Those houses represent security, order, solidarity, and one recalls Spender's use of this idea in his poem which includes the line, "It is too late now to stay in those houses your fathers built." The warning is very clear, but as such lines continued to meet only indifference, Day Lewis' tone became increasingly angry and scathing. Watching the blank, bemused, peanut-gobbling audience at a cinema newsreel he writes:

> Bathed in this common source you gape incurious
> At what your active hours have willed.
> Sleep-walking on that silver wall the furious
> Sick shapes and pregnant fancies of your world. (Overtures to Death), p.17.

The soporific warmth of "bathed" and the blank dullness implied in "gape" set the scene. The rhyme between "incurious" and "furious" significantly stresses the contrast here, because if the audience is indifferent, the angry political truths their apathy is permitting are violent. But the essential line is surely the second. It drives home again the insistence on personal responsibility. The newsreel trivialities of "the society wedding...and old crock's race and a politician in fishing waders" are only emanations from the acceptance of the inherent values of the age. A society which accepts these trivial phantasies on the "silver wall" is already acquiescing in its own destruction. Their "pregnant fancies" are nightmares which will cause them to awake to a worse reality and bring to birth only their own destruction. That "pregnant" recalls again the image of the bomber's womb. The response to such a warning newsreel is only the cheerful observation of "Oh look at all the aeroplanes," and Day Lewis, with a mixture of scorn and wry compassion can only observe:

> But what are they to trouble?
> These silver shadows to trouble
> your womb-deep sleep.
> (Overtures to Death),p.17.

It is in the last two stanzas of this poem that the poet directly asserts the obvious dangers of these

"silver shadows."

> See the big guns rising, groping erected
> To plant death in your world's soft womb.
> (Overtures to Death), p.17.

The obvious phallic symbol of the guns is developed by the metaphor of the womb and the repetition of "womb" with so many ramifications echos like a leit-motiv through these verses.

> Are these exotics? They will grow nearer
> home:
> Grow nearer home and out of the dream house
> stumbling
> One night into the strangling air, and the
> flung
> Legs of children and the thunder of stone
> Niagaras tumbling
> You'll know you slept too long.
> (Overtures to Death), p.17.

The word "exotics" chides the British insular assumption that these preparations for war do not concern them. No longer can they isolate themselves either politically, or in the false security of their "womb-deep sleep.". "Dream house" used ironically, recalls the interminable rows of jerry-built boxes with their patches of garden, that disfigured the new arterial roads. Now the idea of sleeping takes on an extra force for the whold idea of those dreams of the security of the little private house that obsessed these years are part of an unreality, or rather a somnolent escape from reality. They will be awoken from this slumber by the "thunder of stone Niagaras." The

evidence of war will no longer be "silver shadows" but a reality in which that "fatal embryo" destroys the limbs of their children. This awakening will present a reality that is more horrifying than the worst of those fearsome "pregnant fancies." The last line, although minatory, is primarily pessimistic. Obviously the poet feels that the awakening will never be achieved by his warnings, only by the "stone Niagaras."

Day Lewis' pessimism was justified. He found himself, in the last words of this volume, in a dismaying world "when madmen play the piper and knaves call the tune." In September, 1939, shortly after the final defeat of the Spanish Republic the greater European war began.

During the period of the war Day Lewis published two fairly short new volumes of poetry; Word Over All (1943) and Poems 1943-47 (1949). The former contains a few poems about the war itself and a large number of rather weak verses which ignore it altogether. The latter volume seems to have regret as its chief, if unconscious, theme. Here in poem after poem, on a variety of different subjects Day Lewis returns to examine his feelings of failure. Like the other poets he saw in European international politics and war, the

destruction of all the ideals he had championed. He writes in tones both guilty and despairing. One searches in vain for any of the sustained confidence and maturity that has marked some of the better poems I have considered in this essay.

A typical example of his war poetry from Word Over All can be found in the following lines:

> I watch the searchlights set the low cloud
> smoking
> Like acid on a metal. I start
> At sirens, sweat to feel a whole town wince
> And thrum, a terrified heart
> Under the bomb strokes.
> (Short Is The Time), p.66.

The rhythm here is awkwardly broken to my ear, far more than can be justified by a conscious attempt to suggest the sharp stress of the events, and that scientific comparison of the acid on metal seems just a little calculated. It recalls the determined choice of pylon imagery rather that the concentrated emphasis on meaning that the poet has achieved elsewhere.

At other times there is only posturing. Revealingly he again returns to the Auden note. He borrows Auden's well-worn air-man image and applies it, this time without symbolic overtones, to the R.A.F. pilots. He describes their battles in the following shallow and above all second-hand lines:

> Speak for the air, your element, you hunters
> Who range across the ribbed and shifting sky
> Speak for whatever gives you mastery-
> Wings that bear out your purpose, quick responsive
> Fingers, a fighting heart, a kestrel's eye.
> (Short Is The Time), p.78.

One can scarcely withhold a sigh when that ubiquitous bird, the kestrel, flies by again.

It has been suggested that the geographical magnitude of the 1939 war may have prevented writers from approaching it as a subject, but this seems hardly probable. After all, one is not asking for another War and Peace and there were several events which might have called to the poet's imagination in the way that battles of the Spanish war had done. Stalingrad, for example, was a battle incomparably more significant than the defense of Teruel or Huesca, yet it was hymned only in the pompous rhymes which are the newspapers' concession to poetry. It seemed that the horrors of this war boggled the imagination, just as the very capacity for compassion is dried up by the excessive appeals made upon it by the documentary films of the atrocities. After a time one's own reaction becomes almost as paralyzed as the feelings of the perpetrator. The imagination cannot meet the enormity of the event. If the elimination of 6,000,000

Jews was out of the reach of poetry certain incidents supplied that moment of comprehension which allowed the often inadequate feelings of compassion and anger to explode. One such event was the destruction of the Czechoslovakian village of Lidice.

The German governor, Heidrich, had been assassinated there and in retaliation the Germans, with typical thoroughness, razed the whole village and murdered or deported the entire population. Lidice horrified the world. Gerald Kersh, the English novelist, whose reputation grew unfortunately inflated during the war years produced a tender and burning novel on this event. Here was a subject that also awoke the pen of Day Lewis, but his poem is the clearest proof that anger and indignation are rarely the best motivation for poetry, however righteous these emotions might be. Too often such feelings only produce the hollow rhetoric and the empty declamation of the following stanza.

> Cry to us, murdered village, while your grave
> Aches raw on history, make us understand
> What freedom asks of us. Strengthen our hand
> Against the arrogant dogmas that deprave
> And have no proof but death at their command.
> (Short is the Time), p.79.

The failure here is obvious. It shows in the ponderous tone that is supposed to be solemn and is

only pompous. The poem reads like a bad prayer. The heavy rhyme suggests the hymn book at its most unctuous, rather than the verse of a major poet. The earnestness becomes an empty clang of facile emotions like the words of a cheap orator. The appeal to our sympathy and compassion is lost as we contemplate only the emptiness of the tone. When one seeks for a comparison with this phony intensity one comes to a most significant similarity. This poem reads exactly like the tone and style of some of the many awful poems that were written for Spain. There is the same cheap rhetoric; the same assumption that the theme is in itself sufficient to create poetry; and the same intense personal feelings masked by a shallow and empty urgency. Crude emotionalism is masquerading as poetry. The important thing of course, is not that such a common thing should happen, but that it should occur in Day Lewis' verse at such a moment. Here is a poet whose verse matured and refined over Spain, now producing the same emotional lines that he would have condemned as inadequate or insincere during the Spanish struggle. Here to me is evidence of the relaxing grasp, the failure of the touch that had produced the powerful urgency of <u>The Volunteer</u>.

Day Lewis' capacity to write poetry was not lost

when an incident could stimulate the emotion of personal involvement. Two war poems in particular I find effective; both are elegies to dead soldiers, the one simple and lyric, the other more definitely leads to explanation and blame. They are called Reconciliation and The Dead. The first lines of the former have a gentle tone, very reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's masterly lyric Asleep.

> All day beside the shattered tank he'd lain
> Like a limp creature hacked out of its shell,
> Now shrivelling on the desert's grid
> Now floating above a sharp set ridge of pain.
>
> Then came a roar, like water in his ear.
> The mortal dust was laid. He seemed to be dying
> In a cool coffin of stone walls,
> While memory slid towards a plunging weir.
> (Short Is The Time), p.83.

The comparison of the soldier outside the protection of his tank with a snail dying after its shell is destroyed is fanciful but not eccentric. The tone is so sure that our response is exactly that mixture of horror and compassion that the poet must have wished to convey. The developed metaphor of the water and the desert so typical of Day Lewis at his most effective. It seems both calculated and instinctive at the same time. The limp creature shrivelling in the desert becoming dust, stands alongside the idea of the healing refreshment of water in the words "floating,"

"roar like water." One recalls the significant contrast between the arid desert plateau and England's streams in The Volunteer. Death becomes for this soldier the "laying of the dust." That mixture of the homely spraying of water, and the idea of burial in being laid to rest mesh exactly, broadening our emotions to include the solemnity of this death, with a warm understanding of the still important daily life outside this heroism. The poet contemplates this scene with that same balance of passionate commitment and scrupulous detachment that Owen achieved at his greatest.

> The Time that was, the time that might have been
> Find in this shell of stone a chance to kiss
> Before they part eternally.
> (Short Is The Time), p.83.

In The Dead, the description seems a little less natural. The bodies,

> They lie in the Sunday street
> Like effigies thrown down after a fete.
> (Short Is The Time), p.82.

He develops this idea of waste in such words as "fag-ends", "litter" and "stale confetti." The double meaning of the adjective in the line, "The bare-faced houses frankly yawning revulsion," is an effective irony, but somehow the lines do not achieve a response like that created by the powerful lines of

Reconciliation. The detachment that can find these bodies as litter is not making possible a more general emotion by escaping from sentimentality; it is rather a means of rejecting all emotion, to play with the arid toughness that conceals nothing but its own purposelessness. But in this poem the scene is not the significant thing, the important verse is the second in which Day Lewis tries to explain the reason for these pointless deaths which have left men like "effigies" in the street.

> We cannot blame the great
> Alone--the mad the calculating or effete
> Rulers. Whatever grotesque scuffle and
> piercing
> Indignant orgasm of pain took them,
> All that enforced activity of death
> Did answer and compensate
> Some voluntary inaction, soft option,
> dream retreat.
> For each man died for the sins of the
> whole world;
> For the ant's self-abdication, the fat
> stock's patience
> Are sweet goodbye to human nations.
> (Short Is The Time), p.82.

That "sweet goodbye" sounds like the title of a cheap crime story, but if one ignores this let-down, one finds the old theme earnestly and powerfully restated. The blame for this war and this particular shabby death, cannot be transferred entirely onto the heads of the rulers however "mad" or criminally "calculating" they may have been. This is the result again of "what your

active hours have willed." Whether their deaths were the ludicrous comedy of a "grotesque scuffle" or whether the violence of the pain gave it the martyred significance of agony, both represent the payment for the "dream retreat" that "womb-deep sleep" in which these events were allowed to develop. "Voluntary inaction, soft option," all the failures of will and nerve of this generation have resulted in the "fete" whether it is "Purification or All Fool's Day." The cause is the failure to act like a human being, to understand and to judge. To play the part of an animal is the abdication of human duty. This may be the attitude of the ant which remains busy and energetic without bothering itself with the purpose of its industry. It may be the placid indifference of the cow (or is there a neat double meaning in the term stock?). The cow seems totally satisfied with daily feeding and a routine of total inactivity. These extremes of industry and indolence are equally "sweet goodbye to human nations." The jaunty slang may be questioned; the statement is a truth that Day Lewis realized needed constant reiteration.

Day Lewis did however produce one very famous war poem at this time. Ironically and understandably it did not concern the war directly. It was an ans-

wer to the constant question, "Where are the War Poets?" Not that any honest poetry was really sought. The poetry of a Rosenberg or an Owen would have been nothing but an embarrassment. A poet was required who would rouse the flagging enthusiasm of those who found it less than satisfactory that politicians had taken only twenty years to eliminate the concept of the "war to end wars", and create another conflict. Day Lewis' answer to their demand was incisive and indicting.

> They who in folly or mere greed
> Enslaved religion, markets, laws,
> Borrow your language now and bid
> Us to speak up in freedom's cause.
>
> It is the logic of our time
> No subject for immortal verse,
> That we who loved by honest dreams
> Defend the bad against the worse.
> (Short Is The Time), p.76.

In this poem the denunciation is angry but rigidly controlled. It is harshly scathing, but the bitterness does not destroy the tight strength of the rhythms. The language is so direct that it scarcely needs comment or explanation. The meaning appeals with simple force to anyone who knows something of the history of the 1930s. It asserts that religion, the economic system and the very laws of justice have been subordinated to the expediency of the state. Whether this destruction of liberties was caused by the "folly" of

the politicians, or the "mere greed" of the industrialists is largely irrelevent in view of the present conflict that resulted. Such academic debate can be left to the historians. In answer to the appeal that they speak up for "freedom's cause," the poets can only point to the "logic" (the word is wryly ironic) of their times which has brought them to facing the madness of this war. The poets were committed to this war. They would fight, there was no alternative. The poets would "defend the bad" knowing how much worse was the evil which they fought. But this is hardly the kind of knowledge which creates idealism and sentimentality. The war becomes a dirty necessary job, about as romantic as clearing away garbage. The motives are clearly understood. "It's for dear life we shall be fighting."

> It's for dear life alone we shall be fighting,
> The poet's living space, the love of men,
> And poets must speak for the common suffering men
> While history in sheets of fire is writing.
>
> Dedicatory stanzas for a translation of the Georgics Horizon, II, (Sept. 1940) p.90.

The resentment that they would feel against being involved in such a duty is aggravated when the very people who repudiated their warnings, now demand some laureate, martial verse glorifying the miserable results of their own folly. Appeals for self-sacrifice

and national service ring rather ironically when one remembers the indifference of so many to that same appeal from the poets when the issues were clear, and the motives moral. The poets had wanted to live by "Honest dreams", now they were forced into a dishonest reality. In refusing to see this war in black and white terms as a crusade of angel against devil they avoided being stampeded into sentimentality and false heroics. They used their "open eyes" and fought against the worse as every rational man must. When this struggle was complete the bad would in turn be challenged and its guilt denounced, so that a new, finer England could be created where another such defence would not be needed. Suddenly Lewis' view begins to change to a more despondent outlook. He sees that this war, like the previous one, will cause only the same hypocrisy, the same failure. He sees only a repetition of the absurd time;

> When madmen play the piper
> And knaves call the tune.
> (Overtures to Death), p.62.

He realizes that there is no evidence that the elusive "better world" is any nearer. Much suggests that the same misery will occur. In, "Will it be so again?" he asks a series of questions but the tone suggests that, for all the question form, he feels

pessimistic enough to regard the questions as positive statements.

> Will it be so again
> That the brave, the gifted are lost from view,
> And empty, scheming men
> Are left in peace their lunatic age to renew?
> Will it be so again?
> (Short Is The Time), p.84.

and again:

> Must it be always so
> That the best are chosen to fall and sleep?
> (Short Is The Time), p.84.

The most successful verse is the third, in which in three lines he is able to describe and condemn the whole inter-war years.

> Will it be so again--
> The jungle code and the hypocrite gesture?
> A poppy wreath for the slain
> And a cut throat world for the living? that stale imposture
> Played on us once again?
> (Short Is The Time), p.84.

These highly concentrated lines are too clear to need much elucidation. The "jungle code" links with the "Cut throat," which includes both a single type of violence and the whold business ethos of unrestrained competition and its effect. The "gesture" joins with "imposture," the unctuous praise of the dead while the living are condemned to the kind of life that Day Lewis had described so fiercely in his poems of a decade before. It seems only too likely that exactly the same trick is going to be "played on us once again." This

knowledge removed the chief justification from the vigorous appeals from the hierachy. The intellectuals were at least too shrewd to have to be bitten twice by the same dog.

The next volume of Day Lewis's verse was published in 1948, and was called simply Poems. The title alone might suggest the lack of any overall theme. The subjects are varied and the style also shows very considerable diversity. If one seeks to generalize about the themes of these poems one finds three main subjects. There are poems of introspection such as Juvenalia, The Chrysantheumum Show and New Year's Eve... There is some love poetry such as the Marriage of Two and Heart and Mind. There are a few poems discussing the poetry of such writers as Bronte, Hardy and Blunden. Besides these there are a few songs and some translations.

The most obvious fact to be noticed here is the new detachment from events. Only In The Shelter, by its location though little else, can be said to have any connection with external political or international events which had been the major stimulus to Day Lewis' earlier writing. He appears to be retreating from his previous position into a more academically conventional poetic world. It is indicative too, that the poems which comment on other writers concern those whose se-

lection implies a taste that is growing conservative and orthodox.

The themes in these poems appear widely diverse, but a single idea constantly recurs in them. It is the feeling of regret and a sense of failure. This theme is so pervasive that it might almost be unconscious. The guilt nags away like an exposed nerve. Again and again this feeling occurs fleetingly in poems which are concerned with an entirely different theme. Only in one, significantly entitled A Failure is the whole poem given over to an expression of this mood. Here the idea is conveyed in a metaphor of farming which is developed throughout the entire poem. With this metaphor he examines the perplexing failure of an age.

> The soil was deep and the field well sited,
> The seed was sound.
> Average luck with the weather, one thought,
> And the crop would abound.
> (Poems 43), pg.33.

In spite of the expectation there is the discovery that the promise is belied and crop seems inexplicably blighted.

> The fruit of a year's work, a lifetime's lore,
> Had ceased to grow.
> (Poems 43), p.33.

Neither individual "work" nor the inheritance of "lore" has been enough to offset the failure. The efforts of those who preached a liberal idealism had not achieved

any lasting result or "crop." Day Lewis goes on to consider the reason for the failure.

> Some galloping blight
> From earth's metabolism must have sprung
> To ruin all;
> Or perhaps his own high hopes had made
> The wizened look tall.
> (Poems 1943-47), (London, 1948) p.34.

He seems to offer two explanations. Firstly, he suggests that there was some deficiency inherent in the "earth." It is not clear whether he is suggesting something as vague as the idea that the times were against them, or the more pessimistic view that there is an instinctive inborn evil in man which prevents the achievement of any utopia. Day Lewis then toys with the depressing thought that perhaps even the evidence of the first growth was an illusion. Perhaps even the early hopeful sheets were themselves stunted and wizened. His own idealistic optimism may have seen an awaking spring in an empty fallow field. If this were so, clearly the whole validity of the work of these contemporary writers is also to be understood as only an illusion, a trick of the vision which was straining to see "high hopes" in the conditions found when this decade began. This prospect would be so shattering that Day Lewis does not even allow himself to consider it further. Bravely and a little too hastily, he dismisses the whole line of argument as

irrelevent. Clearly the truth is rather that he fears carrying it to its unpleasantly convincing conclusions.

> But it's useless to argue the why and the wherefore.
> When a crop is so thin,
> There's nothing to do but to set the teeth
> And plough it in.
> (Poems 43), p.34.

The tone has the false heartiness of one who is concealing the intensity of his despair. With a determination based only on the degree of his disillusion he rejects all attempts to patch and improve and decides to destroy the whole lot, and hope for some more promising crop in the future. The sudden decision to "plough it in" clearly represents a response to all the hopes and dreams of a decade which Day Lewis can only see now as a time of total failure.

A Failure is the only poem in this volume that directly broaches the issue of the results achieved during the thirties, and it is obviously profoundly pessimistic. Day Lewis refuses to begin to investigate the causes for this, his short "it's useless to argue" sweeps the whole issue under the carpet and precludes either evaluation or post-mortem. Having read his verse with some admiration I cannot agree he need feel so sweepingly disgusted. The crop, far from being"so thin" includes, on the literary side, some impressive

poetry. In political terms, his actions had the effect of gradually stiffening the will to face and fight those powers against whom the poets had given such vehement warnings. It is pointless, however, for me to evaluate the degree of his success; what is obvious is Day Lewis' own intense sense of personal failure, a feeling which I have already indicated in much of the later poetry of Stephen Spender. This attitude vitiated all the post-war poetry of Day Lewis. It undermined the basis of his previous work without substituting any principle on which he could construct further poetry. The result of this failure of faith can best be seen in his next long poem An Italian Visit which I shall discuss later. First I wish to focus on the varied expressions of disappointment and guilt which are to be found throughout this post-war volume of his poetry to indicate the pervasiveness of this mood.

The primary theme amongst the general tone of disillusion is the failure of his poetry. It is not the politics which cause the despair, not the power and wickedness of the dictatorships, but the emptiness he now detects in the heart of all his past verse.

> All I have felt and sung
> Seems now but the moon's fitful
> Sleep on a clouded bay.
> (Short Is The Time), p.70.

The scene of the sea-coast and the moon is conventionally poetic. So much so that one almost wonders if his rejection is directed not only at the failure of the achievement in attempting to communicate, but also an admission that what seemed most determinedly revolutionary, most anti-romantic, is nothing more than a rehash of the old second-hand fragments.

Suddenly with a sense of shame he seems to see his failure exposed to every eye. Again the sea-coast scene is used. It is effective in suggesting the useless flotsam from a past which is now a distasteful memory. The description communicates the mood but there is still no evidence that allows us to begin to understand why he feels this revulsion. This poem is called All Gone.

> The sea drained off, my poverty's uncovered
> Sand, sand, a rusted anchor, broken glass,
> The listless sediment of sparkling days.

One might speculate about the personal symbolism of that anchor and smashed glass, but the general meaning is entirely clear here. The poet seems to find his writing only a sediment. He does not choose to stop writing, but he nags himself into feeling a sense of futility. He is aware of the limitations his verse has and claims that now he can only be an observer. He chooses to "record" in "patience." Here is an unexpected attempt at detachment after the fine passion

of his earlier verse. It makes one think of the temporary, affected pose of Christopher Isherwood in I am a Camera.[12]

> Today I can but record
> In truth and patience
> This high delirium of nations
> And hold to it the reflecting fragile word.
> (Short Is The Time), p.79.

What is the point of merely reflecting this "high delirium"? How can this attitude be defended by such a poet in the middle of a violent war? The calmness becomes not restraint but abdication. The flatness and calm of these lines indicate the defeatism in the very style, as well as in the thought of these lines.

Later in some chatty lines he examines the group of poets with whom his name was associated:

> We who "flowered" in the thirties
> Were an odd lot, sceptical, yet susceptible
> Dour though enthusiastic, horizon addicts
> And future fans, terribly apt to ask what
> Our all-very-fine sensations were in aid of.
> Pegasus (London, 1957) p.24.

The tone of these lines is simply amazing. They seem to constitute not only a denial of the ideals of the thirties, but an assumption that these attitudes were so idiosyncratic as to be laughable. How can one ex-

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[12]A similar attempt at detachment occurs in the chapter titled "The Thirties" in The Buried Day. "I do not want either to bury the Thirties or to praise them - only to find my way back into the self I was then." (p.208)

plain the ironic commas around "flowered" and the colloquial journalese of "odd lot", "fans" and "in aid of." The utopian ideals are now described as an addiction suggesting a vice or being a "fan" with its association with silly excess for films or sport. It is a calculated belittlement. I do like the probably unintentional but very appropriate pun in "horizon" which reminds one of Cyril Connolly's influential magazine of the same name. Alone these lines could be explained as simply a lapse of taste, an example of wit which is merely silly, but set along with the other examples I am considering, they become further evidence of a mood that must, presumably, be taken seriously. If this is so, Day Lewis is deliberately attacking all he believed a few years before and he is using the same arguments which he had so scathingly and impressively refuted when he had attacked the sneerers in Where Are The War Poets? This mockery of what he once believed, can only be interpreted as another facet in the guilty repudiation he appears to be undertaking.

