

Modern English Poetry: A Critical Survey*

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Like good literature of past ages, significant writings of the present century have been influenced and conditioned by the writers' imaginative responses to the changes—political, social, philosophical and moral—that have characterized our times. Leonard Woolf observed in 1931: 'In August 1914 something happened in the world. This happening lasted only four years, though the ripple of the events continues over the world's surface.'¹ The First World War, to which Woolf alludes here, was an apocalyptic event in modern English history: it brought to the surface the 'crisis' which had been brewing for at least some years, and this 'crisis' was to pervade life during the succeeding decades.

Though pre-industrial ways of life came under constant threat throughout the nineteenth-century, it was only in later years that the break finally did come about with the establishment of the supremacy of science and industry. With the gradual disappearance of the agricultural communities—and organic cultures and the spiritual values that they embodied—there appeared a spiritual vacuum in the lives of the people. A growing materialism and fierce competitive spirit seemed to guide and order most human actions and aspirations. Man began to be reduced to the economic level as a result of the continuing diminution of his spiritual identity. This process was hastened by the increasingly popular Marxist view of man as being moulded by economic and social forces. Another blow at man's spirituality was struck by Freud and his followers who pointed out that man was mainly a biological phenomenon and that he was governed by the 'unconscious' within him. All such developments have changed the very nature of man, as it were, and since it has become impossible to accept the traditional ways of looking at the world, man has found himself in a state of 'crisis,' bewilderment, perplexity and ultimately disillusionment. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is the more sensitive members of the society, poets and artists, who have responded acutely to such a predicament of the modern man. But, it is important to remember, at the very outset, that though the artist of this century unflinchingly recognizes and reflects the perplexities and the spiritual degradation of man, he also succeeds, in many a case, in affirming life. In other words, the work of the modern artist is not nihilistic simply because he depicts man's loss of spirituality and his debasement in a world of materialism and fierce competition: as an American critic has put it, 'poetry can be affirmative even when it cuts painfully into the bone so as to affirm the marrow.'² Such an affirmation is not only confined to the courage with which the modern man has explored the painful realities of human existence. As we shall see, some of the major poets of our times have been able to discover (or re-discover) some positive values which

*A translated version of this article appeared in my *Modern English Poetry* (Tokyo: Kaibunsha, 1982).

might make human life worth living. By doing so they have retained their place in the long English poetic tradition which the Anglo-Saxon poets started by showing man's capacity for endurance, courage and determination in the face of the sorrows, the sufferings and disillusionments of life.

Although traces of the modernist themes can be found throughout the nineteenth-century English literature, it was only towards the end of the century that English poetry decisively sought a new direction. A superficial reading of the poetry of the 1890's might give the impression that it was concerned with the creation of 'aesthetic dream worlds' and that the poets and artists ignored the harsher realities of the outside world. But, in fact, this poetry grew out of the contemporary realities whose debased materialism was rejected by it in favour of aesthetic values. It reflected the gap between the poet and the public which later on became so characteristic of the modern poetic situation. However, the poets of the 1890's failed to make a lasting impact on the contemporary poetic scene because they lacked vigour and vitality. Their disgust with the world did not result in anything positive, it only produced a sense of weariness and boredom, of pallid indifference. In matters of technique, though poets like Dowson and Lionel Johnson made interesting experiments, they were generally conventional in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelites, using hackneyed and romantic images and diction.

Thus we find that much of the poetry written in the opening decades of this century was going away from, and reacting against, the poetry of the last few years of the nineteenth-century. This can be regarded as an attempt to go back to the traditional themes and modes. Among the 'Edwardian Poets' (so called because they wrote some of their best poems during the reign of King Edward VI, 1901-1910) there was an undisguised attempt to write verses of noisy, and often vulgar, broad appeal. Poets like Kipling, Newbolt, Noyes and Chesterton tried to bridge the gap between the poet and the public, and in attempting to do so they pandered to a vein of unself-critical popular sentiments. Thus for instance, though Queen Victoria was now dead, these poets reflected in their poetry the popular wish to maintain Victorian self-confidence and believe in the Imperial destiny of the English nation. They were unashamedly 'patriotic' and they advocated the values of loyalty and obedience in order to carry out 'the white man's burden.' Their poems were brassy and popular in a vulgar, journalistic sense rather than deep or significantly human. The other, and more interesting, kind of poems that the Edwardians wrote were those that aimed at exalting simplicity. The obvious weakness of such poems was their narrowness of outlook and an absence of depth and complexity. But they wrote accomplished poems, displaying poetic powers and technical skills—in such poems as those by Kipling, for instance, one is struck by the sincerity and honesty of sentiments and by his skill in using the techniques of the ballad-form and the rhythms of colloquial speech for creating a dramatic effect. Another group of poets, consisting of Robert Bridges, Sturge Moore and Laurence Binyon—though they were not a conscious literary group—retreated into a world of myths, books and scholarship, and wrote quasi-philosophical poems and translations of classical works in skilful prosodic lines. However, they do not seem to have made any significant

impact on the contemporary scene or indeed on the history of English poetry of the twentieth-century, mainly because they appear to have constituted an isolated group of cultivated and slightly pedantic gentlemen for whom poetry was predominantly a 'cultural' activity.

A serious challenge to the above-mentioned poetic trends came from the Georgian poets. A senior civil servant, Edward Marsh, who was a lover of poetry and painting, edited a series of volumes of poetry between the years 1911–22. The anthologies appeared under the title, *Georgian Poetry* (thus acknowledging the ascendance to the throne of George V in 1910), and in the Prefatory Note to the first volume, *Georgian Poetry (1911–12)*, Marsh made the following claim:

This volume is issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on new strength and beauty.

Few readers have the leisure or the zeal to investigate each volume as it appears; and the process of recognition is often slow. This collection, drawn entirely from the publication of the past two years may, if it is fortunate, help the lovers of poetry to realize that we are at the beginning of another 'Georgian Period' which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past.

