

THE VOICE OF PROTEST IN ENGLISH POETRY

(With special reference to poets of the
first three decades of the twentieth
century)

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

of Rhodes University

by

EDITH N.E. VERSCHOOR

December 1972

P R E F A C E

Poetry, like every other form of art, reflects the values of the artist himself as well as the values of the age in which he lives.

"I would say that the poet may write about anything provided that the thing matters to him to start with, for then it will bring with it into the poem the intellectual or moral significance which it has for him in life". (Louis MacNeice).

This thesis sets out to uncover some of the things which, in the long pageant of English poetry, have "mattered" to poets to such an extent that they have felt compelled to voice their protest against any violation of such things perceived by them in life around them. The basic study has been a search for the different kinds of values and codes of conduct, in social, political and moral spheres, which have been unacceptable to some of the major poets in English, and to examine particularly the manner and the tone of voice in which each one has expressed his disapproval.

"Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society." (T.L.Peacock). English poets who have protested against whatever they regarded as worthy of protest have continued up to the maturity of civil society to be rattles (some soft and mellow, others loud and harsh), to awaken both the intellect and the conscience of their readers.

The writer of this thesis wishes to acknowledge with sincere gratitude the guidance given by her supervisor, Professor F.G.Butler, of the Department of English, Rhodes University. Thanks are also due to Mrs Janet A. Smith of the University of Fort Hare staff, who undertook the typing.

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CHAPTER I

PROTEST DEFINED

The voice of protest in English poetry is as old as English poetry itself. In fact, it is older. The satirical tone, which is frequently indicative of protest, whether of a mild or mordant degree, was already heard in England in verse written in the Latin and French tongues, long before writing in the vernacular made its first appearance. The voice of protest may have been raised even earlier, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, but it has not been the intention here to extend our search any further back than the beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era.

If this study purposes to give a review of some voices of protest in English poetry, it will be necessary first to define as clearly as possible what is meant here by "protest".

Poets throughout all ages, it will be found, and in fact in all literatures, have been moved to protest against many aspects of life. They have voiced at one time or another, in tones of either woeful lamentation or angry vehemence, their displeasure at the cruelties of Cupid, at Death's indiscriminate culling, at the relentless caprice and vagaries of Fate, and at the inevitable ills of old age, to mention only a few of their complaints. Early in the sixteenth century Sir Thomas Wyatt expostulated against love with all

the great assays
The cruel wrong, the scornful ways, 1
The painful patience in delays.

Later Shakespeare allowed his hero in Hamlet to inveigh against "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and later still William Butler Yeats complained disconsolately

1 Thomas Wyatt, Forget not yet, The Oxford Book of English Verse, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 60.

that

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick..... 2

Instances of such repinings in English poetry are legion.

This vain decrying of something beyond the control of man is not, however, the concern of this study. Such poems might be classified rather as laments or railing, as diverse forms of threnody. Nor should the type of poem be included which sets out merely to moralise and, in the process, implies a rejection of certain ideas, codes of conduct, patterns of behaviour and belief. Such poems are usually purely didactic, and didacticism is not necessarily protest. A preceptive note may steal into almost any poem, even when the poet's initial intention was neither to instruct nor to demur. When in a poem like Thoughts in a Garden Andrew Marvell exclaims

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the Palm, the Oak, or Bays! 3

and goes on to relate how he had vainly sought for peace in "busy companies of men", he is not protesting; he is making a casual comment on man's folly and incidentally teaching his auditors where serenity and quietude are to be found.

Although no answer to the question "What is Poetry?" has ever met with universal approval, it is generally agreed that part of the poet's task, like that of the orator, is to evoke in his audience certain emotions about the subject of his utterance. In the poetry of protest with which we are here concerned, the aim of the writer is to arouse feelings of distaste, indignation, scorn, contempt and even hatred for some state of affairs, some aspect of the society in which he finds himself. He desires to express at the same time his own awareness of what is wrong or evil, his condemnation of such conditions, his dissatisfaction with some of man's self-imposed miseries, such as the "mind-forg'd manacles" which William Blake impugned. The poet of protest wishes to expose those circumstances and conditions in

2 William Butler Yeats, Sailing to Byzantium, The Penguin Book of English Verse, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 408.

3 Andrew Marvell, Thoughts in a Garden, The Oxford Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 390.

his world which he finds difficult to bear. He may, according to his nature, be comparatively clement in his attack or he may be stridently contumacious, but any deliberate exposure of abuses, misuses and general social ills must surely imply a protest against them. Why should the poet otherwise set out to lay bare what he finds repugnant, unless there is behind his revelation a reforming purpose of some kind? If there is not, then his poetry, if it is satirical, is generally merely purposeless carping or personal lampooning.

Here it might be argued that poetry with a reforming purpose should be labelled purely as didactic poetry. Didacticism, though possibly a distant cousin of protest, is, as has already been indicated, by no means its identical twin, for the simple reason that the didactic poet sets out to teach, but does not really aim to reveal any intense sensibility on his own part, as a rule, or desire to unleash "the very torrent, tempest and whirlwind" of his own passions.

Furthermore, just as there is the poet who teaches, so there is the poet who scolds, but even his work need not necessarily be regarded as poetry of protest, for protest is something more powerfully felt than the mere desire to rebuke or reprimand. Protest involves a state of mind as well as an intention. It implies that the poet is profoundly, often painfully, aware of the world of man around him, fully cognizant of what to him seems reprehensible and wrong with it and deeply disturbed thereby. He will be under a strong compulsion, proportionate in strength to the urgency of his feeling, to express his inability to accept those things with which he is at variance, and his protest (though the vehemence of the tone in each case may vary) will be clear and unequivocal.

The poet of protest may use various weapons, but the oldest, most sophisticated and effective piece in his armoury is satire, and this he makes the main vehicle of expression. Conversely, however, every satirist is not necessarily a poet of protest, for satire may have as its only aim little more than a desire to evoke ridicule, derision or even mere merriment at the expense of a personal bête noire.

To sum up then: the poet of protest sets out to express his own dissatisfaction with the world and its ways, while he exposes the causes of his dissidence, reveals its fervour, and attempts to arouse in his reader a similar state of disquietude and discontent, a like awareness of social and moral evils and a sharing with the poet of a desire to see reform or amelioration.

The purpose of this study is to show that protest was, as a rule, restrained, frequently almost incidental and casually registered, in the cradle days of English poetry. Human vices and the social, religious and political abuses of the times were laid bare with comparative mildness. In Chaucer's seemingly straight-faced descriptions of some of the ecclesiastical characters who are numbered amongst his pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales there are to be found subtle attacks on the worldliness of churchmen and churchwomen of his day. The manner of his disclosure of their worldliness is usually indulgent and lenient, but the repeated revelation of their regard for things of the world (for example, the prioress's concern with her outward demeanour and deportment instead of with spiritual things) is undoubtedly meant to be satirical, despite the gentle and amused tone of the poet's irony. What he says, or leaves unsaid, about them, constitutes an exposure of the general secularity pervading the Church at the time. The ways and wiles of women, the love of show, the hypocrisy, the materialism and various kinds of greed in human beings are all lightly rapped in incidental fashion in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales and in some of the Tales themselves. Another even earlier writer who lamented and exposed the vices of his age was John de Hauteville who wrote Architrenius, and censure of some of the abuses practised by the Church was also expressed in Nigel Wireker's poem, Speculum Stultorum. More detailed reference will be made to these earlier and milder protesters in Chapter II.

As one pages through the poetry of the last eight centuries in England, it soon becomes evident that if prevalent follies and vices were at first assailed with ridicule rather than with serious denunciation, as life for mankind grew more complicated with the passage of time, and Everyman became

more keenly involved in a search after Truth, the poet's protest waxed more robust and deliberate. There was a more deeply felt personal involvement on the part of the poet, compelling him to reveal not only his awareness of specific social wrongs, but also his deep disenchantment and disillusionment with what he saw everywhere around him, his unease over the human predicament.

These feelings reached a peak of pressure in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the protest became insistent, fervid, often fiery and shrill. Satire alone, the strictly measured beat of conventional verse forms and the traditional poetic diction could neither encompass nor express the urgency of the poet's protest. The angry young men of a world and an ethos racked and rent by wars and rumours of wars required new poetic techniques and often strange and obscure poetic devices as media for expressing their earnest censure of social and moral evils and practices, falling standards of conduct, false values and man's inhumanity to man.

The disillusionment which followed hard upon the nobler hopes engendered in the early months of the 1914-1918 War caused the poets of the first decades of the twentieth century to view the world through a miasma of blood, tears and sweat, and their frustration found expression in a body of poetry varied both in subject-matter and treatment, but throbbing with a bitter and ironic pessimism that demanded utterance, stark and unveiled. In T.S. Eliot's The Hollow Men we have a powerful expression of the post-war mood, and Stephen Spender made clear his disgust with the present and with contemporary mismanagement in poems such as After they have tired and An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum. After the "first fine careless rapture" of the war came the powerful denunciation of its futility and wastefulness in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, while Ronald Bottrall sank into a nadir of hopelessness in The Future Is Not For Us. These poems, and many others contemporary with them, embody powerful protest. Each word cries out an asseveration, and the satire of earlier voices languishes in the blast of twentieth-century contumacy.

I have selected in the ensuing chapters only some of the voices of protest in English poetry. There have been many such voices, voices which set out "to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution", to quote Shelley's words about the poet's aim in his essay, "A Defence of Poetry".⁴ It has been necessary to be selective: those voices that have been chosen for inclusion here seem to have set out pre-eminently to expose, to deride and to censure, each in a particular sphere and each in an individual tone of voice. The distinctiveness of the poet's voice has, to a large extent, influenced my choice.

Although, for example, the claim will be made in the chapter on nineteenth-century poetry that this age was not particularly remarkable for poetry of protest, this does not mean that only those poets actually discussed - Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth - raised their voices to decry what seemed to them to merit censure. All through this century there were poets who were awake to the grave social ills of their times and who made isolated assaults on the evils inseparable from the system so rampant in the nineteenth century, a system in which greed for gain was generally the main motivation of man's actions. Although only Wordsworth's attack on worldliness and materialism will be discussed in detail (his sonnet, The World is too much with us), there was, for instance, a poem by Thomas Hood who lived a rather short life in the first half of the century (1799 - 1845). This particular poem bears the oddly intriguing title of Miss Kilmansegg and her Golden Leg. It, too, sets out very definitely to unmask the besetting sin of the nineteenth century, namely, love of wealth, the idea that riches should be pursued not as a means, but as an end of life. Hood protests vigorously against the universally held belief of his era that happiness can be bought by gold, and his castigation of his countrymen for their worship of cash is clear in two lines of the poem, particularly where he says

That the Golden Ass, or the Golden Bull
Was English John, with his pockets full⁵

4 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry", English Critical Texts, ed. D.J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 255.

5 Hugh Walker, English Satire and Satirists (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1925), p. 281.

Political protest was loud in some of the poetry of another minor poet contemporary with Hood, Ebenezer Elliott (1781 - 1849). One of his poems, Corn-Law Rhymes, written in 1831, constitutes an angry condemnation of the existing fiscal system and the notorious Corn Laws. A generation later, but still in the nineteenth century, there was Robert Barnabas Brough (1826 - 1860) who wrote Songs of the Governing Classes. The title itself suggests that it could be an attack (which, in fact, it was) on the political, social and commercial leaders of his times. He deplures their lack of intelligence, principles and morals. Many of these verses scattered throughout nineteenth-century poetry are amusing, interesting, entertaining, but their authors are not major poets.

Reference has been made in the above paragraph to "protest-which-had-to-be-passed over" in the nineteenth century only. Actually, in each century dealt with there has had, perforce, to be similar drastic culling. Indeed, whole eras have been omitted, such as, for instance, the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, not because there was no poetry of protest at all in those times, but because such periods were not particularly remarkable for this kind of poetry, and because such isolated voices of protest as there were have been muted by the more patent protest of Pope, Blake, D.H. Lawrence and others who have been chosen to play leading roles in our long procession of dissenters. Sir Thomas Wyatt in the early sixteenth century (1503 - 1542) frequently censured folly and denounced vice, and wrote a number of satires between 1536 and 1537, but there is no fierce indignation in his satirical verses, which comprise chiefly attacks on the insincerity of court and courtiers. Besides, the beauty of his sonnets is such that he is remembered for them rather than for his assertions that those who are "droncke of ale" are likely to be praised for their "counceill" by servile and hypocritical courtiers prepared at all times to "Grynne when he laugheth that bereth all the sweye".⁶ John Donne, too, at times attacked the inefficiency and corruption in courts of law, but, again, these rather random

6 Ibid., p. 62.

protests are lost in the brilliance of his metaphysical poetry and his love sonnets. His voice has thus been omitted from our choir of protesters. I have also had to pass over one or two other major poets or to deal with them perfunctorily. As far as possible, explanations for such omissions have been given in the relevant chapters.

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CHAPTER II

EARLY VOICES OF PROTEST IN ENGLISH POETRY

If, as was asserted in Chapter I, the vehicle of protest has always been chiefly satire, then the voice of protest was heard in England (if not in English) as early as the twelfth century, for that, Hugh Walker tells us, is when English satire was born.⁷ It was also affirmed in the previous chapter that every piece of satirical writing need not necessarily be the kind of protest with which we are concerned in this study. That satire and protest are, however, closely linked is claimed by Ian Jack. He says that satire is, in fact, "protest become art" and that it is "born of the instinct to protest".⁸

One of the earliest of twelfth-century satirical poems of protest is Speculum Stultorum (The Looking-glass of Fools). In it the writer, Nigel Wireker, a Benedictine monk, embodies his views on the world in general and on monks and scholars in particular. In form this poem is an allegory. It tells the tale of Burnellus the Ass, who represents the monks on whose behaviour Brother Nigel desires to pronounce stricture. Burnellus's actions clearly expose the worldliness and epicureanism of the ecclesiastics of the day, and, in the poet's exposure of the prevailing abuses, the VOICE OF PROTEST is unquestionably heard, for the desire to express disapproval and to reform is obvious. The poet is conscious of some of the evils in the system of which he is himself a part and would like to see them rectified.

It is interesting to note that in English literature in general and English poetry in particular the Church and its ecclesiastics were the earliest butts of poetic protest; that organised religion, doctrine and dogma were among the first matters which induced the poet of protest to dip his quill in his gall-filled inkhorn. As the sequel will show, the Church and its malpractices remained, in fact, a

7 Ibid., p. 1.

8 Ian Jack, Pope (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), p. 17.

target of protest through William Blake in the eighteenth century up to T.S. Eliot in modern times. Suffice it here to mention in passing that in notes of woe Blake's *Little Vagabond* protested that "the Church is cold", while with mordant irony the poet Eliot sneered that

...fruits of pomegranate and peach
Refresh the Church from over sea. 9

And even earlier than Blake, in the seventeenth century, there was John Milton's puritan protest against corrupt clergy in his *Lycidas* (ll. 125-129) :

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoln with wind and the rank mist they draw
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread.
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said... 10

Scholars of literature have proved that as far back as 913 A.D. very early protest against Church and Churchmen revealed itself in the so-called Goliardic verse. Authorship of this type of verse is veiled in the mists of time, although to one, Walter Map, many of these poems have been attributed. He certainly did write some of the Goliardic verses, but others were probably the work of wandering scholars or dissenting ecclesiastics. Whoever the authors might have been, most of these poems are a form of protest against abuses which had woven themselves into the fabric of the Church at the time. It is mainly the worldliness, avarice and licentiousness of the clergy at which the verses are aimed. One of the most pungent of these satirical protests is *Apocalypsis Goliae* which spares not even Pope or Bishops. 11

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- 9 T.S. Eliot, *The Hippopotamus, Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1954), p. 40.
- 10 John Milton, *Lycidas*, *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.
- 11 Hugh Walker in *English Satire and Satirists* (*op. cit.*) discusses the work of Wireker and de Hauteville and the controversial authorship of the Goliardic verse in his Chapter I. He outlines the story of Burnellus the Ass, revealing the targets of the author's satirical attacks. He shows clearly that much of the verse of these early writers was indubitably protest. Discussing the kind of satire they used, he says (on p. 4): "They wield the bludgeon...".

When vernacular verse first appeared in the thirteenth century during the reign of Edward I, the Church continued to be the main objective of satirical assault, although poets now directed their arrows also against abuses of a more political nature, such as the cupidity of the king's counsellors and the heavy burden of taxation laid upon the common man. In one piece of verse of this period, a more pragmatic voice of protest is heard in the plaint that

even the furthe peni mot to the kyng. ¹²

Political poetic protest became more trenchant in the reign of Edward II, for, despite the dazzling victories gained for English arms in this period, abuses and vices were rampant in every facet of religious and public life.

Goliardic verse, as well as early English vernacular verse, was bold in its exposure and attack, but neither was great poetry. Towards the end of the fourteenth century there appeared a long poem, Piers Plowman, which had a greater claim to be called "poetry". The authorship of this poem, too, is a vexed question. It is generally attributed to one, William Langland. Like the earlier Speculum Stultorum, Piers Plowman is also allegorical, a type of verse which appealed to the mediaeval mind. In a dream the poet sees the whole fair world spread out before him. On one side rises a mighty tower, the abode of Truth, while on the other side the fields descend to a dark, deep valley where Death and Evil sojourn. In typical mediaeval manner there is a Lovely Lady whose task is to enlighten the poet about Truth. Those who should teach the Truth, the whole ecclesiastical hierarchy, do not know the way thither, but the honest Plowman, who "ditches and delves", knows the way. Piers may be regarded as a slightly earlier version of Chaucer's Plowman who was also "a trewe swinker" who lived "in pees and parfit charitee", applying himself to "dyke and delve/ For Cristes sake". ¹³

12 Ibid., p. 7.

13 The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer were begun in 1386. The years 1387 - 1388 are regarded as the central period, according to Walter Skeat, editor of Chaucer: Complete Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1912). All quotations here have been taken from Chaucer's description of the Plowman in The Prologue, p. 425, 11.531-541.

There is another Chaucerian parallel in Piers Plowman, for Langland, too, has a Pardoner in his tale, who is as vigorously denounced for his avarice and corruption as is his prototype in The Canterbury Tales. Beginning immediately on an ironical note, Chaucer introduces his Pardoner as "a gentil Pardoner", and then, in his description of him, but above all in The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, the poet proceeds to expose his character, in merciless fashion, as a grasping cheat and a conceited liar. In his presentation of this rogue, in fact, Chaucer abandons much of his usually mild manner and indulgent treatment, for he depicts the Pardoner as both physically and morally repulsive. Chaucer's Pardoner will be dealt with in greater detail later in this chapter. Langland's Pardoner shares many of the vices of his twin-character in The Canterbury Tales, hypocrisy, greed and deceit, as the following extract shows:

There preched a pardoner,
As he a preest were;
Broughte forth a bulle
With many bisshopes seles,
And seide that hymself myghte
Assoillen hem alle
Of fashede, of tastynge,
Of avowes y-broken.
Lewed men leved it wel,
And liked hise wordes;
Comen up knelynge
To kissen hise bulles.
He bouched hem with his brevet,
And blered hir eighen,
And raughte with his rageman
Rynges and broches.
Thus thei gyven hire gold
Glotons to kepe,
And leveth in swiche losels
As leccherie haunten.

Langland then makes his censure of the whole system of abuses in the Church quite plain, for he goes on:

Were the bisshope y-blessed,
And worth bothe hise eris,
His seel sholde noght be sent
To deceyve the peple.

He attacks other ecclesiastics as well. He continues a few lines further on:

Parsons and parisshe preestes
Pleynd hem to the bisshope,
That hire parisshe were povere
Sith the pestilence tyme,

To have a licence and leve
 At London to dwelle,
 And syngen ther for symonie¹⁴
 For silver is swete.

Chaucer also refers to this preference for rich city parishes in his description of the Parson in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales. His "Persoun" is "A good man ... of religion", but he exposes the fact that there are many examples of the kind of priest who would act as follows:

Sette ... his benefice to hyre,
 And leet his sheep encombred in the myre,
 And ran to London, un-to sēynt Poules,
 To seken him a chaunterie for soules...¹⁵

One more short quotation from Langland's poem should suffice to show the poet's exposure of, and protest against, the mercenariness and worldliness of Churchmen in general. Here he attacks friars:

I fond there freres,
 Alle the foure ordres,
 Prechyng the peple
 For profit of hemselve;
 Glosed the gospel,
 As hem good liked;
 For coveitise of copes,
 Construwed it as thei wolde.¹⁶

Actually, although the whole body of churchmen comes under Langland's lash, just as it was attacked in the verse of the two preceding centuries, the range of Langland's satiric protest is wider, for he castigates also the Law and Trade. The scope of his poem is, in fact, immense. "It embodies a running satire on the world. Primarily it is a satire on the fourteenth century, but incidentally it is also a satire on that human nature which survives to the present day".¹⁷ Langland's poem is without doubt a protest against man's behaviour, man as he was and still is. For this reason, it deserves to be mentioned in this study. In matter and in manner it is a typical example of the earliest voices of protest in English poetry.

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14 William Langland, Piers Ploughman (From the Vision of Piers Ploughman), Vol. 1, edited by Thomas Wright. (London: Reeves & Turner, 1883), pp. 5-6, ll. 134-172.

15 Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer : Complete Works, ed. Walter Skeat. (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p.425, ll.507-510.

16 Langland, op. cit., p. 4, ll. 115-122.

17 Hugh Walker, op. cit., p. 10.

CHAPTER III

GEOFFREY CHAUCER : THE MILD VOICE OF PROTEST

The quotation contained in the closing paragraph of Chapter II could be applied almost equally well to some of the work of Geoffrey Chaucer who has often been referred to as the "father of English poetry". His range of ideas is also of perennial interest. There is, however, a great difference in the tone of voice of the two satirists: Langland's tone and view is sombre, while Chaucer's keen and kindly eye beheld the foibles and vices of his fellow-men with a wider humanity, with a morality which, though profound and unassailable, was yet more subtle and less obtrusive.

This unobtrusiveness and Chaucer's universally recognised benignity may prompt some readers to question his inclusion amongst the poets of protest in English poetry. While it is true that his general tolerance and indulgent zest for life limit his satire to a large extent, there seems to be no doubt that, particularly in parts of The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales and perhaps above all in the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, the poet is aroused by a very real awareness of the evils prevalent in the society of his day and particularly censorious of the abuses rampant in the Church. Although Chaucer's satire is singularly free from bitterness, he does set out to expose what his morality cannot accept. Such exposure (as was asserted in Chapter I) is part of the self-imposed task of the poet of protest, even if the stricture in his voice is strongly diluted with "the milk of human kindness".

Hugh Walker claims that Chaucer set out "to illustrate quite dispassionately the workings of human nature",¹⁸ but poetic protest, as I see it, need not necessarily be categorical; it may be veiled. It will, however, be clearly adumbrated if the protester creates and implies, as Chaucer does in The Prologue, an order of moral values. Helen Storm Corsa's masterpiece on Chaucer is largely the portrait of a

18 Ibid., p. 18. (Italics mine).

jovial and gentle poet, but she, too, allows that "his mirth is moral and his morality is mirthful".¹⁹

In reply to any criticism levelled against the inclusion of Chaucer amongst the poets of protest, one might present the following argument. If this study is to show (and this is one of its purposes) that the voice of protest in English poetry seems, when looked at broadly, to have become increasingly conscious, deliberate and militant, reaching quite vociferous heights in the early twentieth century, then one should surely start from the other extreme, the mild and kindly, the deliberately artless, voice of protest. For this reason, then, Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales should be closely examined.

Despite the jollity with which this fourteenth-century poet presents his twenty-nine pilgrims in The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, despite the genial "felawshipe" with which he moves among these "sondry folk", it soon becomes clear that "al the condicioun of ech of hem"²⁰ is not equally pleasing to Chaucer. Careful reading will reveal that the poet finds human and social vices to which he cannot be reconciled. We find that his protest is aimed chiefly against hypocrisy and sham in all its guises. I hope to show in later chapters that this particular element in man's demeanour and actions is one of the favourite targets of nearly all the voices of protest in English poetry.

Chaucer's attack on hypocrisy and sham takes many forms. More often than not, humour, the desire to amuse, is the major ingredient in his satire of this very human and universal vice. A case in point is his presentation of the Prioress. Here we have an example of satire amply diluted with an indulgent sense of fun. Instead of a keen thrust at the extreme worldliness of an ecclesiastical character, Chaucer subtly sharpens the edge of his satire by revealing the contrast between conduct and profession.

This nun is introduced to us by name, Madame Eglentyne.²¹

19 Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer : Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 48.

20 Chaucer, op. cit., p. 419, ll. 25-39.

21 Ibid., p. 420-421, ll. 118-162. All quotations in this and following paragraph taken from this passage.

Immediately we are struck by the secular quality of her name: eglantine, a kind of wild rose. As the portrait of this abbess "ful simple and coy" is unveiled, we become increasingly aware that she is not being pictured as a devout religious who has withdrawn from the world to the secluded cloisters of the nunnery; she is far more like some genteel and sophisticated habitué of the court. Whatever she does is done in a "ful semely" manner and she has, in fact, "peyned hir to countrefete cheere of court". Everything about her is "fetis" and "semely", and it is indeed in the latter word that the satirist's blunted barb lies. This is the key-word to her character, for the way she should "seem" in the eyes of the world is very important to her. This word has, in fact, been chosen with the utmost subtlety, for its irony is two-edged. It also suggests that her "peyned" efforts to be a meticulously mannered court lady are not altogether successful, and Chaucer's kindly protest at her unseemly worldliness raises a merry chuckle from his readers.

Chaucer tells us nothing at all about the Prioress's dedication to her calling, except to refer to her singing of "the service divyne", but even here her vocal efforts are affected and "entuned in her nose ful semely". Again the "semely"! It suggests that there is something amusingly sham about this holy nun whose secular inclinations are astutely exposed in the description of her rosary:

A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene.²²

On it "heng a broche of gold ful shene" instead of the crucifix one would have expected to find. There is indeed little of the avowed ascetic in the description of Madame Eglentyne, charming and delightfully human though she may be.

It is in his presentation of the Pardoner that Chaucer's satire reaches its most trenchant heights. Together with the satire we also see a concomitant protest against the most flagrant vices and abuses of the mediaeval Church. In the case of the Pardoner Chaucer is attacking not only the hypocrisy and blatant avarice in a particular

22 Ibid., p. 421, l. 159.

individual, but abuses most vilely mercenary which were rife in the whole Church hierarchy.

By the time we meet the Pardoner, greed and gluttony have already been unmasked in the poet's description of the Monk and the Friar. The former is "a lord ful fat and in good poynt" who loves a fat swan "best of any roost",²³ while the Friar, when hearing confessions, believes that

in stede of wepinge and preyeres,
Men moot yeve silver to the povre freres.²⁴

Note the amused irony in the last two words, an irony enhanced by the fact that in the next couplet we are told

His tipet was aye farsed ful of knyves
And pinnes, for to yeven faire wyves.²⁵

Both meaning and sound of the phrase "farsed ful" connote abundance. This couplet does not suggest that the Friar lived in any "condicioun" of poverty and chastity, especially when we learn in due course that he frequented taverns, was familiar with all the franklins in his domain and on "love-dayes" dressed "like a maister or a pope". Indeed, throughout the description of this pilgrim the portraitist highlights the corruption, bribery and general wantonness practised in the name of godly austerity. The Friar is a man whose courtesy, lowliness and service depend on whether "ther as profit sholde arise".²⁶ Chaucer disapproves of the gluttony and avarice here, but these two religious figures, whose lives and ways run so completely counter to all the principles of monasticism, are presented chiefly as figures of fun. However, the kindly tolerance with which they are treated should not debar us from detecting the mild rebuke beneath it.

In the case of the Pardoner the censure is far more patent and relentless. This pilgrim is evil to the core, as the General Prologue and his own Prologue to his Tale reveal. Walker remarks in this connection that "the most tolerant and humane of spirits may be roused by a sense of

23 Ibid., p. 421, ll. 200-206.

24 Ibid., p. 422, ll. 231-232.

25 Ibid., p. 422, ll. 233-234.

26 Ibid., p. 422, l. 249.

special evils; and Chaucer evidently was roused by a sense of the evils connected with the Church".²⁷ His presentation of the Pardoner embodies his protest, for protest may assume many forms, and this distasteful picture of an extremely distasteful character is but one of its guises.

The Pardoner's physiognomy, as Chaucer details it, is as revolting to the sight as is T.S. Eliot's picture of the faded and debauched prostitute in Sweeney Erect with her

withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes,
This oval O cropped out with teeth:²⁸

The poet does not spare the Pardoner in any way. He is as morally offensive as he is physically loathsome. Ironically, he is introduced as "a gentil Pardoner", but in the same breath Chaucer tells us that he is singing noisily what must have been a popular song of the time. It smacks loudly of the secular, and this despite the fact that he "streight was comen fro the court of Rome".²⁹ Is it possible to miss the irony of the juxtaposition here?

Next details of his appearance follow.³⁰ He has hair "as yellow as wax", a fact which immediately suggests a certain smooth and oily glibness about this character. He presents a thoroughly dishevelled appearance. There is more about his hair: it hangs down to his shoulders "by ounces" and "by colpons oon and oon". He wears no hood over his head, for he refuses, it seems, to act conventionally and is in every way a law unto himself. He takes pains, he admits in the Prologue to his Tale, to preach in an arrogant tone, "to han an hauteyn speche",³¹ and treats his listeners with high-handed insolence.

The subtlety of Chaucer's satire is always seen in his selection of details. Casually sewn on the Pardoner's

27 Walker, op. cit., p. 21.

28 Eliot, op. cit., p. 36.

29 Chaucer, op. cit., p. 427, l. 670.

30 Chaucer, op. cit., p. 427, ll. 675-700. All quotations in this paragraph and subsequent ones describing the Pardoner have been taken from this passage.

31 Ibid. (The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale), p.557, ll.111-113.

cap is a vernicle, a miniature of the Holy Face on the handkerchief of St Veronica. This is an advertisement of his calling, but, in the context, it must also be seen as a sign of the casual cynicism which this vendor of relics accords to all things that should be held sacred. His most precious possession is obviously his "walet", for it lies "biforn him in his lappe", a fact which is subtly suggestive of the caution he expends on the wealth he has extorted from the "lewd peple" whose credulity he exploits.

At this point Chaucer makes use of one of his favourite weapons of satire, namely, bathos. The juxtaposition of the "vernicle" (bearing Christ's image) and "walet" is cleverly conceived. It has a harshly satiric and bathetic effect, because it is love of money that causes the Pardoner to betray his calling, just as love of money featured in the betrayal of Christ. We find this same device of bathetic juxtaposition a little later in the description, when the words "croys" and "pigges bones" are mentioned in one breath. Chaucer never fails to draw attention to anything that smacks of mercenariness. It is his gentle protest against a spirit that was becoming increasingly prevalent in his times with the rise of the new commercial middle class. His gibe at this social group is good-natured but nonetheless clear in his presentation of The Wife of Bath.

Our disgust at the Pardoner grows as we read of his "glaringe eyen", always on the look-out, we fancy, for a likely victim, and of the "voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot". Then Chaucer goes out of his way to make the Pardoner even more objectionable by stating his certainty that he is an emasculated and sexless creature, "a gelding or a mare". With stinging economy of satire the poet speaks not of the Pardoner's profession or vocation, but of his "craft", and so we are prepared, but none the less shocked, to hear that he palms off "pigges bones" on the ignorant rustics and that with

feyned flaterye and japes
He made the person and the peple his apes. 32

Here the condemnatory tone of protest is perfectly clear. Soon afterwards we discover that his loud singing is not a sign of carefree joyousness, but merely an attempt to loosen up his vocal organs and "affyle" them "to winne silver".

Chaucer's satire of the Pardoner and his implied protest against his avaricious malpractices continue with even greater zest in the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale. With brazen amorality and flagrant cynicism the speaker here acknowledges his own hypocrisy and his disregard for the very text he chooses for all his sermons : "Radix malorum est cupiditas". After his Tale exposing the just retribution for greed, he has the effrontery to offer his worthless pardons for sale and his fake relics to be kissed.

In his Prologue the Pardoner admits that he spares no effort to defraud the poor. "I peyne me", he says, a villian describing his own tricks, in the fashion of mediaeval satire. He is full of "gaudes" and "japes", and, in his haughty way, he asks:

What? trowe ye, the whyles I may preche
And winne gold and silver for I teche,
That I wol live in povert wilfully? 33

Emphatically he answers his own question:

Nay, nay, I thoghte it never trewely... 34
I wol non of the apostles counterfete.

In the Pardoner Chaucer has personified the corruption of the Church. Although his accounts of the other religious characters already mentioned (except the Summoner and the Pardoner) are amused in tone rather than seriously censorious, it is nevertheless plain that in all of these ecclesiastics Chaucer notices the unwillingness to follow the teachings of the Apostles and of the founders of their orders. The merry Monk did not care "a pulled hen" for any old religious maxims and although the poet comments, "And I seyde, his opinioun was good",³⁵ we realise that he is just having his fun with this holy "pricasour", for does he not show us, by way of sharp contrast, three idealised figures, the Knight, the Parson and the Ploughman, fighter, priest and worker, all

33 Ibid., p. 577, ll. 111-113.

34 Ibid., p. 557, ll. 114-115.

35 Ibid., p. 421, l. 183.

dedicated to service rather than to self? These three characters embody the human virtues which Chaucer regarded as being of great value and importance.

Though many critics and readers see this poet mainly as the dispassionate and amused observer, there can be little doubt that his presentation of the Pardoner is "fearless and unsparing satire",³⁶ as John Livingstone Lowes labels it, a descriptive phrase which must surely imply protest.