Even more remarkable is the poem The Rebuke, which actually concludes the earlier collection Word Over All. Here the style is a little less effusively hammy but it remains inexplicably jaunty as he considers the

poetry written by himself and others of the thirties. He exclaims with lilting unconcern about "What lies we told, what lies we told." His accusation appears to be clear enough, but it cannot be read as an accusation. The repetition and the tone of this exclamation is too jaunty to permit the condemnation to be taken quite seriously as a judgment. It only causes one rather to condemn the attitude of a man who, at this stage in his career, can so glibly and irresponsibly throw away the dreams and achievements of a decade without consideration or hesitation. One can scarcely believe that he means what he says, for if he did he could not be so unmoved and cheerful. In a similar way, it might be argued that the poets of this era were a little too prolific and often the publication of a collected edition has necessitated considerable pruning, but can one really dismiss this occasional over-fluency with this pair of lines?

> The irresponsible poets sang
> What came into their head.
> (Short Is The Time), p.97.

Can this be a serious comment on the verse of his contemporaries? If it is not this, what else is it? Day Lewis goes beyond a criticism of the writing to an assault on the beliefs and principles of these men. The ideals which many of these writers so ardently held are

belittled with as little consideration as he gives to the dismissal of their writing:

> We little guessed who spoke the word
> Of hope and freedom high...
> It was a lie, a heart felt lie.
> (Short Is The Time), p.97.

The apparent paradox obtained by combining "Heart-felt" and "lie" is suggestive of the intensity of his disillusion.

It is never explained what has caused this sweeping loss of faith, but the theme is recorded in lines throughout this poem:

> Now the years advance ...
> We doubt the flame that once we knew
> Heroic words sound all untrue.
> (Short Is The Time), pg.97.

The last lines of the poem have an unequalled[13] bitterness. The "damn" seems not a colloquial affectation, but the breaking point of an intolerable exasperation.

> Who cares a damn for the truth that's grown
> Exhausted haggling for its own
> And speaks without desire?
> (Short Is The Time), p.98.

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[13] This emotion is rather peculiarly anticipated in 1938 when in a stanza of Regency Houses Day Lewis exposes the first stanza of disappointment.

> We who in younger days,
> Hoping too much, tried on
> The habit of perfection,
> Have learnt how it betrays
> Our shrinking flesh. (Overtures to Death), p.18.

The answer to this rhetorical question ought to be Day Lewis and all the intellectuals like him who had fought for truth in those long depressing years. Perhaps these lines can be interpreted a little more hopefully, because truth, as such, is not rejected, only condemned in that it now "speaks without desire." This is explained as the result of the long years of "haggling" that they have had to do for it. If one interprets it this way, however, it tends to contradict the whole tone of this poem which is defeated and despairing.

The cause of this change of attitude that undermined the whole power and spirit of Day Lewis' verse can hardly be known. One can speculate on its origin from the clues in some lines in his later war-time poems. Sometimes his vision of the war is too horrifying and appalling to allow further social optimism. The following two lines could be a text for George Orwell's nightmare vision of society:

> Lying awake one night he saw
> Eternity stretched like a howl of pain.
> (Overtures to Death), p.60.

The future suddenly ceased to present even the most distant hope of an utopia. It seemed only an eternal proliferation of the agonizing present, and the depressing past. He feels obligated to admit that the ideals he accepted are too big to be realized, his hopes are only the folly of self-delusion.

> Destiny, History, Duty, Fortitude,
> Honour, all
> The words of the politicians seem
> Too big or too small.
> (Short Is The Time), p.75.

The capital letters underline the irony, and yet those ideals do not cease to exist because of their abuse at the hands of glib politicians. The actions of some who fought with the International Brigade had restored a great deal of force and quality to these much mis-handled words, otherwise what is The Volunteer all about?

Perhaps he best expresses his feeling of retreat in the whole seventh section of O Dreams, O Destination. Here he acknowledges the limitations that he faces. But to do this honestly is no disgrace, and is hardly sufficient to justify the later despair. The crucial lines in the argument follow, None of them explain the later condemnation of the past. They are re-strained and sensible explanations about how to make the best of fighting for "the bad against the worse."

> We're glad to gain the limited objective,
> Knowing the war we fight in has no end.
>
> Lost the archaic dawn wherein we started,
> The appetite for wholeness: now we prize
> Half-loaves, half-truths-enough for the half-hearted
> The gleam snatched from corruption satisfies.
> (Short Is The Time), p.64.

Perhaps this is not so much after the idealistic visions of the previous decade, but it is certainly a reason-

able adaptation to the conditions of a war.

Perhaps the changed attitude may partially be seen as a turning away from events into the longed for peace of a countryside whose beauty he has often recorded, whether among the condemned mine pits of the depression or the high plateau of Spain. During the war while he was living in the country he was made an officer in the newly formed Home Guard. Manoeuvres among the farms had a playful buccolic air.[14] Thoughts of war were quickly dismissed when crops and harvesting demanded attention. One notices in the following poem how hastily he turns from the subjects of war to talk of the farm life around him. This may be natural enough, but it is another facet of Lewis' withdrawal. The poem is called Watching Post.

> I talk for a while of invaders:
> But soon we turn to crops-the autumnal hope
> Making of cider, prizes for ewes.

He is aware of the ominous fact that "a cold wind from

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[14]His casual attitude to military training may be seen from the amusing anecdote he records in The Buried Day (p. 101). His Home Guard men were lined up for their final inspection. He ended his review with "On the command, Dismiss, the Company will turn smartly to the right and move into the Lion." From the ranks a long-suffering farmer was heard to remark, "First bloody sensible thing you've said tonight, Mr. Lewis."

Europe blows back the words in my teeth." Events are threatening all the ideals he defended so ardently in his earlier writing. For the moment he observes placidly,

> I write this verse to record the men who
> have watched with me
> Spot who is good at darts; Squibby at repartee,
> Mark and Cyril, the dead shots; Ralph with a
> ploughman's gait...
> (Short Is The Time), p.74.

Many times he appears to acknowledge this changed attitude in himself. He looks back and finds no contact with the man who wrote the earlier verse. In Juvenalia he discusses his feelings as he reads his earlier poems. His response is indicative. He is completely unable to recapture the spirit in which they were written:

> But gone is the breath of dawn
> Clinker the dreams it fanned.
> (Poems 43), p.14.

Yet some of the lines still move him powerfully, and he ceases to condemn and finds rather that these poems "keep faith." It is he, not they, that change:

> Myself repudiates myself of yesterday;
> But the words it lived in and cast like
> a shell keep faith
> With that dead self always.
> (Poems 43), p.14.

But he apparently wants to cancel the themes of his poetry, for he finds that there are still

> So many words to unsay
> So much hue and cry
> After a whisp of flame.
> (Short Is The Time) P. 14.

The despair continues and in New Year's Eve, that time of inevitable introspection, he looks back only with disappointment.

> We lament not one year only
> Gone with its chance and change...
> But all our time lost, profitless,
> misspent. (Short Is The Time) P. 14.

The despair stretches back beyond any single year and erodes the past. Even more directly pessmistic are the following lines:

> What has our fumbling virtue to look back on?
> How much has it passed up, mishandled, ruined.
> (Short Is The Time) P. 14.

Even the virtue is seen as "fumbling"; incompetently mismanaging the ideals it professes, causing its own hardships which have results as serious as those created by vice. A later stanza in this poem has a plaintive revival of an old theme. Like a sad echo, the verse recalls the confident high flying "airmen" who are now revealingly "stranded" and the energetic image of electricity that was often used in "pylon" days appears now in a shadow of its old strength, as a battery fading. Both these images, existing as deflated remnants of an older virility, indicate as clearly as the

last clause the decline of a vigorous poetic force.

> Tonight as flyers stranded
> On a mountain, the battery fading, we tap out
> Into a snow-capped void our weakening
> Vocations and desires.
> (Short Is The Time) P.50.

With the knowledge of this increasing weakness and the rejection of much of his past work, Day Lewis began work on the last book which is included in his Collected Works. It is entitled An Italian Visit and it was first published in 1953. It is an extraordinary poem to come from the pen of a mature and able poet. It consists of long beginning and end sections which are made up of a rather prosaic conversation either between three people or probably three "personas" exemplifying the poet's divergent views. These parts bracket a central section which consists of a rather dull travelogue and a series of set pieces. These individual poems describe Italian works of art in the styles of certain other poets. I am not quite sure whether these should be called pastiche or parody. A few examples should be sufficient to indicate the general level of the opening pages. The triviality of the first lines ought to be a warning of what lies ahead.

> Tom: So here we are, we three, bound on a new experience.

Dick: Three persons in one man, bound for the Eternal City.

Harry: We're not as young as we were, but Italy's some years older. 15

Harry usually speaks lines that are exactly like the worst failures found in Eliot's later plays:

I have omitted to pack my Kierkgaard, Marx and Groddeck
My angst I can only hope they will confiscate at the customs.
(Italian Visit) P. 13.

The following lines read like a parody of sections of The Cocktail Party.

Yes travel is travail, a witless
Ordeal of self-abasement to an irreversible process.
(Italian Visit) P. 16.

Tom appears to be the practical one who remains defiantly prosaic:

If he means what I think he means, I'm not going to look out of the windows.
(Italian Visit) P. 16.

Finally, the description gets the plane off the ground, making the process seem as complex and daring as launching an astronaut. Then the plane's flight is described with something of the old Auden enthusiasm though this sky rhetoric has now become rather

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15 C. Day Lewis, Italian Visit (London, 1953) p. 13.

old hat.

> Bank and turn, bank and turn,
> Air-treading bull, my silver Alitalia.
> Bank and turn, while the earth below
> Swings. (Italian Visit) P. 29.

Under the circumstances one might be grateful he was not travelling in such a recalcitrantly unpoetic airline as BOAC. The bull-ring metaphor which made such a colorful flourish in The Nabara, is in this poem, strained across half a page.

They arrive in Rome and his response is given in the form of a poetic letter. The following piece of chat begins it and is not untypical of the general tone:

> We have been here three days and Rome is really--
> I know, I know, it would take three life-times to
> Cover the glorious junk heap.

After some pages of sight-seeing news he concludes with a firm dismissal and the promise of further description:

> So much for Rome
> Tomorrow we shall take the bus to Florence.
> (Italian Visit) P. 43.

In Florence he begins his series of parodies. I suppose they are in themselves fairly competently done, but saying this does not sufficiently to me explain their presence and purpose in this poem. The lines modelled on Yeats, for example, may represent his more irritated condemnations of Maud

Gonne's politics, but they are rather cruder lines than one would wish to find in Yeat's later verse.

> A political woman is an atrocious thing
> Come what may she will have her fling
> In flesh and blood. (Italian Visit) P. 57.

He gets much closer to the style of Dylan Thomas but this is not very difficult to do. Thomas's excess invites parody and some of his more extreme verse might well be self-parody, intentional or otherwise. Still such lines as these are very recognizable, which I suppose is the criterion.

> I went to school with a glee of dolphins
> Bowling their hoops round the brine-tongued isles.
> (Italian Visit) P. 60.

It is not surprising though, that Day Lewis is at his most successful in his parody of Auden whose style he uses, rather inappropriately, to describe a painting by Piero di Cosimo. Since he had spent a large part of his poetic apprenticeship in fighting off the too powerful influence of Auden on whom he leaned in much of his earlier verse, all he had to do was remove the restraints which taste and a developing poetic individuality had imposed on such unnatural and excessive borrowing. The following lines exactly catch the style of Auden at his most glibly pretentious.

> When gilt-edged hopes are selling short,
> Virtue's devalued, and the swart
> Avenger rises. (Italian Visit) p. 58.

The "Swart" is a typical piece of Auden's recondite vocabulary.

But what is the point of discussing the efficacy or failure of these tricks? Here is a mature work of a man who had promised to develop as a significant poet and the result is this trivial and derivative work. Somewhere along the line of his development the fire has been allowed to die out. The lyric beauty of his descriptions and the proud truth of The Volunteer have both been dissipated.

Increasingly Day Lewis has turned to other work than poetic creation. He has translated poems from the French. He has lectured in the universities and given several talks on the BBC's Third Program. He has utilized his sensitive and refined intellect in many worthwhile fields, but the spark that once burned in his poetry seems to have been largely extinguished. In 1957 he published a new volume of poetry in England, and the reviewers pointed out the influence of Edward Thomas, Thomas Hardy, and George Meredith. No doubt this verse has a tranquil charm, but the change of tone implicit when such comparisons can be made is very obvious. As Thwaites

observes rather plaintively,

> How can one judge a twentieth century poet who, after helping achieve the poetic revolution of our time, reacts in his prime by writing work which is a pastiche of two eminent Victorian poets?[16]

The poet who fought the liberal battle of his time has surrendered both politically and poetically. He appears to have retreated into the cloistered calm of academia and from this peaceful insulation one can scarcely hope for any more of the triumphantly powerful verse that remains as a memory of his significant talent. Yet in this collection Pegasus there are repeated, if isolated, hints that the concern and dismay still exist. About one third of this volume is given to four long poems about Greek gods; Pegasus, Psyche, Baucis and Philemon and Ariadne. These seem rather unremarkable until suddenly Baucis is made to despair:

> Where are my memories? Who has taken the memories
> I stored against these winter nights, to keep me warm?
> My past is under snow--seed-beds, bud-grafts,
> Flowering blood, globed hours, all shrouded, erased:
> There I lie, buried alive before my own eyes.

It is impossible not to detect something of Day Lewis' own feelings in such words. And in the second section

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[16] A. Thwaites, Contemporary English Poetry (Tokyo, 1957), P. 97.

of the book; the shorter, more personal poems; this dismayed note of anxious reconsideration is heard again. Always there is the same question to be asked:

> Is it a second childhood,
> No wiser than the first,
> That we so rage and thirst
> For some unchangeable good?
> Should not a wise man laugh
> At desires that are only proof
> Of slackening flesh and blood?
> (Pegasus) P. 50.

"The new dreams are no wiser than the first." The old illusions, the ideals of the previous decade stay to haunt him and no insistence on the benevolent rest promised by age can settle these mocking ghosts. He fights against the constant remembrance that "Betrayal is always self-betrayal." Sometimes there is even exasperation at the persistence of the old beliefs. It shows in the demand for a more coldly efficient organization. Irritated by a tiresome debate he has had while serving on an incompetent committee, he impatiently dismisses its usefulness with a view that should never have been spoken by a man with such an essential attachment to democratic idealism. Even although his response here may be transient and trivial, not a demonstration of any real change of social principle, it is still revealing of his different vision.

And I regret another afternoon wasted,
And wearily think there is something to be said
For the methods of the dictatorships--I who shall waste
Even the last drops of twilight in self-pity.
(Pegasus) P. 26.

Actually that self-pity is not a very significant mood in this collection. It does exist but the questioning reflects anxiety rather than pity, and is developed most fully in a poem called The Long Road. As a poem it is casual, conversational and very discursive. It is almost more a series of remarks than a poem. The prosy repetitions suggest that this experience was not quite assimilated sufficiently to make a poem, as if these lines were the mental investigations that make the prelude to the writing of poetry rather than the finished work itself.

There was no precise point at which to say
I am on the wrong road. So well he knew
Where he wanted to go, he had walked in a dream
Never dreaming he could lose his way.
Besides for such travellers it's all but true
That up to a point any road will do
As well as another -- so why not walk
Straight on? The trouble is after this point
There's no turning back, not even a fork;
And you never can see that point until
After you have passed it. And when you know
For certain you are lost, there's nothing to do
But go on walking your road, although
You walk in a nightmare now, not a dream.
(Pegasus) P. 27.

It is tempting and probably approximately right to equate the road with Communism. Certainly Day Lewis

faced in that night at Queen's Hall the haunted realization that "I am on the wrong road. " Yet it makes for some difficulties. What can one get from that extraordinary "any road will do" suggestion? In a similar way it is very true that Day Lewis, like other intellectuals, did not see the danger. Inherent in Communism, they perferred to accept their own idealistic interpretations of its dogma than the cruel evidence of Russian domestic and international policy. But having recognized betrayal of ideals, albeit tardily and reluctantly, they did change direction. If they did not have the confidence to turn back as one would wish, they at least stopped going along the same track. Lewis' discovery that he had been "walking in a nightmare not a dream" was a hard realization to make. Now, though he may regret the loss of the old illusionary dream he has woken up. The only nightmare he walks in now is the one that inflicts a sense of shame and regret. But this is not what the poem says, it rather pretends that he still marches along the old paths.

These questions may be applied in exactly the same way to the last stanza in which he attempts to argue what went wrong, somewhat in the tone of

of the earlier poem, Failure.

> You can argue it thus or thus: either the road
> Changed gradually under his feet and became
> A wrong road, or else it was he who changed
> And put the road wrong. We'd hesitate to blame
> The traveller for a highway's going askew;
> Yet possibly he and it became one
> At a certain stage like means and ends.
> For this lost traveller, all depends
> On how real the road is to him--not as a mode
> Of advancement or exercise--rather, as a grain
> To timber, intrinsic-real.
>
> He can but pursue
> His course and believe that, granting the road
> Was right at the start, it will see him through
> Their errors and turn into the right road again. (Pegasus) P.28.

Again it is easy to find clear personal interpretations for many lines. It is right that they should make themselves consider if it was Communism that changed, or their own falsely idealistic hopes, It is proper that they should be aware that not all the blame can be laid to the Communists. Equally it is revealing that the debate on this point should center on ends and means. If there was a single intellectual issue which broke many from the Party it was the realization that the communists would defend any means if the ends were the expansion of the Marxism. The belief that means condition ends was dismissed as a bourgeois quibble against Marxist dialectics. The last lines to be applicable at all would have to refer to the rather sad old communists who go on without faith or belief

because there is nothing else they can accept. As I suggested earlier the poets lost faith but they drifted rather to a political agnosticism than continued to retain the worn out old social faith. They had been sufficiently disabused to find Marxism intolerable however much they might regret their inability to find an adequate substitute. The possessive adjective "their" is also curious since it has no possible antecedent anywhere in the poem. Much remains unanswered andone rather begins to doubt that Lewis has, or intends, an answer. As I commented earlier the lines read like a series of hesitant speculations towards a poem, and may rather be a measure of his own doubt and confusion in this time of unbelief.

Last year Day Lewis published another collection of poems called The Gate.[17] These are gathered from various places of publication including the less than aestheic pages of Punch and The New Yorker. Nearly half the book does not consist of poetry proper at all. A long monologue for Madelaine Smith the suspected murderess was for oral delivery on the radio. Another section, The Unexploded

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17 C. Day Lewis, The Gate (London, 1963).

Bomb was for declamation at a nuclear disarmament rally. This is the nearest any of these four poets have come to political commitment recently though it is nothing but a simple satire. The Christmas Rose and a modern version of the Requiem Mass were written for musical scores. It is not easy to find any single theme in the brief remainder of the book. The title poem itself begins with one of the poet's most exotic images like one of those he used earlier. He describes "In the foreground clots of cream-white flowers." The verb is typical of Lewis' earlier style as is the whole neat gate image:

> The gate it is, dead center, ghost-amethyt-hued,
> Fastens the whole together like a brooch.
> (The Gate) P. 12.

The titles make a fairly inconsequent list: A View From an Upper Window, Sheepdog Trials in Hyde Park, Circus Lion, Getting Warm--Getting Cold. No obvious theme binds these poems together, but one idea, like a thread, shows repeatedly in unexpected places among the weave. This is the same note of introspective doubt that has been heard continually in Lewis' post-war poetry. It is found not so much in an entire poem as in constant

hints and asides within poems nominally on another subject. The poem on Edward Elgar for example, contains the old passion for England's lovely landscape. Day Lewis even repeats the music-countryside analogy he used earlier when he describes his exhilarated delight in a West country scene along the River Severn.

> Cloud-shadows sweeping in arpeggios up the hill-
> sides;
> Grey muted light which, brooding on stone, tree,
> clover
> And cornfield, makes their colours sing most clear--
> All moods and themes of light. (The Gate) P. 51.

But even in this poem celebrating the beauty of the apple-producing Evesham Valley, one can easily detect undertones. What on the surface pretends to be a picture of an orchard in which the trees never came to fruit, has very clear associations with the dead blossoms of social hope which equally failed in fruition.

> Orchards are in it--the vale of Evesham blooming:
> Rainshine of orchards growing out of the past.
> The sadness of remembering orchards that never bore,
> Never for us bore fruit: year after year they fruited,
> But all, all was premature--
> We were not ripe to gather the full beauty.
> And now when I hear "orchards" I think of loss, recall
> White tears of blossom streaming away down-wind,
> And wish the flower could have stayed to be one
> with the fruit it formed.
> (The Gate) P. 50.

The casual "Who cares," the studied disinterest of "for all I know" set the new emotional tone and his daughter Helen's statement, "You are so calm you amaze me, father," echoes something of our own sentiments after we have read the appeals of his poetry some twenty years before. But the poet has withdrawn to a point where the world becomes circumscribed by his own self. He attempts only the negative virtue that his acts should not make people suffer. Perhaps he is haunted by the thought of the tragic futility his earnest and impassioned advice brought to those who accepted it and died fighting for the false dawn promised by the battlefields of Spain. It may be this guilt, as well as the sense of failure, that makes him write:

> There's this to be said for growing old--one loses
> The itch for wholeness, the need to justify
> One's maimed condition. I have lived all these years
> A leper beneath the skin, scrupulous always
> To keep away from where I could spread infection.
> (The Gate), p. 33.

Other men found some satisfaction in escape from the "itch for wholeness", discovering the limited success of partial achievement after the determination to reform the world by wholesale revolution. But no other poet reached the point of

this self-horror, such total withdrawal. Regret and concern; that much was proper and necessary, but the sense of personal responsibility for such political disaster was never seen as such a single, individual burden by others.

One poem in this collection reflects something of the concerns of The Long Road. It is called Travelling Light. It is a modernized comment upon the motives of Jason's classical voyage but several moments seem to contain just that personal relevence which I have been indicating earlier. He begins, "Naturally we travelled light" and if one begins to make a tentative association of these travellers with the radical poets of England in the thirties a number of lines seem revealing. Consider the following lines as a comment on their necessity to graft social criticism onto a naturally lyric style. "What our need had forced on us grew second nature." "So when we resolved to sail beyond sheltering bays and sight of land" might refer to the decision to break from the comfortable security of their middle-class homes for

> We despised the chaffering sort
> Of matelot who tacks from port
> To port, lodges from isle to isle,
> Intent upon making his pile. (The Gate), P.23.

One can think very readily of the "chaffering sort" of politician in the years before the war. The moments of apparent success are also happily perceived. He recalls times of decision,

> I mean
> Times when horizon, heart, sky, sea
> Dilate with absolute potency--
> The present at its highest power,
> The course in view, the wake in flower
> (The Gate) P. 24.

But against these significant moments must be set the times of defeat and the need for retrenchment.

> No, we can afford
> To jetison flesh and blood still less
> Than keep these encumbrances.
> Which clutter our deck. (The Gate) P. 24.

From his present position, retired from the voyaging and political strife he can still assert though with vague relevance the old necessity.

> When age or weakness dims the creed
> Of travelling light, there's still a need
> To travel. (The Gate) P. 25.

