A STUDY OF THE poetry of the SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR AS A REFLECTION OF ~~THEIR~~ its AGE

THESIS

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MASTER OF ARTS

by

MILDRED DAVIDSON B.A.

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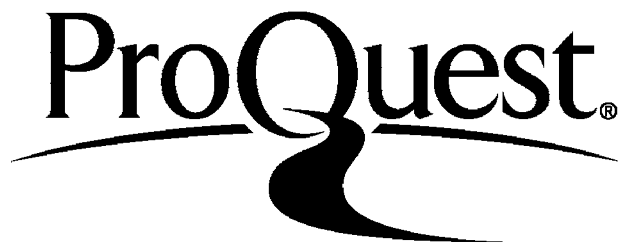

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Abstract

I have attempted in this thesis to study war poetry from various angles in order to show how far it reflected its age, and to trace how ~~far~~ the changes occurring in poetry produced between the opening of the 1930 decade as far as the end of the Second World War depended a great deal on the changes in outlook actually taking place in England at that time. Some comparison with the First World War is intended again to bring out the literary difference occasioned by events.

Part I covers the Spanish Civil War, led up to in the Introduction by a brief résumée of previous war poetry, intended to mark the chief differences in outlook of the twentieth century.

It was necessary to deal with the Spanish War by a consideration of most of the 1930 decade, proving that the war itself, while quite individual in character, was merely a link in a chain, and as far as the poets were concerned extremely important for its POSITION - the climax of early 1930 aspirations, and the landslide towards the Second World War. After a general résumée of movements and types of poetry produced in this decade in Chapters 1 and 2, I have approached the subject in Chapter 3 by means of a "close-up", a detailed study of two poets, who, by contrast, seemed to reveal the age most appositely.

In Part II I have dealt with the Second World War by choosing representative poets of three generations to contrast the differ-

ent ways in which men reacted to the war, according to their experience. I have tried to bring out in the Introduction what the poets themselves considered they should be doing, in Chapter 1 what they actually accomplished, and in Chapter 2 what their reviewers considered they had achieved or failed to achieve. Chapter 3, in a "close-up" of certain poems, discusses how far and in what ways the war period was a communal one.

The conclusions reached in the body of the thesis are briefly summarised in the Epilogue by means of a general consideration of the imagery.

Preface

Owing to the vast amount of material, I have excluded that work written during the war which was not strictly relevant to it, and confined myself to the poetry reflecting a war age in any one of its aspects.

I have selected also amongst the relevant material in various ways at various times. The chapter on the older generation of poets, for instance, is a detailed analysis of a few representative writers. The chapter on the younger generation is a résumée of general trends built up on selective quotation rather than selective poets.

By this means I hoped to gain an insight into the question on various levels.

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P A R T I

INTRODUCTION

A résumée of English War Poetry

> 'My argument is that War makes rattling good history, but Peace is poor reading. So I back Bonaparte for the reason that he will give pleasure to posterity.'[1]

The truth of that statement is for an age that might be said to have ended in the vicinity of 1915. Consider, in contrast, Auden's '<u>In Time of War</u>'[2] where the poet tries to visualise a future generation capable of looking back and saying that good came even of THIS, - a far cry from the "pleasure to posterity." Or turn to the sonnets of Rupert Brooke and ask why they are generally labelled (derogatively) romantic, - why they are not in their sentiments popular today. It is not so much because they were overrated as poetry when they were first produced, as that they belong to an age when war still made 'rattling good history'. Between them and our own time, there is a barrier of event that has created a NEW age. Seldom has a war, for instance, even approached the 1939-45 conflict in changing the whole way of English life, and although Brooke's sonnets may well survive time, they fail to survive the experience of this particular war period.

If we examine English literature from the Anglo-Saxon age onward, we find two types of approach to war - the communal,

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1. Thomas Hardy. '<u>The Dynasts</u>' (1919) Act II scene 5.
2. See '<u>Journey to a War</u>' London 1939.

and the individual. To the early English, the fight for survival was quite literal. The Anglo-Saxon period as reflected in its literature was an age not of war but of the warrior. In many ways it resembles the Roman age in its emphasis on strength, leadership, and bravery in battle. True enough it heroicises the nobleman because it was a court literature, but where the noble led, the people followed, and the spirit was a communal one. The poets expressed a whole people's outlook in their tales of contemporary events like Maldon or historical (usually Biblical) warfare, even though it was on a heroic level, - they expressed an age that looked to its leaders to safeguard it. Battle itself was never tragic. It was life that was tragic, but in battle a man could triumph over life by dying bravely. War was not to be thought of as divorced from the ordinary run of everyday events, it was the terms on which men ran their society by sheer necessity. This is not to say that the Anglo-Saxon failed to recognise that war brought tragedy, - the theme of loss and the sorrow of survivors is always uppermost in the poet's mind, - but they didn't complain, they accepted. The Roman writers restricted themselves to accounts of battles, and they too never viewed war as tragic in itself. Defeat was tragic, but not war. They were after all, brought up to regard soldiering as a profession, and on the whole battle involved professional soldiers, not civilians. The latter suffered usually in the case of defeat. The fighter was as much an integral and accepted part of their society as among the Anglo-

Saxons, and when poets wrote of battles, they wrote as citizens.

Turn to the Middle Ages and war becomes less a social necessity than a social art. Together with knowing the elaborate code of chivalry went proficiency in handling deadly weapons. The element of Romance,epitomised in Chaucer's '<u>Knight's Tale</u>' glossed over the fact that in reality war was barbaric. Any form of warfare that is regarded as an art and developed with the pleasure of art (invariably involving torture), carries its own contradiction. The Middle Ages' attitude to war may well be compared with that of the Japanese during this century. Yet, in a literature that was written mainly for court circles, soldiering was still the hallmark of a gentleman, and the means of gaining personal honour and fame. How the rank and file fared was, on the whole, disregarded.

The same tradition continued through the court literature of the Elizabethan period, through Sidney and Spenser. Because, when all was said and done, it was entertainment, - tales of battle were as POPULAR as the glorification of England and at times synonymous. But a new aspect of war penetrated the drama. The 'people's entertainment' had always tended to be realistic. Some of the scenes in Shakespeare's history plays were probably based on what was common knowledge among the lower classes of Elizabethan England, and had been missed out of the Romanticised court literature. Henry V before Harfleur, Falstaff and his army of ragamuffins, Henry IV trying to avoid war for the preservation of his country, - the atrocities, the hardship, the

innocent suffering, the scavangers, and the REALITY of war are all present, side by side with the chivalry. It was the recognition that war involved ordinary human beings,[1] not just knights and heroes, and it spoke for a different strata of the age.

After that, the view of war becomes a personal matter. We hear that the Cavalier poet is on his way to war and must leave the beloved behind, and we know what Milton thought of gunpowder, but war was no longer a popular part of the social structure nor the social conscience. Milton pursued the epic ideal as a literary form, and the latter part of the seventeenth century witnessed the mammoth production of the heroic drama, but the age of heroes had disappeared. Civil War was part of, and contributed to, the sense of disruption, of an old order changing. The greatest blessing it could bring was not victory but peace, and the seventeenth century poet was remarkably silent on the subject. The expression of an age of which the war itself was merely an outcome rather than a cause, was what occupied most of the main writers of the time.

The new period that emerged from this darkness was one in which soldiering was less a necessity than a career, and the poet chose to stay at home. The wars of the age were merely the background to the age, and Dryden could sit in a boat politely discussing with three other gentlemen whether to rhyme

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1. Notice for instance the Father who has killed his son and the Son who has killed his father. 'Henry VI' Part III Act 2 scene 5.

or not to rhyme, to the noise of guns a little further off down the Channel.

Most of the eighteenth century followed in much the same way. Society wasn't interested in war, except in so far as it was interested in its soldiers. George II was the last Hanoverian martial leader. The new office of Prime Minister that emerged with Walpole was also purely civilian. Poetry at least was still the occupation of the gentleman, and the poet was more interested in the social world at home than in the everlasting conflict abroad. Where the subject did occur, it was in the form of England's part in war, a social celebration of her success in a poem like '<u>Annus Mirabilis</u>'.

But with the Romantics an interest in the European situation returned. This time the poet was writing as an individual, not as the voice of society. The attitude was therefore varied and changeable. The French Revolution for instance, made an immediate but short-lived appeal to Wordsworth. The ideal of liberty was very much to the fore in the work of Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley. But the attitude towards England's part in previous and present wars was one of disillusionment. Southey's '<u>After Blenheim</u>', and Byron's '<u>Childe Harold</u>' show the waste and fruitlessness of war, or perhaps it would be more correct to say - of particular wars. Byron was only too ready to go and fight for Greek independence when he thought that fighting could accomplish something in the future. But where England's efforts in the past are concerned -

'What good came of it at last?'

asked little Peterkin about Marlborough's famous victory. And in Byron's well-known stanzas on Waterloo we find the bitterness of a modern attitude to war, - the revolutionary ardour dissolving into the cynical knowledge that war accomplishes nothing except to leave behind it a fine memorial.

> 'Stop! - for thy tread is on an Empire's dust!
> An Earthquake's spoil is sepulchred below!
> Is the spot mark'd with no colossal bust?
> Nor column trophied for triumphal show?
> None; but the morals' truth tells simpler so,
> As the ground was before, thus let it be;-
> How that red rain hath made the harvest grow!
> And is this all the world hath gain'd by thee,
> Thou first and last of fields! king-making Victory?'[1]

But war is still divorced from the rest of life, the poet from the soldier, the sympathy from the pity. Even the cynicism makes 'rattling good history' with its

> 'Rider and horse, - friend, foe, - in one red burial blent.'[2]

The nineteenth century continued the romanticising. Few poems contain more of the excitement traditionally associated with war than 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' Yet at the same time it is easily overlooked that this is a serious piece of criticism of the British command in the Crimea. The chief interest of the poet in writing such a poem was not necessarily meant to be the chief interest of the reader once it had gone

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1. 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' (1812) Canto. III. stanza 17.
2. Ditto. stanza 28.

forth to the public. It was not until the 1914-18 war that poets give the impression that they are writing with immediate deadly seriousness both in front of the seeing eye as well as behind it.

Francis Brett Young's '<u>The Island</u>'[1] was a poem produced during the Second World War reviewing England's past history and battles, designed to show the pluck of our forefathers in situations which seemed as rough as ours, and how everything has led up to Britain's 'finest hour'. In dealing with historical episodes the poet has tried to capture some of the different ways in which men thought at different times and their various attitudes to war. The '<u>Episode of the Garrulous Centurion</u>' for instance bears out our conclusion on the Roman period:-

'Of course we had fighting
Now and again; but war is a soldier's duty,
And fighting's what he's paid for.'

Now listen to the '<u>Elegy in Whitehall November 11th 1920</u>'. Here the poet captures the sudden change the First World War brought to men's outlook on what we might term 'the whole rotten business'. Here is the bitterness which not even the 1939 conflict could equal, and the turning point in the poem's theme:-

'There was an age when feckless poets sought
Vicarious raptures in the clash of swords;
Nay, even in war's hideous features traced
A baleful splendour. Tell not us who fought
With Prussia's brutish hordes
That war breeds aught but butchery and waste.

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1. London. 1944(1955).

> Spare us your threadbare cant of chivalry:
> War is no princely sport
> But a fool's game in which Death loads the die:
> So speak the truth for our dead comrades' sakes -
> War maims and kills more heroes than it makes.'

After almost a century of peace, - for the Boer war and the Crimean were too distant and isolated to have an effect on any except those who fought in them, and they were after all in pursuance of the old ideal of British mastery while at the same time producing a whole stock of famous names(Nightingale, Kitchener, Gordon,) - sufficient for the British public to wave its flags about - after such an ideal, consolidatory century, the First World War was not only to shock the men who fought but to inspire them with the iconoclastic desire to shock equally the people at home. How unexpected it was can be seen from the kind of poetry that heralded its outbreak. To poets like Brooke and Grenfell[1] as for many of the young volunteers, it was a chance to live through some 'rattling good history'. The fighting, it seemed, meant more to them than writing poetry. The outcome of such expectations was so completely overwhelming in its contrast that people who have lived through both World Wars still look back today and consider the worst conflict of the century to have been the 1914-18 one. Even in a poet like Kipling who upheld and stood for certain British traditions there is the sense of a change beginning to take place:-

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1. See Brooke's five sonnets and Julian Grenfell's '<u>Into Battle</u>'.

'Our world has passed away,
In wantonness o'erthrown.
There is nothing left today
But steel and fire and stone.'[1]

In '<u>Gethsemane 1914-18</u>' the poet records his meeting with gas during the war as the epitome of all human suffering and the cup which a man prays might pass from him. The soldier has, moreover, become in his comparative innocence, helplessness and pain, a martyred saviour.

The changed attitude to war was due partly to the change in warfare itself, but partly to the fact that the men who suffered were able to speak out to the world. Both the early ideal of a just and heroic cause, and conscription, brought the poets themselves into the trenches, together with many men who had never been trained as soldiers and who had never regarded the army as a career.

The First World War did two things for the poets themselves. It made them think about WAR as divorced from time and events, war in the abstact, what it does for and against civilisation.[2] And it gave them a purpose in their writing on war. How that purpose compared with that of poets of the Second War will be discussed in a later chapter. It is sufficient to note

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1. '<u>For all we have and are</u>' (1914).

2. R.C.Sherriff's play '<u>Journey's End</u>', the classic sob-story first produced in 1928, for instance, may well be taken as an archetypal experience of any war, though inspired by the 1914-18 conflict. cf. J.B.Priestley's '<u>Desert Highway</u>' first produced December 1943, in which the author deliberately casts the action in two different centuries.

here that contemporary events not only inspired poetry, but inspired poetry that tried to accomplish something for its own age.

The Second War was different from the First primarily in men's attitude toward it. The First War was something new in the way of pointless and unexpectedly degrading suffering. The Second War's personal flavour may perhaps be suggested by Eliot's expression of his own feeling after the invasion of Czechoslovakia:-

> 'In the present state of public affairs - which has induced in myself a depression of spirits so different from any other experience of fifty years as to be a new emotion...'[1]

But, from the verses quoted in this Introduction, it can easily be seen that as far as a general consideration of the age goes, the changes the First World War produced in men's outlook were a pointer to the Second. There was no going back to an age of 'rattling good history'. Kipling's lines could as well have been written for the latter as for the former war. We have therefore to remember in considering how the poets we are dealing with reflected their age, that the age itself had taken a new turning, that poets could no longer talk in the terms of Drake or Sir Richard Grenville, of Lepanto or Waterloo, and remain contemporary. War itself was contemporary and reality had a different face from tradition.

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1. The Criterion. January 1939. Vol.18 No. 71. Editor's '<u>Last Words</u>'.

CHAPTER 1

The 1930 Poets

The Spanish Civil War which broke out in 1936 and which attracted the support of England's leading young writers, - so much so that some were even willing to sacrifice their lives - was by no means the source, but rather the outcome of a war atmosphere that had steadily been built up during the 1920's. The 'war to end wars' had put almost every European country on the defensive, as Julian Bell wrote in his satire '<u>Arms and the Man</u>'[1] -

> 'Russia's a threat - by being on the map -
> Or how can France her million men resign
> While fifty thousand Germans threat the Rhine?'

And John Lehmann in the same volume, sees

> 'The Modern World divided into nations:
> So neatly planned, that if you merely tap it
> The armaments will start their devastations,
> . . . .
> And very few are asking Why not scrap it?'[2]

And if England seemed more disrupted by her own social problems than by military preparations, a visit to Germany, which many young writers paid at this time, was sufficient to supply the deficiency in the forefront of their mind.

For we can gather even from their own opinions that war thoughts and impressions had never ceased to lie at the back

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1. '<u>New Signatures</u>' London. 1932 ed.
2. '<u>This Excellent Machine</u>'.

of the minds of those writers who had been just too late to enter the glorious conflict for which they had been trained while at school. Christopher Isherwood in his autobiography 'Lions and Shadows' wrote in 1938:-

> we young writers of the middle twenties were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war.'

And again Michael Roberts in his Preface to 'New Country' in 1933 points out how the young poets of his generation have never really known what it is to be free from the shadow of war, they had been brought up to be 'Sergeants of our school O.T.C.'s, admirers of our elder brothers.'

Owing to the new psycho-analytical fashion that followed the work of Freud, we find at this period a willingness in most writers to pry into the subconscious reasons for disappointment, frustration, and the timeless melancholia, - and continually the blame is laid at the door of war. The oddness which these writers seem to have liked finding not only in themselves but in their fellow writers - 'Lions and Shadows' and 'World within World'[1] for instance are full of caricatures where Auden, 'Chalmers', Spender, and Isherwood are concerned - this oddness time and again was balanced by a search for some communal cause. As well as pleas of individual

1. Stephen Spender's autobiography.

upbringing, men suffered communally from war, from public-school life, from Cambridge, from Fascism, from propaganda, from Communist lack of compromise, - and above all, in connection with poetry, from a society that had lost all contact between poet and ordinary reader. In connection with war, Isherwood wrote:-

> 'Like most of my generation, I was obsessed by a complex of terrors and longings connected with the idea "War". "War" in this purely neurotic sense, meant The Test. The test of your courage, of your maturity, of your sexual prowess: "Are you really a Man?"'[1]

The 1930's in England saw a general movement among poets to become Left-Wing supporters in the field of politics, and their names were connected with Communism.[2] The sense of a new movement emerging was fostered by their grouping themselves together, taking a definite communal stand, and contributing to periodicals[3] that were founded with the intention of bringing their views to the public.[4] As Arthur Calder-Marshal later

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1. '<u>Lions and Shadows</u>' London. 1938.
2. Spender joined the Communist party. For a history of the movement through the eyes of one of its chief members, see C. Day Lewis' '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>' pp.47-57.
3. '<u>New Signatures</u>' London. 1932., '<u>New Country</u>' London.1933., '<u>New Writing</u>' London. 1936-8.
4. John Lehmann afterwards wrote of the birth of '<u>New Writing</u>': 'as soon as Hitler triumphed in Berlin and the terrible stream of refugees began to pour over the world, this intellectual interchange between the artists and the anti-Fascist political groupings became even closer. I realised that this was beginning to create a literature with special qualities of its own, and a powerful realistic and human appeal' ('<u>New Writing in Europe</u>' New York. 1940.)

wrote:-

> 'There was never a decade in which so large a body of dissident writers felt enough unity to refer to themselves in the first person plural.'[1]

The whole tone of English poetry was being changed from one of despair and disillusionment that had dogged 1920 writers, led by Eliot, to one of hope at new vistas, to an urge to change the present state of affairs: Rex Warner, in his '<u>Hymn</u>' in '<u>New Country</u>', calls for a renewal of youth.

> 'Come, then, companions. This is the spring of blood, heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good.'

It might in part be accounted for by an atmosphere that was full of impending action, it might also in part have been reaction to the previous decade.[2] The state of war that we have already seen as the background to the minds of young writers was no doubt a great determining factor in making them politically conscious. So too was the economic depression, the queues waiting for the dole, the sight of social poverty and militarism abroad. But the great impetus was a world-wide surge, like the Renaissance and the French Revolution, that was washing clean and giving new life to all branches of civilisation, political, economic, social,(and within the latter - literary). The Russian Revolution has been spoken of as the most important event of this century. The difference between it and the many other small revolutions that have taken place

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1. '<u>New Statesman</u>' February 15th 1941.
2. Notice also what C.Day Lewis says in '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>' (Oxford.1934)'The Great War tore away our youth from its roots.'

in European states, is in the wealth of new ideas, almost of new philosophy, that lay behind it. It took some time for the full impact to reach England, but the 1920's -30's saw a rising interest in the way states are governed. Michael Roberts wrote of how, after the First World War, we lost all sense of security, feeling that the world was in nobody's hands,-

> 'Politics isn't, and hasn't been, a real activity in our time.'[1]

But now even poets were being drawn into the flow of political ideas.

Yet we might well ask if any of the 1930 writers had anything more than a naive grasp on Communism as a system to live under. Some, like Spender and Auden, turned to the Left-Wing partly because they had seen the dangers of Fascism in Germany.[2] To most of them it heralded a great and glorious beginning. As in many Anglo-Saxon battles just before the end - hope was renewed. C. Day Lewis' '<u>Magnetic Mountain</u>' is a rallying call, a pæan of joy, a looking forward with expectation -

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1. Preface to '<u>New Country</u>' London. 1933.

2. Arthur Calder-Marshal wrote in the New Statesman, February 15th, 1941, reviewing John Lehmann's '<u>New Writing in Europe</u>':- 'The pattern of the growth of Fascism, which obsessed the work of the 'thirties', was an intellectual formula, evolved by schoolmasters who knew no Fascists or Communists, no armament manufacturers or international gunmen...and when Auden and Isherwood were commissioned to report the Chinese war, they produced a book which Nero would have enjoyed reading while Rome burnt.'

> 'Broad let our valleys embrace the morning
> And satisfied see a good day dying,
> Accepting the shadows, sure of seed.'[1]

Spender in '<u>New Signatures</u>' calls

> 'Oh comrades step beautifully from the solid wall
> advance to rebuild, and sleep with friend on hill.'[2]

And continually in the background as a contrast lies the dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs to spur them on. Lesser writers are inclined as always to reflect the age more directly, to deal with the details that make up an ordinary man's dissatisfaction with life, - so Julian Bell writes sarcastically of England's economic depression

> 'Long queues of unemployed th'Exchange besiege,
> And that's all right, because of our Prestige.'[3]

And Rex Warner -

> 'Nothing keen in us workless, us almost crying,
> dogged, dazed, rebellious, cranked, taut or tied,
> who have lost the smile of the wind, the fierce heart, the
> glad heart and the easy stride.'[4]

And not only in these writers, but throughout the '<u>Magnetic Mountain</u>', we have emphasised the fact that 'the old order changeth, yielding place to new,' - that the old world has ceased to satisfy

> 'Geared too high our power was wasted,
> Who have lost the old way to the happy ending'[5]

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1. London. 1933. (Section 29)
2. '<u>Poems</u>' London. 1933.
3. Julian Bell. '<u>Arms and the Man</u>' ('<u>New Signatures</u>' London. 1932.)
4. Chorus from '<u>The Dam</u>' ('<u>New Country</u>' London. 1933.)
5. Section 26.

and that the time has now come to strike, - the fight has begun in fact a long time before England was forced to enter active conflict, because the whole age is reflected in the poet's mind as one of struggle.

> 'It is now or never, the hour of the knife,
> The break with the past, the major operation.'[1]

In his '<u>Letter to a Young Revolutionary</u>' Day Lewis emphasises Auden's view - that England is sick - and suggests that what is wanted is not just a new economic system, but a new heart - the task of the revolutionary is to cultivate in the Englishman 'the seeds of courage, jollity, truth and self-respect.' There is something highly idealistic about an opinion like this. There is in fact something idealistic in England's whole attitude at the time. Communism was popular - the theoretical side in blunt headlines had an appeal to those who were suffering from the depression of post-war years. We can get an idea of the temper of the times from a statement by H. P. Fowler in '<u>Peace News</u>' in 1938, reviewing '<u>The Russian Myth</u>':-

> 'Those who treasure illusions about the liberal outlook of the Russian régime, will not find this pamphlet pleasant reading. Nevertheless, recent events tend to show that the information which it contains needs a wider public, and the Freedom Press has produced a distinctly worthwhile pamphlet.'

But even allowing for popular enthusiasm, why should poets seize so thoroughly upon Communism and make it a rallying point,

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1. Section 25.

a means to effecting the changes they desired? Some did accept it as a complete creed, for instance Charles Madge, in his '<u>Letter to the Intelligentsia</u>' is writing party propaganda:-

'Lenin, would you were living at this hour'[1]

ending with a plea to the English to join the team, aware of it as a world-wide movement -

'we turn the pages
Of a larger atlas; telegrams come in
From China, and the world is mapped on our brains
Rainbow from cell to cell.'

And Auden writes in '<u>A Communist to Others</u>' from a similar point of view, although it is impossible with Auden to quote it as his personal viewpoint.

Most writers had had no practical experience of the working of Communism, - the behaviour of Communists in the Spanish Civil War brought disillusionment to many who came into contact with them. And in actual fact some poets were very careful how they committed themselves in any way, - Day Lewis, for instance, insisted in his '<u>Letter to a Young Revolutionary</u>' that of course the way Communism worked in Russia could not be expected to work in England.

But for most of these poets Communism was also a political means to a literary end. They hoped that a change in the state would draw together again poet and public. Herbert Read, although

1. '<u>New Country</u>' London. 1933.

not in support of the totalitarian government that Russia had provided herself with, sees that an "essential Communism" is needed to provide the classless society where art can flourish,[1] -

> 'it is almost impossible to be a poet in an industrial age, nor is it possible for art to flourish where there is no suitable relationship between an individual and society. In the classless society, the mind of every individual will have at least the opportunity to expand in breadth and depth, and culture will once more be the natural product of economic circumstances.'

There was a spate of writing on this particular subject. Michael Roberts raised the flag against 'the commercialisation of culture', and informed the intelligentsia that it could no longer remain aloof from politics[2] -

> 'It is time that those who would conserve something which is still valuable in England began to see that only a revolution can save their standards. It's past the stage of sentimental pity for the poor, we're all in the same boat.' ... 'Provincial life is impoverished and the intellectual is turned to a pettifogging squabbler in Bloomsbury drawing-rooms or a recluse "in country houses at the end of drives!"'

Eliot's warning against measuring out life in coffee spoons was having its effect on the next generation.

Spender in his essay 'Poetry and Revolution'[3] points out that the artist is bound by a bourgeois audience, - nothing new can be produced in that tradition, and there is no hope of

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1. '<u>Poetry and Anarchism</u>' London. 1938.
2. '<u>New Country</u>' London. 1933.
3. Ditto.

an audience outside it. Therefore -

> 'For these reasons he is tempted to feel that the artist should go into politics now as there is no need for art.'

In a later work[1] Spender insists - like Read - that the artist should not be a politician, but since a special kind of society is required for the development and freedom of the imagination, the artist must have an interest in the state, he must find a way between the armoured tank and the ivory tower. At the same time Spender also suggests, looking back on it, a reason for the failure of the 'Pink Decade' of the 30's.

> 'We were in a false position. Hypnotised by the sense of the necessity of saving civilisation from fascism, we were entangled in a net of theoretical ways and means which evaded our grasp..... These writers, artists, scientists, supported the politics which seemed to offer the one chance of saving their disinterested and civilising activities. But the intellectual, having given politics his support, became an Orestes pursued by Furies of Ends and Means, Propaganda and Necessity.'

The fact that it is the poet's DUTY to join in the struggle and take sides comes out frequently in the poetry. In '<u>The Magnetic Mountain</u>', the fourth enemy tempts the writer -

> 'You're a poet, so am I:
> No man's keeper, intimate
> Of breeding earth and brooding sky,
> Irresponsible, remote,-
> A cool cloud, creation's eye.
> Seek not to turn the winter tide
> But to temperate deserts fly.'[2]

But the poet's reply has the stern temper of Wyatt's lyrics and an equal irrevocability:-

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1. '<u>Life and the Poet</u>' London. 1942.

2. Section 23.

'Tempt me no more.'

The poet has a hard but necessary task:-

'Bayonets are closing round.
I shrink; yet I must wring
A living from despair
And out of steel a song.'[1]

When these poets got round to the actual fighting of the Spanish Civil War, they had already been through a period of revolution. In some respects the poetry produced on the war hardly reflects the sense of struggle so well as that produced just before.

It was a movement en masse in which poets were saying 'Let us go' rather than as in real war 'Look how they have gone'. It both possessed and lacked the characteristics of war. In the first place, it was clean and bloodless, - its imagery consisted of spies, barriers, frontiers, leaders, even of no-man's land, - but not of bodies and mangled remains. There is at times a public school atmosphere of 'Play up, play up, and play the game'. It fostered the sense of comradeship, with the poet as one of the band, but it relied on singleness of purpose and faith in forging a new heaven and new earth. C. Day Lewis perhaps had more of the spirit of the movement than any other poet. In '<u>Learning to Talk</u>'[2] he gives the rallying call of the '30 poets,- (and not only here but on several other occasions)

'Though we fall once, though we often,
Though we fall to rise not again,
From our horizon sons begin;
When we go down they will be tall ones'.

Comradeship did not exist through the pity or terror or shame

1. Section 24

2. '<u>A Time to Dance</u>' London. 1935.

Owen and Sassoon had previously distilled from war, although love is emphasised in a poet like Spender. But its heroics were now of a different calibre

'Bravery is now
Not in the dying breath
But resisting the temptations
To sky-line operations.'[1]

Day Lewis' '<u>Letter to a Young Revolutionary</u>'[2] asks

'Have you the courage not to be a hero?'

All the usual feelings connected with war must be revised, re-forged, and used deliberately in the common cause. All our efforts must aim at producing

'The integral spirit and the communal sense'.

The prayer of '<u>The Magnetic Mountain</u>' is not that we might be spared pain in the new Utopia, -

'But that we may be given the chance to be men.'[3]

Day Lewis constantly conveys the effort that is required on his part, making 'a depth-charge of grief', and W. H. Auden in a more impersonal manner suggests the rigidity of the Communist way of life, the passing 'Alive into the house'. We should notice the strangeness of this warfare as typical of a period that felt the strain, - all the mental suffering without the physical activity to relieve it, - the secrecy and at the same

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1. W. H. Auden, '<u>Missing</u>'('<u>Poems</u>' London. 1930. No.24.)
2. '<u>New Country</u>'
3. Section 34.

time the shouting aloud that it must be kept secret.[1]

The patriotic theme is by no means missing. Day Lewis spoke directly to 'You that love England', and Madge looked back on his time spent there with sentiments that it is the habit nowadays to attribute discreditingly to Brook:-

> 'Yes, England, I was at school with you, I've known
> Your hills come open to me, call me crying
> With bird voice, and passing I have been haunted
> By a wood, I have loved you, slept with you
> By moonlight.'[2]

But England does not stand as an image of freedom - rather is she connected with sickness and imprisonment, assumed deliberately as an image of the post-war years of hardship, the former being the impression Auden handed on to his followers, the latter expressed usually by out-and-out enthusiasts of Communism, with sentiments parallel to those of Wordsworth gazing from afar at the French Revolution:-

> 'Lenin, would you were living at this hour:
> England has need of you....'[3]

But how far does all this idealism of the early 'thirties' really reflect its age? It had the spirit of a movement led by the intellectuals themselves, but it had been inspired by the thoughts and hopes raised by Marxist doctrine, and in some ways it was a potted form of this doctrine. It drew upon the philosophy of its own age, even if in somewhat naïve fashion. So in

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1. A fine comic example of the deception and counter-deception continental society had devised for itself can be found in Isherwood's 'Mr. Norris changes trains' (London. 1935)

2. 'Letter to the Intelligentsia' ('New Country' London. 1933)

3. DITTO

'The Magnetic Mountain', the poet envisages

> 'a world where the will of all shall be raised to highest power,
> Village or factory shall form the unit.'[1]

And Spender tells us

> 'No one
> Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally'.[2]

But on the whole if reference is made to propaganda of any kind it takes the form of hitting at social poverty or stagnation, - Auden's 'A Communist to others' deals with a celluloid world, and in his song

> 'Come live with me and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove
> Of peace and plenty, bed and board,
> That chance employment may afford.'[3]

Day Lewis is deliberately showing in satire the state of the working classes in that day and age. The supremacy of bourgeois society is reflected, - and hated, by a group of bourgeois writers[4] who were intent on exalting the rise of the common man and supporting the proletariat. The third defendant in 'The Magnetic Mountain' is

> 'The petty bourgeois of the soul
> The middleman of God.'[5]

At the same time, it should be noticed that many lesser names

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1. Section 34.
2. 'Not palaces, an era's crown' ('Poems' London.1933)
3. 'A Time to Dance' London. 1935.
4. Arthur Calder-Marshal later suggested that these writers failed through refusing to abandon their own privileges. Yet at the same time, - 'We rediscovered our affinity to the journalist and mixed more freely than our predecessors with people of every class' ('New Statesman' February 15th 1941.)
5. Section 12.

belonging to the movement were deliberately drawn by the men in charge, from the working classes. And even if the authors belonged to the wrong class, the right subject matter was strictly adhered to. John Lehmann, speaking of '<u>New Writing</u>' tells us:-[1]

> 'In No. 2, which appeared in the autumn of 1936, there were, for instance, contributors who had been leather-workers, plasterers, dock-labourers, seamen, wood-cutters, and tailors' apprentices, and among the themes chosen by the authors represented in No.3, to take another instance, were miners at work in their pits, and miners wasting in unemployment, volunteers gathering in Paris for the International Brigade, workers fighting in Spain, homesick peasants struggling for a living in Burmese tea-plantations, peasants harvesting in France....'etc.

This of course fitted in with the Communist ideals of English intellectuals. It fitted in also with the emphasis on how the working classes were living, and with the need for something to be done.[2]

But we cannot say that we have any clear impression of what Communism was expected to accomplish, from the poetry. A little of what being a Communist might entail is found most clearly in Auden, who with his ability to select salient and characteristic detail gives us a picture of the self-repression and resignation demanded in '<u>Missing</u>' and '<u>The Secret Agent</u>'.[3]

But on the whole, "the cause" is usually represented by allegory - in '<u>The Magnetic Mountain</u>' there is the setting out

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1. Reference here is, of course, not merely to poets.

2. William Plomer's '<u>Epitaph for a Contemporary</u>'('<u>New Signatures</u>' 1932) shows what had come to be a recurring problem of the age, - the fate of the small individual, 'a saunterer on battlefields' - during revolution.

3. '<u>Poems</u>' London. 1930. (Auden). Nos. 24 and 15.

for a new country by rail, the mountain itself lying at the end of the journey, and the difficulty involved because

> 'No line is laid so far.
> Ties rusting in a stack
> And sleepers - dead men's bones -
> Mark a defeated track'[1]

And perhaps this allegory is used because the form this pioneering is to take is never quite clear. It was not until the Spanish Civil War that any outlet for action was provided, and it may account for the way in which the poets were ready to rush forward as soon as the war did break out.

