

POETRY AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION

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I

MESSRS. Cecil Day Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender, poets by profession and radical in their leanings, have recently been the storm-centre of a violent controversy. Marxist critics accused them of virtual disloyalty to "the Revolution". They were, it seems, but fellow-travellers, and the ideological fervor of fellow-travellers does not burn brightly or fiercely enough. Their poetry is not an incandescent paraphrase of *The Communist Manifesto*. It does not conform to the key doctrine of the class war. If their poetry fails to do any of these things, however, it is because these writers are primarily poets, and only secondarily interested in politics. Intuitively they realize—and it is a profoundly wise realization—that the political faith they hold as poets can be made to appear true and convincing only if the poetry is fully effective. The fundamental condition of communication is that the poetry must come first. If they have turned eagerly to the ideal of a classless society, it is because such a society seemed to them to offer the sole hope of salvation. It is the vision of a freer and better world, and not the scholastic categories of Marxism, that has inspired them. What they seek to win is a state of spiritual integrity and artistic fulfilment. It is, therefore, not surprising that their verse is free from ready-made formulas or rabble-rousing slogans. Their poetry gains immensely in communicative efficacy for that very reason. As Shelley long ago announced—and it is a truth that must once more be emphasized—the poet, by virtue of his unique vocation, is revolutionary. As such, he rejects the dogmas of professional revolutionists; he is skeptical of the Bible of Communism, as he is of any other Bible. He relies on the concrete experience, the vital impression.

Such conclusions serve only to enrage militant Marxists. One Communist critic in America has gone so far as to accuse this triumvirate of poets of being at heart deracinated aristocrats, who have coquetted with Marxism because life within their class led to intolerable tension. He found fault with them for idealizing the physique of the working man. Their idealization of the proletariat, he maintained, has been the product of the romantic spirit of which

they were the unconscious victims. In brief, they were not writing for the proletariat; their appeal was primarily to intellectuals; they had failed to ally themselves with the working-class movement. They had been content to struggle with their personal problems as poets: to achieve a creative synthesis by attaching themselves to some positive vision for the regeneration of society.

It is, on the whole, an absurd position for a critic to take. Shall a poet's progress be measured by the degree of his radicalism? If the effort to achieve a creative synthesis is a signal limitation, then the writing of poetry is itself a grave handicap. For one might cogently argue—and some have, indeed, argued in this fashion—that the scribbling of verse, however noble, however impassioned, is relatively unimportant, compared to the crucial task of leading the proletariat to the walls of the New Jerusalem. One might further contend that it is the function of the poet to engage in revolutionary activities—to picket factories, to lead relief expeditions, head delegations, volunteer for service with the International Legion in Spain, deliver fiery speeches protesting against racial persecution and the suppression of all civil liberties in Germany. Such argument simply constitutes an ethical indictment of the value of poetry, on more or less the same grounds as those advanced by the Puritans in Cromwell's time.

Stephen Spender, for instance, is raked over hot coals because he indulges in the obsolete vision of honour and the dangerous—dangerous from the point of view of orthodox Communism, of course—ideal of love that will succeed in binding men together. In other words, Spender is dismissed as a poet, not because his poetry is feeble in execution and anemic in substance, but because the critic disagrees with his political orientation. All this, in fact, bears witness to Spender's deep and true perceptions. He sees individuals floundering in the mire of poverty; he does not write poems based on statistical computations of the number of persons unemployed in England. He is not generalizing about contradictions in the capitalistic system; he is expressing a personal vision of unemployment. The men and women he writes about—and the poet can write only about individuals—suffer individually, and they suffer differently, each according to temperament and the peculiar conditions amidst which he or she lives. Collective poetry is a contradiction in terms. It is invariably the concrete that releases the universal. The process cannot be reversed. A generalization is not poetry. As T. S. Eliot has shrewdly pointed out, emotions not passed through the catalytic agent of some objective situation are not communicated.

II

Of the triumvirate of left-wing English poets, Cecil Day Lewis is intellectually the most gifted, the most enterprising. He has deep critical insight, a comprehensive philosophical outlook. His poetry is less eccentric, less explosive than that of W. H. Auden, for example. He writes with equal ardor, but he retains full control over his material, and conscientiously makes the effort at complete communication. He can at least be understood, whereas Auden puzzles even the most agile and attentive reader. He is clear, vigorous, consistent.