But if this need is still present, it is not entirely credible to the poet as he stands towards the end of his experience, lamed, only faintly hopeful. In the last secion of this poem he writes:

> the nearer
> We approach the harsh whirlpool --
> End of our voyaging--whose pull
> Grows daily stronger now. Past fears,

> Hopes, joys live in these souvenirs
> We've kept; but they do not oppress
> Like flesh and blood our consciences.
> Let's say they're given us to console
> The heart for being no longer whole.
> For the loss of each wide hour-
> The course in view, the wake in flower--
> When being rose in utmost power. (The Gate) P. 25.

The poet looks to a time of the "past fears, hopes and joys" and he realizes now that they do not oppress him. He can even seek some consolation in the experience. Though the heart is "no longer whole", at least there is the reminder of the past when the whole spirit of his early manhood both political and poetic "rose in utmost power." No subsequent reassessment and self-analysis can destroy that past. Sometimes it seems as if Lewis's despair seeks to destroy the dignity of the past decision. This poem, although it is in many ways a retreat from the confidence of the position he once held, hints that for all his denial some residue remains. This will not be admitted by his conscious will which has accepted political and spiritual defeat. It seems unlikely that this memoried residue will prove sufficient upon which to construct any new and significant poetry. The incidental hints scattered throughout the two most recent collections of his verse indicate that the Day Lewis

of the thirties will not quite die, no matter how firmly his youth's hope is exercised by the despairing and defeated soul who now prefers to recreate the verse style of his earliest pastoral writing.

LOUIS MACNEICE

By the casual critic, Louis MacNeice is usually grouped for consideration with Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, and there are obvious points of similarity in both technique and intellectual attitude. One can discover, as usual, the predominating influence of Auden, and like the other three, MacNeice wrote of social events in tones of anger and concern. Yet his view seems more balanced than that of the others. Edwin Muir once called his work "The poetry of a man who is never swept off his feet." Because of this restraint MacNeice saw the Spanish war more in the context of European events. Although he felt deeply involved in the political issues of his time, his reaction to them was less dramatic and less emotional than the fierce response recorded in the verse of the other three. Even the poetry he wrote while in Spain seems to concern the war only tangentially. In spite of this fact, MacNeice's work stands so centrally at the heart of the inter-war poetic and idealistic dilemma that he cannot be ignored

in this context. My comments will focus less on his response to the war in Spain and more on his examination of the problems of a liberal conscience in the thirties.

MacNeice's rather surprising impartiality over Spain probably arises from his awareness of a broader historical perspective which caused him to regard the Anchluss, Abyssinia and later Munich, as equally significant moments at which a decision had to be made on moral grounds. The other three would no doubt point out that the difference in the case of Spain, was that action was possible; for here individual decision could lead to the determination to fight. This was an alternative which was not open to a person in the other crises of this decade. MacNeice's temperate attitude to Spain does, however, have very important poetic results. He would have less to retract today than many poets who allowed their liberal emotions to rule their poetic sensibility. More important, he was not "played out" by his response to the Spanish struggle. After the Spanish war the other three poets, inasmuch as they wrote at all, produced work with a strongly valedictory note; heavy with the sense of disillusion. MacNeice's work is for

a continuous progression than, for example, Spender's. He has less to regret spiritually and poetically than the other three poets. Even MacNeice, however, ends his poetry on a note that is both depressed and nostalgic.

In the Preface to his Collected Poems he can write that he "resists the temptation to collect only what I most admire." This confident decision contrasts pointedly with Spender's "selection" and Auden's grotesque and unashamed "improvements." MacNeice reserved his emotions sufficiently that he was able to respond to Munich and the outbreak of the war in 1939, in a manner that is clearly derived from his earlier writing, while other poets seemed at this time to have reached a point of apathy and rejection. If these poems, unlike the later work of say Day Lewis, show little regression, they do not, however, demonstrate developing maturity.

I think in this essay I can demonstrate the continuity which enabled MacNeice to escape from the despair that engulfed the others after Spain. Some of his poems written during the war and immediately afterwards seem more successful than most of the verse written then by the other three poets. MacNeice is able to point out the post-war failure

to achieve the ideals which the poets had sought in the inter-war years. He can rage at the folly when man cannot learn from the mistakes of history. His poetry after 1939 does not, alas, show any significant development; rather there is the restating of old themes in the old way. If his later poems are sometimes successful in themselves, they do not exhibit that growth and mature power that one had the right to expect from a poet whose promise had shown so brightly before he was thirty. MacNeice's later work allows me to demonstrate again the basic tenet of this thesis, that none of the poets who reacted so forcibly, so powerfully, to the social and international crises of their times, have developed into major poets. Their reputations, based on their brilliance and promise in the thirties have received little reinforcement from any of their later work.

MacNeice's family and social background were, like those of the other three, upper middle-class. He received the best possible education at a renowned public school, Marlborough, and went on to Merton College Oxford where he studied classics with great distinction. At Oxford he first read the poetry of Eliot and subsequently he was introduced

to the work and personality of W. H. Auden. MacNeice shares with the other three poets the guilt-ridden knowledge, that although he longs for a social revolution to reform the injustices and distress of English life, his own background is part of that privileged class. His education and family background have set him eternally apart from his sympathies. In the biographical section of his Modern Poetry he lists his limitations:

> Repression from the age of 6 - 9; inferiority complex on grounds of physique and class consciousness; lack of a social life until I was grown up; late puberty; ignorance of music; inability to ride horses.[1]

But at the same time none of these problems altered his realization that he was among the elite. He knew the traditional family position.

> I was the rector's son, born to the Anglican order
> Banned forever from the candles of the Irish poor.
> The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept
> With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.
> (Earth Compels), p. 7.

His secure acceptance of his class was daily harrowed by the knowledge that there were others who found only suffering in their lives. His memory of the early years is of constant appeals to his compassion and assaults on his conscience.

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[1]Louis MacNeice, Modern Poetry, (Oxford 1938), p.88.

Later when he recalls the scenes in the depression he describes the area in which he lived, the Black Country of Britain.

> We lived in Birmingham through the slump-
> Line your boots with a piece of paper-
> Sunlight dancing on the rubbish dump,
> On the queues of men and the hungry chimneys.
> (Autumn Journal) P. 34.

And he vividly remembers other scenes from his childhood.

> The North where I was a boy
> Is still the North, veneered with the grime of Glasgow,
> Thousands of men whom nobody will employ
> Standing at the corners, coughing,
> And the street children play on the wet
> Pavement--hopscotch or marbles;
> And each rich family boasts a sagging tennis net.
> (Autumn Journal) P. 64.

He realizes he is set apart, partly by his birth, but more by his education which was so exactly designed to reinforce all the petty distinctions of class attitudes; particularly since he studies in the vocationally "worthless" and thus socially snobbish field of classical studies. He feels he must question the purpose of his learning and with wry wit he seeks a virtue in this apparently dilettante area of learning.

> I ought to be glad
> That I studied the classics at Marlborough and Merton,
> Not everyone here having had
> The privilege of learning a language
> That is incontrovertably dead. (Autumn Journal) P. 50.

There is a nice irony in the use of "privilege". That language "incontrovertably dead" may hint at his belief that English before the stylistic revolution of Eliot and Auden was at least moribund. Later his scarcasm becomes heavier as he remarks on the strong traditionalism of English education. One might compare this view with Day Lewis' continuing admiration for an early classics teacher who dismissed science with pity for those who spent their days "making smells."

> We learned that a gentlemen never misplaces his accents,
> That nobody knows how to speak, much less how to write
> English who has not hob-nobbed with the great grandparents of English,
> That the boy on the Modern Side is merely a parasite
> But the classical student is bred to the purple, his training in syntax
> Is also a training in thought
> And even in morals; if called to the bar or the barracks
> He will do what he ought. (Autumn Journal) P. 50.

This is a conventional pose of the socialist convert, and at other times with more personal honesty he recalls his school life with a sentimental affection which is rather engaging. He recalls a nostalgic melage of,

> the M. A. gown
> Alphas and Betas, central heating, floor polish
> and I think of the beginnings of other terms...
> And memory reaffirms
> That alarm and exhileration of arrival:
> White wooden boxes, clatter of books, a smell

> Of changing rooms--Lifebuoy soap and muddy flannels
> And over all a bell
> Dragooning us to dormitory and classroom.
> (Autumn Journal) P. 40.

This dichotomy between the instinctive affection and the regulation left-wing pose may be seen repeatedly through the work of MacNeice, Spender and Day Lewis, with a wider reference than the mere attitude to their schooling. For them the choice of a left-wing position and a belief in the justice of socialism could never be the casual acceptance of a belief instilled through family politics. This is completely different, one might observe, from the instinctive Labour vote of the new left-wing writers like Alan Stillitoe and John Osborne who are from truly working class backgrounds. It had to be a choice that meant rebellion and also the rejection of so much that was pleasant, if selfish. They must have all faced the insidious voice of the tempter, whether it came in the outspoken comments from the family, or from their own mind when indolence and self-satisfaction was temporarily dominant. In a similar way Auden in Letter to Lord Byron calls himself "a selfish, pink old liberal to the last." The following lines suggest the present temptations more seductively than those

resisted by Bunyan's pilgrim:

> And now the tempter whispers "But you also
> Have the slave-owners' mind
> Would like to sleep on a mattress of easy profits,
> To snap your fingers or a whip and find
> Servants or houris ready to wince and flatter
> And build with their degradation your self-esteem."
> (Autumn Journal) P. 17.

It is unconsciously revealing, that after these evocative and tantalizing lines, MacNeice's rejection is stilted and pompous. It includes these lines of priggish moral posturing:

> And I answer that this is largely so for habit
> makes me
> Think that victory for one implies another's
> defeat,
> That freedom means the power to order.
> (Autumn Journal) P. 17.

He escapes from his dangerous dreams with a stiff does of Marxist theory; MacNeice equally establishes with precision those same exotic temptations translated into the elegant comforts of English country house living. It is a gracious settled world of

> roses on a rustic trellis and mulberry trees
> And bacon and eggs in a silver dish for breakfast
> And all the inherited assets of bodily ease.
> (Autumn Journal) P. 9.

The choice of the nouns make a particularly exact vision of traditional British comfort.

The socialism of these intellectuals, however, was not only a matter of conscience, but appeared

to offer an alternative to the apparent collapse of the old social order. Besides the economic stagnation it seemed also that their whole class was doomed along with all its futile privileges. Again MacNeice records this belief with a mixture of nostalgic affection and sarcasm; that strange dualism of emotion that afflicts those who reject their class.

> None of them can endure, for how could they, possibly, without
> The flotsam of private property, pekinese and poloyanthus.
> The good things which in the end turn to poison and puss,
> Without the brandy chairs and the sugar in the silver tongs
> And the inter-ripple and resonance of years of dinner gongs? (Poems), p. 17.

Again it is the nouns in these lines which are especially evocative. One notes the slight affectation of the sugar tongs and the social status of the gong, usually acquired during some stint of military or official duty in the colonial east. Yet if this is seen as the foolish or greedy indulgence of the privileged MacNeice regularly hints at his reservations in the face of change. The revolution that seemed inevitable would seep away more than these trivial impedimenta of class.

> What will happen when our civilization, like a long pent balloon
> What will happen will happen; the whore and the balloon
> Will come off best; no dreamers, they cannot lose their dream
> And are at least likely to be reinstated in the new regime. (Poems), p. 18.

Such knowledge made MacNeice question some of the easy optimism that flowered in the verse of his more politically orthodox contemporaries. He could not escape the appeals made to his liberal conscience, but he always understood that the human issue was deeper than even the most violent revolution could solve. Without Spender's deep if sometimes facile compassion; without Auden's easy assumption of arrogant authority and Day Lewis' confident politics MacNeice had to forge an acceptable synthesis to face a world that despised the attitudes to which he had been reared. He sought a future he knew that would offer no solution for his poetic imagination. Although he was too brave to avoid accepting the principle of the greater good for the dispossessed through revolution, he perceived that his decision had to be a choice between two dangerous forces. This issue was less simple than the others appeared to have imagined. While he saw no alternative but to join the wave of the future, he had moments when he regretted the past even while he satirized it. As he honestly observed,

> My sympathies are, I suppose, Left -- on paper and

> in the soul.
> But not in my heart or my guts. On paper yes, I would vote
> Left any day, sign manifestos, answer questionnaires
> Ditto my soul. My soul is all for moving towards the
> classless society. But unlike Plato, what my soul says
> does not seem to go. There is a lot more to one than
> soul you know--with my heart and my guts I lament the
> passing of class, property and snobbery--I am both a
> money snob and a class snob.[2]

In his verse he sought to express his new belief, always aware that there existed the same inner struggle in his poetry as in his life. Grigson recalls MacNeice's undergraduate poetry in his memoirs. He describes it as having,

> A many-coloured plumage out of the tropical jungle or a cage in the zoo--He was a spangled acrobat performing on silvery wires. Icicles mixed with ice cream and lace and froth and fireworks. (The Crest of Silver), p.115.

Such a style could even be a handicap for the new subjects MacNeice wished to describe. In revealing lines in Eclogue by a Five Barred Gate, Death acts as an alter ego, warning him of the poetic road that he must traverse. The speaker has offered a conventionally Georgian view of the nature of a poet:

> I thought a shepherd was a poet--on his flute--
> But certainly poets are sleepers,
> The sleeping beauty behind the many coloured hedge.
> (Poems), p. 25.

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[2] I Crossed The Minch (London, 1938), p. 125.

Death suggests a different and contemporary vision of the poet. The instinctive use of the "pylon" train image is in itself revealing.

> I thought he was a poet and could quote the prices
> Of significant living and decent dying, and could
> lay the rails level on the sleepers
> To carry the powerful train of abstruse thought.
> (Poems), p. 25.

MacNeice's bounded duty was to write verse that would support this "powerful train of abstruse thought." Death goes on to reprove him sternly for his neglect:

> All you do is burke the other and terrible beauty,
> all you do is hedge
> And shirk the inevitable issue ...
> Poetry you think is only the surface vanity,
> The painted nails, the hips narrowed by fashion,
> The hooks and eyes of words; but it is not that
> only. (Poems), p. 25.

The comparison between the transient triviality of certain poetry and the pointless and absurd alternations in female fashions is effectively sardonic, but this is only negative warning that the slickly up-to-date is sterile and impermanent. The positive instructions are in the last two lines. MacNeice sees it his duty to seek "the other and terrible beauty" of true poetry. To achieve this he understands that he must face "the inevitable issue" which must be resolved both in his political and his poetic life. Death again asserts the responsibilities the poet must meet:

> All the time is not your tear-off jotter, you
> cannot afford to scribble
> So many false answers.
> This escapism of yours is blasphemy...(Poems),
> p. 26.

There are several associations involved in that "tear-off jotter." There is the idea that casual poetry is wrongly assumed to be eternally significant; that past failure and experience can be casually rejected by the poet at will. All these thoughts reinforce the essential condemnation of the poet's attitude to life and verse which is trivial and self-centered. MacNeice realized if he was to write other than "many false answers" he would have to break away from the social and poetic traditions which bound him to a class and an attitude. If his social conscience helped him to escape the complacency of his home background, the influence of Auden did the same for his poetry.

Auden's persuasive influence permeated this decade and although his voice had a fresh power that swept away much cant and mush in contemporary poetry it had a very dangerous effect on the writing and sensibilities of poets like MacNeice and Day Lewis, who were trying to find their own authentic voices. Auden's style acted on their poetry like a too potent drug on the body; its sudden exhilerating

effects soon offset by the long-term damage done. The danger was that in the emulation of Auden, too often only the slick, the obvious and the crude was borrowed. These qualities were grafted onto a developing style that could be stunted or deformed by such borrowing, for they contradicted so often the natural poetic development of the younger poet. One form that always marks Auden's influence is the use of the music-hall jingle. Auden often used this device with superb rhythmic skill. In a less subtle hand it too regularly becomes tuneful, syncopated doggerel; gay but meaningless. Consider the following couplets. They are presumably surrealist and may owe something to the violent pictorial fantasies of Dali, but their symbolism is designedly non-rational and senseless.

> John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa
> Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker
> Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whiskey
> Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.

(Earth Compels), p. 58.

One can point to the jauntiness and the inconsequence which makes this sound a little like Auden, but its silliness can only be attributed to the foolishness of the writer himself. In the same vein but now attempting to shock with a silly crudity are the following lines:

> Mrs. Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job
> with repulsion
> Said to the midwife "Take it away; I'm through with
> overproduction." (Earth Compels),
> p. 58.

Such lines can produce a titter, and they can even express a kind of rough exasperation which in the following example has a resilient strength in its homely colloquialism:

> Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your
> hat on a pension.

Such instinctive social criticism, although easily making for excess, has a certain healthy power, and it is sometimes slipped unexpectedly into lines of unexampled doggeral. The poem Bagpipe Music from which the above lines about John MacDonald were taken continues in similar lines of free-flowing drivel, until, within the following pair of couplets, the meaning suddenly twists into a significant social statement that achieves poetry. Consider the contrast between the cheerful rhyme of the first couplet with the sudden seriousness and anger of the latter:

> It's no go my honey-love, it's no go my poppet,
> Work your hands from day to day, the winds will
> blow the profit.
> The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will
> fall forever,
> But you break the bloody glass you won't hold up
> the weather.[3]

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[3]Earth Compels, p. 59. MacNeice had used this barometer image much earlier in Glass Falling (1926).

> A wet night coming, the glass is going
> Down, the sun is going down.

It is interesting to see how in the later verse the image has acquired specific political association.

Here the colloquialism and the use of "bloody" seem less of a pose, less of an affected counter to Georgian poetry, then an honest and exasperated desire to get through to a wider audience. It is a minor example of the attempt make by so many other poets in the thirties to make poetry bite and sting again; to redeem it from its fallen state in which it existed as an annodyne for the sentimental and the self-satisfied. This is the true nature of the revolution that Eliot once brought to English poetry. The third line above is a pessimistic assertion of the political events of this period. As the last line observes, ignorance and the refusal to face the plainest, recorded evidence is only delusion. The truths that the poets were warning of at this time were as certain as the measured facts on the dial. To dismiss such warnings as false, was as efficacious as to destroy an instrument which offered readings one disliked. Perhaps there is even the more pessimistic assertion that events were already beyond man's control, having the same elemental power as natural forces.

Exactly the same contrast between proximate lines of poetry and drivel is exhibited in MacNeice's poem, Letter to Graham and Anna. Its beginning is simply dreadful, none the better for being consciously bad.

> To Graham and Anna from the Arctic Gate
> I send this letter to N. W. 8,
> Hoping that town is not the usual mess
> That Fauli is full of worms, the new cook a success
> I've got here you see without being sick
> On a boat of 800 tons of Reykjavik.
> (Letter from Iceland) P. 33.

The dreary rhythm of these lines is in itself indicative of the emotiness of the sentiment, but this actually serves to lower the reader's guard. While he shows superior smiles or delighted comprehension he is laid open for the sudden change of tone, a quick thrust of true poetry. The real reason for MacNeice's voyage is to escape from an environment that has become too restricting and familiar. The divorce, which MacNeice was trying to make from his family background, had temporarily at least, to be a spatial escape into unknown territory. To seek detachment he had to run away, for as he explains,

> I have come north, gaily running away
> From the grinding gears, the change from day to day,
> The creaks of the familiar room, the smile
> Of the cruel clock, the bills upon the file,
> The excess of books and cushions, the high heels
> That walk the street. (Letter from Iceland) P. 35.

If the first lines have a familiar air in their description of the rut of routine in city living, the last two appear to me to show, with magnificant compression, the venial vices of the intellectual; the vicarious experience of books; the selfish urge

to achieve laziness and creature comforts, and the cerebal lechery aimed at the passing woman, an emotion which is as heated as it is introvert. More fearsome than this bric-a-brac is the oppression of the intellectual strain where all experience becomes an unresolved problem.

> The ambushes of sex, the panic to retrieve
> Significance from the river of passing peoples.
> The attempt to climb the ever climbing steeple.
> (Letter from Iceland) P. 35.

"Ambush" brilliantly suggests the effect on a man of a sudden view of "high heels" when he innocently hoped he had achieved a point of temporary sexual passivity. The word "panic" is a further remainder of the urgency and desperation which seemed to afflict this decade. There was so much to be done to gain "significance" from the ever-running river of social and technological change that their urgency became a kind of frenzy, which MacNeice sought temporarily to escape in Iceland.

> Here is a different rhythm, the juggled balls
> Hang in the air. (Letter from Iceland) P. 35.

The image emphasizes his sense of escape from the constant effort to retain the precarious balance of a dozen conflicts, for in juggling, only concentration and activity can retain even the status quo of hanging balls. This type of image is clever and typical of MacNeice's quality as a poet. I shall

discuss this issue further later on; now I merely wish to indicate the way in which in MacNeices's hands the dangerously powerful influence of Auden's glib rhythm and pungent colloquialisms is often absorbed into his own authentic style: the failure to be seen when he merely emulates the Auden forms, is very obvious.

Another factor which MacNeice had to fit into his poetic style was the "pylon" imagery of this decade. Most poets at this time played with this kind of flashy up-to-dateness. So often this became nothing but a mannerism which more than anything has served to "date" the poetry of this time. It seemed to be imagined that the incorporation of references to the new science would produce a "new" poetry more relevent to the changes of this decade. MacNeice managed to avoid the worst effects of this imagery as he also managed to avoid an excess of the influence of Auden. Yet he did not choose to avoid the "machine" references and he can use the form as crudely as anyone. There is a comparison which begins <u>An Eclogue for Christmas</u> in which the movement of time is seen as a worn-out machine:

> The jaded calender revolved
> The nuts need oil, chokes and valves. (<u>Poems</u>), P. 13.

Here the associated meanings may be usefully explored. Sugar presumably suggests the false values of this society, the trashy writing and the sentimentality. Just as diabetes is self-extending and finally kills the body in which it exists, so vulgarity and literary rubbish debase the whole cultural body on which it preys, to the point where it destroys the life which it exploits. Here the unusual and modern image is successful because it communicates a poetic meaning which is the only justification for any imagery.

Generally MacNeice's imagery is far less exclusively intellectual than Auden's. It has similarity with Day Lewis' sensory power, though this is clearly not a case of influence in either direction. Images of dazzling brilliance in their evoked colour are typical of his writing. Consider the almost excessively exotic colouring of the following lines:

> Indigo mottle of purple and amber ink
> Damson whipped with cream, improbable colours of sea
> And unanalysable rhythms-fingering foam
> Tracing erasing its runes, regardless
> Of you and me. (Holes in the Sky), p. 23.

The colours luckily dazzle the eye, otherwise one begins to visualize a little too distinctly the vomit-making mixture of ink and cream and squashed fruit. But if there is sometimes excess there is regularly the powerfully controlled image of deeply satisfying

appropriateness. In the line "Between March and April, when barrows of daffodils butter the pavement," that unexpected verb has an assured accuracy. The scene is perceived in the same plastic depth as in the painting of an artist working with a palate-knive. There is a connection of colour and form. In the next example taken from Autumn Journal, the colour becomes functional and reflects the mood of the poet's response.

> And August going out to the tin trumpets of nasturtiums
> And the Salvation Army blare of brass.
> (Autumn Journal, p. 9.

The novelty of the image is soon lost in our appreciation of its effectiveness in conveying the harsh brightness of high summer. The colour and shape of the nasturtiums' horn-shaped flowers calls to mind the brass trumpets of the Salvation Army band and its strident colour also reminds us of the fierce heartiness of the S. A. meeting. Another example of this original imagery is found in the following lines of London Rain:

> The rain of London pimples
> The ebony street with white. (Plant and Phantom), p. 23.