Marsh brought out four more anthologies in 1915, 1917, 1919 and 1922, and all in all he represented the work of forty poets. What gave unity to the poems contained in these five volumes by diverse poets was the editor's poetic taste. As a reader, and editor, of poetry, Marsh had expressed his admiration for poems that were 'intelligible, musical and racy,'³ and most of the poems that he included in his anthologies can be said to fulfil these modest requirements. But Marsh's claims for the anthologies (quoted above) were less modest. He thought that he was introducing poems of 'a new strength and beauty' which heralded a new age in English poetry. This, of course, meant a rejection of the poetry that had been written in England in the immediate past, of the 'aesthetic' poetry of the 1890's as well as that of the hearty, irresponsible Edwardians. Avoiding these dangers of their predecessors, the Georgians, it is claimed, wrote poetry which made 'an attempt to come to terms with immediate experience, sensuous or imaginative, in a language close to common speech.'⁴ In other words, the Georgians were more 'realistic' both in their theme and style. Using a 'selection from the real language of men' they wrote about ordinary human experiences. Nature was by far their favourite subject and they wrote about English farms and fields, birds and beasts with a caressing delight. Their poems were generally concerned with descriptions of natural objects and their gentle pleasure in them. The Georgians were very English in that they drew upon the long tradition of English poetry which consisted in noting homely details and describing them in simple, everyday language. This point is significant, particularly because English poetry was to become more and more 'cosmopolitan' and 'international' in its theme and technique in the subsequent years. In fact, the poets who came to dominate the English poetic scene in the twenties and the thirties by bringing about the 'modernist' revolution expressed their dissatisfaction with

Georgian poetry for its provincialism, escapism (from the harsher realities of modern life) and a feeble, diluted traditionalism in style and technique. Thus when in 1934, C. Day Lewis tried to trace the development of English poetry during the post-war years, he dismissed the Georgians as a 'sadly pedestrian rabble,'⁵ and Stephen Spender has recalled that his generation of sensitive young men were attracted by the writings of Eliot and Lawrence rather than the Georgians because the latter 'did not seem to touch our lives at any point.'⁶

Before we go on to discuss *the* 'modernist' revolution in English poetry, it is well to remember that there were at least two major poets, Hopkins and Hardy, who have had a significant influence on English poetry of this century even though they did not subscribe to any new literary manifesto. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a rather isolated figure who felt himself cut off from the mainstream of life: he was born an Anglo-Catholic but while at Oxford (where he proved to be a brilliant scholar) he was deeply attracted by Catholicism, and soon after leaving university he became a Jesuit priest. In this role he led a life of religious discipline and asceticism devoting all his time and energy to the tasks assigned to him by his church superiors. He wrote no poetry for seven years: in fact, he burned most of his early poems. It was only when one of his superiors suggested that he might compose a poem on the subject of the tragic death of five nuns on board the German ship *The Deutschland*, which had been wrecked in a snow-storm, that Hopkins returned to poetry. But because of the new techniques that he had adopted and the unusual nature of his poetic subject-matter, his poems remained mainly unpublished during his life-time. It was not until 1918 that his friend, the poet Robert Bridges, published a selection of Hopkins's poems in a single volume, and real poetic recognition came to him only in the 1930s and after-years. Now he is hailed as one of the major 'modern' poets and the fact that he lived and died during the Victorian era is mentioned in order to emphasise the fact that he was singularly different from the poets of his time.

Hopkins believed that the highest poetry uses the language of inspiration. His own poetry was written in the rhythms of contemporary speech, but it was 'heightened' under the pressure of poetic inspiration. His style was masculine and muscular; the metre that he used was also different in that he employed what is often described as 'sprung-rhythm.' He emphasised the importance of stresses and disregarded the number of syllables in a given line of verse. That is to say, the length of a line depended on the number of stresses rather than syllables. He used this and other such technical innovations for expressing his unique vision of life which, of course, was based on deep religious faith. He was greatly sensitive to the sensuous aspects of life and nature, and at the same time he was aware of the spiritual emptiness in the lives of the people around him. His poetry combines sensuousness and spirituality. In sonnets like 'Pied Beauty' and 'The Windhover' the perception of sensuous beauty in nature is intensified by an awareness of its link with things spiritual. But he also knew that the industrial Victorian world was ugly and that everything around him was 'seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil' ('God's Grandeur'). This suggested the spiritual sterility in men. Hopkins

realized this but he did not allow himself to sink into despair. He had every faith that God, being merciful, will renew man's life as He renews nature.

In Hopkins's later poems (which are often called 'the terrible sonnets') joy in the sensuous beauty of the world almost disappears, and what we have in the poems instead is the deep agony and feelings of abandonment by God. The poet never loses his faith in God but is, nevertheless, full of conflict, anguish, anxiety and almost despair. These feelings might be related to Hopkins's personal sense of frustration in his later life when he felt that he was isolated from the cultural, social and literary life of the times, and perhaps to the fact that he did not get the comfort that he had hoped to find from his religious faith. His poems of this period are remarkable for embodying the authentic doubts and debates that went on in the mind of a deeply religious poet. It is in this context that one can see how different Hopkins was from his contemporary Victorian poets and how he shows affinities with the 'modern' poets who were to come subsequently: F R Leavis explains such affinities in these words, '... a technique so much concerned with inner division, friction, and psychological complexities in general has a special bearing on the problems of contemporary poetry.'⁷