While omitting the details, however, most poets at least managed to convey the atmosphere of war that hung over the '30's.[2] A poet like Julian Bell, with an eye more that of the journalist, does give us a superficial picture of events -

> 'The soldier yet, by Progress undismay'd,
> Can flaunt the pomp of war - upon parade.'[3]

But it is Auden is a poem like 'Which side am I supposed to be on?'[4] who can impress upon us the readiness and training for battle, the enemies summoning their hatred and envisaging the flight of the other, telling themselves which side God is on, and yet the sense that war is not yet come. All the military orders are there, the military machine, and the military regimentation, - rather, we might imagine, like the school O.T.C.'s, but of signs of

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1. Section 3.
2. There was no doubt in many people's minds at this time that some kind of a struggle was inevitable. Notice the literature being produced e.g. 1935. T. H. Wintringham's 'The Coming World War.'
3. 'Arms and the Man' ('New Signatures' London. 1932)
4. 'The Orators' London. 1934. p.103.

actual fighting there are none.

But where the poet's link with his age is superficially clearest is in a 'future-addict' like Day Lewis. He has a colloquial sense of his audience's way of life, and there are times when he seems to be playing down to it, to be deliberately saying 'Let's be modern.' So '<u>The Magnetic Mountain</u>' is an allegory of a journey by rail - almost like any pleasure trip -

> '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.'[1]

The present-day world, with its 'chocolate creams from the slot machines' is vividly realised. It is only when we approach the country without a name that the imagery becomes symbolic rather than photographic. Lewis' poetry is a continual alternation of the two, and the clamp that rivets them together is the sense of the familiar that pervades it, partly because the poet deliberately reproduces traditional metres and those metres and tricks of style we might associate with a definite and well-known poet. By making us constantly aware of himself as a poet still belonging to a tradition, half the fight in putting over new material is won. Yet the ~~means~~ method, from the point of view of modernity, is inherently pernicious. It can only ape, - it cannot embody an expression of its age as fully as a form and style beaten out personally by the age itself. It leaves valid only the superficial aspect - the mention of limousines, of railways, of X-rays,

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1. Section 4.

and of headlights.

When we turn to Spender, we find him a poet of his age who did not as blatantly as the others reflect his age. Apart from a few odd references to exploding shells and tanks, there is little either in the imagery or sentiments of many poems of this section of his work that is not timeless. But he speaks in the common cause and with a voice similar to that of his fellow writers, - the appeal for instance is usually to 'comrades', there is a rather vague emphasis on 'the love of man for man', and there is the avoidance of sentimentality (an intellectual reaction to the age.) Some of the symbols also run parallel:-

'Readers of this strange language,
We have come at last to a country
Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes all faces.'[1]

Where he does deal with events and images of the modern world, he is inspired by a historical sense of everything contributing to something greater than our puny plot. So we have a list in '<u>Perhaps</u>'[2] of political crises -

'The explosion of a bomb' -
'Top hats talking at edge of silk-blue lake'

the King 'in his skidding car' being shot -

'Did that war
lop off dead branches'
'Is it the Shape of Things to Come, that revolution
nosing whale-like at Antarctic edge?'

But the conclusion of all these contemporary events is one that

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1. '<u>Poems</u>' London. 1933. No.29.

2. Ditto. (Revised version from '<u>Collected Poems</u>' quoted.)

only Spender amongst the 1930 poets would come to - and which we shall see even more clearly in the Spanish Civil War poems. A conclusion which accounts perhaps for his admission in '<u>The Creative Element</u>' that

> 'Communism was a matter of conscience, not of belief.' -

> 'Perhaps it is the dead above the plain
> who grow; not our time bombs but Time
> monstrous with stillness like that Alpine range.' [1]

'<u>The Creative Element</u>', published in 1953, in telling us that the writers of the 30's were affected by the unemployment of the working class, making them dissatisfied with their own bourgeois background, also asserts that it was this dissatisfaction rather than any belief in Communism, as a doctrine that inspired poets. A poem like '<u>The Funeral</u>'[2] shows us Spender's own innate sympathy with a class outside his own, a sympathy that would tend to make the poet at least in accordance with the movements of his age. In this poem he is one with the workers laying to rest their comrade, who 'excelled all others in making driving belts' - he is at one with their hopes and aspirations, even with their thoughts:-

> 'They think how one life hums, revolves and toils,
> One cog in a golden singing hive.'

If we compare this with Auden's far more objective attitude, we will see why Spender had a Communist phase and why Auden had only a short time in Spain.

There is another aspect of these poets with Communist

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1. '<u>Poems</u>' London. 1933. No.30.
2. '<u>New Signatures.</u>' London. 1932.

leanings that tends, or would tend in some people's estimation, to show up their ideals as completely naïve.

'Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun'[1]

writes Spender of '<u>Those who were truly great</u>', - and his heroes will bring

'Death to the killers, bringing light to life.'

And again, in Auden's '<u>Spain</u>', the line to which Orwell took exception

'The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder.'

All these add up to a vision divorced from the real horrors of warfare. That there can be spiritual values to eclipse the physical nature of death is true enough, but these poets somehow have a carelessness that shows inexperience rather than a soaring above mortal weaknesses in coming face to face with death. Once the Spanish Civil War had broken out they were to become far more aware of it as a pressing reality, as the collection of poems by Day Lewis under the title '<u>Overtures to Death</u>' was to show.

Some poets, however, conveyed a sense of the destructiveness of war, - those with a steady eye on contemporary events and the realisation that another war was possible. Julian Bell, for instance, is inclined to despise the heroics that will lead to actual fighting:-

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1. '<u>Poems</u>' 1933. No.28.

> 'Yet, though for King and Country once men bled,
> What use areeither to a man that's dead.'[1]

But here we should perhaps note the career of Julian Bell. The 1930's saw both the Resolution of the Oxford Union and the Peace Ballot, both declaring against war. In 1935 appeared a book edited by Bell, '<u>We did not fight</u>', which contained experiences of pacifists from 1914-18. The Foreward tells us:-

> 'There are now fifty thousand Englishmen pledged never to take part in another war.'[2]

Julian Bell was one of these pacifists, and although it is only a small percentage of his work that reveals the fact, we must remember that he was really only at the start of his career. In a letter to Day Lewis he criticised the Communist Movement and the Marxist attitude, showing himself to be remarkably percipient:

> 'it is a humanitarian, romantic attitude, at heart like a child of nineteenth century liberalism...it has its origins in the uneasiness of converts from the bourgeoisie and in the bitterness and even more the snobbery of déclassé proletarians become intellectuals.'

Later, Bell fought and died in the Spanish Civil War, not because he had changed his mind about pacifism, but because

> 'I believe that the war-resistance movements of my generation will in the end succeed in putting down war - by force if necessary.'[3]

The Spanish Civil War was the outlet for many hopes (and fears) concerning the poets' own generation, and the desire to establish

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1. Julian Bell '<u>Arms and the Man</u>' ('<u>New Signatures</u>' London.1932)
2. Canon H. R. L. Sheppard.
3. Bell's Introduction to '<u>We did not fight</u>' London. 1935.

peace was only one of them. Bell is an example both of unfailing idealism and seriousness of purpose.

For the 1930 writers, above everything, took their ideals seriously. They had a firm belief that they could change the state they lived in. The poet was determined to do something with his age, and so at the same time was forced to take the age into account. The Introduction to 'Poems for Spain'[1] laid down, almost as a poetic principle reminiscent of 'Lyrical Ballads', that

> 'an understanding of the fundamental nature of political ideas' is 'a subject worthy of poetry'.

Not that the Auden-Day Lewis group were without their attackers, but when they were attacked, by Roy Campbell for instance, it was just as much on political grounds as on literary.

1. London. 1939.

CHAPTER 2

The Spanish Civil War

And then in 1936 came war, and revolution was real, and the hated powers of Fascism were there to be hit at. And there was hardly a young writer who was unaffected by it. As a pointer to what was to culminate in 1939 the Spanish Civil War was probably the most important event of the century. The sides were already formed for the great conflict and already at loggerheads. Europe was split into two camps, Russia had chosen her side, and Americans were drifting into the International Brigade. The mixture of ingredients that composed the fight - Revolution, civil war, international strife, struggle of political ideologies for supremacy, and even a Catholic Crusade, is only equalled by the number of things the Spanish War actually did mean to those outside it. We have only to look at Day Lewis' '<u>Nabara</u>' to realise that Spain was to those steeped in English traditions still a magic word that carried with it old heroic themes and battles long ago. And yet, to many who approached the war with high hopes, with an intellectual faith in an essential Communism for instance, it was their moment of disillusionment.[1] Spender, who

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1. John Lehmann compared the progress of the Spanish War with that of 1914-18, from its early idealism through to the disillusionment: - "From Auden's 'Spain' to George Orwell's 'Homage to Catalonia': the same parabola had been described" ('The Whispering Gallery' London, 1955).

performed his part in a series of miscellaneous and rather undistinguished adventures while attending a writers' conference, tells us in his autobiography of those details that were the turning point,- the intractability of the Communists, the failure of any system of free thought, the selfishness of most of those concerned.

After the Second World War it is difficult for us to view the Spanish conflict as anything more than a pinprick. But for the young writers of the time, it supplied the call to what Isherwood had summed up as 'the test of manhood'. They made it the rallying ground on which to fight for all the heroic qualities the century had either starved with poverty and unemployment, swamped in mass production, or failed to inspire in a commercialised civilisation.[1]

> 'See Spain and see the world. Freedom extends or contracts in all hearts'[2]

The Spanish conflict was the centre and the outlet for all the "war" thoughts and aspirations that had been built up in the 1930's. But just as it was the training ground for Mussolini's planes and armies it was the training ground also for the hatred war sharpens and the disillusionment it brings. At the same time there were those who went out to fight and to

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1. It reflected its age by its revolt against it.
2. Rex Warner, '<u>The Tourist looks at Spain</u>'(<u>New Writing</u>, 1937, Vol. 4.)

die like heroes. Clive Branson even in the prison camp of San Pedro sees the other prisoners as

'giants chained down from the skies
To congregate an old and empty hell.'[1]

But what is most striking about the attitude of those who were willing to go and fight on foreign soil is their sense of the inevitability of whatever doom awaited them in Spain. John Cornford, who was killed in the conflict and who was as fully aware as Owen of the physical horrors and pain war entailed, who wrote that the greatest fear is 'Flesh still is weak', at the same time embodied in his poetry the sense that here is the one chance - not for himself as an individual, but for the human race. And it is not the easy optimism of what up-to-now Day Lewis had been writing. The poet is really up against death[2], and his poetry embodies the immediacy of war, the immediacy of loss - in one slight lyric on his march to Huesca he can still write to his beloved

'Heart of the heartless world,
Dear heart, the thought of you
Is the pain at my side,
The shadow that chills my view.'[3]

In spite of this, like most of the young writers of his time, the poet thinks in terms of countries, nations, of the world.

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1. '<u>New Writing</u>'1939. vol.2.

2. But notice the superficial aspect of death, e.g. '<u>Battle of Jarama 1937</u>'('<u>Poems for Spain</u>'London.1939) where death is part of the ACTION, not something pondered upon as in the Second World War.

3. '<u>New Writing</u>' 1937. vol.4.

And he reflects the whole movement of struggle -

> 'Not by any introspection
> Can we regain the name of action,
> Whatever dreams may mean to you, they mean sleep.
> Black over Europe falls the night,
> The darkness of our long retreat,
> And winter closes with a silent grip.' [1]

Even in writers who do not deal with war, in Eliot for instance, there is the constant pointer to the world being wholly foul. But to these younger writers, the cause did not lie in 'the taking of a toast and tea' so much as in the necessity for regaining the name of action.[2] Fascism was training the minds of its young men to think in military terms, and the spirit of resistance 'could not stand apart.' It had above all things, a purpose -

> 'It is the aim that is right and the end is freedom.
> In Spain the veil is torn.
> In Spain is Europe. England also is in Spain.'[3]

And this purpose reflects its age's search for some solution to all the weariness, hardship, and spiritual sterility.

To many poets, as Day Lewis' poems on '_The Volunteer_' and '_The Nabara_' show, to support the Spanish Republican party was an act of patriotism. Warner wrote in '_A Tourist looks at Spain_':-

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1. '_New Writing_' 1937.vol.4.
2. We must remember that they went WILLINGLY, putting everything else second. See Richard Church's '_The Madrid Defenders_' ('_Poems for Spain_' London,1939)
   'Our love is another,
   Much greater than one
   For husband, for mother,
   For wife or for son.'
3. '_A Tourist looks at Spain_' ('_New Writing_' 1937.vol.4)

'Near Bilbao are buried the vanguard of our army.
It is us too they defended who defended Madrid.'

But this purpose meant to Cornford and the other fighters that

'We must learn to mock at what makes readers wince.'[1]

The pity of war will not be found among these poets - among objective observers like Spender and Read, - yes! But those who fought were poets who 'have no time to stand and stare.'[2] There is a lack of sentimentality about their poetry, a lack even of emotionalisation, - we might almost say they were soldiers before they were poets. Without any of the usual patriotic sentiments, without exploiting the usual flag-waving heroics of a just and righteous war, they entered the darkness and winter of Europe with resignation. Ewart Milne's '_Sierran Vigil_' captures something of the Spanish atmosphere, and its laziness seems to invade the sentiments; they are less rousing than stoic:-

'Where the lazy wall is down
Where the lemon leaf is poisoned
where the road is holed: where gloom of
cloud and sky is blessing: we
Speaking no good word for war
for heroics, for the kingly dust,
exalting not the self-evident murder,
turn: not assuming hope: turn, offering hands.'[3]

It is very much to the point that the three poems of Cornford

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1. '_New Writing_' 1937.vol.4.

2. ~~A poem like~~ '_Eyes_'('_Poems for Spain_') captures the sense of action, the lack of time to think.

3. '_New Writing_' 1939.vol.2.

that appeared in '<u>New Writing</u>' were prefaced by a translation from the Anglo-Saxon -

> 'Mind shall be harder
> Heart the keener
> Mood the more
> As our might lessens.'

Not that there weren't plenty at home who were doing the flag waving for them. '<u>The Nabara</u>' and '<u>Spain</u>' were no doubt meant to impress the age with its own events. The former especially with its reminiscences of the Armada and Sir Richard Grenville was a call to the stirring heroism of war. Day Lewis seems always in his "war poetry" to have tried rousing his age to action rather than being content merely to reflect it.

But it is doubtful whether writers inquired very deeply into what they were fighting for - and the fact is significant. The cause gradually became less important than the enemy, for Fascism was a clear-cut enemy, more so than Communism. Any idea about freedom, equality, and brotherhood could suffer disillusionment, -did, in fact for many writers, - but Fascism was pernicious.[1] Orwell in '<u>Homage to Catalonia</u>' tells us that he had not at first thought very much about the political situation before he went to Spain, that came after

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1. Spender wrote in his impressions of Germany at the outbreak of war:- 'However bad I was, Fascism was worse; by being anti-Fascist I created a rightness for myself besides which personal guilt seemed unimportant' ('<u>World within World</u>' London. 1951)

he had had experience of the many factions that made up the Republic. But, he adds, the one thing that held them together was hatred of a common enemy. In Spender's '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>', we have a vivid picture of Fascism as the big black villain, in comparison with which Communism is inoffensive, a lamb to the slaughter, more sinned against than sinning. In '<u>New Writing</u>' 1939[1], Goronwy Rees tells us that the concrete political situation of the play allows the characters to exist as political beings, the Judge symbolising 'the dilemma of the middle class.' In 1939 the middle class might have recognised this dilemma of theirs in the Judge, but read nowadays it is as clear as daylight which side the poet means us to come down on. There is no doubt which is black and which is white. Petra's brother is the embodiment of all those who were incited by righteous indignation to go out and fight in the Spanish Civil War

> 'To cross that frontier all I need declare
> Is I have nothing and I give my life
> To those with nothing but their lives.'[2]

In a way, the acquiring of a scapegoat was not only a direct reflection on one political ideology of the age, it not only reflected the antagonism Fascism was arousing in non-Fascist countries, but at the same time it was an escape from

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1. New Series. 2. Vol.2. '<u>Politics on the London Stage</u>'.
2. Act 1. p.26.

thinking that

'It is the world that is wholly foul'

While there was a definite evil to fight against, the men who were fighting it could not be so bad. They could even be heroes. For where Eliot had seen man as spiritually sterile, a new aspect was being presented to the 1930's - to be developed during the Second World War, - his propensity for utter inhuman cruelty. Spender's Judge declares

'Since once in my country
Such a murder is done, and there are eleven million
Who will applaud the doers, we approach
Smoking fields of chaos where
The integral mind melts in collected
Panic and cruelty.'[1]

An age of belittlement, of Shaw and Lytton Strachey and Huxley, and of a war in which man's personal suffering was shown up, of Owen and Read and Sassoon, was degenerating into an age of men whose whole purpose seemed to be to inflict that suffering. It had of necessity to produce its heroes to steal fire from the tyrannical gods. In '<u>The Ascent of F.6</u>', Mr. A. speaks of the climbers

'But these are prepared to risk their lives in action
In which the peril is their only satisfaction.
They have not asked us to alter our lives
Or to eat less meat or to be more kind to our wives'

This play was published as early as 1936 and may therefore

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1. Act I. p.18.

never have been meant as a comment on the Spanish Civil War, but it fits supremely well, besides containing many direct references to the dirt of international politics.

But as it went on, the Spanish Civil War became not only a clearance of the past and present, but a warning of the future. There was not only disillusionment involved, as in Day Lewis' '<u>Regency Houses</u>' -

> 'We who in younger days,
> Hoping too much, tried on
> The habit of perfection,
> Have learnt how it betrays
> Our shrinking flesh.'

But in the same volume[1] there are several poems, notably '<u>Newsreel</u>' and '<u>Bombers</u>' where we are shown the definite evils of war. The poet appeals in the latter, in a way which is typical of him, to basic human feeling on an everyday level, -

'Choose between your child and this fatal embryo.'

'<u>Newsreel</u>' offers a dig at man's indifference, with an increasing awareness of what war is going to mean to us, even if we are not yet directly involved. The 1930 poets had actually come into contact with it as a reality, and their intellectual strife had been changed to a far less bloodless one. We have only to contrast two plays, both by Auden and Isherwood, '<u>The Ascent of F.6</u>' (1936) with '<u>On the Frontier</u>' (1938), to see how the theme of the age, - struggle and achievement and

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1. '<u>Overtures to Death</u>' London, 1938.

conflict - allegorised in the attempt to conquer a mountain, became realised in the war between two states. One mirrors the thought of its age, the other its actual events. Both show different stages in outlook. But the former lacks the sense of universal calamity embodied in the second. Ransom's tragedy is personal, but that of Eric and Anna seeking 'the good place'

> 'Where the air is not filled with screams of hatred
> Nor words of great and good men twisted
> To flatter conceit and justify murder.'[1]

is one of any young couple caught up in war, a theme later dealt with during the Second World War. The poets were, perhaps before the general conscience of their country, becoming aware of world-wide disaster. Their interest in politics led to their keeping an eye on the world at large. Current affairs and especially knowledge of state régimes were their property. '<u>On the Frontier</u>' and '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' show this peculiarly contemporary outlook. They were aware of what was happening in other countries, just as other writers of the time, novelists for instance - Orwell, Huxley, Waugh, - have been ultra-conscious of their civilisation. They even considered it as part of their duty to be up-to-date.[2]

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1. Act 2. scene 1. p.68.
2. In Evelyn Waugh's novel '<u>Put out more flags</u>' (London 1942) there is a reference to two writers who went to America at the beginning of the Second World War. The discussion centres on Parsnip and Pimpernel as escapists:-"What I don't see is how these two can claim to be Contemporary if they run away from the biggest event in contemporary history. They were contemporary enough about Spain when no-one threatened to come and bomb Them."

It is perhaps a trait generally of a century of mass production, to regard man as a collective species, but the nature of mass warfare would tend to increase this outlook. Once there might have been a differentiation between the soldier and the rest of the population, but now there is a sense of man's responsibility as a race. It is why Eric 'could not stand apart'. In Bronowski's '<u>Take your gun</u>'[1], we find sarcasm at what man has done to man - a philosophy that might be found in the poetry of any age, but here roused to anger by the enquiry into man's (incredible) nature:-

'What are you, man, that gun in hand
with savagery and pity go,
and face to face with madness stand.'

The sense of man's responsibility was united with the sense of universal suffering, that mankind generally was to endure torment - not just the British army nor the brave soldier. '<u>On the Frontier</u>' belongs to 1938, a year before the World War broke out, but the scene was not only set for the fight, destruction was already under way.

'We cannot choose our world,
Our time, our class. None are innocent, none.
Causes of violence lie so deep in all our lives
It touches every act.
Certain it is for all we do
We shall pay dearly.'[2]

In spite of poems like '<u>The Nabara</u>', the state of mind of English poets was gradually becoming more and more pessimistic.

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1. '<u>New Writing</u>' 1938. vol.1.
2. Act 3, scene 3, p.120.

Auden, Brecht (in translation), and Spender produced poems on exiles and refugees.[1] Barker's '<u>Elegies</u>' have a sense of impending doom. The advance of the tide could be heard even above the Spanish conflict. In 1939 Bernard Gutteridge clinched the connection with his '<u>Spanish Earth</u>'[2], in which he shows the movement of war from Spain to England:-

> 'Now we can walk into the picture easily
> To be the unknown hero and the death;
> We who have watched these things as stunts
> And held our startled breath.'

The poets were only too well aware of the calamities of their age and could not stand apart from them. Events in Spain left their mark and they began to realise the full horrors of the death roll, until life seemed remarkably empty of all save the worst. It is little wonder that Virginia Woolf should commit suicide when existence had degenerated to

> 'The rapid death from ordnance
> And the slow from gas, the fascist whip, the nervous
> Horror of workless rotting at home, these are
> Our age, our dreams, and only poetry.'[3]

But these are the general comments that war elicited. Many poems were written on single events during the Spanish conflict by poets who were savouring an experience where the Spanish landscape and way of life was still a colourful

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1. Auden:- '<u>Exiles</u>', '<u>Refugee Blues</u>', '<u>In memoriam Ernst Toller</u>'.
   Brecht:- Poem translated by Spender ('<u>New Writing</u>' 1938, vol.5.
   Spender:- '<u>The Prisoners</u>'.
2. '<u>New Writing</u>' 1939. vol.3.
3. Roy Fuller ('<u>New Writing</u>' 1937. vol.3.)

manifesto of age-long traditions. A writer like Hemingway for instance, in '<u>For Whom the Bell Tolls</u>', could still combine a support for one side and a sympathetic insight into the mind of a modern American, with a feeling for those traditions and for a people who were steeped in them. Apart from the many Spanish poems that were translated into English at this time, some English poets attempted to write with an eye on Spain alone rather than on Spain in relation to the rest of the world. They tend to be more 'personal' writers like Spender and Herbert Read.

Especially in Spender, who liked savouring an experience, who could be found sitting on the cliff summit of Port Bou feeling the surge of events and the progress of life around him without the necessity for any sense of purpose to make the scene precious, especially in his work do we find something outside the immediate urges and horrors and claims of the age. The Spanish conflict had a poetic value, possibly because it was remote enough not to touch the poet too nearly except on an intellectual level, and because it could be viewed objectively as a mighty event in the scheme of things, and because it was full of isolated situations that lend themselves to the imagination. The young boy 'lying dead under the olive trees' for instance, or the two armies waiting in between periods of attack as in Henry V:-

> 'When the machines are stilled, a common suffering
> Whitens the air with breath and makes both one
> As though these enemies slept in each other's arms,'[1]

or the death of a Spanish poet, or the two comrades who are associated with the stopwatch and ordnance map presumably in one of those tiny personal missions that Hemingway described in '<u>For Whom the Bell Tolls</u>'. The war, compared with the world conflict that was to follow, was leisurely enough in parts to provide incidents rather than mass movements or mass destruction.

Spender's sensitivity allows him to sympathise with the fighters whose fate he did not share, and there is at times a similarity to Owen's poems. But because of this perhaps, the two are even more distinguishable in their attitude to war, and the wars themselves are differentiated. Even when he uses phrases from Owen, there seems a lack of any kind of emotion apart from Spender's peculiar sensitivity. Pity, anger, hatred, bitterness, pain, are absent in the following verse which is one of the pieces nearest to Owen and at the same time furthest from him:-

> 'Finally they cease to hate: for although hate
> Bursts from the air and whips the earth with hail
> Or shoots it up in fountains to marvel at,
> And although hundreds fall who can connect
> The inexhaustible anger of the guns
> With the dumb patience of those tormented animals?'[2]

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1. '<u>Two Armies</u>' ('<u>The Still Centre</u>' London.1939.p.56)
2. Ditto.

Compare this with Owen's 'What passing bells for those who die like cattle', and the resemblance will be seen to lie purely on the level of ideas. Spender believed in communicating experience, but it is less a dramatic communication than the lyricism of a passing scene, or well-known feelings and attitudes rather than sharp, unexpected contrasts that war usually elicits. That favourite theme of beauty versus ugliness, of the living versus the dead, or pity versus brutality, has its place in Spender, but only because both sides exist to make up one whole element, not because one shows up the other. Byron's purpose in his description of those who fell at Waterloo - 'Last noon beheld them full of lusty life' etc., or Herbert Read's in one of the most horrific images of those who fell in Spain -

> 'They are laid out in ranks
> like paper lanterns that have fallen
> after a night of riot
> extinct in the dry morning air' [1] -

the purpose of these is different from that of Spender when he contrasts the times of

> 'Heroes in the hall
> Where the feet thundered and the bronze throats roared'

with the present period when the names

> 'Are now furiously deleted
> Or to dust surrender their gold
> From praise excluded.'[2]

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1. '<u>Bombing Casualties in Spain</u>' ('<u>Collected Poems</u>'.London.1946)

2. '<u>Fall of a City</u>' ('<u>The Still Centre</u>'. London.1939.p.65.)

The contrast is on a less emotional and more philosophical level. We are always being reminded of the movement of time against the rigid present, of space and eternity outside us in which death has a different meaning. The continual imagery of moon, bones, white, space, and time seems brought in to every situation. The result is a resemblance to Yeats in an effect of remote loveliness and a constant widening of the subject into general realms:-

> 'And the watch flew off his wrist
> Like a moon struck from the earth
> Marking a blank time that stares
> On the tides of change beneath.'[1]

Because he writes as an observer of events, there is only on rare occasions any direct appeal. He tells us in his autobiography that while at Oxford he read Shakespeare, the Elizabethans, the Romantics, the Moderns, - and little else. And because he thinks in much the same way, his thought may seem at times to be cliché:-

'Perhaps it is we - the living - who are dead.'[2]

There is no evidence behind a remark like this to prevent us feeling that he has derived it from any source other than a sympathetic reading of Shelley.

Where we must look for his originality of thought is not

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1. 'A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map'. ('The Still Centre' p.61.)

2. 'To a Spanish Poet'. ('The Still Centre' 1939) Revised version quoted - see 'Collected Poems'. London. 1946.)

in ideas but in imagery and his use of it.
How then does a poet like Spender reflect his age, apart from direct mention of the Stock Exchange and No-Man's Land? First of all by the sense we gain of continual destruction and change, of 'the revolving and dissolving world.' Nothing is fixed, nothing can be gauged.

'He saw the flagship at the quay,
His mother's care, his father's kiss,
The white accompaniment of spray,
Lead to the bullet and to this.
Flesh, bone, muscle, eyes
Built in their noble tower of lies,
Scattered on the icy breeze
Him their false promises betrayed.'[1]

Then there is the feeling that we must get back to more human sentiments. Love is emphasised in Spender, Auden[2], and Day Lewis. The latter in '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>' (1934) gave an explanation of why poets of the time started from love, namely because it was necessary to re-establish brotherhood before poetic contact could be made. In both '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' and '<u>On the Frontier</u>' it is seen as the one thing that conquers, even against the terrors and political ideologies of the period.

Then again, a more realistic display of fighting entered poetry once bloodshed had actually begun in Europe. There is an extravagant display of it in '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' where the

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1. '<u>The Coward</u>' - see '<u>Collected Poems</u>'. London.1946.

2. John Lehmann reviewing Auden's '<u>Look Stranger</u>' writes:-"he sees "love" in a new guise, as the power which now directs the passion and ambition of the most intensely living men, to such unspectacular and humble tasks as underground party activity' ('<u>New Writing in Europe</u>'. New York. 1940)

Fascists describe Petra's shooting:-

> 'We dragged him screaming
> Out of the straw bed by the heels.
> I shot him, stripped. Then we stamped on him
> And kicked his face in.' [1]

But in the poems on the Spanish Civil War, much of the violence of the age is expressed indirectly through the imagery:-

> 'The light is fallen and you are hidden
> In sunbright peninsulas of the sword:
> Torn like leaves through Europe is the peace
> That through us flowed.'[2]

European calamity and personal are merged together in the same way as the age's rupture is expressed in the form of one individual's absence from another. '<u>World within World</u>' is a fitting title for Spender's style as well as his life.[3]

His is a completely different method from that of a poet like MacNeice who in his '<u>Autumn Journal</u>' (1938) has several passages on Spain and on England facing an impending crisis. We could very well read this as an interesting documentary of the time;- to tell us what is happening at one particular moment in one particular place is its purpose. This insularity, while at the same time being able to express aptly and wittily the ordinary thoughts of an educated man of the period, is MacNeice's peculiar gift. -

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1. Act I. p.17.

2. '<u>The Room above the Square</u>' (see '<u>Collected Poems</u>'. London. 1946)

3. Day Lewis makes a similar point about Spender's vocabulary:- 'Spender is unlike most of his contemporaries in that he relies for poetic effect considerably on the associational value of his words' (see '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>'.Oxford. 1934. p.69.)

> 'You can't step in the same river twice so there can't be
> Ghosts; thank God that rivers always flow.'

Such sentiments might have been the daily self-encouragement of any ordinary thinker just before the outbreak of war, the attempt to convince oneself that another war can't possibly take place. Yet at the same time we learn directly from MacNeice that 'The New Year comes with bombs.' But we are more likely to find in Spender the tragedy at the heart of things:-

> 'And although there is gold in the corn and gaiety
> In a girl's eyes or sliding along the stream,
> Everything is without a meaning.'[1]

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1. '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' London. 1938.p.46.
   See John Lehmann's '<u>New Writing in Europe</u>' New York.1940., for an appreciative criticism of Spender's insight into the issues involved in the Spanish Civil War.

CHAPTER 3

Auden and Campbell - as satirists.

In the 1920's, England, acting in traditional manner, sent to Oxford a young poet, well-educated and upper-middle-class; Oxford, acting in equally traditional manner, allowed him to grow slightly larger than life, reflected him to his face as a leader of poets who were to express a new age; and finally, the poet himself, having imbibed the literary tradition running through Shakespeare, Milton and Johnson, became a schoolmaster pending the full realisation of the age that was his destiny.

A little earlier than this, South Africa, acting in no less traditional manner, had produced a young man who later listed himself in '<u>Who's Who</u>' as a cattle breeder. This "cattle breeder", bursting with all the effusiveness of a country still in its swaddling clothes, and a little scornful of the pains and anxieties that attack an older parent civilisation, set out to be a poet.

The Spanish Civil War saw the cattle breeder on the side of the most high-necked Spanish conservative Catholicism, - and the Oxford high-brow at least behind the ranks of the newly infiltrating and revolutionary Socialism. But Catholic crusades belong in Western civilisation to past history, - it was Marxist dogma that was up-to-date, the new spirit of a new age. From the very nature of their upbringing and aims, W. H. Auden stood on the inside of that age whether he approved of it or not, and Roy Campbell, whether he fought against it or not, on the outside.

In Stephen Spender's autobiography, we have a picture of Auden at Oxford, judging, encouraging, changing, and directing the work of his contemporaries, in an attempt to set up a new school of poets to express the new age. In '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>' , published in 1939, Campbell wrote of

> 'The fat snuggery of Auden, Spender,
> And others of the self-same breed and gender,
> Who hold by guile the fort of English letters...'[1]

Between 1929 and 1939, W. H. Auden had planned, made, and succeeded in his attack on the fort of English letters. Campbell might, as his enemy in politics, style, and temperament, accuse him of employing guile, but he has all the same to admit that the fort is his. Auden was the poet of the 1930 decade against whom all other poets were measured. Campbell was well aware that his own poetry was moving to a great extent against the main tide of contemporary English literature as exemplified by the fat snuggery of Auden, Spender, etc. A great deal of '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>' is taken up with castigating poets of the opposite camp not simply for their political leanings but for the kind of literature they produced.

The eruption into the world of Campbell's poetic gifts was by a much more erratic and wayward process than Auden's.[2] He was an Englishman brought up by South Africa with results comparable with those of Kipling's Mowgli being brought up by wolves. The

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1. '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>' ('<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.143.

2. See autobiography '<u>Light on a dark horse</u>' London. 1951.)

latter never forgot that he belonged to the human race, though he found it difficult to return to it. The former never forgot that he was an Englishman, though he could never return wholeheartedly to English institutions and ways of thinking. At one and the same time he was fed mentally on the classics and indulged in a wild, powerful and open-air life of horse riding, and turning octopuses inside out. The result was that when he turned to consider life in his poetry, he was as far as enthusiasm went, an out-and-out Romantic; when he criticised it, he was a conventional eighteenth century satirist. In an age of complications, Campbell's poetry is as elementary as truth, and as stimulating as a concoction of the most exciting things in past literature dished up without any consideration of order, tradition, or development. From his position outside the fat snuggery, he sees:

> 'Some self-aborted pedants stray forlorn
> And pity those who venture to be born -
> Born, if they knew it, in the Morning's pride
> When never Death was sweeter to deride
> Nor Life so fresh and fiery for the ride.'[1]

People living in England after the first World War and the disillusioning years of peace that followed it, were not accustomed to thinking of the world as young. The thoughts that occupied Prufrock were the signs of advancing age. In his '<u>Georgiad</u>' Campbell mocks at one who was

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' Vol.2. p.143.

'Still in his tender disillusion sore
Because, ten years ago, there was a war.'[1]

We must remember that Auden was brought up in that atmosphere of disillusionment.