MacNeice had used this image before in the lines,

> After the warm days the rain comes pimpling
> The paving stones with white. (Autumn Journal), p. 50.

The verb "pimples" recalls the earlier example "butters." It has the same ingenuity which makes its impact by being unexpected, but then, after the first shock, investigation confirms the appropriateness of the application, as one visualizes the first spatter marks of the rain on the dusty urban streets. Another example is found in a poem called Sunday Morning. MacNeice describes the sounds of music in terms as unexpected as that colourful Salvation Army comparison.

> Down the road someone is practicing scales,
> The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails.
>
> (Poems), p. 39.

The implied pun of scales of fish and music might be an accidental connection. But the fish tail suggests the shape of the note on the page of music before it becomes sound. Then as the sound floats away it has the same quick transitory existence of the fish briefly seen as it flicks its way in a river. The transience and the sudden flash of beauty are both present in this association.

Many images of this type may be found throughout MacNeice's writing, and they combine imagination with a powerfully developed sensory perception. There is the visual dazzle of the following lines where the verbs lend vital exhilaration to the sense of colour:

> Or where broom and gorse beflagged the chalkland
> All the flare and gusto of the unenduring
> Joys of a season. (Earth Compels), p. 9.

In another place the image suggests a tactual sensation:

> The sand looks like metal, feels like fur.[4]

The sensuous excitement of taste is explored in the vivid image of the grape "exploding on the palate." The very verb, though echoing Hopkins' famous "sloe" image, is evidence of the vivid physical delight of MacNeice's senses.

> A Basque
> Woman cooked on charcoal--aubergines with garlic
> And there were long green grapes exploding on the palate
> And smelling of eau de cologne. (Collected Poems), p. 197.

In the following lines the chicken/wood flesh analogy is introduced and this image combines elements which were separate in some of the other comparisons.

> The night is damp and still,
> And I hear dull blows on wood outside my window;
> They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill
> The wood is white like the roast flesh of chicken,
> Each tree falling like a closing fan.
> (Autumn Journal), p. 31.

The broken white wood of the tree is compared in texture and colour , and behind this comparison must

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[4]Holes in the Sky, p. 23.

also be the idea of death as these London trees are destroyed. In another sensory combination the poem The Cyclist has an image that combines sound and sight.

> The grass boils with grasshoppers. (Holes in the Sky), p. 38.

Here the buzzing of these insects is a hiss like simmering water, and their constant flickering movement across the grass suggests the breaking bubbles on the surface.

Some lines from the poem entitled Birmingham are particularly interesting because they demonstrate a strange amalgam between "pylon" imagery and the use of vivid descriptive colour.

> On shining lines the trams, like vast sarcophagi move
> Into the sky, plum after sunset merging to duck's egg bared with mauve,
> Zeppelin clouds, and Pentecost-like the cars' headlights bud
> Out from sideroads and the traffic signals, creme de menthe or bull's blood.
> (Poems), p. 42.

Within these four lines one finds the contemporary reference of trams, zeppelins, cars' headlights and traffic signals, and a vivid mixture of colour recalling the damson and cream of Littoral. There are plum, duck-egg, mauve, menthe and blood. The colours might be an accurate description of the sunset, but somehow the mixture suggested by the nouns is so unusual that it absorbs all the attention which should be given to the experiencing of the colours of the description. These lines fail for the opposite reason that the others succeed.

The earlier unusual images stop the attention momentarily so that investigation of the image can take place. Then one perceives its general application. Hereafter the mind has been arrested by that inconsequent mixture of items; it seems to remain bogged down in them, refusing to budge into the generalized perception of colour that might be the experience described.

MacNeice is not only an imagist of colour and texture, he sometimes, though less often, employs Auden's intellectual image. In some cases this type of image lacks a definite reference, rather in the manner of certain French film directors who throw an inexplicable incident at an audience seeming to assume that it is the duty of the viewer to supply any symbolic reference. When MacNeice describes a mysterious incident, as in the following lines, I suspect he hopes the Kafka-like unexpectedness will create a mood in the reader. I feel it conceals an inability to produce a more definitive concrete image to describe the experience.

> And as I go out I see a windscreen wiper
> In an empty car
> Wiping away like made and I feel astounded
> That things have gone so far.
> (Autumn Journal), p. 31.

When he moves closer to the typical hammer-stroke

intellectualism of Auden, we find the exciting image, powerful and unexpected that was such a strength in Auden's verse. MacNeice's "We must cut the throat of love," has much in common with Auden's "The rigid promise fractured in the garden." In both cases the cleverness momentarily dazzles and the impact is far greater than any subsequent rational examination of the image can explain. It is the drive of the lean, spare, powerful rhetoric that excites more than any later pedestrian attempt to explore the ramifications of meaning can explain. At other times the impact can be amply sustained by mental investigation of the images. The following two lines are characteristic:

> And left us, as he always did, to follow
> His colonizing fate through Africa's of thought.[5]

Here the casual introduction of associations of

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[5] This is a development of the same image used in an early poem Spring Sunshine (1929).

> Is it worth while really
> To colonize any more the already populous
> Tree of Knowledge?

The later version is more effective because of the associations of "Africa", and also because the earlier usage insists on one visualizing the ludicrous picture of people colonizing a tree.

frontiers of the mind is made. These frontiers are explored and then "settled," as once geographically "darkest Africa" was explored. The uncharted regions of the world are equated with the areas of knowledge as yet unexploited. The intellectual pioneers lead the way and make new fields available to the slower and less venturesome as the old time overers did; the explorers making way for the settlers. Intellectually the pure thinkers prepare the ground for the applied scientists. These associations develop the idea far beyond the point of the first impact of this metaphor.

With the development of these techniques MacNeice honed a style which was to express the social beliefs that had destroyed the placid acceptance of his early training and background. With MacNeice, as with the other poets I am considering, the ideological motivation of their writing was the sense of outrage, the shamed conscience in the face of the failure of the economic and social order to grant a man a life of even minimal decency. They saw, as a continual humiliation, the human position when man was dominated and degraded by the forces he should have controlled for his own welfare. In his poetry MacNeice states the familiar tripartite

grievance against contemporary society. A social and economic order that allowed millions to remain unemployed, and burned crops while people starved, was an evil mockery. This order created, or at least tolerated, ugliness, squalor and human despair. Politically in the face of the Nazi threat there was fatalism and a shameful evasion of responsibility while "the glass is going down."

Perhaps at times he regretted the necessity of facing these issues in his verse, as he had felt some nostalgic longing for the past which he felt he had to reject. Perhaps, like Day Lewis, the times made him a poet with a tone he would never have chosen had he developed as a poet twenty years before or after. Their times made demands upon them that only a rigorous sense of duty and social necessity allowed them to fulfill. It is a measure of their true status as poets, that in embracing this undesired demand, they created sincere and significant poetry. It is perhaps reading a little more into MacNeice's poem Aubade than he intended if one regards it as a kind of farewell to the type of poetry he might have written. It includes a sense of contrast he must have felt. The comparison is not only between past and

present time; the one rosy and beautiful, the other grim and forbidding; it must include the alteration in his own life brought about when the silver spoon of his childhood was yielded for the search for a social justice. One notices especially the vivid sensuous enjoyment of the first lines, taste, touch and colour creating an exciting sense of physical well-being.

> Having bitten on life like a sharp apple
> Or playing it like a fish, been happy,
> Having felt with fingers that the sky is blue,
> What have we after that to look forward to?
> Not to the twilight of the gods but a precise dawn
> Of sallow and grey bricks, and newsboys crying war.
> (Poems), P. 52.

If the past seemed to be this exciting compendium of sense im ressions, sharply satisfy ng, the future "sallow and grey" does not even promise the cosmic sensation of gotterdammerung.

Putting this past behind him MacNeice seeks to record the contemporary scene, again and again, in tones varying from violent anger to almost suicidal despair. It was above all the eternal ugliness he saw on every side: the machine-produced squalor of cheap goods and sholdy housing. The vision tore at his poetic soul, and he saw its manifestation on every side whether in Belfast Shops or Birmingham Suburbs. The shops contain only vulgar trivialities:

And in the marble stores rubber gloves like polyps
Cluster, celluloid painted ware, glaring
Metal patents, parchment lampshades, harsh
Attempts at buyable beauty. (Poems), P. 46.

The description manifests an almost physical revulsion. The things are crudely cheap or vaguely obscene like those rubber gloves. The last line is simply a sneer which, if esthetically just, is brutal in its implications.

On another journey driving into Birmingham, MacNeice's vision moves from the particular to the whole suburban sprawl of the new cheap suburbs, Ribbon development by speculative builders had desecrated the countryside with a series of mock-eries of the post-war promise of "homes for heroes."[6]

Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
Seducingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed
So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic through bleary haws
And only a six-inch grin of the racing earth in their concrete claws;

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[6] This vision is repeated in the scornful lines from Autumn Journal where he talks of the ribbon development along the new arterial roads leading out of London.

Along the North Circular and Great West roads
Running the gauntlet of impoverished fancy
Where housewives bolster up their jerry built abodes
With amour propre and the habit of Hire Purchase,
(Autumn Journal, P. 54).

> In these houses men as in a dream pursue the
> Platonic Forms
> With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets
> approximating to the fickle norms
> And endeavour to find God and score one over the
> neighbour
> By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built
> beauty and sweated labour.
> (Poems), p. 41.

All words here add to MacNeice's disgusted condemnation; "splayed" with its suggestion of the grotesque and deformed, "seducingly rigged" implying the cheap ornamentation to lure the most vulgar taste, an implication confirmed by the "half-timbered" describing the shoddy and pointless gimmick of borrowing a past beauty. The whole description reminds one of whores standing in cheap seductiveness along a street. The house is balanced on "Six-inch" foundations for this inferior architecture aims at only the most transient dwelling. Besides the literal short-lived quality, there is the thought that "racing earth" offering violent and rapid change will as soon dispose of these shoddy houses as the fallacious dreams which they so inadequately satisfy. The idea is carried further for, if these are dream houses to the advertisers, the men who live in them exist "as in a dream."

In seeking the toys of their social consumption of dogs and radio (the entertainment revolution of

the thirties) they are asleep to the real issues of their world. They strive only for conformity of norms and these are as fickly changeable as the latest fashion in dress or a child's craze. The certainty which they hoped to find in such existence is permanently denied because such security is only a dream, and so they seek God and "score one over the neighbour." The juxtaposition is ironic because it states the obvious fallacy; a true religious or ethical position cannot be found in a society dedicated only to greedy ambition. The word "upward" applies ironically both to the yearning towards God and the social climbing of material progress. No wonder, in either case, the progress is only "tentative" if the norms of beauty are the cheap crudity of this architecture, and the savage economic competition of "sweated labour." Not even Auden's icy jeer can equal the power of MacNeice's vehement denunciation. His eyes see the decay throughout the land, and he demands a new poetry to replace "idylls" and pastorals" which would be dishonest in this decade of the depression.

> Polluted rivers run--the Lethe and the Styx;
> The soil is tired and the profit little and the hunchback

> Bobs on a carthorse round the sodden ricks.
> Sing us no more idylls, no more pastorals,
> No more epics of the English earth;
> The country is a swindling annexe to the factory,
> Squalid as an afterbirth. (Autumn Journal), P. 70.

That last line is a physical revulsion and the condemnation is also an intellectual one, for the birth of the Industrial Revolution has been not a new life, but the aborted economic system with all its "fickle norms."

Amongst these constant assaults on the artist's vision come the inescapable attacks on his conscience. In all cities there is evidence of the shame of this society:

> Outside the delicatessen shop the hero
> With his ribbons and his empty sleeve-up sleeve
> Badges for money, while with turned up collars
> His comrades blow through brass the Londonderry Air.
> (Earth Corners), P. 32.

This dismal scene is invoked by the word "badges" with its meaning of sly, rather shameful begging; thought it is not the begger who needs to be ashamed here. Those turned up collars with their hint of inadequate warmth and the choice of stand outside the food shop, all contribute to the mood which is as plaintive as the tune they incompetently play. It is a scene that repeatedly impinges on his horrified vision. In Autumn Journal he describes

a similar scene:

> Beneath the standard lights the paralytic winding
> His barrel organ sprays the passers by
> With April music, the many ribboned hero
> With half a lung or leg waits his turn to die.
> (Autumn Journal), p. 72.

Even the offer of help is loaded with false values. When approached by a do-gooder charitably collecting by "the sale of little cardboard flags on pins," MacNeice snarls "Us too they sold." He denounces the whole wretched pack with an indignation worthy of Siegfried Sassoon, but with an intellectual judgment that is most powerful than Sassoon's emotional condemnations.

> Us too they sold
> The women and the men with many sheep.
> Graft and aggression, legal prevarication
> Drove out the best of us,
> Secured long life to only the sly and the dumb
> To those who would not say what they really thought
> But got their ends through pretended indifference
> And through the sweat and blood of thralls and hacks
> Cheating the poor man of their share ... (Letters from Iceland), p. 128.

Here in a few lines is the accumulated bitterness of a generation of those who had fought in the Great War, had fought in vain, suffering only for the selfishness of those at home and the dismal disillusion that awaited them at demobilization. MacNeice had not experienced this betrayal himself, but he perceived it with an acute political realization which is deeper than Sassoon's less focussed anger; more violent than Owen's fatalistic compassion. Knowing his generation inherits this chaos and the results of past indifference he can link his own generation with the soldiers' suffering and say, "Us too they sold."[7]

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[7]His mood is clearly allied to C. Day Lewis' observations

He could see no end to the crisis except an explosion of revolution or war, for

> given poverty,
> Given two on the dole and one a cripple,
> Given the false peace and the plight of England...
> Given her wakeful nights trying to balance the budget
> And given her ignorance of her own frailty,
> What other end was coming?

Yet for the humanist with the humane sympathies of MacNeice, the effect of this decay on people's souls was more depressing than the abstract problems of social justice. It is possible to conceive a practical solution to the problem of unemployment, and of the exploitation of labour, but how can one change the spiritual smugness and aridity of a nation in which,

> Most are accepters, born and bred to harness
> And take things as they come. (Autumn Journal), p. 16.

MacNeice and all the idealistic social reformers who shared his views, wanted to rouse people from the apathy and disinterest into which, they argued, social hardship had driven them. MacNeice's conception of life was totally an idealist one, seeking an escape as he had said, "From the excess of books and cushions, the high heels;" His own vision showed the way to a life of greater significance and beauty, rejecting the ridiculous concept of life as something measured in material acquisition. He scorns a person

> Who wants to live, i.e. wants more
> Presents, jewelry, furs, gadgets, solicitations
> As if life were not
> Following the curve of a planet or controlled water
> But a leap in the dark, a tangent, a stray shot.

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7 continued from previous page.
in his autobiography.

> When...I first read the poems of Wilfred Owen I found myself at home with his language and his meanings, though I had suffered nothing of the agony from which they grew and had been too young to feel that pity that informs them. (The Buried Day, (New York, 1960), p. 85).

> It is this we learn after so many failures,
> The building of castles in sand, of queens in snow,
> That we cannot make any corner in life or in life's beauty,
> That no river is a river that does not flow.
> (Autumn Journal), pp. 10-11.

I regret that "i.e.", because it seems evidence that this poetry is conceived as a visual form, to be read rather than to be sounded aloud, yet the theme itself is honest, even heroic, in its acceptance of human limitations. Those exotic attempts to define the brevity of life and its beauty as "the curve of a planet" and a "tangent" seem strangely evocative. They all have in common their indefiniteness, the unknown of the "leap," the side-issue of the "tangent" and the inconsequence of that "stray shot." These lines acknowledge above all the transience of beauty, a lack of permanency that in no way invalidates its significance. To realize that all rivers flow, that all castles will crumble, that all women are mortal, is to comprehend a truism which yet has to be re-learned by every generation. One cannot "make a corner in life." "To corner" is the stock-exchange expression for attempting to gether together into one control all of a single commodity. It applies here to the attempt to bring together the material totality of life. Also the associations of such a

phrase ironically underline the folly of considering life in such materialist terms.

MacNeice was able to make this diagnosis for himself, but his aim was wide communication. Conceiving life in its consecutive beauties he could only be horrified at the indifference and ignorance of the mass of the population. His concern was naturally the stronger because he could not emulate the easy Fascist attitude which assumes that the masses are mindless sheep awaiting the dominating leader. MacNeice's beliefs were optimistic in that they assumed the dignity of man. Yet along with the ugliness of the contemporary scene his mind was continually affronted by the failure of men to live up to the capacity of their natures. Too often men seemed satisfied to wallow in an acceptance of the dreary world they had inherited. MacNeice feels both despair and anger at this knowledge. As he describes it,

> So take London today: the queues of itching minds
> Waiting for news that they do not want, for nostrums
> They only pretend to believe in; most of their living
> Is grinding mills that are not even their own.
> The pigeons are luckier. (Holes in the Sky,) p. 63.

The picture of those "itching" minds both purient

and unsatisfied is deliberately unattractive. Above all this is a description of purposelessness, the dreary round of meaningless stimulation taking the place of thoughtful living. Even their work has a pointlessness. Although it occupies them a large part of the day, it gives them no personal satisfaction and adds nothing to their own prosperity or well-being. When this day's labour is done they seek only the anodyne of escapist entertainment and self-forgetfulness. There is more sadness than condemnation in MacNeice's lines,

> The eight hour day but after that the solace
> Of films and football pools
> Or of the gossip or cuddle, the moments of self-glory
> Or self-indulgence, blinkers on the eyes of doubt
> The blue smoke rising and the brown lace sinking
> In the empty glass of stout. (Autumn Journal), p. 16.

Self-indulgence in sex or the minor gamble, the empty pleasures of the cigarette and the glass of beer all act as "blinkers on the eyes of doubt." Without the routine of minor pleasure to fill the emptiness of non-working hours questions would intrude, demanding why life must be without purpose and pleasure. MacNeice and his friends aimed at suggesting a more significant use of life than "the gossip or cuddle."

In the face of such massive indifference at this level, it is hardly surprising that he would

find some of his assertions less than efficacious. The desire to suggest reform met unexpected disinterest at the working-class level. Many reformers have discovered the disconcerting fact that one cannot always count upon the support of those for whom the reform is designed; habit and indifference prove too strong. The poet saw that in many cases their success was nominal.

> At times we are doctrinaire, at times we are frivolous
> Plastering over the cracks, a gesture making good,
> But the strength of us does not comes out in us.
> (Poems), p 33.

There is pessimism for he sees their efforts as only gestures and often even frivolous ones, which only conceal the threatening disintegration beneath the surface of this society. But MacNeice is not really pessimistic. If he experiences disappointment he is never cynical; he never loses sight of the true aim. It is his profound belief in the nobility of mankind that reassures him that something can be salvaged from this squalor and ignorance. MacNeice's deep confidence is more positive than Spender's forgiving compassion, more human than Auden's cool dissection and at the end of his poem entitled Plurality, MacNeice puts forward a personal credo as moving and honest as any lines written in this decade.

It is the finest exposition of the rationalist position of the humanist faith. He believes that "If man is a mere mirror of God, the gods collapse." Man exists only in "striving towards perfection."

> Man is man because he might have been a beast
> And is not what he was and feels himself increased,
> Man is man in as much as he is not god and yet
> Hankers to see and touch the pantheon and forget
> The means within the end and man is truly man
> In that he would transcend and flout the human span:
>
> A species become rich by seeing things as wrong
> And patching them, to which I am proud that I belong.
> Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
> By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
> Raising a frail scaffold in the never-ending flux,
> Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux
> And so he must continue, raiding the abyss
> With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,
> Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick
> Ego and the broken past and the block that goes too quick,
> Conscious of waste of labour, conscious of spite and hate,
> Of dissension with his neighbour, of beggars at the gate,
> But conscious also of love and the joy of things and the power
> Of going beyond and above the limits of the lagging hour,
> Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death's in-veigling touch,
> Not completely conscious but partly-and that is much.
> (Plant and Phantom), pp. 79-80.

This is one of the most powerful and heroic declarations of faith in man that I know. At first the long twelve syllable line stumbles a little awkwardly, the short, rather repetitive phrases fail to slide tidily

into the rhythmic structure, but soon the theme takes hold and the lines end with a sinewy and powerful rhetoric. The poet's faith is centered in man; man as man, not as an animal or a divine soul pace psychologists and theologians. Man is not god and yet he aspires to the status of god, refusing to accept the limitations of his nature, seeking always to "transcend and flout the human span." Always the stress is on achievement without which man "might have been a beast." Both the decision and the achievement belong to man who seeks always an unobtainable perfection and it is partially achieved by "patching"; a word that avoids any suggestion of remaking the world to man's better convenience, but rather shows the sane, pragmatic approach of a rational being. Divided between "lovely hopes" and the omnipresent "bad dreams" he struggles against an alien and often threatening universe. The struggle is the one thing that is everlasting, the fight against the flux, seeking to establish a brief assurance in spite of "aching bone" and the certainty that things are "amiss." The next lines seem the core of this poem, the rhythm develops a taut lilt and the meaning exhibits that complexity of compression which marks the

most significant poetry.

> Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick Ego and the broken past and the clock that goes too quick.

These flat, blunt words recall Hamlet's similar tragic analysis, "The pangs of despised love, the law's delay." There is the same grappling with the essential tragedy of man's existence. Man faces the flux conscious of the guilt for his failure and incompetence, ashamed of the past, and fearful that the end will come before he can redeem his impotence by further patching. But there are other experiences that conflict with this despair. There is love to counter the "dissension with his neighbour." There is joy in the moments of achievement when successful man feels the wonder of briefly "going beyond and above the limits." There is the sense of beauty and fertility implied in the word "sunlight." These lines are clearly not tragic, they are profoundly optimistic, yet this optimism is in no way facile. There has been an honesty in the tragic analysis; now comes the confident assertion of the true liberal who sees glory in man's search for an unattainable perfection. There is a final ironic twist of triumph. Man is "not completely conscious." Admit that fact, let the sociologists, the psychologists and the

theologians bemoan the fallibility and weakness of man, but MacNeice answers them with the understated but confident assurance that man is "partly" conscious and this is much. It is the recognition of just what glory that "partly" can incorporate that is the triumph of MacNeice's belief. It stresses the positive greatness of man's potential the more powerfully because it so openly admits the limitations. The poet here makes one join gladly in his assertion that man is a species "to which I am proud that I belong."

MacNeice knows too that such an optimistic view of man must be the basis for a valid belief in the possibility of social change, otherwise the attempt to promote social justice can only be the merest palliative. Only with such hope can men answer the crude attacks of those who assume the inevitability of man's failure without the omniscient leader or some supra-human guidance. MacNeice is one of this idealistic group and he points out the strength of the beliefs he holds.

> These are the people who know in their bones the answer
> To the statesman's quiz and the false reformers' crude
> Alternatives and ultimatums. These have eyes
> And can see each other's goodness do not need salvation
> By whip, brochure sterilization or drugs

> Being incurably human, these are the catalytics
> To break the inhuman into humanity; these are
> The voices whose words, whether in code or in clear,
> Are to the point and can be received apart from
> The buzz of jargon. (Collected Poems), p 276.

This is a plea for human love more rational and just as intense as Auden's famous "We must love one another or die." MacNeice sets the instinctive goodness of intelligent men against all the "crude alternatives" presented by the self-appointed redeemers. Enlightened men can find their own salvation without the whip of the secret police, the brochures of the religious cranks, and the politicians or the drugs of the brave new world scientists. Their importance, however, is not in their own solution, but that they are catalysts, able to strengthen and carry to others their human conviction. Their words (clearly MacNeice is now thinking of the poets of his time) stand apart from "the buzz of jargon" which afflicts every ear. Their words are clear and honest and they are as fine and relevent as they were in the nineteen thirties, because our humanity is more wantonly abused now than MacNeice at his most pessimistic could have conceived.