Thomas Hardy's case illustrates a strange paradox in the history of modern English poetry. On the one hand, he was considered to be 'traditional' rather than 'modern' because his verse-technique showed no attempt to 'experiment' and 'innovate' and his themes and setting were generally rural and not urban and cosmopolitan. On the other hand, he influenced succeeding generations of poets like Robert Graves, W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin. Indeed, Hardy is now regarded almost universally as a major poet of this century and this has something to do (as we shall see) with the reaction against 'modernism' in the post-war years. More significantly, Hardy's poetry appeals to the modern man even though it does not attempt to break away from the form and technique of traditional English poetry in order to adequately project the peculiar predicament of man in the twentieth century. I. A. Richards placed Hardy among the modern writers because he 'has courageously accepted the modern background' which Richards has described in his *Science And Poetry* (1926) as 'the neutralization of nature.' Richards speaks there of the breakdown of traditional values which has resulted in great changes in the human situation, and he believes that Hardy's poetry reflects these changes, and that the poet refuses to be comforted by any facile belief in imperialism or pantheism as the Edwardians and the Georgians seemed to have been. Much of his poetry is born out of the tension between the traditional world-view that he had inherited from his fore-fathers, and the philosophy of the nineteenth-century thinkers who rejected God's role in the creation of the world. He has a tragic sense of life and his poetry conveys this sense, not through abstract speculations but by embodying it in personal experiences and ordinary events. His poems deal with various subjects, the man-woman relationship, war, social and religious problems, but underlying them all is the feeling that nature or God is indifferent, if not hostile, to human aspirations and values. What makes such feelings authentic and poignant is Hardy's rendering of them in personal and easily comprehensible terms. Thus love's sorrow as expressed in intensely personal

poems like 'Neutral Tones' and 'The Voice' has the genuineness and honesty of felt experience, and at the same time there are suggestions to the effect that the poet's own sorrow has universal significance. The natural background in both these poems (bleak and autumnal) helps to broaden the picture of sadness, disappointment, betrayal and failure. Hardy inhabits a tragic universe in which the 'Immanent Will' not only deflates the pompous shallowness of modern civilization ('The Convergence of the Twain') but also frustrates all human desires, ambitions and hopes which make life worth living. Since the nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists had made it difficult for man to have faith in Christianity, Hardy does not have the consolation of religion. In fact, the recognition of the drying up of this traditional source of comfort renders his poetry more poignant, and makes it deeply relevant to the modern man whose own world is very much a part of Hardy's universe. This is not to say, however, that Hardy's poetry is pessimistic. Paradoxically, he exudes a sense of courage and fortitude in the very manner in which he investigates and faces the tragic reality of human existence. Besides, there is to be found in his poetry a sense of repose, calm and dignity as it depicts man coming to terms with frustration, misery and suffering.

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The 'modernist' revolution in the English poetry of the twentieth-century owed much to foreign influences—mainly continental and American. During the early years of this century various *avant-garde* groups of artists (e.g. Futurists, Vorticists) experimented with different new techniques in art. However, the only such group that had any lasting impact on the course of the development of modern English poetry was the one known as the Imagists. Poems in the Imagist mode had been written as early as 1908 by two Englishmen, Edward Storer and his friend T. E. Hulme, but it was not until the publication of the anthology called *Des Imagistes* in 1914 that the Imagistic movement as such can be claimed to have been established. The poets included in this anthology were not only English but Irish and American so that one can describe the movement as 'Anglo-American.' The Imagists rejected the romantic strain in English poetry and aimed at the clarity and precision of ancient Greek and Chinese poetry. They wanted to use the language of contemporary speech, and exact words in order to produce poetry of hard and clear (as opposed to vague) images. However, their objectives were too narrowly technical for them to have exerted a decisive influence on the course of modern English poetry. But these poets can be credited with having registered a much-needed protest against the shallow rhetoric and romantic verbosity of much contemporary verse.

Interestingly enough, the poets of the First World War showed their dissatisfaction with the contemporary poets' attitude to, and handling of, their subject-matter. With very few exceptions (Rosenberg, and to some extent Owen), the War Poets adopted the traditional verse-forms but they brought into the English poetry of the time a new theme and a subject—the brutality and the inhumanity as well as frustration and suffering of man in the twentieth-century. Their main contribution was that they brought English

poetry in closer proximation to the reality of modern life than the Georgians (or the Imperialists) had managed to do. The War Poets wrote poetry out of their own experiences, and they reflected the sense of release and freedom that people felt during the early stages of the war as well as the terrible suffering that they and their fellow-soldiers saw and experienced as the war went on, revealing its sinister nature. Thus we have poets like Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell who glorify war, but they are followed by poets like Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg who severely condemn it. These latter poets do not see death in battle as a heroic sacrifice but as cruel and meaningless waste. Furthermore, they direct their indignation at the politicians and civilians who waged wars for their own selfish ends. The two central aims of their poetry are to depict the terrible reality of war and to thrust that reality into the face of the complacent civilians. This poetry has had a profound effect on the course of the future development of modern poetry: it anticipated the modern poet's view of man as being a part of a huge, impersonal machine—a role which has taken away all spiritual significance from his life. Also, by depicting the human existence as a condition of suffering, frustration and disillusionment, the War Poet opened the way for the 'modernist' poet's vision of life as sterile, a vision which he presents to the reader by using shock-tactics—again and again we find the modern poet shocking the reader into an awareness of the 'real' condition of man, very much in the manner that the War Poet used for making the civilians realize the real, horrible nature of modern warfare.

It is, however, T. S. Eliot whose work 'represents a complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition, and a new start.'⁸ This America-born poet and his fellow-countryman Ezra Pound (1885–1972) came to live in England in the first decade of this century. Both of them were dissatisfied with the English poetic scene and they set about reforming it by writing a new kind of poetry, and also by subjecting past and present literature to searching criticism and revaluation. Pound made a significant contribution to the 'modernist' revolution in English poetry not only by writing some of (the best) early poems and critical articles and reviews, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by giving positive encouragement and guidance to younger (and even older) writers who were experimenting with the new ideas and techniques. But Pound left England for good in 1920 and since he remained, for all intents and purposes, an American, he properly belongs to the American poetic tradition. T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, became a British citizen and spent the rest of his life in England as a dominant literary figure. He, of course, started his life in America as a young, aspiring poet and even at an early age he felt dissatisfied with the poetry written in English (whether in England or America) in his own time or in the immediate past. His reading in 1908 of Arthur Symonds's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) introduced him to Symbolism and, for him at least, two important French Symbolist poets, Laforgue and Corbière. The French Symbolists had reacted against the nineteenth-century Naturalists (like Zola) whose intention was to give scientific, objective documentation of life because man, for them, belonged to the natural order: they believed that man was shaped by heredity and environment, and they ignored any attempt to see man's relationship with his soul

