SOME TRENDS OF PRIMITIVISM AND ANARCHISM IN MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

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The impact of the Second World War on the soul of western man and society had been particularly violent, and a number of English writers and poets were, during the post-war years, searching for new ways of establishing the shaken foundations and lost values of western civilization. Among the writers who distinguished themselves in England during the period between the two world wars, D. H. Lawrence who sought man's salvation in a return to a primitive mode of living, and Herbert Read who believed in anarchism, are interesting from the point of view of the peculiarity of their ideology. Although far from being a great poetic genius, Lawrence exerted considerable influence on such poets as C. Day Lewis, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Louis Mac Neice, who began to write during the 30's. As for Herbert Read, it can be said that his influence was not so much through his poetry as through his criticism. It is not, however, easy to determine the influence of his revolutionary work *Poetry and Anarchism* published in 1938, just before the Second World War, on the mind of the young generation of poets, because with the breaking out of the war, these poets found themselves in a mood of profound disillusionment, so much so that some of them (Spender) thought they could no longer be able to write. I was not surprised to note, in an interview I had with H. Read in Ankara two years ago, that the author of *Poetry and Anarchism* had abandoned many of the extremist views that he had entertained before the war.

The movements of primitivism and anarchism were foreign to the main traditions of English literature, which had always attached great importance to civilized and human values. The literary productions of the advocates of these movements as well as of social revolution were rarely above the standard of propaganda and rhetoric. Although all these movements are virtually dead today, their study would throw some light on some of the complicated aspects of the literature of the period between the two world wars.

Although of little art value, the poems of Lawrence are important documents of the attempt of a modern writer to find a new and better way of living for man at a time when the world seemed to have lost its bearings. Like his contemporary T. S. Eliot, he also was not a product
of the war, but he had been profoundly affected by the tremendous upheaval that it caused. As his novels and other, prose works his poems are full of strong reactions to modern life and mentality, and remedies to the diseases of the individual and society. First of all, Lawrence was an individualist, and his views are largely based on the conviction that his personal problems were also the problems of western society. The results of his interior search seemed so universal to him that he did not hesitate to generalize them for the whole society. Eliot's diagnosis was that western society had lost its values and that the ideal of classical beauty had been substituted by modern ugliness in all its forms. His main concern, however, was with the soul of the individual; he hoped that the present undesirable condition of mankind could be improved only through changes that could be made there. Lawrence, on the other hand, was occupied mainly with man's body. While Eliot was seeking man's salvation in following the path to Christ, Lawrence was claiming that man had too long been concerned with his soul, and that it was time he paid some attention to his body and its natural needs. As a matter of fact, he believed, most of the causes of man's unhappiness was a result of this negligence. He strongly emphasized that the only tradition man should adhere to was his body and its primitive urges. When he looked at nature he found that man was the only unhappy creature among the rest, and that this was because he had isolated himself from nature as if from a contagious disease. His duty as poet was to help man to reestablish his primitive ties with nature. Man's modern milieu was so far removed from nature that, his unconscious was filled with frustrated primitive urges which led to various forms of neuroses, sexual and social maladjustments. All through his literary career Lawrence attacked the so called civilized values of modern western society, and tried to show its false and artificial character. It is in these attacks that his primitivism finds its clearest expression. A study of his religious ideas and beliefs would reveal Lawrence, who is believed to be irreligious, to be deeply religious. It must, however, be pointed out that his religion was pagan and that his beliefs were pantheistic in character. His poem 'Shadows' is a clear expression of these features:

And if tonight my soul may find her peace  
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,  
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower  
then I have been dipped again in God, and new-created.  

Lawrence always wanted to be in touch with God, but his God was not the God of Christianity. His was a pagan God. As expressed in the poem 'The Hands of God' he dreaded the idea of being abandoned by God:

1 'Shadows' Last Poems, 1932.
It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them.