The poems of both Campbell and Auden, dealing in any degree with the subject of war, are part and parcel of the rest of their work. Neither is remarkable for what either the Spanish Civil or the Second World War encouraged them to produce, except perhaps that the former was the basic inspiration of what Campbell considered his greatest work, the "epic" '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>'. War might have influenced their outlook and ideas, and added to their subject matter, but it cannot be held responsible for developing their poetic geniuses or ripening their experiences to the extent that either can be called "war poets" in the same way as we allude to Owen. What the 1930 decade did for both was to develop their political consciousness. And the very fact that each has an interest in one particular side of the Spanish conflict is illuminating.

From the very beginning, according to Spender, Auden ruled that a good poem should be 'symptomatic' and show 'contemporary sensibility'. The poet should himself be clinical and detached, an 'ordinary man', 'dressed like a bank clerk'. From these statements we should expect objective poetry dealing with war,

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1949. p.224.

political parties, and world powers, as symptomatic of the age Auden lived in. Spender has told us in his autobiography that Auden never had a Communist phase, -

> ''A Communist to Others' is an exercise in entering into a point of view not his own'.

Auden's poems on Communism might reveal where the poet's interest lies, but they are far from being either support for the cause or propaganda. Spender's description of '<u>Spain</u>'as

> 'the best poetic statement in English of the Republican case',

captures its essential quality - it is from a political point of view no more than a statement of a case. True enough it expresses Marxist dogma in the changing bourgeois society,but there is no individual opinion behind it. In dealing with Campbell, however, we find a poet who knows why he is a Catholic and why he is on the side he is. He has a personal enthusiasm in his cause that approaches most nearly to Day Lewis'. But it is Auden's supreme gift to allow himself to be deeply enough involved in the thought of his age to capture its partisan mode of thinking and yet remain uncommitted to what he writes.[1]

There is to begin with, a difference in attitude between the two poets. In '<u>The Quest</u>' sequence of sonnets (1941) there

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1. 'The main role of Auden in his early work was that of Cassandra. As a poetic reporter, his poems survey without pity the disintegration of society and foretell revolution and war, while as a strong undercurrent is his interest in the neurosis of the individual faced with the impossible task of achieving fulfilment in such a society.' (Francis Scarfe - '<u>W. H. Auden</u>' France. 1949.)

is a description that might be of Auden himself:-

> 'Incredulous, he stared at the amused
> Official writing down his name among
> Those whose request to suffer was refused.
> The pen ceased scratching; though he came too late
> To join the martyrs, there was still a place
> Among the tempters for a caustic tongue
> To test the resolution of the young
> With tales of the small failings of the great,
> And shame the eager with ironic praise.'

Auden was employed in showing the faults and illness of society. When he portrayed it in the form of Fascism in his plays, it could be said that he was Left-Wing, but it was still part of a general social satire.[1] The majority of his "war" poems are not on fighting at all. What they do, however, is to take us on a journey round 'a low dishonest decade'. Auden uses his subject to tell us things about ourselves and our century. He speaks for a general consciousness, or as Spender puts it, he states the problem of Man in this Century.

And what in contrast is Campbell bent on telling us? In 'Flowering Rifle', we might note, he is using satire to make those who belittle mankind seem small:-

> 'For life and history are heroic things
> ...with the sagas and the myths they'll run
> Rejoicing with the seasons and the sun.'[2]

A tonic for weariness, disillusionment, boredom, and cynicism, Campbell stands out among the poets of his time, and knows it:

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1. Lehmann points out in 'New Writing in Europe' that it is interesting to see in 'The Orators' (London.1934 - the Airman section) 'how closely the schemes of the Airman and his feeling about the destruction of the Old Order are to the ways of the fascist mind.'

2. 'Collected Poems' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.233.

'As for myself I glory in my crime -
Of English poets first in all my time
To sock the bleary monster in my rhyme.'[1]

He is quite determined that his life will end with a bang, not with a whimper. Not even the horrors of the Second World War could depress his ebullience or prevent him loving

'the hard and stony track
Where humour flashes from the flint.'[2]

His generous, "grand" style and outlook is in direct contrast to Auden's dry, probing, scientific manner. And when it comes to war, we are among a welter of flying bullets, ravages, and lurid ferocities. It is from Campbell that we can expect an insight into what it was actually like to fight in Spain, and he is a poet who never spares the detail. The result is that a series of quick primal emotions are solicited from the reader in comparison with which Auden's poetry is complex and sophisticated.

Both poets look at their age from a satirical point of view. But Auden gives the impression of being not just a satirist by choice, but a satirist by nature. Whereas, on the other hand, we feel that Campbell can switch from various styles, - lyricism, propaganda writing, comedy, - to satire, whenever it pleases him. The nature of Communism is built up in '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>' in a series of events and images conveying its atrocities and compared with the hard-working side of Fascism. He hits

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol. 2. p.226.
2. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.69.('<u>Monologue</u>')

deliberately at his enemies in the same way as Pope hit at his, by railing at them, by sarcasm, and by a series of biased contrasts.

> 'The Russian was a savage: he of Spain
> More highly civilised and deeply sane
> Than most who read the papers in the train.'[1]

The way in which Campbell reflects his age is not in capturing its spirit, but in protesting against it. To him Marx and Freud have done the damage, to him the disillusionment of the age is a disease, and the poets who express it are part and parcel of it. It is an age that makes gods

> 'Of Economics, Science, Gold, and Sex.'[2]

And the poet has nothing but contempt for the lot, turning instead to a country that

> 'repudiates the Creed that barters
> And owns the sway of heroes, saints, and martyrs.'[3]

Campbell's intense faith in life and in himself, in man generally being able to rise above his situation again places him outside a period whose poets were desperately desirous of being contemporary. Moreover, although most poets were critics of the age and of aspects of social and moral degeneration that Campbell also criticised, they were more truly part of it and therefore to a certain extent lost in it than Campbell, who had at least

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.140.
2. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol 2. p.163.
3. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.188.

something to pose against it, namely that Crusading spirit that made him declare

> 'suffering
> Is all we have to conquer to be king
> Of more than worlds.'[1]

We are of course assuming that the hallmark of the age, the accent which the twentieth century has placed on our civilisation, lies in the city, and not the glory of cities but the sordidness. Campbell belongs neither to the age of cities nor the age of anxiety. When he writes of such matters he writes from the viewpoint of an observer, not as one who has become part of the life of his day whether he likes it or not.

He has an eighteenth century way of directing the reader's sympathy, and it is the vein of prejudice that gives life to his satire. When he criticised, the worst was there by contrast with the best. As far as war went, Campbell's inveighing against the Red atrocities in Spain brings out the crusading nature of his own side of the line. The one justifies the other. But in Auden's poetry[2] there seems no norm or suitable contrast, - the

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.173.

2. See '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>' pp.41 and 43. It traces a new form of satire back to Lawrence and Freud. 'At a time when the traditional moral standards were being questioned or discarded, Freud and his followers began to suggest quite seriously what Samuel Butler had said half in fun, that virtue was health and vice a sickness. We are not now concerned with the finality or extent of truth in this judgement. The point is that it gained a widespread credence among the cultured class in Europe and so gave poets some sort of basis, if only a temporary one, for the 'criticism of life.' It completely took the edge off the old weapons of satire: the satirist had used sword and dagger; now he must take up the scalpel.'

happy valley is there for poetic effect within its context in a poem like '<u>Missing</u>'. It is terrible and terrifying poetry in its plain statement of what seems the only ideal and the only best. It seems to say that if something better were possible then the present state of affairs might be criticised in contrast, but there is nothing really for it to fall short of. It has its age's sense, not of failing to live up to the ideal, but of the ideal ceasing to exist altogether.

> 'bravery is now
> Not in the dying breath
> But resisting the temptations
> To skyline operations.'

This is a particular kind of bravery that political movements like Communism, depending on Underground activity for the party cause rather than clean fighting, brought into the limelight in this century. It could in a saint or similar figure be idealised. But as it is,

> 'Heroes are buried who
> Did not believe in death,'

and these men are

> 'Fighters for no one's sake,
> Who died beyond the border.'

The negative quality of this bravery is unnatural, and we react to this at the same time as we react to the picture of a hero.

What Auden does use as a contrast to reality as he sees it, is convention, and at the same time as he is criticising the present day world, he is also in an undertone satirising conven-

tional ideals either as unreal or as valueless, by his very use of them in their context. So we see the 'summer visitors' and 'prize competitors' who reduce heroism to a professional sport. And much later in '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>' the horrifying scenes that Thetis sees portrayed in the shield are set against the ideals we have of the past that belong to a world of art, and, at the same time, the mother who desires that the world should be idealised in her son's shield is contrasted with Achilles, the son as he really is, even in his own time no more than a man-slayer. The overtones of one of Auden's poems are therefore quite immense, simple as it may seem on the surface.

The general impression of Campbell's work is that the imagery builds it up/ we are seeing war and everything else through one particular imagination. But Auden's work reflects the scientific training of the age; a poem like '<u>Missing</u>' is not a realistic portrayal of the outer characteristics of Communism, but an imaginative one of its inner essence, - and the imagery does not build it up so much as analyse it. In the same way he 'analyses' his age, in 'exact' terms conveying its desolation and colourlessness. It is possibly due to their strongly individualist temperaments that whatever Campbell chooses to deal with, whether it be the sorrows of war or the more humourous side of life, what comes over to

us is his joy and his enthusiasm -

'Life and I, with time to spare ...'[1]

No 1930 poet who took politics and the world situation seriously could have made such a remark. And what Campbell accuses English poets of, failing to find that joy, is to a great extent true of Auden. If we consider the present age to be predominantly tragic in spirit, we have to admit him its supreme vocalist. Even though some of the early poems could be spared the title of satire or criticism, so scientifically objective has Auden managed to make them, their tone is still one of over-all gloom.

War on the whole brings to a head the poet's feeling for the decline of human kind, displayed most prominently in the verse drama '<u>On the Frontier</u>' and the later poems produced during the Second World War e.g. '<u>Refugee Blues</u>', '<u>1st September 1939</u>', '<u>In Time of War</u>', '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>'. Two of these, - '<u>1st September 1939</u>', and '<u>In Time of War</u>'contain direct statements of how Auden looks at mankind, as a fallen race still on the decline. The latter is a history of man's degeneration from the days of Adam. Poems produced during or just before the Spanish Civil War are inclined to be more impersonal. '<u>Spain</u>' and '<u>Which Side am I supposed to be on</u>', to a certain extent accept war as something that has to be got

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1. '<u>Dawn on the Sierra of Gredos</u>' ('<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1957. vol.2. p.58)

on with to clear the way, - 'Today the struggle', even though there is something trivial and futile in the demands we make upon life -

> 'Are you in training?
> Are you taking care of yourself? are you sure of passing
> The endurance test?'

But '<u>In Time of War</u>' not only shows us the meanness of our present day way of life, but goes further, and shows us the smallness of man's nature.

> 'The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
> The little natures that will make us cry.'

Auden's has been the voice of the growing tragedy of the age. All man's neuroses come out in this century, - how he

> 'spoke approvingly of Law and Order,
> And hated life with all his soul'

and

> 'gathered into crowds and was alone'

Loneliness in the midst of crowds reflects again an urban, impersonal, mechanised world. The fact is emphasised that

> 'We live in freedom by necessity.'

Campbell enjoys writing about those things that belong to the ideal man in any age, about a natural joy in life. But there is in Auden, as might be gathered, a pinpointing of the way the smaller natures think, and the poet's method is that of the tragic satirist. As a tragedian he presents us with a situation or a problem, - '<u>The Secret Agent</u>' for instance is balanced, we condemn neither side, as in '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>' there seems no solution, because things are as they are. Combined

with this is a kind of intellectual pity, found in lines like

'The stars are dead, the animals will not look,'[1]

but growing even more prominent in the later work, in the scenes depicted on Achilles' shield, where three men are placed to die; -

> 'The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small
> And could not hope for help and no help came.'[2]

It is this finality, that no help ever comes, that we find continually in Auden's work.

It might be asked why, in a period when hopes were roused by the possibility of a Left-wing victory in Spain, and the establishment of those principles for which so many poets thought it worth while to sacrifice their lives - as Auden himself recorded it in '<u>Spain</u>'

> 'Many have heard it on remote peninsulas,
> 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.
> . . . .
> They walked the passes: they came to present their lives,'[3]

~~very strange indeed, that~~ - why the poetry of one who has been termed at least a 'pink liberal', should strike a note not of joy, but of sadness. Admittedly satire is hot so prominent in the early work as in the later. Poems like '<u>Fleet Visit</u>',

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1. See '<u>Collected Shorter Poems</u>' (1930-44) London. 1950. p.192
2. '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>' London. 1955.
3. See '<u>Collected Shorter Poems</u>' (1930-44) London.1950.p.191.

'The Shield of Achilles', 'Refugee Blues' and 'In Time of War' have become bitter enough to employ irony. But throughout his work Auden reflects the complexity of his civilisation. He lacks the single-mindedness and uncomplicated emotions of a poet like Campbell who at one moment can despise his enemies and at another can write

> 'On that dark night, too dark to say "goodnight",
> When what was gentlest in the shaken hand
> Cut like a sword - how could I understand
> My friends in their true mastery and height?'[1]

Campbell has a completely personal attitude towards war which in his early poems Auden lacks. Also he is inclined to take events as they come, - during the Spanish Civil War he was pro-Fascist, during the Second World War he was pro-British, - he acted upon his own experience of how a country flourishes under various kinds of government. He lived in Spain for some time before the war and could boast of being one who had

> 'lived beneath the two régimes
> And have not dreamed the Leftie Teacher's dreams.'[2]

His imagery, although not glaringly original, draws upon the detail of his experience rather than the century's experience, the squid coming in time and again. At other times he draws directly upon eighteenth century writers; for instance one

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1. 'Collected Poems' London. 1957. Vol.2. p.192.
2. Ditto. p.148.

event of the war when France's ships blockaded one of the ports, is described in terms Dryden might have used, removing from it the sense of contemporaneity.

> 'Where in the Ports the part blockades the Whole,
> Dead bulk out-marshalled by the fiery soul.'[1]

And it is interesting to note that the two most vivid and important poems on the actual warfare in Spain, - Campbell's '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>' and Day Lewis''<u>Nabara</u>', hark back to tradition in English literature. But Day Lewis brings tradition up-to-date - Campbell removes the present into the past. There are in fact certain elements in the Spanish conflict that are out of keeping both with what went before and what was to come after. And in standing slightly aloof from the early idealism, Auden might have been closer to the general temper of the century.

One very clear point about Auden's poetry is that it is far from the conventional type of war poetry - and as such reflects an age in which war has come to mean something more than just battles and trench fighting, - from '<u>The Secret Agent</u>' in which we see the underhand consequences of enmity exemplified in the spy system, to '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>' in which we have the usual everyday signs that a state of war exists, the shooting of prisoners at dawn, the line up of an army, looking, acting, and thinking in the manner war imposes upon it -

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London.1957. Vol.2. p.148.

> 'A million eyes, a million boots in line,
> Without expression waiting for a sign.'

Time and again, we feel that it is simply as a deliberate reflection of his age that Auden has produced anything at all on war, - because such things are 'symptomatic.'

There is an element lacking in Auden for which he has been greatly blamed. Patrick Kavanagh in Envoy, June 1951, points out that the defect in Auden's poetry is that it is earth-born. He has the quality of creativity in greater abundance than any other poet, a comic detachment from life like Shakespeare and can create the constant state of excitement that makes in the best poetry for an orgy of sensation. But Kavanagh finds that there is no progression to the religious healing also found in the best poets. He quotes James Stephens as saying in a conversation:-

> 'Auden was bounded by mortal walls. He didn't project.
> He had the power of earth-bewitchment but not prophecy.'

Stephens illustrated this by the ballad

> 'She died of a fever and no-one could save her
> And that was the end of sweet Molly Malone,'

which is where a poem of Auden's would end - but the actual ballad goes on

> 'But her ghost wheeled her barrow through streets, broad and narrow
> Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive O!'

It seems true enough that Auden, in the few poems on "war" subjects finds it sufficient to present a case or state a

problem, without even suggesting that there can be a solution. And this becomes part of the age's bitterness and acceptance that life will be bitter. '<u>In Time of War</u>' gives us one picture on the unknown soldier theme that has nothing of the conventional eulogy about it, and affects us not as the tragedy of a hero but as the tragedy of an age:-

> 'He will not be introduced
> When this campaign is tidied into books:
> No vital knowledge perished in his skull;
> His jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull;
> His name is lost forever like his looks.'

Heroism of the ordinary man has been extolled down the ages, but the realisation that the ordinary man is no better than he is, even while acting a heroic part, is a cruel blow that has descended in a century when the ordinary man is given the chance to develop. The deliberate earth-bound quality of Auden's poetry is very apparent here. We are not raised spiritually by this man's death because he himself

> 'neither knew nor chose the Good.'

On the other hand we might notice, no character in Campbell is ever 'ordinary' in this sense.

But however much Auden might differ from Campbell, there is one point on which they run very close, - and that is in an AWARENESS[1] of their age, of its sordidness and propaganda and false values. Where Auden takes us through it, Campbell

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1. The awareness of the 1930 poets generally can be seen in their self-consciousness and the amount they wrote on themselves, their movement, and its aims, in an attempt to explain their purpose.

raises us above it by being, as Edith Sitwell has put it, a 'poetic tornado'. In seeing much of modern civilisation as a disease, he again approaches Auden, but in his belief that the remedy and answer is there for those who seek it, he is very far from the Oxford poet. Even though the latter adopted the Anglican faith during the Second World War, it is difficult to see anything but intense ironic pity and bitterness in his war poems.

Campbell is never as detached as the Auden group of 1930 poets because he relied too firmly on his own emotions.[1] Although the Auden group were no doubt sincerely affected by their beliefs and the need for those beliefs, their's was a movement that relied upon THOUGHT. Spender, in his autobiography wrote that Auden had the ability to

> 'think of everything and everyone as a cipher within a pattern which he has invented to explain life in his own mind.'

And even when calling upon a Higher Being the answer Auden seems to be seeking is an intellectual one, -

> 'Clear from the head the masses of impressive rubbish;
> Rally the lost and trembling forces of the will.'[2]

The 1930 poets have helped to increase our consideration of

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1. This is not to imply that the 1930 poets were not partisan. Louis MacNeice tells us that whereas Eliot had sat back and observed,'The whole poetry, on the other hand, of Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis implies that they have desires and hatreds of their own and, further, that they think some things OUGHT to be desired and others hated' ('Modern Poetry' London. 1938.)

2. 'In Time of War' (See 'Collected Shorter Poems'1930-44. London. 1950. p.296.)

the age as one of movements, parties, groups, leaders and followers. But in the final resort, it was perhaps less a reflection of England than of what was appearing in English newspapers as happening in the world at large.

When Campbell hurled his accusation at these poets, that they were adding to the perversion of life, he was disregarding the rôle they set themselves in all good faith as physicians. We must remember Spender's criticism of '<u>Flowering Rifle</u>', (one of those bouts of literary mud-slinging that arise from time to time from firm convictions that have absolutely nothing to do with a work of art as such). He can hardly contain himself in his determination that the last word shall be a defence of his own beliefs:-

> 'Mr. Campbell indignantly repudiates the accusation that he is a Romantic. He is quite right, for the Romantics were distinguished by their disinterested passion for truth, equalled only by their love of freedom and justice.'[1]

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1. <u>New Statesman</u> March 11th, 1939.

P A R T II

INTRODUCTION

How the poets themselves viewed their own position.

The years 1914-18 so completely involved every man who had anything to do with the Great War, and so turned people's thoughts to considering the position they themselves held as part of the human race, that although much poetry bears no witness to the external events of the war, it still echoes a dissonant world. Walter de la Mare for instance has written only an occasional poem dealing with the subject. But however he might choose to turn from war's grimness, he is as much aware of it as Jane Austen no doubt was of Waterloo:-

> 'Nay, but a dream I had
> Of a world all mad.
> Not simple happy mad like me,
> Who am mad like an empty scene
> Of water and willow tree,
> Where the wind hath been.'[1]

Apart from those young poets for whom war was both an inspiration and stimulus - notably Brooke and Grenfell[2] - or even a source of patriotic flag-waving (see Kipling), - most writers can be generally divided into three main groups. There were those who intended to speak of the pity of war, those who intended to fight the stupidity of it, and those who intended saying nothing at all. And these were positions on which poets

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1. 'Motley' (See 'Motley' London. 1918.)
2. See Brooke's sonnets, especially 'The Dead', and Grenfell's 'Into Battle'. cf. airforce fighters during the Second World War.

deliberately took their stand. The latter group found a voice in one of the major poets of his age, W. B. Yeats. On being asked for a war poem, he wrote:-

> 'I think it better that in times like these
> A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
> We have no gift to set a statesman right;
> He has had enough of meddling who can please
> A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
> Or an old man upon a winter's night.'[1]

Twenty years later, W. H. Auden wrote an ode on the death of Yeats[2] in which he remarked:-

> 'For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its saying where executives
> Would never want to tamper: it flows south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth.'

The Second World War had its poets, like Eliot, who remained silent on the subject. And, it might be noted, it was one of the Left Wing poets of the '30's who is adopting the non-Platonic view that poetry makes nothing happen.

But the similarity between the two wars does not end here. The poets' awareness of their position produced similar proclamations of purpose on another matter. When Wilfred Owen made his famous manifesto:-

> 'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity',[3]

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1. See '<u>The Wild Swans at Coole</u>' London. 1919.
2. '<u>In Memoriam W. B. Yeats</u>' ('<u>Another Time</u>' London. 1940.)
3. See '<u>The Poems of Wilfred Owen</u>' ed. Edmund Blunden. London. 1931. Owen's own Preface, p.40.

he was setting himself up as a voice for those mutilated, suffering comrades of his, in the same way as Sidney Keyes in 'The Foreign Gate'[1] offered himself as a bridge, a medium and a mouth, telling his brothers to

> 'Cry through the trumpet of my fear and rage.'

As soldiers, both sympathised with the suffering and approaching death to be met with in battle.

But there is one element continually voiced in the First World War that does not belong to the Second. When Owen wrote that the only poetry he was concerned with was the pity of war, he added:-

> 'Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.'[2]

The accent for all the poets who felt it their duty to write about the war, was on truth, on letting the nation know what really happened, what it really felt like to be

> 'involved in the indignities of war.'

In his 'Ode, Written during the battle of Dunkirk,May,1940'[3] Herbert Read told of his experience of coming through the First War:-

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1. See 'Collected Poems' London. 1945.
2. See 'The Poems of Wilfred Owen' ed. Edmund Blunden. London. 1931. Owen's own Preface. p.40.
3. See 'A World within a War' London. 1944.

'One of the dazed and disinherited
I crawled out of that mess
with two medals and a gift of blood-money.
No visible wounds to lick - only a resolve
to tell the truth without rhetoric
the truth about war and about men
involved in the indignities of war.'

In the '<u>Fortnightly Review</u>'[1] Patric Dickinson goes so far as to accuse Owen of writing poetry that will probably be more painful than consolatory to a future generation. Whether we agree with this or not, it corroborates the view that many First War poets sought before all things to keep their eye on truth.

It seems possible to ascribe this to the shock poets, as indeed most other men, sustained during that particularly protracted and bloody carnage. Osbert Sitwell's '<u>The Poets Lament</u>' that prefaces his '<u>Poems of the Last and the Next War</u>'[2] tells of how war brought about the evolution of pure poet to satirist:-

'Before the dawning of the death-day
My mind was a confusion of beauty.
Thoughts fell from it in riot
Of colour,
In wreaths and garlands of flowers and fruit.....

Then the red dawn came
- And no thought touched me
Except pity, anger
And bitter reproach.'

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1. London. 1944.

2. See '<u>Collected Satires and Poems</u>' London. 1931.

The shock sustained during the First World War resulted in a far more concentrated bitterness than anything during the Second. It accounts for many things, for the misery of Owen, the hatred of Sassoon, the satire of Sitwell. Above all, for the resolve that the statesmen (and to Osbert Sitwell, Cain was the first statesman) were not going to get away with it. The poet had a duty to keep on reminding the world.

> 'We shall sing to you
> Of the men who have been trampled
> To death in the circus of Flanders.'[1]

And in the poem 'Rhapsode', again comes the manifesto of the second half of the war that repudiates the earlier attitude of Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell:-

> 'You hope that we shall tell you that they found their happiness in fighting,
> Or that they died with a song on their lips,
> Or that we shall use the old familiar phrases
> With which your paid servants please you in the press:
> But we are poets,
> And shall tell the truth.'

And there perhaps lies the great difference between the First and Second World War poets. The former set themselves the task of reflecting the age to the age, partly because the men who went out to fight were so divorced from the civilians who stayed at home. Hitler and the Luftwaffe not only evened out the area of suffering, but changed the need for one half of a country in arms to understand the other half, to the need for a whole nation

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1. 'Rhapsode' (See 'Collected Satires and Poems' London. 1931.

to understand the same experience. And even though Day Lewis might attack in a short poem the men who have destroyed the poet's hopes,[1] and though John Lehmann might describe Keyes' poetry as

> 'bitter brooding on the cards that fate has dealt his generation,'[2]

the prevailing note in the Second World War poetry that has any value, the poetry that the poets were writing, is not primarily the bitter realism of the First War, although some of the sadness and complaint is retained, but what Lehmann has described as

> 'the realism of the '30's, combined with a new spiritual probing.'

In a series of articles under the title '<u>The Armoured Writer</u>' he suggests there is a change from the "realist movement" of the '30's, writers are turning more towards symbolism, but at the same time they will still be aware of the age:-

> 'There can be no going back to purely esoteric literature, except among those who are entirely out of touch with the life of their time.'

On the other hand in the modern world

> 'there is no true and complete picture of existence in which the unseen, what lies beyond our five senses and logical proof, does not play a part.'

Writers today make use of 'poetic symbolism against surface realism', but it does not cancel out the awareness of the age.

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1. '<u>Where are the War Poets?</u>'(See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London.1954) In this poem Day Lewis speaks quite bitterly of the war - mongers who have forced poets into the position where they c an only'defend the bad against the worse.'
2. '<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' Autumn 1942.('<u>The Armoured Writer</u>' V.)

And with the discrediting of the formula for Utopia with the failure of the Spanish Civil War, the way is clear for a modern tragedy. At first Lehmann is thinking in terms of prose, but later admits that a vision of the age might be achieved by a collection of lyrics. But the emphasis is always on

'a vision of the age'.

If we look back to Owen, we will find in his last poem '<u>Strange Meeting</u>', that this poet had progressed towards a synthesis of Lehmann's surface realism and poetic symbolism that was to appear more markedly during the Second War. It is interesting, moreover, because here in this last poem is the cry of the poet truly and solely in his role, of poet against a war that destroyed the writing of poetry:-

'Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
. . . .
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.'

The poet bound by his age, forced by that age to fetter himself and destroy his own gifts - this is the young poet's cry peculiar to the modern world of mass warfare and conscription. And it looks forward to a later pronunciation from Keyes -

'I am the man who looked for peace and found
My own eyes barbed.
I am the man who groped for words and found
An arrow in my hand.'[1]

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1. '<u>War Poet</u>' (See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.)

We must make allowance for the sensitivity of the artist in assessing how seriously he took his own position in wartime. In '<u>A Moment's Escape</u>'[1], Richard Church confessed

> 'A continent upon my back,
> Heavy with threats of war,
> Leaden with tyrannies,
> I crept away from man.'

This desire to be rid of the weight and oppression of the modern world must be a natural corollary of the imaginative temperament. And with very few exceptions, poets show a complete aversion to the kind of life to which war has brought the human race. Among the better poets, Roy Campbell alone seemed to retain that jocularity which might at times pass through dungeons only to emerge into bright sunshine, but never passed like most writers through a shadowed valley. For too many of them were the horrors of war magnified. In '<u>The Cycle</u>'[2] Church wrote of how

> 'Knowing these things were coming with the heroes,
> I turned aside, hiding my head in fear,
> And in that individual darkness saw
> With a prophet's eye, the bomb before it fell.'

But the dominant feeling of the poet of the Second World War, is that he has a duty to go on writing.

> 'Yet words there must be, wept on the cratered present,
> To gleam beyond it;
> Never was cup so mortal but poets with mild
> Everlastings have crowned it.'[3]

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1. 'The Solitary Man' London. 1941.
2. Ditto.
3. C. Day Lewis. '<u>Word Over All</u>'(See '<u>Word Over All</u>' London.1943)

Day Lewis is here pointing out how the agony of our time can be made into a shining example of courage by the poet. He is speaking for those who intended to write expressly for a nation or a world involved in war.

And whether they were writing explicitly on the war or not, poets of the Second War were aware that they were writing for an audience that was undergoing the stresses of a conflict where victory seemed ultimately to lie with the spirit.[1] In 1944 Eliot published his '<u>Four Quartets</u>'. From Richard Church came '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>', - even though in 1936 this particular poet, in view of the younger generation's aspirations towards "Progress" , had written,

> 'It is time for us, the middle generation,
> To stop singing. . . . . .
> . . . .
> the broken and spilled,
> The scrannel-piped scare-boys on the old battlefield.'[2]

Stephen Spender joined the fire service so that he could go on writing poetry, and in '<u>New Writing</u> ' (1941), although insisting on the importance of political beliefs in a political age, added

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1. E. M. Forster gives us an account in '<u>Abinger Harvest</u>' of how, during the First World War when stationed in India, he came across the work of T. S. Eliot, and how he was affected by the poet's disgust at tea parties:- 'For what, in that world of gigantic horror, was tolerable except the slighter gestures of dissent? He who measured himself against the war, who drew himself to his full height, as it were, and said to Armadillo-Armageddon 'Avaunt!' collapsed at once into a pinch of dust. But he who could turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing-rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect, he carried on the human heritage.'

2. '<u>The War-Time Singers</u>' ('<u>Twelve Noon</u>' London.1936.)

'The business of the poet is not so much to criticise life as to show where it exists, and to insist that with all its weaknesses and all its needs it does in fact exist.'

He quotes then from Auden:-

'All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie.'

The emphasis is on the poet as a voice, because he can express his age with it, like Keyes the suffering of his fellow soldiers, like Auden the state of the world today. Donald Bain in '<u>War Poet</u>'[1] wrote:-

'It may be that our later selves or else our unborn sons
Will search for meaning in the dust of long deserted guns,
We only watch, and indicate and make our scribbled pencil notes.
We do not wish to moralize, only to ease our dusty throats.'

This is something completely different from either the bitterness, the enthusiasm or the flag-waving of the First World War. It springs from the poet's feeling for both the inadequacy of his position, and also its power. All he has is a voice, but still it can undo the folded lie, - not in literal terms perhaps, but on a different level. And combined with the feeling that the poet must speak, is the sense that he must speak for and to his age.

Osbert Sitwell in an essay on '<u>Wilfred Owen</u>'[2] wrote:-

'the very phrase War Poet indicates a strange twentieth-century phenomenon, the attempt to combine two incompatibles. There had been no War Poets in the Peninsular, Crimean, or the Boer Wars. But War had suddenly become transformed by the effort of scientist and mechanician into something so

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1. '<u>Penguin New Writing</u>' 21. 1944.

2. Ditto. 26. 1946.

infernal, so inhuman, that it was recognised that only their natural enemy, the poet, could pierce through the armour of horror with which they were encased to the pity at the human core; only the poet could steadily contemplate the struggle at the level of tragedy...... The invention of the atomic bomb again changed these values; for war has once more altered its character, and an Atomic Bomb Poet is not to be thought of.'

CHAPTER 1

A. The Older Generation of Poets.

Because of the nature of the Second World War, it was not just the young men, the fighters, and the army chieftains who sampled the onrush of battle. Where, in the First World War there had been a distinct difference between being at the front and returning home on leave, it might during the Second World War have been more of a disadvantage to return to a bombarded London than to remain on duty in a fairly quiet outpost. It meant that war could be experienced by all generations, whether fit for active service or not, and it also meant that poets of widely varying age and life were caught up in it.

It might well be expected that a poet who lived through both wars would look with different eyes at the second one than the young men who were sampling fighting for the first time. To consider the differences and similarities there are between the work of dissimilar generations, we will divide the writers into three groups, - the older generation, many of whom had fought during the First War, - the middle generation born at the opening of the century, who had grown up during the first war, and many of whom had formed the nucleus of Spanish Civil War supporters, - and finally the younger generation who usually write from their positions on the battlefield.

The older generation, including men like Blunden, Read, Church, Palmer, and G. Rostrevor Hamilton, form a rather miscellaneous group. For although years of war may draw men together

if not in a single cause at least through common experience, years of peace are likely to divide them, sending each along his separate path. And they will bring to the mere observation of a second war twenty years later, not simply the memories they might share of the previous fight, but at the same time all those years of separation that lie between. In spite of this the Second World War seems to have drawn from them thoughts and ideas that distinguish them as a group.

Herbert Read is perhaps the poet who most clearly moved in a straight line from First to Second War, partly because the years between he spent with an eye on the political situation after his personal experience of European conflict, and hence reflected part of the movement of history. He was caught up in the intellectual thought of his age, mirroring its trials and needs, its search for an answer in a form of Communism, and its final disillusionment.

During the Second War he deliberately looks back and has the continual sense of the failure of the years between. In the Preface to his autobiography he wrote:-

> 'These pages will make sufficiently clear that I consider the no-man's-years between the wars as largely futile, spent unprofitably by me and all my kind.'[1]

'To a Conscript of 1940'[2] sums up the disillusionment of those people who lived through the first war and hoped for great things

1. 'Annals of Innocence and Experience' London. 1940. p.9.
2. 'A World within a War' London. 1944.

from it. The Second War has given the final blow to a structure that was already crumbling in the years of hardship that followed 1918.

> 'We think we gave in vain. The world was not renewed.
> There was hope in the homestead and anger in the streets
> But the old world was restored and we returned
> To the dreary field and workshop, and the immemorial feud
> Of rich and poor.'

Now there is retribution, and the young paying for the faults of their fathers.