or the spiritual world. The Symbolists, on the other hand, were concerned with man's inner, spiritual realities, and they felt that the only way they could understand and communicate their subject was by using symbols, images and metaphors. Since spiritual reality by definition is vague and indefinite, the Symbolist poetry was also characterized by these qualities. To these one may add the sense of mystery and suggestiveness which went with the exploration of inner, non-material realities. In many ways, Symbolism may be seen as an off-shoot of 'romanticism' but the French Symbolists differed from the 'romantic' poets in their insistence on the use of urban imagery and the rhythms of contemporary speech. There were of course individual differences also among the poets: Jules Laforgue, for instance, made complex use of irony (and Eliot's use of the ironical, self-distrustful attitudes can be seen as a result of the French poet's influence on him). Eliot also derived inspiration from the native English sources but he went back to the Jacobean dramatists and the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth-century. He was impressed by the Imagistic experimentations too but perhaps the single writer whom he admired most was Dante. Such a list—and this can be elaborated and expanded further—might give the impression that Eliot is creator of *pastiche* works, but in fact he has succeeded in absorbing and assimilating all the various influences—foreign and native—for writing original poems, plays and criticism of deep artistic and human significance.

Though Eliot's early poems were first published in 1915, they were written several years earlier, and they already show his awareness of the devitalization and dehumanization of the modern man which the War Poets were to expose so memorably during (and after) the war-years. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is justly regarded by many as the first major quintessentially 'modernist' poem in England. In it the epigraph, taken from Dante, sets the tone of the poem which depicts a hellish and nightmarish vision of the modern world. The opening stanzas reveal the sordid misery, the listlessness and the numb agony that characterize human life in this world. Prufrock is the opposite of a 'heroic' tragic figure: he is diffident, timid and pathetically self-conscious. His failure to find meaning or spiritual significance in life links him with Gerontion, the little old man of the subsequent poem of the same title whose life has been a steady decline into spiritual exhaustion and emptiness. It was, however, in *The Waste Land* that Eliot presented most powerfully his vision of modern life as barren, arid and spiritually bankrupt. When it was first published in 1922, critics saw it as embodying the disillusionment of the post-war generation. But as the war itself was a catalyst, rather than the initial cause of the disillusionment of the times, *The Waste Land* reflects a more comprehensive vision of modern man whose life had been radically altered in the late nineteenth-century and the early twentieth-century by the growing industrialization, urbanization, commercialism and religious scepticism. Hardy, for instance, lived in an age of transition but by the time Eliot came to write his mature poems the shift into the 'modern' age was almost complete, and he was intensely sensitive to its special problems—increasing dehumanization and erosion of spiritual values together with squalor and sordidness in human life and relationships. As a poet he felt it was his duty to deal with

this modern experience, despite its harsh unpleasantness and ugliness. In fact, his chief complaint against much contemporary verse was that it evaded this reality, that it conveyed conventional, pseudo-romantic and generalized attitudes rather than confronted the real experience of the modern man. Thus his remark, 'What nearly all the Georgians have in common is the quality of pleasantness . . . the Georgians caress everything they touch,'⁹ is a comment on the grave deficiency of profound subject-matter and seriousness of purpose in Georgian poetry.

Indeed, Eliot's new attitude to poetic subject-matter opened up fresh possibilities for English poetry. As a young man he had felt that the contemporary verse did not deal with the problems and experiences that concerned him at that particular time, and these were bound up with the industrial squalor, materialism and the human degradation of the machine age. It was for this reason that he was attracted to the French Symbolists who had demonstrated that a poet could reject the conventional ideas about the 'poetical subject' and create poetry out of what was hitherto considered as 'unpoetical' material:

I think from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic. From him as from Laforgue, I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic. That, in fact, the business of the poet was to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical; that the poet, in fact, was committed by his profession to turn the unpoetical into poetry.¹⁰

Strengthened and encouraged by the examples of these French poets, Eliot was convinced that as a poet it was his duty to deal with the specific historical realities of his times. This meant an enlargement of the poet's subject-matter because he was free to treat any subject, any mood, any experience in his poetry. Since it was his desire to see (and reflect) the reality as it was, he refused to be fettered by the conventional notions of things. For example, the experience of love or sentiments of patriotism appear in altogether a new light in modern poetry: love is neither a matter of moonlight and serenades nor of wistful regret and heartbreaks; it might involve sexuality, feelings of bliss, sterility or emptiness. Similarly, the whole idea of patriotism underwent a profound change not only in the hands of the War Poets but also as a result of the new cosmopolitan cultural situation that sought to break barriers among nations and peoples and races.

This meant an inevitable widening of the gap between the poet and his reader.