MacNeice saw clearly that the greatest threat in his time was the dehumanisation of man. To him uniformity and the denial of man's spirit was a greater threat than the temporary chaos of the economic failure

of these years. In one of MacNeice's most famous poems, Prayer Before Birth, he explores the yearnings of the human soul for liberation and self-fulfillment. He speaks through the thoughts of an unborn infant. The child understands the nature of the world into which he is going to be born, and already he perceives the need for consolation.

> I am not yet born, console me.
> I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
> with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies
> lure me
> on black racks rack me, in blood baths roll me.
> (Springboard), p.13.

The threats are the same as those in the previous poem, violations of the human soul by drugs, lies or violence by scientists, propagandists and secret police. Here there is less assurance, rather an anxious appeal for consolation. There is also the knowledge of his inescapable guilt, a guilt that is certain without his own volition:

> I am not yet born; forgive me
> For the sins that in me the world shall commit.

The world he faces is an oppressive one in which all the things in it, and all the other people, seem aimed only at destroying that single spark which is the essential of life, and yet will set him apart from the conforming and satisfied mass.

> I am not yet born; rehearse me
> In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
> old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me,
> mountains frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the
> white waves call me to folly and the desert calls
> me to doom and the beggar refuses
> my gift and my children curse me.
> (Springboard), p. 13.

Even the world and the elements implied by "waves" and the "desert" are antagonistic. Those who most need the idealism which he perceives, who are "beggars" for a life of greater significance, they will reject the truth which he offers them, scorning the solution he has formulated. With pessimistic prescience he also knows the next generation will also reject him. MacNeice may be recalling his own rejection of his family background or simply observing the common swing of the pendulum between generations. He could not have been more accurate as we observe the new conservatism and orthodoxy of youth which rejects out of hand the old-fashioned idealism of MacNeice's generation in favor of more positive and pragmatic dogmas. Again the unborn child begs to escape from those who believe human beings are more or less than man. Those who consider man an animal to be led or exploited, and those who believe themselves divinely inspired are both fatal threats.

> I am not yet born; O hear me,
> Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he
> is God come near me.

The horror and fear is strong, and it is above all caused by the possibility that these powerful forces can reduce him to their own empty condition. The last verse develops a rhetoric which, with confident power, exposes the constant dangers:

> I am not yet born; O fill me
> With strength against those who would freeze my
> humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal
> automaton,
> would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
> one face, a thing, and against all those
> who would dissipate my entirety, would
> blow me like thistle down hither and
> thither or hither and thither
> like water held in the
> hands would spill me.
> (Springboard), p. 14.

> Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill
> me.
> Otherwise kill me.

This is an appeal for strength to resist the multiple pressures of the society into which he will be born. There is only one danger but it shows itself in several guises: it is the danger that he may lose humanity and identity. He fears above all the threat that he may become an automaton; a single measureable quantity in the social sciences, a statistic to the state, a hand to the employer, "a cog in a machine," anything but a man. The "freeze" is set against the common descriptions of humanity as warm with humane affection. There is further realization that this danger to

himself is equally a danger to all others for the automaton is "lethal." Take away the human spirit and a monster is created devoid of the qualities that attempt to control the innate destructiveness and savagery of man. This monster is non-human, that is why MacNeice describes it as "a thing with one face." This phrase conjures up the memory of the set, empty expressions of those rows of cold, undifferentiated faces under the steel helmets of men who have only one face; the compassionless unmoving expression of blind obedience to a monolithic state. They have been drilled to such expressionless automata that even killing can be performed without anger, and without compassion. The tension seems slightly dissipated by the next two images. They both suggest inconsequent loss, the dispersal of thistledown and the trickling of water, but they seem to add little to the positive passion of the earlier lines and all those hithers and thithers seem to suggest a certain groping. But the last lines reiterate the essential theme and sum up the assertion made by this poem. He chooses to die rather than be the unfeeling stone to which so many aspects of contemporary life threaten to reduce him. The ending appears a little blunt in spite of the obvious passion of the last line, but the important

thing about this poem is the degree to which it is a positive statement. The fears, so accurately delineated, become warnings and the implications allow one to see very clearly the reverse virtues that need constant assertion in the face of assault.

His horror in this poem has appeared to be an emotional one, but MacNeice is fundamentally an intellectual and he perceives the obligation of those who see the truths to proclaim them to an apathetic population. They too accept a monotonous round of misleading pretension; of gourmet living and etiolated scholarship. The are prepared

> to stand in queues
> For entertainment, and to work at desks
> To browse round the counters of dead books, to pore
> On picture catalogues and Soho menus
> To preen ourselves and the reinterpretation
> Of the words of obsolete interpreters,
> Collate, delete, their faded lives like texts.
> (Earth Compels), p. 33.

He also sees that it is often the intellectuals who fail to maintain the validity of truth, preferring the pose of indifference and disinterest at the disintegration around them. Angrily he points to the contemporary scene:

> Here where tourist values are the only
> Values, where we pretend
> That eating and drinking are more important than
> thinking

> The looking at things than action and a casual friend
> Than a collegue and that work is a dull convenience
> Endured to provide
> Money to be spent on amusement.
> (Autumn Journal), p. 87.

There is little imagery in these lines, but how well does MacNeice typify the foibles and poses of the intellectuals: that strange world of cynicism and pretence that is a pose to conceal the knowledge of alienation from a world that casually rejects the values that the intellectual must admire. But the pose angers MacNeice because it is these intellectuals who should lead the faceless men, who in bored apathy become mere statistics.

> There are only too many who say, 'What difference does it make
> One way or the other?
> To turn the stream of history will take
> More than a by-election.' (Autumn Journal), p. 55.

"What difference does it make." These are the words that have always baffled the arguments of the reformers. The present day nuclear disarmament groups discover precisely the same reason for indifference. But MacNeice had a voice and a pen to beg that a choice be made in defense of much abused and ridiculed democracy. It is pointless to deny its cumbersome faults, but it is even more important to realize its virtues if its system is set against the totalitarian regimes that at this time were dominating Europe.

> Remembering that this crude and so-called obsolete
> Top-heavy, tedious parliamentary system
> Is our only ready weapon to defeat
> The legion's evils and the victor's axes.
> (Autumn Journal), p. 55.

I do not know whether the apparent pun in "axes" recalled the Hitler-Mussolini "axis" is intentional, nor whether "legions" has any specific Roman and therefore Italian reference; these are minor issues. Day Lewis' vague condemnation when he writes of fighting for "the bad against the worse" is here reduced to specific assertion. MacNeice was less impressed by the Communist solution than most of his contemporaries, seeing that Communism offered only a different dictatorship rather than a true solution. With a kind of cocktail party irony of tone he begs them consider,

> But before you proclaim the millenium, my dear,
> Consult the barometer--
> This poise is perfect but maintained
> For one day only. (Poems), p. 38.

This snide, bitchy comment might be remembered in the context of Day Lewis' embarrassing line, "Why do we seeing a Red feel small?"[8] For MacNeice the problem was a deeper one than mere dialectics. If he seemed to accept the inevitable fact that some measure of

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[8] C. Day Lewis, A Time To Dance, p. 58.

socialism was needed to overcome the misery he had witnessed in Birmingham and Glasgow during the years of unemployment, in such a poem as Prayer Before Birth and others similar in subject, he exposes his doubt that any social change can promise immediate relief from the pressures that destroy humanity.

During the latter part of the thirties the threats were obvious. Life appeared to be lived tensely against the imminent threat of explosion as if a time bomb were ticking away the days of their generation. Seeking an escape in human contact MacNeice appeals,

> If you were only here
> Among these rocks
> I should not feel the dull
> That taut and ticking fear
> That hides in all the clocks
> And creeps inside the skull. (Earth Compels,) p.12.

The Fascist dictatorships were increasing in power and defiance in Europe. The inevitable point of war was coming daily nearer and MacNeice was among the first to hear,

> The nightmare noise of the scythe upon the hone
> Time sharpening his blade among the high rocks
> alone. (Poems), p.103.

The strong vowels and the repeated "s" sound give a verbal onomatopoeic background to this image. The vision seems more intense and original than one would

consider possible with such a conventional figure as Time the Reaper. Somehow that vision of the lone figure and the calm preparation for killing makes the impact much fiercer than a memory of the night-shirted figure in New Year cartoons would give one to imagine. The impending violence is already near and death is imminent, and with a change of viewpoint MacNeice sees present actuality,

> The face that fate hangs as a figure head
> Above the truncheon or the nickelled death.
> (Poems), p 103.

The idea of death has been transposed from the allegorical figure remote in the rocks, to the "face" that is near enough to inflict it by beating or bullet. There is probably a more definite meaning. The association is with death at the hands of the Gestapo, because, besides the obvious reference to brutality and shooting, the "nickelled death" may be the skull emblem which was on the front of the caps of the secret police. In these two pairs of lines MacNeice has embraced the idea of death as both a general threat and an immediate danger. With despair he sees the politicians "arguing for peace while zero-hour approaches." In Postscript to Iceland he writes to W. H. Auden "who has felt the death wish too." The

rhyming couplet has a jaunty defiance,

> Still I drink your health before
> The gun butt raps upon the door. (Earth Compels), p 10.

Again in a mood far more resigned, he writes,

> Our freedom as free lances
> Advances towards its end;
> The earth compels, upon it
> Sonnets and birds descend;
> And soon my friend,
> We shall have no time for dances.
> (Earth Compels), p 63.

In another verse of this poem, The Sunlight on the Garden, he develops the same mood of approaching disaster with an image of intense visual beauty.

> The sunlight on the garden
> Hardens and grows cold,
> We cannot cage the minute
> Within its nets of gold,
> When all is told
> We cannot beg for pardon. (Earth compels), p 10.

The meaning here is incorporated in a description of intense accuracy. The long lines of the sun's rays are apparently static and the idea of "hardens" to stress the lack of change is carried forward into the word "cold." The hardening seems a kind of freezing as the sun's power is withdrawn. The hardened beams then remind him of bars, and the image is extended to a cage in which one tries to hold an animal that threatens to escape. Now it is time that is slipping away, and the image is extended once more. It is altered yet clearly connected visually to the patterns of the sun's beams. Now the cage has become a net,

its light strings shaped by the sun's rays and again suggesting the possibility of retaining time, even while the moving sun is indicating its transience. Then with an unexpected twist the idea is linked back to their own sense of guilt and doubt, and there is the painful assertion that "We cannot beg for pardon." The knowledge that they cannot be pardoned is the realization of their failure and their folly of their times. MacNeice makes the firm assertion of the truth that they have got to take their medicine.

> At this hour of the day it's no good saying
> Take away this cup
> Having helped to fill it ourselves it is only logic
> That now we should drink it up.
> (Autumn Journal), p 24.

The contrast between "take away this cup" which recalls the Passion and has associations with Christ's death, and the cheerful "drink it up" of a mother to a child over nasty medicine makes a contrast of extremes which suggests the mixture of historical pessimism and personal petulence that the poets must have felt at this time.

But Manchuria and Abyssinia were geographically remote and conscience was less affronted by the Rhineland occupation which broke a treaty rather than a

principle. It was Spain that brought the issues of the inter-war years into the clearest focus. MacNeice had visited Spain just before the war. In Eclogue from Iceland he recalls the scenes his tourist eye had witnessed. He describes how,

> This Easter I was in Spain before the Civil War
> Gobbling the trippers' treats, the local colour
> Storks on Avila, the coffee-coloured waters of Ronda
> The comedy of bootblacks in the cafes
> The legless beggars in the corridors of the trains
> Dominos on marble tables. (Letters from Iceland) (New York, 1937) p 126.

This is merely the surface observation of the tourist, and although he did notice "the scrawled hammer and sickle" he was there as a visitor and a writer at that, and to him at this time, "It was all copy, impenetrable surface, I did not look for the sneer beneath the surface."[9] But the impression was much less superficial than he pretends, and when he invokes the scene again in his Autumn Journal he demonstrates the impact that has been made.

> And I remember Spain
> At Easter ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin....
> With writings on the walls--
> Hammer and sickle, Boicot, Viva, Muerra.
> (Autumn Journal), p 26.

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9 Earth Compels, p. 31.

He remembers the signs of corruption and poverty on every side which were to forment the revolt. He saw the scene

> With slovenly soldiers, nuns
> And peeling posters from the last elections
> Promising bread or guns
> Or an amnesty or another
> Order or else the old
> Glory veneered and varnished
> As if veneer could hold
> The rotten guts and crumbled bones together
> And a vulture hung in the air.
> (Autumn Journal) p. 27.

MacNeice stresses two factors, the lack of order and the threat of violence. The deliberate contrast between bread and guns, the sarcastic weariness implied by "another order" suggest rather that MacNeice himself saw only confusion rather than sides being drawn up for battle. This impression is emphasized by the reference to "rotten guts and crumbled bones." It is obvious, if superficial, to point out the contrast between contemporary Spain and her sixteenth century glory. Although he is aware of the symbolism of that hovering vulture which will pick over the bones of war-ravaged Spain, he seems to ignore the implication of the threat. If he at the time saw only "varnish and veneer," he was going to find such a surface view unsatisfactory when the issues were made more clear.

But, as he reiterates, he was a tourist and was prepared to accept tourist values, a habit he earlier had roundly condemned in others. So he left Spain with no apparent commitment:

> And next day we took the boat
> For home, forgetting Spain, not realizing
> That Spain would soon denote
> Our grief, our exasperation,
> Not knowing that our blunt
> Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit
> Would find its frontier on the Spanish front
> Its body in a rag-tag army. (Autumn Journal) p 29.

In these lines MacNeice now indicates the true feeling about Spain that was held by so many idealists. Forgetting his previous tourist views he sees its new intense aymbolism. Spain will sharpen the "blunt ideals" of their vision of England. All the condemnations they made of England's lethargy and corruption were now focussed on the struggle there, where liberalism and justice seemed on trial. The frontier of the spirit, suggesting the limits of human advance, the dividing line against hostile foes, was drawn up in Spain. Along this frontier the International Brigade was to defend European liberalism. One notices now the calm intensity with which MacNeice writes of the issue. In Spain, he knows that the "ideals" are shocked by the Spanish revolt, the spirit is moved to consider action, the "body" intercedes to

translate the spirit's determination into fighting.

Later in his Autumn Journal he describes the fighting and praises the heroism that defended the Republic.

> For here and now the new valkyries ride
> The Spanish constellations
> As over the Plaza Cataluna
> Orion lolls on his side;
> Droning over from Majorca
> To maim or blind or kill
> The bearers of the living will,
> The stubborn heirs of freedom
> Whose matter-of-fact faith and courage shame
> Our niggling equivocations--
> We who play for safety,
> A safety only in name.
> Whereas these people contain truth, whatever
> Their nominal facade.
> Listen: a whirr, a challenge, an aubade--
> It is the cock crowing in Barcelona.
> (Autumn Journal) p 92.

The events are seen here at two levels not especially convincingly contrasted. There is the level of the battles of the gods, valkyries and constellations suggesting cosmic struggles, and there is the more prosaic level of that "matter-of-fact faith." The valkyries are German but the bombers are of course Italian. They fly from the island of Majorca, which had been exacted from France as part of the price for Mussolini's assistance. Somehow the rhetoric of the middle lines although flat seems successful though one instinctively begins by distrusting those journalist

phrases "the bearers of the living will" and "the stubborn heirs of freedom." Perhaps it is because MacNeice is so manifestly sincere that we almost accept these phrases at his own valuation of their quality. The short colloquial sentences may be effective simply because one might distrust a more conscious and successful rhetoric, and his spare lines express faithfully the idealism that attached to the Spanish Republican troops. The last two lines are compressed almost to the point of confusion. We are asked to listen to a whirr. Presumably this is the noise of the bombs or the bombers. These bombers are a challenge to all Europe since they represent the military expansion of Fascism. At the same time they represent a dawn because Spain symbolizes the beginning of what will become a wider fight against dictators, and optimistically this dawn may suggest the end of their dark powers. Or one might suggest simply that the new aubade of this age is the droning of the approaching bomber. This whirr also becomes a cock crowing. The symbolism of betrayal is commonplace, though no doubt the aubade and dawn elements are continued too. I have struggled with this verse because it is an important assertion of MacNeice's attitude to Spain

which links his feelings clearly to the ideas of the other three poets, and yet I am aware that somehow the whole thing just does not quite come off. There is a deadness about it that no moral justification can quite revive.

Later in Autumn Journal he again describes Spain during the war concentrating, on Barcelona which, even more than Madrid, seemed to epitomize the heroism of the Spanish struggle.

> The shops are empty and in Barceloneta the eye-
> Sockets of the houses are empty.
> But still they manage to laugh
> Though they have no eggs, no fish, no fruit, no tobacco, no butter
> Though they live upon lentils and sleep in the Metro,
> Though the old order is gone and the golden calf
> Of Catalan industry shattered;
> The human values remain, purged in the fire,
> And it appears that every man's desire
> Is life rather than victuals ....
> Here at least the soul has found its voice
> Though not indeed by choice;
> The cost was heavy. (Autumn Journal), pp.89-90.

Again one can only observe that somehow this poem never gets off the ground. The indifference of the rhythm and the awkward flatness of the tone lend a heaviness to what is obviously an attempt at strained sincerity. It is true that the long poem, Autumn Journal, in which most of MacNeice's comments on Spain appear, is a journal and therefore one has to expect a discursive, colloquial, even pedestrian style, but one also has the right to expect poetry. What is a reader to

make of that absurd shopping-list of "victuals" in the middle lines? Surely that cannot add any intensity to the suffering. Even in the last three lines with their vital call that "the soul has found its voice," there is a glumness and a rhythmic deadness. That "indeed" is as pompous as some of the worst 1914 war poetry.

Occasionally lines are rather more successful. MacNeice repeats the image of the cock crowing again, with greater firmness in the association:

> And in the pauses of destruction
> The cocks in the centre of the town crow.
> The cocks crow in Barcelona
> Where the clocks are few to strike the hour;
> Is it the heart's reville or the sour
> Reproach of Simon Peter?
> (Autumn Journal), p 90.

It seems to me that the lack of clocks, unless it has some inexplicable symbolism, is merely a snippet of information. But the last two lines ask the question that was only implied in the previous usage. It may represent the same awareness of betrayal that caused Peter such agony, or it may be the clarion call to rouse the democracies to action. But no answer is offered. Rather hastily MacNeice changes the subject, finding this, "Time for resolutions, for stock-taking." Yet if his approach seems less incisive than that of his contemporaries, he saw the issues with sharp accuracy.

Down in Europe Seville fell,
Nations germinating hell. (Poems), p 113.

The word "germinating" is significant here, for besides its ironically accidental hint of "German" it asserts that Spain is a beginning. This war is not the fruition of the European horror but a seed, the cause of world catastrophe.

In contrast to the other poets whose work I have considered MacNeice wrote little about Spain, and his concern though genuine appears a little pre-occupied. There seems no obvious explanation for this fact, but it did at least permit MacNeice a more balanced perspective as he viewed subsequent European events. By avoiding an emotional over-inflation of the issues he could respond to those anxious months of crisis in 1938 and 1939 with less sense of indifference, and with the same integrity that he had demonstrated when observing the scene in England in the previous few years.

In 1938 during those strained summer months before the Munich agreement he saw the hectic, haphazard war preparations, of the "blackout practice and A. R. P., the newspaper boys driving a roaring business." Beneath this excitement and apparent determination he also saw the subterfuge, the anxious

yearning for peace at any price, the desire to "save my skin and damn my conscience." This knowledge leads to the following sarcastic lines:

> And negotiation wins,
> If you can call it winning,
> And here we are--just as before--safe in our skins;
> Glory to God for Munich.
> And stocks go up and wrecks
> Are salved and politicians' reputations
> Go up like Jack-on-the-Beanstalk; only the Czechs
> Go down without fighting. (Autumn Journal), p 36.

Many people asked nothing more of the Munich conference than that it leave them "just as before, safe," rather than bombed into oblivion, but as MacNeice uses the phrase there is a heavy sarcasm directed at those who have chosen such temporary convenience rather than the path of moral responsibility. This tone is doubly clear from the mock-pious "Glory to God." Once the decision is made to jettison the Czechs all appears satisfactory, stocks and reputations go up. The "salved" seems to be an abbreviated form of "salvaged" but includes the meaning of applying healing balm which suggests the cuts and grazes that the politicians have suffered are only skin deep. There is also the neat association with the fairy story. Jack's snatching of the golden goose from under the giant's very nose is compared with Chamberlain's quick snatching of peace from the dictators.

Unfortunately when these fast growing reputations were cut down the giant did not obligingly fall with them. The sarcastic twist at the end is typical of MacNeice. After the pretense at shallow optimism he turns with the bitter comment that "only the Czechs go down."

Later with less sarcasm and more balanced concern, he tries to investigate his own emotions as he experiences that overwhelming sense of relief at the unexpected escape from what appeared to be the inevitable debacle.

> Now we are back to normal, now the mind is
> Back to the even tenor of the usual day
> Skidding no longer across the uneasy camber
> Of the nightmare way.
> We are safe though others have crashed the railings
> Over the river ravine; their wheel tracks carve the bank
> But after the event all we can do is argue
> And count the widening ripples where they sank.
> (Autumn Journal) p 37.

The whole emotion is reduced to the violent road accident; this metaphor is developed throughout these lines. The potential violence of the nightmare skid evaporates to the safe curiosity in the face of others' disaster. There has to be a comfortable sense of relief that they at least have avoided the crash over the railings along the ravine where danger was always near. The crash is over, the Czechs are

destroyed but for those who witnessed their destruction from the safety of England there remains only argument; the vehement discussion of what might have been, and finally the rather detached observation of the scene. The "widening ripples" indicate the continuing and spreading impact of this crash on European events.

But the important realization that Munich brought to MacNeice was an understanding which many of his contemporaries had shown during the Spanish fighting, that at some point the decision to take military action was necessary. Until the Spanish war this generation of intellectuals had generally been rather cynically pacifist. The memories of the follies of the trench campaigns of the previous war were fresh; so was the evidence of the failure of that costly war to achieve anything. The obvious lies about "the war to end war," and the cynical failure to create "the land fit for heroes to live in," had created a mood of indifference and the determination not to be sold again on such lies. MacNeice now saw the necessity of a change of heart. In the following lines he describes his new belief and the awkwardness of the rhyme seems to underline the strain in

finding this new position.

> And we who have been brought up to think of
> "Gallant Belgium"
> As so much blague
> Are now preparing again to essay good through evil
> For the sake of Prague. (Autumn Journal), p 32.

The change of view that led them after despising the myth of "gallant Belgium" to consider fighting again, this time for "gallant Prague," is part of an intellectual revolution which these poets both experienced and initiated. But that the decision is still a little hesitant is indicated by the use of "preparing" and "essay," neither of them very decisive or certain. There is still the understanding of the wickedness of war; memories are not that short, and the doubts include the speculation that even in such a cause the chances of achieving "good through evil" are remote and incalculable.

Other issues made calls upon his compassion. He saw the refugees now streaming out of Europe and his poem Refugees has none of the brash music-hall jingle of Auden's poem on the same subject with its syncopated reiteration of "But they're not German Jews my dear." In MacNeice's poem the refugees have reached the promised security of America. He sees them huddled on the deck of the liner approaching New York.