Chaucer's morality is unequivocal. Helen Storm Corsa claims that in a sense the Pardoner should be seen as Chaucer's symbol of disorder. She goes on to point out that the very virtues which we see in the Knight are those which the Pardoner deliberately perverts and "his perversions seem, for the moment, to proclaim the rule of Disorder".³⁷ We find the Knight mentioned first in the list of pilgrims because he is highest in the social scale, but he is aptly placed first for another reason: he and his Tale seem to represent those values which were all-important to his creator and the best of his contemporaries.

Geoffrey Chaucer has shown us his world as he saw it, in many ways the same world that he would see now were he alive today. That he is often hugely diverted by it is obvious, but laughter, too, can contain within its peals a protest. In the next chapter we shall turn to another poet who also used laughter and raillery to protest against the follies of humanity, although his laughter often had a gnomic and more mocking ring.

Chaucer's protest is couched in smooth and graceful verse which is flawlessly metrical in its sparkling flow. He uses few poetic tricks and devices beyond homely but apt similes, for the subtlety of his irony, his predilection for the revealing concrete rather than the abstract and his seemingly artless selection of facts, non sequitur linking and juxtaposing of statements require no other artifice. I have already pointed out how in the case of the Prioress he uses "semely" with ironic ambiguity, and we find that he sometimes uses "worthy" and also "good" (as in the case of

36 John Livingstone Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 186.

37 Corsa, op. cit., p. 194.

suggested and they parallel the two vices prevalent in the Church and its churchmen which Chaucer is holding up to ridicule: worldliness and avarice. His obvious scorn for the Pardoner shows that he intends to do more than merely ridicule. He disapproves of these vices; they run counter to his own values, to all the virtues which make up his concept of "gentillesse". Exposure is motivated by disapprobation and implies protest.

Subtle irony and non sequitur linking and juxtaposing are found in the following lines from the description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue:

He made the person and the peple his apes.
But trewely to tellen, atte laste,
He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste. ⁴¹

The statement made in the first line quoted above throws immediate doubt on the validity of the assertion in the third line, and the irony emerges. The poet juxtaposes, without comment, this hypocrite's ignoble activities amongst the simple village folk with his sham noble deportment in the church.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to show that despite the zest with which he looked at life, despite the fact that he was no militant reformer or protester, Chaucer does manage to make quite clear his awareness and disapproval of certain facets of the social and religious life of his times which were unpalatable to him. Perhaps the poet's own words sum up his mild protest best. In Troilus and Criseyde he wrote:

Swich is this world; whoso it kan byholde.
In ech estat is litel hertes reste;
God leve us for to take it for the beste! ⁴²

--oOo--

41 Ibid., p. 428, ll. 705-707.

42 Ibid., p. 323, ll. 1748-1750.

CHAPTER IV

ALEXANDER POPE : THE VOICE OF MOCKERY

We now leap over three centuries to find in the early 1700s a rather different voice of protest to those we have considered before, a new target and a new technique. No longer are the Church and politics the objectives of assault, for Alexander Pope sets his sights instead at the gay and glittering "society" that was the glory of the Augustan Age. This controversial poet, whose work was to be variously condemned to the depths and lauded to the skies by contemporaries and posterity alike, was, I believe, one of the greatest poets of social protest in English literature.

It has been found possible to take the three-century stride through time in this study, because, although the voice of protest has never been entirely stilled and did make itself heard in those intervening centuries as well, its utterances were sporadic and less insistent, less consciously contumacious.

There was, for instance, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century John Donne, whose "despair of making a unity out of the broken images of life [has] brought him close to some contemporary poets", says Ifor Evans.⁴³ Other critics have also seen points of similarity between Donne's The Second Anniversarie and T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. Donne adjures his auditors to "Forget this rotten world", adding in terms of harsh bitterness,

What fragmentary rubbishge this world is
Thou knowest, and that it is not worth a thought.⁴⁴

One undoubtedly hears an echo of these lines in Eliot's

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? ⁴⁵

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- 43 Ifor Evans, A Short History of English Literature (Aylesbury: Hunt, Barnard & Co. Ltd, 1963), p. 29.
- 44 John Donne, The Second Anniversarie of the Progresse of the Soule, The Penguin Book of English Verse, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966), p.85-86.
- 45 T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land, op. cit., p. 51.

After the greatness of the Elizabethan period in England when growing national prestige and territorial expansion left little room for serious revolt or even much political doubt, the new learning, philosophy and science of the seventeenth century did demand from its poets a profound reorientation of outlook, and old ways of thought and feeling tended to be threatened. Nevertheless, poets of this age seem to have been chiefly concerned with a more personal conflict (Donne and Herbert, for instance, with their own relationships with God). The conflicts which challenged their poetic muses were conflicts "recollected in tranquillity", as it were, and the general protest was largely lost in the personal anguish, as these poets expressed their suffering in poems about love and religion. It was quite obviously a purely personal protest which provoked George Herbert's rebellious outburst:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
 I will abroad.
 What? shall I ever sigh and pine? 46

Similarly, when Henry Vaughan yearned

 to travell back
 And tread again that ancient track, 47

his dissatisfaction with "this place/appointed for my second race" was a personal discontent only.

So we pass over poets such as these; also over Ben Jonson, although his verse did at times criticise his world and utter protest at its ways, as, for example, in the elegiac poem, On Salathiel Pavy, where the poet censures the use of child-actors in the Court theatres, by implication and incidentally. The Metaphysicals will also have to be omitted and there will be time and space for only brief reference to Milton, whose genius was indeed powerful enough to have registered strong protest, had his soul not been, as Wordsworth puts it, "like a star and dwelt apart". Reference was made in Chapter II to Milton's incidental denunciation of corrupt clergy in Lycidas, and there is no

46 George Herbert, The Collar, Penguin Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 110.

47 Henry Vaughan, The Retreat, Penguin Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 120.

doubt about his interest in the politico/religious affairs of his time and of his strong feelings about them. His Samson Agonistes may be regarded as being a political tract in addition to being mainly a dramatisation of a Biblical episode. In On the Morning of Christ's Nativity there are several instances of oblique censure of the contemporary social and political scene where "spear and shield" and "hookèd chariot" are too much in evidence and not "idle" or "unstained" as (he infers) they should be.⁴⁸ There is also an assertion (by implication) that the world lacks "Truth and Justice" in stanza 15. And, of course, there is his sonnet On the Late Massacre in Piedmont in which the denunciation of the persecution of Protestants by Roman Catholics is undeniably protest of a religious nature. It thunders out in powerful language like boulders crashing down the hillside, and the attack on "the Triple Tyrant" (the Pope) in the closing lines trumpets forth with tremendous vehemence.

Despite the undoubted bursts of protest throughout the body of Milton's poetry, his great qualities as a poet in other respects seem to overshadow the element of protest. We shall leave him now and pass on to the eighteenth century, to the Augustan Age and to Alexander Pope. This era in the history of English poetry seems to be a more fruitful field for our search and offers, in any case, a very special type of protest, expressed in a very particular way, as the title of this chapter indicates.

Perhaps the first thing that strikes the reader about the poetry and the protest of the eighteenth century in general and of Pope in particular is its restraint - a restraint which, in fact, often tends to hide the protest. In Augustan poetry we find very clearly a reaction against the enthusiasm which was so characteristic of the religious life of many of the Puritans of the previous century. This "enthusiasm" was frequently reflected in the unrestrained

48 John Milton, Hymn on the morning of Christ's Nativity, quoted in William Henry Hudson, Milton & his Poetry (London: G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1931), p. 25.

spiritual outpourings which comprise much of the Puritan poetry of the time, for example Henry Vaughan's I walkt the other Day or Thomas Traherne's The Salutation. Such poetic zeal degenerated later, as it was almost bound to do, into hypocritical cant. In their reaction against this, the Augustans were strongly suspicious of any kind of violent self-revelation, and so we find Pope turning to the controlled heroic couplet for the poetic form in which to express the mockery that was his particular brand of protest against the social follies of his age. Though Pope's metrical skill enabled him to make the heroic couplet dance, trip, march or glide at will, with a seemingly nonchalant sureness of touch, the very form of the verse gives his poetry a certain weightiness, as if the poet were expressing not so much his own feelings as a common judgement. When in his Essay on Man he bids his readers

Look next on greatness: say where greatness lies, 49
Where, but among the heroes and the wise?

he appears to speak with the assurance which only certainty of general support can give.

It is this confidence, this very noticeable Augustan assurance, which strikes one chiefly about Pope's voice of protest. There is in his tone none of the personal and painful uncertainty which was to characterise the poetry of many protesters of later ages. Pope saw the follies and frivolities of the shimmering social world in which he spent "that long disease, my life" and he moved up his artillery to do battle, priming his cannon with the powder of mockery, a mockery often mingled, one has to admit, with more than a pinch of malice. H.V.D. Dyson has labelled the spirit and tone in which Pope made his assault very neatly as "a sophisticated malice-flecked delight".⁵⁰ Pope undoubtedly shared, upheld and developed the Augustan view that poetry could be an important instrument of moral improvement. He believed that its most effective method was that of satire. The element of ridicule in it attracts the hearer or reader

49 Alexander Pope, Essay on Man, Collected Poems, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1959), p. 211, ll. 217-218.

50 H.V.D. Dyson (ed.), Pope: Poetry and Prose (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), Introduction, p. vii.

in a powerful way; it entertains and amuses while it exposes and castigates.

Pope first set out to tilt at Augustan high society in a comparatively mild and frolicsome way in his mock-heroic poem, the justly famous The Rape of the Lock. The incident which inspired the poem is well known : the severing by Lord Petre of a lock of Miss Arabella Fermor's hair. This dastardly social gaffe had caused a serious breach between the families of the two protagonists. It was suggested to Pope that he should write a poem making a jest of the incident and using laughter as a means of terminating the feud. The idea appealed to the poet who saw in it also a means of exposing some of the absurdities and sham of the beau monde in which the two families moved. That is why it may truly be said that The Rape of the Lock "transcends the comic intention and becomes a work of serious art in its own right".⁵¹

To the already traditional weapon of the protester, namely satire, Pope was to give a new shape and to afford it the mock-heroic treatment. He would exalt the setting, the protagonists and the actions to epic heights in order to parade the rank foolishness of the whole trivial lock-snipping affair in particular and of the conduct of Augustan beaux and belles in general. He would, in fact, parody setting and action by the use of pompous expressions for low actions, by the skilful employment of periphrasis. Thus we find him denoting the sacrilegious pair of scissors used in the action as the "two-edg'd weapon" and the "little engine". Milady's powders, paints and pomades become "the cosmetic powers", while her perfumes are referred to as "the imprison'd essences".

We should remark, then, that Pope's satire differs widely from that of Chaucer. Instead of the directly diminishing images of straightforward satire which Chaucer tended to use in his descriptions of the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar and others, Pope's images heighten what they intend to bring low and give a mock dignity to the trivial to

51 Kenneth Hopkins, English Poetry : A Short History (London: Phoenix House Ltd , 1961), p. 207.

enhance the effect of the fundamental irony. The result is denigration. Although Pope himself undoubtedly delights in some of the artificial beauty, the glittering glamour, which he describes in parts of the poem, in much the same way that Chaucer delights in his coy and courtly nun, yet he is, like the earlier poet, simultaneously passing a judgment. He also, like Chaucer, requires his reader, after he has stifled his chuckle, to disapprove of the ways of human kind. As Cleanth Brooks puts it: "Pope is able to indulge in social satire and at the same time do justice to the charm of the society which he censures",⁵² We see this ambivalent attitude very clearly in Pope's frequent use of the word "glittering". Though he allows us to see the charm of the splendour, we are at the same time made aware of the old adage that all that glitters is not gold. Pope is, in fact, using this word in much the same way that Chaucer uses "semely" in connection with the Prioress, and both poets are protesting against the sham in man's behaviour.

Yet there is a difference in the techniques of the two poets. Whereas Chaucer's satire is embedded chiefly in what he tells us about his characters, in the information he gives, Pope's satire is sharpened by means of his diction. It scintillates with Wit, the literary and conversational cult of the Augustan Age. This Wit, which Pope himself defined as

.....Nature to advantage dress'd
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd,⁵³

is often concisely achieved by the use of various poetic devices such as the pun, zeugma, bathos and striking antithesis. Although Pope also follows Chaucer's method of carefully selected details to pinpoint attention upon that which he is satirising, the mediaeval poet's simple but telling similes are replaced in the Augustan's work by more elaborate comparisons, by a wider use of metaphor and by an altogether richer imagery and texture.

52 Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (London: PL Editions Poetry London Ltd, 1948), p. 47.

53 Pope, Essay on Criticism, Collected Poems, op. cit., p. 65, ll. 297-298.

We have a clear example of the difference in technique when we consider how Chaucer gives a denigrating impression of the Pardoner by retailing that he has a "voys as smal as hath a goot". Pope, describing the angry voices of the beaux and belles raised in wordy battle writes:

So when bold Homer makes the Gods engage,
And heavenly breasts with human passions rage;
'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms;
And all Olympus rings with loud alarms;
Jove's thunder roars, Heaven trembles all around,
Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing deeps resound:
Earth shakes her nodding towers, the ground gives way,
And the pale ghosts start at the flash of day! 54

The very heightening here has the effect of diminishing and the loud and foolish quarrel is reduced to just proportions, the lovers' tiff is set in true perspective and its triviality satirised. The fierce viragos are reduced almost to the stature of T.S. Eliot's inanely chattering females who, in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,

Come and go
Talking of Michelangelo. 55

Ian Jack claims that no genre could have been more suitable for The Rape of the Lock than the mock-heroic. "It had been evolved for the very purpose of 'diminishing' petty quarrels and combined the two sorts of writing in which the age was most interested : epic and satire. And there was still a spice of novelty about it".⁵⁶ He goes on to say that, "In mock-heroic a dignified genre is turned to witty use without being cheapened in any way. The poet has an opportunity of ridiculing through incongruity ..."⁵⁷ Examples of mockery and humour achieved through incongruity abound throughout the poem. The sylphs are armed with "bodkin spears", Chloe kills her adversary "with a frown", while Belinda subdues the lord with "a charge of snuff".

54 Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto V, Collected Poems, op. cit., p. 93, ll. 45-53.

55 Eliot, op. cit., p. 11.

56 Ian Jack, Augustan Satire : Intention and Idiom in English Poetry (London: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 77.

57 Ibid., p. 78.

It is difficult to select from a mock-heroic poem so uniformly excellent and witty any lines for special comment, but perhaps the following might be quoted as exhibiting Pope's outstanding talent for this genre. The passage is taken from Canto V and describes the start of the battle between the sexes for the recovery of "the precious hairs":

"To arms, to arms!" the fierce virago cries,
 And swift as lightning to the combat flies.
 All side in parties, and begin th' attack:
 Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack;
 Heroes' and heroines' shouts confusedly rise,
 And bass and treble voices strike the skies.
 No common weapons in their hands are found,
 Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound. 58

These lines show the validity of the claim that "Classical epic provides the 'rich and edifying' contrast against which the vanity and pretentiousness of the beau monde can be judged". 59

It is important to remember that in The Rape of the Lock Pope sets out to expose a moral fault, namely, excessive female pride. However, the satire he uses is not directed against Arabella Fermor only, for the poet is protesting against a weakness which she shared with all in her social set. The male of the species, too, was guilty of foppish conceit and dissembling, although Pope would delay his most virulent assault on masculine vanity and inanity until he came to write The Dunciad, the "Sporus" extract from The Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot and his other Epistles. His irony would then become less gentle and chivalrous, his attack more blatant.

After the statement of the problem, the dedication and the invocation which are traditionally found in epic poetry, Pope begins The Rape of the Lock with a delicate exposure of the indolence and self-indulgence of the élite of his day. He depicts the cushioned opulence in which it luxuriated and spent its pleasure-packed hours:

Sol through white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,
 And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day:

58 Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto V, op. cit., p. 93, 11. 37-44.

59 J.S. Cunningham, Pope: The Rape of the Lock (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd, 1961), p. 10.

Now lap-dogs gave themselves the rousing shake,
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve awake:
 Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,
 And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound.
 Belinda still her downy pillow press'd,
 Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest:
 'Twas he had summon'd to her silent bed
 The morning-dream that hover'd o'er her head?
 A youth more glittering than a birth-night beau,
 (That ev'n in slumber caused her cheek to glow)
 Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay,
 And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say:...

Like Chaucer before him, Pope is by no means aggressively censorious, as this passage reveals. Ian Jack claims that "the essential satirist's object is to kill any sympathy which the reader may feel for the subject of his satire, moving him instead to amusement and contempt".⁶¹ This is precisely what our poet sets out to do here, but he places particular emphasis on the "amusement" aspect of his aim. Pope delights in the early morning whiteness and brightness of this scene, but I make the same claim for him as I did for Chaucer: despite the laughter-provoking effect of what he has to say, Pope, too, is exposing follies and frivolities; he too, is showing an awareness of certain features of his world which to him seem worthy of exposure and censure; his aim is also to register his disapproval and to arouse derision on the part of his readers.

In addition, Pope, like Chaucer, is a poet of morality. His poetry is concerned with man in action. Geoffrey Tillotson points out that "Pope's concern with morality is constant" and he goes on to say, "Scattered all through his poems... are those passages studying man as he lives his life, which, despite the persistent currency of some of their phrases, strike each new reader as freshly minted".⁶² In The Rape of the Lock the poet's concern is largely with life, and, as he depicts this life, he is undoubtedly making a comparison, albeit implicit, between the fine and the flip-pant, the serious and the silly. All these features of

60 Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto I, op. cit., p. 77, 11. 13-26.

61 Jack, Augustan Satire, op. cit., p. 23.

62 Geoffrey Tillotson, Pope and Human Nature (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 36.

the poem under consideration validate the claim that Pope is a poet of protest, for, as a study of the words italicised in the previous paragraph will reveal, he fulfils all the requirements which were laid down in Chapter I. Pope quite obviously satirises that of which he does not approve or which he cannot accept. It might be well to remind ourselves here of Ian Jack's dictum (already quoted), that "Satire is born of the instinct to protest".⁶³

In the passage from The Rape of the Lock quoted above, the reader should remark how Belinda's mere awakening in the morning is given epic treatment and elevated to a kind of matutinal ritual. As the poet's narration of her daily routine is unfolded, despite all the beauty, colour, urbanity and decorum of her days, the very seriousness with which it is treated reveals the idle sham of her modus vivendi. Like Chaucer's Madame Eglentyne, Belinda is charming and lovable, but she is also imperious, pampered and spoilt. Pope undoubtedly means us to see her as a typical example of the ladies who graced the court of Queen Anne. Her impatience and hauteur is very evident in the incisive tonal quality of the following couplet with its preponderance of monosyllabic words:

Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground.⁶⁴
And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound.

The whole scene sparkles with voluptuous luxury, and symbols of status cram the lines: the white curtains, Sol's subservience, the lapdog, watch and "downy pillow". Indolence breathes lightly from the phrase "balmy rest" and from the reference to the "morning dream". One gathers that Belinda is no busy, early riser. The steady positioning of the caesura in these lines, the long, rich vowels and the stately, almost somnolent roll of the verse all serve to give an impression of urbane censure passed by the poet on the whole social set. Pope is, in fact, justifying his own well-known claim that his poem was

Form'd to delight at once and lash the age.

Hard upon Belinda's languid bestirring of herself

63 Jack, Pope, op. cit., p. 17.

64 Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto I, op. cit., p.77, ll.17-18.

from sleep follows Ariel's speech and the rhythm subtly changes to "the slight breath of a summer air among young leaves".⁶⁵ However, cunningly concealed in the silvery, sylph-like lightness of Ariel's words to the waking nymph are scattered a host of references to the vanity, superficiality and arrogant femininity of Augustan belles: their "joy in gilden chariots", their "love of ombre", the coquetry, the "gay ideas" that "crowd the vacant brain", the consciously rolling eyes and blushing cheeks, all summed up in the witty phrase, "the moving toy-shop of their heart". The whole wanton life of an era is woven into the airy texture of the speech and the reader is given a consummate picture of Belinda's world of the theatre-box, the ring, the sedan chair with its equipage of pages, the "courtly balls and midnight masquerades", "the glance by day and whisper in the dark".⁶⁶

The values which this society respects are wigs and sword-knots, "garters, stars and coronets", while the whole muddled ethos, the confusion and hollowness of values, is adequately expressed in the contents of Belinda's dressing-table drawer:

Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux.⁶⁷

This line is a fine example of how Pope uses "a tumble of discrepant items" to expose "the belle's jumbled notions of comparative value".⁶⁸ We find an exposure of this same weakness in Belinda's microcosm, when Ariel catalogues the possible calamities which may occur when on "this day black omens threat the brightest fair".⁶⁹ As J. S. Cunningham points out, "The confusion of values is not, of course, a waywardness of the sylphs, but a disorder of the whole social system".⁷⁰ Worst features of this disorder are its superficiality and sham, and the poet's disclosure of

65 Edith Sitwell, Alexander Pope (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1930), p. 275.

66 Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto I, op. cit., p. 78, ll. 27-105. All quotations in this paragraph have been taken from these lines.

67 Ibid., p. 80, l. 138.

68 Cunningham, op. cit., p. 41.

69. Pope, The Rape of the Lock, Canto II, op. cit., p.83, ll.101-110.

70 Cunningham, loc. cit.

and protest against these vices are brilliantly condensed in the boudoir passage. The puffs, powders and patches symbolise not only superficiality, but also pretence, for patches were added to mask a face, as it were, while billet-doux connote the extravagantly mannered and meaningless relationship between the sexes. The word "Bibles" adroitly wedged between the "patches" and "billet-doux", forgotten amidst the jumbled female bric-à-brac, speaks for itself. We see Pope here exposing sham with the same amused delight as Chaucer exposed the hypocrisy of his world when he mentioned the Prioress's "broche of gold ful shene" amongst her personal adornments.

Perhaps at this point we should leave The Rape of the Lock, since so much has already been written about it by eminent critics and scholars, and turn to another poem of Pope's, Epistle IV, to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington. In this he attacks with sterner and more relentless protest one of the besetting sins of his age, the misuse of riches and its concomitant ostentation. The poet's protest is quite clear and specific in the first four lines:

'Tis strange, the miser should his cares employ
To gain those riches he can ne'er enjoy:
Is it less strange, the prodigal should waste
His wealth to purchase what he ne'er can taste? ⁷¹

With a skilful combination of animus and urbanity he goes on to attack the wealthy classes who, having no taste themselves, are compelled to employ connoisseurs to buy for them, and to buy only for vaunting display.

Although Pope concentrates on one particular folly in this Epistle, in the course of his assault he points to other imbecilities as well. Richard Boyle had just published Palladio's designs of the Baths, Arches, Theatres of ancient Rome Addressing him, the poet says:

You show us Rome was glorious, not profuse,
And pompous buildings once were things of use.
Yet shall (my lord) your just, your noble rules
Fill half the land with imitating fools;
Who random drawings from your sheets shall take, ⁷²
And of one beauty many blunders make;

71 Pope, op. cit., p. 246, ll. 1-4.

72 Ibid., p. 247, ll. 23-28.

The operative words in the above lines are of course "profuse", "pompous", "things of use", "imitating fools" and "blunders", for Pope saw in the showy architecture of his contemporaries nothing but pomposity, profusion and bungling carried out by fools who tried to imitate the glories of classical Rome. Instead of "things of use", they created monstrosities. He concludes with the reminder that

'Tis use alone that sanctifies expense
And splendour borrows all her rays from sense. 73

Pope, we must remember, was the product of a neo-classical civilization which demanded that Art, Nature, Beauty, Use, Industry and Decorum should be reconciled. Yet, as he looked around him, he found such reconciliation completely lacking in the showy castles and mansions of the greatest in the land. It was, in fact, wanting in the whole way of life of the rich. Even of their banquets he asks with unvarnished mockery

Is this a dinner? this a genial room?
No, 'tis a temple, and a hecatomb.
A solemn sacrifice, perform'd in state,
You drink by measure, and to minutes eat. 74

Again we have the attack on the ritualistic and pretentious formality of Augustan life in the words "temple" and "solemn sacrifice". It is clear that the poet sees behind all this extravagant ostentation and ceremony nothing but stupidity and dullness. The master of Timon's magnificent villa is but

A puny insect, shivering at a breeze! 75

Timon is not so much "puny" of physical build as of brain-power, like all the others of his ilk mentioned in Epistle IV.

Dullness! For Pope this was the greatest evil of the age. He would go on to castigate this defect with flagrant animosity in the four books of The Dunciad. His protest would rise here at times to strident heights, the shrillness only just tempered by his own special brand of urbanity and wit.

73 Ibid., p. 251, ll. 179-180.

74 Ibid., p. 251, ll. 155-158.

75 Ibid., p. 249, l. 108.

The Dunciad began as a collection of jibes at the various petty critics and poetasters teeming in the writer's literary world. It grew into a much more extensive poem than had originally been intended and became a study of, and a protest against, the whole unsatisfactory state of letters. Kenneth Hopkins sums up the motivation behind the poem very clearly:

Pope turned on his enemies and crushed them, but this is not the strength of the poem. Pope really (and with justification) saw Dulness as a menace to letters, and its many adherents (so to call them) as an army, the units of which were perhaps harmless themselves, but of formidable influence when combined. Dulness was much more than the quality of being unreadable: it arose from false values, false emphasis and faulty practice: these poets and critics had nothing of value to say and they said it badly. They were not honest craftsmen, they had neither skill nor pride; and the inference was that unless this slovenly breed were rooted out, literature in England would perish. Perhaps the satire began as something personal; it ended as an indictment of bad writing, bad taste and intellectual poverty... 76

In The Dunciad the poet again uses his favourite poetic form for his attack, the mock-heroic, but in this poem he gives a particular punch to his satire by more powerful use of denigrating imagery, by frequent employment of feminine rhymes, which lower the style to near the level of the burlesque, and by quite patent parodying and lampooning. The poet is unsparing in his assault, and the delight in the dancing couplets of The Rape of the Lock is lacking here, although The Dunciad too has passages of remarkable beauty.

The poem begins with a line of correctly elevated heroic idiom and with the traditional invocation, but before a dozen words have been written, the heroic is parodied and reduced to the mock-heroic by the introduction of the single word, "Smithfield":

The mighty mother, and her son, who brings
The Smithfield muses to the ear of kings, 77
I sing.

At once the mockery is there, and the occasion for the poem

76 Hopkins, op. cit., p. 210.

77 Pope, The Dunciad, Book I, op. cit., p. 125.

would have been apparent to all the informed of Pope's day: the appointment of Colley Cibber to the post of Poet Laureate. Pope then makes his proposition clear. He proposes to

Say, how the goddess bade Britannia sleep
And pour'd her spirit o'er the land and deep. 78

Immediately the extent of what the poet's protest will cover is made manifest, for the whole of Britannia, both land and sea, is asleep in the arms of Dulness, says the writer.

In magnificently rolling lines which have been given an ominously solemn tread by the use of deep and heavy vowel sounds, the poet goes on to describe this "mighty mother". She is the "Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night". The accumulative power of the words suggesting degeneration, "Chaos", "dotage", "idiot" "gross" and "anarchy", is awesome. The poet tells his readers that

Gross as her sire, and as her mother grave,
Laborious, heavy, busy, bold and blind,
She ruled, in native anarchy, the mind. 79

Note the heavy, dragging, brooding movement of these lines, a heaviness of movement which is increased by the punctuation and the alliteration of the harsh, plosive b-consonants in the second line. These devices, coupled with the polysyllabic word "laborious" at the beginning of the line, make it extremely difficult to utter. The vowel-sounds of this line are also awkwardly arranged and the dissonance thus produced helps to complete the picture which the passage conjures up of a doltish ruler clumsily misgoverning a sluggish and apathetic kingdom.

This, then, is the spirit which Pope feels has crept upon, overpowered and enervated Britain, and from now on he spares no person, class or group which has in any way contributed to this all-embracing lethargy of the spirit existing in every cranny of English cultural, intellectual and spiritual life. One by one he lashes the different groups, the dull poets, like Cibber and all his "brazen, brainless brothers", and those in authority who hold

78 Ibid., ll. 7-8.

79 Ibid., p. 126. All quotations here and above from ll. 9-16.

Pomps without guilt, of bloodless swords and maces,
Glad chains, warm furs, broad banners and broad faces. 80

The "broad faces" is a striking example of Pope's brilliant and often devastating choice of words. This genius for selection of diction enabled him to obliterate with mockery whatever he desired to satirise. Note how ingeniously he both mirrors and mocks all the pageantry and the empty extravagance of Lord Mayor's Day. These two lines also reveal the technique I referred to earlier of using feminine rhymes to produce the effect of burlesque.

Nobody in the long and motley procession of dullards escapes. The poet flogs them all in turn: wits, coxcombs, bores, editors, pamphleteers and playwrights, politicians, patrons and flatterers of dunces, incompetent composers of opera and other music, pedants and idle pupils, all those, in fact, who have brought about a state where

Science groans in chains
And Wit dreads exile, penalties and pains.
Where foamed rebellious Logic, gagged and bound,
Where, stripp'd, fair Rhetoric languished on the 81
ground;

Queen Dulness calls them all her beloved sons. She assembles them around her (in Book IV) and confers on them "her titles and degrees", and the poem rises in a crescendo to the final magnificent thirty lines where Pope reaches what is perhaps the highest peak of his poetic achievement as he predicts that under the reign of this Mighty Mother, Dulness,

Art after art goes out, and all is night,
See skulking Truth to her old cavern fled,
Mountains of casuistry heaped o'er her head!
Philosophy, that leaned on Heaven before,
Shrinks to her second cause, and is no more.
Physic of metaphysic begs defence,
And metaphysic calls for aid on sense!
See mystery to mathematics fly!
In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.
Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
And unawares morality expires.
Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine,
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;

80 Ibid., p. 128, ll. 87-88.

81 Ibid., Book IV, p. 162, ll. 21-24.

Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall, 82
And universal darkness buries all.

Was there ever a picture of anarchy and chaos in more terrifying colours and surrealistic design? William Thackeray once said of these lines: "No poet's verse ever mounted higher than that wonderful flight". All is indeed night and "universal darkness" as words like "skulking", "cavern", "shrinks", "rave" and "veils" pile up to give an awe-inspiring panorama of general gloom and decay.

Not only does the poet's verse reach a peak of greatness in this final section of The Dunciad, but we also hear his protest resounding loud and strong in its thunderous mockery.

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CHAPTER V

WILLIAM BLAKE : THE VOICE OF THE BARD

Alexander Pope, whose voice of protest, targets and technique I attempted to define in the previous chapter, died in 1744. The prevailing spirit in poetry at the end of the first half of the eighteenth century was still strictly Augustan or "classical", and Pope's protest, as we have seen, was directed almost entirely against the upper echelons of society, the urbane, polished, sophisticated and often sceptical level which comprised those persons of rank and fashion who set the style of thought and behaviour. Pope mocked, as I tried to show, the absurdities in their social conduct, the extravagance, sham and lack of true "classical" taste which lay below the glittering gilt of élite and court life in the reign of Anne.

In William Blake (1757 - 1827) we hear another, a new, voice of protest. He was to direct his more patent and potent rebelliousness at completely different facets and levels of life, at the moral and social behaviour of mankind in general, at Dame Lurch with her bandy brood, at sham and hypocrisy not only in the Church, but in the State and its institutions, at

God & his Priest & King
Who made up a heaven of our misery. 83

The emphasis on the "our" is mine, for I think it reveals very clearly the all-embracing quality of this poet's rebellion and his more personal involvement.

William Blake was born thirteen years after the death of Alexander Pope. By 1757 a change of mood was beginning to show itself in Georgian England in the face of the lingering Augustan spirit. William Gaunt comments on this change of mood and instances it in "the dawn of wonder, the budding of romance, the beginning of a new emotional life"⁸⁴ which began to appear in literature and thought.

83 William Blake, The Chimney Sweeper, William Blake: A Selection of Poems and Letters, ed. J. Bronowski (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1961), p. 47.

84 William Gaunt, Arrows of Desire (London: Museum Press Ltd., 1956), p. 9.

There were undoubtedly stirrings of revolt against the principles of Order and Reason which had set the tone and permeated the atmosphere of the coffee-houses, salons and boudoirs of Pope's day. Gaunt goes on to state more specifically that "somewhere between the years 1740 and 1760, this eighteenth century began to split in two".⁸⁵ Certain poets, artists, philosophers and religious teachers began to view society in all its dimensions, to feel for man as man, the individual (which is one of the characteristics of Romantic poetry) and to show an interest in the hopeless and helpless state of the lower classes. As examples of the new thinking one might cite the poets Thomas Gray, William Collins and Thomas Chatterton, the artist Paul Sandby, the philosopher Swedenborg, and John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. The social conscience was beginning to stir at the brutality and callous cruelty which the social structure had for long imposed on those lower ranks whose cry might have echoed that of Blake's little chimney-sweeper: "'Weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'"

These early stirrings of the Romantic spirit, which was later in the century to become a far-reaching and significant movement, were seen not only in the interest shown in humble man, as for example in Gray's famous Elegy written in a Country Churchyard, but also in a new interest in the Gothic mode in many forms of art - a turning away, thus, from the Classical to the post-Classical age. A feeling of revolt was slowly gathering head.

The desire for change and the changed outlook would later gain force, generated by the march of political and social events in the last three decades of the century and by economic pressures and developments. There would be new ideals, new theories, new works of art and literature, a new interest in religious doctrines, dogma and practices.