Like many of the older generation, Read gives the impression almost of puzzlement that this has happened before, and now it is happening again. The older poets are never tired of saying in one way or another -

> 'This is not the first time!'

From this arises a sense of history, a feeling for the age in its place among all other ages, that only perhaps the old can really grasp. In '<u>The Contrary Experience</u>', Read sees history repeating itself:-

> 'Lybia, Egypt, Hellas,
> the same tide ebbing, the same gull crying.'[1]

And yet he realises that war itself is changed,

> 'the crusade heart outshatter'd'.[2]

The answer is one we will find in the other writers of this group, to go on in spite of everything, and knowing the hope-

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1. '<u>A World within a War</u>.' London. 1944.
2. '<u>War and Peace</u>' ('<u>A World within a War</u>'. London. 1944.)

lessness of it -

> 'To fight without hope is to fight with grace,
> The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired.'[1]

To reach this point the poet has been through the pit of despair at the condition of man. The intellectual agnosticism that opened the century meant that our period is one of humanism, - only those with faith in God

> 'can wait patiently for the end.'

> 'But we who have put our faith
> in the goodness of man
> and now see man's image debas'd
> lower than the wolf or the hog -
> Where can we turn for consolation?'[2]

The First World War elicited horror and pity - for the beauty of the flesh that was destroyed and the agony endured. The actual witnessing of bloodshed and death seemed to create a tenderness for the body of man. To debase him was to tear him limb from limb. But when Read writes of man's image being debased in the Second War, he means something far more intellectual. It is not the beauty of man but the goodness of man that is being desecrated, - an entirely new stand, which an older poet can grasp.

It is from the older generation that we might look for a decrial of all the flagwaving that poets did at the opening of

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1. 'To a conscript of 1940' ('A World within a War' London. 1944.)

2. Dunkirk 'Ode' ('A World within a War' London.1944.)

the First war. Read tells us that he has learnt what heroism really is, the reality and not the ideal, there are no illusions left now, except perhaps in the simple goodness of man.[1]

> 'But one thing we learned: there is no glory in the deed
> Until the soldier wears a badge of tarnish'd braid;
> There are heroes who have heard the rally and have seen
> The glitter of a garland round their head.
> Their's is the hollow victory.'[2]

He has also learnt what sacrifice means and he writes to advise the young. His whole attitude in fact is that of the onlooker, the man who knows because he has had experience of it. He represents that generation that had to accustom themselves once again to a terror that they had already fought one war to end. And just as they have one foot in the past, they look forward to the next phase of history in the future.

> 'The root deep in the dark soil of the past
> but deeper in the unform'd future
> is folded the flower.'[3]

In '<u>A World within a War</u>', the poet retires to a secret world and preaches inward peace, going back to the way in which friars and martyrs found grace, forgiving and nulling pain. Even as early as '<u>Kneeshaw goes to war</u>' the poet sought to prove how important is the individual soul and its response to life in general. His concluding thoughts on the First War are to be

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1. '<u>Annals of Innocence and Experience</u>' London. 1940. p.9.
2. See '<u>To a conscript of 1940</u>' ('<u>A World within a War</u>'. London. 1944.)
3. Dunkirk '<u>Ode</u>' ('<u>A World within a War</u>'. London.1944.)

found in 'The End of a War'[1], in which he touches on the meaning of life and God's part, through three dramatic monologues. There, one alternative conclusion he came to was that this is the world's last tragic act. The Second War pvoed that this was not so, so much so that in his autobiography Read sees the crisis as one of a young world breaking through its parent bondage. But it is not until 'A World within a War' that we feel that he is seeking a personal re-assurance. There is hope in the future if not joy, and a search for the healing of those wounds opened by the disillusionment of 1914-18.

Edmund Blunden was another poet who fought in and wrote much on the First War, much more than on the Second. In 'War's People' he told us

> 'We went, returned,
> But came with that far country learned.'[2]

The impression of the First War saw so distinct that it became part of man's nature. Like other poets his memories in his early poems were full of pity and horror, of the hardness of death because death was never desired, a death full of harsh detail, lacking all graciousness -

> 'Worley with a tot of rum
> And shouting in his face could not restore him.'[3]

The pastoral nature of his early poetry is combined with this

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1. London. 1933.
2. 'Poems 1914-30' London. 1930.
3. 'Pillbox' ('Undertones of War'. London. 1936.)

strong realism, -

'the lean green flies upon the red flesh madding'[1]

to indicate the

'weary hate of foul and endless war.'

Like the rest of his generation, Blunden was just as bitter against the "vicarious heroes", and did not hesitate to attack where attack was needed. His pre-occupation with the subject can be seen in the number of times he recalled the First War during the peace years.

But the Second War poetry is like an '_Oedipus at Colonus_' following an '_Oedipus Rex_'. The volume entitled '_After the Bombing_'[2] has very little reference to actual warfare and death, - it shows mainly the gradual growth of peace and how nature is never deterred by man's upheavals.

'That brown patch in the wood is where the last bomb shattered,
And next year's bluebells wait to show how much it mattered.'[3]

Compared with the photographic accounts of life in the trenches in 1914-18 his description of bombs during the Second War in '_When the Statue fell_', is light, romantic, almost flippant -

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1. '_Third Ypres_' ('_Undertones of War_'. London. 1936.)
2. London. 1949.
3. '_Southern England in 1944_' ('_After the Bombing_' London. 1949.) cf. Hardy's '_In the time of the breaking of nations_.'

'Heard a new voice, of thunder-throated things
Behind the hills, and hideous travellings
Of airy devils; into roof and room
These raced their way and ruptured into smoke,
And here and there and everywhere outbroke
The mad plague murderous.'[1]

The most piteous poem is '<u>For the Fallen</u>'[2] and even there the note is one of pathos rather than bitterness. That same bitterness of the First War was replaced by the realisation that this war is different from others, that men chose to enter it of their own free will knowing exactly what it means:-

'So you have chosen, saying little, knowing
That surface paths are counted easier going,
That other wars make quicker, gaudier showing.'[3]

It is a truth about the younger generation that went out to fight, - without the illusion of there being anything heroic in the war or in its purpose.[4]

But turning to '<u>Inter Arma</u>' we find a quiet optimism about what man desires, and therefore hope for the future:-

'Being asked to conceive that the fortune of war now raging
In forms of blazing metal and desperate valour
Will settle the question of life worth living or not
For a century hence, I could only doubt the relevance
Of such slant argument.'

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1. '<u>After the Bombing</u>' London. 1949.
2. Ditto:- 'And where are all we millions
Who joined in that compulsive chase?
Some of us were unlucky;
Perhaps were not. Poor human race,
Remember us, though gone with never a trace.'
3. '<u>The Boy on Leave</u>' ('<u>Shells by a Stream</u>'. London. 1944.)
4. For a comparison with the First War fighters see Humbert Wolfe's '<u>News of the Devil</u>' London. 1926. p.30.

'Through transient stress, young love and grace return.
What war decides, though slow we are to learn,
Is war's concern.'[1]

Notice that war as a force has become a 'slant argument'.

Richard Church, in contrast with Blunden, is a poet who has written practically nothing on the First War but a great deal on the Second. He writes usually from the standpoint of the small individual who turns to his gardening for security in this world tornado. At the same time he is aware of old age, of belonging more entirely to a previous war, of being an onlooker. He refers to 'your generation' as knowing

'The worst that can befall the race of man'[2]

and speaks of himself as one of

'The scrannel-piped scareboys on the old battlefield.'[3]

'The Wartime Singers' at the same time gives us a picture of the young generation refusing to listen to the old, and eliciting from them a certain admiration for their

'strange, hard music, compounded on different laws.'

The fact that he has written hardly anything on the First War does not mean that he was not perfectly well aware of it, or that he has not the same servility toward the memory of the ogre. He later wrote of how

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1. 'After the Bombing' London. 1949.
2. 'Riding up the Hill' ('The Solitary Man'. London. 1941.)
3. 'The Wartime Singers' ('Twelve Noon'. London. 1936.)

'Twenty years ago
My generation learned
To be afraid of mud.
We watched its vileness grow,
Deeper and deeper churned
From earth, spirit, and blood.'[1]

But with the Second War the poet really comes into his own. And he shows an awareness similar to Read's of events in their place in history. The position, however, is very slightly different. Church speaks from the viewpoint of a religious man, and most of his examples are drawn from the Bible. What is still continuing through the centuries is man's nature - this it is that connects past and present -

'Our art and science
No longer feature hell and paradise.
But still the ancient longing and regret
Govern our actions; still the old defiance.'[2]

Church not only takes up a religious attitude towards the war - seeing the solution as lying in God's hands, but he distils also certain values from it. He speaks as an onlooker for the people at home, the people who had to endure the heavy bombardment, acknowledging their heroic spirit almost like a Wordsworthian lesson.

As well as speaking for a certain class, faith, and generation, Church is also consciously aware of his age. It is the

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1. 'Mud' ('Twelve Noon' London. 1936.) cf. Edward Shanks' 'Let the Dead Speak Today' (November 11th, 1951) - 'We in the slime - filled pits of Passchendale....etc.'

2. 'Twentieth Century Psalter' London. 1943. First evening,

historian's sense again coupled with a critical eye. He sees the insecurity of the age and at the same time its disgrace:

> 'We shall not be forgotten; we shall be
> Like Ozymandias, self-named King of Kings,
> A monument to man's fatuity
> When an ironic god first gave him wings.'[1]

In some of his short poems he attempts deliberately, like Auden, to be up-to-date. '<u>Secret Service</u>' is a symbolic reflection on a certain type of person that seems to have become common through the uprooting quality of the century:-

> '"I am the guest," I answer at the inn,
> The guest for a night; I am the rootless man"
> Ever unknown,
> Man of no service, man of no secrets, the man
> Murdered one night at the inn, the anonymous man.'[2]

Like Read, Richard Church is a reflective poet. His task is to ponder the life of today rather than give us an exact picture of it. His poetry in consequence goes deeply into causes and reasons, analyses the 'spirit of the age', sees how man has lost his sense of wonder in

> 'A world self-conscious even in its fear,
> Scorning its few surviving superstitions,
> Condemning love as a romantic fraud.'[3]

His own sense of wonder makes him delight in things of the imagination, combining a romance element with realism. But again Church is quite opposite to the flag-waving patriots of

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1. '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>'. London.1943. Eighth morning.
2. '<u>The Solitary Man</u>' London. 1941.
3. '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>' London. 1943.Sixth morning.

the First War. We might well compare Grenfell's pæan to war '<u>Into Battle</u>' with Church's poem '<u>Legends</u>', remembering that Church has confessed his predilection for a world of romance. But the knowledge that comes from experience deeply thought over, makes him write that legends are

> 'Most eloquent of battles, but are dumb
> And do not tell of womens' hearts made numb
> With misery, of cottages stripped bare.'[1]

We might well query, in comparing Grenfell's poem, whether it is the life of action that can ever create the fullest understanding of the world's miseries.

And yet, like Read and Blunden, Church has hope for the future. The emphasis of his '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>' is on joy and love - the title itself indicates its religious character. The very horrors of war make the poet feel that at least we have known the worst. He himself has

'Groped near the ground for the moisture of faith'[2]

and he finds that the willow and quince he has planted as a sign of sorrow and bitterness have flowered, - that the desert can blossom like the rose. War makes us aware of the transient nature of things, but the poet looks ahead and sees that when war and its desecration have passed we will find that they have lent some meaning to life it would otherwise have lacked.

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1. '<u>Last Poems 1942-47</u>' (See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London.1948)
2. '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>' London.1943. Sixth evening.

This is expressed in a popular image of the bomb damage -

> 'Charred passion, and a broken wall,
> Make ruins that will lean
> With more significance than the unrifled
> Originals now mean.'[1]

Throughout his poetry there is the constant emphasis on distilling some soul of goodness from things evil, finding re-assurance in natural magnificence where the life of man seems corrupt.

Turning to Herbert Palmer, we come across a poet who like others of his generation, stands back and comments on war as an onlooker, but unlike the others gives us little idea of his personal feelings or modes of consolation. He speaks objectively, often lightly and humourously. In contrast, although the First war did not stir him to produce any body of poetry on it, the few poems he did write have a bitterness and surface seriousness that is lacking in the work produced during the Second World War. '<u>At a City War-Memorial</u>'[2] is an attack on the world that has not kept its promise to the dead. Another poem, '<u>The unknown Warrior speaks at his Tomb: Autumn 1920</u>'[3] , in showing us that man's history ends in the calamity of war, insists that the earth requires retribution.

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1. '<u>Be Patient</u>' ('<u>The Solitary Man</u>' London. 1941)
2. '<u>The Unknown Warrior</u>' London. 1924.
3. Ditto.

'Oh! more of you may pay for this, your veins
Bedew the outraged verdure of the soil,
Your hearts and minds be riven who caused and planned it,
Your strength and substance dwindle as the moonbeams.'

'The Second Crucifixion'[1] again shows the absolute shock that the First War produced. It was that rather than the Second War that was the new experience. In this poem, a Scotsman bending over a dying German tells how he has fought both Boers and Arabs, but only now is he really sickened from slaughter:-

'For the Boche has all devils of hell.'

Like most of the poets of his generation, Palmer's Second War poetry, while aware that this seems

'the last of the Ages -
Passing out with a terrible cry.'[2]

at the same time refuses to submit to a completely pessimistic rendering of life. The serious state of the world is lightened by its presentation - 'An Awful Warning'[3] is embodied in the fairy tale form of

'a small thing that wasn't nice the least.'

In 'Cat-o-nine-tails:1938'[4], which even before the outbreak of war prognosticated the seriousness of Hitler's intentions, there is a combination of fact and nursery rhyme. The attack is humourously levelled against malicious reviewers, although

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1. 'Two Foemen and other Poems' London. 1920.
2. 'The Soldiers of Freedom:1939-45' ('A Sword in the Desert' London. 1946.)
3. 'A Sword in the Desert' London. 1946.
4. Ditto.

the background spells WAR.

'He got the props, he got the stops, he got the checks, the sky,
He got the Jews, he got the Blues, he put the Reds in pie.
He got the large and useful things, so he will get the small;
For he was made to swing a blade and write upon a wall.'

This light bantering style is even retained when he points out the chivalry that is to be found on the other side of the fence, a point of view that is rare in an age of propaganda and the false logic of the news columns, and hence more safely expressed under cover of light-heartedness.

One thing that Palmer has more than anything in common with the rest of his generation is his sense of history, his feeling for the repetition of a pattern, and his habit of looking back on times that have gone. The Germans are once again the Huns of Attila, and in '<u>History Repeats</u>'[1] he pictures their savage spirits coming back to life in war, just as in '<u>Spain:1936-9</u>'[2] the shambles of war is increased by the ghosts of bulls and horses

'For a sadist pleasure slain.'

With the observer's eye he can see the element of fighting that has nothing to do with a cause, when these ghosts know neither good nor evil, neither Left nor Right, but simply trample all before them.

There is one element, however, out of keeping with other

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1. See '<u>A Sword in the Desert</u>' London. 1946.
2. Ditto.

poets of his generation, and which to a certain extent links him with Campbell. In '<u>Kaleidoscope: September,1939</u>'[1], he welcomes war as a means of defeating the Germans:-

> 'Now God be praised that I have seen this day
> Our nursemaid England takes the soldier way
> . . . .
> So now that crooked cross, that spider spell,
> That fourfold gallows shall go down to Hell.'

Yet we have seen that one of the distinctive characteristics of these poets is the divergent ways in which they can approach war, combining the real and the ideal, the light and the serious, the important and the unimportant, the optimistic and the pessimistic. Like all of them Palmer expects the future to be better whatever the present is like.

G. Rostrevor Hamilton, like Palmer, wrote little on the First War, and that little was serious and disillusioned. The most outstanding poem '<u>Three Cities</u>'[2] probably belongs to the period just before the Second War, and has an Audenesque clear-cut visual quality summing up without comment three states in which man existed at the time, death, sleep, and preparation for war.

The Second War elicited more comment, singularly in keeping with that of the other writers we have discussed. The

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1. '<u>The Gallows Cross</u>' London. 1940.
2. '<u>Memoir 1887-1937</u>' London, Toronto. 1938.

Introduction to 'The Sober War'[1] tells us

> 'the word "sober" seems the most distinctive of the mood of the time; it excludes a certain romantic flag-and-glory type of poem, much written in the past.'

The poem itself known as 'The Sober War' repeats the lesson that this war is different from others because men are entering it without any illusions about heroism or glory.

> 'Often - but never as today the nation,
> Single, with sober voice,
> Knowing war damnable, has answered the challenge,
> Because, in decency, there was no choice.'

Likewise, he looks back to the between-war years, criticises the social system, finds fault with his generation on whose heads has lain the responsibility for the Second War. In his Preface to 'Apollyon'[2] he criticises the whole system of values that formed the backbone of English life, as Spender did in 'The Fates' -

> 'During the first months of the war I came to feel more and more strongly the inadequacy of the standards by which we have lived - too lukewarm a religion, too mellow and comfortable a morality. To look only to the credit side, our humane and gentlemanly virtues, often attractive as with the haze of a summer afternoon, have come to appear somewhat futile in the face of extreme and methodical evil. This attitude implies a personal failure in the days before the War - a failure to look deep enough into causes. That I am not political-minded by nature is partly an excuse, partly a condemnation. The failure has been widespread, and is therefore of importance; many must feel as I do.'

Again the poet speaks for those at home during the war and

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1. London,Toronto. 1940.
2. London,Toronto. 1941.

in all honesty, - how they felt mourning their dead, and at the same time the monotony of sitting back waiting for news,-

> 'We, O Lord,
> Counting the days that follow, confess we are bored,
> Bored let the infinite shame of it bend our knees.'[1]

The ultimate struggle as Hamilton sees it is similar to Read's view, of humanity versus a mechanised world. Material greatness is contrasted with man and his soul, and in '3rd September 1939' human nature is opposed to the mechanical nature of mass-warfare:-

> 'Have faith, now mechanized murder is beginning,
> That human things shall conquer in the end.'[2]

We might perhaps expect the older generation to be more aware of this 'mechanical' quality of present-day life, far more than a generation that has been cradled to the hum of its wheels. And we find it also in Blunden and Church in a wider context, - there the contrast is between the God-made world of nature, and that made by man - pictured vividly in one poem of Church's in the description of the descent into an orchard of airmen and their machines -

> 'Hung from dripping branches,
> Blood and aluminium.'[3]

But there is hope again in Hamilton as in these other poets that the world will win through in the end, and in his

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1. 'From the Home Front' ('Apollyon' London, Toronto. 1941.)
2. 'The Sober War.' London, Toronto. 1940.
3. 'Twentieth Century Psalter' London. 1943. Twenty-third evening.

'Lines for two marrying in an evil time'[1], he says that the couple must take from the world what they can:-

> 'Draw from the dying world, the dying veins
> Of the general world, what virtue yet remains.'

The similarity of thought of this older generation of poets will by now be obvious, whatever their essential basic differences. All of them view the war in a way similar to E. M. Forster's description in 'Howards End' of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, - the goblins are there walking from one end of the world to the other, but always the light and the romance and chivalry floods back - yet the memory of the goblin predominates. After all, they had lived long enough to see that goblin come and go - and come back again. The difference in attitude towards First and Second Wars corresponds in all. Where the First War elicited an outspoken bitterness and a dwelling upon the physical details of the conflict - even from Church's rare allusion to it we still learn of the degradation of mud, - the Second is treated in a singularly intellectual manner - we learn that people suffer, but on the whole we do not wade through the carnage, - the poet is treading more softly and looking from a different angle at the repeat performance of war. We come back time and again to war being a 'slant argument.'

1.'The Sober War' London, Toronto. 1940.

They reflect a generation which, by mentioning war, could conjure up such painful memories that any further details would be superfluous. They also represent a generation for whom the present was important not as something new but as a repeat performance. The Second War, however, was not a repetition of the Passchendaele trenches (they were comparable only in Burma, and there at least something was happening). But this generation of poets is continually writing with the First War in the background of their minds. In some cases, e.g. Palmer's, there is the First War attitude that this race of Huns needs putting down. In a poet like Edward Shanks there is the glorification of England and her heroes. Their great strength lies in their awareness of the past in the present. Their great weakness lies in their inability to grasp the distinctive flavour of the present, because they are not as completely part of it as a younger generation is likely to be.

B. The Middle Generation of Poets.

As representative of the middle generation of poets, let us take that group that flourished in the 'thirties - Spender, Day Lewis, Auden, Lehmann, and MacNeice. As poets it is just as difficult to see the similarities between them as between the older generation of writers. But listened to as a group, although they speak with different voices, what we hear might well turn out to be the same thing in the end.

What strikes us first and foremost is that these poets who took the lead in verbally revolutionising the world in the 1930's, are at a loss once Europe is at war, to find any clear clarion call that can be blown. To begin with, war had scattered them to settle their own accounts in the disrupted universe, - Auden and Isherwood to America, Spender in the fire service, and Day Lewis in the home guard. All of them had made their mark in the poetic world and no longer needed each other from a professional point of view. But their work gives the impression that war has interrupted something. Day Lewis chafes at the bit when asked '<u>Where are the war poets?</u>'[1] and speaks of poetry now as a necessity for the world rather than a pleasure for the poet. The Second World War did away with the enthusiasm for change and a new dawn breaking that we find in a poem like '<u>The Magnetic Mountain</u>', whereas the

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1. '<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943.

Spanish Civil War had got rid simply of their ideals. Where the First World War had been the direct inspiration of many writers, this group of poets during the Second War wanted to get on with the business of writing poetry, and the war was a side issue that not only kept intruding itself upon their notice, but involved duties that kept them from the actual writing (apart from Auden). Spender, in fact, tells us that he joined the fire service in order to go on being a poet.

As a group, these poets have much in common in not being fighters. Their's is the home-front background, whether it be New York, London, or the English countryside. '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' and '<u>On the Frontier</u>' had laid their scenes in the middle of continental warfare, but with the outbreak of 1939, it seemed as if surrounding detail were too pressing for the mind to wander into a realm that was not of the poet's immediate experience. Therefore these poets tend to speak on behalf of the men at home, the ordinary civilian who suffered bomb damage and knew only of Tobruk and Dachau and Nanking from the radio.

And really they are extremely well cut out for this position. They are a generation of social satirists - a little more of the romantic lyricist in Spender and Day Lewis, - but always poets aware of the way the world around them looks. In fact the great value of this group of poets lies in their combination of the immediate homely element as the ordinary man might see it (not as a Wordsworth could transform it) with

wider issues. Whereas poets like Owen and Sassoon had been forced by war to take up the position of satirists, these poets were satirists of society to begin with. The war accomplished no change in this direction, it merely turned them into recorders of events and feelings that belong to a special six-year period.

They are extremely self-conscious, moreover, of their own positions, of their place in the scheme of events. They are capable of looking back to a former period and of looking forward to a future. Their work lacks the weight of years and history that burdens the older writers, yet at the same time it sees the age in its place in relation to past and future.

What perhaps drains these poets of the revolutionary enthusiasm of their early work is the failure of their ideals. They are continually harking back to them and their pessimism over the world situation is bound up with their disillusionment over those ideals. When John Lehmann writes

'Our peace is only that we see
Tomorrow may make others well,'[1]

he is pre-supposing not only the age's unrest but his own generation's failure to make men well today.

Although Auden, after his departure to America, turned

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1. '<u>The End</u>' ('<u>The Age of the Dragon</u>' London. 1951.)

to religion, his work did not become less despairing in consequence. Rather is his mood blacker. All the poets of this group were aware of the approach of war long before it broke out, partly through their associations with the continent, and Auden's main contribution to this was his play (in collaboration with Isherwood), '<u>On the Frontier</u>' (1938). It had much to say in Shavian fashion about the dictatorships that evolved during the 1930's - in its accent on the man of power and his complete control of mankind. But its central tragic theme is war, war of our time - in the background the song of the soldiers with its echoes of 1914-18, - in the foreground the innocent that are put on opposite sides of the fence, the lovers who are torn apart. A sense of guilt pervades the play that it is not simply the corruption of government that brings this about, but 'the world that is wholly foul'. Eric'sspeech at the end is moving because it turns to tragedy the very fact that we are of this particular age and time, an age of guilt and sorrow and suffering, present and to come.

> 'We cannot choose our world,
> Our time, our class. None are innocent, none.
> Causes of violence lie so deep in all our lives
> It touches every act.
> Certain it is for all we do
> We shall pay dearly.'[1]

But there is still to be found in this play a belief in the

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1. p.120.

'good place', even though Eric and Anna are not allowed to find it. It bridges both the idealism of the '30's and the blacker realism of the '40's. And yet the non-romantic note it strikes, while at the same time being an imaginary situation, belongs singularly to the year 1938, the year of the shadow of 1939 -

> 'And maps can really point to places
> Where life is evil now.'[1]

Whether it be Edith Sitwell's Shadow of Cain or Tolkien's Shadow of Sauran, the poet can feel it spread black across the horizon, - he is aware of something mightier in its horror than the world has yet seen. As a play on war, '<u>On the Frontier</u>' stands closer to Shaw and the novelists of the period than to plays such as Fry's '<u>The Dark is Light Enough</u>', or '<u>A Sleep of Prisoners</u>', both of which have war as a background, and which have been produced since the war.

The great danger, Auden is saying, is not really war itself, but what man is becoming, - a different attitude from Fry's - who sees men rising triumphant from the ashes of their struggle. Valerian's speech contains something of Undershaft:-

> 'This is probably the last period of human history. The political régimes of the future may have many fancy names, but never again will the common man be allowed to rule his own life or judge for himself. To be an artist or a saint has ceased to be modern ... yes, for the man of power, there can now be but one aim - absolute control of mankind.'[2]

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1. '<u>In Time of War</u>' (See '<u>Journey to a War</u>' London.1939) XVI.
2. p.26.

The war was the climax and at the same time the eruption of the atmosphere that had been gradually built up in the 1930's. The hope of finding 'the good place' is gone. The poems in '<u>Journey to a War</u>' which just preceded the actual outbreak in September show of how little significance the actual entry of England into the European conflict was as a date-line. The intellectual world was ready for the Second World War as it had never been for any previous war. '<u>In Time of War</u>' was in the same volume, and in this poem we are told that war has become real, inevitably real, on a far vaster scale than the Spanish conflict.

> '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,
> Who never quite believed they could exist,
> Not where we were.'[1]

Although this generation of poets were capable of anticipating the outbreak of war, they were incapable of accepting it. A poem like this reflects the incredulity; reality has become too real to believe in. Perhaps it was because of their former hopes, not so much of what the world might become, as of their ability to make their mark upon it, that when war came it meant personal failure as well as world chaos:-

> 'The Good Place has not been; our star has warmed to birth
> A race of promise that has never proved its worth.'[2]

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1. '<u>In Time of War</u>' (see '<u>Journey to a War</u>' London. 1939). XIV.
2. Ditto. XIII.

Auden's poetry is full of the sense of betrayal, everything has been a sham and nothing true. The voyager on his quest for the good place or the juster life -

> 'discovers nothing; he does not want to arrive.
> The journey is false; the false journey really an illness
> On the false island where the heart cannot act and will not suffer.'[1]

Apart from looking back on the failure of their early hopes, this generation of poets recall less of the past than the older, understandably so. But they have an awareness of the future, and of the future's opinion of the present, of this dark age. As we said earlier, Auden expresses the sentiment

> 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'

> 'Can future ages ever escape so far,
> Yet feel derived from everything that happened,
> Even from us, that even this was well?'[2]

The bitterness is not against war specifically as in 1914-18, but against the status to which man's life is reduced partly as a result of war. There is no longer a clear issue, a poet can only'defend the bad against the worse.'

Two of Auden's shorter lyrics, '<u>Refugee Blues</u>' and '<u>First September, 1939</u>'[3] record not just war as such, but war of a particular age. They record attitudes of the human race as if fossilized in their layer of time. Suffering and indifference in the former are not feelings but states of man.

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1. '<u>The Voyage</u>' ('<u>Journey to a War</u>' London. 1939)
2. '<u>In Time of War</u>' ('<u>Journey to a War</u>' XX.)
3. '<u>Another Time</u>' London. 1940.

In the latter the shallowness of New York is expressed by its outer aspect, for it is an age when those outer aspects serve the poet singularly well in expressing what the inner man has become:-

'Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play.'

'<u>The Age of Anxiety</u>'[1] does the same job on a larger scale. It sees war's effect on society and as part of that society. The seediness of life is increased by the clinical analysis of a world grown dull with excess. Malin's tale of action, for instance, related ironically in Anglo-Saxon metre, lacks both colour, and the excitement and emotion of the Anglo-Saxon world. There is nothing epic about our way of life, - the Leader, the Fourth man at a conference, is not of epic stature, he enters through a side door -

'Quick, quiet, unquestionable as death,
Grief or guilt.'

The Lord of this life

'smiles well, he smells of the future,
Odourless ages, an ordered world
Of planned pleasure and passport control.'[2]

The world, the poet points out, is in the hands of men like this, a world of smallness and of the unheroic, - not deliberately so as in the 1930's, but inevitably now.

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1. London. 1948.

2. p.22.

The accounts of warfare hold none of the old heroics - men suffer but do not fight, hospital trains move with sensitized freight, men lie bandaged in barns

> 'Their poor hands in a panic of need
> Groping weakly for a gun-butt or
> A friendly fist.'[1]

Here we have pity and terror on a wide scale but not on a grand scale. Auden's '<u>Age of Anxiety</u>' would be heavy going without the element of definite criticism it contains. This particular dialogue plumbs the depths of man as a 'new barbarian' bred by civilisation:-

> 'college towns
> Mothered his mind, and many journals
> Backed his beliefs.'[2]

War is all of a piece with what civilisation has become. When victory is finally declared

> 'behind the festooned
> Conqueror's car there come his heirs, the
> Public hangman, the private wastrel.'[3]

There is a great difference in fact between the conception of war of Auden's generation and that of the 1914-18 poets. What lies between is Mr. Eliot's patient etherized upon a table. To Owen and Sassoon war was horrible in itself, to Auden it is a "symptom" of a greater horror. That is why war as a subject on its own is rarely touched upon by this generation

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1. p.20.
2. p.24.
3. p.24.

of poets, why people might well ask 'Where are the war poets?'

The protests against the First War demanded peace. But Auden makes Rosetta say

> 'Lies and lethargies police the world
> In its periods of peace. What pain taught
> Is soon forgotten; we celebrate
> What ought to happen as if it were done,
> Are blinded by our boasts.'[1]

This generation had seen men of the First War hoping and being disappointed, and while they do not emphasise those hopes because they had not been old enough to share in them, they are never-the-less aware of men's inability to reap in peace what they had not sown in war.

But '<u>The Age of Anxiety</u>' was published in 1948 when the war was safely tucked away in its black box, and when it was obvious that peace meant simply a cease fire in Europe. Its clinical quality might be due to the fact that now the worst was over the poet, like the rest of the world, could adopt a dry ironic note. For it would be wrong to assume that CRITICISM was Auden's sole forte during the war even though isolated in America. Like Spender, Day Lewis, MacNeice, and Lehmann, he SUFFERED from war no less than Owen.[2] Auden's '<u>New Year Letter</u>'[3] is one of his most personal poems, and one

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1. '<u>Age of Anxiety</u>' London. 1948. p.24
2. Notice the comment of a perceptive young Greek writer, Demetrios Capetenakis:- 'Intellect has always been a danger in Auden's poetry, but in his best moments its mobile and cold unreality was always filled with the glowing and solid reality of feeling.''<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' Summer. 1943.
3. London. 1941.

of his most strikingly sincere. There the world itself is the suffering Prometheus, suffering from its own fault perhaps, - but still suffering. The poet voices the fears of his time, the lack of determination, the sense of being lost in the world. The New Year is 1941, and as Auden wrote

'The New Year brings an earth afraid.'

This was the blackest period of the war for Britain, when WAR completely overshadowed any personal or social worries.

Most literature will demonstrate how man will rise to the finest spirit of sadness just before the peak of battle, the climax of effort, - Anglo-Saxon battles, Shakespeare's Henry V before Agincourt, Frodo and Sam, Samson Agonistes, Tolstoy's Prince André - all of them bear the same marks of some common experience in the hour before the darkness closes. Churchill's speeches during the Battle of Britain are the prime example of this during the Second World War. But Auden captures a little of it too in the verse of '<u>New Year Letter</u>'

'Only on battlefields, where the dying
With low voices and not very much to say
Repair the antique silence the insects broke
In an architectural passion,
Can night return to our cooling fibres.'[1]

At the same time he is torn by the pity of it, for war is to life what it is to his poetry, - an image of something gone wrong, of what man himself is -

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1. p.14.

'For we are conscripts to our age
Simply by being born, we wage
The war we are.'[1]

To describe man at this time in terms of war is to describe him at his most miserable, - the sentiment might well have come from Macbeth, Hamlet, or the rest of the tragic leaders. But the story of this tragedy is unnecessary to the audience, the stage has become real life as Spender points out in '<u>The Fates</u>' or as MacNeice described the war afterwards -

'we walked a stage
With real thunder off.'[2]

The dominant note of Auden's '<u>New Year Letter</u>' is of a child crying out in the dark - we have completely lost our way

'O not ever war can frighten us enough'

and this is something completely different from the irony of a much later volume, '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>'[3], although at the same time it leads up to and is contained in that irony.

On occasions Auden's poetry suggests there might be some road that leads out of the maze, but those occasions are rare, and it is only a suggestion that one day

'the fever shall have a cure, the true journey an end
Where hearts meet and are really true.'[4]

Auden speaks for an age, not like Eliot looking on, nor like Owen identifying himself only with those whose personal

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1. p.57.
2. '<u>Autumn Sequel</u>' London. 1954. Canto 1.
3. London. 1955.
4. '<u>The Voyage</u>' ('<u>Journey to a War</u>' London. 1939.)

experience will match his own, but from within the world and the human race and the time of which he partakes. The other poets of this group tend to be more obviously personal poets while at the same time echoing Auden's disillusionment with world affairs, and the 'immeasurable grief' into which war has plunged civilisation. Spender in '<u>Poetry since 1939</u>' [1] tells us

> 'There was a tendency for the poetry of Day Lewis, MacNeice and Spender to turn inwards towards a personal subject matter and to avoid the world of outer events.'[2]

We are not concerned here with those strictly personal poems, only with the ones in which the poets strive to express to the world its own tragedy. And there are several in which we see the poets seeking to find an outlet not only for their feelings about war, but for the need they always had to explain the age to itself. That is perhaps why we have so many poems on the raiding and burning of London. In that they could see the need of the people around them and through poetry alone could find some means of transcending the pity of it.