With prune-dark eyes, thick lips, jostling each
other
These, disinterred from Europe, throng the deck
To watch their hope heave up in steel and concrete
Powerful but delicate as a swan's neck,

Thinking, each of them, the worst is over
And we do not want any more to be prominent or
rich,
Only to be ourselves, to be unmolested
And make ends meet--an ideal surely which

Here if anywhere is feasible.
(Plant and Phantom), p 64.

Escape is from the tomb that is Europe, as is clear from the grim "disinterred" but the exchange of this death for another hope is fraught with new difficulties. Their new hopes must be represented in purely material terms in the steel and concrete of docks and Manhattan skyscrapers. There is a warning in the observation that is more than vivid description. The hopes, like the buildings, are powerful but also delicate and may not offer the security they seek. They seek only one boon, to be unacknowledged, to forget the racial identification that has destroyed their lives in their own countries. America, the land that has absorbed so much despair and refection, surely can make this modest yearning feasible. But America is a means to a new life, not the ready-made solution for which they hope. They must wait:

> Till something or other turns up. Something-or-
> other
> Becomes an expected angel from the sky;
> But do not trust the sky, the blue that looks
> so candid
> Is non-committal, frigid as a harlot's eye.
>
> Gangways--the handclasp of the land. The resurrected,
> The brisk or resigned Lazaruses, who want
> Another chance, go trooping ashore, But chances
> Are dubious. Fate is stingy, recalcitrant,
> And officialdom greets them blankly.
> (Plant and Phantom), p. 65.

Their hope is vague; it can only be that "something or other turns up." In the repetition of this phrase with the capital letters, the hope for some practical temporal assistance becomes more remote and exists only as the most nebulous desire for some undefined deity to offer a little concern. This hope is expressly denied. The sky is compared to the harlot outwardly so bright and attractive and welcoming, but inside cold and grasping, demanding harsh terms for every favor. The sky and God are non-committal at a time when so much suffering demands moral commitment. The hint of disinterred is continued in those resurrected "Lazaruses" but the welcome to these liberated corpses is dubious and stingy, and the longed for angel seems to be the grudging customs official who paws over their luggage, apparently resentful that it is "foreign-looking."

On this note the poem rather abruptly and unsatisfyingly ends. MacNeice, being unable to do more than record his sympathy avoids the glib extremes of either hope or despair. That "non-committal" sky remains just that and "stingy" fate does not deny all possibility of some paucity of redemption. MacNeice's concern has not precluded the most rigorous detachment.

When war was declared in 1939, none of the mature and major poets I am considering made much attempt to translate the significance of this event into their poetry. MacNeice wrote a few poems, only two of which I find at all successful. In several poems written at this time he falls back into the stupid jingle that was such a tediously overworked trick of this time. What can one say about verses like these, not scribbled on the back of a menu, but solemnly recorded in the Collected Poems of a considerable writer.

> I'm only a wartime working girl
> The machine shop makes me deaf
> I have no prospects after the war
> And my young man is in the R. A. F.
> (Springboard,) p 27.

Even the simple jiggling rhythm breaks down in the last line. Or consider the pointlessness of the stupid parody sung to the old children's tune, "Nuts in May."

> May came up with Very lights,
> May came up with duty,
> May came up with a bouncing cheque,
> An acid drop and a bandage. (Springboard), p 31.

In a more conventional vein, but with greater success, MacNeice describes the movement of the convoy in firm, if slightly flat, description. The poem is called Convoy.

> Together, keeping in line, slow as if hypnotized
> Across the blackboard sea in sombre echelon
> The food ships draw their wakes. No Euclid could have devised
> Neater means to a more essential end--
> Unless the chalk breaks off, the convoy is surprised. (Springboard), p 24.

The point of this scene is made by combining the actual ships with the same convoy drawn on the maps of the naval shore headquarters. The two elements run parallel meeting in the description of blackboard sea, which besides its appropriateness to the flat appearance and gray-black color of the North Atlantic, describes the chart on which the convoy's progress is plotted. Also there is the subsidiary memory of the classroom maths of MacNeice's boyhood recalled by the triangular shape of the widening ship's wash. The break off has the same double reference. The white wake of the ship abruptly ceases, and on the H. Q. board the chalk line that marks the ship's progress is terminated. The dual

levels of this idea mesh together linking event and planning in a clever if contrived manner.

In a similar manner MacNeice develops a single image to describe the fires caused by the bombing of London.

> When our brother Fire was having his dog's day
> Jumping the London streets with millions of tin cans
> Clanking at his tail, we heard some shadows say
> "Give the dog a bone"---and so we gave him ours;
> Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away
> The beams of human life, the tops of topless towers. (Springboard), p 18.

These lines from Brother Fire seem considerably less effective, from the phony Franciscan title onwards. The main reason for the whole metaphor seems to be a development from the casual use of the idiom "dog's day." Slavering and crunching can apply to both the burning and the dog gnawing, but I do not think that the comparison adds much elucidation to the description. The paradoxical "tops of topless towers" may echo Marlowe but it seems only to add to the lack of precision.

More successful are two poems Bottleneck and The Conscript which are both more personal. The first concerns the intellectual who faces that dilemma peculiar to his nature, that action can only be undertaken if the most rigorous theoretical conditions

are met. His principles are clear.

> Never to fight unless from a pure motive
> And for a clear end was his unwritten rule
> Who had been in books and visions to a progressive school
> And dreamt of barricades, yet being observant
> Knew that that was not the way things are:
> This man would never make a soldier or a servant.
> (Springboard), p. 28.

Here is the apex of impractical idealism for this age, the desire for a "pure motive" that reduces the choices to the simplicity of black and white. Not for this arrogant intellect Day Lewis' sad but more honest understanding that it is often necessary to "defend the bad against the worse." Here is the mind of the idealistic revolutionary whose visions are of "barricades" with their dated but optimistic associations of nineteenth century spontaneous risings. Such foolish ideals can have no place in the fighting now. Yet this intellectual discovery is not a happy one. The direct ardor, that the intellectual is often too self-conscious to feel, seems a desirable simplicity, to be envied even while it is superiorly despised. MacNeice watches this man at the harbor.

> When I saw him last, carving the longshore mist
> With an ascetic profile, he was standing
> Watching the troopship leave, he did not speak
> But from his eyes there peered a furtive, footsore envy
> Of those who sailed away to make an opposed landing--
> So calm because so young, so lethal because so meek.
> (Springboard), p. 28.

The intellectual has refused such service but his emotion is "a furtive, footsore envy." That the envy must be furtive is clear; such unthinking sacrifice cannot be rationally accepted, but that "footsore" brings a number of unusual associations. The envy is not something fresh and open, it is a grubby tired thing because the emotion is resented and shameful. The journey to this feeling of envy is reached only after a tedious struggle along the route assailed by every intellectual argument that can be thrown against its irrational appeal. Then there are the paradoxes of the last line in which the contrast is made between the intellectual who is neither young nor meek, and will never share this dedication of service. MacNeice continues to meditate on this figure:

> Where he is now I could not say; he will,
> The odds are, always be non-combatant
> Being too violent in his soul to kill
> Anyone but himself, yet in his mind
> A crowd of odd components mutter and press
> For compromise with fact, longing to be combined
> Into a working whole but cannot jostle through
> The permanent bottleneck of his highmindedness.
> (Springboard), p 28.

Again there is the paradox. The young soldiers were "lethal because so meek," the intellectual is "too violent...to kill." His ruthlessness is purely a mental decision as different from actual action as

the world is from his vision. He knows that his view of the world is "hot the way things are," and he seeks an impossible synthesis of his ideals and reality. His mind is full of "odd components" which can never form a machine that will allow the intellectual to act in practical ways. The "mutter and press" suggest the anxious turmoil in the mind, the jostling to form a shape that will fit "through the permanent bottle-neck." The phrase (which was virtually a war-time joke) is half humorous, pointing ironically at his failure. The awkward rhythm, suggesting the jostling struggle, reinforces this feeling. The tone is a little more difficult to analyze. There is some mockery at the incapacity, some sadness and exasperation, but no single emotion. MacNeice, was enough of an intellectual himself to know that this rather absurd figure was one part of his own sensibility. This analysis becomes also an explanation, for many of his contemporaries had fallen into this trapped pose.

With greater sympathy MacNeice describes the young conscript, his youth setting so oddly against his present training. He speculates on the importance that falls onto such a youth.

> Being so young he feels the weight of history
> Like clay around his boots, he would, if he could, fly
> In search of a future like a sycamore seed
> But is prevented by his own Necessity,
> His own yet alien, which, whatever he may plead,
> To every question gives the same reply.
> (Springboard), p 30.

The effect of historical event which has called him to this training weighs upon the young man. He dreams of escaping to the future, and it is clear that this implies both immediate escape into a world more attractive than this present one of military training, and to a future which is freed from the pressures of history. He seeks a life that is not subjected to the foolish decisions of past treaties which this generation are forced to try to rectify. But the simile for this leap into the future is the "sycamore seed" and the implication is clear; if he can escape from the weight of this history he might plant some productive hope. This would develop into a more positive thing than the destruction for which he is now preparing. But the necessity which brings him to this position is not only the "alien" pressure of history but his own. This means more than that he is a conscript, rather that he must accept the whole inheritance of event that falls on everyone. To hope to begin with a clean slate of history is even more

foolish than the intellectual's desire for the "pure motive." For the conscript there is only one answer whatever the question, and this, in spite of his pleading, demands the answer of action, reluctant and on sufferance as it might be. This theme is reiterated in the next two stanzas.

> Choiceless therefore, driven from pillar to post,
> Expiating his pedigree, fulfilling
> An oracle whose returns grow less and less,
> Bandied from camp to camp to practice killing
> He fails even so at times to remain engrossed
> And is aware, at times, of life's largesse.
>
> From camp to camp, from Eocene to chalk,
> He lives a paradox, lives in a groove
> That runs dead straight to an ordained disaster
> So that in two dimensions he must move
> Like an automaton, yet his inward stalk
> Vertically aspires and makes him his own master.
> (Springboard), p 30.

Although he is choiceless, his duty is also his own necessity, and he must expiate his inheritance of history fulfilling the doom prognosticated by the oracles; perhaps the Casandra-like calls of the poets of the inter-war era. Now the paradox of the first stanza, the equal pull of history and future, is made explicit. The youth who ought to be allowed hopes of the future, his "sycamore seed," is like an "inward stalk which vertically aspires." Yet such hopes are denied by the present fact and "stalk" and "seed" with their suggestion of a life force are

matched by the training that is making him an automaton. His present route is clearly mapped; a dead straight groove to disaster, a disaster that will reject or destroy all the hopes of "sycamore" fruition. The conscript lives in two times and two dimensions. One insists that he can only be present automaton, the other encourages the idea that he might be "his own master." MacNeice sums up this painful contrast that coexists in the life of this youth.

> Hence, though on the flat his life has no
> Promise of diminishing returns,
> By feeling down and upwards he can divine
> That dignity which far above him burns
> In stars that yet are his and which below
> Stands rooted like a dolmen in his spine.
> (Springboard), p 30.

Although rooted by the clay around his boots he can divine (the dual meaning here is very obvious) a dignity which should be his; symbolized by the untouchable eternity of the stars. "Burns" must combine the sparkle of the star with the intensity of the limitless human yearning which they here represent. This humanity is too strong for drill and training to destroy, too powerful for the temporary groove to deny. It is rooted within him and all men. "Dolmen" is a curious word, because although it means a pile of stones which would suggest longlasting strength, it usually marks a tomb, and one is left with this hint

in the last line, that although the general statement is optimistic, for the individual this historical disaster may bring death.

In this way MacNeice debated the human issues that made the war such a disaster in its effects on any idealistic philosophy. After the war he looked back on his memories with the same sense of malaise and concern. The years have slid by leaving a kind of gap between the clear ideals of the thirties and the muddied concern of the post-war world. He hesitates, failing to find the certainty of vision that will extract order from the multiple events. In a poem called Newsreel he expresses this failure to induce coherence.

> Since Munich, what? A tangle of black film
> Squirming like bait upon the floor of my mind
> And scissors clicking daily. I am inclined
> To pick these pictures now but will hold back
> Till memory has elicited from this blind
> Drama its threads of vision, the intrusions
> Of value upon fact. (Springboard), p 53.

The almost incidental comparison between the length of film and the wriggling of worms sticks in the memory, but this is not the important aspect. One notes the determination to wait to allow the too great commitment of this age to break before its experience will be distilled into poetry. For some poets this

lapse is essential to create the detachment out of which poetry constructs order. But commitment and immediacy were always the essence of the writing of the poets I am considering. Now at this crucial political moment, the poet rather seeks withdrawal; to step out of the stream of events. This decision that might be unimportant or admirable in another poet is a conscious denial of the whole line of development in the mouth of MacNeice. He did not wait while memory supplied the pattern of the economic failure of the previous decade. Now the issues appear more complex, the certainty of the poet weakens and retreats along a groove of history from which he is no longer able to escape.

Even more unexpectedly and definitely he appears to reject the experience of the war. In a poem with the revealingly explanatory title Hiatus he writes:

> The years that did not count--Civilians in the towns
> Remained at the same age as in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine,
> Saying last year, meaning the last of peace;
> Yet eyes began to pucker, mouth to crease,
> The hiatus was too packed with fears and frowns,
> The would-be absent heart came forth a magnetic mine.
> (Holes in the Sky), p 15

I do not think this is significant poetry in itself, and the last line seems merely confusing, in spite of the apparent suggestiveness of the symbolism. The important thing is rather the attitude which finds the

war as "the years that did not count." MacNeice apparently finds them a "hiatus" in his life. The last verse is more important and equally revealing.

> Yes, we wake stiff and older; especially when
> The schoolboys of the thirties reappear,
> Fledged in the void, indubitably men,
> Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount
> And found some dark and tentative things made clear,
> Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count. (Holes in the Sky), p 15.

After the intervening lines of examination the repetition of the phrase "the years that did not count" that brackets this poem has become increasingly bitter. The boys who were scarcely old enough to understand the historical inevitability of this war were called upon to fight it and became men by doing so. The "Mount" is obviously linked with Christ's time of trial, but this one is an "Unholy Mount" of war. While searching within themselves there, the young soldiers found a clarity where previously issues had been "dark". Perhaps this suggests the result of the more confident action that MacNeice's generation had avoided in their search for the "pure motive." At the same time the war with its complexity of moral decision and suffering darkened much of their clear and certain faith. This comprehension and development were the product in youth, of "the years

that did not count."

It seems as if this consideration of the attitude of a new generation and the discovery that his contemporaries were no longer the eager vanguard of a new revolution, caused MacNeice to look back over the attempts he had made during the previous decade with a sense of defeat. I have already suggested the very dramatic way in which Day Lewis criticised and all but repudiated the attitudes of his younger years. MacNeice's reaction is similar though less iconoclastic. His response is more of reproof and anxious explanation than condemnation. Nevertheless it is important to see in his work at this time a similar disappointment and dismay at the failure of the idealism he had earlier denied himself so much to embrace. From attacking others he turns to attack himself. During the thirties his theme had been the blame of others and the suffering of the people; now the theme is his own failure and incompetence. His criticism is aimed at both his ideas and his writing, and if the result is less savagely denunciatory than Day Lewis' similar verse, it is none the less clear and firm.

Firstly he attempts to express the difficulty

of the communication he is attempting.

> How, yes how! To achieve in a world of flux
> and bonfires
> Something of art's coherence, in a world of
> wind and hinges
> An even approximate poise in a world of beds and
> hunger
> A fullness more than feeding a sieve.
> (Plant and Phantom), p 87.

Here is an assertion of the difficulty of detachment in a world of flux, and a world of appetites for sex or food. Whether the bonfires are those of war which destroys the traditions on which poetry survives or refer to the actual bookburning and the political destruction of poetry is not certain. After a half lifetime of poetry aimed as he himself put it "raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux," and thirty years of living through the complex and savage history of the inter-war years, MacNeice begins to bemoan the difficulty of maintaining poetic poise. It is true that a desire to escape urban pressure sent him on his voyage to Iceland which I discussed earlier, but that was fifteen years before and now the concern seems fresh and potent.

In the Elegy For Minor Poets he is discussing a broader aspect of literary history, poets whose "books are library flotsam/ some of their names--not all--we learned at school." The poem was apparently written

towards the end of the war. The affectionate, slightly whimsical tone suddenly gives place in the fifth verse to a highly suggestive generalization which must, calculatedly or not, be applicable to many of his contemporaries, perhaps to himself. He is describing those poets

> Who were too carefree or careful, who were too many
> Though were always few and alone, who went the pace
> But ran in circles, who were lamed by fashion,
> Who lived in the wrong time or the wrong place,
> Who might have caught fire had only a spark occurred,
> Who knew all the words but failed to achieve the Word. (Holes in the Sky), p 42.

If one provisionally assumes that this has some personal reference, one can see exactly the relevence of the lines to the problems faced by Spender, Day Lewis and MacNeice himself. "Lamed by fashion" is a pertinent criticism of much of the trivial experiments into which they were lured before finding their own true voices. Spain must have been considered a spark, and yet the fire was fitful and finally petered out without causing any poetic conflagration in the years immediately afterwards. Their technical skill was profound. The words that Auden used were an unmatchable fount of vocabulary and yet "the Word" was not in them, except in sudden lines or verses where the rich authentic power of poetry is seen to blaze.

The self-doubt appears justified to a degree and MacNeice turns from poetic criticism to self-criticism, seeming to find the root of failure in his own nature as Day Lewis did. He had already felt some sense of disaffection before the war:

> Now I must make amends...
> I have loved defeat and sloth,
> The tawdry halo of the idle martyr;
> I have thrown away the roots of will and conscience,
> Now I must look for both, ...
> Soon or late the delights of self pity must pall
> And the fun of cursing the wicked
> World into which we were born.
> (Autumn Journal), p 91.

This self-criticism is a very common mood obviously, and the vices of sloth and the failure to act are the usual ones to which an intellectual succumbs. But the rather strange line about the "fun of curing the wicked world" pokes ridicule at many of the challenges to the social organization that were written during the thirties. Many poems are belittled by the suggestion that they were the result of either self-pity or fun and MacNeice's mood stretches back across his own works ridiculing their legitimate and even noble indignation.

In 1953 MacNeice published a volume called Autumn Sequel, as a sequel to his Autumn Journal of fifteen years before. It is a rather long, discursive poem which seems to lack the moments of intensity

and illumination that marked the original diary. Although some sections appeared in magazines it was primarily conceived for a radio reading.

In this poem, the themes of disconsolate discovery and rejection that are found throughout his later post-war verse, are brought together. At the beginning, when he looks back across the decade and a half that separates him from his earlier poem, he announces his resentful dismissal:

> Fifteen years--and enough. Plain or pearled,
> Chequered or lacquered, I do not want them again.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 11.

The rejection is sufficiently profound and far reaching that the mood stretches across both the past and the future, to

> Deaths we cannot mourn and loveless love affairs,
> One waste of traffic jams, one jam of death.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 43.

In the face of this mood the question he levies is purely rhetorical, "Why should we/Still feel at times inept, inert, afraid?" The answer is only too clear, the future seems a torment measured against the utopian hopes of the past,

> tomorrow means
> Return to London, that prosaic mould
> In which our bright dreams cool. Tomorrow means
> Our backward looking thoughts, snatches away
> What few stray ears of corn our fancy gleans.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 108.

MacNeice is held in a present he doubts, waiting for a future he fears. If he hates the past for its failure and folly at least though despairing he asserts that there was some painful truth in that decade, "a few stray ears."

Now along with the loss of hopes goes the loss of youth, "the bright dreams cool" and he is forced to see himself as he is at middle age.

> Now I am long in the tooth and cannot bridle
> My thrusting paunch or halt my thinning hair.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 152.

At this lost moment he can only beg the new generation;

> Pity us for the follies we have lost;
> Pity us for our learning, who can count
> In light years by the million, but not the cost
> Of even a broken toy. (Autumn Sequel), p 134.

When his autumn diary approaches December and the symbolic winter, there is only a frustrated and helpless rage which is exposed as a human hate at the times' folly and delusion.

> The news continues mad, the bigwigs trounce
> Each other, Science in her armoured huts
> Sharpens her claws and bides her time to pounce,

> And pessimism whines and optimism abutts
> On lunacy and works and days grow weary--
> Goodwill towards men my foot! I hate their guts;

> Or lack of guts, corrupted by some theory.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 141

The very tone here indicates just how much "works and

days grow weary" for MacNeice. The almost childish petulance of the expletive "my foot" is matched by the bored, rather than angry tone in the cliche, "I hate their guts." This expression has come dangerously close to the very pessimistic "whining" that he claims to deplore.

Only for a moment does he reaffirm any of the past position. The following lines seem just and genuine in their assertion of the poet's spirit.

> our Obiit
> Cannot disprove our skill, if we were skilled,
> Our lives if we ever lived. On a grave as wide
> As the world there is no need to carve or gild
>
> An epitath; for neither time nor tide
> Invalidates the lives and deaths of those
> Who turned their cosmic guilt to cosmic pride.
> (Autumn Sequel), p 49.

Such lines seem honest and the hesitant "if" clauses do not deny the positive assertion. MacNeice's generation did finally receive a grave "as wide as the world" in a quite literal sense. Their world guilt in the face of the frustration and defeat of the thirties was transmuted by Spain into a world pride. The failure of their support for the Spanish Republic does not prevent individual groups from feeling pride. It is governments that must feel shame. But these stanzas are only a moment in a book of some 160 pages,

and the overall tone is defeated. Youth and political hope are equally denied, and the most optimistic mood he can manage seems to be merely nostalgia. The emotion of MacNeice at this period is virtually identical to the tone adopted by Day Lewis in his writing of this time. The close similarity of their responses to the disappointment and doubt of the ten years that followed the war, is indicative of the pervading mood that their poetry both recorded and exemplified.

In Aftermath also he explores the same sense of disappointment:

> Shuffle and cut, What was so large and one
> Is now a pack of dog's eared chances--Oh
> Where is the fear that warmed us to the gun,
> That moved the cock to tousle the night and crow
> In gaps between the bombs.
> (Holes in the Sky), p 17.

At the beginning of his Collected Poems, MacNeice offers as dedication an important new poem of introspection called To Hedli. He has reread with some amazement the poems of his youth collected here; seeing their confidence through more mature eyes. He finds "those April answers had withered off their Question." The question remains as powerful and unchanging as the tree's trunk, Only the hopeful flush of blossom and leaf have died. He is astounded

by his confident youthful omniscience.

> I stand here now dumbfounded by the volume
> Of angry sound which pours from every turning
> On those who only so lately knew the answers.
> (Collected Poems), p 9.

Here he appears to be concerned at others' rejection of ideals that once seemed to be "answers," but the reference is not entirely clear until in two significant stanzas he approaches the crux of the problem in self-analysis.

> At one time I was content if things would image
> Themselves in their own dazzle, if the answers
> Came quick and smooth and the great depth and volume
> Of the cold sea would wash me the chance present,
> Bone or shell or message from some older
> Castaway for whom there was no returning.
>
> But now I am not content, the leaves are turning
> And the gilt flaking from each private image
> And all the poets I know, both younger and older,
> Condemned to silence unless they divine the answers
> Which our grim past has cached throughout our present
> And which are no more than groped for in this volume. (Collected Poems), p 9.