In his volume, *Collected Poems*, and in his recently issued *A Time to Dance*, one encounters no brain-distilled esoterica, no clever sophistication. In these, once more, the noble, racy language that Milton spoke is fused with worthy and solid substance. The bleak denials, the arid skepticism, of a T. S. Eliot, in his earlier incarnation, are transcended in work of a soaring and robust imagination. Lewis, too, has passed through the private Gehenna of doubt and despair, but he has come through, and he sings with fine gusto of the natural and perennial joys of life. To-day, poetry of this type—firm-bodied, full-throated—is extremely rare. We regain what we missed for some time, and even believed was forever lost—the glory of sunlight, the quick reviving pulse of Nature, the march of the seasons, the significance of life in the cities, the essential worth and dignity of man. The lyric bud has flowered into brightness. We hear no more the morbid whine of an exclusive, intellectualized self. Here is God's plenty, music and gladness and blithe acceptance.

The fact that many of these poems are autobiographical does not make them any the less representative. In fact, it gives them the stamp of authenticity, the unmistakable impress of truth experienced at first hand, a universality seen and felt through the particular. For his experiences are symbolical, as they are to every genuine poet. At first, misled by the prevailing belief that beauty needed solitude, he had put passion away in cold storage. Gradually he came to realize that integrity is laid bare and made manifest in the most common and humble scene. He escaped from the false and sterile logic of introversion by creative act and affirmation, by the surrender of his personal will to the varied influences of the visible universe. If he could only achieve the single mind! Then he would discover nothing in the world surprising or awry; the harmony would endure, the architecture last.

The recoil from the excesses of romantic individualism leads Lewis to adopt a collectivistic philosophy. His consciousness of the

actual world, and the great responsibilities that life entails, is voiced in "The Magnetic Mountain". The lover turns rebel, the poet protestant; the mind is kindled by the necessity for revolutionary action. The magnetic mountain represents the classless society which is the absolute of Marxism. Capitalism is destroyed; the past is left behind; the light is focussed on a brighter and happier world for mankind. Like a twentieth-century Shelley, he cries out:

Make us a wind
To shake the world out of this sleepy sickness
Where flesh has dwindled and brightness waned!

He bids the workers cower in the darkness no longer. When the zero hour is signalled, they will be leaders—

Wielders of power and welders of a new world.

What he is pleading for is not prosperity, nor a utopian paradise, but only the chance for men to regain their manhood:

Publish the vision, broadcast and screen it,
Of a world where the will of all shall be raised to highest power,
Village or factory shall form the unit.
Control shall be from the centre, quick brain, warm heart,
And the bearings bathed in a pure
Fluid of sympathy. There possessions no more shall be part
Of the man, where riches and sacrifice
Are of flesh and blood, sex, muscles, limb and eyes.
Each shall give his best. It shall seem proper
For all to share what all produced.

This vision of the new social order is profoundly significant. The radical sympathies of a poet like Cecil Day Lewis reveal the emerging social consciousness of our time. He is the advance guard of opinion, the lyrical projection of our awakened conscience. He points to the future. The predominant characteristic of his poetry is a passion for social justice. His interest in social themes, however, is not abstract, no doctrinaire preoccupation. It communicates a genuine emotional experience. It represents a triumph over the refractory material of his art. He has shown that Marxism, like Catholicism, like any form of faith deeply and sincerely felt, can be transmuted into the stuff of poetry. He has demonstrated that industrialism and science can be assimilated by the poet, and effectively expressed.

Cecil Day Lewis's contribution to "proletarian" poetry consists not only of "The Magnetic Mountain", but also of "Noah and

the Waters", which was first designed for a choral ballet, but which is, in reality, a Marxist morality play. A conflict is undramatically depicted as going on in Noah between the old life of capitalistic exploitation and the new life of the Flood. A similar struggle, which took place in the mind of the poet, is described in "The Conflict". For a time, song gave him the power to rise above the battle and to appease his personal sorrows; but the consciousness of living between two worlds, without belonging to either, forced upon him the realization that poetry is not salvation:

For where we used to build and love
Is no man's land, and only ghosts can live
Between two fires.

