MODERN POETRY IN ENGLAND

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Modern poetry is an outgrowth of the modern world, and as the thought and experience of to-day are very complex, the poetry they inspire is neither simple in itself, nor easy to classify. This paper covers the poetry mainly of the past 25 years, with reference however to poets writing before the first World War who contributed to the foundation of modern poetic thought and technique. The period covered therefore is one of social and international difficulty, and the poets reflect the urgent concern with hunger, unemployment, and war which preoccupy the modern world. Not only were social traditions in chaos: In the sphere of art, the decade of 1920 s was one of feverish experiment as men sought appropriate ways of expressing their response to the world around them. Despite the furor of experiment, much fine music, many sensitive poems and novels were written. But success was frequently achieved only through intense personal struggle - modern poetry is marked by passionate currents of urgent thought.

A dominant concern of 19th century English poets was the creation of a beautiful world of dream. 20th century poets have instead turned their eyes to the condition of their fellows, have sought to take the world as it is and express it in words. This needs both physical courage - modern poets like many of the predecessors have taken an active part in politics or war - and mental courage, for a modern poet must dominate a bewildering mass of material: His work shows the influence of science, anthropology, theology, psychology, politics, sociology, and he must fight against the enervating despair which comes from the contemplation of war and suffering.

Against this social background, modern poetry can be considered from the point of view of its technique and its subject matter. A technical revolution has been brought about in the past 30 years, mainly by Erza Pound and T. S. Eliot, both Americans, and the example of G. M. Hopkins, a Welshman. The work of W. B. Yeats, the Irish poet, has also been influential. This receiving of stimuli from many sources is part of a 600-years old tradition in English literature. Pound and Eliot have practised a manner in which economy of words, pregnany of ideas, wide literary experience, and dramatic contrasts of images are the main characteristics. Their work,
especially that of Eliot, the greater poet, is difficult, concentrated, and very influential. Eliot's main theme is that of a lost, unfertile land waiting in a crisis of impotence for a redeemer, through whom will take place a painful rebirth into fertility, order, spiritual grace. His verse is revolutionary in technique because of its compression, difficulty, intensity, and high degree of individuality.

G. M. Hopkins' work, though he died in 1889, only became influential after 1930. His poetic language is violent, irregular and subtly sensitive, resembling in some ways the late verse of Shakespeare. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was one of the greatest poets of the past hundred years. Hopkins gave poetry a passionate, tortured strength: Yeats gave confident richness and beauty expressed in imaginative half-colloquial speech. His feelings were passionate, his thought haunting and rich; he was interested in philosophy, Irish folk-lore, politics; he organised the modern Irish dramatic movement and became a senator of the Irish Free State. In poetry he progressed from unreal decorative verse towards living, sparse, intense expression. His vocabulary can be direct, homely, vivid, or rich and symbolically magnificent. His poem *Sailing to Byzantium* deals with his progress away from the transient delights of the senses towards the rich splendours of the intellect and of age-old philosophic wisdom and art.

The generation of poets becoming mature between 1925 and 1933—Cecil Day Lewis, Louis Mac Neice, W. H. Auden Stephan Spender, George Barker, Dylan Thomas, and others—was influenced by Pound, Eliot, Hopkins and Yeats, but has found its subject-matter in the world around it. Day Lewis is the most lyrical and clear of the group: Auden is at times compact and difficult, at other times loose and colloquial: Mac Neice has the best eye of any, with a remarkable power of describing town or country. Spender is a poet and critic of rich feeling, and admirable honesty. George Barker's work is rich and violent. Whatever their individual traits, they all live in the world of crowds, factories, politics and they all want to bring back to man the joy of living. Their work is sometime pessimistic, but the grimness is tempered by a firmset courage, the pessimism of the present enlightened with hope for the future, and a determination not to lose what the nobility of life can give us even now. Of self-pity they seem to be devoid.

Their gifts are mainly—an accurate imaginative vision of the world in which they live: the artistic discipline which comes from hard thought: wide sympathies for the common man: a sense of their own individuality and also of their community with others. Their technical skill and the intensity of their thought produce a poetry in which the attention of neither writer nor reader can relax. After reading them the work of later nineteenth-century poets seem unendurably slack, relaxed. Eliot's example has imposed a control of rhythm and image
which continually surprises with its alertness. They prefer the bare lonely landscapes of the north to the richer beauties of the south, and their work is similarly bracing, exhilarating. As for their sympathies with the common man, they derive from the social crisis the world is suffering. During the 1920s, poetry became more exclusive; and the public more indifferent. But during the 1930s, poets realised that there was something more important than poetry—the anguish of suffering man. And though their work is difficult, it has won a considerable audience which admires its integrity. It is too early to call this a decisive rebirth of popular culture; but along with the increasing demand for good drama, music and ballet which has become insatiable since the outbreak of the war, it shows that there is a wide public for serious, uncompromising creative work, desiring the growth of spiritual freedom even amid the tragedies of the time.