> 'But words there must be, wept on the crater'd present
> To gleam beyond it.'[3]

They tend moreover to be poetic journalists in their awareness of contemporary events. '<u>Autumn Sequel</u>' is full of

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1. London. 1946.
2. This fact cannot be over-emphasised. We should keep it in front of us when considering the poetry that does deal with war.
3. '<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943.

radio reports, Spender writes of a particular air-raid or of a particular period in Vienna, Auden writes of Nanking, Dachau, of how we've seen

> 'Old Russia suddenly mutate
> Into a proletarian state.'[1]

Every age has had its contemporary references, and most of our finest poets, including Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, and Wordsworth, have, if not always written journalistic accounts of current affairs at least addressed themselves to an audience aware of them. It is quite fitting that of all modern writers on the war, it should be these social-minded poets who leave a similar record of their times.

While they are intent on summing up their period, on laying their finger on the very spot that is going to make the rest of the body writhe in anguish, they cannot help expressing their horror. Day Lewis' opinion of his world is

> 'a day of monsters, a desert of abject stone
> Whose outward terrors paralyse the will.'[2]

And to express their age in terms of their age, psychological analyses are typical of this group of writers. We have seen how singularly capable Auden is of revealing the movement of thought behind the superficial aspect of civilisation by the very fact that the surface atmosphere is kept up:-

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1. '<u>New Year Letter</u>. London. 1941. p.39.

2. '<u>The Image</u>' ('<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943.) We should notice that this particular poem expresses also the need of the age to bring things down to something smaller before they can be grasped.

'The lights must never go out
The music must always play.'

There is both analysis of society as a mass-consciousness, and analysis of the typed individual, the representative of layers of that society. MacNeice gives us '<u>The Conscript</u>' and '<u>The Mixer</u>', Spender again gives us '<u>The Conscript</u>', also the society woman and her son in '<u>The Fates</u>', Lehmann imagines what the thoughts of the victor might be when the present is crowned with laurels and the past with blood ('<u>Campaign Photograph</u>').[1]

We will find in these poets the effect of war upon men's minds, and the guilt it creates. War, they prove, can become a personal neurosis as tormenting as sex, and it is interesting to note how, once war comes to the foreground it does take pride of place as a social evil. It is still the outward view of world purgatory, even while the poets include themselves in the picture and while they deal with the details that disgust the individual. Eric and Anna are not hero and heroine of '<u>On the Frontier</u>' , - they are victims. And the two primary emotions connected with the neurosis of war are agony and fear. Day Lewis expresses it in terms of sickness, but the sickness is itself part of the neurosis:-

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1. See MacNeice's '<u>Collected Poems</u> 1925-48' London. 1949.
See Spender's '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1955.
See Lehmann's '<u>The Age of the Dragon</u>' London. 1951.

'Now Fear has come again
To live with us
In poisoned intimacy like pus,
Hourly extending the area of our pain.'

Hardly ever could an ode have been written that had more bearing upon its age than this particular '<u>Ode to Fear</u>'.[1]

It is due to this psychological insight these poets have, that when we have finished reading their poetry we feel we have been through the war - and hated every moment of it. We have been sick, crazed, paralysed, and frightened, - we have seen the dead, the mad, the fearful, and 'the face of destruction'. We have seen little of actual warfare, only of the world in a state of war, and we have cared about that part of war that goes on after the ravaging - the murdered village, the dead

'Like effigies thrown down after a fête,'[2]

the roofless old, and the child beneath the débris. We have had it proved to us that war does not pay. And we are struck most of all by the fact that everything has been tainted by the war, the marks are left, are exposed, and are not to be forgotten. '<u>An Italian Visit</u>' was not published until 1953, but in the '<u>Dialogue at the Airport</u>' there are some enlightening lines on the terms in which war has made people think, and in which they will go on thinking for a long time to come, - like

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1. '<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943.

2. '<u>The Dead</u>' ('<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943)

Lady Macbeth they cannot erase the stain of blood from the mind:

> 'But even you have been taught the simpler associations -
> For example, mouth and famine, lily and corpse, bambino
> And bomb - to say nothing of odi et amo - which stand in the light of
> Enjoyment pure and simple.'

But apart from the psychology of war, or perhaps even as part of it, we find in these poets the details of everyday life that bring the war years vividly back to mind. Day Lewis has one or two poems on the simple folk he knew, the farmer he fire-watched with[1], and in '<u>The Stand-To</u>', 'the ragtag fighters of lane and shadow.' But it is in Louis MacNeice that we get closest to the atmosphere, thoughts, and way of life that pervaded the 1940 decade as might be expressed in any newspaper or radio report of the time. In '<u>Autumn Sequel</u>' the poet looks back on how

> 'The war flowed by
> In short or medium waves with a disarray
>
> Of initials, M.I.5., O.W.I.,
> Of names, Metaxas or Mihailovitch,
> Of doubts and queries, If and But and Why,
>
> Provided and Supposing, Where and Which,
> And most especially When: oh when would this
> Thing start or that thing stop?'[2]

Between '<u>Autumn Journal</u>' in 1938, which shows the signs of approaching war, and '<u>Autumn Sequel</u>' in 1954, in which life

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1. '<u>Word Over All</u>' London. 1943.

2. Canto IV.

in the after-war years is reviewed, there are a vast number of short poems which capture the life of our time in miniature. MacNeice is at ease in a social world, - an urbane poet, he understands without employing or requiring depth, the way certain men were reacting in time of war -

> 'Those Haves who cannot bear making a choice,
> Those Have-nots who are bored with having nothing to choose.'[1]

A poem like '<u>Swing Song</u>'seems as pointless as war itself, and suggests that the poet is deliberately seeking after the common touch. It means that his poetry must be both perceptive yet kept on a certain level. Because it is going deliberately to deal with ordinary people, it must tell us that people are ordinary. In '<u>Tam Cari Caritas</u>', the reason why we miss someone lies

> 'in killing
> Time when he could have livened it.'[2]

'<u>Autumn Journal</u>' shows us how men were thinking on the brink of war, how they were living on the banks of Rubicon, how they were arguing (though superficially it appears the poet's personal argument because he assumes for himself the position of the common man) that the nightmare of history repeating itself can't be really true. On the near side of the war, '<u>Autumn Sequel</u>' has recorded for future ages the anti-climax in the years following 1945, how although things

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1. '<u>Alcohol</u>' ('<u>Collected Poems 1925-48</u>' London. 1949.)
2. '<u>Collected Poems 1925-48</u>' London. 1949.

were gradually returning to what they had been before the war, there still remained a sense of inadequacy

> 'As usual, Devlin sang
> Folksongs, the Farmer's Boy and the Bold Drover
>
> And the Foggy Dew, but they had lost their tang
> Not being heard in danger.'[1]

MacNeice can reflect the doubts and fears of men on a more immediate and less tragic scale than Auden, yet retain the atmosphere of the age. The sense of insecurity within the changing universe for instance, is related to a similar example taken from classical times

> 'that all things are mixed
> Or have two sides had taught Thucydides
> How little, a precious little, is life is fixed.'[2]

It is an example of a single man, not of a whole universe, of life on a small scale, not on a big one - yet at the same time appropriate. And perhaps because he can keep so much closer to a completely normal way of life than most of the poets within this group, he shares also in the eternal optimism and common-sense view of the man in the street -

> 'Meanwhile we
> Are here, not There; if we have lost a pawn
>
> We have kept our queen, this is still land, not sea,
> Still life, not death.'[3]

Where we really encounter those forces of 'Thrones,

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1. Canto IV.
2. Canto I.
3. Canto V.

Dominions, Powers' etc. in the work of MacNeice is in a radio drama 'The Dark Tower',[1] which as a piece of "quest" literature deals more obviously with general and ultimate values. The poet refuses in his Introduction to reveal any intended meaning the play might have, but we don't have to listen for very long before we are aware that it is a parable on our own day and age.

> 'All that we know is there is something there
> Which makes the Dark Tower dark and is the source
> Of evil through the world. It is immortal
> But men must try to kill it, - and keep on trying
> So long as we would be human'

This was broadcast in 1946, a year after the great battle to prevent a deadly menace spreading. The phrase that Roland has to translate is 'Per ardua ad astra', a commonplace during the war years. The soldiers who went out to fight went with the knowledge of the carnage of a previous war, a bare twenty years after the war to end wars, and they went for a different reason this time:-

> 'We had a word "honour" - but it is obsolete.
> Try the word "duty", and there's another word -
> "Necessity"'.

This is not the sole interpretation of 'The Dark Tower' - it is a myth that refuses any exact rendering, it is only necessary to point out its significance for our time, the period of the great darkness, of 'the age of the dragon' as

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1. London. ~~1955.~~ 1947

John Lehmann calls it. At the end of the play Roland comes across a stone bearing the inscription:-

> 'To Those Who Did Not Go Back -
> Whose Bones being Nowhere, their signature is for All Men -
> Who went to their Death of their Own Free Will
> Bequeathing Free Will to Others.'

In an age when freedom was threatened, this is a fitting epitaph for all the unknown soldiers who went on fighting to the end. At the same time it celebrates the continual battle against evil in an age that has become increasingly aware of it.

'The Dark Tower' is a piece of imaginative literature a little different from the usual descriptive or satirical writings of MacNeice or Auden. It approximates more closely to the work of Spender and Lehmann. In 'Returning to Vienna 1947'[1] Spender writes

> 'I saw there in our gaze what breaks the heart -
> The tears and bloodshot vein of seeing
> The outer world destroy the inner world.'

And in these two poets we find continual emphasis laid on the relationship between the two worlds. In Lehmann there is a kind of quiet garden within that cannot be touched by the ravages of war even though he is continually aware of it. In his autobiography 'The Whispering Gallery'[2] he quotes from a poem showing the signs of approaching war -

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1. 'The Edge of Being.' London 1949.
2. London. 1955. p.325-6.

'Not these alone the evidence of Spring:
Under the light green mist that veils the trees
Soldiers parade in pride of tank and gun,
By High Command dolled-up to please.'

And continues:-

'The sense of something in human life indifferent to its great secular dramas and disasters, that crept into the irony of this poem, was classically expressed by Auden in his poem of Brueghel's Crucifixion.....'

Then he goes on to speak of his feeling for the indifference of Nature and quotes

'All this expanse of noiseless growth, and rock,
Would hardly stir or change, though just beyond
World reeled in war's first shock.'

And throughout Lehmann's poetry we find nature either as a background or woven into the imagery so that we never lose sight of that quiet garden of his. '<u>The Sphere of Glass</u>'[1] tells us how brother and sister walking through a wood are protected from the fears of the world by some power linking the grief of the past

'With voices of their vaster war
The sun-shot bombers homing drone'

creating a tragic harmony in Wordsworthian fashion.

In '<u>Poem</u>' which starts very much like any critical analysis of our present-day life by this group of poets -

'Yes, we are desperate men: our violence,
The blood that streams from our satanic creeds...'[2]

the poet at the same time pictures himself stamping through a

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1. London. 1944.

2. '<u>The Age of the Dragon</u>' London. 1951.

frosty winter's morning, thinking as he goes

> 'Such dark thoughts: while I ponder where they flow,
> The winter sun behind the orchard trees
> Has drawn blue shadows on the diamond snow.'

This it is that completely revolutionises his poetry from what it might have been. Lehmann is closer, as we shall find later, to the younger poets in his manner of writing than to those of his own generation. This is due partly to the language and imagery he draws upon. Where he copies his own generation, he copies their early work, - '<u>The Summer Story</u>'[1] for instance displays all the early Audenesque adventure vocabulary - 'cable, journey, quests, explorer, lake, comrades, citadel.' The thoughts of the group are often echoed in his work, the sense that we have been a race of promise that never proved its worth -

> 'Far in the censored oceans you are lost,
> But lost the world, too, which your longing haunts.'[2]

and at times the horror of the age we live in is emphasised, where

> 'in a monstrous rhythm before our eyes
> The alien future, horrible, is born.'

And again we find a great deal in his poetry about the need for love, especially at this time, 'the hour of earthquakes and exploding spires.'[3]

But more usual in his work is the richness of pure poetry,

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1. '<u>The Age of the Dragon</u>' London. 1951.
2. '<u>Letter</u>' (Ditto)
3. '<u>Invocation</u>' (Ditto)

relying not on politics or contemporary reference, but while employing past traditions, literary or historical, is written FOR our time rather than ABOUT it. Hence the use of allegory and the myth as in 'The Dark Tower', - it is not the Age of Anxiety but the Age of the Dragon. Poems like 'The Last Ascent', 'The Nightmare', 'There is a house',[1] discuss the age in terms which cannot be nailed down to it. Instead of realistic exactness, the clever hitting of the nail on the head that we find in Auden and MacNeice, we have imaginative distortion. In 'The Nightmare' the poet pictures himself running from the calamities that seek to overwhelm him, and there is one image that could be said to render in literary terms the war dead

> 'And there were giant statues black as jet
> Prone at my feet.'[2]

This is a vast departure from the stark realism of First War writers, but it does picture the realities of war, - we can call it neither escapist, optimistic, nor romantic in the Rupert Brooke sense. It follows the formula Lehmann himself gave in 'The Armoured Writer',[3] the use of poetic symbolism as against surface realism.

It is interesting to note that the titles of Lehmann's war poems are singularly down to earth, - 'In a London Terminus', 'Armistice', 'Campaign Photograph', 'At a time of death',

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1. 'The Age of the Dragon' London. 1951.
2. 'The Nightmare' ('The Age of the Dragon' London. 1951)
3. 'New Writing and Daylight' Summer 1942. 'The Armoured Writer' I.

'Letter'. And some of them do touch upon the guns and blood of warfare, though never in an unpleasant manner. If we compare Lehmann's poems with his translations from André Chamson we will see not only what Lehmann lacks but what all the poets lack who stayed at home, the feeling of being actually in the war, the sense of the man next to you in the trench, and the blood beneath your feet, the sense of comradeship that we will find in the younger writers as in the First World War. But in a poem like 'Letter', written from the viewpoint of one at home, we have the sense of destruction without actual warfare,[1] and this feeling for things breaking up around them is typical of the middle generation of poets, and probably easier for them to capture than for those sharing in the battle.

The disillusionment of his generation is to be found in Lehmann, and perhaps the continual use of symbolism is a form of it. The poems written in the 1930 decade are far more packed with contemporary references than those written during the war, although even there, there is still a balance between ephemeral and eternal. And in spite of his optimism that the inner life will triumph eventually, he still expresses the helplessness and emptiness of our time. 'The Ballad of Jack at the World's End'[2] insists upon our responsibility for the young involved in a war not of their making -

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1. This probably accounts for the feeling we have that destruction is in a vacuum - there is nothing concrete to pin it to.

2. 'The Age of the Dragon' London. 1951.

'They were drowning, young airmen, and sighing
"O save, for our hearts grow cold."'

The same sentiment may be found in Spender, - our responsibility for the young, for the innocent, for Vienna, for the loss of our ultimate values, because

'The fault is not in our stars, dear Brutus
But in ourselves.'

Spender's work bears a certain resemblance to Lehmann's in his ability to write of war in terms that are not entirely to do with it. (In '_The New Realism_'(1939) he speaks of how unsatisfactory naturalism has become. There must be an analytic approach to life for the artist must not cut himself off, but -

'Considering the world today as we know it, evidently the analytic approach required must be sweeping, profound and general.')

Where they differ, even in this, is that Spender tends to employ images directly contemporary - '_An Air Raid across the Bay at Plymouth_' for instance, is related in terms of cranes and derricks. And his metres tend to be less traditional, less trite perhaps, than Lehmann's do.

But his emphasis is even more upon the inner life, not just its existence, but the necessity for clinging on to it. Though war damages, we must keep alive to the fact of war around us, must learn what suffering teaches.

'To steel the will against awareness would banish
The angel who arrives each instant
From the horrific flesh;
Who warns that power, fear, agony, are the life under many;

That the real is the terrible; that to deny
This, unsheathes tyranny.' [1]

The dominant note in Spender's work is that of agony. There is some bitterness at the thought of how the world after the First War has plunged itself into another, as in '<u>The Conscript</u>' and '<u>June 1940</u>', and he has a feeling comparable with Day Lewis' that

'The greater wrong must meet
From the less evil with the worse defeat.'[2]

In fact in '<u>Poetry since 1939</u>' he tells us that many poets were doubtful whether the war was being fought for a purified cause. This increases the agony at the thought of the innocent suffering, because there seems no sufficient explanation for it. In '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>', the evil was quite clearly seen for what it was. But in a poem like '<u>The War God</u>'[3] there is a bewildered age-old questioning why the wheat cannot be divided and the soldier sent home, why in fact there need be war at all. The poet answers with an analysis of power and revenge, how they go on endlessly in a vicious circle. The title itself is a primitive term for the modern dictator and serves to emphasise the timelessness of the theme. In '<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' [4] Spender tells us

'The problem of the contemporary writer of any poetry that

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1. '<u>The Angel</u>' ('<u>The Edge of Being</u>' London. 1949) cf. Auden on Forster ('<u>Journey to a War</u>' London. 1939)
2. '<u>June 1940</u>' (See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1955)
3. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1955.
4. '<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' Winter 1942-3. ('<u>The Creative Spirit II</u>' cf. '<u>Where are the War Poets</u>'.

deals with the struggle of the whole society against external evils is the same as Milton's. He can accept the evil at its face value, but the good has to be created and maintained against the very forces which are fighting the evil.'

The answer to the muddle-headedness of the First War was attack, - irony, sarcasm, criticism of the men at home. But the Second War was different, - the fault could be pinned down to no-one in particular, and therefore the criticism had to centre upon what we had failed to do rather than upon what we had done. '<u>The Fates</u>' is a criticism of the shallow strata in which we rested for so long, refusing to recognise that such a reality as war could ever exist, unable to realise that

'History is a dragon under human skin.'[1]

The way the poets of this generation deal with the riddle of war is to see it in its context, not just to protest against it. Spender tells us that the First War poets like Owen and Sassoon failed in two ways, firstly because they see only the soldier's point-of-view, instead of,like Hardy, seeing the statesman's as well. Therefore it is difficult to say whether Owen and Sassoon were against the war itself (apart from the suffering of the soldiers) because they do not take the reasons for it into account. Their second failure is again their unfairness, because they blame the men at home simply because they are at home (where someone had to be!) 'The limitations of their view of the last war are borne out by the subsequent

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1. '<u>June 1940</u>' (See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1955)

writings of the soldier poets who survived it' - i.e. they were not interested in the forces that produced suffering. The modern writer, on the other hand, must be aware, like the Russians, of his background.

It is typical of this generation of poets that they can speak of poets failing in the stand they took - because they come very near to acknowledging themselves as legislators. They question the life around them, which is why they tend to be critical and philosophical. Even when we get a passage that appears pure description as in Spender's '<u>Air Raid</u>'[1] the ending again poses a problem in the picture of man hammering nails in man 'High on his crucifix.'

Part of the flavour of these poets lies in recapturing the immediacy of the background against which they wrote. We have considered Lehmann's nature imagery, but in other poets also we are aware of the time of year. 'June 1940' captures the holiday atmosphere in the midst of noises and echoes of war -

> 'And the grey First War voices, each to each
> Speak, adrift on deck chairs.'

We cannot perhaps appreciate in our present position how much of the war years these poets did set down in their work for future generations to read. But they do primarily what might be expected of Second War poets, philosophise far more than

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1. '<u>Air Raid across the Bay at Plymouth</u>' (See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1955.)

the First War poets ever did. We are meant to THINK when we read their work, to try to understand ourselves, our position, and the world we live in. To do this they use their personal experience, - an air raid, a visit to Vienna, fire-watching, and often they analyse the way other people think. Demetrios Capetenakis in 'Notes on some Contemporary Writers'[1] reviews the efforts of the '30's poets, and sees them as picturing humanity now

> 'More complete, deeper, as if with one more dimension, the metaphysical one' -

quoting Spender's 'Fates', the end of 'The Ambitious Son', 'Elegy', and Lehmann's last poems ('Summer Story' and 'Vigils').

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1. 'New Writing and Daylight' 1943.

C. The Younger Generation of Poets.

It is to this group that we must turn for our "fighter" poets, the men who correspond to Owen and Sassoon, Grenfell and Brooke, during the First War, the men who LEFT their home background to go out and meet the dragon. In it therefore we shall include poets like Fuller who belong to Auden's generation in time but who are better classed among the fighters.

On approaching these writers who were at the centre of the aggressive (rather than defensive) warfare, we might well feel that we are nearing the heart of the matter. They are the men who go through the fire, and the poetry they write will be hot from the furnace. What, therefore, can we expect? The First War poets did two things in particular, - they celebrated war in its ideal state both at the beginning and in their epitaphs (e.g. Binyon), and they cursed what they eventually found it to be like. The latter gives us a vivid picture of the brute reality of trench fighting, death and putrefaction of the body, the suffering of the flesh, the over-liberal sprinkling of blood. The guiding emotions were pity and horror.

Should we not expect the same thing on a vaster scale from the Second War poets, seeing that the war itself was on a much vaster scale? We wouldn't be likely to expect another Rupert Brooke, - war's glorification had been played out before the disillusioning years of peace that followed 1918. But we might expect increased bitterness in the manner of Sassoon, increased

pathos in the manner of Owen. And should we not expect a verse expressing chaos, a loose, disjointed metre, a clash of stark and angry imagery. Or perhaps, moving with the times, it might be a poetry of neurosis, of boredom and fear, of THOUGHTS of war as opposed to actual warfare, of 'bitter brooding upon the cards that fate has dealt his generation.'[1] Or should we expect a reaction, and one so complete that if these poets were sitting down to write music, they'd be writing Mozart?

What is quite definite about the Second World War poetry is firstly that there is a great deal of variety in it, and secondly that on the whole the kind of poetry produced during the First World War is not part of that variety.[2]

It is, in the last resort, easier to say what is not part of this Second War poetry than to define the mixture as it stands. There are for instance, two ways in which the Second War differed from the First, - in the kind of war it was, and in the spirit in which men approached it. The First War had been, when it broke out, something new and therefore exciting - not only to Julian Grenfell, but also to the young Wilfred Owen. It inspired patriotism and heroics, if not for long. This initial wave of enthusiasm did not exist for the Second War fighters. In

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1. 'New Writing and Daylight' Autumn 1944. (John Lehmann. 'The Armoured Writer V')

2. It should be remembered that all generalisations about the Second War poetry must be qualified and taken to refer to 'the majority of poems'. The bulk of poetry was so huge that there may well be at least one exception to every rule.

'New Writing and Daylight 1942-3' Spender writes:-

> 'People marvel that while our young men can go bravely to their deaths, they cannot write heroic patriotic war poetry. It is greatly to their credit that they do not do so. They are willing to give their lives for the cause of the democracies, but not to tell heroic lies. In that discrimination lies a greater hope for the future than lay with the generation of Rupert Brooke.'[1]

In what way then did the two wars differ? Firstly in size, secondly in mechanisation. The Second War was, in actual fighting, a war not OF men, but which INVOLVED men. There were many forms of death - by bomb shells, by explosion, by drowning, by fire, by gas, - but hand to hand fighting was reserved for the few (the day of trenches and bayonets was fast becoming obsolete). Men were incarcerated in their machines, - aeroplanes, tanks, ships, submarines. There was a great divorce between enemy and enemy,[2] an unnatural, impersonal, and monstrous form of warfare, culminating in the atomic bomb.[3] Moreover, men's lives had to be organised, regimented, as part of the vast machinery of war. There could be analysed

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1. 'The Creative Spirit' III.

2. Robert Graves commented on the Germans during the 1914-18 war:- 'On the whole, they fought fairly and courageously; and I felt most grateful, after Loos, when they held their fire and allowed us to get our wounded in from no-man's land. "Kaiser Bill" might deserve hanging as Lloyd George claimed, but he was no Hitler. The need to regard Hitler's Nazis as a horde of criminal lunatics robbed war of its few remaining decencies, and the idea of fraternising with them would have been ridiculous from the very start.' ('The Observer. November 9th. 1958.)

3. 'And horrors grow impersonal as engines' (Roy Fuller. 'Winter in England' - see 'A Lost Season' London. 1944.)

'A growing self-detachment making man
Less homesick, fearful, proud,
But less a man.'[1]

War in this instance is therefore itself indicative of 'the machine age', as well as contributing to it. Social satirists have in both the novel and the drama shown its two aspects - the retreat from nature, and the change forced upon man himself e.g. Huxley, Forster, Orwell, Waugh, Shaw. (In these writers not only are men's thoughts perverted but the "natural" instincts and forms of life are mass organised and re-distributed - sex, physical attributes, home life, birth, even death, are reduced to a scientific level that makes a primitive life seem to produce the noble savage.) In the same way we have seen how Auden and his group of writers had been afraid in particular of what man was becoming, ruled by the monsters he had himself let loose upon the world.

What then is the reaction of the young poets? What is the overall impression we gain from a general reading? Not that they are writing about war because they are interested in it as such (cf. '<u>Charge of the Light Brigade</u>', Brooke's sonnets), nor because they are obsessed with the desire to be up-to-date, nor because they want to point out the evils of warfare and the folly of the men who plunge us into it. These are side issues compared with the eternal themes of Love, Separation, and Death. For what, in a world of science and mass sadism, the Second War poets

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1. Alun Lewis '<u>After Dunkirk</u>' (see '<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London.1942)

were concerned with was 'men as they are men within themselves.'

First and foremost they wrote about themselves, and secondly they wrote for the people around them who they knew felt the same. And in a way they found it a necessity to preserve something personal and something that might outlast their own transiency. History had already shown them the fate of 'the common soldier' -

> 'The meanest priest preserved from dust
> wound from wind in mummy cloth
> has more eternity than us
> - our character is lost in death
> and what are we to passers-by
> but grey stone in a field of green?'[1]

They have a continual awareness of their own youth, of not having tasted life to the full, - and above all, of never perhaps having the opportunity.

> 'We have hardly started to suck the core of the apple,
> our gobbet of life is stranger still to the tongue;
> we have scarcely yet forsaken the drying nipple
> for a man's place in the sun.'[2]

They are aware that they are speaking for a war generation just as Owen deliberately spoke for his butchered comrades, but unlike Owen their's is not so much a desire to tell the world what it already knew only too well, but to get from life on the spot the things they most wanted:-

> 'living each hour on the crumbs of a bargain broken,
> ignoring the haemorrhage.'[3]

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1. John Bayliss 'October' (see 'New Road' 1944.)
2. Alan Rook 'War Generation' (see 'Soldiers, this Solitude' London. 1942.)
3. Alan Rook. Ditto.

This was an attitude common to many people during the instability of the war years - the on-the-spot marriages, the black market, the grabbing of everything that could be got while it could be got. Rupert Brooke had idealised the things he loved as worth dying for. The second generation of war poets wanted to possess those things once again before they died. Their poetry is a history of the struggle to retain and the struggle to give up. In the final event they had to face death 'Knowing I am no lover, but destroyer.'[1] And this continual conflict enriches their poetry in two ways. The life they loved had a heightened attraction by its sudden desirability, - and the necessity for turning away from it, the necessity for growing into a different kind of person without losing the old one, involved the growth of spiritual vision. The diamond had not only to be polished, it had to be cut to a different shape.

Ronald Wilcox's 'Operational Squadron'[2] shows how the poet is aware of what is taking place among his generation.[3] He feels the sudden blazing awareness of life:-

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1. Sidney Keyes. 'The Wilderness' (see 'Collected Poems' London. 1945.)
2. 'Air-Force Poetry' London. 1944.
3. Which is at the same time different from Spender's attempt to keep ahead of the times, - it is nearer to a realisation of being the essence of the time. cf. Fuller's comment on other poets:- 'They reflect time: I am the very ticking.' ('A Wry Smile' - see 'A Lost Season' London. 1944.)

'Suddenly life leaps up to a swift crescendo,
a taut fatality hangs upon the days
so scarcely left to us.'

And to balance this hailing of life, there is the leave-taking (speaking for a generation whose Ave atque Vale must be spoken in the same breath.)

'Now we have said farewell to loveliness,
to quietude, the cool unhurried dreams
and quiet aspirations; all that seems
fantastic now, for we have seen the cess
this world is built on.'

The war was, after all, a struggle for existence, - for the preservation of a whole system of values, not for freedom for the sake of freedom, but because it stood for a way of life and thought that the Nazi régime was set on stamping out. It was based less on anger than on fear, fought less with the feeling that there was something to hate than with the resolve that there should be something left to love.

'It was not red resolve of anger stole the young
Nor even hate:
But love of living, O very bounty of love,
Into their open hearts aimed irons of fate.'[1]

We need not therefore expect to find poetry dealing with the enemy, or even inferring any enemy except 'the world'. Anything on the Huns, Attila, Mussolini, or Hitler is completely ruled out. The iron had not entered so deeply into their soul as it had into that of the older generation who had seen the German

1. John Pudney 'In the dark nature of forgiveness' (see 'Commemorations' London. 1948.)

menace twice over. In '<u>Graves: El Alemein</u>',[1] Pudney can suggest that we live and let live, and not harbour bitterness against the foe that fell with us.

The feeling, however, of having been pushed into a war not of their own choosing is probably the chief source of bitterness, as far as bitterness does show itself in their work. Sometimes it is a direct outcry like Keyes' '<u>War Poet</u>',[2] - sometimes it emerges in a rather acid humour like Fuller's account of the various pains and disabilities of poets from Blake's madness to Southwell's hanging, ending

> 'I envy not only their talents
> And fertile lack of balance
> But the appearance of choice
> In their sad and fatal voice.'[3]

Or to sink to the bottom of the scale, there is Charles Causley's '<u>Soldiers Chorus</u>' on the lad being called up:-

> 'Say that you did it for glory
>   Defending your hoary name
> It's still the same bloody old story
>   And I'm pushed in the pit just the same.'[4]

On the whole, these poets make no attempt to remedy the situation - they are neither social thinkers, nor satirists, - nor idealists. But there is one outstanding exception to this,

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1. '<u>Commemorations</u>' London. 1948.
2. See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.
3. '<u>January 1940</u>' (see '<u>The Middle of a War</u>' London. 1942.)
4. '<u>Survivors' Leave</u>' Aldington. 1953.

Alex Comfort, whose poetry gives us an impression ~~of him~~, not as a social thinker nor satirist, - but as an idealist intent upon saying 'This must not happen again, because this need not happen again':-

> 'There is one freedom only -
> to take the hands of men called enemies
> and you and they walking together go
> to seek out every throat that told you Kill.'[1]

'The Signal to Engage', the volume containing this poem which pointed out that victory could be dead-sea fruit, was published in 1946, directly after the war, when memories of war and loss of men, and the animal state to which many lives had been reduced (especially with the freeing of prisoners-of-war) were not only uppermost in men's minds but carried more than a bitter sting, - a period when we could start actually thinking about what had happened, survey the damage and start the clearing up. At the same time it was a period of memorials, of concluding speeches, of welcoming the soldiers home and burying the dead - it was no less than returning to 1918. 'We live in a blind time' is not only ironical itself, but points out the irony of the age -

> 'the animals that feed from communal graves
>
> going about chewing and saying Victory, Freedom,
> Justice, then turning for another mouthful.'

Probably the bitterest poetry of all (and the most ironic)

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1. 'The Wingless Victory' (see 'The Signal to Engage' London 1946.)

was produced at the conclusion of the war, once the atomic bomb had been let loose (cf. Edith Sitwell's 'Shadow of Cain', Auden's 'Shield of Achilles', D. J. Enright's 'The Monuments of Hiroshima', Pudney's 'Commemorations') Comfort is resolved that the living must go on fighting - a different kind of battle, for their dead comrades' sake

> 'for never before the circle of time threw up
> such battle as we join, nor ranged so clearly
> men against government, sent a resistless voice
> saying to all who still live - choose: to the dead-Silence!'[1]

Some of Comfort's irony, especially in a poem like 'We live in a blind time' is reminiscent of the First War poets. But compared with the bulk of Comfort's work, the comparison is slight. It differs also in suggesting that a course of action be taken rather than seeking to arouse either pity or horror at the extravagances of war. It is a clarion call to move AGAINST war, just as Grenfell's 'Into Battle' seemed to move TOWARDS it. 'At a meeting in a garden'[2] puts into symbolic form the resolution to end war, - from a hill top the poet decides that History will be defeated because

> 'we will go down
> to make the level countryside spring out
> in many-coloured fire, as we fight
> and snap the backs of those who killed our friends.'

In one way Comfort resembles the middle generation of poets, in

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1. 'Song for the dead' (see 'The Signal to Engage' London.1946)
2. 'The Signal to Engage' London. 1946.

putting forward the need for a concerted effort on behalf of a whole society.[1] 'The Petrified Forest'[2], for instance, has echoes of the Fascist régime and its "yes-men". And in 'Children in the Luxembourg Gardens'[3] , there is the appeal to the 'fellow-student', not to his pity, though the picture is of dead children, but it has a more reasoned, intellectual quality. These children are a matter of principle, not at all the same thing as comrades known personally.

Yet the attitude of most of the other young writers is that of Alun Lewis when he mentions 'the world we could not change'.[4] They are only too aware that they are victims, not partakers of the political situation, as bewildered as young children cast off by their mother for no apparent reason. In 'Home Thoughts from Abroad'[5], Lewis says of the West -

> 'We surely were not hard to please
> And yet you cast us out.'

It is characteristic of the younger generation, and not of the intellectual of the period, that the world situation should be

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1. 'The Pattern of the Future' London. 1949. (broadcast 1946) - deals with man's need for disobedience against power wrongly used - scientific humanism preached:- 'The values of today, I believe, come from belief in man and in his fragility, his impermanence, his need to fight the universe by knowing it and changing it.' (Page 29)

2. 'And all but he departed' London. 1951.