Blake has been generally recognised as a forerunner of this movement which was later to be given the epithet, "Romantic". It is not surprising to find in his work an intense interest in religion, for an awareness of the spiritual significance in common things, and the importance of personal experience, were also characterising aspects of the Romantic

85 Ibid., p. 11.

movement.

Interest in religion among poets was, of course, nothing new. It was shown in a previous chapter that Chaucer's protest, for instance, was directed largely against the Church and its clergy. He, however, attacked specific abuses in Church practice and in the conduct of churchmen, as did even earlier poets. Blake's protest was against the very heart of religion, the rigidity of its dogma and doctrine, the distorted image it disseminated of God, the Father. Blake's voice of protest was, therefore, a new voice: the voice of the mystic, the seer, "who Present, Past, & Future, sees".⁸⁶

It was, however, not only the matter of Blake's poetry that was something new. As regards poetic form he was also a rebel, for he denounced and renounced the verse forms that had become traditional and turned again to the lyric, ousting the politely sneering Augustan satire and restoring the gift of song to English poetry. Blake's earlier poems constitute some of the sweetest lyrics in our literature. He made much use of simple four-line stanzas, as a glance through his Songs will show, but he used other lyrical stanza-lengths as well, thus avoiding any monotony in his poetry. Even to the quatrains he gave variety of rhythm, each type suiting its subject. Sometimes the verses have a hymnal metre, sometimes almost a nursery-rhyme skipping, while in Songs of Experience the form takes an ampler scope, and many move with a firmer tread or a forceful, thrusting beat. Gone was the heroic couplet of the Augustan Age.

A Londoner born and bred, Blake saw, as he tramped the "charter'd" streets of the city, all the social and moral evils which festered in the rapidly growing metropolis, where men were massed together and with them their most depraved vices, passions, inventions and institutions. Everywhere he saw the individual spirit in bondage. Yet the young Blake's habits and mode of life enabled him to see another world as well. On his frequent wanderings through the more rural fringes of London, along river-side Lambeth, Hampstead and the Strand, he saw also a world far removed from the grimy alleys

86 Blake, Introduction from Songs of Experience, op. cit., p.41.

of Soho. It was a world of lush green fields, of hills and dales, a world of care-free laughter and merry song, of sun and thrush and lark, of innocent woolly lambs and "dimpling" streams. In joyous mood the poet wrote his early Songs of Innocence.

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee, 87

he mirrored in them this real world of the English countryside, but presented it also as a visionary world, as the state of man's soul as he believed his Creator had meant it to be. He saw man as a child, innocent, free, unfettered, embodying all the divine qualities:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love 88
Is Man, his child and care.

He presents his joyous vision of the world very clearly in poems such as The Ecchoing Green, Laughing Song and Nurse's Song, all included in Songs of Innocence, but experience would soon teach him that this was not the world which humanity had made for itself and that there was a different world, a contrary state of the human soul and a contrary notion of man. In fact, even when he wrote his Songs of Innocence, faint misgivings already seemed to be stirring in the poet's breast. In The Little Black Boy, for example, he is aware that for some individuals life might well be clouded and "like a shady grove"; already in the first poem entitled The Chimney Sweeper, we find faint, implicit rebellion against imposed conformity and subservience, as we do also in the first Holy Thursday where, on closer inspection, the whole of Stanza 1 reveals a picture of regimentation: the children "walking two & two", the uniforms of "red & blue & green", the ironic reference to the beadle's "wands as white as snow". Raymond Lister claims that it is in this poem that we may see

signs of Blake's radicalism in the spectacle of childish innocence, the 'flowers of London Town', being ushered in companies into the great cathedral; innocence regimented by charity, however well-meaning, is a reminder that charity - official charity in particular - has its dangers. We may discern here embryonic thoughts that were later

87 Blake, Introduction from Songs of Innocence, op.cit., p.26.

88 Blake, op. cit., p. 33.

to give rise to such bitter sentiments as these from "Night the Seventh" of the later Vala or the Four Zoas :

Compell the poor to live upon a crust of bread, 89
by soft mild arts.

Little wonder, then, that the first Holy Thursday ends on a warning note:

Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.⁹⁰

The reproach in such lines is mild. In the Songs of Experience we hear the real voice of protest. In the world pictured here, the innocent, happy child has become the experienced and jaded adult, just as the piper, the poet, has become the knowing bard. These Songs reveal the harsh realities of life in England during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and Blake's acute awareness of them. In poem after poem in this group he attacks a materialistic society which exploits youth and innocence (The Chimney Sweeper), a society which is rigid and hypocritically moral (A Little Boy Lost) and which is responsible for the secret, illicit love of The Sick Rose:

O, Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love 91
Does thy life destroy.

This delicate short poem is so charged with meaning that it may be interpreted as a symbol of a whole world which is sick at the roots. The conventional and rational morality of this society which Blake attacks is careless of the human lot, especially the lot of the lower orders. The orthodox religion which it preaches is a distorted thing. It is not faith; it is fear and denial of life and love; it kills the creative spirit of the imagination; the "bed/Of crimson joy" has become a place of destruction. Religion has become a solemn, arid religiosity, mere priestcraft, turning

89 Raymond Lister, William Blake (London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1968), p. 18.

90 Blake, op. cit., p. 34.

91 Ibid., p. 48.

"the ecchoing green" into a graveyard of "tomb-stones where flowers should be". (The Garden of Love).⁹²

Besides the fact that he believed that eighteenth-century religion crushed all natural joy, it was chiefly the apathy of the Church and its support of vested interests against which Blake protested. He showed in The Human Abstract that those very virtues which were regarded by the pious as Christian really sprang from mental and material poverty, for with biting sardonic irony and irrefutable logic he pointed out that

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we. 93

What a contrary vision this is to that presented in The Divine Image, the first verse of which I have already quoted!

With all the forceful, thrusting rhythm which iambic tetrameter lines are able to give, he asks in Holy Thursday (from Songs of Experience):

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduc'd to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand? 94

Here he exposes and pillories the pharasaical kind of charity which the Church countenanced and practised, and he answers his own rhetorical question in the last stanza of this same poem, when he says:

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall,
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall. 95

The sun and the rain symbolise a land in the state that God meant it to be, a land which should share out to everyone Nature's great blessings with which it is endowed; instead, it is really "a land of poverty" and "it is eternal winter there".

92 Ibid., p. 51.

93 Ibid., p. 53.

94 Ibid., p. 43.

95 Idem.

The main purpose of this thesis is to show the remarkable variety in the voices of protest in English poetry, and, particularly, to note (as was stated in Chapter I) that, with the steady tread of time, protest in poetry marched along with increasingly forceful step. I venture to hope that the validity of this premise becomes clearer now, as we probe the depths of Blake's apparently simple lyrics. Bernard Blackstone says: "Blake's social conscience is seen clearly at work in the Songs of Experience. The evils of poverty, the exploitation of the poor, the incomprehension of the adult for the child, of the man for the insect, of man for man - all these aspects of a fallen society are pressed home in a series of consummate lyrics".⁹⁶

Blake did indeed "press home" his protest. William Gaunt writes of his "demonic defiance" in the "rebellious epigrams of The Proverbs of Hell",⁹⁷ and it is true that, beside the urgency of his tones, the voices of those earlier and milder protesters already discussed become mere murmurs or mumblings. Blake's protest is loud and clear. Its like had never before been heard in English poetry. Blackstone agrees. He says: "The burning intensity of Blake's vision was something new [my emphasis] in English poetry. Without expostulating, without screaming, he conveys the sense of indignation and judgment. And how vivid are his phrases!"⁹⁸

Blake's most brilliantly concentrated assault on the evils of his times is undoubtedly found in what is perhaps the best-known of his Songs of Experience, the poem which is simply and starkly entitled London. The vices he deplors are all present in this city which he once called "a human awful wonder of God",⁹⁹ and he boldly steps in to attack in the very first line, while his restrained, but nonetheless blasting, indignation mounts with each stanza to the last startling oxymoron.

96 Bernard Blackstone, English Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949), p. 39.

97 Gaunt, op. cit., p. 54.

98 Blackstone, loc. cit.

99 Kathleen Raine, William Blake (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1951), p. 8.

LONDON.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
 Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
 And mark in every face I meet,
 Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
 In every Infant's cry of fear,
 In every voice, in every ban,
 The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
 every black'ning Church appalls;
 And the hapless Soldier's sigh
 Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
 How the youthful Harlot's curse
 Blasts the new born Infant's tear,
 And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse. 100

This remarkable poem is both a reverie and a lament. It is written in monologue form. The speaker is detached, as the word, "wander", with its connotations of desultory walking suggests, and yet he is involved too, for there is certainly no indifference on his part in the last stanza. Much the same effect is thus achieved as in some of the poems of T.S. Eliot, as a later chapter will show.

The poem is a masterpiece of bold simplicity, coupled with tremendous charging of meaning behind almost every word. Consider the verb, "wander". It suggests, as I said above, a certain detachment, but it also connotes a familiarity with the scene and is more purposeful than "stroll", "roam", or "ramble" would be. The poet knows what he is going to see. Each street is "charter'd", an epithet which is deliberately ambiguous, for a charter implies the granting of certain rights, privileges and liberties. Here, however, we have an example of Blake's subtly biting irony, for such rights are also always conditional and limited in some way ("subjected to restrictions", to give a dictionary definition) and this is the meaning that Blake seems to desire us to read into the word. The Thames which "doth flow" (a word connoting freedom) is also "charter'd", and now, as we read the second line, the full force of the word strikes

home in devastating fashion: everywhere in this city order is imposed by restrictions, by institutions such as the State, the Law and the Church. The repetition of the word is very subtle. It engenders a feeling of the weary, dreary tedium which endless streets produce. At the same time one senses a note of anger and indignation in the wanderer's voice. This impression is reinforced by the heavy trochaic beat which the strongly-stressed first syllable of the word "charter'd" gives. In this way the speaker's tone is established from the outset. Furthermore, a "charter" is associated with some politico/economic situation or contract and immediately suggests materialism and the soulless mercantilism which was the ruling political theory in England at the time. With this brilliantly chosen word, repeated so that its import cannot be missed, Blake makes his first protest - against the mercenary attitude to life which he decried in all his Songs.

The speaker goes on to say that he can "mark" in every face he sees "marks of weakness, marks of woe". Again he uses deliberate repetition to achieve the desired effect. The verb "mark" in 1.3 is also ambivalent. It suggests, once more, a certain idle indifference in the roving eyes of the wanderer, and yet, "to mark" something can have an almost ominous ring. In 1.4 the noun "marks" means "blemishes" as well as "signs". Is the woe that he sees all around him not perhaps the result of the moral "weakness" of the city's inhabitants? If we read the sentence this way, it will link up with the thought implied behind "mind-forg'd manacles" in stanza 2. The cold, censorious morality of eighteenth-century England blighted all joy and energy, as Blake repeatedly points out in both Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience and also in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. "Exuberance is Beauty", he says, and "The cistern contains; the fountain overflows". (Proverbs of Hell).¹⁰¹ This was his creed, but nowhere did he see it practised.

To return to London - note how even the rhythm of 1.4. of Stanza 1 is made to emphasise the word "marks". It is placed at the beginning of the line and is heavily stressed,

101 Blake, op. cit., p. 97-98.

breaking the iambic tetrameter form used in the first three lines. In line 4 the poet has switched to trochaic tetrameter, the final trochee being catalectic, namely, the important word "woe" to which the whole verse has been leading up - the all-embracing and ultimate result of restrictions, prohibitions and general moral weakness. The poet repeatedly uses this rhythmic device, a reversal from iambic to trochaic metre, as his feeling and attitude fluctuates and as his protest grows more urgent.

In Stanza 2 the universality of the "woe" is stressed by means of repetition of the simple demonstrative adjective "every". It is repeated five times, and again the reader experiences and shares with the wanderer an infinite weariness. The combination of repetition, alliteration and assonance in this stanza, far from leading to any monotony in the diction itself, is emotionally evocative and stresses the melancholy felt by the poet/wanderer at what he sees. It gives an impression of rising indignation at the restraints imposed upon man and at the misery they bring. Life has become so regimented that it has lost its purpose, and all humanity, from infant stage to adulthood, has become helpless. The preponderance of words beginning with vowel-sounds gives a strangely hollow, empty ring and a harshness to the sound of this verse. In fact, in both the stanzas discussed thus far, Blake has achieved a remarkable aural effect. Although the diction is amazingly simple, when these verses are read aloud one gains an impression (chiefly, I think, through the movement of the verse and the dominant m- and w-consonants) of a kind of vague bustle, the incessant stirrings and mutterings of a city, interrupted by various cries and voices.

I cannot leave stanza 2 without remarking on the brilliant choice and placing of the word "ban", with its connotations of negation and possibly, of authoritarianism and state intervention. It is charged with meaning and drops with portentous reverberation at the end of the line, its sound (and meaning) re-echoing in "manacles" in the next line. Of the greatest significance, of course, is the fact that the manacles and the bans are "mind-forg'd" - imposed on man by man himself, by the insidious institutions which he has



himself established.

In Stanza 3 the objects of Blake's protest are more specifically stated:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

It is Church and State ("God & his Priest & King")¹⁰² that in some way or another either cause or countenance the "woe". They permit the exploitation of child labour and the frightful futility of war, against which twentieth-century poets, such as Owen and Sassoon, were to protest so vigorously (to be discussed in a later chapter). As far as I have been able to ascertain, by reading through numerous anthologies, this stanza is the first one in English poetry which raises a cry against the "hapless" state of the soldier. "Hapless" is well-chosen: it connotes a luckless, unhappy and unfortunate state, suggesting that the soldier has no say in, or control over, his destiny. He can only "sigh" helplessly at the shedding of his blood for the maintenance of the State. The imagery used in the last two lines of this stanza is striking and strange. While the meaning is not difficult to grasp (the "sigh" which "runs" in "blood"), the manner in which the image works is difficult to define. It certainly makes a great impact on the reader who cannot fail to see that the poet intends to stress the futility of war, for one pictures the soldier's blood running wastefully "down Palace walls".

Looked at as a whole, the imagery of this stanza gives a general impression of man against a blank wall: the "black'ning" wall of the Church, the blood-streaked wall of the State. Both these institutions are stony, cold, indifferent and immovable. The epithet "black'ning" is interesting: it is crammed with intellectual meaning, as well as having the literal meaning of smog-smear'd griminess, for it suggests that the Church is becoming evil, and perhaps that, as a moral force, it is dead. Note its reaction to the chimney-sweeper's plaint: it is merely "appalled". From this word, in its context, one might conclude that no action

102 Blake, The Chimney Sweeper, op. cit., p. 47.

against this evil is being taken by the Church. Shocked some churchmen may be, but their shock merely paralyses them into immobility and inaction. The Church may disapprove, but it allows the exploitation and cruelty to continue. The word "appalls" has another meaning too, "to place a pall on". A funeral pall is black; it is associated with death, and this word therefore links up with "black'ning" in the same line and reinforces the idea of inertia on the part of the Church, its criminal, deathly inactivity. There is, thus, great concentration of meaning in these two lines and a noteworthy unity of thought and imagery, such as the association of the blackness of soot with the blackness of death and the blackness of evil. It is interesting to note how "cry" and "sigh" (actions which both emanate from unhappiness and despair) are given prominence at the end of lines 1 and 3. Thus placed, they give a remarkable effect. When the verse is read aloud, the voice naturally rises a semi-tone or two to ejaculate the harsh-sounding, grating word "cry"; it drops, without conscious effort, in line 3, as it hisses out the predominant sibilant sounds, giving a drooping quality to the last four syllables and evoking an almost numbing melancholy. Again the child's woe and the adult's despair link up with the phrase, "mind-forg'd manacles" at the end of stanza 2. Both are actually required by Church and State in order to entrench themselves.

Note how the metre has changed in stanza 3. It is trochaic throughout, ending on a single stressed syllable in each of the four lines. The poet's anger and protest is mounting, and the vehemence of his feelings is dramatically expressed by the mixed metres of stanza 4. The confusion of rhythm and a disturbed movement in the verse underlines the confusion of values, the immoral morality, the unstable state of society and the poet's own turbulent and mutinous rebellion against it all.

In stanza 3 we found two complex images representing the man-conceived institutions, both of which act as agencies helping man to manacle himself. The final stanza has a third, similarly complex, image, representing another such institution : the Law, in particular, Marriage Laws.

Prostitution was rife in Blake's England and the poet blamed the many artificial restrictions surrounding marriage for this state of affairs. There were, for example, laws which forbade inter-church marriage, which prohibited the administration of the Holy Sacrament in various cases, or the re-marriage of divorced persons. There was the system of arranged marriages and the prudish attitude to sex, to name but a few of the usages and attitudes which the poet probably had in mind. These restraints resulted in love becoming either an illicit or a commercialised thing.

The final stanza begins with a slow movement in iambic tetrameter, and the centrally placed word "midnight" conjures up immediate associations with something dark, secret and illicit. The reader is reminded of the final lines of The Sick Rose:

And his dark secret love 103
Does thy life destroy.

Here too, the poet suggests that there is something unhealthy, stealthy and destructive about sexual love, or rather, that sexual love was so regarded by his contemporaries. The word "midnight" in stanza 4 of London, because it is associated with darkness, also links this stanza very subtly to the preceding one with all its references to blackness.

The texture of the verse in the final stanza grows rougher in each line as paradoxical words clash in a taut piling-up: "youthful" and "curse", "infant" and "blast", "plagues" with "marriage" and then the final powerful and striking "Marriage hearse". Lines 2 and 3 change to the more thrusting, cogent and vigorous trochaic beat as the wanderer hears the "youthful Harlot's curse", blasting "the new born Infant's tear". The lines are packed with meaning and capable of varied interpretation. Perhaps she literally curses the child because it is illegitimate, unwanted, the tragic result of her harlotry. But the "Harlot's curse" which "blasts" the babe could also be regarded as a medical image, suggesting the even more tragic passing on of venereal disease, the sins of the mother

destroying the health of the child. The latter interpretation seems to link up forcibly with the words "blights" and "plagues" in line 4, for promiscuity spreads its loathsome contagion throughout the family and the whole community, leading to fatal consequences, so that the marriage coach might well become the "Marriage hearse". All these evils, such as prostitution, illegitimacy, marriage restrictions, blight society and are like a spreading pestilence. They pervert love into lust and kill marriage which should be a union of delight. As here, so also in The Sick Rose and Ah! Sunflower we find the purest sort of symbolism: the imagery suggests the corruption or denial of life and joy by some hostile force.

Notice with what subtlety Blake speaks, not of the new-born infant's cry (which is symbolic of life, of the first sound made by the breathing baby), but of the "Infant's tear", which has more poignant connotations: sorrow, grief, distress and pain. One is immediately reminded of another of Blake's Songs, the brief Infant Sorrow, the theme of which is the new-born child's protest at its birth and at its first experience of constraint.

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
 Into the dangerous world I leapt:
 Helpless, naked, piping loud:
 Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
 Striving against my swadling bands.
 Bound and weary I thought best
 To sulk upon my mother's breast. 104

This simple poem, with its nursery-rhyme-like quality, also presents marriage as something which has been made sick and death-like. There is no joy for father, mother or child. The seminal idea in the second verse is clearly seen from the piling-up of words connoting restriction: "struggling", "striving", "swadling" and "bound". Constraint is forced upon man from infancy.

The theme of London is similar. Man is so "bound and weary" (like the infant), so constrained in a vice of social and institutional prohibitions that he can never

achieve full humanity. Nor can society with its sham charity and hypocritical piety or stony indifference ever be truly humane. Blake's condemnation of the whole vicious circle rings out "in a crescendo of volume, intensity and sonorousness, growing slower and more damning at each stage, until the final

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

with its strong alliteration, the explosive consonant clusters of 'blasts...blights...plagues' and, to cap 'Harlot's curse', the bitterly outflung 'Marriage hearse'.¹⁰⁵ The poet's righteous indignation is ready to burst; his protest is unequivocal.

I have devoted most of this chapter to London because in it is concentrated, I believe, Blake's rebellion against all the things that he hated most: pretence, self-seeking, injustice, cruelty, callousness, exploitation of the helpless, miserly charity, and all the repressive forces of the mind. "Blake believed that sin came from restrictive law, evil from bounding and fettering creeds".¹⁰⁶ I have also touched on one or two of his other Songs to illustrate how the same themes run through all these lyrics, especially through Songs of Experience. Over a century was to pass before English poetry would again produce a voice of such bold and consistent protest. "All through Blake's writings are scattered his belief in freedom, his hatred of oppression and of misery capable of being alleviated, his social and political outbursts", writes Allardyce Nicoll.¹⁰⁷ Margoliouth, too, stresses the unremitting quality of this poet's protest when he says: "But Blake throughout his life was to set principles above persons, his convictions about truth and reality above all orthodoxies new or old".¹⁰⁸

Because his voice was "the Voice of the Bard", Blake did not only protest, he did not merely satirise or mock, as the above two quotations make clear; he offered a remedy for

105 Alicia Ostriker, Vision and Verse in William Blake (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 68.

106 Allardyce Nicoll, William Blake and his Poetry (London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1922), p. 105.

107 Nicoll, op. cit., p. 59.

108 H.M. Margoliouth, William Blake (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 5.

the human ills which he deplored. His remedy lay in his positive commitments, for Blake was by no means merely negative in his rebellion, as rebels frequently are. He stated his values both explicitly and implicitly throughout his Songs. They were Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love. He made his most definite utterances of these values in The Divine Image (from Songs of Innocence), the second stanza of which I have already quoted. They were, in his opinion, the qualities most sorely needed by man, not discipline, restraint and blind obedience. He calls them "virtues of delight" in the first stanza of this poem, and claims that "All pray [to them] in their distress". They are the realities, but in the antithesis to this poem, The Human Abstract (from Songs of Experience), these divine impulses have become mere abstractions. The "Human Brain"¹⁰⁹ has distorted them and uses them as a cover for base or cowardly motives.

However, though mankind had departed from these ideals so infinitely precious to him, Blake, the Bard, had a vision of the "fallen, fallen light" being renewed in his Introduction to Songs of Experience. "The Holy Word", correctly interpreted, of course, might yet call back the "lapsed Soul" of Earth. Pope, by mocking man's folly, hoped to see re-established a world governed by Reason, Sense and Taste, as I tried to show in the previous chapter.

Reason the bias turns to good from ill,
And Nero reigns a Titus, if he will,

he wrote in his Essay on Man.¹¹⁰ Pope's protest was motivated, as even the imagery in the above two lines suggests, by his desire to see a Classical Age reborn; Blake envisaged a New Jerusalem. He prophesied that the earth would awake from sleep and

arise and seek
For her maker meek;
And the desert wild
Become a garden mild.

But he did more than just envisage a visionary better world; he pledged himself to fight for it. In the New

109 Blake, The Human Abstract, op. cit., p. 54.

110 Pope, op. cit., p. 194, ll. 197-198.

Jerusalem he wrote:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
 Till we have built Jerusalem
 In England's green and pleasant Land. ¹¹¹

Writing about Blake's The Chimney Sweeper, D.G. Gillham says that the poet is showing that the parents in the poem "occupy a 'heaven' that is very much of this world - a place where self-satisfied and insensitive people may make themselves secure and be comfortable". ¹¹² The morally wrong qualities referred to in this sentence are indeed the main targets of attack by Blake in the poems discussed in this chapter: complacency, hypocrisy, self-interest, insensitivity and lack of humanity. They were the things which Blake, social and moral critic, censured. Blake, the Bard, had a vision of a world, a New Jerusalem, from which these and other evils would be expunged.

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111 Blake, The New Jerusalem, The Penguin Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 247.

112 D.G. Gillham, Blake's Contrary States (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 45.

CHAPTER VI

NINETEENTH-CENTURY PROTEST : THE ROMANTICS AND THE VICTORIANS

In the previous chapter William Blake was referred to as a forerunner of the so-called Romantic movement. When he died on 12 August, 1827, this new movement was well in its stride. Oddly enough, although he is generally regarded as a forerunner, Blake actually outlived several of the giants amongst the Romantic poets, for Lord Byron died in 1824 and Percy Bysshe Shelley, though younger than Byron, two years earlier. John Keats, the last-born of the well-known Romantics (1795), was the first to die, in 1821. Coleridge's life was to last a decade longer than Byron's, and Wordsworth, first-born of the Romantics, reached octogenarian status, living until 1850, although both he and Coleridge, traditionally regarded as the innovators of this new movement, were poetically "dead" by 1830, a mere three years after William Blake died. The Songs of Experience were published in 1794. By this time Wordsworth and Coleridge were young men in their twenties, and Blake was still to write or publish many hundreds of lines of his prophetic books, including Vala or the Four Zoas (1795-1804), Milton (1804-1808) and Jerusalem (completed in 1820). So, although he belonged chronologically to a generation earlier than the Romantics, he did write contemporaneously with them.

Those who dislike dates may find the above paragraph irksome. The dates have been given to show that, chronologically, no great gap exists between the poetry dealt with in Chapter V and that which will be discussed in the present chapter. Yet, traditionally, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats (to mention only the major poets of the early nineteenth century) have always been classified under the label "Romantic", and so we shall pass now, from Blake, to examine their work in our search for the voice of protest in English poetry.

Perhaps I should first define what I mean by "Romantic" poetry. I am inclined to agree with Graham Hough who says: "The word 'romantic' has so many meanings, and they are so ill

distinguished from each other that one is sometimes tempted to feel that it is hardly worth using it at all".¹¹³ He goes on to explain that he uses this word "to describe the imaginative literature of the early part of the last century".¹¹⁴ He therefore uses it chronologically, although this label is (he points out) more than chronological; it does more than point to a particular group of writers, for it connotes something about their work which had certain things in common, despite their very dissimilar life-histories and personal characters. He goes on:

The major poetry of this period is all written under the influence of the new secular, liberal conception of man and his destiny that had sprung from the French Revolution and the French eighteenth-century thought that had preceded it. I avoid saying inspired by the French Revolution, for that would suggest that the poetry is predominantly political and social, which it is not: and it would fail to suggest what is certainly true, that a reaction against the revolutionary ideal is almost as important as the revolutionary ideal itself. Secondly, the scepticism /my emphasis/ about existing society engendered by the revolutionary ferment impels the more imaginative minds into a new communion with nature. When the world of man is harsh and repugnant, in need of violent reform, yet so often, it appears, irreformable, the poet is apt to seek consolation /my emphasis/ in the world of nature which does not need reforming.¹¹⁵

I have quoted Hough at length because, firstly, I use the term "Romantic" in the same way as he does, and, secondly, because what he says in the passage given above probably accounts to a large extent for the fact that the search for poems of protest in this period has proved to be rather unrewarding. Scepticism and any kind of escapism can rarely become the bellows to fan the spark of dissatisfaction or indignation into flames of passionate protest.

While one might agree with Hough that these Romantic poets tended to seek "a new communion with nature", it would not be accurate to say that they did not still believe, despite their revolt against Augustan orthodoxy in poetics, that "the proper study of mankind is man". They did; but

113 Graham Hough, The Romantic Poets (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1953), p. 9.

114 Idem.

115 Idem.

in their poetry the emphasis seemed to shift from social man to the individual man. Pope saw man chiefly in the setting of court, country mansion, club and drawing-room; Blake saw man in relation to his fellow-men and to Law, State and Church; the Romantic poet saw man more often in relation to the natural universe of which he forms a part.

Considering the importance of the whole Romantic movement, its impact on English literature and the volume of poetry written in this era, it is strange that one should be able to find only very little of the kind of poetic protest with which this study is concerned. The movement was certainly a radical and reactionary one and it was, furthermore, not confined within the coast-lines of Britain, for it was a spontaneous international revolt against the established literary traditions based on Classicism and Reason, coinciding with a revolutionary spirit in many aspects of life. Its scope was wide, and some of its English poetic leaders were at first supporters of and sympathisers with the American and French Revolutions which erupted towards the end of the eighteenth century. One might thus quite reasonably have expected to hear the voice of protest ringing loudly and clearly in the poetry of England in these troubled times; yet this is not so. Admittedly, there was much revolutionary writing, but it seems to have been confined mainly to prose and to have been largely of a political nature only.

Momentous events were taking place both in England and in almost all of Europe in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, yet, in their verse (although not always in their actions, as, for example, in the case of Lord Byron) the Romantic poets seemed to stand aside, to be either mere onlookers, or to turn away from the world, to seek consolation in nature (as Hough has said), or to turn in upon themselves. There is a new subjectivism in most of their poetry, and the tendency to self-absorption found in so many Romantics seems to cause their protest to pale beside that of Blake. Crane Brinton claims that "almost to a man, the English romanticists were actively interested in politics" and that "it is seldom...that a whole generation devotes

itself to politics as fervently as did that of 1800 in England".¹¹⁶ Although the validity of this statement must be granted, many of the poems written during the Romantic period seem to lack the fire of the true protester and to be often too reflective and speculative to kindle indignation in the reader. They are frequently the expression of political yearnings or stirrings of uneasiness rather than the clarion call of protest. True, we have Byron's Don Juan, which may be regarded as a satirical panorama of the ruling classes of his time, and many fine lines in praise of liberty and implicitly condemning injustice are scattered about this poem. The fact that these implied criticisms are so lightly strewn makes it difficult to select a passage of any suitable length as an example of a poem, or even a stanza, of protest.

High claims for Byron as a satirist are made by Kenneth Hopkins. He writes: "The real bent and greatness of Byron was in satire, and he was (although very different ¹¹⁷ from his predecessors) the last great English verse satirist". The work which first made this poet famous, almost overnight, was Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, published in March, 1812. It was the first characteristic example of his genius. The hero, who wanders off to seek adventure in foreign lands, is obviously wearied with the trivialities of fashionable life and in many of the verses the poet is quite patently satirising the high society life of the age. Some six years later Byron began to write, and in 1819 began to publish, the long poem, Don Juan. Using a finely balanced mingling of wit, satire, invective, invention and pure lyric and Romantic poetry, he again exposes many of the follies of the fashionable life of the early nineteenth century.

In Canto 13, where the poet is describing one of Don Juan's amours, with the Lady Adeline Amundville, he makes repeated reference to the trivial interests and occupations of the smart social set. Despite the dissimilarity in style, there is a flavour of Pope's mockery in Byron's ridiculing of social gossip and the amorous intrigues (real or

116 Crane Brinton, Political Ideas of the English Romanticists (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 4.

117 Hopkins, op. cit., p. 343.

imagined) which aroused it, of feminine jealousies and of male susceptibility to female charms:

Sweet Adeline, amidst the gay world's hum
Was the Queen-Bee, the glass of all that's fair;
Whose charms made all men speak, and women dumb.
The last's a miracle, and such was reckon'd,
And since that time there has not been a second.¹¹⁸

The whole poem, in fact, is concerned largely with "the gay world's hum", and amidst all the busy little bees of the social whirl, Adeline was, in this particular hive, "the Queen-Bee". The imagery here is ironic in its context, for the members of Adeline's social set are really drones. They buzz around without the worker-bees' purposive activities. There is further mocking banter in the poet's description of her effect on her set being a unique miracle. Stanza XIV continues in the same chaffing vein:

Chaste was she to detraction's desperation,
And wedded unto one she had loved well -¹¹⁹

The keenest satire lies, of course, in the phrase "to detractions's desperation", for it suggests, with wit and with all the punch of the alliterated d-sounds, that gossip-mongers are indefatigable in their efforts to ruin reputations.

Lady Adeline's husband, Lord Henry, features in stanzas XIV - XIX and the poet's mockery of his pose of imperturbability, his "hauteur", his prejudice and lack of judgment cannot be missed. Lord Henry is a polite caricature of the ruling classes, "A man known in the councils of the nation" (stanza XIV). In the subsequent stanzas of the canto which describe Don Juan's growing friendship with this nobleman and his wife, ample satirical reference is made to the idle and empty political, economic and social life of London, to foolish pride of position, to the petty diversions in which the rich engaged, to the "parade" and "coquetry", the "debates not very wise or witty" and to all the extravagant living which invariably ended for tradesmen in "long bills and longer faces" at the end of the London season. Byron sums up the vacuity of the smart set's life in two lines in

118 George Gordon, Lord Byron, Don Juan (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., no date), p. 410, stanza XIII.

119 Idem.

stanza XCV:

Society is now one polish'd horde,
Formed of two mighty tribes, the BORES and BORED. ¹²⁰

Although these two lines smack so much of Alexander Pope that a reader might be forgiven for thinking that they have been taken from The Dunciad, they nevertheless lack, in some indefinable way, something of the Popeian thrust. Don Juan never makes one feel that its author's purpose was "to lash the age", as the poet of The Rape of the Lock claimed that he set out partly to do. (see Ch. IV) There is never really any defiant thunder in Byron's verse, and any protest that there might have been is muffled under the sang-froid and charm of the man-about-town. There is something too enchanting and sprawling about Don Juan for it to be regarded as a serious poem of protest. The passages given above have been quoted largely to serve as a foil to the protest of Pope and Blake, for example. They also show that satire alone, even in the hands of a master of this poetic genre, is not necessarily protest, despite all that has been said about its potency for this purpose. Byron seems to have had the potential for being one of the rebels in English poetry; perhaps it was only what Kenneth Hopkins refers to as "his brief and crowded life" and his "troubled and varied personal life" ¹²¹ which prevented him from playing such a role.

So, Byron must be dismissed for our purposes, and with him also John Keats; although one does find here and there in the latter's poetry a tone of dissatisfaction with the life around him. In Ode to a Nightingale he does complain of "The weariness, the fever and the fret" ¹²² of this world, but, though he has pity for others, he also reveals a strong streak of self-pity at times, and this, no doubt, precludes him from being a strong protester. He was too much of a sensuous mystic and he died too young, when his soul was still "in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain", to quote his own words about himself in his Preface to Endymion.