The poet's interest in contemporary reality did not stop short at merely mirroring it but it extended to a searching analysis and close examination of that reality. Such an attempt questioned the values and ideas held and cherished by the ordinary people and repudiated the middle-class bourgeois culture because an honest exploration of life revealed its mechanical nature, its ugliness and sterility. Right since the times of Tennyson until that of the Imperialists, the Edwardians and the Georgians, English poets had tried to write for the broad middle-class, and this had meant that the values, ideas and sentiments of this class were not to be seriously challenged. (Only in the prose-fiction of the time did major literary talent express its understanding of the deeper and more disturbing realities.) It is true that the poets of the 'nineties had cut themselves off from the vulgar and commercialized life, and it is significant that a poet like Swinburne was greatly fascinated by French Symbolist poets like Verlaine, Baudelaire and Gautier but the poets of the 'nineties as a group were too self-consciously bohemian and much too 'romantic' in their techniques to exert any lasting influence on the future course of English poetry. Eliot and his followers, on the other hand, felt the need to revolutionize both the poetic theme and technique in order to project the modern sensibility. The rejection of the conventional subject-matter also called for discarding of the conventional techniques in poetry: experimentation in theme required innovation in versification also. The latter part of the nineteenth-century and the early decades of the twentieth-century saw experiments being carried out in different art-forms, especially in painting, so that when Pound and Eliot felt the need for innovation they had healthy precedents. In the first place, they saw no reason why poetry about contemporary life could not be written in the rhythms of contemporary speech. They refused to use 'romantic' diction and employed words that people use in day-to-day life. Instead of the traditional 'romantic' images they used images taken directly from contemporary life. Thus, for instance, in 'Prufrock' Eliot uses what might be called shocking images taken from a typical modern, industrialized city. And typically again, he uses an image from modern science—'a patient etherised upon a table'—to convey the speaker's 'diseased' sensibility that led him to view the evening in the manner he does. In fact, Eliot shows how brilliantly he had learned from his French masters the trick of turning 'intractably unpoetic' material into poetry. Eliot's employment of contemporary speech and 'realistic' imagery gave him an added advantage: it helped him to introduce economy and precision of expression (as opposed to the 'romantic' verbosity and flabbiness) into his poetry. The question whether Eliot was actually influenced by Imagism is perhaps difficult to answer but what is indisputable is that Eliot aimed at, and achieved, the Imagistic ideals of economy and precision.

Similarly, Eliot's habit of disregarding logical development and continuity of ideas in his poetry can be said to have been encouraged by one of the 'philosophers' behind the Imagist Movement, T. E. Hulme, who had said that 'one of the main achievements of the nineteenth-century was the elaboration and universal application of the principle of continuity. The destruction of this conception is, on the contrary, an urgent necessity of the present.'¹¹ For Eliot this was an 'urgent necessity' because he felt that this was

the best way the modern consciousness could be expressed in poetry. Under the influence of the newly-developed science of psychology, Eliot recognized the 'irrational' nature of human behaviour and the unconscious motivations within man that could not be explained away by reason. The only way he could render this significant aspect of human experience was by using images which, though not possessing rational links, were associated with one another psychologically. This led to 'obscurity' for the general reader who was used to logical development of ideas and rational connection between the images in a given poem. Eliot was aware of this difficulty. He therefore explained his method and suggested the ways a reader should approach his kind of poetry:

Any obscurity on first reading is due to the suppression of 'links in the chain,' of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviations of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression.

The reader has to allow the images to fall into the memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that at the end a total effect is produced. Such a selection of images has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of imagination as well as a logic of concepts¹²

These ideas can be related to Eliot's view, based on his reading of Metaphysical poetry, that in the mind of a poet different and disparate experiences are constantly forming 'new wholes': 'When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.'¹³ With the aid of such explanations, one is in a position to understand better, and appreciate, the new techniques that Eliot and the other 'modernist' poets use. One can see how the juxtaposition of dissimilar and contrasting images in fact intensifies the complex, total impression that the poet is creating in his poetry. Eliot and poets like him realized that in having chosen to deal with the contemporary reality they had taken up a complex subject-matter. An inevitable result of this was that their poetry became more complex and difficult:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into meaning.¹⁴

This passage, written in Eliot's characteristic pithy manner, sums up the difficult

problems that the modern poet was faced with and how he proposed to tackle it. There is a recognition that the modern 'subject-matter' was not amenable to lyrical or 'romantic' treatment, and that its complex nature demanded that any emotional reaction to it must be restrained by intellectual discipline. Further, it called for a sophisticated use of the poet's linguistic resources that brought to one's mind the examples of the *avant-garde* (mostly foreign) writers of the present as well as the past ages.

In this connection one must bring in Eliot's ideas about the role of 'tradition' in a poet's work. In his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917), Eliot explained that for a poet 'the historical sense' was 'indispensable' and that 'the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.' Eliot himself expresses 'the historical sense' by introducing into his poetry allusions to myths and literary works not only of the English historic past but also of the pasts of foreign countries, sometimes in foreign languages. *The Waste Land* is of course the classic example of Eliot's use of this method. Any serious reader of this poem, as indeed of any other of Eliot's major poems, can see how far the 'modernist' poet had travelled from the stage where the poet was mainly content to deal with conventional subject-matter in a conventional style. The modern poet is much more 'serious' and he is gravely worried about the predicament of man in the modern industrialized society. He is aware of the break-down of the traditional values of society and is confronted by a fragmentary civilization where people are rootless and without spiritual or religious strength. For an adequate exploration of this 'modern reality' he has invented a matching 'modern technique' which in turn is aided by 'modern' sciences like psychology and anthropology and new artistic ideas and devices. Thus, T. S. Eliot (together with the initial help of Ezra Pound) inaugurated, and established, the 'modernist' mode in English poetry which retained its domination from about the 1920s till the beginning of the Second World War.

All the 'modernist' poets, of course, did not follow Eliot and Pound in every detail but they were one with him in that they all reacted, in their own different ways, to the 'modern' situation and broke away from the more conventional and traditional poetry of the immediate past. W. B. Yeats started his poetic career in the traditional mode. He was influenced by Spenser and Shelley and was drawn to the 'romantic' exuberance of the Pre-Raphaelites, and indeed believed that 'only beautiful things should be painted, and that only ancient things and the stuff of dreams were beautiful.'¹⁵ Many of his early poems, like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', were born out of this artistic belief which seemed to prefer an idealized world of beauty to the drab actuality of life. But this was not so much an escape from life as a rejection of the dull, commercialized world in favour of a world of 'higher reality.' For a brief period he joined the Rhymers' Club and was attracted by the 'aesthetic ideas' of the other members of the club, like Dowson, Symonds and Johnson. But despite the fact that he learned from them the need for painstaking craftsmanship and the feeling that the poet must have a sense of alienation