The first stanza indicates the delight and satisfaction he obtained from his early verse where the "dazzle" of an image was its sufficient justification. There is an implied criticism of answers which come "quick and smooth," and the sense of tradition appears to consist of snatching the occasional piece of flotsam from the cold sea of the past. These easy creations satisfied for a while but from his

present standpoint in the second stanza they are no longer satisfying. "The gilt is flaking from each private image" and the suggestion is of the thin tawdry plating of pure gold over the base metal of the image. The "leaves" refer back to those April questions, besides any more general reference to approaching age. The most definite assertion is MacNeice's statement that "all the poets I know.. are condemned to silence unless they divine the answers." These are hidden because of "our grim past." This seems a direct assertion of both the failure of the past whose images are now "flaking," and the impossibility of writing now, for the generation is "condemned to silence." Such a view is totally pessimistic because it denies the possibility of further "groping," the process that so legitimately created the poems in this volume. He sees these poems now as only "waifs and wraiths of image and half-blind questions that still lack their answers." The diffidence may be appropriate; that youth is assertively over-confident is a truism, but the important thing is surely to continue to find the questions worth asking, the tentative answers a valuable hypothesis. In these lines MacNeice sadly seems to deny the possibility of both these things. Perhaps

such a feeling has no greater validity than a passing mood, and if for MacNeice's generation there were no answers perhaps their failure serves as a point of beginning for other new and greater poets. This seems, from an historical viewpoint, to have proved untrue, and yet in the gentle sanctity of Prayer In Mid-Passage MacNeice begs for just such a result.

> We were the past--and doomed because
> We were a past that never was;
> Yet grant to men that they may climb
> This time-bound ladder out of time
> And by our human organs we
> Shall thus transcend humanity.
> (Springboard), p 43.

He now can accept their failure. Perhaps their interpretation was of "a past that never was," but their failure carries within it the possibility for others to transcend their own present.

With this slightly more cheerful hope MacNeice is able to look at the poetic generation of which he was a part, and he writes for them an epitath, sincere and dignified in the face of much acknowledged failure. The title is simply, Epitaph For Liberal Poets. He begins with the question, what would they wish the future to say of their efforts?

> If in the latter
> End--which is fairly soon--our way of life goes west,
> And some shall say So What, and some What Matter,
> Ready under new names to exploit or be exploited,
> What though better unsaid, would we have history say
> Of us who walked in our sleep and died on our Quest?
> (Springboard), p 39

The cliche of "our way of life" and the colloquial "goes west" and "so what" indicate the attempt the poet is making at a deliberate lightness, as if to eliminate part of the almost tragic seriousness of what is to come. He pretends an unconcern with "better unsaid." But in spite of the foolish modesty of calling their search walking "in our sleep," many have "died on our quest." Because of this sacrifice history must take them seriously enough to make a comment more relevent than "what matter." History at this point does not choose to answer and MacNeice uses the next stanza to speculate on history's future attitude, and especially the place of their humane idealism in the future triumph of technology.

> We who always had, but never admitted, a master,
> Who were expected---andpaid--to be ourselves,
> Conditioned to think freely, how can we
> Patch up our broken hearts and modes of thought
> in plaster
> And glorify in chromium-plated stories
> Those who shall supersede us and cannot need us--
> The tight-lipped technocratic Conquistadores?
> (Springboard), p 39.

The force of these poets being expected and paid to be themselves is not entirely clear, except inasmuch as they were read by those already partially conditioned to their viewpoint. The important lines are those that express, with a deliberately awkward inner

rhyme, the pessimistic belief that the future will have no need for their liberal philosophies for "those who supersede us...cannot need us." This new generation, the new adventurous "Conquistadores" as MacNeice calls them with angry sarcasm, are tight-lipped and technocratic. They lack smiling humanity in their world of technology which is reflected by "chromium plated stores;" bright, shiny, grossly modernistic. At least in MacNeice's case he talked of "gilt" on his images; this chromium suggests all the tinselled flashiness and aseptic valugarity of the brave new world future. In this future their humane idealism can have no place, and the only reassurance that MacNeice can find is that this cycle of neglect is not new to history, and he recalls Catullus:

> The Individual has died before; Catullus
> Went down young, gave place to those who were born old
> And more adaptable and were not even jealous
> Of his wild life and lyrics. Though our songs
> Were not so warm as his, our fate is no less cold.
> (Springboard), p 39.

How well MacNeice epitomises the social adjusters, those who find their society so totally acceptable they are "born old," arguing about a pension as soon as they leave college and without even the imagination and grace to feel that they are giving up anything

precious. They cannot even understand why, in choosing their life, they should miss the "warm life and lyrics." There seems some wry consolation in the fact that these poets share the Roman fate. The last stanza, however, is more assertive and even hopeful.

> Such silence then before us, pinned against the wall
> Why need we whine? There is no way out, the birds
> Will tell us nothing more; we shall vanish first,
> Yet leave behind us certain frozen words
> Which some day, though not certainly, may melt
> And, for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst.
> (Springboard), p 39.

MacNeice faces the realization that for a time this poetry will be forgotten, for "there is silence before us." But this vanishing is not the end for something will be left behind, neglected now, but potentially valid, "frozen words." The "frozen" implies the temporary frigidity of their reception, though they are poems almost "as warm as his." A further suggestion, of course, is of refrigeration; these words can be stored indefinitely and wait for a time when a warmth of "birds" and "wild life" will again give them life. As they melt the ice turns to water, and the figure is continued in the hope that this water will give a moment of refreshment to a future to which the "tight-lipped technocrats" have denied this spiritual irrigation. These modest lines seem a very idealistic longing. Temporarily the poets

face extinction, but their dreams, their words, are as eternal as those of Catullus, and all MacNeice expects is that they may under a warmth of sympathy "for a moment or two accentuate a thirst." That "accentuate" is typical. It would have been so easy to use "assuage" but the values of these poets do not aim at satiating and stultifying the feelings but at beginning their creation, for these verses are not answers but "half-blind questions" that are as eternal as the condition of mankind which they reflect.

This poem makes a concluding point in the continuous line of MacNeice's spiritual development. A sense of defeat and frustration has for a moment lightened to a point of hope in the identification with the line of other poets.

Then in 1961 after a gap, came a new slim volume of poetry entitled Solstices. The title itself is highly suggestive for it implies a point of stasis before the sun changes direction. It is not clear whether this is meant to serve as a declaration that the poet will make a sudden change or merely the rather lame explanation that conversely these are the last poems in this style. The most obvious aspect of this volume is the number of stylistic and thematic

threads one can find that copy and echo the earlier work. It is a volume of retrospection. I can best indicate this effect by discussing some examples.

From time to time there are faint hints of the old interest in pylon or technical imagery. Consider the references in the poem called The Wiper.

> But never a gauge nor needle
> To tell us where we are going
> Or when day will come.
> (Louis MacNeice, Solstices) p 64.

The instruments are used to point out the poet's failure to measure the future he faces. I have already commented on the use of the powerful verbs in MacNeice's lines. When he wrote one war poem concerning the burning of London called Brother Fire, the dog imagery was rather heavily handled. He reverts to the same subject in retrospect in Homage to Wren.

> And the flames were whippeting, dolphining
> over the streets,
> The red whale spouting out of submerged Londinium
> And Davy Jones locker burst wide open.
> (Louis MacNeice, Solstices) p 64.

It is clear that this burning had considerable impact on his memory, but this poem is not much better than the earlier one. The dog image lingers in "whippeting" but the general theme is of the "sea"

of fire that justifies the use of "dolphins" and "whales." The compression created by making verbs of "whippet" and "dolphin" looks as though it should produce a valid metaphor but somehow there seems inadequate justification for their use.

In a poem called The Park, MacNeice reminds one of the colorful imagery he has used in the past, like those vivid Salvation Army nasturtiums of Autumn Journal. However now the impact is somewhat less satisfying.

> Through a grass greenly men as trees walking
> Led by their dogs, trees as torrents
> Loosed by the thaw, tulips as shriek marks
> (Yelps of delight) lovers as coracles
> Riding the rapids: Spring as Spring
> Releasing the jack-in-the-box of a fanfare.
> (Solstices), p 47.

Here the images appear sudden and exciting; those "trees as torrents" have an almost Van Gogh passion. Yet somehow there is a sense of strain. The comparisons are a shade too violent, almost as if they contain an element of hysteria. The bright, sculptured tulips do give a sudden splash of violent color in the flower beds, but are they that dramatic? There seems a forced shrillness in the comparison of the flowers with the noisy "shrieks" and "yelps." The "jack-in-the-box" is also false for Spring is

hardly that mechanical. It seems to me that here there are the old methods now a little less subtly handled, more vulgar in their over-emphasis. Maturity which should have brought refinement has caused MacNeice to strain after exactly that uncontrolled excess that would often mark a youthful poet's flashier lines.

Another aspect found in this volume that has rarely been a feature of MacNeice's poetry is a dullness of theme. In a lengthy poem called Indoor Games he describes darts, shovehalfpenny and vingt-et-un. An explanation of the rules takes up a large proportion of the poem. These lines are typical:

Darts. Begin and end with a double. He places his feet
Square apart on the rubber mat. I bet I shall end
As always on double one.

Vingt-et-un.
Stay, twist or buy. Ase is eleven or one.
Not really much scope for skill. I could
play this game in my sleep.
(Solstices), p 33.

I fail to see any worthwhile feature in lines like these.

In my earlier discussion of Bagpipe Music, I pointed out the way that sometimes lines of the silliest doggerel did have one value, they allowed following significant lines of poetry to make a more

striking impact. This trick is revived in the generally rather trivial poem Yours Next. This poem carries the tavern cry of "Someone has got to pay for the round." The first verse is as flat as the explanations for games above. Here he describes the pin-ball machine.

> Fruit machines and pin tables--
> Someone has got to pay for the round.
> Only release the spring, the ball
> Will scurry, the coins will clatter and all
> That was ill lost may well be found.
> (Solstices), p 29.

The last verse repeats this theme but now it has significantly deepened. Now the poet very earnestly uses the same phrase to indicate a much wider reponsibility for payment. What a man does must be paid for and the triviality of the pin tables only serves to reinforce the solemnity when the same terms are used for the most significant humane concerns.

> Stake and faggot and gas chamber--
> Someone has got to pay for the round.
> Only press the button and all
> The strings will twang, the heads will fall,
> And yet, whatever the drinks are downed,
> Somebody has got to pay for the round.
> (Solstices), 29

Pin tables and the gas chamber, inconsequence and man's responsibility are brought together here. The technique is one that MacNeice has used successfully earlier. Against that stake and gas-chamber

the paying for the round has a sinister and effective echo, but it seems no advance on previous usage of the same device of contrast.

There are also some parodies that are quite amusing. One in particular, Old Masters Abroad, wittily discusses the problems of teaching the examination classics of English literature to students who can have no personal experience of the associations on which they depend. The study of this literature exists for them, in a huge vacuum to be approached only through ardent feats of memorization. The two key verses which record his teaching experience in India are these.

> And the skylark crying 'Bird I never!'
> Routs parrakeet, hornbill, kookaburra,
> While the nightingale puts on spurs in Hampstead
> To rip the guts from the decadent bulbul.
>
> Wee sleekit courin timorous warthog!
> Tirra lirra by Kabul River!
> The elmtree bole is in tiny leaf but
> Not for long because of the termites.
> (Solstices), p 57.

These playful lines are quite funny but one can scarcely pretend that they make serious poetry.

Another subject that occupies MacNeice again is his feelings about his schooling and early training. English Public School boys never escape the effect of these years whether their feeling towards them are

stickily sentimental or violently antagonistic. In Notes for a Biography MacNeice reconsiders the effect of the principles ingrained at school. It is revealing that although this poem records the accepted pattern (the thrashings to inculcate the qualities that will rule an empire) it is not MacNeice's own history because he did not have to undertake a stint of colonial service. Orwell did and his experiences demonstrate the same attitude and self-analysis that MacNeice undertakes.

> Splinters under the nails, weals on the buttocks,
> Schooled to service (or was it pride of class?)
> He graduated at length to a land of babus and
> banyans.
> And fought their topsy-turvey and held the pass
> And was just, so he thought; but lonely.
>
> Until the pass was sold (Or was it redeemed?)
> And he who had been so homesick, went home reluctant,
> Among his own kind a stranger--and one who dreamed
> Of a million strangers who fawned or looked askance
> Yet kept his life worth living.
> (Solstices), pp 16, 17.

The most obvious point to be made here is that there is exactly the same emotional division that characterised MacNeice's earlier poems about his family and school. On the one hand there is the dreary repetition of all the stock socialist poses. The assertion, made so often, that bullying and discipline set

a boy up to employ the same when he "graduates" (the sneer is deliberate) to acting as an awesome schoolmaster in a colonial district. The schooling, based on class pride, has let to a world of service. The motive significance of "babu" is about the same as "wog". The man succeeds, in fact very well, making the "topsy turvey" orderly and defends those public school values of justice. So one has to set together the sneers of the earlier lines with the rather resentful respect of the last two. Then the colony is made independent and the administrator is brought back a stranger to the land in which he was educated. His education has fitted him for nothing in his own country. This again is a legitimate enough observation, as is the questioing whether the loss of such colonies was a sell-out or a redemption for both colony and occupier. But this serious topic is left for the remark in the last line where the obvious cliché of "life worth living" is used to ridicule the duties he performed. The "million strangers who fawned" is another stock left-wing picture. MacNeice still seems ready to fall back upon the stereotype when it fits in with the attitudes he feels he should adopt.

The fourth section of this poem reviews the assumptions on which MacNeice had lived his life and it includes some comments about his feelings over Hiroshima. These lines are vague and brief enough, but there is significance in the fact that of all the liberal poets who had written about the disasters of the thirties, only MacNeice could find it in himself to write a few casual lines about this bombing with all its moral implications. The section begins with words spoken presumably by the same youth of the previous section. He has found that he must question all the established traditions and beliefs to which he has been brought up.

> And I
> Could assume in my youth that the system was sound
> And the world little more than one great polo ground.
>
> But the years they went past and I noticed a change:
> The world had grown larger and out of my range.
> With the horses gone out and ideas come in,
> Where we thought we had ended they bade us begin.
> (Solstices), p 18.

I think the tripping, regular rhythm is in itself a measure of the triviality that dominates the poem. One notes especially that repetition of subject to maintain the brisk anapests in "but the years they went past." The deliberate cliche' of "the system was sound" and the snob reference to polo maintains

the orthodox left-wing tone of the previous sections. MacNeice is approaching a serious subject in a deliberately light and belittling tone. The same arguments can be used to criticize the next stanza. That trick of the double subject is repeated and the capital "H" of "Hour" puts sarcastic quotation marks round the word. The only surprise is that the Lords of Convention are no longer the conservative traditionalists, but the new power seekers who despise the old imperial ideas for practical, not idealistic reasons.

> Then the Lords of Convention they rose up and spoke:
> 'Your values are senile, your system is broke;
> You may still talk of duty but we talk of power,
> So open the atlas, for this is the Hour.'
> (Solstices), p 18.

It seems at first as if this stanza would fit very neatly into the speech of any socialist character who acted as the mouth-piece for left-wing theories in the political drama of the thirties when so many plays were written for special left-wing club audiences. But the irony here is that it is presumably spoken by the new powerful, monied managers who despise the values of the old aristocracy as much as they condemn the ideas of the left-wing working classes. There is great irony here but more in the fact itself than in the use that MacNeice makes of it in

these lines. These too-rhythmic couplets prepare the way for his comment on the use of the atomic bomb. I have indicated their significance as being the only comment to come from the pens of the major liberal poets of this era. That they are indifferent in quality is also highly indicative.

> 'Now follow our pointer, look, here is Japan
> Where man must now make what he chooses of man,
> And these towns are selected to pay for their crime--
> A milestone in history, a gravestone in time.'
>
> When I first read the news, to my shame I was glad;
> When I next read the news I thought man had
> gone mad,
> And every day since the more news that I read
> I too would plead guilty--but where can I plead?
>
> For no one will listen, however much I rage;
> I am not of their temper and not of this age.
> Outnumbered, outmoded, I only can pray
> Common sense if not love, will still carry the day.
> (Solstices), pp 18-19.

The thought that the towns must pay for "their" crime, allows the possessive to stand for all mankind, rather than the crime of their citizens, the enemy. But if this is serious immediately comes the cliché dredged from the politicians' speeches "a milestone in history." The next two lines, in which instinctive violence and a feeling of the triumph of victory come before the realization of man's criminal folly, is a truthful observation, though one cannot take it fully seriously when it is gabbled as the

rhythm demands. The last verse that finally escapes from that regular metre seems the most successful, though presumably it is now MacNeice himself talking through the persona of the polo player. The important thing is that in these lines we have returned to an attitude which MacNeice had already investigated in many of the last poems in his Collected Poems, the sense of alienation and despair. He now accepts that "however I rage" he will not be heeded. Perhaps he is remembering the rage with which he wrote his passionate poems in the thirties. This indignation he must increasingly see as wasted. The same aptness can be seen in "outnumbered outmoded." The last plaintive line is a revealing footnote to Auden's "We must love one another or die." Clearly of the alternative, death in an atomic holocaust now seems the most likely. Against such an event MacNeice now seems to feel that "love" is too high an ideal to be achieved, only a little prosaic "common-sense" can be set against the destruction. Even at this moment of solemn despair the verse ends with another of those glib little clichés, "will still carry the day."

This anxious despairing note that had occurred so often in his earlier volume is found throughout

Solstices as he seeks some relief from the knowledge that "all tomorrows must be faced alone." He sees still on every side the evidence of the destruction of the things he cherishes, the development of a cold materialistic society.

> That sameness governed by a switch
> Which could epitomise our times
> Where everything, not only light
> But food and freedom, thought and life,
> Can be switched on just so--or off.

Yet in the face of the daily encroachments of things on the life he seeks, he still finds amongst the intellectuals the same fatuous blindness; the old refusal to act; the trivialities, that had driven him to the isolation of Iceland. In Idle Talk he criticises these who shelter behind a spate of words.

> And yet we continue, frivolous, garrulous,
> Plotting our chatter, planting our annuals--
> Anecdote, limerick, tittle-tattle, chestnut--
> But come full circle, the leaves are green.
> (Solstices), p 52.

These leaves should "put to shame our idle gossip," but it continues, for there is no solution to the intellectuals' plight.

In this recent volume of poetry MacNeice has taken up the old themes, he has utilized the techniques of his earlier verse. In neither style nor idea has there been any decisive change. The old questions remain and the confidence in the answers has departed.

Somehow I can feel that MacNeice is not fully convinced himself by his recent verse and yet there is no obvious hint that we can expect different or more significant poetry in future. The early promise has evaporated, the expected maturity has not really developed. There are now only "a few frozen words" that remind us of the achievement of this poet.

In 1963 MacNeice published his last work. It is a slim volume of poetry called The Burning Perch (London, 1963). Does its title wittily suggest the extreme hazard of his menaced poetic position? The book itself rather sadly confirms the characteristice I describe in Solstices. Perhaps the best single word to describe this work may be taken from the title of one of these poems, Rechauffé. The various styles lack either coherence or authority. One poem with a title from the old round song inflated into French is a pointless reworking of the nursery tune, Chateau Jackson. It begins with tiresome inversions of the popular ditty:

> Where is the Jack that built the house
> That houses the folk that tilled the field
> That filled the bags that brimmed the mill....
> (The Burning Perch), p 16.

There are thirty-seven subsequent "that" clauses.

The poem Flower Show in contrast to the above

simplicity is a hideous agglomeration of repeated polysyllables which are supposed to describe the collected blooms on display.

> Squidlike, phallic or vulvar, hypnotic, idiotic, oleanginous,
> Fanged or whale-boned, wattled or budding, brimstone or cold. (The Burning Perch), p. 19.

Here the reader is bludgeoned by the blows of excess vocabulary.

The Taxis is partly in song form, but seems to desire to suggest some Kafka-like symbolism of the unknown. Hiring the fourth of the series of taxis is recorded in these curiously inexplicable words:

> As for the fourth taxi he was alone
> Tra-la when he hailed it, but the cabby looked
> Through him and said, "Ican't tra-la well take
> So many people, not to speak of the dog."

The rhythm of the last line disintegrates to the point of being deliberately ludicrous. After encountering this poem one is regaled with an odd appeal to a recalcitrant milkman.

> Milkman, milkman your empties
> Are all to collect, do not wait
> Till they jive on the steps. (The Burning Perch), p. 28.

A longer poem is a series of stanzaa each addressed with encyclopedic comprehensiveness to a separate tree; Willow, oak, palm and so on. The stanza on yew may be taken as a typical example.

> Your health, master yew, my bones are few
> And I fully admit my rent is due,
> But do not be vexed I will post-date a cheque
> for you.

What can one make of doggerel like this?

Only once in this generally trivial collection does something of the old note sound. MacNeice is leaving London, and as he writes his Goodbye to London he recalls the city as it had been some twenty years before. As he remembers that past time he also approaches again the emotions which possessed him in that decade.

> Then came the head-shrinking war, the city
> Closed in too, the people were fewer
> But closer too, were back in the womb.
> Nevertheless let the petals fall
> Fast from the flower of cities all.
>
> From which reborn into anti-climax
> We endured much litter and apathy, hoping
> The phoenix would rise, for so they promised.
> Nevertheless let the petals fall
> Fast from the flower of cities all.

I do not consider that this is especially significant poetry, but the second stanza does indicate something of the more general sense of disappointment MacNeice feels; "We endured much...hoping the phoenix would rise." But the post-war world did nothing to rehabilitate their hopes for a city of justice and

beauty. The idealists of the thirties had to face that the promises were not going to be kept any more than they had been in 1919. MacNeice begins to speculate that it may be his ideals that are no longer relevent to a time which seem such a total anti-climax. In a poem entitled Off the Peg, he compares his old beliefs to the crudely pre-cut sizes of the ready-to-wear tailor. There has been no attempt to remeasure the suit of ideas to fit the changing social and political circumstances. He observes

> The same times hang on the pegs in the cloak-rooms of the mind
> That fitted us ten or twenty or thirty years ago.
> (The Burning Perch), p 57.

That they no longer fit is sadly obvious from this collection. But there is no evidence of any busy tailoring going on to make a more effective bespoke garment.

As I write this essay the death of Louis MacNeice has just been announced. He was only 56. Now all the speculations about any possible future poetic development are stilled. It was interesting to note the tone of the brief obituary columns that discussed his work. They implicitly accepted that his achievement had been in the past. The writers talked of

his views in the thirties, of his feeling for the Spanish revolution, of his association with the other three poets of this thesis. Then there is an awkward hiatus and his work for the B.B.C. radio programs is discussed with praise. It was almost universally accepted that MacNeice's poetry written after the war had declined to the point where it was almost negligible as a poetic force in English letters. In the essay I have tried to demonstrate the nature of this decline, and perhaps explain partly the reasons. That his premature death is a loss to English letters is obvious, and yet one could not have imagined that more valuable poetry was to come. Solstices may have implied that his work was about to enter another phase, but none of the repetitive and thin verses in that collection promised the beginnings of the new writing that might have been suggested by the title, and The Burning Perch was a decisive failure. One can only fear that when the obituaries are written to the other poets, the comments will be somewhat similar. It is not easy to believe that a longer life will in fact produce further significant poetry. The last collections of each show a definite scraping of the barrel of the

old styles. There is little hint of a new embryonic form or experimental style that suggests the possibility of subsequent major achievement. As MacNeice had written earlier, in a heartfelt prayer,

> O Thou, my monster, Thou my guide,
> Be with me where the bluffs divide
> Nor let me contemplate return
> To where my backward chattels burn
> In haunts of friendship and untruth
> The Cities of the Plain of Youth.
> (Springboard), p 43.

The distant Cities of Youth would remain the vital part of the poetic empires of all four of these writers.