3. ~~See~~ ditto.

4. 'The Jungle' ('Ha! Ha! among the trumpets' London. 1945.)

5. 'Ha! Ha! among the trumpets' London. 1945.

simply background for the personal. It comes out clearly in 'The Island'[1], where the poet addresses the young patrician leaving his tiny home so proudly for the mainland -

> 'And do you in this piteous human flux
> Possess the high imponderable art
> To turn us by a hair's breadth in our trouble
> To greater agony or joy of heart?'

Where the majority of young poets reflect their age is simply in speaking for the men like them involved in the same situation. While the plight is a common one, and their emotions primary and uncomplicated by personal neurosis, they are identifiable with all the other young men who went out to fight and who were incapable of expressing themselves.

'This piteous human flux' sums up their kind of poetry. In Roy Fuller we find echoes of the '30's, - mention of Spain, of how civilisation has been affected, of History as a living, breathing force (as in Comfort), but even Fuller feels the pull of something apart from "the situation", and having both sides to his vision he expresses the conflict, or rather not a conflict but the sense of standing between. In 'The Statue'[2] he conveys a sense of human values apart from the war. The statue (of a warrior) itself epitomises the war, the purpose, the cause. But imposing as it is, it must take second place beside the memory of a man smoking a pipe, contemplating his great

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1. 'Ha! Ha! among the trumpets' London. 1945.
2. 'A Lost Season.' London. 1944.

dirty feet -

'As though there dominated this sea's threshold and this night
Not the raised hooves, the thick snake neck, the profile, and the might,
The wrought, eternal bronze, the dead protagonist, the fight,

But that unmoving, pale but living shape that drops no tears,
Ridiculous and haunting, which each epoch reappears,
And is what history is not. O love, O human fears!'

The essence of the poetry of this generation is timelessness, and yet pinpointing man in a certain kind of situation, man as he is affected emotionally and spiritually by a war age.

But if they are not primarily concerned with man as a political animal, have these young poets opinions about the war itself? First and foremost they realise, young as they are, that this war is different from the others and therefore cannot be expressed in the same terms -

'the words for honour and glory
Wear too small'[1]

Together with this goes the awareness that this generation itself is 'different'. Apart from the fact that it has been called to almost certain sacrifice, - or possibly because of it - it is also supremely an EARNEST generation that has set itself to a task. Against the existence of war, against the hardships of war it frequently rebels, but the sacrifice it accepts.

'For there lies all our power; the power of the young and the lonely.
I know that the past is lies, and the present only
Important. I see in life service and in dying an end
Of loving.'[2]

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1. '<u>Fall</u>' (see '<u>Beyond this Disregard</u>' London. 1943.)
2. '<u>The Retreat</u>' (see '<u>Soldiers, this Solitude</u>' London.1942.)

They accept their place in the war even though 'Too undeceived for patriotic man'[1]. It is some of the things war means that they find it hard to stomach and which makes for an underlying bitterness to a great deal of their work.

And war means on the whole, three things. Firstly there is the burden of war which they themselves must bear, the separation from home, the boredom, the desire

> 'To see THE WORST, and yet not die
> Of their lucid despair.'[2]

In Alan Rook it is in as physical terms as Dante's journey in '<u>The Divine Comedy</u>':-

> 'Please God teach me how the mountain carries
> the weight of heaven; and to run with streams which go
> uncomplaining through the weight of their own valleys.'[3]

And in the second place there is the actual Inferno of war that must be passed through. This is different from war's actualities, from the bloodshed and the guns, - the latter belong to a world at war, but the Inferno expressed by some of these young poets is a kind of Underworld created by war, where they find

> 'The emptiness of noon, the void of night.'[4]

It is difficult to express the presence of this quality in their work except as spiritual nightmare. John Lehmann has pointed

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1. Lawrence Whistler '<u>In time of Suspense</u>' (see '<u>Poems of this War</u>' Cambridge. 1942.)
2. David Gascoyne '<u>Zero: September 1939</u>' (see '<u>Poems 1937-42</u>' London. 1943.)
3. '<u>The Task</u>' (see '<u>We who are fortunate</u>' London. 1945.)
4. '<u>Infantry</u>' (see '<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>'London. 1945.)

out that 'the void is Fuller's dominating experience', that his images emphasise 'abdication, loss, deception, degradation.'[1] But he is not alone in his feeling for this emptiness. The following passage from Alun Lewis is superficially an account of the horrors of warfare, but read again, those horrors become themselves images building up an atmosphere not of destruction but something far nearer to Dante's Inferno, - a state where these things go on endlessly, where hope is lost 'that comes to all'. The poet is keeping vigil, waiting in the barracks for his love - WHO DOES NOT COME.

> 'And here the hiatus falls, the stammer,
> The black-lipped wound that mouths oblivion,
> Here children scream and blood is shed in vain
> In a dark eclipse where the shadowy mistral blinds
> Our daunted eyes and touches us to dust.'[2]

In Alak Rook it takes an even more abstract and arid form when he speaks of

> 'the indifferent phrase
> And gesture of the ugly, the long-neglected
> vision of love which created only
> a wider loneliness.'[3]

And the third form that war takes is the actual day-to-day realities, strangely enough at first sight the least dwelt on, except in a certain class of poetry. Just as in Tolkien's '<u>Lord of the Kings</u>', the mission is carried out by two different

1. '<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' Autumn 1944. (<u>The Armoured Writer V</u>)
2. '<u>War Wedding</u>' I - The Vigil. (see '<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.)
3. '<u>Poem from H.Q.</u>'- 1st. December. 1939. (see '<u>Soldiers, this Solitude</u>' London. 1942.)

types of character, Frodo and Sam, who each have an individualistic outlook on the same situation, so there are many "kinds" of poetry produced during a war. If we look for journalistic accounts we are more likely to find them in barrack room ballad literature or imitation of the barrack room ballad, and even then it is confined to mess-life rather than dealing with the large-scale horrors of machine warfare. A poet may not necessarily portray the age by what he leaves out, but he can convey both the age's feelings and his own. The poets of the Second World War showed their desire to get down to common and fundamental humanity both emotionally and descriptively. And more often than not, a "horror" film contains less of true human nature than a cartoon.

The "cartoon"[1] writers give the impression that they are reflecting more of the war than the "serious" writers. In actual fact, although most poets do not seem to sit down deliberately to write of events or situations, the themes of Love, Separation, and Death are often related in terms of war. The imagery in Keye's '<u>A hope for those separated by war</u>'[2] is almost entirely drawn from a fund of "outrages". The poets draw upon the circumstances of the age to express a situation created by those circumstances, but unlike Owen and Sassoon,

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1. By "cartoon" is meant the more colloquial as opposed to the strictly poetic. Even the 'serious' writers indulge in it. (cf. Owen during the First War.)

2. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.

their purpose is not primarily to point to them. Moreover the "war" imagery of a poet like Sidney Keyes is created, selected, and employed imaginatively, whether for background, atmosphere, hyperbole, or even the fibre of the poem itself.

And yet, when poets turn to writing on such subjects as an attack on Malta or the occupation of France, where realism might well be expected, the opposite is true of their imagery. The coming of war in Alex Comfort's '<u>France</u>'[1] is related in the following terms

> ' - There are doors opened where no doors were.
> The cradle's gone. The slim chimneys are fallen.'

War here is like a spirit, a presence, or a wind, simple and clean.

But to return to the barracks, - we have learnt more about day-to-day life in the army than probably any generation previous to Kipling, far more than about the military side. (Previous to this century we have poetry written by poets as poets, treating war as strictly "poetic" subject matter.) But these poems must not be taken as mere soldiers' reminiscences, many are more professional than that, written by men who were unusually sensitive to 'the inevitable adjective'[2], and who usually either expressed or conveyed disgust or hatred or boredom at men sitting together -

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1. '<u>A Wreath for the Living</u>' London. 1942.
2. Timothy Corsellis. '<u>What I never saw</u>'. ('<u>Poems of this War</u>' Cambridge. 1942.)

'Bound by no ideal of service
But by a common interest in pornography and a desire
to outdrink one another.'[1]

This was the life that young men, as the rest of the poem shows, still with some ideal of living life to the full by being ready

'To draw my last breath
Amidst a chaos of dramatic thunder,'[2]

this was the kind of life they encountered. In Kenneth Neal's picture of army life, he is forced to cry

'Let us have some clean killing at the last!
. . . .
It's mad - the stupid and the humble folk
Are khaki heroes here, the beautiful's a swear
Word and our lives a dirty joke.'[3]

On the military side, it is not so much the fighting that seems to affect poets as the THOUGHT of war in terms of large-scale "horror", the fact that this has been planned and organised, that it is so completely impersonal, and that innocent people are involved in it.[4] These are the terms in which the poets thought of it on the whole, with the exeeption of the air-force fighters. For them there was something of the exhilaration that Grenfell found in battle, - even in fear. There is something above the sordid and the horrible and the painful about

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1. Timothy Corsellis 'What I never saw'('Poems of this War' Cambridge. 1942.)

2. Ditto.

3. Kenneth Neal 'Army'('Poems of this War' Cambridge. 1942.)

4. See Roy Fuller's 'What is terrible' ('A Lost Season'London. 1944.)

'This infinite upon whose little rim
Man dares to crawl.'[1]

Spender in 'Poetry since 1939[2]', speaking of Blunden and Sassoon as "circumscribed", considers how the poets of this war will compare:-

> 'Probably their development will be different because this war, with all its terrors, has been adventurous and expansive, more likely to produce agoraphobia than the claustrophobia of the war 1914-18.'[3]

The chief of our air-force poets was John Pudney, and he, in spite of an underlying bitterness, manages (rather like the Anglo-Saxons for whom life was so unhappily exciting) to capture the heroics and thrill of flying, - not always in poems-actually on the subject of the part the airforce played during the war, but in the slight romanticism of his imagery, and in his conception of war on an abstract rather than wholly concrete level. In 'Rank and File'[4] for instance, he celebrates Rodrigo de Triano who accompanied Christopher Columbus, and died at sea,

> 'not for a tale to be told
> Of America, Europe or gold,
> But because the eye is wide and blood is red.'

Returning to the point made at the beginning, that on the whole the poets deliberately accepted war, we find two things resulting. It means in the first place they turned to face

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1. O. C. Chave. 'There are no frontiers in the sky'(see 'Air-Force Poetry' London. 1944.)
2. London. 1946. p.22.
3. cf. St. Exupery 'Pilote de Guerre':- '....l'avion, qui écrase les villes à l'arrière des troupes, a changé la guerre.'
4. See 'Beyond this Disregard' London. 1943.

something at an early age that men aren't usually called upon to face. While life was still at the full they had to enter what Keyes called '<u>The Wilderness</u>'. It is a spiritual state apart from day-to-day reality, that inevitably employs symbols for its expression. Keyes' poem is the finest example of this with its insistence both on the harshness of the country he must pass through and the necessity for continuing, while at the same time grasping hold of what is fundamental to every man's life in the imagery

> 'Here where the horned skulls mark the limit
> Of instinct and intransigeant desire
> I beat against the rough-tongued wind
> Towards the heart of fire.'[1]

Here we have the most direct connection with some of the symbolic works of the middle generation, especially in the theme of a journey. But to the young poets it is not just a theme, it is a direct experience. It is impossible to read at random any half dozen lines of this poem of Keyes' without being deeply moved by the sensitivity and feeling of a great poet.

In Lewis we have another aspect of stoicism. '<u>Sacco writes to his Son</u>'

> 'Be not perturbed if you are called to fight
> Only a fool thinks life was made his way.'[2]

This again is a stoic willingness to sacrifice what must be

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1. See '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.
2. See '<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>' London. 1945.

sacrificed. It is also a realisation of the complexity and suffering involved in life. The young poets were forced, by the nature of their circumstances, to combine some of the wisdom of age with the vitality and love of life that belonged primarily to them.

But the other side to their acceptance is hope, that by leaving what they desire they are giving something to the future,[1] that it is the life they leave that is the justification for their leaving it:-

> 'For young and old who die
> At every hour
> Now life is sole and solemn monument.'[2]

They are occupied frequently with speaking for their generation before it perishes, with the feeling that it will perish, and that they wish us to know why they have accepted their fate:-

> 'Whatever happens, remember we strove for a more beautiful world.'[3]

In the First World War there was the feeling after a while that men were dying for no apparent cause, and that patriotism was not enough. The Second War was of such a nature that patriotism went by the board in the attempt to preserve some part of the world as fit to live in. The young poets are, like the middle

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1. cf. Alan Rook '<u>Not as a Refuge</u>' Amsterdam. 1948:- 'For war is a temporary and superficial condition. It destroys but it cannot kill. Still the life-giving presences continue.....'

2. John Pudney. '<u>Memorial</u>'('<u>Beyond this Disregard</u>' London. 1943)

3. Keidrych Rhys. '<u>Letter to my Wife</u>' ('<u>The Van Pool and other poems</u>' London. 1942.)

generation, thinking in terms of 'the world'. The very fact that they are not thinking of nations only, reflects the age unconsciously.

And what were these young poets dying for? Not for freedom because they had never actually existed under or seen any kind of tyranny, Fascist or Communist, working. Not for any political ideal or any form of abstract patriotism. The Second World War as far as England was concerned began in 1939 and ended in 1945. What was taking place on the continent during the 1930's was after all merely what was taking place on the continent. The English, apart from those who travelled abroad, were aware of the Gestapo on the radio, not at their front door. For a country like Hungary the war never really came to an end. But upon England, there fell like a shot from the blue, six years that could well be described as un-English. Spender's 'The Fates'[1] was not on the whole far short of the mark. As Roy Fuller wrote in his 'Dedicatory Poem' to 'Epitaphs and Occasions'[2]

> 'For us the Reichstag burned to tones
> Of Bach on hand-made gramophones.
> We saw the long-drawn fascist trauma
> In terms of the poetic drama.'

And yet this generation, even without a flag to fly, are neither cynics nor pessimists. Alex Comfort writes of soldiers as

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1. See 'Collected Poems' London. 1955.

2. London. 1949.

'Not fools, but men who knew the price obeying,
the lice for what they were, the Cause for a fraud,
hoped for no good and cherished no illusions.'[1]

Yet they were by no means de Vigny writers, they did not lose themselves in service. Quite the opposite in fact. The values they appreciate and the values they come to appreciate are outside duty and heroism. They are civilian, not military. Thomas Hardy wrote '<u>In time of "The Breaking of Nations"</u>' of those things that will always be part of the English landscape. He, among all the poets of the First War, anticipated what was to be the guiding light of the young Second War poets, - those things that go on existing during the breaking of nations.

Wherever they were stationed they were calmly sitting down and writing about their particular background - Alun Lewis in India, Roy Fuller in Africa, Alex Comfort in France, John Pudney flying over Malta. They give us a picture of how life went on in various parts of the world during the war -

'Zeppu will forget
And Grez, barefooted, carrying her shoes,
Will pray for some till harvest.'[2]

Peasants gather in the harvest, strike up their tribal dances, give birth, copulate, and die, in their poetry. There is a width and yet a fundamentalism in their outlook, both of which seem to remove the poets from their particular age and time.

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1. '<u>Song for the heroes</u>' ('<u>The Signal to Engage</u>'London. 1946.)
2. '<u>Malta</u>' ('<u>South of Forty</u>' London. 1943.)

This is partly due to the kind of civilisation they found themselves amongst. If they had been writing about a country like England, their thoughts might have been more securely bounded by war. But instead they were coming into contact with life and thought so different from their own, that not even the exigencies of war could detract from the strangeness of their travels. Alun Lewis wrote in one of his letters:-

> 'England is easy compared with India - easier to corrupt and easier to improve. There are few deterrents at home: the inclination isn't continually oppressed by the cosmic disinclination, the individual isn't so ruthlessly and permanently subject to the laissez faire of the sun and the sterility.'[1]

The richness and fullness of the life and values these poets depict may be compared with the poverty of the First War realism. They are part of an age for which the world was becoming easily compassable, an age that was living in terms of continents and civilisations rather than countries, - partly because of the economic development of the world, partly because countries like India were growing up and countries like Turkey were being Westernised, partly because of the improvement of communications. Whatever the reason, the extent of the war was itself indicative of a twentieth century outlook, and the poets expressed their feeling for something which existed outside themselves.

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1. See Introduction to '<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>'

The heroic dramatists of the late seventeenth century had travelled extensively in imagination. Their fantasy spelled in reverse a period that gradually sought to contain itself within intellectual, civilised bounds. The twentieth century writers in an age that tries hard to be up-to-date and progressive (whether in industry, social amenities, or machine warfare), have an eye for the historic, - but the history that has actually taken place and is still continuing today, the sense of the past and all its values that remains even in the present. The younger generation of poets captured some of the atmosphere of the traditional beneath the shadow of the Second World War. John Pudney's '<u>Siege of Malta</u>'[1] presents the people of that country as embodying all the events that have happened to them in the past, and even this war is only one more to add to the centuries of invasion and passing civilisations.

> 'Phoenician-eyed, these saw Carthage and Rome,
> Greeks, Infidels and Normans in their humours.
> . . . .
> No toll
> Ever was taken but here these eyes looked on,
> And the waters were troubled with blood and oil.
> Death blooms in Mediterranean profusion:
> We are old where nothing is new, now, Airman John.'

But their outlook on the past is never free of the present, just as the seventeenth century heroic drama was never on the

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1. At first simply entitled '<u>Malta</u>' ('<u>South of Forty</u>' London. 1943.)

whole free from seventeenth century ideals. In this generation of poets the past shows up these things that are fundamental to any age and yet which are particularly apposite at the time.[1] The poets are writing with certain ideas at the back of their minds, their themes are Love, Separation, and Death, and their outlook is that of men involved in a twentieth century world-wide struggle. In '<u>The Odyssey</u>'[2] of Alun Lewis for instance, the poet pictures the thoughts of a sailor departing from burning Troy, discovering that there is nothing glorious about any of their deeds, that even the leader is afraid of Life:-

> 'We knew that vision of a ruined age
> To be the shape our minds and deeds had fashioned,
> And we ourselves to be a wretched omen
> Tossed in the tides and never making landfall,
> A dying race whose doom it was to live.'

The poet could as well have said it about his own destructive generation as about the Greeks. It was a constant reflection of his that he and his comrades were 'Tossed in the tides and never making landfall.'

Likewise Lehmann says of Roy Fuller's African poems, that he uses animal life

> 'to point some grim and pitiful truth about the life he and his comrades are leading.'[3]

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1. cf. the way in which the seventeenth century has been compared with ours because the disturbance of society then was similar to that in our day.

2. See '<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.

3. '<u>New Writing and Daylight</u>' Autumn 1944. ('<u>The Armoured Writer V</u>')

Giraffes, for instance, are remarkable and strange because they are 'creatures walking without pain or love,'[1] in a time when, it is implied, these are fundamental beyond everything else to human beings.

Something of an explanation can be found again in a letter of Alun Lewis:-

> 'I've taken a sardonic title for the poems from Job 39. 'Ha! Ha! among the trumpets.' You know the beautiful chapter. The liberty of the wild ass, the lovelessness of the ostrich, the intrepidity of the horse. These are the particulars. The infinite, of which I can never be sure, is God the Maker. I prefer the ostrich's eggs warming in the sun. I avoid speculations and haven't been touched by intuitions.'[2]

Here Lewis sums up on his own behalf what we find in nearly all the young poets, - the feeling for particular everyday detail as a vehicle for expressing a depth of experience arising from their situation;-

> 'for there doesn't seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one, of what survives of all the beloved.'

Combined with this is a sensitivity to what is natural and what is not. The kind of war that was taking place must have stood out in direct contrast to the background of Nature and life lived according to the dictates of nature. Add to this the dislike of their own position. The result is a poetry that

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1. 'The Giraffes' ('A Lost Season' London. 1944.)
2. See Introduction to 'Ha! Ha! among the trumpets' London.1945.

harks back to a time of peace, that sees in the soldier's life something unnatural, and considers the years of war as a turning aside from and distortion of the laws of the universe. What is important is that these poets do not try to bury themselves in memories of happier times, instead they record for us the joys of a natural life within the setting of their present situation.

Whatever the poet may remember of the beloved, he is aware of change. There is '<u>A hope for those separated by war</u>'[1] but the lovers must reach each other through and in spite of the tortures they endure. In '<u>Encirclement</u>'[2] the poet strives through his present surroundings to reach the place -

> 'Where the lamplit room awaits a stranger
> And suffering has sanctified your face.'

The poets do not need to deliberately record their time, because they themselves, as its victims, bear the impress, and they feel themselves part of a disturbed universe.

'<u>All Nature's agents image war to me</u>'[3] is a poem by Clive Sansom, and natural phenomena are often used as symbols, but Nature herself is rarely seen as 'red in tooth and claw'. It is continually viewed from an aesthetic point of view

> 'Out of the almond-tree and the acacia
> shall come back beauty.'[4]

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1. See Keyes' '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.
2. See '<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>' London. 1945.
3. '<u>Poems of this War</u>' Cambridge 1942.
4. John Bayliss '<u>Testament and Prophecy</u>'('<u>New Road</u>' 1943.)

This is part of that Life which goes on after the breaking of nations, and is a sign of hope. These poems are full of the most joyful natural description as opposed to the social satire of the middle generation. Questions are raised, morals are pointed in fundamental terms of Nature. David Gascoyne especially is a poet of the English landscape who yet is aware of a war background. '<u>Snow in Europe</u>'[1] is a poem with many significances. Europeans have their dreams but they could not stop the snow. Therefore, it implies, they won't stop the flow of blood either. The poet shows how snow has stopped war by glossing over boundaries, but the nations are waiting in readiness for it to disappear. The whole poem implies far more than it states. The snow is an agent of beauty, and by its very habit of blotting out distinctions an agent of peace, - it is only man who is out of his natural element, who sets up his own lines of demarkation and quarrels over them. '<u>Walking at Whitsun</u>'[2] is more purely a poem of description, turned only at the end into a reminder of war:-

> 'And meditating as I pace
> The afternoon away, upon the smile
> (Like that worn by the dead) which Nature wears
> In ignorance of our unnatural tears,
> From time to time I think: How such a sun
> Must glitter on their helmets! How bright-red
> Against this sky's clear screen will ruins burn...'

There is something perennial about the seasons and what

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1. '<u>Poems 1937-42</u>' London. 1943.
2. Ditto.

they bring with them that is both the hall-mark of a future and an antithesis to a war manufactured by men:-

> 'and still Spring must
> Swing back through Time's continual arc to earth.'

When Keyes in '<u>Cervières</u>'[1] wishes to express the continuance of that which is destroyed, he does it through the image of the cherry orchard despoiled by birds and yet resown because of the life remaining in the seed.

It is this hope for a future life that the poets leave behind them. Nature is often used as an image of all they most value, - in Keyes it has literary connotations, the rivers and gardens that are left behind for the wilderness, - in Lewis it is a sign that 'We are of Life'[2]:-

> 'Only the fleeting sunlight in the forest,
> And dragonflies' blue flicker on quiet pools
> Will perpetuate our vision
> Who die young.'

And in Rook it becomes

> 'a vision so real that almost
> you could squeeze it.'[3]

In itself, this description of Nature does not reflect this age more than any other, except that it embodies the spirit of a youthful generation face to face with death, and shows how, as a direct reaction to the war, people were turning to a simple

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1. '<u>Collected Poems</u>' London. 1945.
2. '<u>Lines on a Tudor Mansion</u>' ('<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.)
3. '<u>Poem from H.Q.</u>' ('<u>Soldiers, this Solitude</u>' London. 1942.)

joy in life. Kathleen Raine has pointed out in 'New Road' 1943[1] that they are feeling with nerves of beauty rather than nerves of pain:-

> 'It seems that the war, far from producing a crop of war poetry, has made us turn to life with new reverence.'

The feeling for natural beauty acted also upon their desire for home, for their women and their children. Separation was one of the unnatural results of being at war, and the poets celebrated sex in its most natural and erotic form. Owen had abandoned all thoughts of the beloved in order to dwell upon the death of his martyred comrades. The Second War poets were not primarily interested in describing dying men, but in expressing the feelings of men all in a hell of a similar situation, recognising that

> 'What's done
> To me is done to many.'[2]

Alun Lewis admits that his poems are 'expressions of personal experience'[3] written for his wife Gweno. Time and again he points out that mankind generally, having lost the fine mastery over its fate, has brought about a situation culminating in the poet's own sorrow

> 'And huge as the shadows
> My longing runs wild
> Oh world! Oh wanton!
> For my woman, my child.'[4]

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1. 'Are poets doing their duty'
2. Roy Fuller. 'What is Terrible'('A Lost Season' London.1944.)
3. See Introduction to 'Ha! Ha! among the trumpets' London.1945)
4. 'Chanson Triste' (Ditto)

The love expressed in these poems is usually very simple and very earthy, - it is the soldier's longing for the warmth of his bed and his wife's arms. But its significance extends farther than this. In one '<u>Song</u>'[1] Lewis tells us -

> 'That Life has trembled in a kiss
> From Genesis to Genesis,
> And what's transfigured will live on
> Long after Death has come and gone.'

Love seems to have a strange power in the poems of this generation. Part of it is possibly derived from the abstract expression of the need for love in the poetry of Spender, Auden, and their group, although this sometimes enters also in a similar form, among the younger poets.[2] But in them it develops further into a full-blooded yearning for life with all its natural joys. In '<u>Odi et Amo</u>'[3], the strength of the poet's hatred for war and 'this blood-soaked forest of disease' is contrasted with the strength of his love for forms of life:-

> 'My soul cries out with love
> Of all that walk and swim and fly.
> From the mountains, from the sky,
> Out of the depths of the sea
> Love cries and cries in me.'

Separation from the beloved is sometimes a sign that the world is out of its natural state (cf. the Elizabethan world-

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1. '<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>' London. 1945.
2. 'Today all living know the power of hatred for evil. Not everyone knows that this hatred hides an aching need to love.' (Alan Rook '<u>Not as a Refuge</u>' Amsterdam. 1948.)
3. '<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.

order)[1]. On the other hand the significance of amor may be only in its being a constant aid to the fighter in the midst of warfare, keeping him normal, human, and happy, in a private life that goes on existing through and above all world-wide catastrophe. These poets speak for the individual rather than society, for the Englishman absent from his home rather than England at war.

> 'O ecstasies of courting days. O clouded quarrel days
> The Fuehrer wants a word with you! the simple life the
> simple Joy just stays.'[2]

Whether these young poets would have been writing love sonnets if the world had been at peace, and whether the war was an intrusion into the poet's personal world, or whether the theme of love arose through the war, it is difficult to say. It seems, however, more likely that the war brought out the personal desires, hopes and frustrations, as much of what they wrote (especially before and since the war), shows an ability to absorb what is outside themselves, even to think in terms of social satire (Pudney, Lewis, Comfort), although they tend rather towards the emotional than the intellectual.

They were, however, involved at an early age in action. The immediacy of their experience vitalises both the drama of

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1. Roy Fuller. '<u>Royal Naval Air Station</u>' ('<u>The Middle of a War</u>' London. 1942.

2. Keidrych Rhys '<u>Letter to my Wife</u>' ('<u>The Van Pool and other poems</u>' London. 1942.

their work and the sentiments. They themselves realise that the climax of their lives has been forced upon them before they have had time to think about it:-

> 'For what is lost to this
> generation is the passionate withdrawal,
> the consistent retreat to the desert. And what
> has come is the participation
> in the involuntary event.'[1]

They are fulfilling what Auden prophesied in '<u>On the Frontier</u>', this is that same generation that could not stand apart, recording the position for itself.

And the final realisation comes gradually, that resignation to war and to separation eventually means resignation to death. It means a deliberate and irrevocable abandonment of the things they most value. In the first war death meant carnage and waste. In the Second it means neither the horrors of bloodshed nor the pitiful throwing away of life. That is too external a form. Above all, it is not enlarged by the imagination, the poets are not trying to play upon our emotions, although they can move us, - they are recording an experience. And they achieve an impression of the nearness of death that is hardly to be paralleled -

> 'I have left
> The lovely bodies of the boy and girl
> Deep in each other's placid arms;
> And I have left
> The beautiful lanes of sleep
> That barefoot lovers follow to the last
> Cold shore of thought I guard.

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1. Alan Rook '<u>Poem from H.Q.</u>' ('<u>Soldiers, this Solitude</u>' London. 1942.)

I have begun to die
And the guns' implacable silence
Is my black interim, my youth and age.'[1]

Whereas in the Middle Ages war's common denominator lay in a code of chivalry, a specified manner in which a battle was to be fought, and traditional terms in which it was related, the common denominator today lies in the basic experience expressed by men facing the same fundamental realities.

Sidney Keyes is a poet who writes not for himself personally, but as a voice for the life and the generation of which he is part. It is no accident that he tells the voiceless speakers to 'Cry through the trumpet of my rage and fear.'[2] It is significant also, from our findings on what poets were writing about, that his themes embrace both the soldier and the lover. 'The Foreign Gate' for instance enters intimately and sensitively into the pain of separation and the agony of death. He has an insight into the lives of his comrades in the same way as his poetry proves he can lose himself in any subject he turns his hand to, - a gift of imagination way and beyond any personal experience of his own, comparable with Shakespeare's 'negative capability.' His experience is not taken as a pointer to that of others, but their experience is made his own. And of the experience of death, he tells us -

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1. Alun Lewis. 'The Sentry' ('Raiders' Dawn' London. 1942.)
2. 'Collected Poems' London. 1945.

'Whatever gift, it is the giving
Remains significant, whatever death
It is the dying matters.'

Whatever form death takes (and that is not the pre-occupation of this generation of poets) it is the turning to meet it that raises it to another plane;-

'And there the soul found strength
To break the blurred delirious veils
Of silence and of pathos and of self.'[1]

The poets record various stages in their attitude to the subject. We are not left with the impression that the struggle has been easy, only that on the whole it has been victorious. It is for nearly all of them 'hard and bitter agony', especially at the thought that this generation that has not reached maturity is itself something precious that is being lost to the world -

'Man has not learned, man has not lived,
And man is dying, in his death
Godlike as lightning and more ruinous.'[2]

But the bitterness of the First War poets is softened, partly by acceptance, partly by the thought of the beauty and power of the dark, (the poet again feeling with nerves of beauty rather than of pain)[3], partly by the consolation in a poet like Rook that

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1. Alun Lewis '<u>Parable</u>' ('<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.)
2. Clifford Dyment '<u>Now in the Fall</u>' ('<u>Collected Poems 1935-48</u>' London. 1949.)
3. See Alun Lewis '<u>Burma Casualty</u>' ('<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>' London. 1945.)

'death shall come
not in the moment of expected danger
but only
when the reaper is ripe for the corn,'[1]

partly because of the level of tragic splendour to which they raise the subject of their final destiny. Gascoyne in his '<u>Farewell Chorus</u>'[2] sees it as the culminating point of 'Years through the rising storm of which we grew', realising that all the petty fears and trivialities of those years are falling away, leaving them with certain truths about mens' lives.

'Beyond despair
May we take wiser leave of you, knowing disaster's cause.'

But the dominating mood is one that is common to everybody involved in the war, at home or abroad, - the expectation of death at any moment as something life is now bringing, - forging a bond between all men because of the mortality they have in common:-

'you will be quiet, all of you -
quiet, in rows; for this city is dropping its cones,
life is dropping its cones, and they roll, and we are among them.'[3]

The First War in 1914 celebrated its young men going out to fight heroically for cause and country, and in 1918 it exalted its dead. The Second War does very little of either.

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1. '<u>Harvest</u>' ('<u>These are my comrades</u>' London. 1943.)
2. See '<u>Poems 1937-42</u>' London. 1943.
3. Alex Comfort '<u>Stylites</u>' ('<u>A Wreath for the Living</u>' London. 1942.)

In fact there is a continual strain of displeasure at the thought of the public, popular epitaph that will follow the close of the war.[1] In actual fact, the young poets who survived were more intent on pointing out how the sense of the reality of the war would fade with time, and on trying on the whole to keep it alive, than on producing anything like Binyon's 'For the Fallen'. But what they did do was to celebrate certain aspects of the war while it was taking place, with neither bitterness nor hatred. Death was one of these aspects, the soldier was another. In both cases they had too firm a grasp on reality to idealise. They were quite aware of the ordinariness of the common fighter, and that there were millions more like him. They celebrate in fact, the age of the common man, the 'little people grown huge with death,'[2]

> 'A digit in the cost
> Of the planners.'[3]

They realise that these men have been forced to become heroes because of their age -

> 'Who might have remained, and been
> Cobblers or schoolmasters.'[4]

There are very few poems idealising leaders, King, or country.

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1. See John Pudney's 'Commemorations' London. 1948.
2. Alun Lewis 'At a Play' ('Raiders' Dawn' London. 1942.)
3. John Pudney 'At the Ceremony' (See 'Commemorations' London. 1948.)
4. Alex Comfort 'And all but he departed' (See volume of same name. London. 1951.)

Just as the Anglo-Saxons sang of their particular heroes until it seemed that the ordinary soldier hardly existed in their ranks, they were so full of heored-men, so the twentieth century fighter is one of many, completely undistinguished unless the poet has a personal recollection of a particular friend. They have been

> 'Made great by history
> By a trick of the light.'[1]

The poets speak of their comrades, not objectively, but as men in the same situation as themselves. The bond forged between men fighting during the war is implicit in their work.

> 'Red fool, my laughing comrade'[2]

is how Lewis addresses a comrade in arms, and something of the good fellowship, the laughing, drinking, and enduring together comes out in such a phrase.

It might be said that these poets reflect their age by accident, because they cannot help the way they think (which must to a great extent be conditioned by their situation). They certainly don't make a conscious effort to be up-to-date. They reflect a trend of thought perhaps, rather than an age, and future generations will turn to them, not to find out what the war was like, but to discover why it was that men endured as much as they did. Kathleen Raine writes in <u>New Road</u>[3] 1943:-

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1. Alex Comfort '<u>And all but he departed</u>' (See volume of the same name. London. 1951.)