from the bourgeois values of the society, Yeats realized that in their pursuit of dreamy, hypnotic rhythm and fondness for 'romantic' languorous phrases and images, the 'aesthetes' had cut themselves off from the vital forces of life. Since he himself was convinced of the 'deep spiritual realities' he went to magic, theosophy and the occult for a greater grasp of such realities. When Arthur Symons introduced him to the French Symbolists like Mallarmè, Verlaine, Baudelaire and Nerval he excitedly discovered the possibility of employing Symbolist techniques for exploring and presenting the spiritual realities that govern human existence. He learned that Symbolist art was evocative, suggestive and subtle, and that he could use symbols taken from ancient myths, legends and beliefs for embodying the deeper, inner, spiritual realities. The fact that he was an Irish nationalist, more as an artist than as a politician, helped him in that he found symbols for his poetry in the Irish history, myths, legends and in Irish personalities and places. This Irishness gave a solidity to his symbols for, whereas the 'private' symbols of Mallarmè became almost unintelligible at times, the Irish symbols of Yeats have rich traditional associations. Yeats's attempt to bring about an Irish cultural renaissance had another significant effect on his poetry. His work towards a revival of Irish drama (and the founding of the Abbey Theatre) brought him in close touch with contemporary Ireland. He saw Irish drama as a cultural force rather than a vehicle for the dissemination of social or political ideas and beliefs. This aesthetic creed of his did not satisfy the majority of Irish nationalists who were fighting for a political cause. The ordinary Irishman found fault with the theatre on the ground that it staged plays (like those of Synge, for example) which depicted the Irish as coarse, brutal and 'immoral' people. Yeats bitterly resented such attacks and severely criticized the stupidity and the crass materialism of the Irish in his poetry. He also wrote political poems based on Irish history (e.g. 'Easter 1916' 'Meditations in Time of Civil War') in which he expressed a sense of tragedy over the plight of Ireland, and extended it to a vision of the tragic nature of human existence.

Yeats's involvement in Irish drama brought him down to contemporary Ireland in another sense, namely, that in writing plays he recognized the importance of direct speech in dialogues. In this he was greatly influenced by his friend Synge who was disturbed by the stark reality of Irish life and expressed this dissatisfaction in an unadorned style in his writings. Synge was dissatisfied also with the 'poeticisms' of much contemporary poetry, and in the preface to his *Collected Poems* (1908) said: 'It may be said that before verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal.' Yeats seems to have taken this advice, and we find that in his later poems he gets rid of the rich, decorative style of his earlier poems (see 'A Coat') and deals directly with 'the foul-rag-and-bone shop of the heart' ('The Circus Animals' Desertion'). Such changes first became apparent in *The Green Helmet* (1910) and *Responsibilities* (1914) and they continued throughout the rest of his career. This is not to say, however, that Yeats totally discarded the use of symbols. He needed symbols for projecting his highly imaginative vision of life but what he did was to drop the figures and incidents of Irish myths and legends and convert actual things (swans, rose, birds, his own house, contemporary personalities)

into symbols. It is true that Yeats retained his interest in the esoteric and the mysterious (one remembers, for example, his *A Vision* (1925) in which he explained his highly private doctrines) but his attempt was now to use the actual, material world for symbolic purposes. By doing so, he emerges as a uniquely 'modernist' poet, as M. L. Rosenthal has explained:

Towards the end of his long career, William Butler Yeats wrote: 'I seek an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself.' He never described his own work more truly or more succinctly. Yeats spoke to the modern mind in every way. The rise of nationalism and the political problems that were to create two world wars, the shattering and challenging effects of new science on old beliefs, the reopening of every question of truth and value—all these elements entered his imagination and were then absorbed and transmuted into the symbolic structure of his poetry.¹⁶

Like Yeats, D. H. Lawrence's 'modernism' lies not so much in startling technical experimentations as in the expression of the modern consciousness in his poetry. Of course, Lawrence rejected what he called the 'skilled' verse of conventional poetry and wrote in metres that might be called irregular and free from any kind of constraints, but he was mainly concerned with writing poetry that would convey the rhythms of his moods and emotions. His moods and emotions were those of a man who vigorously denounced the human degradation, commercialisation and over-sophistication of the intellect that characterize the modern scientific and industrialised society. He was a believer in the primitive vitality of man, the potential imaginative and spiritual richness of his life, and in his poetry (as indeed in all his writings) he asserted these essential human qualities which he thought had lain suppressed, if not extinguished, by the mechanistic culture of the modern age. This explains his great interest in the animal and the natural worlds which, he believed, had remained uncorrupted by the human vices. He believed that man's basic vitality and springs of joy came from the same sources as nature's, and by responding to the freedom and instinctive vitality in the animal and the natural worlds he came to see how the 'modern' man had cut himself off from these sources. Thus in his diagnosis of the 'modern' man's 'disease' in terms of the scientific materialism of his time, Lawrence was very much like the major writers of the time. Like them, again, with all his concern with the darker aspects of life, he comes out with a positive and affirmative vision. He demonstrates how it is possible for man to achieve self-fulfilment and joy in his personal relationships as well as in his general relationships with other people if he can free himself from self-consciousness, rationalism and crass materialism. In the final analysis, Lawrence can be seen to be asserting the validity of life itself as Yeats does. Yeats's vision is perhaps more complex and comprehensive because he takes into account the dialectical conflicts within the human soul between good and evil, sensuality and imagination, the earth and paradise, and he finally projects a unified vision in which the sense of the tragedy of life goes with a fierce joy in it. Eliot is different from both Yeats and Lawrence in that his positive

affirmation is based on religious faith. In *The Waste Land*, redemption is offered to those who would accept the traditionally religious-oriented human values; and after his formal conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, he announced in 1928 that his poetry derived strength and sustenance from this faith. Thus the examples of these poets illustrate the paradoxical fact that while the 'modern' poet relentlessly explores and exposes the anguished state of mankind he is also equally determined to discover alternative values that might sustain him in his perilous predicament.