120 Ibid., p. 430.

121 Hopkins, op. cit., pp. 343 and 346.

122 John Keats, Ode to a Nightingale, The Penguin Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 293.

Of the three important short-lived Romantic poets, Byron, Keats and Shelley, it is really Shelley's work that yields the most fruitful crop of protest-poetry, despite Matthew Arnold's famous definition of him as "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain". In 1818 Shelley published The Revolt of Islam, a revised and re-issued version of an earlier poem, Laon and Cythna. The poem is concerned allegorically with the miserable condition of the English working-classes of the time and could thus have been an important poem of social protest. The desire to reform seems to have been strong in Shelley, as it must be in every voice of protest, but again the Romantic quality in his personal make-up and in his thought and style dilutes the force of the censure or condemnation. Hugh Walker, discussing satire in the nineteenth century, claims that, "The spirit of romance is not friendly to satire".¹²³ Perhaps it would be equally true to say that the romantic spirit is not congenial to protest either. Kenneth Hopkins refers to Shelley's failure as a reformer and gives as "the true reason" this: "He championed people who could scarcely read in verses by no means easy reading even for the educated".¹²⁴ The Revolt of Islam, beautiful though it is, is too long and too philosophical, so that it makes very little impact as protest.

However, amongst Shelley's Poems written in 1819 there are three poems which surely deserve to be mentioned as poetry of protest and which must have made some impact at the time, even if their political interest (and protest) is, after the passage of a century and a half, somewhat lost upon us. The three poems are: Lines written during the Castlereagh Administration, Song to the Men of England and Sonnet: England in 1819. There is also the longer polemical The Mask of Anarchy, written on the occasion (as the subtitle explains) of the massacre at Manchester. It has ninety-one quatrains and is a political attack on Castlereagh, Sidmouth and other politicians of the time, including also the King, all of whom Shelley held responsible for this political event. He pictures them as riding in procession, a "ghastly masquerade",

123 Walker, op. cit., p. 279.

124 Hopkins, op. cit., p. 351.

which is "tearing up, and trampling down" on its way and bringing about "the triumph of Anarchy"¹²⁵ by its cruel and evil administration. The three shorter poems mentioned are written in much the same vein. The poem, Lines written during the Castlereagh Administration, begins on a grisly and sombre note which is given force by means of alliteration and powerful o-vowel sounds:

Corpses are cold in the tomb;
Stones on the pavement are dumb;
Abortions are dead in the womb,
And their mothers look pale - like the white shore
Of Albion, free no more. 126

The two falling dactyllic feet of the first two lines and the single stressed final syllable give a heavy tread and an ominous quality to the verse. A piling-up of words connoting cold and pallor, death and darkness, is aptly used to describe the state of England when freedom has died. Her liberty, Shelley says in the next stanza, has been "smitten to death". The third stanza is plainly vituperative and the poet's attack on the tyrannous rule under which the "men of England" suffer is patent in his accusing appellation for Castlereagh, "thou Oppressor!"¹²⁷ In the final stanza his protest against despotism becomes also a fierce prediction of doom for the country:

Aye, marry thy ghastly wife!
Let Fear and Disquiet and Strife
Spread the couch in the Chamber of Life!
Marry Ruin, thou Tyrant! and God be thy guide 128
To the bed of thy bride!

In Song to the Men of England the poet sounds a clear call to Britons to rise against tyranny. The poem is not really great poetry, but it is powerful oratory and inflammatory exhortation. The first three verses are loaded with agrarian and domestic imagery. It is concrete and would have strong visual and intellectual appeal for the English yeoman and working-classes to whom the poem is addressed:

125 Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Mask of Anarchy, Shelley's Poetical Works II, ed. H.B. Forman (London: Reeves & Turner, 1882), p. 33.

126 Shelley, Lines written during the Castlereagh Administration, op. cit., p. 185.

127 Idem.

128 Ibid., p. 186.

Men of England, wherefore plough
 For the lords who lay ye low?
 Wherefore weave with toil and care
 The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,
 From the cradle to the grave,
 Those ungrateful drones who would
 Drain your sweat - nay, drink your blood?

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
 Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
 That the stingless drones may spoil 129
 The forced produce of your toil?

The trochaic beat, each line ending again on a stressed monosyllabic word with powerful denotations and connotations, gives a rousing, homiletic quality to the exhortation. Although the language abounds in metaphor, it is simple and clear enough to satisfy Wordsworth's demand for the language of ordinary men in poetry. "Shelley, far more than Wordsworth despite theory and prefaces, is content to use only the language of the day", say Grierson and Smith.¹³⁰

The poet's own "sting" in the above verses lies particularly in his application of the epithet "stingless" to the "drones" whom he is attacking. By stressing their weakness, he hopes to belittle them and at the same time to rouse his hearers to punitive action. The drones are "ungrateful" too, but, worst of all, they are "destructive", for like parasites they "drain" and "drink" and "spoil". Stanza 5 puts the whole position very clearly in four antithetical statements:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
 The wealth ye find, another keeps;
 The robes ye weave, another wears;
 The arms ye forge, another bears. 131

The language and the imagery of everyday (mainly rustic) domestic life could not be more pellucid. The metre has changed meaningfully and the first two feet of each line are iambic in this verse. This metric device suits the antithetical quality of the lines to perfection, for it requires a kind of double caesura, which focuses

129 Shelley, Song to the Men of England, op. cit., p. 186.

130 Herbert J.C.Grierson & J.C.Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 354.

131 Shelley, op. cit., p. 187.

attention firmly on the statements.

The metre changes once more in stanza 6, where the poet, using an identical pattern of imagery, lists his injunctions to those he is exhorting. Each line begins with two stressed monosyllabic words, after which the rest of the line seems to hurry along vigorously, and the whole stanza constitutes a perfect contrast of conditions to those pertaining in stanza 5:

Sow seed,- but let no tyrant reap;
Find wealth,- let no imposter heap;
Weave robes,- let not the idle wear;
Forge arms,- in your defence to bear.

In stanzas 7 and 8 the poet's tone changes completely. The hortative note has gone. He now uses a different stratagem in his rhetoric: derogation, instead of exhortation. He speaks to the men of England as if they were spineless rats, and with blistering sarcasm bids them:

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells.

In scathing tones he reminds them that

In halls ye deck another dwells.

The contrast between the "cellars" and the "halls", the hovels of the poor and the mansions of the rich, is stressed by the verbs "shrink" (which is powerfully emotive with its implications of poverty, deficiency and timidity) and "dwells" (which has connotations of wealth, spaciousness and security). He dares his hearers to go on as they are doing, because if they continue to put up with the existing state of affairs, they will "weave [their own] winding-sheet".

till fair
England be your sepulchre. ¹³²

The poem ends on this grimly foreboding and forbidding note.

Sonnet: England in 1819 embodies another powerful political protest against the regime of the time. The ruling monarch, George, the Third, is described in most derogatory terms as

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,-

while other administrative and governmental leaders, "princes" and "rulers", the poet calls "the dregs of their dull race", and "mud from a muddy spring". They are, he says, men

Who neither see, nor feel, nor know
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,-

All institutions are attacked in turn - State, army, Church and Parliament, or "Senate", as he calls it. Again the protest is chiefly that the government is parasitic and useless. Where before, in the *Castlereagh* poem, he labelled the rulers as "drones", here he calls them "leeches", a much more pejorative word, but then the whole tone of this sonnet is angrier and more abusive than the other Shelleyan poems discussed previously. The poet's protest is directed not only against the rulers, but also against the ruled. The whole nation is accused of weakness: the "princes" are "mud from a muddy spring"; they are "the dregs" from a "dull race", and England is a "fainting country"; her rulers sap her strength without meeting any resistance on the part of the people, as is implied in the line, "Till they drop...without a blow". In Song to the Men of England Shelley predicted that England would be their "sepulchre", if the national lethargy persisted; in this poem he claims that all her institutions "are graves". The picture he gives of the state of the country is grim, but fortunately the poet ends the sonnet on a more cheerful note, for he expresses the hope that from these "graves"

a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.¹³³

These poems of Shelley's are of particular interest within the frame of reference of this study because of the fact that they are so definitely political protest and, therefore, rather different from any others hitherto discussed. Poems dealt with in previous chapters have embodied protest against hypocrisy, follies, abuses and evils in Church, society and State; Shelley's protest is more specific, and certainly bolder.

133 Shelley, Sonnet: England in 1819, op. cit., p. 187.
(For all quotations in this, and preceding, para.).

William Wordsworth shared Shelley's dissatisfaction with the general state of affairs in England in the second and early third decade of the century. Where the latter poet saw the country as a "sepulchre", the former, as we shall see presently, visualised it as a stagnating morass. Although, of course, chronologically Wordsworth comes first amongst the Romantic poets and is, indeed, generally accepted (with Coleridge) as the leader of this movement, I have deliberately reversed the chronological order, and his poems of protest are being dealt with last in this chapter.

Gillham, comparing a certain aspect in the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth and speaking of the latter's search for truth in his prose discourses on poetry, has this to say: "Perhaps this itch in Wordsworth to set [the truth] down philosophically is due to the fact that he was so much less capable than a man like Blake of handling theories and abstractions".¹³⁴ He was, it seems, also "less capable" of handling "protest". Despite his stature as a poet, despite his well-known rebellion as far as poetic style and diction were concerned, despite his early sympathies with the French Revolution, and despite the volume of poetry he produced, he was not a great poetic protester. For this reason, chiefly, Wordsworth brings up the rear in this chapter. Two of his sonnets, however, seem to qualify very legitimately for inclusion amongst our voices of protest. They reveal his dissatisfaction with the state of general stagnation in his country, and are directed against a prevalent evil, materialism, to which he felt mankind in general and his compatriots in particular had succumbed. Thereby mankind was denying the very values which the poet himself held dear.

A great deal has been written about Wordsworth and his poetic development, and he has frequently been accused by his critics of too much preoccupation with and manipulation of his personal feelings. Malcolm Elwin, in the rather harsh picture which he gives of Wordsworth in his study of him and Coleridge, speaks of his "egotistical detachment", his "very uncouthness".¹³⁵ He also alludes to his "narrowness

134 Gillham, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

135 Malcolm Elwin, *The First Romantics* (London: Macdonald & Co., Ltd., 1947), p. 176.

of life and habit of self-absorption".¹³⁶ I remarked earlier that scepticism and escapism are hardly likely to produce poetry of protest; nor will self-absorption. Ardour is a prerequisite of the protester, and if Wordsworth did, in fact, later become too much like "a great lonely ram [stalking] across his moorlands", as F.L. Lucas has put it,¹³⁷ there is no doubt about the ardour of the young Wordsworth. His early enthusiasm for the revolutionary ideals have been embalmed for eternity in his well-known utterance in The French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,¹³⁸
But to be young was very heaven.

There is, indeed, no lack of fervent feeling here; but political disillusionment was soon to follow. Wordsworth discovered, as so many adherents to revolutionary causes have discovered, that what begins as a movement of liberation frequently ends in a despotism as dictatorial and unbending as the regime it replaced. However, in 1802 Wordsworth visited France for personal reasons, and on this journey his political interests, and with them, his ardour, revived. In that year and the next, he wrote some of his best-known sonnets, and it is in one or two of these that one detects a note of protest. They will, therefore be examined closely in the sequel.

First it might be well to recall briefly the political and historical events in Wordsworth's world of 1802-1803. Napoleon had been declared Consul for life in August 1802, and the Peace of Amiens, so patently a mere truce and breathing-space for both warring countries, had come and gone. A French attack on England was imminent. To the disillusioned political idealism which Wordsworth was already experiencing in the face of Bonaparte's seizure of despotic powers, there was now added a natural anxiety for his country and a patriotism which was obviously beginning to stir even as he

136 Ibid., p. 181

137 F.L. Lucas, Introduction to Wordsworth, Fifteen Poets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 226.

138 William Wordsworth, The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind (Text of 1805), ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), Book X, p. 196.

journeyed to France. On his way there he composed what is perhaps the most famous of his sonnets, the much anthologised Upon Westminster Bridge. This poem reveals unmistakable stirrings of love of country when the poet says of London:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty: 139

However, it is not with Wordsworth's patriotism that we are dealing in this study, but with his protest. The above sonnet has been mentioned to show that the poet was at this stage beginning to give closer attention to his own country and to take stock of its moral and social state. Some of the sonnets which he produced in that year and the next indicate his apprehension at what he saw. He was concerned, chiefly, about the materialism and worldliness which he felt to be rampant in England at that time. The Industrial Revolution was already four or five decades old; Blake's "Satanic mills" belched their smoke unceasingly over the land; men massed together in ever increasing numbers in rapidly growing cities and towns; commercialism held men's minds in thrall and, as Crane Brinton puts it, "in an urban 140 civilisation rural life had become an anomaly or a distraction".

It was this state of affairs, this drifting of man away from the simplicity and serenity of rustic life, the stagnant worldliness which ensued and the consequent blindness to the beauties of nature which Wordsworth attacked in his sonnets, To Milton and The World. Of all the poetry of the Romantic period which I have read, these two sonnets seem to me to contain most clearly and unequivocally a voice of protest against Man's departure from the poet's values. In both sonnets he makes it quite clear that all is not well from a moral point of view in the England of his day, and that the values obtaining there are not those to which he can subscribe. In another sonnet of the same period, England, 1802, he lists these false values: they are "Rapine, avarice, expense", and he adds reprovingly, like a prophet of old, "these we adore". He complains that "now our life is only drest/ For show", and

139 Wordsworth, Sonnet composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802, Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p.240, ll. 1-3.

140 Brinton, op. cit., p. 2.

he is "opprest", he says, by the knowledge that

We must run glittering like a brook
In the open sunshine, or we are unblest. 141

The kind of satirical gibe that we have in these two lines is actually rare in Wordsworth, but the imagery he has used here is the theme of this sonnet and also that of the two which I propose to examine more fully in due course. In England, 1802 the poet goes on to deplore the loss of "The homely beauty of the good old cause", and the lack of "peace", "fearful innocence" and "pure religion breathing household laws". The tone of this sonnet is like a lament for the passing away of things which the poet holds dear. The speaker is bewildered, does not know which way to look "for comfort" and so, his protest here (if we may call it that) is rather hesitant and uncertain, too subjective to be a vehement plea for reformation.

In To Milton, however, Wordsworth steps more boldly into the attack. He has already in the sonnet, Great Men have been among us, deplored the fact that England no longer has hands to pen or tongues to utter wisdom. Now he addresses one of those earlier sages and in simple words, but ringing, fervent tones, he cries:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: 142

He goes on to explain what has motivated his appeal to Milton's shade and, in so doing, registers his protest against the fact that his country has sunk into a swamp of decadence. The mental and moral torpor in which he sees her engulfed is expressed uncomprisingly in line 2. He uses an image which has visual, olfactory and kinesthetic sensory meaning. He says that,

she is a fen
Of stagnant waters:

The sight of pollution, the smell of decay, the slimy feel of standing water, and the malodorous dampness it exudes are all concentrated in this simple, but effective, metaphor.

141 Wordsworth, England, 1802 (i), The Oxford Book of English Verse, op. cit., p. 600.

142 Wordsworth, England, 1802 (ii), loc. cit. This sonnet is frequently anthologised under the title, To Milton.

Perhaps it does not have the concentration of meaning of Blake's imagery, or the powerful impact of that which T.S. Eliot was later to use, but it expresses adequately what the poet wishes to say and reveals his feelings of opposition and disgust. The short Old English word "fen" drops emphatically with a reverberation almost of doom at the end of the line before it runs on into the qualifying phrase of the next line. This phrase reinforces the idea of inertia, sluggishness and "the lethargy of custom", to use Coleridge's phrase from Biographia Literaria (Chap.XIV) when he was explaining Wordsworth's aims in their new poetry. The simple diction and the plain statements used in the three lines already quoted evince clearly the poet's apprehension and conviction.

He now goes on to assert that degeneracy has infected every aspect of English life: religion, military pre-eminence, literature and learning, the domestic life of both humble home and aristocratic mansion. In fact, the whole ethos of a nation has become debased. He uses all the visual clarity and intellectual meaning which metonymy is able to provide:

Altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness.

The nouns used in the first two lines of the above quotation are simple and homely, but, listed as they are, they have a comprehensive force, encompassing every facet of the national life with remarkable precision, while the last phrase of the second line embodies implicitly some of the spiritual values to which the poet is committed: time-hallowed nobility, chivalry, courage, gracious living and contentment. It is the disappearance of "heroic wealth" which he deplores, just as in England, 1802 (i) he bewails the reign of, the "idolatry" of, "rapine", avarice, expense". (Students of the political ideas of the English Romanticists may be interested to mark the emergence here of Wordsworth, the Tory, the beginnings of the change in the poet's political affiliation which was much later to gain for him Browning's rebuke in The Lost Leader.)

It is clear from line 4 of To Milton that Wordsworth is no radical, condemning inherited position or well-used riches. He protests only against the worship of Mammon and the vitiating pursuit of wealth, which results in

the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world, ¹⁴³

about which he complains in Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey. Man has become egotistic and materialistic: "We are selfish men", the speaker goes on to say in his address to Milton, and just as Blake urged the Earth to "return again" in his Introduction to Songs of Experience, so Wordsworth too prays that another Milton may "raise us up" and prevail upon Englishmen to practise again the manners and virtues that once characterised the nation. He believes that they will then be granted, in return, the "inward happiness" that was once their heritage, the freedom and prestige they once enjoyed. The word in these lines which most firmly suggests the poet's rebuke is "forfeited", because of its connotations of wilful surrender; and this idea, as well as his censure of his country's folly, is further entrenched in the metaphor "dower", because of its implications of titular rights, riches and talents legally and deservedly bestowed.

In the sestet of the sonnet under discussion, Wordsworth turns more specifically to the subject of his opening apostrophe, and the tone of protest becomes rather lost in the eulogy to Milton; not entirely, though, for the virtues which he extols in Milton in the final six lines are, in fact, those which he now finds wanting in his own contemporaries: steadfastness, uprightness, "cheerful godliness", humility and selflessness. These, obviously, are Wordsworth's values and they link up quite clearly with those which he listed more explicitly in England, 1802 (i).

The rank materialism and grasping mercantilism of nineteenth-century England are even more fervently attacked in another well-known sonnet written at about the same time:

The world is too much with us; late and soon
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

143 Wordsworth, Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey..., Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 236, ll. 26-27.

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. - Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; 144
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.

The poet's protest is disclosed in the uncompromising, bluntly brief statement with which the sonnet opens. It is a patent attack on worldliness and the tone is palpably reprimanding. The poet accuses his generation of deliberately destroying something valuable, for he says we "lay waste our powers". The verb he uses here is, in fact, even more strongly denunciatory than the word "forfeit" which he employed in the previous sonnet discussed, for it connotes widespread and intentional destruction, an act of even greater folly than mere forfeiture.

In this sonnet we see very distinctly the Romantic concern with man in relation to the natural universe of which he is a part, a concern to which reference was made earlier. Wordsworth's disquietude arises from the fact that, because man is wholly occupied with "getting and spending" (both mercenary pursuits), he is "out of tune" with the world of nature, sees none of its beauty, is moved by neither its sights nor its sounds. In a remarkable way, without any explicit statement at all, the sonneteer manages to suggest in these lines the vastness of the natural universe and the littleness of man. He is an emmet-like figure, forever busy, "late and soon", with his petty and mundane activities. He is a discordant note in the great symphony of the creation. "We have given our hearts away", the poet says, and this statement is followed by the oxymoron, "a sordid boon". In this phrase lies the poet's scornful accusation and implicit protest. Man has thrown away the divine gift of imagination and sensitivity, a gift which should have been a blessing. Instead, it has been wasted on base and ignoble material things. Consequently the beauty of sea and moon and wind makes no appeal to man's blunted perceptions. It was, of

144 Wordsworth, The World is too much with us, Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 239.

course, against this same lack of imagination, lack of sensitivity, that William Blake protested throughout his poetry. (see Chapter V)

In true sonnet tradition, Wordsworth turns, in the sestet of his sonnet, from the general to the particular, from the universal to the personal. He is deeply moved, as the ejaculation, "Great God!" reveals, and claims that he would rather be a pagan, "suckled in a creed outworn", living in a primitive closeness to nature than to be (he implies) so-called civilised nineteenth-century man. The "creed outworn" is at least not torpid and stagnant: Proteus rises from the sea and Triton blows his horn, both actions being signs of vibrant life. The poet would then be "less forlorn" and be able to live a more richly imaginative and spiritually satisfying life.

This is always the burden of Wordsworth's protest: dissatisfaction with the prevailing spirit of worldliness and materialism in Georgian England which had a blunting effect on man's spirit. It is explicit in these two sonnets (which is the reason why they were selected for close examination); it stirs and trembles beneath much of his other poetry. The difference between his protest and that of Blake should be immediately obvious: the later William was more of a moralist and philosopher than a rebel, reflective and speculative rather than defiantly outspoken or biting satirical, as was the earlier William. Malcolm Elwin puts it this way: Wordsworth's "sensitive resentment of injustice engendered the instincts of a rebel [my emphasis]. But the spirit of rebellion inspired in him no fiery outbursts..." He was "not the man to set his standard of revolt in the market-place.." ¹⁴⁵ Blake, on the other hand, nailed his colours firmly to the mast.

It should also be obvious that no use has been made at all of any satire in the two sonnets which have just been discussed in detail. Satire, as I pointed out before, is the protesting poet's most powerful weapon. Every poet discussed in preceding chapters has used it in one way or another with great effect. There is no satire in To Milton or The World. This statement may be challenged, for, as

145 Elwin, op. cit., p. 176.

Arthur Pollard says, "the variety of satire is almost infinite".¹⁴⁶ He also claims that "Satire is always acutely conscious of the difference between what things are and what they ought to be".¹⁴⁷ There is, one must grant, no doubt about Wordsworth's awareness of this difference in the sonnets already discussed, and perhaps his outburst in the sestet of The World might well be regarded as satirical. Wordsworth's assertion of his preference for the existence of "A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" to that of contemporary man is certainly denigrating to man. Pollard claims that "Satire does not exalt; it deflates",¹⁴⁸ and the poet's intent here might thus be regarded as satirical. Even if one concedes that, it has to be admitted that Wordsworth's satire does not have either a rapier- or a bludgeon-like quality. Perhaps this is because Wordsworth does not focus the satire precisely enough on his object and includes himself amongst the worldly ones, for he says, "The world is too much with us". This gives a reflective quality to his poem. Indeed, comparatively speaking, very little sharp satire seems to have been used at all by early nineteenth-century poets, if one takes into account the considerable amount of poetry written during this period.

Perhaps the picture which F.L. Lucas gives of Wordsworth in his essay "William Wordsworth" validates the classification of this poet as only a rather mild protester. The first part of the quotation from Lucas might seem to refute such a label for this poet, because the essayist claims that Wordsworth is still today "a living voice, crying in the wilderness its prophetic protest, not only against the unhealthiness of all over-civilization, but also against the drab brutality of the machine-world and of the mass-state".¹⁴⁹ This is true. But then Lucas continues (and this seems to be important): "He goes his own way, this grey, homespun man, who would wear his woollen stockings even to court, under his silk ones: he goes on his own way, but he does not lose it".¹⁵⁰

146 Arthur Pollard, Satire (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1970), p. 4.

147 Ibid., p. 3.

148 Ibid., p. 7.

149 F.L. Lucas, "William Wordsworth", Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 223.

150 Ibid., p. 225.

If we accept the above portrait of the poet, it would explain why his protest seems so colourless in comparison with that of Blake and of later poets whose work I have yet to discuss. "He goes his own way, this grey, homespun man". This picture suggests a moralist perhaps, or maybe a philosopher, certainly a rather solitary, contemplative, unworldly man. But the true protester must do more than go his own way. If his protest is to make a strongly-felt impact, he must adopt a more positive role and arouse his readers into sharing his own indignation by the very vehemence of his own feelings.

.....

What the Romantics in general, and Wordsworth in particular, had to say in condemnation of those things which seemed to them unacceptable in their era had little effect on the march of events in England during their century. The juggernaut of the Industrial Revolution could not be rammed into reverse gear, and the general socio-economic trend, the mechanisation, industrialisation and urbanisation, swept on apace as Georgian England merged into Victorian England. From a moralistic point of view, the blatant, rather sordid, materialism of the new wealthy middle class in the first few decades merely disguised its crudity, later in the century, under a frock-coat of prosperous respectability. Britannia ruled the waves and, by the end of the century, large land-tracts of the globe as well. Though the solitary voice (in this case Matthew Arnold's) might speak in elegiac and nostalgic tones about

This strang disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims, 151

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on the surface, at any rate, Victoria's reign was a golden age for Britain. The general prosperity, air of optimism and patriotic pride in the nation's greatness was reflected in most of the poetry of the Victorian poets. The novel tended to become the most popular form of literature and in the work of major novelists, such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens and others, protest was registered against many of

151 Matthew Arnold, The Scholar Gipsy, Fifteen Poets,
op. cit., p. 475, stanza 21.

the social, economic and moral evils in the subtle satire which pervaded a large number of their novels. These are, however, not our concern here.

As regards Victorian poetry, two poets in particular dominated this field of literature, Tennyson and Browning, although there were many other important poets, giving a great variety to the poetry of the later nineteenth century: Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti, and Edward Fitzgerald, to mention only a few. Taken as a whole, most Victorian poetry seems to contain (when it is not written on the optimistic note of Browning's "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world") a longing, a sadness, sometimes a gentle melancholy, even a sense of frustration, but nowhere is there a very clear note of protest. One gains the impression that, although these poets were aware of wrongs, injustice and social and moral ills, they did not express any unmistakable indignation or revolt. Browning's interest, for example, lay rather in the psychological evil in particular characters; he turned to men and women, rather than to Man, while Tennyson concerned himself with "a rather misty kind of philosophical speculation".¹⁵² He preached a gospel of hope and faith in human progress, which he expressed, very often, in some of the most delicate and faultless lyrical verse in the English language. He refers to some of the things which he deploras in In Memoriam, Part CVI, but it is the "wild bells" which "ring out", not the poet's protest:

Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;

So the stanzas continue to list wrong values, but end on the optimistic line: "Ring in the thousand years of peace".¹⁵³

The poet's voice will always be found to be tuned to

152 J.B. Steane, Tennyson (London: Evans Brothers Ltd, 1966), p. 20.

153 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, In Memoriam, Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 401.

the note of his age, and perhaps the fact that England in Victoria's reign entered on an era of peace and plenty, broken only by the Chartist agitation at home (an unrest which was remedied by the Repeal of the Corn Laws) and by the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny abroad, accounts for the fact that English poets of the time did not really protest. Instead, they tended to find their themes in private lives rather than in public issues. This is, of course, particularly true of Robert Browning. They were often filled with pride of country, and wrote of valorous deeds. They also wrote poems of mood. They subdued their doubts, often overcame their despair and looked forward to and prophesied the dawning of a new day, as Tennyson did in Locksley Hall. Grierson and Smith put it well. They speak of Tennyson and Browning as the two great prophets of the Victorian era and then they comment: "The Victorian prophets differed from those of Israel inasmuch as they came less to curse than to bless, to encourage rather than to warn..."¹⁵⁴ This may be why we do not hear in Victorian poetry the voice of a Pope, a Blake or even a Wordsworth; only, at times, an underlying disquietude and scattered references to

".....this iron time
Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears".¹⁵⁵

or to "the sick fatigue, the languid doubt"¹⁵⁶ in The Scholar Gipsy by the same poet.

Even in the manner or form of nineteenth-century poetry there were no violent radical changes, apart from the movement away from Augustan classicism and the popularity of the heroic couplet. Poets merely returned to poetic forms and metres that were already known, to sonnets, odes and a variety of stanzaic structures that Spenser, Milton and other predecessors had used, and the practice of which had never really fallen entirely into disuse. Wordsworth, in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, proclaimed a rebellion against "poetic diction" and what he called the "gaudiness and inane phraseology" of the fashionable poetry of the time. He also proposed in the Preface to select as his poetic matter

154 Grierson and Smith, op. cit., p. 410.

155 Matthew Arnold, Memorial Verses (April, 1850), Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 463.

156 Arnold, The Scholar Gipsy, Fifteen Poets, op. cit., p. 474.

situations from "low and rustic life". The Lyrical Ballads were certainly a new departure in both form and content, but this new departure was not sustained throughout the whole of the Romantic movement. Placed beside the new metres, the radically changed diction and the entirely novel concepts in poetry, such as Imagism and Symbolism, which were to be introduced in the twentieth century, the revolution in poetic technique of the Romantics pales into insignificance. The first three decades of the nineteenth century were to see a startling abandonment of traditional techniques and entirely new and often bewilderingly strange and original styles which accompanied the whole upheaval in thinking and way of life which burst upon Europe and England at the birth of the century. Its infancy would be disrupted by two world wars, and England was to bear the brunt of both cataclysmic events. Her poets would be forced, in the harsh pre-war and inter-war years, to face life's realities unflinchingly and to express their doubts, fears, frustrations and sense of futility in much more vehement fashion than their forebears had done, as the next chapter will reveal. Many of them would be personally involved in the upheaval. Perhaps this was the trouble with the Romantics and Victorians; they were, on the whole, too detached from the realities of life to register positive protest. John Heath-Stubbs says: "The narrow scientific materialism of the age and the short-sighted social ethic of utilitarianism stifled the finer Romantic protest, which had so courageously reacted against the empiricism of the eighteenth century".¹⁵⁷

Without wishing to dismiss the poets of the nineteenth century in too arbitrary or summary a fashion, we shall have to leave them now and pass on to poets and poems of protest in the twentieth century.

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157 John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950), p. 21.

CHAPTER VII

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETIC PROTEST

D. H. LAWRENCE : THE VEHEMENT VOICE OF PROTEST

Early in the twentieth century, in the second decade, a new and different voice of protest began to make itself audible in English poetry. Its tone was more rebellious and angrier than any that had been heard for nearly a hundred years. Perhaps one might regard it as the angriest ever yet heard, for it rose sometimes to a shrill and strident note.

This new voice of protest was that of a young man from the coal-mining area of Nottinghamshire, David Herbert Lawrence, son of a collier. The indulgently amused and, for the most part, implicit criticism of Chaucer, the wittily mocking satire of Pope, even the bard-like denunciation of Blake pales before the explicit censure and attack in some of the poems of this new rebel who railed against many of the social, economic and religious concepts which held sway at the time and determined the texture of ordinary life in the infant years of the century.

The pre-industrial way of life and economy had finally broken down by the beginning of the 1900s, and urbanisation had brought about an altered social emphasis, a changed pattern in social relations, a new ethic. It had, of course, been developing slowly throughout the nineteenth century, this new ethic of cash and competition; as we saw in the previous chapter, Wordsworth himself was acutely aware of the growing spirit of materialism in his era. The new socio-economic outlook of the industrialised world, the altered sense of community, would naturally, because of the massing of man in urban areas, be very much dependent on the functioning of a positive body of laws, a strong authoritarian administration and a more abstract basis of community relationship. The drowsy world of the Brangwens which Lawrence described so vividly in the first chapter of The Rainbow had vanished forever.

Lawrence was no lover of this new Machine Age. He believed that man, the individual, was becoming lost in man, the mass. Humanity was, in fact, facing a dilemma: if the fault of the old ethic had been man's indifference to man, the danger in the new socio-politico-economic set-up lay in the possibility of the swamping of individuality. The democratic social condition which favours liberty of mind may, paradoxically fetter the individual will to the general will of the majority. Lawrence believed that this was precisely what was happening. He felt that the industrial era had given birth to a mechanical monster of bureaucracy, and that man had become so stamped, filed and pigeon-holed that talking to modern people, he wrote in 1928 in Insouciance, had become like "trying to have a human relationship with the letter X in algebra". Furthermore, the growth of the materialistic spirit had allowed a natural morality, such as that which governed the lives of the early generations of the Brangwens, to be extinguished, and man's degeneracy, caused by industrialisation and its concomitant evils, had resulted in a moral inertia, which Lawrence attacked repeatedly in his poetry. He also launched continuous assaults against the crushing, in modern life, of man's natural intuitive faculties; he deplored the stereotyped civilised responses expected from him, the too-spiritual religious establishment, the lingering Victorian prudery and the tyranny of the merely rational human consciousness. "He came to distrust the mind as the agency by which civilisation had torn men from their roots . . ." says James Reeves.¹⁵⁸ The machine had destroyed man's dignity and forced him into the artificial routine of urban civilisation. Some of these maladies which infect the life of social man had been the targets of protest before, some of them in the poetry of Blake, for instance; but Lawrence spoke out with a new and fearless candour:

But when I see these grey successful men
 so hideous and corpse-like, utterly sunless,
 like gross successful slaves mechanically waddling, 159
 then I am more than radical, I want to work a guillotine.

One of his earliest poems begins as follows:

158 James Reeves, ed. Selected Poems of David Herbert Lawrence (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1951), Introduction, p. xiii.

159 D.H. Lawrence, Democracy, D.H. Lawrence: Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Heinemann, Penguin Books Ltd, 1963),

Look at them standing there in authority,
The pale-faces,
As if it could have any effect any more.

Pale-face authority,
Caryatids;
Pillars of white bronze standing rigid, lest the skies fall.

What a job they've got to keep it up.
Their poor, idealist foreheads naked capitals
To the entablature of clouded heaven.

When the skies are going to fall, fall they will
In a great chute and rush of débâcle downwards.

Oh and I wish the high and super-gothic heavens would
come down now,
The heavens above that we yearn to and aspire to.