Man must win freedom by a knowledge of necessity. He must fight for his beliefs, even if they lead to death.

Objectively considered, what has Cecil Day Lewis attempted to do? In a number of challenging critical studies, notably in *A Hope for Poetry*, he has formulated his aims and explained his method. He has wrestled with the difficult problem whether poetry is of value to the revolutionary movement, whether it has any vital contact with the masses. Unlike some of his Marxist critics, he feels that if poetry is a natural function, there is small reason why the poet should abandon it for revolutionary agitation. For his desire to aid in the establishment of a classless society does not blind him to the essential nature of poetry. "The first qualification of a poem", he declares, "is that it should be a good poem—technically good, I mean. A badly designed, badly constructed house is not excused by the fact that it was built by a class-conscious architect and workmen. Equally, a poem may have been written by a reactionary bourgeois, and yet be a very good poem and of value to the revolutionary; *The Waste Land* is such a one. Any good poem, simply because every good poem is a true statement of the poet's feelings, is bound to be of value: it gives us insight into the state of mind of a larger or smaller group of people." It is hard to conceive of a more forthright and illuminating answer to a perplexing problem than this single quotation. If what it says is true, then the poet must be permitted to enjoy unconditional freedom in the choice of subject matter. The proletarian poet should not be compelled to confine himself to the single theme of "the Revolution". The world is full of a number of absorbing things for the poet to write about—Nature, love, mechanical objects—and he would be arbitrarily stunting his art if he left them out. Moreover, the revolutionary impulse in poetry must not be construed

to mean bald and direct propaganda. A poem may appeal to the mass, but it does so always through the individual. Poetry is personal and sensuous and impassioned. If the revolutionary poet is true to himself, his poetry will be revolutionary without the aid of red symbols or class-war dialectics.

III

W. H. Auden is the most daring pioneer of the three, both in form and in content. He is full of tricks and surprises and high animal spirits. Yet his poetry is charged with intense energy, because it is supported by a socio-political programme, an ultimate vision. He has seen a sign in the sky; he knows the exact nature of our social malady and the medicine that will cure it. His *Golden Age* lies in the future. Like Cecil Day Lewis, he dreams of the collectivistic society about to emerge in the womb of Time. It is the bracing quality of his search for meaning in a society that wills its own sickness, a world shattered by war and economic dislocation—it is that quality which makes his poetry so alive and so important. He makes us share in his dilemmas, his inner contradictions. His hearty affirmations, when they appear, are doubly impressive because they come after maddening doubts and lacerating conflicts. A sturdy skepticism spares him the anguish of sudden disillusionment. His utterances, though still largely conditioned by his personal problems, spring from a realistic and all-embracing knowledge of the world about him. He has no cosmic philosophy to proclaim, no optimistic faith to preach. The main thing, as he sees it, is to achieve the integrity and freedom of the individual being—for all. Once this is achieved, it will then be possible to set about rebuilding the broken foundations of our world. His firm hold on reality, his audacity in including within his poetic range material that was once regarded as vulgar or taboo, his intensity, his fascinated concern with the contemporaneous, his satiric gift, his acceptance and utilization of the values provided by science and machinery—all this is symbolical of the strength and symptomatic of the weakness to be found in modern poetry.

In endeavoring to interpret every aspect of a complex reality, Auden naturally falls into confusion, and his work frequently presents a muddled, distorted picture. Despite his fundamental seriousness of purpose, he gives the impression of being the playboy of the western world. Though few poets have caught so vivid and authentic a perception of the beauty, the dynamism, of our industrial civilization, his cleverness in the end leads him astray. He

goes out of his path to follow the promptings of his streamlined imagination. He yields to the pressure of a cerebration that is consciously stimulated. He is so enchanted with the possibilities of his material and his newly discovered method that he forgets at times the purpose which they are supposed to serve. Only a stern, self-critical discipline will enable him to give birth to some unified poem which will fuse the incongruous ingredients that now balk his creative intentions.