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During the 1930s a greater political and social consciousness entered 'modernist' English poetry, and this was due, at least partially, to the political developments of the time. The end of the War brought about a temporary trade boom but it soon gave way to the Great Depression which resulted in economic crisis, unemployment and strikes. Politically the 'war to end wars' (as some people had chosen to regard the First World War) did not settle much. Nazi dictatorship came to power in Germany and Fascism in Italy. Then there was the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) which was followed by the Second World War (1939–45). There came about a general disintegration in the society in the thirties and the people were dismayed and disillusioned. The group of young poets who appeared in England at this time concerned themselves more directly with social and political aspects of the human situation than any past 'modernists' had done in this century. The major figures in this group were Auden, Day Lewis, Spender and MacNiece who all had gone to Oxford. They did not know each other at the University, nor even when they were grouped together for the first time in the anthologies called *New Signatures* (1932) and *New Country* (1933). The first time they met together in one room was in Venice in 1947. Though they all had left-wing sympathies, only Day Lewis was a committed Communist (though only for a short while). So one might say that in their poetry they flirted with the popular Marxist ideas as indeed they showed an amateurish interest in Freudian psychology. Thus for instance for Auden the symptoms in the society—disintegration, absence of spiritual values etc.—indicated a deeper psychological malaise. For writing this kind of 'social poetry' the poets of the thirties went for inspiration to Hopkins, Eliot and Owen, as C. Day Lewis explained in *A Hope For Poetry* (1934). Eliot and Owen had already shown, in different ways, how the poet could bring within the orbit of poetic vision the social realities of the time. Hopkins on the other hand had demonstrated how it was possible to create memorable poetry out of committed faith (in his case, Catholicism). The poets of the thirties naturally turned to him for writing poetry of social commitment. This 'commitment' was so strong in their case that they tended to ignore personal human relationships as a theme for poetry, and they saw the whole human situation from a socio-political point of view—in 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' Auden saw the tragic predicament of the contemporary man in the light of politics: 'In the nightmare of the dark/All the dogs of Europe bark . . .'. But one must remember that with the passage of time, these poets became less and less socially-oriented though they can be said to have

remained socially conscious for a long time. As G. S. Fraser pointed out, 'today Auden very critically and sharply discusses the failings of the society in his poetry, but from a fundamentally religious point of view. Spender . . . has become . . . a lyrical and meditative poet of the inner life . . . Day Lewis continues, today, the tradition of ruminative and ironic Victorian poets . . . '17 This shows that it was difficult, if not impossible, for the poets to go on writing poems devoted entirely to social or political themes. Even a deeply 'committed' poet like John Cornford who fervently believed in Communism and who died for a political cause in the Spanish Civil War wrote perhaps his best poem ('To Margot Heinemann') about personal emotions of love. However, there is little doubt that the social consciousness on the part of the poets of the thirties broadened the scope of modern English poetry, in the sense that there emerged a new awareness of contemporary life in England both in theme and diction/imagery (with regard to the last, one may refer to Spender's fascination for machinery from which he takes many of his images).

Though Auden and his fellow-poets at Oxford received most of the critical attention and acclaim there were also some other poets like John Betjeman, William Plomer and Roy Campbell who published their first volumes of poems during the 1930s. But perhaps the most important poets of the time (apart from Auden and his group) were Cambridge men like William Empson, Ronald Bottrall and Charles Madge. These poets wrote, on the whole, rather austere, intellectual and difficult poems. Empson, perhaps the best among them, uses the rhythm of polished, conversational prose but his ideas are condensed and his feelings vigorously controlled. Though the social-political realities of the time do get reflected in his poetry, his main concern is with the fundamental human situation. He can be described as 'pessimistic' in his views about life in which he discovers 'built-in' failures, frustrations and disillusionments, but Empson also recognizes that man's persistence in struggling on and his pursuit of human values make life meaningful.

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As the later career of Auden and his fellow-poets show, 'social poetry' had a short run in England. Besides, very soon a new generation of English poets had started to write a different kind of poetry. In the second edition of *A Hope For Poetry* (1936) C. Day Lewis noted a 'reaction from the preoccupation of poets with social justice, their possibly over-mechanized vocabulary, and often slap-dash technique: a return to the ideals of poetic integrity and artistic individualism: a setting out in the direction of "pure poetry."' (p. 80). This was 'the neo-romanticism' of Dylan Thomas, George Barker and David Gascoyne who were influenced directly or indirectly by the surrealist movement which had begun in France in the 1920s. It received great publicity in England when the First International Surrealist Exhibition was held in London in June 1936. This was followed by the publication of surrealist periodicals, books and anthologies. The English poets shared the French Surrealists' interest in the non-rational and the unconscious reality, and they adopted the 'romantic' view that the poet must

concern himself with the inner, psychological and emotional reality of the human condition. In fact, there grew in the early 1940s a poetic movement (called the Apocalyptic Movement) which believed in investigating the submerged truths of human consciousness, and writing about more fundamental and elemental truths rather than temporary social or political problems. Such 'romantic' reactions against the 'social' poetry of Auden and his fellow-poets did not, however, produce much significant poetry. Except for Dylan Thomas (and possibly George Barker) the 'neo-romantics' produced frenzied verses that were often incoherent, flabby and sentimental. But, on the other hand, their 'romantic' attitude to poetic subject-matter helped the poets of the Second World War to deal with the theme of war differently. Whereas most of the poets of the First World War were basically motivated to write poetry of protest, those of the Second World War saw neither the need for that kind of protest nor for condemning it and dwelling on its atrocities. Instead they wrote poems of personal experience, about individual fears and apprehensions and about the tragedy of life which, they felt, was so fiercely illustrated by the war.