I do not yearn, nor aspire, for I am a blind Samson.
And what is daylight to me that I should look skyward?
Only I grope among you, pale-faces, caryatids, as among
a forest of pillars that hold up the dome of high ideal
heaven
Which is my prison,
And all these human pillars of loftiness, going stiff,
metallic-
stunned with the weight of their responsibility
I stumble against them.
Stumbling-blocks, painful ones.

To keep on holding up this ideal civilisation
Must be excruciating; unless you stiffen into metal, when
it is easier to stand rock rigid than to move.

This is why I tug at them, individually, with my arm
round their waist,
The human pillars.
They are not stronger than I am, blind Samson.
The house sways.

I shall be so glad when it comes down.
I am so tired of the limitations of their Infinite.
I am so sick of the pretensions of the Spirit. 160
I am so weary of pale-face importance.

This poem was written while the youthful Lawrence was living in Florence after he and Frieda (first his mistress, later his legal wife) had left England and all the aspects of life there of which he disapproved; left the England which apparently disapproved of him! The spirit

of rebellion and protest in the stanzas quoted above is so palpable that the reader will not be surprised to find that the poem is entitled The Revolutionary. I have quoted about half of it - there is more in a similar vein.

Let us take a closer look at The Revolutionary. It may not be great poetry, I am prepared to admit, but it is contumacious and it is typically Lawrentian, albeit not Lawrence at his best. Furthermore, although many of the lines are colloquial to the point of being pedestrian, and the tone is often choleric and angrily repetitive enough to irritate the reader, on closer inspection the poem is found to have a striking unity of imagery. In fact, it constitutes one single basic image, with a Biblical bias, and there is about it a quality of impressiveness and vastness which has undoubted intellectual and visual appeal.

In this poem Lawrence protests against the whole colossal edifice of callous and rigid authority, against self-important bureaucracy. His target is, in fact, the whole devitalised and enervating morality, religion and institutionalism of post-Victorian England. This is quite explicit in the last stanza which I quoted.

His intransigence here is strongly reminiscent of William Blake's protest against stony "Palace walls" and "black'ning Church" in his poem London. Indeed, there is much in the protest of these two poets which is similar, and Lawrence may perhaps be regarded as a disciple of Blake, in so far as anyone so intensely individualistic could be the "disciple" of someone else. Lawrence must certainly have been acquainted with Blake's poetry and thought. Blake exalted Imagination and Energy, writing in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell that "Energy is Delight" and "Exuberance is Beauty"; Blake rejected Reason as a force of restraint; Blake deplored institutions; and in Lawrence's poetry, too, we find a similar credo. In The Evangelistic Beasts, particularly in St John, and also in Snake (which will be examined more fully later) the poet's message is that "nothing natural is to be rejected by the merely rational human consciousness which would dam up the spring of love".¹⁶¹ The tyranny of the rational, the over-stimulation of the spiritual,

161 Keith Sagar, The Art of D.H. Lawrence (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 126.

the denial of the sensual side of man's nature, the white-washed, worn-out morality of a moribund civilisation, soulless, feelingless authoritarianism... these were some of the aspects of modern life which were anathema to this young poet-rebel.

A glance at The Revolutionary immediately reveals that while there is a similarity of theme in Lawrence's and Blake's poetry, the styles of the two poet's could hardly be more dissimilar. Instead of the lovely lyrical quality of the Blakean Songs, we have here a poem written in the form which Lawrence made his own, namely, free verse, with its conversational rhythm, variety of line-length and complete lack of any regular stanzaic pattern.

Turning to the "matter" of the poem, we sense immediately the poet's angry, embittered and disillusioned frame of mind. Lawrence had cause for bitterness: the adverse criticism of his work, the suspicion with which he and his German-born wife were regarded by a people at war with Germany, the unpopularity and official distrust of his pacifist views, his and Frieda's expulsion from Cornwall on suspicion of spying, and, finally, his self-imposed exile to Europe. In his anger, he sees authority and law as a "ponderous roofed-in erection" (a phrase taken from the penultimate stanza of the poem), a kind of ancient temple such as the one which Samson in his bitter defeat tore down. Those who enforce authority, the law-makers, the officials and functionaries, all those who seek to stifle the natural spontaneous responses and the intuitive faculty of man, are likened by the poet to cold and sallow figures of stone supporting the temple roof. He calls them "pillars of white bronze standing rigid", and adds with impudent and sardonic mockery "lest the skies fall". How important they think they are, he implies. Piling up the calumny and contempt, he sees them not only as pale and sterile in their lifeless inflexibility, but he invests them with a feeble effeminacy, for he refers to them as "caryatids", which are female figures in long robes supporting an entablature. The utmost scorn emanates from the opening injunction to the reader to "Look at them standing there in authority" and he emphasises his contempt in the scoffing third line:

As if it could have any effect any more.

This utterance constitutes both contumely and a challenge. In line 7 the poet lapses into downright colloquial speech, while the irony of the next line exposes their ineffectiveness and inadequacy, their puny efforts to hold up the entablature of a "clouded heaven". The implication of "clouded" here is that the structure which they uphold is something vague, confused and obscure, something which is bound to topple,

In a great chute and rush of débâcle downwards.

The lumbering awkward quality of the vowel and consonant arrangement in this line mimics onomatopoeically the cataclysmic break-up which the poet foresees. Frequently in Lawrence's poetry we find such a doom predicted for modern civilisation and all its institutions. In To let go or to hold on - ? he speaks of "the dark flood of our day's annihilation"¹⁶² and in Grapes he predicts that "Our pale day is sinking into twilight".¹⁶³ When he describes the caryatid-pillars, he speaks with pitying irony of their "poor, idealist foreheads" which act as "naked" capitals of the supporting columns. The word "naked" is powerfully evocative and dramatic in its context, for it reinforces the idea of their weakness, debility and impotence.

Continuing with his Biblical analogy, the poet speaks of himself as a blind Samson with no desire to aspire to such a "high and super-gothic" heaven. Note the satire and irony here, directed against their spurious idealism. In his blindness and helplessness he can "only grope" amongst this "forest of pillars", this jungle of authoritarianism in which he feels imprisoned. These pillars resemble the human form and yet, because of their lack of true humanity, they are

stiff metallic-
stunned with the weight of their responsibility.

The use of a striking compound word, such as "metallic-stunned" in this line, is one of Lawrence's favourite poetic devices. Bonamy Dobrée calls this type of imagery "the

162 Lawrence, Selected Poems (Penguin Edition), op. cit., p. 135.

163 Lawrence, The Collected Poems of D.H. Lawrence (London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1933), p. 362.

unexpected wedding of two words".¹⁶⁴ The example of it used here is fraught with sensory, emotional and intellectual meanings: the reader senses the tactile quality of coldness and hardness, is repelled by the harshness and lifelessness suggested, while the combination of the two words evokes thoughts of an unyielding and inflexible officialdom and the deadening effect on man's free spirit which authoritarianism produces. "The dome of high ideal heaven", says Lawrence, keeping up the ironic tone, is his "prison". Like a blind Samson he "stumbles" against the pillars of this cold, bare, barren temple. They are stumbling-blocks to the free exercise of his individuality and so he tugs at them to pull them down. The word "dome", too, is significant. It suggests both something unattainably high and something hollow and empty, so that it is rich in sensory and emotional meaning. Once more we sense the poet's spurning of a foolish, over-spiritualised idealism.

The Revolutionary abounds in imagery derived from metallurgy and mechanisation, for, as has already been said, it was against twentieth-century industrialisation, mechanisation and materialism that Lawrence repeatedly raised his voice in protest: "Lips of metal" these pale-faces have, "like slits in an automatic machine". Even their footfalls, he says later in the poem, are

a clicketing of bits of disjointed metal
Working in motion.....

Though the language in the above quotation is hardly "poetic" by the conventional standards which prevailed up to Lawrence's time, the onomatopoeic effect of the assonanted i-sounds is evidence of the poet's sensitive ear, and the staccato movement of the first half of the phrase running into the smoother movement of the last three words subtly reflects the meaning. From the imagery it is clear that Lawrence believes that man has become a robot. This is a theme which underlies many of his poems, such as Snake, or is the dominating thought in some of the Pansies, such as The Oxford Voice and How Beastly the Bourgeois is. Because he has become an automaton, man's natural, spontaneous responses have been killed and there is

164 Bonamy Dobrée, The Lamp and the Lute: Studies in Seven Authors (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 87.

no real contact or communication between men. The pallor which the poet associates with officialdom and authority symbolises its sterility and deadness. The poet cannot accept "this crawling, sniffing, spunkless brood of humanity", as he scornfully called devitalised modern man in one of his letters.¹⁶⁵

He goes on in The Revolutionary:

To me, all faces are dark,
All lips are dusky and valved.

Later he says,

To me, the earth rolls ponderously, superbly,
Coming my way without forethought or afterthought.
To me, men's footfalls fall with a dull, soft rumble,
Ominous and lovely,
Coming my way.

The epithet "dark" figures prominently in Lawrence's poetry and has, like "blood", symbolic significance. It symbolises the earthy, the warm, the spontaneous, the natural and the passionate in man's nature. If this side of his nature is left unfettered, then communication is able to take place. Then the footfalls will be "coming my way", he says, and the phrase "without forethought or afterthought" implies that they will come in a spontaneous, instinctive and voluntary manner. Also, the footfalls of man will no longer repel with their mechanical "clicketing", but will be gentle, "soft" and "lovely" with, one presumes, warm humanity. The kind of human contact for which the poet yearns will be in tune with the cosmos, with the slow and superb turning of the earth. It is honest, true and "palpable", in contrast to the hypocrisy which orthodoxy and conventionalism impose upon men, so that they become self-righteous and complacent and

love the effulgence of their holy light,
The sun of their righteousness.

Lawrence, like many other poets, especially the moderns, was much preoccupied with and concerned about the question of human contact, communication between man and man.

165 Lawrence, The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. H.T. Moore (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1962), p.699.

In the modern machine-world, he felt, "dialogue" (as it is popularly called today) had broken down and in the poem Grapes, he looks back nostalgically to a "lost, fern-scented world" where men were still

... all in naked communion communicating as now our
 clothed vision can never communicate.
 Modern man is no longer
 Still, and sensitive, and active.
 He has lost the
 Audile, tactile sensitiveness as of a tendril which
 orientates
 and reaches out,
 Reaching out and grasping by an instinct more delicate 166
 than the moon's as she feels for the tides.

It should by now be obvious from earlier chapters that one of the favourite targets of protest in English poetry has always been sham and hypocrisy. Chaucer may have smiled with gentle forbearance at it, but he did expose it; Pope held it up to ridicule; Blake denounced it and now, repeatedly, in Lawrence's poetry we find a scathing attack on it. In The Revolutionary he rails against self-importance and self-righteousness, both of which are manifestations of sham and pretence, for they constitute an inability to face up to truth and reality. With trenchant irony Lawrence speaks of himself, the blind Samson, as being "sightless among all your visuality" [my emphasis], and he scoffs at the "roofed-in erection of right and wrong/ Your particular heavens". He foresees nothing but the downfall of so outworn a civilisation which is based on false premises and values, and he ends this poem on a note of challenge:

See if I don't move under a dark and nude, vast heaven,
 When your world is in ruins, under your fallen skies.
 Caryatids, pale-faces.
 See if I am not Lord of the dark and moving hosts
 Before I die.

In the above passage we find the word "dark" again. Darkness for Lawrence, says R.P. Draper, meant "the true potent innocence.... which is not the same as the mere harm- 167
 lessness that 'human education' approvingly calls 'innocent'". Therefore Lawrence juxtaposes "dark" in the lines just quoted

166 Lawrence, Grapes, op. cit., p. 361.

167 R.P. Draper, D.H. Lawrence (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 155.

with the epithet "moving", for this true innocence is, he believes, vital, creative, vigorous; it is man's affective life, which must not be repressed, because then a sterile rigidity will replace the "moving" vitality. James Reeves claims that "Lawrence relied less than nearly all other poets on the established symbolism of the past".¹⁶⁸ Here we see the truth of Reeves's claim, for the symbolic meaning which Lawrence gives to "dark" is in fact absolutely contradictory to its traditionally symbolical significance.

In The Revolutionary we find a great deal of the insistence and repetitiveness which have been condemned by so many of Lawrence's critics. For example, there is the reiteration of "caryatids", "pale-faces" and "pillars". Such criticism is often valid, one must admit, although Lawrence does, in his best poetry, use repetition in a subtle and striking manner. However, the question of whether certain criticisms are valid or not does not lie within the terms of reference of this thesis. Its purpose is to examine the protest and the form it takes in the poems discussed.

It should be immediately obvious, even from this one poem, that Lawrence's protest has a wider range than that of any of the other poets we have hitherto encountered. He does not attack specific abuses or vices in certain institutions, professions or callings, or the follies of any particular social group or groups; nor does he aim his arrow at any special human weakness, as Wordsworth did when he spoke out against materialism in the sonnet examined in the previous chapter. Lawrence attacks an entire ethos and protests against a whole outlook on life, against all its evasions, pretensions and rationalisations. His voice is urgent with disapproval, strident with anger. His distaste for the whole socio-economic set-up - materialism, industrialism, mechanisation, mass-production, bureaucracy, prudery, false values and fallacious concepts of God - flares up into passionate and indignant utterance.

Because his voice of protest is angrier, more subjective and embittered, because his disapproval is more cogent and personally felt, than was that of many of his predecessors,

¹⁶⁸ Reeves, ed. Selected Poems (Heinemann), Introduction, p. xvi.

because he actually experiences his problems, perplexities and dilemmas with unusual immediacy as he writes, it was inevitable that he would have to find a new mode of expression for his poetic utterances. His passionate spirit demanded it. F.R. Leavis, writing about Lawrence, the novelist, speaks of "the extraordinary vitality everywhere" in his art and of his "essentially creative" intensity.¹⁶⁹ (*Italics mine*). Bonamy Dobrée points out that "His genius . . . is of the fiery sort, now leaping into plumes of flame, now sinking into a sultry glow..."¹⁷⁰

Such a spirit and such a particular kind of genius, so new and bold a candour, would naturally require a new poetic technique, and so it is not surprising to find D.H. Lawrence using radically new rhythms, diction and devices. Judged by the criteria of an earlier century, his diction (when English readers first encountered it) must have been regarded as distinctly "unpoetic"; yet his sincerity and sensitivity usually lend a dignity and significance to even the most prosaic language, as I hope to show in the sequel.

After his early, mainly autobiographical Rhyming Poems, he abandoned traditional verse forms and metrical devices and adopted not only the new free verse, to which reference has already been made, but also poetic contrivances such as the employment of all the resources of typography: italicised words, indentations, the insertion of foreign words and phrases to add atmosphere, lines consisting of a single emphatic word and other verbal mannerisms. Most characteristically Lawrentian is the use of grammatical parallelism, or the repetition of a phrase with slight variation of structure, "figures of grammar on the Whitmanesque model",¹⁷¹ as Herbert Read calls them. It seems clear, then, that if Lawrence was a rebel in the "matter" of his poetry, he was also a rebel in its "manner".

Another reason why the voice of protest in D.H. Lawrence's poetry is a new one is that in many of his poems he questions established assumptions about manhood and human

169 F.R. Leavis, D.H. Lawrence : Novelist (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 244.

170 Dobrée, op. cit., p. 86.

171 Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling : Studies in English Romantic Poetry (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 99.

conduct in its relations with other creatures. He revolts against stereotyped, civilised responses. His protest takes the form of cutting man down to size, to use a popular colloquial phrase. Perhaps the best example of this type of protest is embodied in his well-known poem, Snake, which is, I believe, also one of his best. Throughout much of his poetic work we hear this poet raising his voice against Man's lordly and aggressive self-assertiveness. As an antidote to this, Lawrence continually draws his reader's attention to the "otherness" of each living creature, its individuality and distinctive life-mode, its own beauty and its place in the God-designed pattern of the Universe.

Snake is both narrative and descriptive. It is an experience seen through a particular temperament, an incident in which a soul, more sensitive and comprehensive than are the souls of ordinary men, has participated. Keith Sagar says of this poem that it is "virtually a dialogue between the poet's two selves.....the voice of education and the voice of the spontaneous self".¹⁷² It is precisely this, the voice of modern man's education, which Lawrence questions in so many of his poems, that "Proud intellect, high-soaring Mind", in all its arrogance, unconscious of its own limitations, ignoring the flesh. The phrase just quoted has been taken from Lawrence's St John, a poem in which he scoffs at intellectualism, representing it as a "sun-peering eagle", looking rather bedraggled, but still arrogant enough to be "staring creation out of countenance..."¹⁷³

Man's lordly stature is considerably diminished by the poet in Snake. In fact, man cuts an almost comic figure (as he does also in another of Lawrence's poems, Man and Bat), when he comes down "in pyjamas for the heat", carrying his pitcher, to the water-trough on a sultry day in Sicily. There he "must wait, must stand and wait", for a snake has reached the trough before him, and the man is only "a second comer".¹⁷⁴ This is actually a recurring theme in Lawrence's poetry. He frequently reminds man, sometimes very subtly, at other times

172 Sagar, op. cit., p. 120.

173 Lawrence, Selected Poems (Penguin Edition), p. 81, l. 30 and l. 20.

174 Lawrence, Snake, op. cit., p. 98. All above quotations.

with almost brutal frankness, that he is "not the measure of creation" (as he does in Fish) and we often sense the poet's awareness of the long, slow process of evolution of which man is only a part. In Humming-bird he speaks of a time "before anything had a soul", when "life was a heave of Matter", when man did not yet exist; yet other creatures might conceivably have been there before him.

The poet tells how the snake

reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the
gloom,
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied
down, over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a
small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack
long body 175
Silently.

I have quoted the whole stanza, because I believe that it must be read in its entirety in order to feel the tremendous and dramatic impression of dignity which the verse emits. This "king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld",¹⁷⁶ with his slow, stately movements, his "naturalness", the honesty suggested in "his straight mouth", throws into stark and crushing relief the pettiness of the man, with all his evasions and rationalisations. The stanza also illustrates so many of the salient qualities of Lawrence's poetry, when it is at its best. Keith Sagar comments on "the sibilant, slithering alliterative s's, the slack undulating rhythms, the whole stanza trailing through one sentence of seven long lines".¹⁷⁷ It exemplifies the poet's unique poetic gift of taking his readers as near to what Hopkins called the "thisness" of other creatures as human perception and language is likely to permit. Lawrence was indeed something quite new in English literature, because he attempted to express, and often succeeded in expressing, what had hitherto been inexpressible.

The poet was impressed by the snake, glad to have him come as

175 Idem. (All quotations in this paragraph).

176 Ibid., p. 101.

177 Sagar, op. cit., p. 121.

.....a guest in quiet, to
 drink at my water-trough.

Here was contact, communication, between one living creature
 and another. But then

The voice of my education said to me
 He must be killed,
 For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the
 gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
 You would take a stick and break him now and finish
 him off.

Note the short, sharp words and the choppy rhythm here, so
 different from the trailing cadences of the stanza describing
 the snake and its movements. This is the voice of "pale-
 face importance" with "lips of metal", the voice which labels
 the poet's natural response to the snake as effeminate and
 cowardly. To his eternal later regret, the poet heeds the
 voice of his education, he conforms to the conventions by
 which man is bound, bonds akin to what Blake, more than a
 century before, had called "mind-forg'd manacles". The
 poet relates:

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
 I picked up a clumsy log
 And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

The whole scene is meant, I believe, to mirror the
 callous, over-intellectualised behaviour of twentieth-century
 man, and the poet's protest against it is dramatised in his
 relation of the man's treatment of the snake. Reason,
 the intellect, was the sole guide and motivation, Reason
 which is paramount in a science-orientated world. Too
 late the poet realises that his action was "paltry", "vulgar"
 and "mean" and he comments:

I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human
 education. 178

The speaker's tone is flat and spiritless with self-contempt
 and the weight is thrown onto the operative word, "education",
 by placing it alone in a line, a favourite Lawrentian device.

The protest in this poem is not as explicit as in

178 Lawrence, *Snake*, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101. (All above
 quotations taken from this poem).

The Revolutionary, but it is perhaps more potent, because it is made with the dignity, composure and earnestness which seem to be essential qualities of great poetry. Lawrence has used a dramatic little incident and given it the force of myth, in order to protest against the autocracy of the intellect over the pattern of man's life. Lawrence saw the twentieth-century world, says R.L. Draper, as one "dominated by the twin evils of industrialism and tyrannical mental consciousness".¹⁷⁹ James Reeves tells us that Lawrence had come to believe that "men's psychological balance was destroyed by the strains placed upon them through the necessity of following the artificial routine of urban convention".¹⁸⁰ And as for industrialism, Lawrence believed that "the machine had destroyed man's dignity and taken away from him the joy of creative work with his hands; if man tried to live away from the forces that bind him to nature and the origins of his own being, he became nervously exhausted, fretful and dissatisfied".¹⁸¹

Lawrence's protest against industrialism is most clearly seen in many of the poems in Pansies. In these, Lawrence faces the dilemma of modern man, a dilemma which has become even more threatening in the four decades since the poet's death, namely, the possibility of man's bringing about his own annihilation through his inability to control the power he has discovered or the general hostility which this power has stimulated. In To let go or to hold on - ? the poet ponders on the wisdom of either allowing "the soul to find its level downwards", or the alternative:

shall a man brace himself up
and lift his face and set his breast
and go forth to change the world?

Is there still the possibility of doing anything at all to cure the malady of modern civilisation, or is it already too late? On a note of deep despair the poet asks:

Are we nothing, already, but the lapsing of a great dead
past? ¹⁸²

The reason why he is moved, so often, to predict the doom of

179 Draper, op. cit., p. 25.

180 Reeves, op. cit., p. xiv.

181 Idem.

182 Lawrence, Selected Poems (Penguin edition), pp. 135-136.

present civilisation is that he feels man is already too devitalised to "hold on". Much of his protest in Pansies is directed against man's degeneration, especially the degeneration of the middle classes who have become decadent as a result of too much leisure and wealth:

How beastly the bourgeois is
especially the male of the species - 183

he declares. Again he uses cutting, incisive, satirical questions to express his scorn.

Isn't he handsome? isn't he healthy? Isn't he a fine specimen?
doesn't he look the fresh clean englishman, outside?
Isn't it god's own image? tramping his thirty miles a day
after partridges, or a little rubber ball?
wouldn't you like to be like that, well off, and quite the
thing?

Oh, but wait!
Let him meet a new emotion, let him be faced with
another man's need,
let him come home to a bit of moral difficulty, let life
face him with a new demand on his understanding
and then watch him go soggy, like a wet meringue.
Watch him turn into a mess, either a fool or a bully.
Just watch the display of him, confronted with a new
demand on his intelligence,
a new life-demand.

How beastly the bourgeois is
especially the male of the species -

Nicely groomed, like a mushroom
standing there so sleek and erect and eyeable -
and like a fungus, living on the remains of bygone life
sucking his life out of the dead leaves of greater life
than his own.

Perhaps this, too, is not great poetry, but it certainly is vigorous, undisguised protest. The whole poem is a virulent, at times splenetic, attack on undeserved, inherited affluence, on abuse of privileges, on the parasitic and purposeless modus vivendi of the idle rich, on materialism, snobbery, on false values, on the feverish frenzy to keep-up-with-the-Joneses, and various other weaknesses of the nouveau riche middle classes which had attained political, economic

183 Lawrence, How Beastly the Bourgeois is -, Selected Poems (Penguin Edition), p. 137-138.

and social power in Lawrence's England. In the above poem we have Lawrence "the angry young man" speaking, and he unfortunately allows the maladjustment to society and the often petulant peevishness which dogged his life to overcome his dignity as a man. His fine sensibility deserts him (the sensibility we found in Snake) and the verse lapses into rather cheap sneering. The poet's voice becomes too shrilly derisive. It is poems such as this one which make any claim that Lawrence is a poet of real stature still contentious.

However, that he used his poetic talent to protest is unquestionable, and that is our chief concern here. The free verse that he has used has such a conversational rhythm in this poem that it is really almost prose; yet there are interesting cadences in the lines and the caesura in the middle of almost every line gives an emphatic quality to the whole utterance. At the same time, it tends to give an irritating impression that the poet takes for granted his readers' concurrence with his censure. The imagery is original and sustained, giving a vivid impression of the poet's vision of a flabby, parasitic way of life. Like T.S.Eliot, he too saw his generation as "hollow men".

In How beastly the bourgeois is - the poet has made ample use of the two main weapons of the satirist, sarcasm and irony, but unluckily the wielder of the weapons lacks the speed, grace and dexterity of the fencer; his satire is wanting in the urbane and rapier-like quality of Alexander Pope's mockery. There is no generosity, no impish smile, but only a rather paltry contempt. The satire is crude in tone and the diction lacks the economy, precision, conciseness and the epigrammatic quality of wit which "wounds with a neat and unexpected stroke".¹⁸⁴ When Pope calls man

The glory, jest and riddle of the world,¹⁸⁵

the satire both instructs and delights. When Lawrence tells readers that the "fresh clean englishman" is that only on the "outside", but when faced with an emergency goes "soggy" like a wet meringue", the force of his protest is to a certain extent lost, because some personal grudge seems to be

184 Pollard, op. cit., p. 66.

185 Pope, Essay on Man: Epistle II, op. cit., p. 190, l. 18.

motivating the charge, and any delight which the originality of the image might have evoked is choked by the vulgarly colloquial line which follows:

Watch him turn into a mess, either a fool or a bully.

In The Oxford Voice we hear the same kind of protest, this time directed against affectation of speech and the upper class tendency to regard a man's accent as a measure of his worth. The poem may be seen as an attack on class distinction when this is based on false and distorted values. One's quarrel with Lawrence here, as in the previous poem, is not so much with what he has to say as with his handling of it. Like How beastly the bourgeois is -, The Oxford Voice is too virulent a piece of satire and the diction too coarse for the verse to amuse or delight in any way.

The poems in Pansies vary considerably in quality. Much the same theme runs through most of them and the titles themselves indicate the targets of Lawrence's protest: Things made by Iron, The Mess of Love, The Root of our Evil, Money-Madness, Always this paying, and Ego-bound. In a few of them the peculiar Lawrentian magic appears briefly. Whatever man makes is one of the Pansies which has that moving appeal.

Whatever man makes and makes it live
lives because of the life put into it.
A yard of India muslin is alive with Hindu life.
And a Navajo woman, weaving her rug in the pattern
of her dream
must run the pattern out in a little break at the end
so that her soul can come out, back to her.

But in the odd pattern, like snake-marks on the sand
it leaves its trail. 186

The elusive charm of this Pansy is difficult to define. Perhaps it lies in the fact that the poet's attitude here is positive. In the first two lines we see Lawrence's ability to put together simple, everyday words, giving them a musical quality by means of alliteration, repetition and arrangement. In contrast to the other two Pansies which I discussed earlier, with their deadening impact, this one is alive and full of colour in some subtle way, and the protest against machine-made goods, against "things made by iron", is only

implied.

This is, in fact, the time when Lawrence's protest is most effective, as we saw in Snake, when the poet is not generalising with spiteful rancour, but weaving his remonstrance delicately into a personal and emotional experience. His attack on the moral inertia of his contemporaries frequently takes this form. He attacks man's lack of reverence for the sanctity of life, particularly non-human life, by the incidental assertion in Man and Bat that

Only life has a way out.
And the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility
In life; 187

just as in Fish he admits with humility that

I am not the measure of creation.
This is beyond me, this fish.
His God stands outside my God.

Later in the poem he recognises that

He was born in front of my sunrise,
Before my day.

He outstarts me.
And I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him,
Have made him die. 188

A similar attack, by implication, against man's arrogance and self-righteous complacency, and an expression of disdain for the over-crowded industrialised world with its teeming millions who have "been there too long", who are "all gone inside/ just like an old mushroom", is contained in the moving poem, Mountain Lion. Lawrence's contempt for the foolishness of the unthinking masses is embodied in the two Mexican hunters in the Lobo canyon. The poet's distaste for all that is brutish and insensitive in what Shakespeare called "the mutable, rank-scented many" (in Coriolanus), is contained in the stanzas:

Men!
Two men!
Men! The only animal in the world to fear!

When the poet speaks to the hunter,

He smiles foolishly, as if he were caught doing wrong.
And we smile, foolishly, as if we didn't know.

187 Lawrence, op. cit., p. 96.

188 Lawrence, op. cit., p. 89.

How easily we all turn a blind eye to what is wrong, cruel, evil and unjust, how easily we all "smile foolishly". The poet's most explicit comment on, and protest against, man's indifference and lack of humanity is contained in the final stanza:

And I think in this empty world there was room for me
 and a mountain lion.
 And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might
 spare a million or two of humans
 And never miss them.
 Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost- 189
 face of that slim yellow mountain lion!

Here, as throughout his work, Lawrence mourns the lack of sensitivity in man, the destruction of beauty, the callous coldness and the moral inertia which marks so much of man's conduct towards both humans and non-humans. I have tried to show how he registers his protest against many aspects of modern life as he saw it. Just as in The Revolutionary he threatened to contend with the upholders of false values, to tear down the "forest of pillars", to "tug at them, individually", so, in the body of his poetry he "tugs at" the false values themselves, one by one.

--oOo--

CHAPTER VIII

POETIC PROTEST AGAINST WAR : THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY WAR POETS

The examination and analysis of D.H. Lawrence's poetry in the preceding chapter revealed that he was a rebel in both the matter and the manner of most of his poetry. We saw that he shied away from the oft-used poetic forms and later employed the new vers libre exclusively. We remarked that he used not only a new poetic form, but also a new poetic diction. This trend towards the novel and unconventional in poetic subject-matter and diction is found also in the work of his contemporaries and, indeed, continued to be used in the work of the generation of poets after him.

Nevertheless, despite his deviation from the poetic norm, there was still discernible in Lawrence's poetry something of the old Romantic tradition. An almost complete break with the conventional on the part of poets was soon to follow. During World War I and the socially chaotic years which ensued, when new values and codes of conduct were to replace the old, the poetry of ecstasy, the poetry of the beautiful, the spiritual and the emotional, which Romantic poets had produced, would be heard only rarely. James Devaney, discussing modern poetry, puts it this way: "Of the famous poetic twins, Truth and Beauty, only one has been allowed to survive".¹⁹⁰ The modern concept of poetry is that it must be functional; it must be a social force; it must be what Matthew Arnold said it should be, "a criticism of life";¹⁹¹ it must shock its readers into an awareness of the ugliness, the drabness and the spiritual aridity of contemporary life; it must confront reality boldly and expose the lack of romance in "our regimented dailiness",¹⁹² rather than soothe and feed men on a diet of spirituality and romanticism. These are indigestible foods for the ulcer-ridden stomachs and tense nervous systems of the mechanised age; they are certainly no cure, the poets of our century believe, for "this

190 James Devaney, Poetry in Our Times (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1952), p. 38.

191 Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry", pub. in English Critical Texts, op. cit., p. 261.

192 Devaney, op. cit., p. 43.

strange disease of modern life" as Matthew Arnold called it.

The radically changed way of life brought about by the First World War and the new tendency to face up to actuality unflinchingly, demanded a new realism in poetry. The war years 1914-1918 yielded a crop of poets spoken of as the "war poets" : Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon, amongst others. Naturally they wrote about the cataclysmic events of their times, and their verse, picturing the horror of it all, helped to a large extent to usher in this new realism in English poetry. Except for William Blake's sardonic reference to "the hapless Soldier's sigh" in his poem, London, (already discussed in Chapter V), there had been, until the second decade of our century, a tendency to extol the glory and the glamour of war, although some notes of disillusionment were heard in one or two of Hardy's poems and in some Boer War poetry. On the whole, however, battle had always been given heroic treatment. Michael Drayton had written his Agincourt, Tennyson The Charge of the Light Brigade, Matthew Arnold his Sohrab and Rustum and Walt Whitman his O Captain! My Captain, to mention only a few such poems which come to mind. The old Roman tenet, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori", was still the accepted attitude to war, and Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), although he was a twentieth-century poet, wrote, at the beginning of the war, his well-known poem, The Soldier, the whole tone of which forms a sharp contrast to the kind of war poetry which will be discussed in the sequel.

The poets who wrote about war in the twentieth century were not civilian poets like the author of The Charge of the Light Brigade, for example. They were men in the field, experiencing war at first hand. Consequently they painted a different picture of treaty-sanctioned massacre. They did not sound the trumpet-call to the valiant in their poems or tell of valorous deeds; they exposed the horror and the agony of the battlefield. "They were angry and rebellious", says Devaney, "at the brutishness and guilt of war and perhaps above all at its stupidity. They protested [my emphasis] against the prevailing horror and especially

against the prevailing cant".¹⁹⁴ The last word in this quotation is of particular interest in this study, for again we see that it is hypocrisy against which the poetic protest in regard to war is largely directed. Previous chapters have shown that whatever is sham and false in every sphere of life has always aroused the poet's derision, contempt or ire.