His social diagnosis is explicitly set forth in "The Dance of Death," dramatically portraying the death of a class. Death the dancer—the central character—is symbolical of capitalism. Though many think that Death loves them, he is in reality betraying them for his own profitable ends. At last, the audience (the People) comes to a realization of its power and its historic destiny. While it is frantically debating which course to follow—ahead or reverse—there is a thunderous crash, and the dancer falls in an epileptic fit. Nothing can revive him, and Death, or capitalism, dies, but not before preparing a will which is a rollicking, rhymed version of the economic processes of history dialectically determined. At the end, Karl Marx with two young economists appears and announces that the instruments of production "have been too much for him." "He is liquidated." The play, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, written in 1935 in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood, is, like "The Dance of Death", a savage satire on modern capitalism. It is done with vigor and skill, but it is too impressionistic in technique to produce a unified effect on the reader.

Auden's obscurity, his reckless gift of improvisation, his failure to fit his highly original material within some coherent and organic pattern, do not altogether hide his positive virtues. Where others have failed miserably, he has succeeded to a large extent in incorporating in poetry the spirit of politics, the significance of the economic struggle. He has interpreted the class war in terms both human and concrete. Refusing to be snared by empty abstractions, he has with a poet's true instinct explored the meaning of crucial world problems by showing how they affect the lives of people. The heart of the economic problem, he declares, is that man must recover a sense of dignity. He must come back to earth, renew his contact with Nature, "keep his primal integrity clean." Before a revolution can take place, a revolution must begin *within* the worker. He must learn the secret of being alone. The death of the old futile, individualistic love may give birth to a new love that will mark the coming of the soul to maturity. If we are to be saved, the old world, together with the old gang of rulers and our

old selves, must die. Auden is bitter in his condemnation, but the bitterness is redeemed by the vision of hope that out of this death a new freedom and harmony will arise.

IV

Of the three poets under discussion, Stephen Spender seems to possess the purest lyrical gift. He has not the variety and originality of W. H. Auden, nor the range and probing intelligence of Cecil Day Lewis, but he is more concentrated, more selective than either one. Within the smaller compass that he has chosen, he is unsurpassed. There is less slag in the composition of his work. Every line is imbued with appropriate energy of expression. Whatever he may lack, Spender, as opposed to Auden, is invariably the sensitive and scrupulous artist.

To achieve this concentrated lyrical effect, he has had to eschew the oratorical and the didactic. His verse is communicated with a bare but poignant simplicity. He, too, has a social philosophy, but it is suggested rather than announced. The poem itself, not the doctrine, is the frame of reference. He describes men who have no work wandering aimlessly through the streets or idling forlornly on the corner, and the sight of these human derelicts, hoplessly draining the hours of life away, prompts to write with a flash of creative identification:

I'm jealous of the weeping hours
They stare through with such hungry eyes.
I'm haunted by these images,
I'm haunted by their emptiness.

That is all. This is not followed by a strident appeal to the unemployed to take up their quarrel with the capitalistic foe, to raise the red banner of revolution. It is the human predicament that haunts and torments him. The fact that men must live choked in darkness, without a clear aim or purposeful ideal, he finds unutterably depressing:

The city builds its horror in my brain,
This writing is my only wings away.

In *Vienna*, a narrative poem which develops an ambitious theme, the recent murder of a number of Viennese Socialists, Spender is too rhetorical and too oracular to be convincing. The diction is involved, the imagery tortured. He is more at home

in the short lyric, which he finds a more effective medium of expression, even for themes of social protest. How was it, he wonders,

How was it that works, money, interest, building, could never hide
The palpable and obvious love of man for man?

Oh comrades, let not those who follow after
—The beautiful generation that shall spring from our sides—
Let not them wonder how after the failure of banks,
The failure of cathedrals and the declared insanity of our rulers,
We lacked the Spring-like resources of the tiger,
Or of plants who strike out new roots to gushing waters.
But through torn-down portions of the old fabric let their eyes
Watch the admiring dawn explode like a shell
Around us, dazing us with its light like snow.

This requires no Marxist glossary to be comprehended, and yet it embodies the heart of his social message. Spender is calling upon youth to abandon the rotting house built by the old men of the tribe. He calls upon them to rebuild the structure of society before it collapses and crushes them beneath an avalanche of debris. Let all the senses be touched and fructified by love. We must surrender our dream of paradise, our reliance on the past, and strengthen our will to achieve the desired change:

No spirit seek here rest. But this: No man
Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.
Our goal which we compel: Man shall be Man.