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It might seem odd to discuss at this juncture the poetry of Robert Graves who published his first volume of poems, *Fairies And Fusiliers*, in 1917. Though Graves can be said to have started his poetic career as a War Poet and then as a Georgian (see his volumes, *The Treasure Box*, 1919, and *Country Sentiment*, 1920), and gained his first literary reputation as a writer of prose when *Goodbye to All That* was published in 1929, he established himself as a significant poet only when he produced his *Poems 1939-1945* in 1946. The central theme of his poetry is love between man and woman. In his important book, *The White Goddess* (1948), he explained that traditionally the theme of all good poetry had been the love and fear of a beautiful woman, who can also be seen as the Muse who will return the love of a true poet but would also destroy him eventually. His own poetry is personal and lyrical, and it deals with the ecstasy and agony, joy and sorrow, fear and disappointment of love. He is a traditionalist in metre and diction too but he is an extremely painstaking and scrupulous craftsman. He was never interested in the revolutionary ideals of the 'modernist' poets and remained largely uninfluenced by foreign examples and experiments. But that is not to say that he has not concerned himself with the problems of the modern man. In fact, by writing fine poems in the traditional manner he upholds traditional values which have been threatened by the mechanical, complex and in some ways destructive culture of modern times. The clarity and the apparent simplicity of his poems should not lead one to think that there is no seriousness and significance in them. Graves consciously aims at clear presentation of complex ideas: in the fifth of his Clark Lectures, he said, 'Personally, I expect poems to say what they mean in the simplest and most economical way; even if the thought they contain is complex.' By achieving this ideal in his own poetry, he has given, and continues to give, a new dimension to English poetry of this century.

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Understandably, there was no recognizable trend in English poetry for about a decade after the end of the Second World War. But when in 1956 Robert Conquest brought out an anthology called *New Lines* he introduced a new generation of English poets. They were labelled as the 'Movement Poets' by an anonymous correspondent in *The Spectator* but it must be remembered that these different poets did not share any common set of beliefs or agreed principles of poetry. But in retrospect, critics have discovered in the works of these poets a rejection of the 'socio-political' poetry of the thirties as well as a contempt for the 'neo-romanticism' of the forties. In fact, the Movement poets—Philip Larkin, John Holloway, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn and John Wain—seemed to have rejected almost all that the 'modernist' movement had stood for, and achieved, during the period between the two World Wars. Kingsley Amis spoke of nobody wanting 'any more poems on the grander themes for a few years, but at the same time nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or painters or novelists or art-galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems. At least, I hope nobody wants them.'¹⁸ Moving away from the 'modernist' poetry of complexity, ambiguity and allusiveness, the Movement poets lowered their sights, and aimed at writing lucid poems of emotional restraint and rational will for the ordinary plain reader. They avoided 'grand' philosophical themes on the one hand and violence or anguished nihilism on the other. This has inevitably led to the charge that the Movement poetry is 'genteel' and 'provincial.' Larkin is regarded as a representative Movement poet because his poetry is neither ambitious nor revolutionary: he is content to deal, in polished skilful verses, with the feelings, hopes and disappointments of ordinary people. For inspiration Larkin went to Hardy rather than to Pound and Eliot because he felt—and he has impressively demonstrated this faith in his poetry—that Hardy's poetic modes and manners could be used with due modifications by a poet of modern sensibility.

But there have been other poets in the post-war years who feel that poetry must be more 'serious' than it has been in the hands of the Movement poets, and they apply themselves to the disturbing aspects of contemporary life, its violence, ugliness and cruelty. Some of the poets who grew up in the Cambridge literary atmosphere of the 1950s—they were called the 'Group Poets' and included Peter Redgrove, Ted Hughes and Philip Hobsbaum—reflected such 'seriousness' in their poetry. Ted Hughes is the most important among them. His poetry explores the principle of violence operating in the universe, and his examination of the violence which pervades the animal kingdom enables him to understand its function in human life. Hughes's wife, Sylvia Plath, did not belong to any poetic 'group' or 'movement' but her poetry, with its concentration on decay, destruction and death, has great affinity with the American 'confessional' poetry of the time like that of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton (Plath was an American and therefore such an affinity is easily understandable). Charles Tomlinson is an English poet but he too has been inspired by American poets like Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Tomlinson believes that the 'modernist' revolution in English (and American) poetry has been beneficial, and his own poetry is ambitious as

it assimilates the ideas and modes of the French Symbolists and the contemporary Americans. Tomlinson is more intellectual, philosophical and cosmopolitan as a poet than most other English poets of his time. Another English poet who is unique as Tomlinson is—though in a very different sense—is R. S. Thomas. He creates impressive poetry out of the bleak, poor lives of the Welsh farmers among whom this poet-priest works and lives.

It is difficult to arrive at an objective assessment of more recent poetry. Philip Larkin, arguably the best among the contemporary English poets, is characteristically modest about his own poetic achievement as well as that of his fellow-poets. In a recent interview he remarked:

Please don't think I'm great. If I'm noticeable, it's because we're in a trough at the moment. Forty years ago we had Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Betjeman, Dylan Thomas, and who have we got now?¹⁹

Nevertheless, I believe that some poets of the post-war generation have produced poetry of impressive quality, and among the younger poets writing now, Seamus Heaney seems to be the most promising.

NOTES

1. Leonard Woolf, *After the Deluge* (1931), p. 19.
2. M L Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets* (1960), p. 7.
3. Edward Marsh, *A Number of People* (1939), p. 332.
4. C K Stead, *The New Poetic* (1967), p. 89.
5. C Day Lewis, *A Hope For Poetry* (1934), p. 2.
6. Allen Tate, ed., *T S Eliot* (1971), p. 47.
7. F R Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1959), p. 193.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
9. T S Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry,' *The Egoist* (September 1917), 118.
10. ———, *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), p. 126.
11. Quoted by David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry* (1976), p. 308.
12. T. S. Eliot, Preface to *Translation of 'Anabase' by St. J. Perse* (1930).
13. ———, *Selected Essays* (3rd. ed. 1951), p. 287.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
15. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955), p. 101.
16. M. L. Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
17. G. S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (Penguin, 1970), p. 299.
18. See D. J. Enright, ed. *Poets of the 1950s* (1955), pp. 17–18.
19. John Haffenden, 'The True and the Beautiful: a conversation with Philip Larkin,' *London Magazine*, (April–May 1980), 87.

July 7, 1982