The change in the thinking about war produced a change in the style of writing about war. The old lyric quality of poetry began to disappear in the verse of twentieth-century war poets. They ceased to sing in the manner of Tennyson, for example, who claimed in his poem, In Memoriam, that

I do but sing because I must
And pipe but as the linnets sing.¹⁹⁵

The poetry of the war poets was concerned with things too harsh and inhuman to suit a linnet's sweet piping or any spontaneous burst into song. There was a more deliberate purposive air about their poetic utterances. They wrote about "the torn fields of France", about fine young bodies "sprawled in the bowels of earth", about "the burying-parties, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp", and about "the merciless east winds that knife us". The first two quotations above have been taken from Isaac Rosenberg's Break of Day in the Trenches and the last two from Wilfred Owen's Exposure. These two poems, and many others like them which were written in the second decade of our century, painted a picture of war in all its grim and grisly ghastliness: meadows and fields pitted with craters, towns and villages reduced to ruin, men maimed and mutilated, the savage shrieking of death-dealing shells, the sludge and mud of the trenches, the gas, and "that horror of harsh wire".¹⁹⁶

With matter such as this to write about, and having themselves experienced the rigors and the terror of modern

194 Devaney, op. cit., p. 68.

195 Tennyson, In Memoriam, Tennyson: Poetry & Prose, ed. F.L. Lucas, op. cit., p. 106.

196 Wilfred Owen, The Show, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 50.

war, it is not to be wondered at that the most striking features of these war poets' verse are the disillusionment and cynicism which emanate from nearly every word in many of the poems. It has often been said that all modern art is really satire. The satirical note is certainly very clear in almost all the poetry of our era. Lavish use is made of irony to expose the follies of contemporary man; and, as far as the war poets were concerned, man's greatest folly was the near-achievement of total self-destruction by means of the hideous implements of war which he himself had devised and made.

Another striking feature of much of the war poetry is the new poetic diction. The trend towards the use of more colloquial language already seen in Lawrence's work grew more pronounced, and the language of poetry tended, towards the end of the second decade, to become harsher, more earthy, often tortured and involved. Poets henceforth were to make no attempt to employ the dulcet tones of nineteenth-century verse, the mellifluous words, or the rhythm of song. There was often a kind of clangour in the diction of the war poetry (and that which followed in the 1920s), and it constituted an eerie echoing of the explosive din and fury of modern war and of the social upheaval and unrest which followed in its wake. Thus twentieth-century poets in general (not only those who wrote about war) had new things to say; consequently they all needed a new way of saying them. The psychology of sophisticated modern man had become a more complex thing under the pressures of a faster, more complicated way of living: industrial, scientific and mechanical developments, densely populated cities, cosmopolitan peoples, speedy communications, complicated social and psychological problems such as the so-called "generation gap", the breakdown of traditional standards, and of accepted norms. The simple emotions which Wordsworth had sought to express in verse and which he claimed he could find amongst ordinary rustic men had become smothered in an age which required from man a difficult adjustment to changed conditions, both social and economic. In the concrete jungle which was spreading over the surface of the earth, the aeons-old struggle for the survival of the fittest had become even more violent, vicious and unremitting

than it had been when the prevailing system of control of the species, the inherent natural law, was "Nature, red in tooth and claw".¹⁹⁷ D.H. Lawrence referred briefly to the new human predatoriness when he claimed in Mountain Lion that the only creature to fear was man.

Not only were there new things to say; there was also a new motive behind the writing of poetry. Older poets had striven to describe a subject - a scene, an incident, an experience. The moderns tried to do more than merely describe a personal experience; they attempted actually to reproduce it. Human relationships were no longer the uncomplicated personal connections they had been, and morality was consequently no longer a two-tone, black/white concept. A simple, binary, right/wrong ethical code is difficult to apply in a complex, competitive way of life. Values had become confused, many of them, in fact, reversed, and men who had lived, or were living, through the war years began to take another, a more searching, look at moral assessments which had long been accepted. For the soldiers in the trenches, for soldier-poets like Wilfred Owen, their death-in-life daily routine was motive enough to rouse the tired mind in the exhausted body to look around and wonder - and then to set down what they saw.

The crudity of the experiences which the poetic muse felt compelled to reproduce was what led, very naturally, to the use of the harsher, cruder, more earthy diction to which I have already referred, and similarly to a new, disconcertingly changed use of the rhythms and rhyme of poetry. We have already noted the change in the rhythm of Lawrence's poetry and marked his weaning from the use of rhyme in his later work. Rhyme is an aspect of poetry based on the harmony of sound, a harmony which reflects to some extent the harmony and the mental discipline of the poet's mind. Some of the war poets, particularly Wilfred Owen, began to make much use of a new type of rhyme based on the discord of sound, a "dissonance rhyme", "consonantal rhyme", "pararhyme" or "half-rhyme", as it has been variously termed by different critics. To say that this kind of rhyming was "new" is not, of course, strictly accurate; it had been used before in

197 Tennyson, op. cit., p. 112.

English by earlier poets such as Henry Vaughan, Emily Dickenson and Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was also much used in Welsh poetry. Perhaps one should rather say that it was re-introduced into English poetry and now used extensively, with considerable variety and to great effect. Frequently the initial and terminal consonant sounds in the end words of two lines are the same, while the vowel sound is dissonant. For example, "war" is made to "rhyme" with "wire" (in Owen's Exposure), "blade" with "blood" and "flash" with "flesh" (in Arms and the Boy, also by Wilfred Owen). Other even more strangely matched words end the lines of stanzas: "stormy" and "army", "crisp" and "grasp", "brambles" and "rumbles", "ice" and "us". The first stanza of Exposure reads:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced, east winds that
knive
us...
 Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens. 198

All the confusion and clangour, all the tumult and turmoil of the battlefield echoes in the jangled consonants and in the awkward-sounding arrangement of the vowels over which the tongue seems to stumble. Their discordance is stressed still further by mingling dissonance with alliteration (to which the human ear has long been attuned in poetry). The resultant mixture of that which is aurally pleasing and soothing with that from which the human ear shrinks achieves an effect which is remarkable from a sensory, emotional and intellectual point of view. It disturbs one aurally, arouses a feeling of unease, and gives an impression of a generally chaotic scene.

The protest of those earlier poets who have been discussed in previous chapters emerged from the words they wrote; satire, wit and irony were their verbal weapons; it was all a matter of semantics. Now, protest was actually embedded in the very sounds of the diction, giving even greater power to the spirit of rebellion behind the poetic utterances. The consonantal rhymes have a haunting quality which is able

to arouse the reader's feelings to a very high pitch of emotional intensity, so that he experiences a strong empathy with the poet, and surrealist scenes combine with discordant resonance to compose a poetic protest more potent than any ever heard before in the English language.

James Devaney would not agree with the latter part of this statement. Commenting on the diction of poetry in general, he writes: "Good poetry can express all that these writers [i.e. the moderns] were after without talking of stinks and guts, without slang and ribaldry and prosaic anarchy".¹⁹⁹ He disapproves just as strongly of the new rhyming devices. The moderns, he says, "rebelled against the use of rhyme and then submitted to an even more mannered form - the half-rhyme, using it in a very forced and artificial way, so deliberately that it became 'a species of poetic trifling'".²⁰⁰ Like most things new, these poetic innovations became a fashion, were taken to extremes and eventually mutilated; but in the hands of the finest of the war poets the new use of language in verse was undoubtedly a puissant aid to protest.

Contemporaneous with the "war poets" were the Georgians: Robert Bridges, James Elroy Flecker and John Drinkwater, amongst others. The Georgian poets were conventional, did not often stray outside the main English tradition, "produced no fireworks, intended few reforms, were not iconoclastic".²⁰¹ Such war poetry as some of them wrote was still highly lyrical and concerned with patriotism, victory and glory. It was not until about 1916 or 1917 that the mood of war poetry began to change noticeably. The new, bitter note was first struck by Siegfried Sassoon in his The Old Huntsman and other Poems, published in 1917, and in Counter-Attack which came out in the next year. The very titles of some of his poems, The One-legged Man, I stood with the Dead, Wirers, Stretcher Case and Golgotha, indicate immediately that here one will find no encomium of war.

Yet Sassoon's poetry about war began on a fairly mild and gentle note. His first poems are actually Georgian in

199 Devaney, op. cit., p. 69.

200 Ibid., p. 79.

201 Hopkins, op. cit., p. 532.

character, written for the most part within the established tradition, displaying a natural lyricism and expressing moments of elation. They are full of thoughts of home and strongly nostalgic in tone. A careful reading of his Selected Poems²⁰² from first to last soon reveals the gradually increasing bitterness and the disgust at the reality of war which he felt and which he expressed in an effort to counter the old romantic notions about battle. In the later poems the reader senses very strongly the satirical protest and the challenge, often a savage challenge, to those who smugly believed that all was well with the gallant and uncomplaining heroes who suffered and died, often as a result of military blunders and the crass ignorance of politicians, leaders and civilians snugly at home. Geoffrey Bullough says of Sassoon:

His predominant mood was not lyrical but satiric, not 'escapist' but rebellious /my emphasis/; for he came to look on his comrades as victims of stay-at-home cant, sacrifices to a false idealism. Though at times the soldier appeared transfigured, a Christ in suffering (The Redeemer), he saw him for the most part more simply as

a decent chap
Who did his work and hadn't much to say.

(A Working Party)

Sassoon turned in disgust from the 'dying heroes and their deathless deeds' to Suicide in the Trenches, remorse after killing, unmanly collapses, physical horrors.²⁰³

Amongst his earlier poems, from The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, and under the sub-section, War Poems : 1915-1917, we find the brief poem entitled Golgotha:

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.
The huddled sentry stares
On gloom at war with white,
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.
Guns with mimic thunder burst and boom,
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs²⁰⁴
But the brown rats, the nimble scavengers.

202 Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1947). All poems quoted in this chapter have been taken from this volume.

203 Geoffrey Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1949), pp. 110-111.

204 Sassoon, op. cit., p. 14.

This little poem has a distinctly lyrical rhythm and, with its mainly traditional kind of rhyming and diction, does not really seem to conform to all that has been said in this chapter about the poetic "manner" of the war poets. Its title, at any rate, is significant and hints at the direction which Siegfried Sassoon's poetry was later to take. Already in the first years of the conflict he sees the battlefield not as a scene of glory but as a "Golgotha" - a place of skulls; also a place of sacrifice and cruel death. A close look at the poem will show how the poet is already beginning to stress the misery of war. The scene is one of intense darkness. The word "gloom" has been used twice. Other words have been carefully chosen for their connotations of cheerlessness. Any beauty which the mind's eye might have visualised in the "falling flares" is cancelled out by the word "spume" which is more powerfully evocative than "spray", for instance, would have been. It has an aural association with "spew" and suggests a foam that is dirty and forcefully blown. The first two lines mirror vividly and realistically the volley of Very lights, and words like "curve", "falling", "flood" and "blanching light" give an ominous and eerie atmosphere to the scene. There is a certain awkwardness about the combination of the vowel-sounds in these two lines, and the alliteration of the f-and l-consonants, far from having the smoothing or soothing effect which alliteration often has, seems to intensify the frightening quality of the intermittently illuminated Cimmerian scene.

The sentry is pictured as "huddled", a word strongly associated with unpleasant physical conditions of either cold or fear or discomfort. He keeps his solitary watch, staring into the darkness. The sounds which break the silence are disquieting: the "mimic thunder of guns", the "whistling", no doubt, of flares and shells, the "mirthless laughter" of men who are wretched, but try to keep up their spirits, and the scurrying little noises of rats. The poem ends on a word which is rich in intellectual meaning, "scavengers". It conjures up all manner of mental pictures of the kind of carrion on which these vermin may feed and visions of the foulness and filth which fill the battle scene. Although the rhyme-scheme, ababccbee, is quite ordinary, the final couplet ending on "stirs" and "scavengers" seems to constitute in some

vague way a dissonant rhyme with "flares" and "stares" in lines 1 and 3. This may of course be quite fortuitous, and not an example of the kind of rhyming which Wilfred Owen was later to use so extensively. Nevertheless, there is certainly something oddly disturbing about the whole rhyme pattern of this poem, something forthright and thrusting, and there is no doubt that already the young poet was beginning to turn from the Georgian type of poetry to the more socially significant. The poem has something of an allegorical nature. The sentry is man; he is surrounded by darkness, a gloom which is "at war with white". In the poetic picture the struggle is between darkness and light, which may be taken to symbolise evil and good. On the periphery of the scene there is chaos in the form of portentous sounds: "burst", "boom", laughter that "rakes", the "whistling night".

The whole picture has a definite and meaningful structure. It begins with darkness; light offers only a feeble opposition; and the poem ends with the mention of rats which have for us strong associations with whatever is doomed, such as sinking ships, with cataclysm and catastrophe, with carrion and garbage, with all that is vile and evil. Sassoon and other war poets frequently mention the rats in their descriptions of scenes at the front. The presence of these vermin was one of the many sore afflictions with which troops in the trenches had to contend. Naturally these ditches, often heaped with helpless, wounded men and with unburied dead after a particularly severe artillery bombardment, were overrun with rats, for they were an ideal scavenging-ground. Sassoon also uses the scurrying, nimble movements of these creatures to throw into sharp relief the stillness, the tedious inactivity, the silent, motionless waiting, which trench-warfare entailed for the soldier.

Two other short poems in this section, A Mystic as Soldier and The Kiss, are, for our purpose, worthy of discussion. A single reading makes it clear that the poet is still the lyricist, but his disillusionment, his anger against the stupidity of war and his satiric attitude towards it are forcibly felt. In the first-mentioned poem he says very explicitly

I walk the secret way
With anger in my brain.

There is great bitterness in the satiric comment which precedes the above lines:

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there, 205

amidst the fury instead of in the tranquillity of his pre-war life. In The Kiss the satire is pungent, made more so by the poignancy of the soldier's loneliness, for he has but two things in which to trust: they are "Brother Lead and Sister Steel", the instruments of death which he has been taught to use with horrific efficiency. The poem is grim, and its theme is the brutalising effect which military training and activity have on man.

To these I turn, in these I trust -
Brother Lead and Sister Steel.
To his blind power I make appeal,
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,
And splits a skull to win my praise;
But up the nobly marching days
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:
That in good fury he may feel
The body where he sets his heel
Quail from your downward darting kiss. 206

Although the combined form and movement of this poem is very lyrical, its music is not meant either to delight or to soothe; the poem is intended to startle and shock. For the purpose of this thesis, this intention is important: it indicates clearly that by this time the poet of protest was indeed sharpening his weapons and intensifying his attack. In line 3 of stanza 1 the poet speaks of the "blind power" of "Brother Lead", who is of course the personification of all bullets, bombs, shrapnel and shells. The most mordant satire lies in the epithet "blind", for in it we find the poet's implicit protest against the senselessness of war. The power to kill is wielded blindly; military missiles fall at random. The soldier is being bitterly ironical when he speaks caressingly of his bayonet and sees beauty in its cold and deadly

205 Sassoon, A Mystic as Soldier, op. cit., p. 15.

206 Sassoon, The Kiss, op. cit., p. 15-16.

glitter. His bayonet (or sword) is well beloved, like a sister, indeed almost like a mistress, for the last line of stanza 2 has an erotic quality. Underneath the soldier's words are undertones of sharp self-disgust, especially in line 2 of verse 2. There is also infinite pathos in the four opening words, "To these I turn...". He has become twisted and deflected from all that is noble and humane.

The most ferocious attack against the brutalising of man, against the dehumanising effect of war, lies in the final stanza. Here the soldier actually implores the steel to grant him a brutish and savage sadism in the performance of his task of killing. Yet, shocking as this plea may sound, the motivation for his prayer for ruthlessness is obviously his distaste for the deed. This is what lends poignancy to the poem, a moving quality which is embodied particularly in the strategically-placed word "quail". The soldier himself quails at his own inhumanity. There is of course also a tremendous weight of irony in the words "good fury" and "nobly marching days". Even in the world of today, where brutality and violence are commonplace occurrences, the word-picture of inhuman cruelty so starkly painted in this stanza causes the mind to recoil so sharply that the poet's protest must strike home.

Another Sassoon poem which portrays with simple starkness the grim reality of war is A Working Party, also included in The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, in the 1915-1917 War Poems.²⁰⁷ The quality of this poem is instantly seen to be less lyrical. The style and the diction are colloquial. The poem is narrative and sounds almost like a monologue, as though a soldier were telling a story about one of his comrades. But the poem is also descriptive and gives a comprehensive, almost detailed, picture of the battle-field at night. Again the emphasis is on the gloom, which is only momentarily lit up by the light of candles, braziers, the "point of red" of cigarettes and the flare of Very lights. But always there is the return to the cheerless obscurity:

Then the slow silver moment died in dark.

207 Sassoon, A Working Party, op. cit., pp. 19-20. (All quotations in this paragraph taken from these pages).

And everywhere there are the rats. The soldier in the story is a member of a working party sent to pile up sand-bags along the top of the trenches. He has always been regarded as

a decent chap
Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
And always laughed at other people's jokes
Because he hadn't any of his own.

There is, of course, a subtle irony in the last line, so subtle that it could easily be missed at a first reading. Life for him was certainly not a joke. The story of his death is as simple as his own history, social setting and life. He pushed his head above the parapet at the wrong, the unlucky, moment, and the poem ends with two bare and tragic lines:

And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

The imagery used to describe his horrible death is shockingly dramatic and the effect is heightened by the four simple words which close the poem. He was just another "good simple soldier", like the one described in A Whispered Tale²⁰⁸ whose voice could only "whisper" of the horrors of war because, says the poet, "they shot you in the throat". This is certainly a powerful new weapon of protest, this shattering realism.

In the poem entitled Blighters a scathing and direct attack is aimed at the fools, the stay-at-homes, the politicians, the warmongers and all those who have not experienced, or thought seriously about, the ghastly reality of mechanised warfare:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!' 209

The words "grin", "cackle" and "drunk with din" express with the utmost clarity the poet's scorn for those who are insensitive, stupid or ignorant enough to think of war as glorious.

208 op. cit., p. 21. (All quotations here from A Whispered Tale).

209 op. cit., p. 21, stanza 1. The "House" is, of course, the theatre. Social life went on gaily in civilian circles during World War I, and Sassoon is being bitingly satirical here about "patriotic" theatre-goers who, seated in safety and comfort, cheered loudly over war-jokes by music-hall comedians to show their "patriotism". The word "harlots" is probably a reference to, and a protest against, the dropping of moral standards during the war.

Almost every word in the stanza is emotively-toned and embodies a most puissant protest: "crammed", "tier beyond tier", "harlots", "shrill". The onslaught is clearly levelled at the strident, loud-mouthed many who boast and brag with sham and hollow patriotic zeal, but know nothing of the rigours and the ruin of war. To them it is a Show, as exciting as a circus.....and just as cruel!

In the second stanza the poet expresses an unambiguous wish that these shrill-voiced warmongers might experience the reality of war. He says:

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

The reference to the "stalls", the "rag-time tunes" and the "Music-halls" is a palpable indictment of the merry-making civilians safely at home, bloated with pride at a new weapon or a new victory. The weight of the poet's caustic irony lies in the title of the popular tune of the decade, "Home, sweet Home" - so nostalgically sentimental, such meaningless and empty cheer for "riddled corpses".

So many of Siegfried Sassoon's war poems contain his protest against it that it is difficult to make a selection of those which are most obviously an arraignment. In the brief poem, with an even briefer title, 'They', the poet demolishes with pulverising satire and irony the cant about war which was preached even from the highest pulpits in the land. This poem might not be great poetry; there is certainly nothing "poetic" about its diction, which is colloquial to the point of crudeness, but the message is clear and requires no imagery or ornament:

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
'New right to breed an honourable race,
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.' 210
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

In some of his poems published under the title Counter-Attack and Other Poems Siegfried Sassoon openly names those against whom his attack is directed. In Suicide in the Trenches he cries out:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. 211

In Glory of Women he speaks directly to sweethearts, wives and mothers who "love us when we're heroes, home on leave"; who "worship decorations" and "make us shells"; who "can't believe that British troops 'retire'". The whole poem is a recrimination against false values, hypocrisy and cant, including the politico/military cant of calling a defeat a retirement. Then come the three most significant lines of the poem, lines which tear at nationalism gone crazy, at a patriotism which excludes all concern for the "other" man and his rights and miseries:

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son 212
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

This was, indeed, something new in poetic protest. Had any English poet ever before made such a patent plea for humanity towards all humanity? Wilfred Owen made a similar plea for the recognition of the brotherhood of man in Strange Meeting which will be discussed later. Siegfried Sassoon felt that women - and men - needed a reminder that war is wrong, and pitiful for both sides; often any real concern for the suffering of troops at the front is shamefully egocentric. In Their Frailty (also among The Counter-Attack poems) he writes:

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere
They die; War bleeds us white.
Mothers and wives and sweethearts, - they don't care
So long as He's all right. 213

No other war poet has dealt so extensively, in such detail, with every aspect of the inhumanity and tragedy of war. The Counter-Attack poems are full of technical terms and military language which in earlier centuries would have been spurned by any poet: "our first objective", "bombers posted",

211 op. cit., p. 78.

212 Op. cit., p. 79.

213 Op. cit., p. 79.

"Lewis guns well placed", "Allemands", "going over the top", "Grim Fusiliers broke ranks", "Zero's at nine", and so on. Scattered liberally throughout many of the verses we find the slang of the soldiery, blasphemies and curses: "God blast your neck", the soldier searching for headquarters shouts as he trips over someone "humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug" (The Rear-Guard).²¹⁴ On a "menacing scarred slope", mad with fear as he "flounders in mud" and "goes over the top" in Attack, a soldier cries: "O Jesus, make it stop!"²¹⁵ Amidst all the scatterings of "lugged" and "crump", "Boche" and "No bloody fear!", references to "the last scrap" and "a cushy job", we find in Sassoon's poetry lines of such exquisite beauty that they light up momentarily the sombre ghastliness of the war scenes which he paints with such ferocity. They are like threads of gold in a drab-coloured weave, or like the sudden illumination of the trench-line flares. The soldier-speaker in Secret Music describes the scene as

Death in his carnival of glare²¹⁶

and the home-sick one, dreaming at dawn in Break of Day, imagines sights of home and tells how

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim
Of twilight stares along the quiet weald,
And the kind, simple country shines revealed²¹⁷
In solitudes of peace, no longer dim.

In a delicate little poem called France the poet describes the

gleaming landscapes swept and shafted²¹⁸
And crowned by cloud pavilions white.

Even to grim scenes Sassoon is able to give an awful beauty. In How to die he describes the scene:

Dark clouds are smouldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head²¹⁹
To watch the glory that returns;

In Dreamers his definition of the troops trembles with the bitterness of tragedy:

214 Op. cit., p. 69.

215 Op. cit., p. 71.

216 Op. cit., p. 32.

217 Op. cit., p. 82.

218 Op. cit., p. 12.

219 Op. cit., p. 72.

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land, 220
 Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrow.

Like D.H. Lawrence, Sassoon makes use of the resources of typography and his use of capitals or lower case letters is often significant. In the above two lines one might have expected him to employ capital letters for "death's" and "time's"; omission to do so gives a "flatness" to the poem which is very suitable. When he desires to stress the universal woe of war, any war, he writes, "War bleeds us white". 221

Sassoon's collection of poems could be the diary of almost any serviceman, a record of the variety of experiences undergone at some time or another by nearly every soldier serving through those four sorry years. The titles indicate the extent of the experiences: Attack, Counter-Attack, Trench Duty, Sick Leave, Remorse, In Barracks.

One last poem must be included before we pass on to Wilfred Owen, because of the fact that its theme is very similar to that of one of Owen's most famous poems. Sassoon's version of the theme is entitled Enemies and it exposes (as does Owen's Strange Meeting) the futility of war, man's inhumanity to man, and the shocking breaking of the bonds of brotherhood between men which is the greatest evil of war. Protest must always expose. Siegfried Sassoon's poem is very much shorter than Owen's, much simpler, more lyrical and conventional in form and diction, with a traditional rhyme-scheme:

He stood alone in some queer sunless place
 Where Armageddon ends. Perhaps he longed
 For days he might have lived; but his young face
 Gazed forth untroubled: and suddenly there thronged
 Round him the hulking Germans that I shot
 When for his death my brooding rage was hot.

He stared at them, half-wondering; and then
 They told him how I'd killed them for his sake -
 Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;
 And still there seemed no answer he could make.
 At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand 222
 Because his face could make them understand.

220 Op. cit., p. 71.

221 Op. cit., Their Frailty, p. 80, stanza 3, l. 2.

222 Sassoon, op. cit., p. 26.

The poem needs no explanation. It is as simple and lyrical as some of Blake's Songs. The situation and the moral is clear; and so is the protest.

There can be no doubt about Siegfried Sassoon's assault upon the romantic view of war, no doubt about the vigour with which he used his poetic talent "to batter the facades of shallow complacency",²²³ and to expose the cruelty and futility of armed strife.

.....

In his introduction to The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, the Poet Laureate, Cecil Day Lewis, begins:

Wilfred Owen must remain in one respect at least, an enigma. His war poems, a body of work composed between January 1917, when he was first sent to the Western Front, and November 1918, when he was killed, seem to me certainly the finest written by any English poet of the First War and probably the greatest poems about war in our literature. His fame was posthumous - he had only four poems published in his life-time. The bulk of his best work was written or finished during a period of intense creative activity, from August 1917 (in one week of October he wrote six poems) to September 1918 - a period comparable with the annus mirabilis of his admired Keats.²²⁴

The influence of Keats is of course so apparent in Owen's poetry that it cannot be missed, but when the latter's work is compared with Sassoon's and judged to be better, the great debt which Owen owed to him must not be forgotten. In a letter written in November 1917 to Sassoon (who was, incidentally, the first editor of his poems) Owen himself recognises the help and inspiration he received from him, for he writes: "I held you as Keats + Christ + Elijah + my Colonel + my father-confessor + Emenophis IV in profile. What's that mathematically?..... If you consider what the above names have severally done for me, you will know what you are doing".²²⁵

In his Preface to his Collected Poems Wilfred Owen claimed:

223 Bullough, op. cit., p. 112.

224 Cecil Day Lewis, ed. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), Introduction, p. 11.

225 Owen, from one of his Letters quoted in Edmund Blunden's Memoir appended to The Collected Poems, op. cit., p. 171.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.

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 true Poets must be truthful. 226

The words of particular interest are: "All a poet can do today is warn". [My emphasis]. To warn, to admonish, necessarily implies that the monitor is also protesting against some action already perpetrated or about to be perpetrated.

Cecil Day Lewis continues in his Introduction:

The originality and force of their language, the passionate nature of the indignation [my emphasis] and pity they express, their blending of harsh realism with a sensuousness unatrophied by the horrors from which they flowered, all these make me feel that Owen's war poems are mature poetry, and that in the best of them.....he showed himself a major poet. 227

The first of the Collected Poems, entitled Strange Meeting,²²⁸ shares (as has already been stated above) a common theme with Sassoon's Enemies, but the impact of the former poem on the reader is greater. Although the tone of the poem is detached and strangely dreamy, beginning with several terms like "seemed", "some dull tunnel" and "long since", which suggest vagueness, the weary disillusionment in the speaker's voice is disturbing from the start. The poem packs a tremendous punch and only to the completely insensitive would the message, the protest, the condemnation of war, not strike home. Wilfred Owen has combined words, sounds, rhythm, metre and imagery to create a work of art which gives the impression that all the resources at the command of a poet have been used. Employing a traditional metre, iambic pentameter, he has moulded it to his purpose, taking the weight out of the stressed beat. By using the "half-rhyme" (referred to earlier) for his couplets, he has skilfully abstracted the heroic or epic quality from this type of metre, and aptly so, for the matter of his poem is entirely "unheroic". The movement of the lines is often halting, almost stumbling and clumsy, but changes continually to suit the contents. When the tone of pity and sadness is uppermost, the lines become

226 Owen, op. cit., p. 31.

227 Lewis, loc. cit.

228 Owen, Strange Meeting, The Collected Poems, op.cit., pp. 35-36.

smoother, for example lines 18 and 19:

after the wildest beauty in the world
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair.

Lines 37 and 38 illustrate very well the constantly changing speed:

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.

The second line here speeds up considerably. The words are all monosyllabic, which aids the acceleration, and there is a tone of mounting anger in this line underscored by the short, sharp quality of the last six words.

The poem begins on a quiet, ordinary note, with a speaker, obviously a soldier, relating, without preamble, that he has "escaped". But soon the nightmarish quality of his experience gathers force:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

The scene depicted is as "strange" as the meeting. The reader gains the impression that it is the battlefield, the "dull tunnel" being the dreary trenches which were such a special feature of the kind of static warfare waged throughout World War I. The phrase "encumbered sleepers groaned" evokes an immediate vision of men in full battle-dress, heavily laden with equipment, some of them wounded, moaning in their sleep. But the whole scene is enlarged to nightmarishly gigantic proportions in the half-line and line

long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

The word "scooped" has great kinesthetic power, being associated for the reader with sustained and exhausting effort. The word "titanic" helps to magnify the scene, while the alliteration of the harsh and guttural gr-sounds reinforces tonally the impression of great and rugged vastness.

No sooner has the impression been gained that the scene is an enormous battlefield at night, when the speaker shocks and affrights the reader by telling him that this "sullen hall" is really "Hell", and now only do we know that the soldier is dead. The same kind of grammatical parallelism in which Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence delighted, has been used in ll. 9 and 10, and used to great effect. The lines have a chill austerity, each word dropping mournfully. There is keen irony in the picture of the second dead soldier's "distressful hands" being lifted "as if to bless", but the irony is seen only retrospectively, when one reaches the end of the poem. In the last few lines comes the disclosure that the meeting is between the speaker and the ghost of a soldier slain by him. "I am the enemy you killed, my friend", the spirit tells him, and then only do we realise that at the time of death the "distressful hands" were probably raised to ward off the blow.

In the next three lines the fantastic atmosphere of vastness and emptiness (surely unique in English poetry) is sustained, chiefly by means of the initial hyperbole but also by means of an impression one gets from the second line of an expected river of blood flowing down from the "upper ground" towards, but not yet reaching, this underworld:

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.

Once again we react to the force of the gr-sound, which is made still more powerful in its effect here (as in previous lines) by the dissonance of "grained" and "ground". The preponderance of n- and m-consonants in the three lines gives them a weirdly echoing hollowness. The total sound effect is remarkable. It is like the strange reverberating background noises produced by modern radio and film techniques. What mechanical devices can do in other fields of art, Owen has done with words and their sounds. He has, in fact, combined an amazing number of poetic devices in the above three lines: alliteration ("grained", "guns", "ground") and assonance ("pains", "grained" and "guns", "thumped"); the dissonance and hyperbole already referred to; the powerful visual imagery of the first line, and the onomatopoeia, the nasal resonance and the drooping cadence of the third line.

The poet, Edmund Blunden, comments on Owen's mastery of language. He says that this poet was "an unwearied worker in the laboratory of word, rhythm, and music of language, partly by nature and partly from his close acquaintance with French poetry and its exacting technical subtleties".²²⁹ In the following paragraph Blunden refers to Owen's rhyming as "pararhyme" and remarks on his powerful use of it in Strange Meeting. He says, "Again and again by means of it he creates remoteness, darkness, emptiness, shock, echo, the last word".²³⁰ It is especially his use of it to say "the last word" which constitutes his most powerful and particularly individual weapon of attack.

At line 14 the monologue in Strange Meeting changes momentarily into a dialogue when the two dead soldiers meet and address each other:

"Strange friend", I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
 "None", said the other, "save the undone years,
 The hopelessness....."

From this point onward the poem again becomes a monologue with the second soldier's speaking voice taking over, and it is in his words that Owen's potent protest against the criminal waste and futility of war is embedded. He tells of how all the rich hopes and ambitions of his life were destroyed by war. All that he might have meant to the world is lost:

For of my glee might many men have laughed,
 And of my weeping something had been left,
 Which must die now.

The first line quoted above exemplifies the sudden rush and acceleration of rhythmic movement to which reference was made earlier. Then in the ensuing line-and-a-half there is again a slowing down and drooping tempo. All the way through the poem we find this alternation, a constant varying of speed which gives such remarkable variety to Owen's use of the iambic pentameter.

The second soldier continues. He says that the greatest "pity of war" is the fact that because of the death of men like himself, the truth will remain "untold". And,

229 Blunden, Memoir (1931), appended to Collected Poems, p.169.

230 Ibid.

what is infinitely worse, men will learn no lesson from the war, nor will it be "the war to end all wars", which was the catchword used at the time by politicians and recruiting officers attempting to justify the hostilities. Whatever turn in the affairs of men the post-war years may bring, man will be the loser (the soldier argues), for either his values and ideals will decline, or else discontent will breed an even bloodier Armageddon. How strangely prophetic Wilfred Owen's words turned out to be! The burden of his protest is contained in the following couplet:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.

A Hopkins-like quality is very noticeable in the second line here, with its ring of fervour, emotional intensity and urgency, and the reshuffling of the resources of English seen in the odd grammatical structure and imagery in the statement about men who will "boil bloody, and be spilled". This is a good example of what Hopkins advocated for poetry, the use of "current language heightened".

The real tragedy of war lies in the misuse of, and the loss of, noble qualities in men. Strange Meeting continues:

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:

The soldier claims that

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not in the cess of war.

Both Sassoon and Owen have used their poetic powers to the utmost not only to picture, in poem after poem, "the cess of war", but also to protest against it. Perhaps the simplest but most powerful irony employed to express this protest against the breaking of the Divine commandment to "love thy neighbour" lies in the stark paradox of the line:

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

Despite what has already been said in this chapter about the loss of the traditional lyrical quality in the "new" poetry, the war poets' verse was not entirely un-lyrical. What had really happened was that the old lyricism was replaced by a new, modern kind which might be described by using the

musical term, "legato". This means that the movement is muted, but still runs unbroken through a very elaborate syntactical structure. This is particularly the case in Owen's work in general and in this poem in particular. Later, in the next chapter, we shall see that T.S.Eliot made use of a similar kind of musicality.