2. Alun Lewis '<u>To a comrade in arms</u>' ('<u>Raiders' Dawn</u>' London. 1942.)

3. '<u>Are poets doing their duty?</u>'

'But poetry written about the war largely disregards all questions of causes and agents. War is an accident, an enemy to the buds of life. It is not a poet's war. No poet has perhaps expressed what this war does mean to those who live in it, or in spite of it, as completely as has Henry Moore in his shelter drawings, but poets who do write of it, write to the same effect as Moore paints - life lives as best it can, trying to disregard the things that seek to destroy it, humble but persistent in the face of death.'

CHAPTER 2

The attitude of the age toward the poets

In order to show the attitude of the age itself toward the poets and poems dealt with in this thesis, I have taken mainly a census of opinion expressed in three reviews, - the New Statesman, the Listener, and the Spectator, from the early thirties as far as the end of the Second World War, supplemented by various other critical works. One thing has to be kept in mind, however, - that many of the reviews were written either by the poets themselves or by writers with certain political leanings,[1] with the result that we get at times a biased view instead of a wholly disinterested observation. (Spender's review of Campbell's 'Flowering Rifle' is one of the best examples of this.) On the other hand we benefit from an inside account of a movement, and gain the opportunity not only of seeing in which direction the age was moving, but in which direction the poets desired it to move.

The reviews of the 1930's are themselves indicative of the political trends of the age. The fact that the New Movement of poetry (as it was called) was Communist in politics was mentioned and accepted without the comment it would arouse today. Critics were inclined to label all the major poets of

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1. Also we should remember the political preferences of the various magazines and reviews. The New Statesman for instance inclined to the Left, the Spectator rather more to the Right.

the movement as belonging to the Communist party. No absolute sympathy is expressed by reviewers (outside definitely partisan critics belonging to the Left magazines), but on the other hand there is not a shade of antagonism. One critic actually makes the statement on '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' that 'in his thinking Mr. Spender is scrupulously fair.'[1] Moreover, the new vitality embodied in the movement, it was suggested, was a sign of the recovery of the age itself in the social-political sphere. As a result:-

> 'The second anthology of "new signatures", 'New Country', was noticeably more Communistic than the first, and rich in what Mr. Lewis calls "adventitious energy".'[2]

The very fact that the poets had come together in a movement was beginning to arouse public interest in them (even though they had published separately before then.)[3]

The <u>Criterion</u> was one magazine which, while admitting that it was not entirely in sympathy with the views expressed in '<u>New Writing</u>', at least agreed that it embodied many present-day feelings and should be admired for taking a stand and doing something about them:-

> 'This change, then, in the significance of the word 'new' shows the increasing anxiety among writers, as well as everyone else, to find something firm to cling to in the

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1. The Spectator March 18th 1938 Nevill Coghill reviewing '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>'.
2. See '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>' Oxford 1934.
3. New Statesman October 27th 1934. G. W. Stonier reviewing third edition of '<u>New Signatures</u>'.

'apparent chaos of contemporary life; the determination to be on one side or other of the fence, not sitting on it as a mark for both parties.'[1]

Yet the main complaint against the 1930 poets lies in the group heritage. It is their common fund of opinions and images that critics proclaim a hindrance to their individual development:-

'leaving the ground, we sit in tethered balloons, the spectators of a mimic warfare, while round us the kestrel (sole bird of this new world) swoops, and the bully-boys of the Muse romp among the clouds like porpoises. There are few occasions when this scene, or part of it, is not invoked. It is the New Country ... That is the mechanical and bad side of the group product.'[2]

The good side, the review goes on, lies in their genuine futurism, for in seeing present society as doomed the poets have a new vision.

Day Lewis and Spender are continually blamed for not integrating politics and poetry.[3] The political and literary groove of the 1930's, apart from its initial newness, is seen rather as something each poet has to step out of before his individual genius can emerge. Spender is seen as a personal poet even in the midst of politics, and the incongruity is noted.[4] And Day Lewis, we are told, fails when his poetry is

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1. Vol. XVI 1936-7. Frank Chapman reviewing '<u>New Writing</u>'.

2. New Statesman. March 9th 1935. G.W.Stonier reviewing '<u>A Time to Dance</u>', '<u>Collected Poems</u>'.

3. Spectator. November 9th 1934. I.M.Parsons reviewing '<u>Vienna</u>'

4. New Statesman. October 27th 1934. G.W.Stonier reviewing Spender's '<u>Poems</u>':- 'Mr. Spender looks distinctly odd, at times, as one of the leaders of a movement.'

determined by PURPOSE rather than by feeling.'[1] Even in the 1940's, his faults are laid at the door of the previous decade:-

> 'One of the best poets of the '30's, Mr. Day Lewis is still, to some extent, mesmerised by the ideas and phraseology of that period, but in poems like "The Poet" and "Reconciliation" there is a freedom and spontaneity which promises new development.'[2]

The critics themselves were, at the beginning of the 1930's, intrigued by a poetry that spoke directly to the age. By the time the Second World War came, they were urging the immediate need for something to be said on the world's plight. (In fact it is amazing how up-to-date poets were expected to be. In reviewing MacNeice's 'The Last Ditch' and Hamilton's 'The Sober War' the Listener remarks:- 'neither ... shows any prophetic awareness, in these poems written some months ago, of the summer of Blitzkrieg.'[3])

The actual DEMAND was not there at the beginning of the '30's, but in a review of 'Noah and the Waters', which most critics considered should have stopped after the third line, we are told to remember that it has a contemporary value, that Day Lewis can be read with interest even when he is writing badly, whereas Church, Palmer, and W. J. Turner are enjoyable

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1. Spectator. March 22nd 1935. Edwin Muir reviewing Day Lewis' 'A Time to dance', 'Collected Poems'.
2. Spectator. March 3rd. 1944. S.Shannon reviewing 'Word Over All'. cf. Listener. January 9th 1941 reviewing Day Lewis' 'Poems in Wartime':- 'has emerged from his entanglement of ideas and political preoccupations. He is now fully himself.'
3. Listener. August 15th 1940.

only when they write well.[1]

'The Ascent of F6' is praised for being 'a topical morality' - 'the self immolation of a good individual in the service of capitalism.'[2] 'Trial of a Judge' is hailed as a modern tragedy:-

> 'Considered as a fable then this play is of gripping interest in a world which has just witnessed the wolfish invasions of Austria and the threat of ballot by bullet.'[3]

There is no doubt that though many older writers, favourites like Blunden and Housman were still being published at this time, it was the Auden group that was 'in fashion'. When Blunden's 'Elegy and other poems' came upon the market in 1938, the reviewer sought to put him forward by denying the charge of escapist, he at least expressed the 'spiritual disillusionment' where more fashionable poets reflected political and social poverty.[4]

The age itself is at times very much aware of its own nature. In reviewing 'Spain' (Auden), 'War-Dance' (Graham-Howe), and 'Epic of the Alcazar' (Major Geoffrey Mosse), the New Statesman points out the link between these three completely

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1. New Statesman. April 4th 1936. G.W.Stonier reviewing 'Noah and the Waters'.

2. cf. July 27th 1940. T.C.Worsley reviewing 'Another Time':- 'Reading Auden, even at his most obscure or his most silly, enlarges our understanding of what the life of our day is really like.'

3. Spectator. March 18th 1938. Nevill Coghill.

4. cf. Spectator, January 5th 1940. Bonamy Dobrée reviewing 'Collected poems of A.E.Housman', points out their significance for the present time.

different writers i.e. they are obsessed by war, fighting, and death, because the age itself is one of sensation hunters who desire strong meat:-

> 'They are people who have grown up on crises, for whom bad news is better than no news, victims of the war fever which is on the increase twenty years after 1914, which may be universal in thirty.'

But, as he remarks on the Spanish Civil War - 'no-one seems able to stop.'[1] Critics, in fact, are not inclined to accept even fine poetry if the note it strikes is a false one. Day Lewis for instance, is criticised for his lines 'Tell them in England ...'. This is too much like Brooke and Flecker, and their period, the reviewer knows, is over. The age has its equivalent only in Roy Campbell.[2]

The fact that the 1930 poets were intent on speaking to and for their age, then, was not objected to. Their efforts and the poetry they produced in the Spanish Civil War was reviewed with considerable sympathy. But what was objected to was the manner in which they chose to reflect the age (that this in itself might be a reflection, was hardly likely to recommend itself). For one thing it was limited in appeal. Auden himself is praised for the width of view his poetry can

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1. New Statesman. June 5th 1937. Cyril Connolly.
2. Ditto. December 3rd 1938. G.W.Stonier reviewing '<u>Overtures to Death</u>'.

give, the sheer physical outlook, the continents and races he surveys from vast heights.[1] The other poets have more limited capabilities though within their limitations some of them are still valued as highly as Auden.[2] But the limitation of the group as a whole lies in the emphasis on the intellectual and cerebral at the expense of the emotional and sensuous. '<u>Another Time</u>' is criticised for the poverty of its verse and the way in which it derides the heroic and romantic.[3] Even as early as 1934, the Listener was writing:-

> 'It was evident in Mr. Pudney's first book of poems, '<u>Spring Encounter</u>', that here was a poet in whom the social sense, though keenly developed, was not going to be exploited at the expense of that sensuous appeal which is the basis of all true poetry.'

Except for Spender who embodies some of the 'true poetry', other writers are simply protracting Eliot's '<u>Waste Land</u>'.[4]

Then there is the further criticism of obscurity. The Criterion, which may be taken as one of the most liberal-minded reviews of the period, while accepting much of Auden's work as praiseworthy though admitting it difficult to understand, still has to give up Rex Warner's '<u>Poems</u>' as a bad job:-

> 'his revolutionary verse is so drenched in the mysticism

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1. Spectator. December 4th 1936. Edwin Muir reviewing '<u>Look Stranger</u>'.
2. Spender, for instance.
3. Listener, August 22nd 1940.
4. Ditto. October 31st 1934. reviewing '<u>Open the Sky</u>'

> of violence and so remote from political realities that one does not know what to make of it.'[1]

Another aspect of the same problem was the reliance on fact at the expense of artistic integrity. The Criterion points out how much style is sacrificed to politics (apart from whatever the politics might be) in 'New Writing'[2]. The Listener reviewing the new series that started in 1939 quoted:-

> '"I saw clumsy Life again at her stupid work" - Henry James's remark ... would shock most of the contributors to New Writing. In nearly all the stories, descriptions and poems included here, truth to the fact, to what actually happened, is the chief consideration ... The authors show us how human beings behave in the shadow of war, fascism and unemployment; but they do not follow any one formula.'[3]

The second major complaint was that the 1930 style of writing dated. Even in the 1930's. As early as 1937 Rex Warner's 'Poems' elicited the comment -

> 'Mr. Warner combines a love of birds with an already old-fashioned habit of hailing the Red Dawn.'[4]

So much for the political ideals, - the style of writing received stronger criticism because it outlasted even those ideals. As Spender observed, the left-wing orthodox party gradually grew into a genre which writers followed willy-nilly.[5] Rook, for

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1. Vol. XVII 1937-8. Edwin Muir reviewing Warner's 'Poems'.
2. Vol. XVI 1936-7. Frank Chapman reviewing 'New Writing'.
3. Listener. June 1st 1939. 'New Writing: New Series No. 2.'
4. Spectator. June 4th 1937. W. Plomer reviewing Warner's 'Poems'.
5. New Statesman. December 9th 1939. Spender: 'Old Wine in New Bottles'.

instance, was reprimanded for writing in a facile manner that had much of the older writers about it.[1]

Both the style of writing and of thinking was out-dated by the time the Second World War broke out. The Listener preferred those poems of Lehmann written prior to 1934 and after 1939, because the between years were full of clichés.[2] And looking back in 1941 on a period of which she had been part, Rosamund Lehmann remarks:-

> 'Far away that time seems now, with its feverish anti-Fascist slogans and frivolous pro-freedom gestures; the dilemma of "Whether to die
> Or live within fear's eye."'[3]

In his 1936 Postscript to '<u>A Hope for Poetry</u>'[4] C.Day Lewis sees both a revival of interest in poetry and

> 'a reaction from the recent pre-occupation of poets with social justice, their possibly over-mechanised vocabulary, and often slapdash technique: a return to the ideals of poetic integrity and artistic individualism: a setting-out-again in the direction of 'pure' poetry.'

The new school of Surrealist poets that appeared with '<u>the white horseman</u>'[5] was quick to seize upon the changing trend of the age to boost their own brand of writing. In the Introduction G.S.Fraser pointed out that -

'Nobody denies the immediate social impact of much of the

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1. Listener. September 10th 1942. '<u>Poems of this War</u>'(Ledward and Strang.)
2. December 31st 1942. Lehmann's '<u>Forty Poems</u>'.
3. New Statesman.March 29th 1941. Rosamund Lehmann reviewing Day Lewis' '<u>Poems in Wartime</u>' and '<u>Selected Poems</u>'.
4. Oxford 1934.
5. London. 1941

poetry of Auden, Spender, or MacNeice. But it was, to a certain extent, an impact of the surface and of the moment. The war, as a matter of fact, has made that sort of immediate political approach, that clear-cut partisanship, a practical impossibility. But, to have social value, poetry does not have to show immediate political relevance.'

The major poets were quicker at heeding the warning of reviewers than their followers. MacNeice was praised in 1945 for moving with the times,[1] and Day Lewis for freeing himself from his early politics.[2] In the meantime the style that younger writers followed was associated especially with the names of Auden and Spender. Gascoyne is found guilty once of descending to the bathos of the '40's which was worthy of Spauden.[3]

And the third great complaint against the 1930 poets is that they stood essentially for a certain class at a certain time. '<u>The Still Centre</u>' was unsatisfactory because the poems are documents 'not of "the human situation" in general, but only of the situation of many English intellectuals today.'[4] The movement that was accepted at the opening of the 1930's, after the disappointment of its early hopes, came to a sudden standstill.[5] The actual fight against fascism in the Second World War was not seen, even by the writers themselves, as the

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1. Listener. March 29th 1945. '<u>Springboard</u>'.
2. Ditto. October 13th 1938. Edwin Muir reviewing '<u>Overtures to Death</u>'.
3. New Statesman. January 22nd 1944. G.W.Stonier reviewing Gascoyne's '<u>Poems 1937-42</u>'.
4. Listener. May 18th 1939. F.T.Prince reviewing '<u>The Still Centre</u>' (supplement).
5. Spectator. July 26th 1940. M.Roberts reviewing '<u>Another Time</u>' - 'gives the impression that Mr.Auden used up all his energy in treating the Spanish Civil War as a crusade.'

glorious outcome of their warnings in the '30's. The New Movement was merely a pointer to the times and not one that went any further. It was discovered that the movement did not move, - partly because the remedy it proposed was palpably ineffective, partly because its crisis had come in the Spanish Civil War, and with that disillusionment came the abandonment of all hope. Elizabeth Bowen notices that in Lehmann's account of '<u>New Writing in Europe</u>', he 'writes of the Spanish war with a capital W and of the present war with a small one,' that the poets he deals with

> 'became "intellectuals" - it is notable that Mr. Lehmann identifies intellectuals with writers - and, by grouping, located themselves, whether abroad or in England, inside the intellectuals' world: isolated, special, intensive, charged with personal feeling and, in the long run, as claustrophobic as any middle-class home. Would it be unfair to say of this group of writers, that, though they changed their milieu, they never fully emerged, but remained life's delicate children after all?'[1]

Critics had been pleased to find poets like Auden and Spender reflecting the 'fascist trauma' in their drama. But as time went on there were fresh aspects of a new age that they demanded should be dealt with. And the 1930 poets, in abandoning their political principles, were rather inclined to retire into a private world. MacNeice for instance, exhibited during the war a 'sickening atmosphere of self-pity', and 'his chief feeling seems to be one of quite natural, though not very

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1. Spectator. January 17th 1941. Elizabeth Bowen reviewing '<u>New Writing in Europe</u>'.

significant annoyance at its interfering with his rather complex personal life.'[1]

For, although critics were wanting a new outlook on the world, they still wanted an awareness of that world and its significance in our time, to be at the centre of the poet's outlook. Kathleen Raine summed up the situation during the Second World War:-

> 'The poets of the last generation - Auden, MacNeice, Empson, Michael Roberts, Day Lewis, Robert Graves, have one great merit that the younger poets on the whole lack. That is, an adult and responsible attitude towards society. Readers of Poetry London, that most representative selection from the poetry being written now, will be aware that in the tendency to return to "pure" poetry there has been a corresponding weakening of the poets' grasp of history in progress. The same turning away from the world is expressed in a great deal of current erotic poetry. Not because it is erotic, but because sex has become for the moment the expression of the individual who can't cope with society in larger units.'[2]

There were of course still people like Read whose 'World within a War' was political in the '30's manner and therefore out-of-date, his war poetry is 'an accomplished but minor comment on a human situation that has left him behind.'[3] The older generation of writers are the ones who are usually blamed for having little of significance to say during the war even when they are writing on it. Hamilton's anti-German poetry belongs to a different age. 1939 required something different, not militancy

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1. Listener. August 15th 1940. reviewing MacNeice's 'The Last Ditch'.
2. 'New Road' 1943. 'Are poets doing their duty?'
3. Listener. September 16th 1944. H.Read's 'World within a War'.

but healing:-

> 'One cannot look to Mr. Hamilton for that terrible awareness of contemporary life which - if one could accept it - might indeed find a way to console us.'[1]

But the middle generation, when they do have something to say, are greatly appreciated. And what they are especially praised for is thinking in tune with their time. MacNeice in '<u>The Earth Compels</u>', writes of the usual worries and delights of life, but

> 'What is more important than all this, is that the poet is afraid. He is haunted by the fears that have been haunting us all - fears of war, the future, regimentation, the unknown - and it looks as if these fears are the making of him as a poet.'[2]

On the other hand, it is fully recognised that MacNeice and his group are writing a war-time poetry rather than war poetry. Their value lies in writing 'the news behind the news' i.e. they extract truth from the experience of war.[3] And the poetry that is usually accepted as reflecting its age is more often than not characterised by 'the virtues of seriousness and humility'. This it is that Pudney lacks and which Church's '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>' possesses.[4] Edith Sitwell, we are told, is at her best during the war and writing more selflessly

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1. Listener. August 15th 1940. G.Rostrevor Hamilton's '<u>The Sober War</u>'.
2. Spectator. June 10th 1938. W.Plomer reviewing '<u>The Earth Compels</u>'.
3. New Statesman. January 27th 1945. Brian Howard reviewing '<u>Springboard</u>' and Barker's '<u>Eros in Dogma</u>'.
4. Ditto. April 17th 1943. Spender reviewing '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>'.

because of it.[1] MacNeice's '<u>Plant and Phantom</u>' is praised for not overstating, and 'That, in these days, is something of an achievement.'[2] Kathleen Raine objects to the aggressive approach of W.R. Rogers -

> 'for experience is inviolable and remains a still, small voice, very unlike Mr. Rogers' histrionic shout.'[3]

Besides these, critics require from the poets maturity, humanity, and the correct sense of values. What had to be taken into account was the change in outlook that war brought about. We have already noted the suffering implicit in the work of the middle generation of writers. It was the human touch that was appreciated more than anything by reviewers. Day Lewis' home guard poems for instance had a special mention.[4] Kathleen Raine points out that A.L.Rowse's work shows the changing influences of the age, beginning with the Homo Rationalis and his hatred for various natural forms of life, - e.g. lovers, and the mother suckling her child. But

> 'Was war the angel that so absolutely reversed Mr. Rowse's values? (And not, I repeat, his alone, for we were all in it.) Certain only that the conversion came, and it is with the same intelligence that the Homo Rationalis

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1. New Statesman. April 4th 1942. Spender reviewing '<u>Street Songs</u>'.

2. Ditto. May 10th 1941. G.W.Stonier reviewing '<u>Plant and Phantom</u>'.

3. Spectator. October 31st 1941. Kathleen Raine reviewing '<u>Awake</u>' (W.R.Rogers).

4. Listener. January 9th 1941. Day Lewis' '<u>Poems in Wartime</u>'.

writes in 1940 with so much tenderness for an anonymous soldier.'[1]

Perhaps it is because of the "human" appeal of their work that women writers come off so well in reviews. The maturity of poetesses like Edith Sitwell and Kathleen Raine is constantly emphasised.[2] They have digested the experiences of war and reformulated life.

The war greatly affected critics' outlook on poetry, just as much as it affected poets' outlook on life. Poetry was praised when it answered the need of the time. Hence:-

> 'The experience of the last two years has helped us to find more in Eliot and Auden than we saw at first, but it has shown up the shallowness of Roy Campbell's cocky poems.'[3]

Personal bitterness in Graves is condemned, along with self-pity and resentment in Spender.[4] And the age itself is aware both of the poet's problem and of its own. The former is how much the poet should 'give himself to the present and how much must he stand aside in order to retain an essential measure of detachment.'[5] The latter is the choice the age must exercise to fulfil its own need.

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1. Spectator. October 31st 1941. Kathleen Raine reviewing '<u>Poems of a Decade</u>' (A.L.Rowse.)
2. Listener. March 19th 1942. '<u>Street Songs</u>'. April 29th 1943. '<u>Stone and Flower 1938-43</u>'.
3. Spectator. March 28th 1946. Janet Adam Smith reviewing '<u>Sons of the Mistral</u>' (Campbell).
4. Ditto. May 8th 1942. S. Shannon.
5. Ditto.

'Today a writer in the traditional forms of poetry is unlikely to obtain his due measure of praise, for we are living in a time when content is divorced from form, and when mere topicality of subject-matter is decisive in winning contemporary attention - just as it may make most of the work of our contemporary writers unreadable in days to come.'[1]

The number of lyrics produced during the war was put down both to the way war detaches a writer from his cultural community (therefore he turns to personal experience),[2] and also to the need of the age for lyric poetry 'to resolve in the individual soul the conflict of emotions aroused by the experience of living and loving in a threatened world.'[3]

The Introduction to '<u>the white horseman</u>' sought to excuse what might appear "escapist" poetry by asking the reader to

'consider what world we are living in. With the war, we are all forced in a sense to become stoics - to depend on ourselves and the universe, the intermediate social worlds having been largely destroyed ... It is only natural, really, that a certain quality of gloom, loneliness, excess, should strike the ordinary reader, about the poetry of our generation.'

The emergence of the younger generation of writers in some respects fulfilled and in others failed to fulfil the demands of the critics. For one thing the glut of poems that went into anthologies like '<u>Poems from the forces</u>' might reflect the age, but certainly was not representative of the best

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1. Spectator. May 8th 1942. John Hampon reviewing '<u>The Hope of Dawn and other Poems</u>' (Edwyn Bevan).

2. Listener. March 18th 1943.

3. Spectator. February 3rd 1939. John Hayward reviewing '<u>The Year's Poetry 1938</u>.'

achievement of the age. The poets had not had enough time to reach maturity either of life or of work. And as one reviewer remarked 'one poem does not make a poet.' Some writers were too derivative both in style and emotion, and most would probably cease writing altogether at the end of the war. Compared with 'Poems for Spain', 'Poems from the Forces' lacks spontaneity and is at times embarrassing.[1] Another criticism of young writers is that they 'write poems as the result of their education',[2] and again they do not think, - 'they are merely tormented, bewildered, flummoxed by thought.'[3]

But the new movement recognised among the young poets is praised on the whole. Another review of 'Poems from the Forces' takes a wider view of the issue and counts most interesting those who are writing from inexperience.[4] Individual poets are praised for directness, for truth, for ordinary human feeling, and for reflecting the emotions and thoughts of their own generation. It is observed that 'most poets who deal with the war contemplate, not the war itself, but themselves as affected by it.'[5] This came to be accepted as a necessity at first. As time wore on, however, it became symptomatic of an

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1. Listener. February 12th 1942.
2. Spectator. January 8th 1943. S. Shannon.
3. New Statesman. January 31st 1942. Edwin Muir reviewing Church's 'The Solitary Man'.
4. Ditto. March 28th 1942. G.W.Stonier reviewing 'Poems from the Forces'.
5. Listener. September 10th 1942. 'Poetry in Wartime'(Tambimuttu).

age when distinctions were disappearing and war and its personal associations became the stock in trade for all poets:-

> 'The distinction between public verse and personal verse may seem to have disappeared. No commemorative ode from the Poet Laureate greets the Moscow Conference, and every soldier who writes a sonnet to his girl asks more or less what we're fighting for.'[1]

There is a complaint that all poets must drag in war, whatever they are writing about,[2] yet on the other hand they are praised when they express any part of the thought and feeling of the age, - Fuller's sense of exile in time and space for instance,[3] and Keyes' dwelling upon death and self-sacrifice.[4]

Spender, with his usual sensitivity, however, pointed out in '<u>Poetry since 1939</u>'[5] an aspect of our war poetry due to our position as opposed to the position of any country on the Continent. He tells us that we have learnt from the war community responsibility:-

> 'However, the values of imagination which cannot be related to public action, human personality considered apart from civic consciousness, beauty, romantic love, have suffered the neglect which is inevitable in a completely mobilised and conscripted community.'

The situation on the continent has been the very opposite:-

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1. New Statesman. November 6th 1943. G.W.Stonier reviewing '<u>Word Over All</u>'.
2. Ditto. July 31st 1943. G.W.Stonier.
3. Ditto. Spetember 2nd 1944. G.W.Stonier reviewing '<u>A Lost Season</u>'.
4. Ditto. August 11th 1945. G.W.Stonier reviewing Keyes' '<u>Collected Peems</u>'.
5. London. 1946.

'The leaders of the Resistance Movements ... had leisure ... to learn the human lessons and the poetic values of their experiences.'

'In such war poetry as England has produced, the intellectual acceptance of a necessary unity on the plane of material action is altogether different from the unity at a personal as well as an ardently patriotic level which we find in the French, the Czech, the Greek, the Norwegian, poetry of Resistance.'

Still the communal binding power of much poetry is pointed to by many reviewers as having the healing properties desired by the British public. What is liked particularly in Lehmann's poems is 'the visionary poetry which is a generally shared experience in this explosive today'.[1] What is liked in Richard Church's is

'the constancy of fertile earth shining into branch and bud as antidote to these calamities'[2]

Richard Spender is praised for

'the innocence of a singer, for whom the abstactions of politicians and moralists are of no concern'.[3]

Keyes and Alun Lewis receive considerable support for their poems which show a fundamental resemblance in being on "the single poetic theme of Life and Death."[4] And to sum up, when Scarfe criticised Prokosch for failing to write poetry

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1. New Statesman. April 17th 1943. Spender reviewing Lehmann's '<u>Forty Poems</u>'.

2. Listener. April 29th 1943. '<u>Twentieth Century Psalter</u>'.

3. Ditto. May 10th 1945. Richard Spender '<u>Collected Poems</u>'.

4. Ditto. August 23rd 1945. Sidney Keyes and '<u>Ha! Ha! among the Trumpets</u>'.

"bearing directly on social matters", the reviewer replied in 1942:-

> 'what poet has or could or would want to? Indirectly, yes - because all great poets are essentially and inevitably of their age - but directly only if they are the most conscious aspirants for a cheap and immediate notoriety.'[1]

Critics want poets to write _for_ their age rather than _about_ their age, during the Second World War. They don't want to be presented with a problem as in the '30's, they want some kind of resolution and consolation. And although the younger writers are encouraged, with special mention for Keyes, Lewis, Fuller, and Comfort, (Pudney, it is noted, speaks for quite a small group during the war - critics aren't always sure what to make of his easy exuberance), the writers who seem especially appreciated are Edith Sitwell, Richard Church, Day Lewis, Gascoyne, Spender, MacNeice, - and there is even a call upon Auden, regretting his departure for America and suggesting that if he had stayed among the ruins of London he might have done what Aragon did for France in '_Le Crève Coeur_'.[2] The nature of the war seemed to call for maturity and stature (which, it is complained, no poet really possesses.)[3]

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1. Spectator. September 4th 1942. S.Shannon reviewing Scarfe's '_Auden and After_'.

2. New Statesman. July 11th 1942. Raymond Mortimer reviewing Aragon's '_Le Crève-Coeur_'.

3. Spectator. May 8th 1942. S.Shannon.

I have left until the end any mention of 'Scrutiny', because in many ways it either contradicts views discussed in this chapter, or it approaches them from a different angle. Also partly because it is a fairly easy periodical to run through and gather up one constant thread of opinion instead of a concensus, partly because it usually had the last word in any case by waiting until all other critics had expressed their views and then descending with its own criticism of those views, and partly because it issued this Manifesto when it first appeared in 1932:-

> 'Scrutiny, then, will be seriously pre-occupied with the movement of modern civilisation.'[1]

In other words Scrutiny was aware of, and was going to comment on the existing world situation as much as New Country or New Writing. It's awareness of the approaching war can be seen from its various articles on the subject. In 1932 for instance, G. Lowes Dickinson warned that war and capitalism were no longer "academic" topics, they were now standing at the front door.[2]

It was determined, however, that it was going to criticise contemporary poetry not only as expressive of its day and age, but from the point of view of literature that lasts (NOT as many other critics approached it during the Second World War, as expressive of the human situation first and foremost). It

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1. May 1932. Vol 1, No 1 'A Manifesto'
2. May 1932. Ditto. 'The Political Background'.

therefore writes off a poet like Palmer as completely out of the range of fire if we take 'a serious interest in contemporary poetry.'[1]

In accordance with its dictates that poetry must, first and foremost be good literature before it can be praised for doing anything else, it cuts itself off from the merit awarded by other critics when they say that AT LEAST a poet like Day Lewis reflects his age. The reply of Scrutiny reviewing '<u>A Time to Dance</u>' is adamant:-

> 'It is not poetry; it is Kipling-Newbolt. The Old Boy may have gone Left, but he remains true at heart to the Old School.'[2]

The great criticism of the Auden-Spender school is levelled against their immaturity. Auden's talent is acknowledged, but like the 'poetical renaissance' which began with his 1930 '<u>Poems</u>' it has 'petered out in vapid mannerisms and stale clichés.'[3] Spender receives worse treatment; his '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>' is

> 'closet drama of the most barren kind. Mr. Spender has not had any greater success at coming to grips with life than he had in '<u>Vienna</u>'.'[4]

What Scrutiny objects to is the inability of a poet like Spender to do what he says he is doing, or the worthlessness of what a

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1. June 1934. Vol III No 1. F.R. Leavis '<u>Comments and Reviews</u>' cf. Francis Scarfe '<u>Auden and After</u>' (London. 1942) p.172 where the author criticises poets who wrote anti-German propaganda and prophesies neglect for them after the war is over.

2. September 1935. Vol IV No 2. John Spiers on '<u>A Time to Dance</u>'.

3. June 1940 Vol IX No 1. R.G.Cox on '<u>New Writing</u>'.

4. September 1938 Vol VII No 2. W.H.A.Mason on 'Trial of a Judge'

poet like MacNeice succeeds in doing. Of 'Autumn Journal' it remarks:-

> 'in this present poem his feelings about such events as the September crisis do not, at their best, differ materially from those of the average sensible 'man in the street' and to his feelings about more personal topics the man in the street would be most often ashamed to own.'[1]

But, adds Scrutiny, the book would not be worth reviewing 'did we not know that it will be acclaimed as a poem of 'some importance.'' We can often tell the way the wind is blowing by Scrutiny's protest against it.

On the whole we can sum up that protest as levelled against the unreality of the 1930 decade, the way the poets assumed positions for themselves, and the way in which they became outdated because they progressed no further. It was a fairly common criticism about their productions by 1939:-

> 'They are all identical and already have the quaintly lavendered air of a period-piece.'[2]

Scrutiny, in fact, sees the 'pylon' poets as similar to the Georgians, an interlude in the main stream of English literature, and adds that

> 'the prevailing tone of Cambridge's 'Poets of Tomorrow' (1940) has singular affinities with that of the day before yesterday.'[3]

But what perhaps, we can gather most clearly from Scrutiny's

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1. June 1939. Vol VIII No 1. W. H. Mellers on 'Autumn Journal'
2. Ditto.
3. December 1940 Vol IX No 3. W. H. Mellers on 'Poets of Tomorrow: Cambridge Poetry 1940'.

criticism is the fact that the 1930 poets came sufficiently into the limelight and laid sufficient claim to a place of importance, for an attack to be levelled against them.

CHAPTER 3

The Communal Sense

'Under great yellow flags and banners of the ancient Cold
Began the huge migrations
From some primeval disaster in the heart of Man.

There were great oscillations
Of temperature ... You knew there had once been warmth.'
(Edith Sitwell. 'The Shadow of Cain')

'Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul men ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.'
(Christopher Fry 'A Sleep of Prisoners')

'Like wartime, he was dull.'
(W. H. Auden 'In Time of War')

In my Introduction, I said that there could be two approaches to war, - the communal and the individual. It remains to consider which term would best describe the attitude of the Second War poets.

The First World War tended on the whole to restrict itself to the soldier, - the men who march away, the fallen, the dead. Yet its changing attitude depended a great deal on the changing face of the war itself as much as any poet's individual outlook. It was communal in that it kept its eyes fixed on the object in front, and also because reviewers (as during the Second War) were making certain demands for poetry to fit its time. So Lascelles Abercrombie[1] points out in 1915 that battle poems

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1. Quarterly Review. London. October 1915 'The War and the Poets'.

e.g. Tennyson's 'Revenge', had very seldom been contemporary. But he thinks that patriotism now should be characterised by reticence. The patriotic motive must co-exist with the artist, a point proved by the half-failures of Newbolt's 'The Vigil' and Kipling's 'For all we have and are'.

The Second War poets, as we have seen, faced similar demands, and even if they themselves paid little attention to them, at least the importance they were conceded in the present-day realm of literature depended a great deal on how far they fulfilled those demands. And the very fact that those demands were made shows some kind of a communal spirit, if not permeating the age, at least being searched for by the age to answer the need of the time.

The three quotations at the head of this chapter are completely different statements made on the Second World War by three writers of equally substantial reputation. The first tells us that war is tragic, the second that war is glorious, and the third that war is dull. All three are attitudes fundamental to the Second World conflict, fundamental moreover to the experience of any class, - and one does not necessarily rule out the other.