THE CONTEMPORARY VIEW

The Spanish Civil War and all the other impassioned issues of the thirties have become only subjects for the historian's detached examination. In one of several recent examinations of the events of this decade an editor comments:

> Already that war seems to belong to ancient history. The emotions it aroused are already foreign to us. The idealism of the young who rushed to the defense of the Republic seems suspect now; it was not at the time. The Recruits who went into battle singing, "Death to the Bride" seem to belong to medieval history. Ghosts walked over Spain, and some became palpable and some died, and still others changed their shape and assumed new disguises. And sometimes the historian may wonder how to disentangle the ghosts from the living presences of the men who suffered through that long and improbable agon.[1]

Today we are separated from the thirties by the great World War of 1939-45. In every way this acts as a division to the out look of generations. No longer is it possible for the young to feel any sense of personal involvement in the issues of that pre-war decade. Walter Allen in a review of John Lehmann's personal memoirs of this time felt called upon to observe:

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1 The Civil War in Spain, R. Payne, edit., (New York, 1962), p. 12.

> The young have known the real thing, how expect them then to be moved by the contemplation of a rehearsal; twenty-five bombers over Barcelona, and such small bombs too? More and more it appears that the real split between generations today reveals itself in the differing emotional attitudes towards the Spanish Civil War.[2]

A young poet and critic expresses the basis of this scorn.

> No doubt the sense of impending disaster in the thirties was oppressive; what actually happened after 1939 was so much more appalling than anyone imagined that all talk of nerves, injustice and retribution now appears trivial...everything Auden had to say of the situation which led up to the Second World War seems as little to the purpose as was Rupert Brooke's heroism.[3]

That this change of attitude is coupled with a different view of politics is noted by Oliver Edwards in an article in the London Times.

> For the first time for more than one hundred years it has ceased to be fashionable, especially among the young who care about writing, to be rebelliously left wing. So young men and women at the universities we are told, now regard the dons who still from force of habit angle their writings in books and weekly papers to the left, much as their fathers did those reactionary tutors who fought to the last ditch for compulsory divinity and Greek.[4]

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2 W. Allen, Review of "The Whispering Gallery," New Statesman, June 21, 1955.

3 A. Alvarez, Stewards of Excellence (New York, 1958), p. 105.

4 O. Edwards, Times, March 24, 1955, p. 18.

It takes a poet to enunciate the ideas of an age; and a young poet, Donald Davie, describes his reaction to the thirties as incredulity mingled with slight resentment. He has known real war and the post-war social change. Spain and the disasters of the inter-war era seem only an irritating and fanciful pre-occupation of his father's generation. The whole period appears only a legend, approached, if at all, through the school history books. Davie has written a poem called Remembering The Thirties in which he expressly attempts to explain his feelings as he contemplates this recent but remote past.

> Hearing one saga we enact the next.
> We please our elders when we sit enthralled
> But then they're puzzled; and at last they're vexed
> To have their youth so avidly recalled.
>
> It dawns upon the veterans after all
> That what for them were agonies, to us
> Are high-brow thrillers; though historical;
> And all their feats quite strictly fabulous.
>
> This novel, written fifteen years ago
> Set in my boyhood and my boyhood home
> These poems about "abandoned workings" show
> Worlds more remote than Ithaca or Rome.
>
> The Anschluss, Guernica, all the names
> At which these poets thrilled or were afraid
> For me mean schools and schoolmasters and games
> And in the process someone is betrayed.
>
> Ourselves perhaps. The devil for a joke
> Might carve his initials on our desk
> And still we'd miss the point because he spoke
> An idiom too dated, Audenesque.

They played the fool, not to appear as fools
In time's long glass. A depreciating air
Disarmed, they thought, the jeers of later schools.
Yet irony itself is doctrinaire.

And, curiously, nothing now betrays
Their type to time's derision like this coy
Insistence on the quizzical, their craze
For showing Hector was a mother's boy.

A neutral tone is nowadays preferred.
And yet it may be better, if we must,
To find the stance impressive and absurd
Than not to see the hero for the dust.

For courage is the vegetable king,
The Spring of all ontologies, the weed
That beards the slag heap with its hectoring
Whose green adventure is to run to seed.
(Remembering the Thirties), p 70.

This is a straightforward declaration of the change between the generations. Not only "abandoned workings" but even poems about them are remote as Ithaca. The welfare State and post-war full employment have made stories of the depression, its soup kitchens and hunger marches "though historical... strictly fabulous." Names such as Guernica, once the rallying points of inter-war liberalism are only recalled as words heard uncomprehendingly during school. It is remembered as a dreary lesson compared with the authentic excitements of sports. But, "someone is betrayed." If the generation of the thirties blamed their fathers for Versailles and their failure to impose a just solution after the 1914-18

war, Davie's generation is just as convinced that the blame for the 1939-45 war can be placed squarely in the laps of their parents, who are of Spender's age. Fascism and unemployment are equally remote to a generation fearing only Communism, overproduction, and an atomic holocaust. The themes that inflamed these poets now seem irrelevant and delusive.

The rejection of the political and social assumptions of the poets would be enough in itself to explain their dismissal by younger intellectuals. But the political reaction has been reinforced by a definite critical change. The devil's style is "dated" because it is "Audenesque"; a scathing enough judgment. It is revealing too that John Mander's recent critical essay on Auden is rhetorically titled "Must We Burn Auden?" His answer has a rather specious generosity; a qualified, "Not all of him and not all at once."[5] The moods of disinterest or occasional wondering irritation about the ideals of the thirties are both a cause and a result of the move towards the political Right in England even if this is signalled only by a tepid apathy to political issues. The optimistic votes for an egalitarian society in 1945 had

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5 John Mander, The Writer and Commitment (Phila., 1962), pp 24-70.

floundered in bureaucratic stagnation by 1950. The lost opportunity to introduce the idealistic reforms from the thirties then led to the squalid decade of the fifties with its ubiquitous motto "I'm all right Jack." In the post-war society joining the Communist party is no longer considered a necessary apprenticeship to adult life. As John Press indicates:

> Scarcely any poets in England turn nowadays to Communism as a source of hope, nor do they feel the least enthusiasm for an anti-communist crusade. For them the Soviet Union is not so much a monstrous tyranny as a narrow, rigid, illiberal, dull bureaucracy, remarkably efficient in certain ways, but fundamentally a dreary civilization.[6]

The urge to revolutionize society seems to have been lost in that combination of joyless hedonism and pathetic defeatism exemplified by the so-called Angry Young Men. The left-wing causes are sardonically repudiated but no alternative seems very engaging. Simone de Beavoir remarked, "La gauche a perdu sa chaleur, la droite n's rien appris." Davie coolly observes in the poem above "A neutral tone is nowadays preferred." It is revealing that the title of the John Press essay quoted above embraces recent poetry under the comprehensive title, "A Neutral Tone."

But if the "neutral tone" insulates one's emotions against the painful results of shattered idealism, such

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[6]J. Press, Rule and Energy (London, 1963), p. 15.

safe indifference is not the most satisfying or exciting stimulus to the young. John Osborne uses the character Jimmy Porter, with his bitter, self-lacerating snarls, as the mouthpiece for an angry, sardonic generation. For him there is almost nostalgia in those remote worlds of Guernica and Jarrow. For all their horror they permitted legitimate and passionate indignation; luxuries denied to his generation. In Look Back in Anger, the play that became the name and focus of a movement, Osborne explains the rootless indifference and the unfocussed cynicism with these biting words:

> I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us in the thirties and forties when we were still kids. There aren't any good brave causes left. If the big bang does come and we all get killed off it won't be in aid of any old fashioned Grand Design. It will be just for the Brave New Nothing thank you very much.[7]

Day Lewis offers a measure of sympathy for this view. He admits that the young may be right to point out the folly and false optimism of his generation. "The thirties might well seem to those unborn then if not an age of faith at least an absurdly credulous one." But he realizes that in spite of the delusion,

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[7]J. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, (London, 1957), p.84.

it gave his generation a sense of purpose and optimism denied to the present one. Compared to the age of Davie and Osborne his may have been the luckier time.

> We were singularly fortunate, compared with the young of today, in believing that something could be done about the social and political evils confronting us. Had we seen all avenues blocked by mushroom-shaped spectres we might well have thrown in our hands.[8]

But many found contemplation of their parts in the history of the thirties less calmly acceptable. Some saw it rather as a period of monstrous swindle. Koestler explodes with bitter anger at the way he had been deluded.

> The members of the Left Book Club in Bournemouth and the dead in the mass graves of Spain, we had all been taken in all right by the greatest farce the world has ever seen.[9]

Yet in some ways Koestler's attitude is more one of despair and frustration than of anger. The era had seemed to offer the dawn of a new hope; the universal order of brotherhood had appeared within their grasp. At the beginning of the war Koestler was imprisoned in a French internment camp surrounded by refugees

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[8]C. Day Lewis, The Buried Day, (London, 1960), p. 208.

[9]A. Koestler, The Scum of the Earth, (New York, 1941), p. 19.

from Fascist Spain and Germany. These men had been ironically interned as the absurd result of France's first anti-German action. Despairingly he records his sad comprehension:

> These 150 men of the leper barracks were the remnants of the International Brigade, once the pride of the European revolutionary movement. They had been the material for the first experiment since the Crusades to form an army of volunteers which would fight for a cosmopolitan creed. But now they were rejected and forgotten as every nation found the concentration camp the only place for their outdated liberal idealism.[10]

For many the discovery that any idealistic belief in Communism was untenable may not have been caused by the despicable ending to the Spanish War. The Russian-German non-aggression pact of 1939, whatever its motives, was a dramatic shock to the party faithful. It was a classic example of diplomatic hypocrisy; the compromise of principle for immediate political advantage. If unremarkable in itself, it demonstrated that the Russian government would undertake the same shifty manoeuvres that were assumed to be characteristic only of decadent capitalist governments. Tschumi claims that it was this pact that "destroyed the myth which had been the center of the doctrine."[11]

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[10] The Scum of the Earth, p. 119.

[11] R. Tschumi, Thought in 20th Century English Poetry. (London, 1951), p. 157.

But whatever the precise moment of illumination for the individual, by the beginning of the war for most intellectuals the realization had come that the brotherhood of man was not going to be founded on the exploded myth of the glorious Russian Revolution. In the God that Failed[12] the great liberal writers of the nations of Europe, including Spender from Britain, Koestler from Hungary, Silone from Italy and Gide from France, expressed their recantations. These ranged in tone from exasperated denunciation to nostalgic longing. And Koestler again voices the way the changed new sentiment had led to their condemnation.

> A few years ago we had been called the martyrs of Fascist barbarism, pioneers of the fight for civilization, defenders of liberty and what not; the Press and the statesmen of the west had made rather a fuss about us, probably to drown the voice of their own bad conscience. Now we had become the scum of the earth.[13]

Poets and intellectuals, all were left a middle age without belief, convicted of self-delusion.

The change of attitude that seems to be so obvious now when Russian communism has been exposed for the merciless expansionist dictatorship it is, does not

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[12] The God That Failed, R. H. Crossman, edit., (New York, 1949), passim.

[13] The Scum of the Earth, p. 67.

alter the validity of its appeal in the thirties. The unchecked advance of Fascism until the reluctant declaration of war in 1939, and the present confident power of Franco in Spain both represent the failure of the liberals to influence international politics, but they do not belittle or invalidate their response or their poetry. As Gadsen puts it,

> Politically it may all be forgotten or discredited but that does not matter since the psychological and moral validity remain.
> (K.W. Gadsen, essay "Rebels and Time Servers" 20th Century Magazine, March, 1957.)

Daniel Aaron supports this belief distinguishing very carefully between the practical folly and the moral validity of this decade.

> We who precariously survive the sixties can regret their inadequacies and failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their selfrighteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and ineffective, to change the world.[14]

In Spain the issue seemed clear and the challenge was taken up with the heroic and honest belief that there was a right and a wrong and that it was possible to choose one or the other, and then do something about that choice. This belief in personal responsibility, so strong in the thirties, is regarded as somewhat naive today when all motives seem questionable and morality blurred to the point where the typical response to events is an ironic shrug. Fairlie in a Spectator

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14 D. Aaron, Writers On The Left. (New York, 1961), p 396.

review remarked rather smugly that "the men with dirty hands in the inter-war years were the intellectuals."[15] His jibe received the following satisfying retort from Kingsley Martin, himself one of these intellectuals:

> Mr. Fairlie and his friends live in a Welfare State in which their consciences are not daily harrowed by the fact of two million unemployed. They are able to write as they do because they eat breakfast in the morning without the thought that they ought to be sharing it with families who are trying to live on twenty-six shillings a week. The intellectuals of the thirties were the desperate defenders of the liberal tradition of the West, against those who, both in Spain and in Germany, denied the modest thesis that men through the power of their own reason might in some degree increase the measure of their own happiness.[16]

The sneers are easy enough. From today's viewpoint the attitude of the thirties seems at best Quixotic, at worst dishonest and muddle-headed posturing. Angus Wilson's topical pen has already ossified them. Although his tone has a certain ambivalent pity the remote extinct people exhibited in his short story Such Darling Dodos[17] are the liberal intellectuals who fought in Spain, deplored Munich

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15 K. Martin, quoted in Review of "The Political Ideas of Herbert Laski", New Statesman, April 1, 1950.

16 loc. cit.

17 A. Wilson, Such Darling Dodos (London, 1956), passim.

and tried to expose the fallacy of Britain's inter-war policy. In another tone George Scott with a superior impatience based on satisfied superiority finds that

> Pity for the individuals has exhausted itself, the mass neurosis of the 30's has been exhibited before us too often for us to find sympathy still. (Time and Place), p. 17.

And Eliot goes still further with this petulant attack in a letter in which he declares:

> For some years literature was involved with a silly kind of political enthusiasm. Less is heard about that now, in fact I think it is generally the opinion that the less said about politics the better and that a literary review should disclose no conviction. (Catacomb).

Even those who felt strongly sympathetic at the time seem to be swept now by historical change into such a revaluation of their previous view that it amounts to a repudiation. Herbert Read announces in the preface to his autobiography:

> These pages will make it sufficiently clear that I consider the "no man's years" between the wars as largely futile, spent unprofitably by me and all my kind. It does not pretend to know how we could have made them more positive, the forces against us were not human but Satanic, blind forces of economic drift, with the walls of faith and reason turning to air behind us.[18]

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[18] H. Read, The Contrary Experience, (London, 1963), p. 3.

Spender in his critical re-examination of poetry, The Creative Element, offers a view that is to be set against his earlier, overtly political, vision of literature, The Destructive Element. He recants with the following explanation.

> Where I went wrong was in thinking that because I saw a political cause where the writers whom I was discussing saw a moral situation their vision implied a political view. I was right to think that politics in the deepest sense is concerned with the moral condition of society but wrong to think that the artist concerned with this condition need also be concerned with politics even by implication. The point really is that a moral view of society can be stated without any concern for social actions of any kind, whereas directly politics enters in social action and taking sides are involved.[19]

Cyril Connolly proclaimed his surrender when in his editorial column he announced his own abdication.

> This change of policy is based on the belief that the homeymoon between literature and action, once so promising, is over. (Horizon, July, 1947)

With German troops in N.A.T.O. and U. S. planes based in Franco's Spain the political reaction is obvious. Yet coupled with this and reinforcing it, is a poetic change, a revision of literay beliefs and principles. Fraser sees this division at an early stage.

> Even before the outbreak of the 1939 war, various reactions were setting in against the dominance of Auden's group...in fact the reaction against the

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19 S. Spender, The Creative Element (London, 1953), p 9.

> tone of 1930's poetry in the last decade was not originally political but poetic.[20]

John Press also recognizes the significant distinction that occurs in English poetry at this period, but he sees the source of the division from a slightly different angle,

> Yet it so happens that the years 1939-41 mark the end of an epoch in British poetry, for reasons only partially connected with the coming of war. (Rule and Energy), p 2.

Press bases his argument on the culmination of several unconnected circumstances; the death of Yeats, the publication of Eliot's Quartets which virtually concluded Eliot's poetry; Ezra Pound's politics and arrest, Auden's departure for America, and the more tangentially still, the deaths of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Be this as it might, obviously the war itself constituted a fundamental division, spiritually and poetically. The six years of war imposed a significant social division between the characteristics of pre and post-war poetry.

The writers who became the chief figures in this literary reaction and the innovators of the new style were poets such as Dylan Thomas, Christopher Fry, George Barker, Henry Treece and David Gascoyne,

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20 G. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World (London, 1953), p 267.

followed by the younger poets, Terence Tiller and Laurie Lee. For all their apparent dissimilarity they exhibit, in common, a sensuous delight in words, a kind of florid, baroque superfluity of style. This gives a richer more ornate surface texture to their work. They reject the spare harsh diction of the thirties and avoid much of the technical experiment that had enlivened that decade. Some, like Gascoyne, even sought brief refuge in the surrealist movement. Their subject matter too exhibits a change towards a more acknowledgedly "romantic" inspiration deriving some of its original impulse from the very influences which the "pylon poets" had so decisively rejected.[21] These poets consciously avoid both the characteristic features and the weaknesses of the poetry of the thirties. They reject the colloquialisms and the avoidance of words with "literary" associations; they resist the tempting throb of the jazz theories and socio-economic analysis. Their change of poetic ideal includes an increasing emphasis on personal themes,

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[21] In this regard it is interesting to see the same assertion from the other side of the argument. Elizabeth Mitchie writing an essay on Romantic poetry asserts the Romantic influence on the post-Auden poetic generation. E. Mitchie, 'Form in Romantic Poetry', Major English Romantic Poets, C. D. Thorpe, edit. (Illinois, 1957), p. 6.

a repudiation of political engagement which seems to them such a fallacious, pointless and essentially non-poetic interest. A minor young poet, Derek Stanford, makes his typical declaration on this issue:

> In an age of mass production we do not intend to churn out exact reproductions of all the inane realities before us. Between the fulfillment of the dream and the frustration of so much drab living we have tried to see our subject through a higher organ than the visual eye, namely the imagination.[22]

It is not possible nor desirable to exhibit a "movement" here; it is enough to indicate a tendency which becomes quite obvious if one examines the poems in any recent literary magazine and then refreshes one's memory by re-reading some of the Little Reviews like New Writing which are so completely typical of the style of the mid-thirties.

This general observation is clearly supported by the editor of the recent collection of verse from which I took the Donald Davie poem as one example. Robert Conquest, discussing the standpoints of these young poets in his introductory essay, writes:

> If one had briefly to distinguish the poetry of the fifties from its predecessors, I believe that the most important general fact would be, that it submits to no general system of theoretical concepts, no agglomeration of unconscious commands. It is empirical in its attitude to all that comes.[23]

The poetess Elizabeth Jennings in her collection of verse written between 1940 and 1960 makes a similar observation

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[22]D. Stanford, The Freedom of Poetry (London, 1947), p. 23.

[23]R. Conquest, ed., New Lines (London, 1956), p. XV.

about this distinction, though her emphasis is different. She sees the period as one in which the poets sought some alternative to the flux and chaos of the inter-war years; they searched for security and order after the maelstrom.

> The most marked characteristic of the period... is a sense of order, an urge to clarity, a leaning towards formal perfection. Poetry has become a gesture of defiance, a plea for order in a universe of confusion and man-made chaos.[24]

Edwin Muir from a rather more critical viewpoint, also observes the division and makes the comment that recent poetry appears to lack challenge and bite if considered against the heartfelt rhetoric of the thirties.

> Critics whose idea of poetry was formed in the thirties regard contemporary poetry with disappointment because it is different and because it is strangely unexciting.[25]

But the dating process goes on inexorably. Even Hoggart who yields to no one in his critical admiration of Auden has to admit that some of his work has already suffered from a dating in the face of both political and poetic change. What has been called in this context Auden's "camphorous whiff" is described a little petulantly by Hoggart.

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[24]E. Jennings, An Anthology of Modern Verse 1940-1960 (London, 1961), p. 7.

[25]Edwin Muir, Images of Tomorrow (London, 1950), p. 143.

> New Signatures and New Country have a strong period flavour. Both these anthologies looked back at from across the war years seem as dated as the Yellow Book, and the nostalgia which the reading of them can produce is probably similar to that which the earlier collection induced in our uncles. Part of the regret is for adolescence in a period when enemies seemed conveniently well-defined, and which had behind all the excited denunciation a sense of "history on the move", a sense still of progress and that through a fairly clear-cut struggle.[26]

On young poets today the influence of the writers I have been discussing is probably at its minimum, partly perhaps because so much of the change they achieved is taken so completely for granted. With the possible exception of the revalued Auden, these poets are now in the twilight. They have lost the admiration they received once for their revolutionary crusading zeal, and they have not yet reached that turgid status which the British public reserves for its Grand Old Men of Literature figures. At a time between these two extremes it should be possible to offer a critical revaluation of these poets which will assess what they are, what they achieved, rather than use them as a convenient target for misguided political or literary abuse. Between those who see the International Brigade and its poets as crusaders before the holy citadel[27] and those who consider them at best as misguided fools producing doggerel of questionable or discreditable sentiments, there

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[26]R. Hoggart, Auden (London, 1951), p. 40.

[27]As Koestler put it:

> A strange historical constellation had focussed Spain into the symbolic position of the Holy Land, and had endowed the struggle for Madrid

is hardly likely to be any agreement; yet it is surely possible to attempt a critical evaluation of the writing of the period without feeling the necessity of taking either extreme position. I hope that I have placed in a new light the quality and significance of the radical poetry of the thirties. The results of my analysis may also go some way toward explaining the reason why so little significant war poetry was written from 1939-45. The truth seems to be that the poets had exhausted their emotional response to the moral issues of the World War when they had written about Spain. Spender sums up this fact from his own experience.

> If one wants to know why there was no poetry of the last war comparable to that of the 1914-18 war, the answer is that the poetry of the war of democracy versus fascism had already been written by French, English and Spanish poets during the Spanish War.[28]

This knowledge makes the work of the inter-war poets even more significant since they are not writnng of a "rehearsal" but about the human issues which made World War II both inevitable and honest. It is a realization of the continuity of their moral position that best exposes the superficiality of the dismissal usually offered by unthinking literary critics. A typical generalization in a popular

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[27] continued from previous page.
with the emotional content of the massacres for the Holy Sepulchre. (Scum of the Earth, p. 120),

[28] S. Spender, The Creative Imagination in the World Today, (London, 1940), p. 18.

brief literary history evaluates these poets in this way:

> Writers and the work of the period when sifted by posterity will, in all probability, be valued in proportion to the degree in which they looked beyond the disturbances of their own period.[29]

The mathematical "in proportion to the degree" and the assumption that the fatuous word "disturbances" is adequate to express the crises of the inter-war years is not only poor in itself, but ignores the whole validity of this poetry. The point of my argument has been to indicate that when the major work of this period does have significance it owes its force largely to the events which provoked it, events whose moral issues challenged all writers inescapably, and that these concerns of their period are equally of our own.

No changing political reorientations, no change in poetic styles and techniques can damage the significance and validity of what they felt when they wrote, nor the capacity of this poetry to affect us, not historically, but with immediate relevence. The moral issues that concern these poets should preoccupy us today as much as they did thirty years ago, for their idealistic belief in compassionate justice is not transient but a continuously elevating social principle. Perhaps our present view of the mood of this era is best indicated by the nostalgic humor of a recent New Statesman competitor who, in a parody that sums up an epoch, wrote:

> Breathes there a man with soul so dead
> Who was not in the thirties a Red?

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[29] W. H. Hudson, A History of English Literature (London, 1955), p. 218.

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