In Apologia Pro Poemate Meo²³¹ there is a strange and moving mingling of aching memories with accusation. The poet admits that on the battlefield, which he calls "the sorrowful dark of hell", a place "Where death becomes absurd and life absurder", he also saw glimmers of beauty and had experiences that were valuable and ennobling:

I, too, saw God through mud,-
and

Merry it was to laugh there -

His own spirit often soared, he says, and he "witnessed exultation", the courage shining through mud-stained faces, "Seraphic for an hour". The contrast between the "mud-stained" and the "seraphic" has the touching quality which the ludicrous often produces.

"I have made fellowships" and "I have perceived much beauty", he claims, "Heard music in the silentness of duty". But, the message of the poem is that, notwithstanding these few blessed moments, there is no possible justification for war. To those who are complacent about it, to those who treat it lightly, to those indeed who cause and countenance it, he cries with arraigning candour in the final lines:

These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

Wilfred Owen never sought to hide the horrible reality of war. Even in his letters home, after the early excitement of the first few weeks at the front, he describes with realism and a determination to endure, the cold, the fatigue, the mud and the misery, "the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies" after a "tornado of shells". These phrases are taken from a letter dated 14 May 1917 and quoted in Edmund Blunden's Memoir.²³²

231 Owen, op. cit., p. 39.

232 Owen, quoted by Blunden, op. cit., p. 166.

In another letter home written earlier that year (4 February) and also quoted in Blunden's Memoir, he claims that for him there is the extra horror of "the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language, and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden) - everything unnatural, broken blasted: the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious".²³³ In this piece of prose we have Owen's ironical comment on the glorification of war, which is the theme of much of his poetry of protest.

Another Wilfred Owen poem which bears a striking similarity of theme to one of Siegfried Sassoon's (discussed earlier, namely, The Kiss) is Arms and the Boy. In Owen's version, however, the bitterness is made even more acrid by the fact that the subject of his poem is still a boy who must be taught to love, value and depend on "cold steel" which is "keen with hunger of blood", and on "blind, blunt bullet-leads/ Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads".²³⁴ Both poets make their aversion to the bestiality of internationally - organised killing very clear in their brutal references to "steel" and "lead". In the phrases quoted above, almost every word has deliberately savage connotations: there is the ambiguity of meaning of "keen" (eager and sharp); there is the terrible irony of "nuzzle"; there is the additional ferocity given by the alliteration of the plosive b-sounds in "blind, blunt, bullet-leads"; and the word "lads", with its connotations of youth and the affection which customarily motivates its use, allows the line to end on a note of pathos. As Sassoon did in his poem, Owen also points to the senselessness of the indiscriminate killing in warfare by describing the bullets as "blind". Owen also adds greater depth to his poem in the last stanza. Having suggested, with bitter, contemptuous irony, that the boy be given "cartridges of fine zinc teeth", he continues:

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.²³⁵

233 Owen, quoted by Blunden, op. cit., p. 162.

234 Owen, Arms and the Boy, op. cit., p. 43.

235 Ibid.

The contrast between the imagery in the first line and that in the rest of the stanza is impressive. The first pictures very vividly, with great economy of brushwork, boy (and man) as he was meant to be. The picture is almost symbolic in its force, exuding happiness, rosy health, and general lusty soundness and sanity. In the next three lines the words "claws", "talons" and "antlers", which are all associated with attack and killing, suggest that man has become a predator, which God did not mean him to be. The portrait of man here is horrific: he is a triple-armed monster. The horror is reinforced by the ominous-sounding verbs "lurk" and "to grow", which, combined as they are, suggest an ever-increasing treachery. The picture of viciousness is supported by the Owenesque half-rhymes which stir up unease in the reader. The poet could hardly have expressed more emphatically his belief that war was not the Creator's plan for man.

In Owen's poetry one encounters (for the purposes of this thesis) the same difficulty met with in Sassoon's; difficulty in selection. Almost every poem contains at least one line of protest, either explicit or implied. An interesting difference is that Owen's poetry seems to encompass a wider vision, a conception of doom for all humankind unless an end is made to the madness of war. In The Parable of the Old Man and the Young²³⁶ (based on the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac), the poet places, by the use of analogy, the blame for the universal slaughter squarely upon the heads of elderly statesmen, puffed up with the pride of nationalism, who prefer to sacrifice a son rather than their pride. The deepest tragedy lies in the fact that thereby they have slain "half of the seed of Europe one by one". The poet's vision of the danger of self-extinction on the part of the warring races is quite evident, and is expressed again implicitly in the final line of the magnificent poem, Anthem for Doomed Youth. In the aurally and visually vivid imagery of "each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds"²³⁷ we are meant to see darkness descending slowly over Europe as the light of civilisation flickers and fades. A similar idea pervades the last stanza of the moving poem, The Send-Off, where the angry

236 Owen, op. cit., p. 42.

237 Owen, op. cit., p. 44.

condemnation of the mass slaughter is implicit in the lines:

A few, a few, too few for drums and yells
 May creep back, silent, to still village wells
 Up half-known roads. 238

Here the poet has departed from his characteristic half-rhymes, dissonant and consonantal rhyming, and has used true rhyme equally effectively. The lines suggest far more than the simple words seem to say. The word "yells" has been chosen with care and serves the same purpose as "cackle" and "shrill" in Sassoon's Blighters (already discussed). In its context here, and with its pejorative connotations, "yells" contains an implied attack on the glorification of war and all the silly hurrahs and "beating of great bells" of the complacent and the smug. But the real significance of this stanza lies in the vague impression, received with disquietude by the reader, of the "few" returning not only to their home villages, but to a strangely "silent", "still" half-world of primitive conditions ("village wells") and highways which have degenerated into "half-known" roads. This epithet is ambiguous and pregnant with meaning, as, indeed, the whole stanza is.

The title of the poem, Exposure,²³⁹ is subtle. It describes the pitiless exposure of the troops to miseries such as the "merciless east winds that knife us", another phrase with a Hopkins-like tang. The poem is also an "exposure" of the realities of war. Perhaps the most frightening revelation of this actuality of war is to be found in the poem, The Show,²⁴⁰ where again one gains an impression of the total collapse of civilisation which Owen so often envisages. In this poem, the ugliness of the battlefield is symbolical of the ugliness of the world after the war, a world which T.S. Eliot was to see as a Waste Land. Owen's post-war world, mirrored in the war world itself, is as shocking a place as Eliot's, and the whole scene constitutes a surrealistic picture of "a sad land" of "sweats of dearth", "pocks", "scabs", "caterpillars", "slimy paths", "warts", "dregs", "smell", "mire" and "spawns". Almost every word in the poem spells

238 Owen, op. cit., p. 46.

239 Owen, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

240 Owen, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

disease, decay and foulness. It is indeed a sick world which the poet both sees and foresees, as much a ruined land in its sliminess as Eliot's Waste Land is in its aridity. It is such a ghastly place that even Death falters and collapses at the horror of it all. The single-line penultimate stanza tells us:

And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.

The awful magnitude of the massacre and the poet's impression of the post-war débâcle is suggested by the imagery of the last stanza:

And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head. 241

When E.L.Black in his introduction to Owen's poems commented on "the nightmare quality of the experience"²⁴² which they express, he must surely have had this poem in mind. However, he speaks also of the poet's use of "language of sombre beauty". Even in this poem of unadulterated horror we find an instance of this in the striking phrase, "From gloom's last dregs...". Owen certainly has a remarkable mastery of language; when he wishes to do so, he is able to handle sounds so that they seem to grate and jar and jangle, adding aural unease to the disquietude which the visual picture arouses.

Wilfred Owen's message is very clear in his well-known Dulce et Decorum Est,²⁴³ and his intransigence speaks bluntly. The title is used with biting irony. After describing once again the horrors of blood and sludge, he refers in this poem to a new man-made horror, poison gas, which causes a frightful death, so that one can actually hear

the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer....

This fragment has been quoted here to illustrate the technique of the modern poet-of-protest. It seems that satire and irony alone are no longer regarded as adequate weapons of attack: they are too sophisticated, urbane and intellectual, so

241 Ibid., p. 51.

242 E.L.Black, ed. Nine Modern Poets (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 35-36.

243 Owen, op. cit., p. 55.

that their message may be missed by the unthinking and insensitive. The poet's feeling of revulsion is too strong for him to express it in subtleties of language. If vile and terrifying words are needed to startle and shock man into waking up to reality, they must be used, whether they are "poetic" or not. Owen ends this poem with a challenge to anyone who has not been a witness to death by gas poisoning:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie : Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Note how the word "Lie" is stressed by means of the capital letter and how much of the condemnation lies in the phrase, "with such high zest".

There is space for only one more of Owen's poems of protest against war, a poem which is gentle in tone, infinitely sad, full of a tragic sense of the utter futility of war, the futility of life itself.

FUTILITY.

Move him into the sun -
Gently its touch awoke him once
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds,-
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil 244
To break earth's sleep at all?

The burden of the poet's message, his despair at the stupid uselessness of all the carnage he has already described in other poems, lies in the last two lines. The situation is simple and clear: a soldier strives vainly to restore a dead or dying comrade by moving him into the sun. The poem is saved from any sentimentality into which it might have sunk in less masterly hands by the poet's wider vision, by his thoughts which transcend the present moment. The thin rays

of a pallid sun streaking wanly over the snow-covered battlefields of France remind the poet of the important part which the mighty heat of the sun has played in the evolution of life on our planet. The sun not only "wakes the seeds" each year; it also once woke "the clays of a cold star". The thought in this stanza has a touch of D.H. Lawrence in it, for he, too, was frequently preoccupied (as was shown in Chapter VII) with thoughts about "the long ages" (Baby Tortoise), about the evolution of this earth and its civilisation from the "primeval-dumb otherworld" with its "awful stillness" (Humming-Bird), and about a prehistoric life "among the mud and mastodons" (Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette). The poet of Futility, identifying himself with the soldier who is watching his comrade, thinks of all the devastation wrought by the war and he asks:

Was it for this the clay grew tall?

This fine piece of imagery, so rich in sensory, emotional and intellectual meaning, expresses his deep feelings of frustration and revolt at the wastage of all the long centuries of evolution, of building up, developing, progressing. He feels an intense world-weariness when he wonders whether all the sun's efforts to wake a cold and lifeless planet were not, after all, merely fatuous and foolish. The word "clay" is richly evocative and comprehensive in meaning, for it embraces, as possibly no other word could, all that grows from the earth, is in and on it, man himself, who is but dust and returns to dust or clay. The epithet "tall" is just as evocative, for it arouses thoughts of erect young men, lofty trees and towering buildings. The poet's feelings are very complex, a wistful melancholy predominating. His anger and protest are muted in this little poem, but are perhaps, for that very reason, all the more impressive.

Owen has made effective use of punctuation in Futility. The many commas and dashes give the verse a halting, tentative movement, suggesting the poet's helplessness and incredulity in the presence of death. He is bewildered. The consonantal rhymes give the poem that haunting quality found in so much of Owen's poetry. The reader also gains an impression of some kind of understatement which is another characteristic of many of his poems. We find it here and there in

Strange Meeting and in the two lines of The Send-Off:

They were not ours:
We never heard to which front these were sent. ²⁴⁵

Used in this way, understatement has considerable force. It lends an air of detachment to the poet's tone and, in an odd manner, muffles the indignation without really weakening it. It infuses gravity and decorum. Geoffrey Bullough says, "It was Owen's privilege to bring a new dignity to war-poetry..."²⁴⁶ This dignity is particularly evident in Futility. It is there largely because of the controlled tone and because his speculations strike deeper than the military system.

On the 4th of November, 1918 Wilfred Owen became a victim of the very war which he had so resolutely denounced; he was killed in action a matter of days before it ended. One cannot refrain from speculating on what his future as a poet would have been had he survived the four-year holocaust. C. Day Lewis, pondering on this, asks: "Would the vein of savage indignation have proved exhausted, or might Owen have found it renewed in the struggle against social injustice which animated some of his poetic successors? It seems possible..."²⁴⁷

In one of Owen's letters written from the hospital on the Somme in June 1918, the poet, after professing his pacifist leanings and the credo behind them, writes: "Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism".²⁴⁸ If one takes into account the strength of Owen's honesty, fervour and dedication to his art, and the beliefs expressed in this letter, it seems very probable that he would have used his talents to expose and protest against whatever warred with "pure Christianity", and that his targets might well have been the injustices and evils in the social disintegration which followed the war years.

After the powerful protest of Sassoon, Owen, Blunden, Rosenberg and all the other war poets of the second decade of the twentieth century, it was left to a new group to take up the cudgels and to attack whatever seemed to them worthy of protest in their generation, after the roll of the war-drums had died away.

--oOo--

²⁴⁵ Owen, op. cit., p. 46.

²⁴⁶ Bullough, op. cit., p. 115.

²⁴⁷ Lewis, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁴⁸ Blunden, op. cit., p. 167.

CHAPTER IX

OTHER VOICES OF PROTEST IN THE FIRST THREE DECADES OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

Traditionally held notions about the glory and the glamour of war were not the only romantic ideas to be exploded by English poets during the second decade of the twentieth century. One might almost feel that there was some strange clairvoyance in the words which Tennyson allows the King to say in Morte D'Arthur:

I think that we
Shall never more, at any future time,
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds... 249

If idealised ideas about man at war went overboard early in our century, so also did the idealised sentiments about man and his world and ways which had for long been the subject-matter of so much of Victorian and Georgian verse. Romanticism in poetry was replaced by a new realism which exposed both the physical and the spiritual squalor which lay beneath so-called Western civilisation. While the war poets whom we discussed in chapter VIII were revealing the horror, the agony and the boredom suffered by men at the front, and condemning the whole tragic waste of war, other poets, writing contemporaneously, were laying bare, with equally bald veracity, the futility, the vacuity and the spiritual aridity of all modern life.

The disillusionment felt and expressed by the war poets had taken hold, it seems, of the whole war and post-war generation by 1918. It was, in reality, no "brave new world" to which the fighting-men returned; it was what Ezra Pound in his poem, Mauberley, called "a botched civilisation" for which millions of young men had died. Dissatisfaction, leading often to cynicism or despair, had become a general state of mind. This disenchantment persisted into the 1920s when the end of hostilities revealed that the post-war socio/politico/economic situation in the Western World was in no way an improvement on pre-war conditions. The war (so politicians, posters and press had declared) was being fought as a war to end war and to

249 Tennyson, Tennyson Poetry & Prose, ed. F.L. Lucas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 51, ll. 17-19.

make the world a place fit for heroes to live in. But the heroes limped back to find that contemporary society was crumbling, that everywhere there was chaos and instability. The war had been a scarifying experience for all who had lived through it, civilians and servicemen alike. Its shattering impact on whole populations had brought about the breakdown of long-established values and traditions. This total collapse of morals and mores was naturally reflected in the poetry of the age. There was a general revulsion and rebellion, amongst the young poets particularly, against the old standards of poetic decorum, which they regarded as "stuffy", as "clap-trap" and as "old hat". They were, says James Devaney, "resolved to be done with anything second-hand. Things already experienced were considered sucked dry, and these included the oft-used poetic forms. Because it was old, older poetry was considered dead and done with. For one thing it was too complacent, too placid..."²⁵⁰ The young moderns were not prepared to be self-satisfied and to delude their readers with false and romantic notions of life; they set out to mirror the world as it really was and to direct their spotlights fully on to what many of them regarded as the disintegration of Western civilisation. They were repelled by the sawdust and cheap tinsel world of the post-war years and the "hollow men" who lived in it and enjoyed its brittle gaiety.

Between 1916 and 1921 six annual cycles of an anthology of poems called Wheels were published. Some of the contributors to this series were Miss Edith Sitwell (who was also its editor), her brothers, Osbert and Sacheverell, Nancy Cunard, Alan Porter and Iris Tree. All these poets were young; many of them belonged to families of high social rank and fashion. Their poetic contributions were mocking, sophisticated, cynical, anti-militaristic, deliberately and defiantly rebellious against whatever they regarded as old-fashioned. "Not surprisingly", says John Press about their poetry, "it evoked abusive hostility and delighted applause. Some of those who greeted it with a measure of approval were fully conscious of its defects, but welcomed it as a useful weapon with which to assail the Georgians and the older generation entrenched in positions of literary authority".²⁵¹

250 Devaney, op. cit., p. 32.

251 John Press, A Map of Modern English Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 156.

Press goes on to assert (and his opinion seems to be shared by most critics) that "one is struck by the poor quality of the verse. Most of the poems are thin and trivial, technically inferior to the work of the despised Georgians, their smartness long faded, their febrility and hollowness cruelly exposed by the passage of time".²⁵² Whatever opinions about its real poetic value may be, it was certainly poetry of protest, and its authors deserve, therefore, to be mentioned here. Having done that, we may turn from the Wheels coterie to one or two other poets whose poetry has without doubt stood the test of time and examine their work.

William Butler Yeats, who is generally regarded as the link between the two generations of poets, the Romantics and the Moderns, and who with T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound dominated the first three decades of the century, gave in his poem, The Second Coming, a terrifying, and perhaps prophetic, picture of his vision of our crumbling, two-thousand-year-old civilisation. He saw the twenty centuries of the Christian era, a mere brief phase of history, as a vast, mounting centrifugal force, sweeping round in ever-widening circles and spiralling higher and higher until its force is spent and it falls apart. The falconer in the poem is the symbol of Christ; the falcon, the Christian world which no longer heeds the commands of its founder. Consequently, all that is settled, ordered and established is whirling into chaos and anarchy. Yeats's poem begins:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-rimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all convictions, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.²⁵³

There is no need here to go into the poet's theory of history as a series of cyclical processes, his imagery of the gyres and his use of private symbolism. Although the first three lines quoted above, particularly, are related to the Yeatsian gyre theory, and an understanding of it would strengthen the reader's response to the poem, yet without knowing about his

252 Ibid.

253 William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming, The Faber Book of Modern Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 73.

theory, one may recognise immediately the poet's vision of the world's predicament and his horror at the prevalent anarchy. "This poem", says A. Norman Jeffares, "can be laden with annotations....fuller explanations and explications: but its shockwave travels consistently through subsequent readings...".²⁵⁴ The powerful imagery in lines 5 and 6 is terrifying in its visual and intellectual richness. One imagines vividly a second Deluge, this time of blood, brought on by all the ghastly massacre which war and violence entail. As in Noah's time, the world is swamped once more, and with it all the "ceremony of innocence", all that was once fine and noble.

It is permissible, I believe, to regard Yeats's The Second Coming as a poem of protest. Particularly in the lines quoted above he was deploring the loss, in his era, of values which he held dear. He was expressing his disgust at prevalent anarchy and of the whole world situation. The poem is, however, so powerful in other ways, philosophic, dramatic, elegiac even, and visionary, that the protest is overshadowed. Its author was, however, very definitely a poet of protest. David Daiches points out, for example, that Yeats protested against and despised the middle-class "Paudeens" with their philistinism and materialism in several of his poems, and that he went either above them or below them to the ordered life of the country house or the free life of the beggar "to find a way of living that he could respect".²⁵⁵ It is particularly in his poems written after 1907, after the commencement of his friendship with Lady Gregory, that he shows his rejection of middle-class behaviour and his contempt for the city mob, his protest against its behaviour, especially against the use of violence. In A Prayer for my Daughter he asks that she may be protected from all that is not "accustomed, ceremonious", for, he adds,

arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.²⁵⁶

One might also possibly regard An Irish Airman foresees his Death as a poem containing an implicit protest against

254 A. Norman Jeffares, W.B. Yeats: The Poems (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd, 1961), p. 39.

255 David Daiches, The Present Age (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), p. 47.

256 Yeats, A Prayer for My Daughter, Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1961), p. 214.

the stupidity of war, particularly the lines

Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love; ²⁵⁷

And there are, of course, a number of poems which constitute political protest in the body of Yeats's work. His stature as a major poet of this century is undeniable, but, as has already been said, so many voices of protest are to be heard in English poetry, that it has been found necessary to be ruthlessly selective, and I have chosen therefore to concentrate mainly on the poetry of T.S.Eliot in this chapter.

Yeats's picture of the descent of ruin upon civilization in The Second Coming is compact, yet it has a panoramic quality of almost cosmic disintegration. At about the same time, his picture of the collapse of order and of the breakdown of "custom and ceremony" was being duplicated, but in more everyday, mundane detail, by T.S.Eliot. In the latter poet's depiction of the twentieth-century world and its people, in his portrayal of characters such as Prufrock, Gerontion and Sweeney in their social milieu, there would be a revelation of how "things were falling apart", so that contemporary man knew "only a heap of broken images"; how there was, indeed, no more "innocence" in human relationships; how men and women "lacked convictions" and had become morally weak and vacillating; how "passionate intensity" (where it existed) was merely brutish animality.

T.S.Eliot was actually composing some of his earliest poems at the same time that Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg were writing their war poetry and telling of the first rising of "the blood-rimmed tide". In fact, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is believed to have been written in 1909-1910 (although some commentators give a later date), so that even before the outbreak of World War 1 Eliot had already envisaged a society stylized to the point of sterility, yet so confused and purposeless, that Man, tormented, inhibited and frustrated, was lost in its "muttering retreats". The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is an exposé of the empty, dessicated life of polite society with its "little anxieties, social embarrassments and unacknowledged vacuity.....where the final reckoning discloses

257 Yeats, An Irish Airman foresees his Death, The Faber Book of Modern Verse, op. cit., p. 70.

only that

I have measured out my life with coffee-spoons." ²⁵⁸

But Eliot also turned his attention from the fashionable and wealthy to the working-class world, to the inmates of "a thousand furnished rooms", to habitués of taverns and brothels, and to the long medley queue of drab city-dwellers crowding around "early coffee-stands" or hurrying home to dingy lodgings where "the little lamp spreads a ring on the stair". ²⁵⁹

Some readers may question the inclusion of Eliot's voice in our choir of poetic protesters. Perhaps his voice does not ring out as clearly militant as do some of the voices of protest already discussed. This may be because of the impression his poetry gives of a certain aloofness and detachment on the poet's part, and because he makes no direct personal comment on all that seems to him to be worthless and lamentable in contemporary life. Perhaps his protest seems less aggressive because he set out to present (as he himself claimed in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism) "the boredom and the horror and the glory" [my emphasis] of his world. Consequently his attitude is very objective. There is nearly always, amidst the squalor and the inanity which he pictures, some small trace of beauty. Several critics have commented on this quality in Eliot's poetry, amongst them F.O. Matthiessen and also Frank Wilson, who points out that Eliot "does not describe Sweeney's surroundings as things merely mean. There is a sinister suggestiveness, almost a furtive beauty, in the scene, for all is illuminated by the eerie light of impending disaster...". ²⁶⁰ Bradbrook also remarks that in Eliot's poetry "the juvenile naughtiness of the neurotic twenties takes on in retrospect a certain pathos". ²⁶¹

In spite of this element of pathos in his work, Eliot is undoubtedly a poet of protest. Whether he deliberately set out to do so or not, he did expose all that was degenerate in modern life, and from the earliest days of English poetry, one of the main objects of the poet of protest has been to expose

258 M.C. Bradbrook, T.S. Eliot (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd, 1950), p. 9.

259 T.S. Eliot, Rhapsody on a Windy Night, Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1954), p. 27, l. 19.

260 Frank Wilson, Six Essays on the Development of T.S. Eliot (London: The Fortune Press, 1948), p. 18.

261 Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 12.

what seems to him to be foolish, false, ignoble or evil.²⁶² Even today, social and political insurgence in all its guises involves, above all, the laying bare, the exposure, of wrongs - hence the slogan-bearing banners and posters which feature so prominently in protest marches and demonstrations.

Another possible reason why Eliot's protest may seem to be somewhat lukewarm is that he makes abundant use of implication. Now, implication or inference requires from the reader a greater mental and intellectual effort than do patent denunciation and blatant invective. Implication does not have the same immediate emotional pressure behind it. One of Eliot's chief concerns in the technique of his poetry was, in fact, the problem of objectifying and externalizing emotion. When in Chapter II of this study it was found necessary to label Chaucer merely as a mild protester, it was because of his benign and tolerant attitude towards mankind. In the case of Eliot, when his protest seems to be similarly muted, it is because of his search for

a new kind of poetry...which will enable a poet to express with greater clarity and objectivity his personal emotions, to transform personal agonies into something impersonal. The need for objectivity is greater since a sensitive and intelligent poet like Eliot is aware of the 'great variety and complexity' of the present age.²⁶³

This is the whole point about Eliot's protest: it is directed against a whole civilisation and its sorry lack of moral strength and of spiritual nobility. Its targets are not certain specific things such as, for example, the abuses in Church or State, or the follies of high society, which were attacked by earlier poets already discussed. Eliot's satire and implied criticism touch upon so many aspects of modern life. The body of his early work is really a mosaic of protest, and although protest may not have been his chief concern (indeed, in his prose writings and comments on his own poetry he denied that it was), the reader cannot fail to regard the early poems, up to and including The Waste Land particularly, as social criticism and, therefore, a form of protest.

262 In Chapter I the poet of protest was defined as one who sets out to express his dissatisfaction with the world and its ways, to expose the causes of his dissidence and to arouse in his reader a similar awareness of social, moral or political wrongs.

263 Sunil Kanti Sen, Metaphysical Tradition and T.S.Eliot (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965), p. 87.

What is especially new and experimental about this new Eliotesque form of protest is that his poetry does not denounce, it expresses, in order to correct. Very often the poet merely paints a scene, and the scene itself, together with its imagery, speaks; the poet does not need to say anything - the scene is sufficient (as will presently be shown) and so is the imagery. It may be that it is this technique which makes the protest, for some readers, so unobtrusive that it can hardly be recognised as such. Once recognised, however, the challenging quality of the protest is striking. Eliot, of course, makes his imagery answer to Ezra Pound's definition of an image, which stresses the fusion of thought and emotion. Images so created have a tremendous power to move the reader to protest.

Perhaps E.M.Forster has summed up most accurately the whole position of Eliot as a poet of protest. Describing in his collection of essays, Abinger Harvest, the relief which the reading of some of Eliot's poetry brought to him while he was convalescing in Cairo, Forster claims that "in that world of gigantic horror", nothing else would have been tolerable except "slight gestures of dissent".²⁶⁴ He recognises the "dissent", even if to him it appears to be "slight". The tribute which W.H.Auden pays to Eliot in verse specially composed on the occasion of Eliot's sixtieth birthday also seems to express something of the very individual quality of this poet's protest and to point to its restrained nature:

it was you
Who, not speechless with shock but finding the right
Language for thirst and fear, did most to
Prevent a panic. 265

It was certainly a world of "thirst and fear" which Eliot set out to mirror in his early poetry. The personae in his first volume of poems are all spiritually arid and fearful. They are purposeless people. Some are displaced, homeless and rootless individuals, cosmopolitan flotsam, unable to communicate with each other or to cope with life. Others are low and brutish and debauched, unlikely to bring invigoration or relief (a relief like that of rain during a drought to a world where, spiritually and morally, there is

264 E.M.Forster, "Abinger Harvest", quoted by M.C.Bradbrook, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

265 W.H.Auden, quoted by M.C.Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 19.

no water but only rock
 Rock and no water and the sandy road
 The road winding above among the mountains 266
 Which are mountains of rock without water.

Certainly in the matter of his poetry Eliot was a rebel. He broke away completely from the kind of subjects that earlier poets, particularly his immediate predecessors, had written about. Instead of descriptions of the beauties of nature and rural environments, this new young poet who blazed into fame in 1917 invited his readers to accompany him through the ugliness and squalor of the urban scene. Instead of singing about dales and daffodils, larks and the lapping of water, Eliot conjured up vividly impressionistic (often surrealistic) pictures of winding grimy streets, of dingy tenements with blackened chimney-pots and broken blinds, of alleys and basement rooms, and of the mingled smells of supper steaks, stale beer and burnt tobacco. His early poems depict the whole repulsive panorama of "a thousand sordid images" which make up contemporary city life. Though he never proclaimed as blatantly as D.H. Lawrence did a disgust for the "beastly bourgeois", or for any specific social class for that matter, he did nevertheless make quite clear his distaste for a whole social set-up where values were as twisted as city streets, where the all-pervading urban smog was only a reflection of "the creeping choking atmosphere of a spiritual miasma".²⁶⁷

In the poem, Preludes, which was amongst those published in the 1917 volume, Prufrock and Other Observations, the contemporary scene is painted in all its soul-deadening squalor, and the atmosphere of dreary streets and dingy rooms is cleverly captured. In Section I the poet, using a kind of poetic shorthand which was something new in English poetry, describes a winter's evening in the drab quarters of a modern city:

The winter evening settles down
 With smell of steaks in passageways.
 Six o'clock.
 The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
 And now a gusty shower wraps
 The grimy scraps
 Of withered leaves about your feet
 And newspapers from vacant lots;
 The showers beat

266 Eliot, The Waste Land, Selected Poems, op. cit., p. 64.

267 Elizabeth Drew, T.S.Eliot: The Design of his Poetry (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950), p. 54.

On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
 And at the corner of the street
 A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps, 268
 And then the lighting of the lamps.

By means of word-pictures and imagery rich in visual, olfactory and gustatory meaning, a street-scene is etched with all the force and impact of an impressionistic painting. The opening sentence with its unadorned clarity and its prosy rhythm is evocative despite its simplicity, and it sets the scene, the atmosphere and the mood. The idea of the dusk "settling down" is full of sensory, emotional and intellectual meaning: there is nothing romantic about this twilight; it descends like a pall or like some gigantic parachute, suffocating the jumper. The verb which the poet has selected in this sentence has a dampening effect on the reader's spirit and evokes thoughts of a dull end to a dull day. The city-dwellers, inhabitants of slum and suburbia alike, probably "settle down" to a boring evening lacking interest and activity, and the visual picture is one of the growing darkness and the murky fog sinking down and taking over, blanketing both the milieu and the mind of man.

The next line consists of a phrase in isolation, an incomplete sentence, having no grammatical relevance to the context, yet it adds tremendously to the atmosphere of dreariness, the mood of weariness and the sense of wasted, futile days. "Six o'clock" also seems to "settle down", to drop with a harsh and empty clangour. It is followed by another isolated phrase alone in a line; real poetic shorthand, this:

The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

Eliot frequently uses imagery connected with cigarette-butts, tobacco smoke and smells, or the smog of chimneys, and always this kind of image evokes the same response from the reader: distaste and a sense of the sordid.

In the next line the rhythm speeds up. There is a sudden flurry of movement in verse and scene. A gust of wind and a shower stirs the grey stillness, but neither breeze nor rain is refreshing. Withered leaves and scraps of paper are blown about, adding to the other litter in the "sawdust"

streets. The "broken blinds and chimney-pots" indicate quite clearly (even if the reader had not already guessed it) that this is an over-crowded, poverty-stricken slum area. Then the final couplet with its drooping movement and its stark picture of the lonely cab-horse waiting patiently in the rain, completes the depressing scene. The mention of the lighting of the lamps in the last line gives a sense of finality: it is definitely the end of another dreary day. Night has fallen. As it grows late, the street-lamps will "sputter" and "mutter", revealing all the sinister and furtive activity of the nocturnal urban scene with its "crowd of twisted things", as they do in Rhapsody on a Windy Night. There is in this first Prelude an implied protest, protest against the aridity and ugliness, both physical and spiritual, in which modern urban man must live. Although there is no note of anger, indignation, mockery or scorn in the tone of voice (such as other poets of protest have used), and although Eliot certainly does not set out "to lash the age" (as Alexander Pope did), he certainly exposes the soul-deadening barrenness and spiritual loneliness of urbanised life today.

The poet has used the minimum of means for the maximum of effect in the first section of Preludes. This compression of meaning was at the time something completely, startlingly new in English poetry. Every noun, every epithet, every image, in fact, every sound, adds another brush-stroke to the cumulative picture of the dinginess of life in a modern metropolis. The alliteration scattered throughout the stanza is used to great effect: the "steams and stamps" in the penultimate line imitates the hissing of the rain on the warm tarmac streets, and the guttural g's in "gusty" and "grimy" mimic the scraping sound of blown leaves and papers. In the first two lines the alliterated s-sound emphasises the silence of nightfall. The vowel-sounds are awkwardly arranged in the middle part of the stanza, suggesting the noises of rain and wind and flapping blinds, and contrasting strongly with the smooth-sounding, softer vowels of the last line when the lights are silently lit.

Part II of the poem describes how, in the early dawn, drab citizens emerge from rented rooms, scruffy and stuffy with the stale smells of human habitation. Listlessly they

prepare to face another day and queue up like zombies round the coffee-stands:

The morning comes to consciousness
 Of faint stale smells of beer
 From the sawdust-trampled street
 With all its muddy feet that press
 To early coffee-stands.
 With the other masquerades
 That time resumes,
 One thinks of all the hands
 That are raising dingy shades
 In a thousand furnished rooms.

Note how there is a quickening in the rhythm of the lines here. There is a "busy" quality about them, aping the increased activity of the daylight scene. The imagery in "sawdust-trampled street" is rich in meaning and links up with and echoes the "sawdust restaurants" of Prufrock's milieu in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. In both cases "sawdust" has connotations of disorder, jumble, waste, left-overs, residue and general messiness. The poet's protest in Part II is implicit in the single word "masquerade", which suggests all the futile sham, the pretence and deceit, the insincerity of modern society. Once more, as so often before, the English poet's voice is raised against hypocrisy.

In Part III Eliot pictures an individual, a city-dweller, waking apathetically to another cheerless day:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
 You lay upon your back, and waited;
 You dozed, and watched the night revealing
 The thousand sordid images
 Of which your soul was constituted;
 They flickered against the ceiling.
 And when all the world came back
 And the light crept up between the shutters
 And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
 You had such a vision of the street
 As the street hardly understands;
 Sitting along the bed's edge, where
 You curled the papers from your hair,
 Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
 In the palms of both soiled hands.