Most ages, if interviewed on the subject, would consider themselves tragic. What differentiates this one is a sense of supreme communal tragedy here and now. Most of the great epics have pointed out truths concerning man as an archetype in the then known civilisation. During the period we are dealing with,

there were two poems in particular which dealt with the epic subject of the race of man, and dealt with it in an epic manner by going back to the Biblical period following the Creation and linking it up with man in his present-day surroundings. The two poems, Edith Sitwell's '<u>Shadow of Cain</u>'[1] and Auden's '<u>In Time of War</u>'[2] are poems nearest to the epic of this age, - an inverted epic, for both of them see man in his present state as of unheroic stature - 'the little natures that will make us cry', - both picture a decline in man, not only in his state, but also in his nature, through his own evil and weakness. Both lead up to the crisis of the present time, - man could reach no lower point, either of evil or of suffering, than he has now come to. So supremely tragic is our age that the whole world disturbance is pictured by Edith Sitwell as comparable with that before the Flood:-

> 'The gulf that was torn across the world seemed as if the
> beds of all the Oceans
> Were emptied ... Naked, and gaping at what once
> had been the Sun,
> Like the mouth of the Universal Famine
> It stretched its jaws from one end of the Earth to the
> other.'

There is a sense, not so much of personal tragedy (except perhaps, among the young soldiers), as of a world-wide tragedy, not at what we as individuals are, but what the race of man has

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1. London. 1947.

2. See '<u>Journey to a War</u>' London 1939.

become. Auden's '<u>In Time of War</u>' in particular reflects the age's awareness of man's size, of how man is getting smaller and smaller, with nothing to rely on. There are of course, many contributory factors, - the expanding universe, for instance, the vast new philosophies that are still calling all in doubt.

If we consider any epic previous to this century, we notice that the poet sees man as against nature i.e. man in his own little world. The poet in his elegiac note at the end of '<u>Beowulf</u>' sees in the fall of a leader the decline of a race, but his conception of 'nature' does not take in the vastness of the universe as we know it today, nor the decline of a race the fall of humanity as we have seen it in a period when there are so many material benefits in favour of its survival and advancement. The Beowulf poet portrayed the sad fate of heroic man in a hostile environment. And he was still bounded by that environment. Even '<u>Paradise Lost</u>' used the fixed Ptolemaic system, - the whole of man's fall is seen within prescribed bounds, with the everlasting arms beneath. But past epic struggles are nothing compared with the negative emptiness poets see facing modern civilisation. Present enemies are loneliness, fear, and corruption, all coming from within, in what appears a limitless universe without Divine planning or upkeep. No doubt War put spark to the tinder, but the fact remains that time and again war is made the stalking horse for the poet's sense of a disturbed civilisation. Auden at one point declares:-

'O not ever war can frighten us enough;
That last attempt to eliminate the Strange
  By uniting us all in a terror
  Of something known, even that's a failure
Which cannot stop us taking our walks alone,
Scared of the unknown, unconditional dark,
  Down the avenues of our longing.'[1]

As Spender points out in 'New Writing',[2] this is a political age -

> 'That is to say political beliefs and events play a part in the lives of contemporaries which religious and spectacular warnings of the working out of doom amongst the great used to play in the past.'

And we have seen how the Spanish Civil War poets tried, by dying in an ideal cause, to return to the secure world of old values - the heroic and the just. We have seen also how this developed partly from the insecurity that appeared to start with the First World War. As Francis Brett Young has described it in 'The Island'[3], the between-war years were given over to Pleasure, Change, and Speed. The evolvement of the Fascist and Communist states may perhaps be attributed to the need for communal safety in an insecure world as much as earlier civilisations found it expedient to pool their resources and form some kind of community.

A sense of man's place in history has come to the fore during this century, as opposed to merely dealing with historical subjects. The picture of man's decline from Creation onwards

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1. 'New Year Letter' London. 1941. Prologue p.14.
2. 'Penguin New Writing' No.6. (1941) 'Books and the War'.
3. London 1944 (later ed. 1955) 'Fantastic Symphony 1918-39'.

is part of it. It is history looked upon from the present and so given a special significance. Another side to it is the feeling that the past - the whole of the past and its futile warring - is very much present, and we are expiating it here and now. In Francis Brett Young's '<u>The Island</u>' we have a diluted instance in the repetition of English history. In Edwin Muir, as in many of the younger fighter poets there is a finer sense of actually being caught up in a world's history that is

> 'The jangling
> Of all the voices of plant and beast and man
> That have not made a harmony
> Since first the great controversy began,
> And cannot sink to silence
> Unless a grace
> Come of itself to wrap our souls in peace
> Between the turning leaves of history'.[1]

Likewise Alun Lewis in India forgets to describe the hardships endured by soldiers on the march in order to reflect on the men who have passed this way before, and to wonder if their thoughts so many years ago matched his own today.[2]

All this contributes to the feeling of the human race, not divided into nations so much as sharing a communal nature. On the other hand, the dangers of community life as the twentieth century has developed it were very apparent. We have seen the satire levelled against it by the 1930 poets in particular. And this age is probably unique (from its very nature) in its awareness of and attack upon the sheep-like herding together of

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1. '<u>The Narrow Place</u>' London 1943. ('<u>The Wheel</u>')
2. '<u>By the gateway of India, Bombay</u>' ('<u>Ha! Ha! among the trumpets</u>' London 1945)

humanity while at the same time laying great stress upon community life. The poets are never tired of telling us of our individual responsibility. Louis MacNeice in 1941 wrote of his pleasure at being back in England because:-

> 'The typical Englishman contains, paradoxically, an anarchist; this can be seen from English poetry. Any social revolution which is to suit this country must take account of that anarchist. The notorious defects of the English are at least the defects of a people who respect the individual human being ... When we come out of the tunnel we must still have faces - not masks.'[1]

Alex Comfort is a poet, as we have seen, who not only protests against community folly in following the warmongers into two world wars, but pushes forward the other side to the argument, - community power for good or ill. And his satire is directed at the same time against the men who cannot think for themselves.[2]

But satire speaks TO its age and about its age. The reviewers of Second World War poetry required poets to speak on behalf of and FOR their age. And what emerges with the tragic view is bitterness and irony. It comes out especially in the work of Auden, of Edith Sitwell, and of Alex Comfort, but it runs through most of the Second War poetry. It differs from the First War poetry in not being levelled by soldiers against civilians, but in being an attack on the state of man generally.

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1. '<u>Penguin New Writing</u>' No.5 (1941) '<u>The way we live now</u>' IV.
2. See '<u>The Petrified Forest</u>' ('<u>And all but he departed</u>' London. 1951.

It doesn't ask Owen's question What are YOU going to do about US? but asks instead What are WE going to do about the present situation, and in doing so underlines the major difference in outlook between the two wars.

When a poet like Edith Sitwell writes of the progress of Man in terms of the evolution of the world in Biblical and epic imagery, she is setting the scene for the magnitude of the tragedy. The motions of war have become the physical motions of nature:-

> 'There were great emerald thunders in the air
> In the violent Spring, the thunders of the sap and the blood in the heart.'[1]

We are aware that the Pterodactyl that fouls its nest has the iron wings of a machine age. But strong irony underlies the use of natural terms, - there is the inference that we have not progressed much beyond the prehistoric state, at the same time we have not even retained the decencies of natural feeling, - the child is left for the baboon to look after, and the baboon does a better job of it than humanity.[2]

Auden's irony is probably strongest in a volume of poems published as late after the war as 1955, - '<u>The Shield of Achilles</u>' In the actual poem under that title the satire has disappeared completely in face of the general tragedy involved.

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1. '<u>The Shadow of Cain</u>' London 1947.
2. '<u>Lullaby</u>' (See '<u>Street Songs</u>' London 1942.)

'Out of the air a voice without a face
  Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
  No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
  Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.'

The atom bomb is not without its mention both from Edith Sitwell and D. J. Enright. The latter in his poem '<u>Monuments of Hiroshima</u>'[1] captures the strangeness and incomprehensibility of this form of warfare to a world that was seeing it for the first time.

How then in view of this conception of our age's tragedy, could a poet write?:-

'Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere.'[2]

The answer lies in the necessities of war itself, the fact that men went on fighting and suffering and still preserved their sense of humour. Stephen Spender collected together ordinary human incidents in bomb-shattered London in his book '<u>Citizens in War - and after</u>'[3], to show the courage and willingness with which people at home faced destruction. We have only to consider the war films of the period to have our spirits raised by the sight of heroic endurance, the sense of the community pulling together, and the thought of winning through in the end.

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1. See Appendix. A

2. '<u>A Sleep of Prisoners</u>' London. 1951.

3. London. 1945.

Churchill's famous war speeches, while preserving the serious tragic spirit were of necessity soul-rousing. Likewise a poem like '<u>The Island</u>' was intended to celebrate our English race of heroes as much as to bewail our plight. Britain's glory is exalted together with the age that will be remembered for our heroism:-

> 'In all my story there has been no page
> Brighter than this: we have lived in a great age;
> The ancient glory fades not from our name
> And goodly is our Island heritage.'[1]

Admittedly we are more likely to find this note in minor writers than major, in writers who looked to or relied on popular approval for their subsistance (hence in drama e.g. Fry's '<u>Sleep of Prisoners</u>', Priestley's '<u>Desert Highway</u>') than in poets who are more pre-occupied with the tragic sense because they are poets.

On the other hand, one of the demands reviewers made upon poetry was that it should offer consolation to its age. And if it was to be a complete reflection of its time it could not leave out the spirit that kept up the proverbial Cockney humour. It had to speak to and for a community that was endeavouring as a community to continue in spite of everything. This it did in various ways.

It might well be questioned at this point whether this

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1. '<u>The Winged Victory</u>'.

poetry of communal endeavour and hope was not really harking back to the Rupert Brooke tradition:-

'Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour.'[1]

But the vigour that comes through the Second War poetry is rather different. It is the result, not of standing at the start of a great adventure, but of having experienced great disaster. Edith Sitwell captures its flavour at the end of '<u>The Shadow of Cain</u>':-

> 'Think! When the
> last clamour of the Bought and Sold
> The agony of Gold
> Is hushed ... When the last Judas-kiss
> Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ,
> these ashes that were Men
> Will rise again
> To be our Fires upon the Judgement Day,
> And yet - who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?
> He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in the
> terrible Rain.'

It is in effect, what reviewers sought, the consolation and healing coming after a straight look at war's destruction.

Then the epic heights to which Edith Sitwell raises both disaster and hope in the same breath differs from the IDEAL heights to which Brooke and Grenfell raised the subject of war. One is a subtle combination, the other a simple faith. With Edith Sitwell, we might compare Dylan Thomas, - '<u>The death of a child by Fire</u>'[2] for instance, in which Biblical terms raise one child's death into a supreme example of final victory that no

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1. '<u>Peace</u>' (1914)

2. See '<u>Collected Poems 1934-52</u>' London 1952.

sorrow can touch, because

'After the first death there is no other.'

Such a poem was written to console its readers both by what it says and the way in which it says it. In fact poets drew a great deal upon the Bible for their imagery at this time, - we find it in writers as diverse as Dylan Thomas, Edith Sitwell, George Barker, Christopher Fry, Stephen Spender, and Sidney Keyes. A conscious return in a time of distress reflects a common feature of the war period.

These writers who did turn their minds to producing a poetry of forgiveness and resolution have the maturity of their experience of suffering. Edith Sitwell in particular, both because of her age and her position of onlooker, might be compared with Hardy when he reached the end of the First World War and wrote '<u>In Time of the Breaking of Nations</u>'. In '<u>An Old Woman</u>'[1] Edith Sitwell touches on Hardy's theme in her fine paean on how all manner of things shall be well:-

'Wise is the earth, consoling grief and glory,
The golden heroes proud as pomp of waves, -
Great is the earth embracing them, their graves,
And great is the earth's story.
. . . .
The world's huge fevers burn and shine, turn cold,
Yet the heavenly bodies and young lovers burn and shine.'

These poets are saying, not that there is glory in war, but that glory can come out of war, - and they rely for this on the way humanity can make a concerted effort to pull through.

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1. See '<u>Street Songs</u>' London 1942.

If we enter into the way men actually did pull through, we will find time and again, especially in the poets who took part in the home-guard, a sense of consolation arising from their job. What they are doing is not only for their own preservation, but because they are linked to the land and the people they guard. It comes out particularly in Day Lewis and in Edward Shanks. The latter in his 'Night Watch for England'[1] for instance, brings to the reader his own immediate awareness of that which he is guarding (in the same way as the younger poets insisted upon the beauty of the life they were leaving).

> 'But I am not alone.
> My outstretched palm rubs on the short rough grass,
> My fingers crush a scabious flower, I can
> Prick myself with the gorse or bring the wild thyme
> Fragrant from ground to nostril.
> All these I love, for these I watch tonight,
> For these, and for the village in the valley,
> And my own house in it.'

The sense of tradition, - of English tradition - is part of this feeling for the value of our common heritage, although it is usually the older generation who preserve it.

The awareness of what is valuable in the life around them was probably there partly by contrast with the destructive and sordid elements of war. Demetrios Capetenakis saw the writers of the 'thirties in a similar position. Taking Spender's 'Oh young men, oh young comrades' as an example, he wrote:-

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1. London. 1942.

'Such dreams of a beautiful, luminous and joyful humanity were only one of the ways by which the pre-occupation of the poets with the ugliness, greyness and misery oppressing and deadening man, was expressed.'[1]

We should notice that in both the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, the pre-occupation of the poets in dealing with what man can do and become, is again with humanity generally. Spender in 'New Writing and Daylight' (1941) did write:-

'Today it is so difficult to be a poet of the public virtues, the public suffering, the public shame, the public aspirations, and the public glory, that many people deny that it is possible.'

But he seems to refer more to speaking openly and officially on behalf of a nation and as part of the nation than to writing poetry to answer the common need of the time. The poets accomplished the latter by reference not to nations so much as to themselves - and themselves as part of a suffering community. The "I", except in a very objective poet like Edith Sitwell, is omnipresent, though in the background. In poems dealing with or aware of the war, the "I" very rarely remains in a vaccuum. Spender's 'Returning to Vienna 1947'[2] is an example of how the poet as a person is affected by the destruction of those things he has valued personally, yet the courage shining from the ruins themselves, the community endurance typified by Vienna puts to shame the selfishness of individual loss:-

'I lacked
That which makes cities not to fall

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1. 'New Writing and Daylight' Summer 1943. 'Notes on Some Contemporary Writers'.

2. 'The Edge of Being' London. 1949.

The drop of agonizing sweat which changes
Into impenetrable crystal upon crosses
Which bear cathedrals.'

There is a continual intertwining of the communal sense with the individual in Second World War poetry, one arising from the other. In discussing himself the poet is dealing with matters that are the concern of a whole community, even though that concern may be momentary only.

The third fundamental communal attitude to the war was summed up in Auden's description of the Unknown Soldier:-

'Like wartime, he was dull'.[1]

On the whole, we might say that community nature makes for dullness, - but especially during the last war. Compare, for instance, the English uniforms of the Second World War, with those of any major conflict before 1914. The nineteenth century red and gold was at least labelled by Gilbert as 'South Kensington'[2], but present day army cloth is surely nearer to 'Shoreditch'. So much of it was technical and incomprehensible warfare, so much depended on NOT being seen, on NOT showing one's colours, on finding one's way through colourless food and colourless streets. But apart from that, life was built up on utilitarian principles, - transportable, collapsible, bulky and durable, - red-brick air-raid shelters and rubber gas-masks, - a cardboard war whose exhibits look shoddy when placed side by side with

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1. '<u>In Time of War</u>' XVIII.(See '<u>Journey to a War</u>' London.1939)
2. '<u>Patience</u>' London. 1881 (first performed) Act I.

the artistic products of previous generations.

Possibly too, in a period of boredom and neurosis the common tragedy of the age was that EVEN war was dull. Rupert Brooke had looked to it as an opportunity to get away from the stagnation of peace, to rouse history once again. But he made no reference to the day-to-day realities of war. In '<u>Homage to Catalonia</u>'[1] George Orwell tells us of the lice that infested the Spanish trenches and points out that soldiers all down the ages must have been troubled by them. But it is in this century that they have been brought to the notice of the public. That is one reason why war is no longer 'rattling good history'. Because men have discussed it without reference to honour, glory and patriotism, - what WAR is like in the abstract, as an experience with the dignity discarded.[2] Consider the following poem written by Julian Bell before the outbreak of the Second World War:-

> 'War is a game for the whole mind,
> An art of will and eye,
> No brothering of mankind
> Or hating inconstantly:
> A hard art of foreseeing,
> Of not too much caring:
> A game for their playing
> Who fall in love with death,

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1. London. 1938. (later ed. 1951)

2. We might, of course, consider the gradual emancipation of women as a possible reason for franker speaking. The fact that women could now be found doing jobs and living through experiences that had previously been considered a man's prerogative, to a great extent lifted the barrier on topics not formerly considered suitable for after-dinner conversation.

> Doubt, and seeping fear,
> Contemptuous of the breath
> Of crowds, and love of common
> Yet loved man or woman.
> A giving that retains
> The privacy of our pains.'[1]

What has gone out of war since Brooke and Grenfell's time is the note of excitement, and what is substituted is 'a hard art of foreseeing.' In other words, the finer emotions which are traditionally associated with British heroism are played down, and the emphasis is laid instead on the necessity for

> 'No brothering of mankind
> Of hating inconstantly.'

the blunting of other, equally fine feelings.

Finally there is one element lacking in English war poetry that can be found in the French, and which probably gives to the latter a sense of a whole community completely at one in its suffering which nothing else can give to the former to any comparable degree. It is the poetry of defeat with its overpowering sadness and helplessness, its looking back upon the things that have passed, its traditional roses and lilies in a poet like Aragon,[2] that expresses the strongest bond. The English poet, Alex Comfort, in his poem '<u>France</u>'[3] captures something of the feeling of a whole country being swept by one wind, and Patric Dickinson in his imaginative and symbolic

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1. '<u>Vienna</u>' (See '<u>Work for the Winter</u>' London. 1936)
2. See Appendix B.
3. See '<u>A Wreath for the Living</u>' London. 1942.

conception of England as an Occupied Country in 'Stone in the Midst'[1] portrays the strength of individual freedom in its inherent inability to accept inevitable oppression. It binds more than the present members of a household together, - it is

> 'One tune, one marching song -
> And your lives are my words
> The dead one, my brother,
> The unborn, his child.'

But English poets on the whole could not realise (nor in their position dared they realise) the strains of actual defeat. In any case they would not have had the background that France had in her series of occupations. The dominant English note is that of near defeat, - but eventual triumph.

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1. London. 1948. Part VII

Epilogue

Impressions of the two wars through the imagery

The easiest way of summing up the two wars is probably by contrasting the different pictures we get from the imagery.

In '<u>New Writing in Europe</u>'[1] Lehmann points out that after the appearance of '<u>New Signatures</u>', people became aware 'that certain younger writers were using a new and contemporary imagery', that

> 'Mr. Auden's '<u>Poems</u>' and Mr. Day Lewis' '<u>From Feathers to Iron</u>' were, I think, the first books in which imagery taken from contemporary life consistently appeared as the natural and spontaneous expression of the poet's thought and feeling ...'

Looking back today we are aware of two main elements in the imagery of the chief 1930 poets. The first is the 'contemporary life' image, the determination to reflect the life of their times, - the second is the fairy-tale element in a modern setting due perhaps to the nature of their ideals. In his Introduction to the '<u>Oxford Book of Modern Verse</u>'[2], Yeats comments on the 1930 poets:-

> 'If I understand aright this difficult art the contemplation of suffering has compelled them to seek beyond the flux something unchanging, inviolate, that country where no ghost haunts, no beloved lures because it has neither past nor future.'

Yeats probably captured earlier than most people the static quality of the 1930 movement, and at the same time the mystery

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1. New York. 1940.
2. London. 1936.

that could well be overlooked because it belonged to bright daylight. Isherwood relates in his autobiography[1] a conversation with Auden on a bus, in which the latter rambled on:-

> 'Of course, intellect's the only thing that matters at all ... Apart, from Nature, geometry's all there is ... Geometry belongs to man. Man's got to assert himself against Nature, all the time ... Of course, I've absolutely no use for colour. Only form. The only really exciting things are volumes and shapes ... Poetry's got to be made up of images of form. I hate sunsets and flowers. And I loathe the sea. The sea is formless ...'

This description is an excellent caricature of the 'cerebral' poetry much indulged in by Auden and Herbert Read in particular, and which relies on thought and ideas (typifying a political age) rather than feelings and sense impressions for which the poet must turn inwards at the same time as he regards the outside world. It gives us an idea also of the new trend for exactitude of words, making a clear-cut appeal to the intellect first and foremost.

But if the definition of terms, the words themselves were to become more distinct, the meaning was not. Here lies the mystery in daylight. There is an intellectual romanticism for instance in the bird that was constantly taken as a symbol of the movement, the kestrel, - that sums up both the poetry and the ideals of the poets. 'From scars where kestrels hover',[2] writes Auden, and we are lost in something very much resembling a Nash painting with its well-defined shapes, indicating some-

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1. 'Lions and Shadows' London. 1938.
2. 'Missing' ('Poems 1930' London 1934 2nd edition.)

thing that we feel is recognisable, but constantly needing to be interpreted.

We are told a great deal in the poetry of Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis about their aims, how we must push forward, how serious the business is getting, how we must DO something on the level of concrete action. But we have to search beneath the surface if we are to discover what those aims are, what the business is, what the Magnetic Mountain might mean. Yeats declared that

> 'it is perhaps a belief shared that has created their intensity, their resemblance; but this belief is not political.'[1]

When we compare the aims of Julian Bell with those of Day Lewis we can see more clearly what this remark means. They could both fight in the same cause without partaking of the same views, and Yeats' description of them forging a new country with its own special qualities is probably the best way of summing them up.

It was a movement that, lacking definite outline, had to exist on symbols. What Rex Warner did in '<u>The Aerodrome</u>'[2] and '<u>The Wild Goose Chase</u>'[3], poets were doing in their own sphere i.e. creating a fairy-tale world with all the horrors of the

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1. Introduction to '<u>Oxford Book of Modern Verse</u>' London. 1936
2. London. 1941.
3. London. 1937.

real one, at its worst simply obscure and pointless, but probably a better reflection of the age on the psychological level than their contemporary references were on the practical. Spender does write of the men who make driving belts and Auden of the celluloid screen, but it was a cult and impresses us as such. These people only exist because they happen to make driving belts or go to the cinema. In Spender's '<u>Trial of a Judge</u>'[1] the characters exist only because they tyrranise or are tyrrannised. That is, references to people are always in a sociological or political sphere. There is no insight into human nature simply because it is human nature as in Eliot's Prufrock.

There are usually two pictures of man to be found in the 1930 poets, - one we can approve of, the other not. They reflect the struggle of the age, the opposing ideologies, - sometimes directly in the clash of Communists and Fascists ('<u>Trial of a Judge</u>'), sometimes in the contrast between the man of ideals and the political forces that seek only to use him for their own ends('<u>The Ascent of F6</u>'), sometimes between the men who are enlightened enough to travel their lonely path to the '<u>Magnetic Mountain</u>' and the general ignorant populace without a purpose.

On the matter of what is to be fought, they are fairly clear - modern civilisation, its sickness, its injustice, its

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1. London. 1938.

tyranny, and its folly. But when it comes to what must be set up in opposition, we enter that unreal world that reflects often in its symbols (frontiers, spies etc.) some of the continental life of the '30's, but remains uninterpreted except in a very facile manner. We cannot say that it was a message to Join the Communist Party, because after all, many of the poets concerned weren't themselves members. It seems, looking back on it, more of an ideal state imaged in a contemporary world. Demetrios Capetenakis wrote of these years:-

> 'The poets we have considered here started their voyage dreaming of a new man. They did not find this man in flesh, but, instead of him, when one night they stranded upon the rock of necessity, an image of man that exceeded in greatness all they had ever dared to dream of, was revealed to them. Their failure was their success.'[1]

Much of the poetry produced during the Spanish Civil War by the men on the march reflected the same striving after the ideal. By giving their lives unasked in a cause that wasn't their own, they put into action the hopes and fears of the age, - fear of what was looming in the near future, hope of what they might achieve in creating a new spirit in man. Their poetry conveys the single-mindedness of their purpose, partly through the lyrical quality they achieve in their verse, partly through their plainness of statement. War is no longer imaged as a conflict, - it is a simple and straight-forward giving of themselves, a marching forward in the face of darkness and winter.

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1. 'New Writing and Daylight' Summer 1943. 'Notes on some contemporary writers'.

The writer speaks as a soldier with a purpose, and with an awareness of nations and worlds in the background depending on that purpose. And now, among the 1930 poets, Spain itself is taken as an image of the Cause.

We should notice also how the Auden group were, through their imagery, deliberately nailing their poetry to a particular age, almost a particular decade. '<u>The Nabara</u>'[1] is probably the most glaring example of this. Exciting as it might be in a Sir Richard Grenville manner, the placing of twentieth century politics in a traditionally Elizabethan setting, only serves to show not the heredity of the feud, but how subtly the child can differ from the parent. In contrast, the soldier poets (led by John Cornford) produced a timeless poetry of any age, both in the thoughts they record of men determined to do their share while still aware of what they are leaving behind, and in their accounts of the excitement of much of the warfare.

As disillusionment set in, though, the poets who survived their hopes see the world imaged as something turbulent and horrible. The shock of that turning point where the end of the Spanish war stretched out to meet the start of the great European conflict, presented to more than one of the early idealists,

> 'a day of monsters, a desert of abject stone
> Whose outward terrors paralyse the will.'[2]

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1. '<u>Overtures to Death</u>' London. 1938.
2. '<u>The Image</u>' (Day Lewis' '<u>Word Over All</u>' London 1943.)

It is at this point if at all that we encounter bloodshed, violence, and brutality pictured in these "war" poets.

When we reach the Second World War, although we still find the barrack room element, the dullness, the swearing, and the army routine that helped the twentieth century to strip war of its dignity, the active "fighting" element is lacking, except in the picture of bomb damage. Prisoner-of-war camps, for instance, do not seem to have found their way into poetry, perhaps understandably so.[1] But then very little of actual horrific warfare did. What we gain from a reading of the poetry of the time is the IMPRESSION of war, but the effect is no less real than vivid descriptions would have been. In fact the latter would probably have fallen short of the mark. John Lehmann once wrote in connection with E. M. Forster:-

> 'He never tries to startle with 'frank' physical descriptions; but to concentrate on blood and sweat and excretions is as often as not a romantic foible, and not a sign of the clear, balanced view a realist should have of life.'[2]

It is interesting to note that the Mediaeval poet used to lay himself out to startle us with the blood and sweat, - but with evident enjoyment. Today we no longer need artificial aids to fear, horror or pain, certainly not in the form of warfare. The Second War poet in looking at the matter from a psychological viewpoint, reflects a common trend exploited in most forms of literature belonging to this psychological age.

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1. Prisoner-of-war camps are mentioned during the Spanish Civil War.

2. cf. Shaw's '<u>Arms and the Man</u>'.

Even in the First World War, a little at least of the greatness of sorrow was preserved amongst the rags and tatters of physical destruction. Notice the ringing tones of Sassoon's 'The Troops'[1]:-

'O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust.'

There is a note in this of Virgil or Milton, of Henry V and Agincourt, a tragi-heroic poetry that remained side by side with the graphic realism and the satire.

The Second World War did not tend to extremes in the same way. The outstanding voice is a SPEAKING one, whether it be in the singular or the plural. Compare with the passage from Sassoon the following one from a poet neither great nor important, - but typical:-

'And what of us, the nameless?
We have loved a little, and been sad together:
We have not smeared our blood on history's curtain,
Or held a candle to the universal dark.
In time's vertical kaleidoscope where only pain is certain,
We shall be forgotten, with this quiet room,
And all that makes us glad or sad tonight.'[2]

The poet is intent upon expressing his thoughts, not trying to

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1. See 'The War Poems of Sassoon' London. 1920.

2. Francis King 'History Between' (See 'Poetry in Wartime' ed. Tambimuttu. London. 1942.)

write great poetry. As he writes, he neither swells his images, colours them, develops them, nor for that matter chooses them with any particular care for their literary association or their sound. The result is that a careless beauty is often achieved by men who seem to have become poets by accident. As Owen would have termed it, - 'The poetry is in the pity.'

The Second War soldier poets give us a picture, not of the great pains of heroes, but of the little universal ones. We see in them the ambitions, desires, fears, sufferings of existence that repeat themselves in the majority of human beings. As a pointer to their "popular" appeal we might compare Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard', or Burns' lyrics, for their use of simple everyday forms of life to paint basic human philosophy.

Moreover, the individual freedom prevailing in the selection of imagery makes that of the 1930 poets appear definitely stylised. It was in matters that the imagery was meant to express that we find the similarity existing among this heterogeneous body of young writers - separation, parting, love of living, - the strength of love, the pull of death.

These young poets on the whole speak from an individual viewpoint, sometimes as poet, sometimes as lover, sometimes as soldier. The men who, for one reason or another, stayed at home, tend to speak collectively, and their imagery assumes a more world-embracing quality. Often in the former we intrude

upon two people, - in the latter we are invited to a conference. The result is that in the former we find imagery chosen and used to express or create a state of mind, - in the latter images become symbolic of a situation, (though the two groups are never mutually exclusive). Consider the following verse that pictures the destruction of youth, felt so personally by the young men who went out to fight, but here captured by the observer as a single instance that stands for the same thing happening on a community scale:-

'Who walks by the shore?
A boy in the mist.
The white vapours twist
On the face of the sun,
And confound sea and land.
If they cleared, it might blind him
This day just begun,
As he walks by the shore
With his footprints in sand
So fleeting behind him
And his shadow before.'[1]

In some ways the war may well be compared with a wind, - unseen except in its effects. It is now part of our past history, but its results are everywhere around us. In the same way, we might say that the war left its mark on poetry without actually showing its face. To take a concrete instance, there is the recognition on the part of 1930 poets that war as much as time has abolished that decade:-

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1. '<u>At a time of death</u>'. (See John Lehmann's 'The Sphere of Glass' London 1944)

'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.'[1]

The hiatus of the war period, the years that did not count, the in-between years, - that is a picture we are given looking back to a time which, even when present was imaged continually as a void, an emptiness. Without actually discussing change as so many poets have done in previous literature, the poetry of the period captures the movement of the modern world, and that includes not just the passing of time, but the rise and fall of the pulse. Not all the poets perform the same task, and because of that, between them they manage to build up a composite picture of the life and thought of their times.

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1. Louis MacNeice '<u>Hiatus</u>' (See '<u>Holes in the Sky</u>' London. 1948)

Appendix A

This poem may be found in The Listener, January 14th 1954, but does not seem to have been included in any collected volume.

'The Monuments of Hiroshima'

(D. J. Enright)

The roughly estimated ones, who do not sort well
with our common phrases,
Who are by no means eating roots of dandelion,
or pushing up the daisies.

The more or less anonymous, to whom no human idiom
can apply,
Who neither passed away, or on,
nor went before, nor vanished on a sigh.

Little of peace for them to rest in, less of them
to rest in peace:
Dust to dust, a swift transition, ashes to ash
with awful ease.

Their only monument will be of others' casting -
A Tower of Peace, a Hall of Peace, a Bridge of Peace
- who might have wished for something lasting,
Like a wooden box.

Appendix B

A much-anthologised poem by Aragon.

'Les Lilas et les Roses'

O mois des floraisons mois des metamorphoses
Mai qui fut sans nuage et Juin poignardé
Je N'oublierai jamais les lilas ni les roses
Ni ceux que le printemps dans ses plis a gardés

Je n'oublierai jamais l'illusion tragique
Le cortège les cris la foule et le soleil
Les chars chargés d'amour les dons de la Belgique
L'air qui tremble et la route à ce bourdon d'abeilles
Le triomphe imprudent qui prime la querelle
Le sang que préfigure en carmin le baiser
Et ceux qui vont mourir debout dans les tourelles
Entourés de lilas par un peuple grisé

Je n'oublierai jamais les jardins de la France
Semblables aux missels des siècles disparus
Ni le trouble des soirs l'énigme du silence
Les roses tout le long du chemin parcouru
Le démenti des fleurs au vent de la panique
Aux soldats qui passaient sur l'aile de la peur
Aux vélos délirants aux canons ironiques
Au pitoyable accoutrement des faux campeurs

Mais je ne sais pourquoi ce tourbillon d'images
Me ramène toujours au même point d'arrêt
A Sainte-Marthe Un general De noirs ramages
Une villa normande au bord de la forêt
Tout se tait l'ennemi dans l'ombre se repose
On nous a dit ce soir que Paris s'est rendu
Je n'oublierai jamais les lilas ni les roses
Et ni les deux amours que nous avons perdus

Bouquets du premier jour lilas lilas des Flandres
Douceur de l'ombre dont la mort farde les joues
Et vous bouquets de la retraite roses tendres
Couleur de l'incendie au loin roses d'Anjou.

('Le Crève-Coeur' Londres. 1942)

Now compare the attitude of the French poet, Aragon, with that of the English Sidney Keyes, on similar ground - the

parting of lovers. The following is the first verse from 'Les Amants Séparés' (See 'Le Crève Coeur')

Comme des sourds-muets parlant dans une gare
Leur langage tragique au coeur noir du vacarme
Les amants séparés font des gestes hagards
Dans le silence blanc de l'hiver et des armes
Et quand au baccara des nuits vient se refaire
Le rêve si ses doigts de feu dans les nuages
Se croisent c'est hélas sur des oiseaux de fer
Ce n'est pas l'alouette O Roméos sauvages
Et ni le rossignol dans le ciel fait enfer.

Compare: 'A Hope for those separated by war' (See 'Collected Poems' London. 1945.)

They crossed her face with blood,
They hung her heart.
They dragged her through a pit
Full of quick sorrow.
Yet her small feet
Ran back on the morrow.

They took his book and caged
His mind in a dark house.
They took his bright eyes
To light their rooms of doubt.
Yet his thin hands
Crawled back and found her out.

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This selection has been made mainly to give an inside (rather than objective) view of the way poetry was tending to move.

A great deal of criticism used in this thesis was taken from periodicals, reviews and introductions, - for which, see footnotes .

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