V

A movement in poetry or politics cannot be born at the dictates of a few determined intellectuals. By concentrating their fire, they can make a great deal of noise; but unless the movement is deeply grounded in the life of a nation, it will die of inanition. This applies with particular force to the proletarian literary situation in England. That situation, especially with regard to poetry, has failed to corroborate Marxist expectations. For what we have here is not a movement at all, but simply the emergence of three highly talented individualistic poets, who dream of a classless society and who sympathize with many of the revolutionary aims of Marxism. Objectively, as Leon Trotsky pointed out in his brilliant polemic, *Literature and Revolution*, the situation is not ripe. Disgust with capitalism, disillusionment with the existing order, an intense emotional sympathy with the working class and hope for their ultimate rise to power—these are not enough to hatch a

poetic renaissance which can be labelled "proletarian". These are generalized states of mind, and do not provide the seminal elements of poetry. Only when artistically integrated with the infinite variety of concrete objects and human events do they give rise to authentic poetry. Standing alone, they yield a kind of inflamed oratory. Perhaps nothing affords a finer illustration of the clear-sighted intelligence and personal as well as artistic integrity of these three English poets than that they have been sufficiently aware of this danger to avoid it.

The fundamental problem for the modern poet remains more or less what it has always been: what shall he believe in? Some form of faith is essential, if the creative life is not to be frustrated. To-day the poet can choose one of turnings. He stands at the cross-roads: Catholicism or Communism. In either case, as is clearly evident, it is the *will to faith*, not the faith itself, that is dominant. T. S. Eliot, who has proclaimed himself a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion, is an unregenerate skeptic: only his skepticism is disciplined and subdued to the dogmas of a Church. That way, he maintains, lies peace and the Truth, and he has deliberately chosen it. In a somewhat similar fashion, many of the literary fellow-travellers, who have begun to chant their hymn of discovery, their liturgical identification with the proletariat, have nothing to go by except an intellectual formula emotionally transubstantiated into the will to believe. Since all else has proved illusory, therefore this must be the road of salvation.

Still the old stubborn taint of liberalism will not come out—liberalism in its finer sense, signifying freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, integrity of mind. In spite of their Marxian protestations, the English triumvirate of poets write in an exceedingly unorthodox, unMarxian manner. They retain their separate individuality as writers, even though they have discarded their insulated and acquisitive ego. They are revolutionaries in a peculiarly English, non-conformist way. In form and content, as we have seen, they dare to be themselves. They attempt to reconcile the doctrine of the class war with a passionate belief that the love of man for man will save the world. In short, they have the rare courage of their convictions, the supreme courage to remain poets first and foremost.

This explains their singular freedom from the cant and clichés of the Marxist literary cult. They are not sectarian. They are neither for nor against Stalin, and their attitude on the criminal heresy known as Trotskyism or on the Kirov assassination is unknown. They stick in general to the condition of their own

country, which—lingering trace of bourgeois sentimentality, presumably—they still love in spite of everything, and to the requirements of their own craft. They make no pretensions to economic insight of a clairvoyant and infallible order. Their message, such as it is, is usually implicit in the poetry itself. While the direction in which they are moving is unmistakably leftward, they do not subscribe one hundred per cent to any fixed political creed. They have been caught up on the tidal wave of an important social movement, but they have somehow managed to think for themselves and to retain their precarious freedom as artists.

Their intuition has proved a sound guide. Their poetry may not be ideologically correct when judged by arbitrary Marxist standards, but it is "correct" on higher grounds: it is artistically satisfying, it is sincere and moving and profoundly alive. Because they voiced their own predicaments, their own hopes and fears, these three poets have become the spokesmen, as it were, of a whole generation, a generation painfully aware of the contradictions of our social system. They have been the poets of a people, not of a class; they have endeavored to write of England and for humanity. They have embodied in their work a vision based on hope and love, not on class hatred and the principle of destruction. Their poetry bears the greatest promise of any that is being written in England now.