Rosenthal suggests that this room is "the unclean world of the prostitute".²⁶⁹ Perhaps it is. Certainly the first line, "You tossed a blanket from the bed", seems to link up vaguely with "the sheets in steam" in Sweeney Erect and

269 M.L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets : A Critical Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 78.

with the pulled-off table-cloth and overturned coffee-cup in Sweeney Among the Nightingales. All are associated with "one-night cheap hotels" and with whatever is sluttish and slipshod. Tumbled blankets, sweaty sheets, stained table-cloths all act as "objective correlatives", evoking a picture of physical disarray which in turn arouses thoughts of spiritual disorder and accompanying disgust.

The indoor scene pictured in Part III is as soul-deadening as the "sawdust-trampled street" outside: rumpled bed-clothes, shuttered windows through which the daylight filters bleakly, the sprawled figure with hair in curlers and unwashed hands, all add up to produce a picture of vileness that is almost surrealistic. Just as Prufrock has brief day-dreams of an idealised world of nymphs and mermaids, so the waking mind of this city-dweller too is stirred by a hazy desire for something more beautiful and better than urban life can offer. There is infinite pathos in the juxtaposing of "sparrows" and "gutters". This subtle and almost "invisible welding of the most contradictory elements, combined with that confusion of the senses, or rather fusion of the senses.....is the hall-mark of modern suggestive writing".²⁷⁰ T.S.Eliot uses this device throughout his poetry.

In Section IV the poet's personality intrudes and, whether it was his deliberate intention to protest or not, the denunciation against the stifling of the human spirit which modern life imposes rings out. This stanza describes the suffocating effect of the unrelieved dreariness of a day-to-day routine on the human spirit. The regimented life of modern man is at every hour "assured of certain certainties"; his daily movement is restricted within the circumscribed bounds of "city block" and "blackened street". A very modern image, which combines the surrealist with the metaphysical, pictures the tortured human soul on a vast rack, "stretched tight across the skies", and the poet's protest against man's suffering is muted for a moment beneath a tone of deep humanity. He sees man as

some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Then he dashes aside the note of pity and invites his reader to

270 J. Isaacs, The Background of Modern Poetry (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1951), p. 26.

laugh sardonically at the futility of it all. Life, the world, the universe is a meaningless gyration, a pitiful and unprofitable daily scrounging to which man must resort

Like ancient women 271
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

By the time we reach Part IV of Preludes, another dusk is descending upon the urban scene and man is returning from the "city block" to the "blackened street". The sense of a vast, all-enveloping twilight is so strong that one cannot help feeling that this darkening scene refers not to the microcosm of the metropolis but to the macrocosm of the earth and that the poet is actually thinking of the world entering into the twilight of Western civilisation.

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

There is a strange ambiguity, and an ambivalence of attitude on the part of the speaker/observer/poet in this final part of Preludes. If the whole poem is a satire upon the grimmer elements in modern life, it is certainly not the ferocious satire that Pope could produce. If there is protest against declining values in lines 8 and 9, where the idea seems to be that the ethos of a grimy street is being assumed by the entire world, there is also pity and the desire to arouse the reader's pity for the helplessness and loneliness of man.

Between 1916 and 1918 Eliot wrote the Quatrain Poems. These poems are much more ferocious than the earlier poems and

there is little, if any, gentleness or compassion in the harsh satire which he directs against people, social conduct and values, and even (as we shall see) against institutions, much in the manner of Blake. In the Quatrain Poems his tone is distinctly disillusioned and bitter. He sees society as debilitated and decadent, the Church as weak and torpid, men as materialistic and corrupt. Everywhere there is social chaos; civilisation is spiritually arid and rotten. He is preparing us for his vision of The Waste Land.

Because he cannot accept current valuations and must reject them, he mocks them, presents them in an ironic light. The Sweeney poems are perhaps the most devastating in their attack on the decadence of contemporary society. Sweeney is modern man - coarse, insensitive, gross, bestial, lacking even the vestige of a saving grace, devoid of even the pathos of Prufrock which at times transforms him into "an infinitely suffering thing". There are, of course, the fleeting touches of beauty to which reference was made earlier, but they are in the scene and the situation. Sweeney himself is wholly repugnant.

In two of these poems, Sweeney Erect and Sweeney Among the Nightingales, we find Sweeney involved in two sordid situations. Both poems are really dramatic sketches. In the former he is an uncouth, uncaring seducer. His crass insensitivity is given powerful embodiment in the delineation of him "broadbottomed, pink from nape to base", moving with "gesture of orang-outang" about the matutinal business of shaving and dressing, while the faded hag of a prostitute with whom he spent the night in "sheets of steam", proceeds to have an epileptic fit.²⁷² Her hysterical ravings and convulsive contortions ("clawing at the pillow-slip") upset the Madam of the brothel and the "ladies of the corridor". After all, such a commotion "does the house no sort of good". Doris, one of the rootless, aimlessly drifting people whom Eliot castigates in his earlier poems, comes to pacify the shrieking whore, and her slatternly déshabillé completes the picture of unrelieved sordidness:

But Doris, towelled from the bath,
Enters padding on broad feet,
Bringing sal volatile
And a glass of brandy neat.

272 Eliot, Sweeney Erect, Selected Poems, op. cit., pp.36-37.

Her method of dealing with the dilemma is inept and stupid, as inane as her way of life - as the way of life of contemporary man. In this poem Eliot makes use of a favourite technique and one which was at the time a complete innovation in English poetry. He uses the classical myth of Theseus and Ariadne to throw into ironic relief the ugly modern situation which it parallels. The prostitute's plight completely lacks the heroic colouring of Ariadne's predicament. Her uncontrolled conduct is sharply contrasted with Ariadne's dignified and noble sorrow. Without any comment by the poet, nobility is juxtaposed with ignobility. In the first two stanzas of the poem the poet paints the classical scene:

Paint me a cavernous waste shore
 Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,
 Paint me the bold anfractuous rocks
 Faced by the snarled and yelping seas.

Display me Aeolus above
 Reviewing the insurgent gales
 Which tangle Ariadne's hair
 And swell with haste the perjured sails.

He uses portentous language to give an inflated effect to the Greek picture and to echo the warning note of the epilogue, but the solemn, flowing movement of the lines smooth out the jarring, raucous quality of words like "cavernous", "Cyclades" and "anfractuous". In a remarkable way the harsh, rocky scene, the stridence of the sea, the insurgence of the gales and the treacherous flight of Theseus are all welded into a picture (paradoxically) of striking and moving beauty. One gains in the mind's eye a portrait of Ariadne, violated yet inviolate, calm and serene, silhouetted against a backdrop of Nature's turbulence which yet has a striking beauty.

And then comes the contrast, when "morning stirs the feet and hands" of "Apeneck Sweeney", and of the haggard whore with her

withered root of knots of hair
 Slitted below and gashed with eyes,
 This oval O cropped out with teeth:
 The sickle motion from the thighs.....

Here, indeed, is another of Eliot's startling, surrealistic pictures.

Perhaps this poet's most unquestionable protest was against debased and depraved modern love. Everywhere in his

poems he shows how it has degenerated into mere lust. Although Eliot's preoccupation with Time and his historical sense made him amply aware of the fact that corruption, seduction, debauchery, faithlessness and treachery were not evils confined solely to the modern way of life, the general deterioration of standards and values in the post-war period seemed to have deprived man of the indefinable dignity he had possessed in ruder times. When Sweeney himself becomes a victim of faithlessness and treachery in Sweeney Among the Nightingales,²⁷³ the sordid incident, his murder by some moronic thug, drab in his "mocha brown", is juxtaposed with the treachery committed by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus against Agamemnon. Images of the present scene are merged with a brief glimpse of the scene in the remote and tragic past, and although, as critics have pointed out, the nightingales singing near the Convent of the Sacred Heart do lend a touch of beauty and pity even to the modern scene, one cannot forget the cheap and beastly behaviour of "the person in the Spanish cape". Equally bestial is "Rachel née Rabinovitch" who "tears at the grapes with murderous claws". These people have no vitality or nobility or order. The assassin is a stupid hired killer; the women are sluts. Their movements suggest that they are scarcely human, but belong to some lower, cell-like form of life:

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws:

The tacit comparison with the Agamemnon/Clytemnestra situation can only act derogatively against the modern parallel.

In scene after scene, sometimes detailed, sometimes fleeting, the degradation of love is pictured in Eliot's poetry. In Portrait of a Lady²⁷⁴ we have the dramatic presentation of the tail-end of an illicit love-affair. The epilogue, taken from The Jew of Malta, is

Thou hast committed —
Fornication : but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.

The epilogue clarifies (as it often does in Eliot's poetry) the situation, and the indifference in the speaker's tone in the last line echoes the unconcern of the male partner in this

273 Eliot, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

274 Eliot, op. cit., pp. 17-21.

modern case of adultery. He is evidently a gigolo, tiring now of his aging mistress. Most of the scenes take place in what is evidently her boudoir and the whole atmosphere is sombre, "An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb". Here we have another of Eliot's devices, the use of literary allusions, often real or parodied quotations from earlier English poetry and drama, to achieve certain effects, usually ironic. The modern poet of protest, we notice, has many new weapons.

In Portrait of a Lady (and the title, incidentally, is taken from Henry James's famous novel and used ironically) the sexual relationship is less uncouth, coarse and animal than those in the later Quatrain Poems, but we have in the relationship the same frustration, disillusionment and sense of futility as are found in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. There is also the same implicit authorial censure of the inanity of polite society with its pseudo-intellectual conversation about a musical recital the couple have attended, censure of the trivial pastimes in which socialites indulge and of their inability to communicate. This incapacity in modern life is a recurrent theme in Eliot's poetry, as it was, also, in the poetry of D.H. Lawrence.

Like the Prufrock poem with its women "who come and go/Talking of Michelangelo",²⁷⁵ this poem, too, has refrains woven into its musical composition: "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance", and "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends". Both refrains conjure up visions of a life without purpose or values. Its emptiness and sameness are summed up in the list of suggestions this lover makes to his mistress as to how they should spend the rest of the afternoon. With infinite tedium in his voice he proposes:

— Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.²⁷⁶

We are reminded of Prufrock here and his equally inane "taking of a toast and tea" or the "butter scones and crumpets" over which (as another poem tells)

275 Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Selected Poems, op. cit., p. 11.

276 Eliot, Portrait of a Lady, op. cit., p. 17.

weeping, weeping multitudes 277
 Droop in a hundred A.B.C s.

These lines from A Cooking Egg also symbolise the futility of modern life. Modern man "weeps" because of his sense of loss, because of the past glory that is gone and because of the simple idealistic world which has been swallowed up by the new world and its false values of Position and Capital and Social Status.

In The Waste Land there are other pictures of and references to seduction, violation, and the degradation of modern love into lust. In Part II, A Game of Chess, we have a picture of a spoilt, frustrated, querulous, neurotic, twentieth-century courtesan surrounded by all the wealth and luxury which a rich lover can bestow: "The glitter of her jewels", "vials of ivory", "satin cases poured in rich profusion".²⁷⁸ The scene which Eliot paints so colourfully here is very reminiscent of Pope's mocking picture of Belinda seated at her dressing-table, and Pope's censure of the vanity and folly of idle socialite women is bound to echo vaguely in the mind as one reads Eliot's boudoir scene. In spite of all her worldly possessions, this pampered strumpet is tense and dissatisfied, complains petulantly about her "nerves" and about the noise of "the wind under her door". Her paramour answers her in a weary tone, for he is, no doubt, as balked of real satisfaction and as aimless as she is:

I think we are in rats' alley
 Where the dead men lost their bones.

Rats and bones often figure in Eliot's imagery and their associations are so obvious that comment is hardly required.

The poet's protest against the artificiality and lack of meaning in contemporary human relationships is subtly expressed when, by means of an echo, a parallelism, from Shakespeare in the first line, he forces his reader to compare the frustrated mistress and her "sugar daddy" who sneaks up the stairs, with the passionate and heroic love of Anthony and Cleopatra:

The Chair she sat in like a burnished throne
 Glowed on the marble.....

The parodying of Shakespeare's lines has a startling effect and

277 Eliot, A Cooking Egg, op. cit., p. 39.

278 Eliot, The Waste Land, II, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

packs a tremendous punch into the satire. This use of parody for ironic purposes is another revolutionary poetic device which Eliot uses quite frequently.

A little further on in the opening lines of A Game of Chess the poet describes a picture hanging above the mantelpiece in the over-heated, over-furnished room, where the disorderly array of cosmetics and synthetic perfumes reflects the spiritual chaos and the sham values of its occupants:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice...

The casual reference to the myth of the rape of Philomel by Tereus and the "sylvan scene" and the "inviolable voice", which still remained despite her ravishment, compels the reader to compare the earlier violation and its ennobling grandeur with its squalid modern counterpart. There is more to it even than that. Eliot's technique is extremely complex and so subtle that each repeated reading of his poetry reveals some new thought or leads to the discovery of some implication hitherto missed. The lines just quoted do not only present for consideration the similarity and yet the dissimilarity between the myth and the modern reality. The framed picture on the wall which is like "a window" letting in the fresh sweet air of "the sylvan scene" acts as a foil to and thus reinforces the scene already imprinted on the mind of the stifling clutter of the room with its "sevenbranched candelabra", the "prolonged candle-flames", the "smoke" and "the firelight". We have, therefore, the amalgamation of a double contrast that appeals to both senses and intellect.

The whole modern social order and its spiritual shabbiness is dramatically presented in A Game of Chess, for later in this section we have the distasteful pub monologue of the vulgar little barmaid discussing her sister's marital affairs with coarse candour. In Part III, The Fire Sermon, there are other references to tawdry weekend liaisons and lewd love-making in sordid bed-sittingrooms, in public gardens, on riverbanks, on Margate sands and in canoes. The whole of Section III is a revelation of what is referred to today as "permissiveness". It would seem, from Eliot's poetry, that it had

already begun to sprout in the second and third decades. Woman had become debased (she was little better than Sweeney) and the poet's portraits of the female sex are all derogatory. His women are trulls and trollops. Their relationship with men is like a game of chess (as the title of Part II of The Waste Land indicates), where they play for advantage and where the game ends in stalemate. In the relationship between the sexes there is the same inability to communicate which characterises all human relationships. Again and again Eliot exposes this weakness in contemporary life, and in the exposure lies the protest.

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass 279
In our dry cellar.

The poem, The Hippopotamus, is perhaps the clearest example of the voice of protest in Eliot's poetry. It is of particular interest in this study because of the fact that there is something very Blake-like in the subject-matter, if not in the diction. This poem reminds the reader vaguely of The Little Vagabond and other Songs in which Blake attacks the Church. The Hippopotamus²⁸⁰ constitutes a scathing assault on the loss of spiritual vigour, the smugness, the materialism, sham and hypocrisy of the Church. Some of these evils are the very ones which Blake censured. In Eliot's poem the people, too, the masses, are castigated and satirized for their grossness and spiritual weakness.

The broad-backed hippopotamus
Rests on his belly in the mud;
Although he seems so firm to us
He is merely flesh and blood.

Flesh and blood is weak and frail,
Susceptible to nervous shock;
While the True Church can never fail
For it is based upon a rock.

The hippo's feeble steps may err
In compassing material ends,
While the True Church need never stir
To gather in its dividends.

279 Eliot, The Hollow Men, Part I, op. cit., p. 77.

280 Eliot, The Hippopotamus, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

The 'potamus can never reach
 The mango on the mango-tree;
 But fruits of pomegranate and peach
 Refresh the Church from over sea.

At mating time the hippo's voice
 Betrays inflexions hoarse and odd,
 But every week we hear rejoice
 The Church, at being one with God.

The hippopotamus's day
 Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
 God works in a mysterious way —
 The Church can sleep and feed at once.

I saw the 'potamus take wing
 Ascending from the damp savannas,
 And quiring angels round him sing
 The praise of God, in loud hosannas.

Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean
 And him shall heavenly arms enfold,
 Among the saints he shall be seen
 Performing on a harp of gold.

He shall be washed as white as snow,
 By all the martyr'd virgins kist,
 While the True Church remains below
 Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.

The hippopotamus, of course, symbolises the masses - physically strong and superficially "firm", but actually lacking in mental and spiritual vitality. The rather pedestrian diction with its anatomical bias and the sagging movement of the second line give a curious flatness and inanimate quality to the first stanza. This flatness is further achieved chiefly by the use of the series of short, monosyllabic words (except for "belly") following immediately after the polysyllabic "hippopotamus". The beast is "broad-backed", which suggests both the magnitude of the populace and a coarse physical strength of a plebeian kind. The crude word "belly", juxtaposed with "mud" and its unpleasant connotations, adds to the whole picture of inelegant grossness. The verb "rests" is also significant and apt, suggesting lethargy and inertia.

Stanza 2 is loaded with sardonic irony. This mountainous beast is "weak and frail" and might even suffer a nervous breakdown. There is a touch of the Eliotesque humour here, which we are all sometimes inclined to miss. M. L. Rosenthal has pointed this out. He says, "So much has been

made of the philosophical and theological convolutions of [Eliot's] work that the foundations of his appeal - evocative skill, aliveness to rhythmic overtones, bold dramatic portraiture, and joyous tomfoolery [my emphasis] - have been obscured...".²⁸¹ Of course the humour here, as in other places in Eliot's poetry, is always used satirically, to point to the paltriness of modern man. The most biting irony in stanza 2 is obviously contained in the last two subordinate clauses:

While the True Church can never fail
For it is based upon a rock.

The word "True" is used satirically and ironically, and the Church's foundation on a "rock" (a Biblical and traditional concept) reminds the reader, with a touch of sardonic humour, that the hippopotamus (the masses) is "based" upon "mud". The full force of the poet's irony is apprehended in the third stanza, where the attack on a Church that is dormant, lethargic and worldly is perfectly plain. There are two levels of irony, the second overlaid upon the first and both depending on the verbs in the stanza. Eliot's verbs are always very carefully chosen and very meaningful. Beneath the irony of lines 3 and 4 there is another ironic implication, namely, that the Church, besides being quiescent and debilitated, is also (or regards itself as) infallible; only the populace "may err". There is a wealth of contempt in the simple verbs "stir" and "to gather in". The latter verb also infers that the Church is greedy and grasping, mingling blatant avarice with its materialism. Eliot's attack on this vice in the Church is fierce and a far cry from some of Chaucer's indulgent censure of this evil in his ecclesiastics, except, of course, his savage attack on The Pardoner.

There can be no beauty in the lives of the populace, the fourth stanza tells us. The lack of beauty in modern urban life, the lack of beauty in modern sexual relationships, the lack of beauty everywhere in contemporary life, are constantly recurring themes in Eliot's poetry, as we see, for example, when Prufrock laments the fact that the mermaids will never "sing to me". In Fragment of an Agon Sweeney tells Doris that life

281 M.L. Rosenthal, op. cit., p. 76.

is just a dreary sameness:

Birth, and copulation, and death.

No wonder that T.S. Pearce says of these Sweeney poems that they picture "a debilitated and rotten civilisation".²⁸² Scattered throughout The Waste Land, too, particularly in Part III, we find exposure of, and with it protest and the implied expression of revulsion against, the grossness of human sexual relationships. Elizabeth and Leicester's "gilded shell/Red and gold" has become "a narrow canoe". There is no longer any beauty in the night and in the moonlight, as Rhapsody on a Windy Night makes very plain.

Stanza 4 of The Hippopotamus carries the burden of the poet's censure: the masses derive few benefits, enjoy no refinements, and struggle to make a living, the exotic fruit, the mango, being symbolical of luxury. Antithetically, the Church lives in wealth and plenty, provided for by the munificence and largesse of its adherents all over the world. The comparison between proletariat and Church is carried on through the next two quatrains. The subject-matter of verse 5 is very similar to much of Blake's criticism of the Church. Its teachings offer only cold comfort and it is quite out of touch with the people. "Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold", wailed the Little Vagabond in Blake's poem. Eliot implies that the Church turns a cold and callous ear to "the hippo's voice" and smugly rejoices about its own at-one-ment with God.

However, it is important to notice that Eliot is censuring not only the clergy but also the laity. The animality of the people, their lack of spirituality and their grossly carnal nature are attacked in the references to the hippopotamus's way of life which, the poet seems to imply, is purely sensual and consists entirely in the activities of mating, sleeping and hunting. Here we think again of Sweeney's cynical and world-weary words to Doris quoted in a previous paragraph.

There is great compression of meaning in these two stanzas (5 and 6) and the cynical irony verges almost on the blasphemous when the hippo's mating is spoken of in the same breath as the Church's "being one with God". The most satirical hint at the apathy and passivity of the Church lies in the

282 T.S. Pearce, T.S. Eliot (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1967), p. 21.

implication contained in the last line of stanza 6 :

The Church can sleep and feed at once.

In the line preceding this, we have an example of the Eliotesque device of weaving a quotation from some other literary source in amongst his own lines. In this case the quotation is a line from Cowper's famous hymn:

God works in a mysterious way—

The quotation is inserted for ironic purposes. After it we again have Eliot's subtle and functional use of punctuation. In this case he uses a dash which usually indicates the breaking off of a thought. Here it also draws attention to the absurdly comic idea of the Church feeding and sleeping simultaneously; it is too lethargic to rouse itself even to eat. Furthermore, there is the implication that the Church will explain this virtually impossible physical feat by attributing it to "God's mysterious ways". The rest of the sentence from Cowper's hymn also stirs in the memory: "His wonders to perform", and one feels vaguely that there is some additional innuendo hidden in the stanza, namely, that it would require one of God's miracles to shake the Church out of its torpor.

Eliot's aliveness to rhythmic overtones is very apparent in this verse. The metre is jerky and clumsy in the first and third lines because of the single polysyllabic word in each. Lines two and four are smooth-flowing, all the words being monosyllabic. The strong caesura in line two (marked by the semicolon) helps to draw attention to the bestial quality of man's life, besides alerting the reader to the slight touch of humour mixed with disdain in the poet's tone. The disturbing effect which this discordant arrangement of words and lines achieves and the mingling of the animal with the spiritual echoes the chaotic state of affairs existing in the religious sphere of modern life as well as in the temporal world.

The last three stanzas constitute a poetic vision which is a brilliant balancing of absurdity and pathos. Suddenly the ponderous and lumbering hippopotamus which has been resting "on his belly in the mud", takes wing, "ascending from the damp savannas" and rises heavenwards, surrounded by "quivering angels". The reader wonders whether Eliot chose this particular spelling of "choir" deliberately. If so, it constitutes a kind of pun.

The word might have auditory associations for some readers with "enquiring", and this would add another comic touch to the scene: a picture of startled angels wondering at the odd new arrival at the gates of Heaven. This pun (if it is one) adds a sardonic note to the complex poetic tone and feeling and makes the picture of the flying hippopotamus even more grotesque.

Despite the comic element, Eliot's vision in these last three stanzas is actually serious and didactic: the poet sees the people, despite their grossness, soaring up to God and acceptable in His sight. They shall be redeemed by the "Blood of the Lamb", and the poet puts his message across notwithstanding the ribald picture in the last line of stanza 8 of the angelic hippopotamus playing a golden harp. As for the True Church, the poet evidently feels that it is beyond salvation, irretrievably enveloped in and bound by its own corruption. Note how the words in the final line-and-a-half have a cumulative quality, all suggesting debasement, enslavement, bondage and fetid pollution. The attack on the Church in The Hippopotamus is so scathing that it is difficult to believe that the same poet could have written this poem and also The Journey of the Magi, The Rock and others which were composed after Eliot's reconciliation with religion and his conversion to the Anglican Faith.

Although there is the similarity already remarked on between Blake's protest against the Church and that of Eliot in The Hippopotamus, the dissimilarity of the two styles cannot be overlooked. The verse form in the latter poem is Blakeian. Blake frequently used quatrains in his Songs, and stanza 2 of The Hippopotamus has a hymnal quality in its metre that resembles some of the earlier poet's verses. There is, furthermore, the same compression of meaning which is found in Blake's poetry, but there the similarity ends; the whole tone, spirit, diction and imagery are quite different. The Hippopotamus is very definitely modern poetry, with its use of colloquial words, its symbolism, literary echoes, juxtaposing of the ugly and the beautiful for ironic effect, and other modernities. In the manner, as well as in the matter, of his poetry, Eliot was undoubtedly a rebel (or protester). He rebelled against the insipid state into which English poetry had sunk and proceeded to revitalise it by the use of elements of strength in the English tradition which had long fallen into disuse: wit,

broad humour, the anti-heroic and unromantic treatment of his protagonists, vivid and frank treatment of sexuality, experimental prosody, the use of a dramatic episode as the structural basis of a poem to state what in the nineteenth century particularly would have been communicated by lyrical explanation, the elimination of connective material, and the use of myth as a mirror with which to confront the modern world and to show modern man what he is and at the same time what he might be.

The Hippopotamus is not Eliot's only poem of protest directed against the Church. In Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning he also strikes at the decadent spiritual state of this institution. This poem is even more revolutionary in diction and style, with its larding of "unpoetic" words and verbal monstrosities like "polyphiloprogenitive", "superfetation", "pustular" and "piaculative".²⁸³ It has, however, little appeal, either sensory or emotional, and does not have the penetrating force of The Hippopotamus.

Space will not permit of discussion of any more of Eliot's poems. He was, of course, not the only author of poetry of protest in the first three decades of our century, besides the war poets, and brief reference has been made in this chapter to Yeats and Pound. But Eliot's greatness as a poet is so undoubted that the verse of his contemporaries is considerably overshadowed. He is great not only because of his artistic genius and strikingly new techniques, but because his vision of the post-war world is, as M.C. Bradbrook tells us, "a cosmic vision, seen on a small scale".²⁸⁴ His protest is, consequently, probably the most extensive in all English poetry. Writing about The Waste Land, Frank Wilson says that this poem is "the summing up, in its most significant form, of his attitude to the world [my emphasis] he rejects".²⁸⁵ And this critic continues: "Eliot does not attempt to penetrate the individual rubbish, but condemns en masse [my emphasis] what he considers to be offenders against fertility, both physical and spiritual".²⁸⁶ This study has attempted to show how Eliot's protest was not directed against any "individual rubbish" or

283 Eliot, op. cit., p. 44.

284 Bradbrook, op. cit., p. 17.

285 Wilson, op. cit., p. 31.

286 Wilson, loc. cit.

single evils which he rejected, but it was a comprehensive indictment of a set of values and a whole ethos which he renounced.

Eliot took his art seriously. George Williamson writes of him: "He is a conscious poet, who has speculated about the nature and function of poetry, particularly in our time. His poetry is the product of one who believes that poetry is neither play, nor random experiment, nor something that is achieved without the fullest exertion of his powers".²⁸⁷ This assertion explains very fully and accurately the reason for Eliot's giant stature as a poet of the twentieth century. Williamson continues: "Nor is it, despite his (Eliot's) vehement qualifications, something unrelated to experience, both his own and that of the race".²⁸⁸ It is the extent of Eliot's exploration of perceptions and values which have always been memorable for mankind, the extent of his revelation of the degeneracy of such values in contemporary life, which constitute his greatness as a modern protester. He created a vision of his age. He invites his readers to see the ugliness, the boredom, the spiritual aridity, but he does not lose sight of the beauty and the glory. Jay Martin, writing in his essay, "T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*" about the poet's mythical method, has summed up both the importance of the method and at the same time Eliot's contribution to English poetry of protest very clearly:

Where history appears so disordered, the poetic backward glance may give meaning to the present, which becomes significant through the realisation of what has been destroyed or lost in it. In this sense, the mythical method is basically satirical. It provides the author with a point of view and a set of standards which give power to his invective and tragic weight to his criticism.....In the complex similarities between all times, in a point of view emphasising the circularity of history, he finds both irony and hope. His apprehension of history is so neutral that he can escape the apparent decadence of the present and imagine a revived future. 289

But there is no doubt that he does reveal the "decadence of the present", and this is what entitles him to be called a

287 George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot (London: Thames & Hudson, 1955), p. 27.

288 Ibid.

289 Jay Martin, ed. A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 7.

poet of protest and to occupy an important place in this study. He had many who followed in his footsteps in the third decade and later decades of our century, Louis MacNeice, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas, to mention only a few. It would be most unjust to label them as imitators; many of them are great poets in their own rights, but the work of none of these has made the same impact or reached anywhere near the extent of the field of protest which Eliot's poetry encompasses.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

Our search for the voice of protest in English poetry has led us on a long wandering through more than seven centuries. It has naturally been necessary, in such a vast survey, to close our ears to many of the protesting voices raised through the ages and to select only those of poets of unquestionable pre-eminence whose poetry is unmistakably protesting.

Bonamy Dobrée calls the writers of such poetry "contumacious". He defines the contumacious poet as "one who finds himself ill at ease in life, unable to accept current valuations, urged to mock, to flout, to outrage; he is hurt by life; he will harden, but cannot rot into cynicism".²⁹⁰ The poets who have been discussed in this study have not all set out "to flout" or "to outrage" (although one might safely say, I think, that D.H. Lawrence was often quite "outrageous"); they have, however, all been "ill at ease in life" and "unable to accept current valuations". It is particularly for this element in English poetry that I have searched. This has been to a large extent the criterion for the labelling of the poets discussed as "poets of protest". Dobrée cites T.S. Eliot as very definitely "the child . . . of the poète contumace . . ." and he goes on to explain how poets of this kind "will not be bound by any accepted doctrine of poetry".²⁹¹ Where this aspect of the poet's protest has been applicable, an attempt has been made to point it out.

Although much protesting verse has had to be eliminated for the reasons already listed, it should be clear from all the poetry that has in fact been quoted and considered in this study that major English poets have all had a strong sense of their own particular age and have not been afraid of using their art to speak out against such things as were unacceptable or repugnant to them. It would seem that in earlier centuries the protest was less obtrusive. We saw that in Chaucer's

290 Bonamy Dobrée, op. cit., p. 109-110.

291 Ibid.

protest against human weaknesses and contemporary abuses in Church and society the breadth of his humanity and his kindly tolerance limited his protest. Later poets seem to have used a more pungent satire and to have exposed more mercilessly those values in their generations which ran counter to their own.

As the tone of protest became more severe, more complicated techniques and devices were required, and the simple satire of the earlier poets, achieved by the use of irony and inference, was not enough. All the resources of rhythm and sound, every contrivance and artifice at the poet's command, were thrown into the later protest. David Daiches labels the years 1914-1935 as "the great experimental period of modern English literature"²⁹² and says that "In poetry, the revolution wrought by Pound and Eliot and the later Yeats, by the new influence of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals and of Hopkins changed the poetic map of the country".²⁹³ There is no doubt about the validity of this assertion. The interest in the plight of the common man which ran so strongly through the verse of the war poets, irrespective of any political issues at stake, had in it a touch of denationalized humanitarianism, and this runs also through the poetry of Eliot and of many of the modern poets who followed him from the 1930s onwards. Even when Eliot writes of London, it is an "Unreal City" and could be any city. What he deplores in it are those things which might be found in any metropolis, for (as I tried to show in Chapter IX) his exposure encompasses the dreary dullness of days of regimented modern man, the life of cosmopolitan Europe.

Such all-embracing protest was a far cry from the poetic attacks on specific practices, on follies and vanities of specific social classes, on specific systems such as the exploitation of children, on particular theories both political and economic and on particular aspects of government. Eliot's poetry does not spotlight a few targets of attack; he uses "a light of incredible intensity showing past and present in perspective".²⁹⁴ Of The Waste Land, which is surely the consummation of Eliot's picture of vice and futility in modern manners, H.V.Routh says that the poet "no longer confines

292 Daiches, op. cit., p. 4.

293 Daiches, op. cit., p. 4.

294 Bullough, op. cit., p. 156.

himself to the absurdities and abuses of modern civilisation, but strikes to its roots [my emphasis], or rather its lack of roots." ²⁹⁵ To its roots..... this is the important point about Eliot's exposure of the general modern decadence. His protest probes deeply. Furthermore, just as Eliot did not believe in expressing emotion but rather in evoking it, so also his protest tends to be not so much expressed by the poet as evoked in the reader. This has become an important feature of all modern poetry, and is, possibly, the special quality which gives to twentieth-century poetic protest its particular power.

Though the frame of reference of this study, as regards time, ends with the 1930s and we should therefore not extend our search beyond this decade, it is interesting to note that forty years after the publication of The Waste Land much the same things, in much the same manner, were being said in protest against our civilisation by English poets. Here is Louis MacNeice's poem, New Jerusalem (1962):

Bulldoze all memories and sanctuaries: our birthright
Means a new city, vertical, impersonal,
Whose horoscope claimed a straight resurrection
Should stimulant stand in conjunction with Sleeping Pill.

As for the citizens, what with their cabinets
Of faces and voices, their bags of music
Their walls of thin ice dividing greynesses,
With numbers and mirrors they defy mortality.

So come up Lazarus: just a spot of make-up
Is all you need and a steel corset
And two glass eyes, we will teach you to touch-type
And give you a police dog to navigate the rush hour.

With all this rebuilding we have found an antidote
To quiet and self-communing: from now on nobody
Strolling the streets need lapse into timelessness.
Or ponder the simple unanswerable questions.

Wheels upon wheels never moving, Ezekiel
Finds himself in a canyon of concrete;
Cage upon cage, Daniel goes feeling
From one to the next in search of a carnivore.

But, that Babel may rise, they must first work downward
To sublimate previous and premature foundations.
Bulldozer, dinosaur, pinheaded diplodocus,
Champ up forgotten and long-dry water-pipes.

The voice of protest continues in English poetry.

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295 H.V.Routh, English Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1946), p. 164.

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