Let me never know, O God
let me never know what I am or should be
when I have fallen out of your hands, the hands of the living God. 1

Although his religious ideas were outside the established religions, they contained most of them. Once he said that one had to be 'so terribly religious to be an artist'. As early as 1913 he formulated his religious beliefs as follows:

My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what our blood feels and believes and says is always true. 2

The following extract from another letter clarifies his religious stand a little further:

I worship Christ, I worship Jehovah, I worship Pan, I worship Aphrodite. But I do not worship hands nailed and running with blood upon a cross, nor licentiousness, nor lust. I want them all, all the God. They are God. But I must serve in real love. If I take my whole passionate, spiritual and physical love to the woman who in turn loves me, that is how I serve God. 3

We have very few clues to his ideas of immortality, though the following lines suggest that he believed in a form of life after death:

Then I must know that still
I am in the hands of the unknown God,
He is breaking me down to his own oblivion
To send me forth on a new morning, a new man. 4

This brief review of his attitude towards religion indicates that, as far as spiritual values were concerned he was inclined towards *paganism*, an aspect of *primitivism*.

As for his political ideology, Lawrence regarded war as a great stupidity, caused by big powers merely for material gain, and he refused to fight. As seen from the following quotation, however, he was not completely lacking nationalistic sympathies:

1 'The Hands of God' *Collected Poems* vol. II.
It seems as if we were all going to be dragged into the dance macabre. One can only grin, and be fatalistic. My dear nation is beaten by the tarantula, and the venom has gone at last... It is very sad, but one isn't sad any more. It is, ... no use crying over spilt milk .... The poor dear ship of Christian democracy is scuttled at last, the breach is made, the veil of the temple is torn, our epoch is over.¹

There is a strong element of sarcasm in these words, which weaken his sympathies for the nation which he regarded as 'a big business concern' existing solely for the purpose of producing and accumulating wealth. Lawrence left England in 1919 for Italy, and he led a traveller's life all over Europe, always trying to find a primitive life that was not penetrated by modern civilization. He wished very much that he was an African native or a man who lived before Noah's time. At one time he and his wife went even to New Mexico, but for some reason or other Lawrence never found the peace that he had hoped to find and returned to Europe.

The following passage from Aaron's Rod (1922) explains to some extent his motives in going to America:

I would have loved the Aztecs and the Red Indians.
I know they hold the element in life which I am looking for — they had living pride. Not like the flea — bitten Asiatics ..... The American races — and the South Sea Islanders — the Marquesans, the Maori blood. That was the true blood. It wasn't frightened.²

Deeply in love with primitive nature, Lawrence was inviting man, whom modern conditions had turned into a living-dead, to this kind of a nature: a lusty and exuberant existence. His life-long advice to man was 'Live, live, live! You have only a few years to do it in.' He was deeply sorry for those who had been deprived of their 'life-giving sun' under the deadening mechanization of their environment. The instinct sun-awareness was the greatest life force to Lawrence. Being deprived of one's sun was worse than death:

I love the sun in any man
When I see it between his brows
Clear, and fearless, even if tiny.

I feel that when people have gone utterly sunless
They shouldn't exist.³

² Aaron's Rod, p. 185.
³ 'Democracy' Pansies, 1929, p. 22.
A relentless enemy of modern science and industry, Lawrence regarded both as a great source of evil; because both had brought about man's present plight, his frustration, his isolation from nature, the inhumanity and vast and bewildering complexity of his new environment.

Now men must get up and depart from evil,
Or all is lost.
The evil in many evil men
Makes an evil world-soul, which purposes
to reduce the world to grey ash.
Wheels are evil,
and machines are evil,
and the will to make money is evil.
All forms of abstraction are evil:
finance is a great evil abstraction
science has now become an evil abstraction
education is an evil abstraction.\(^1\)

The following quotation from his *Apocalypse* (1932) illustrates the degree of contempt that he had for science\(^2\):

All science has taught about fire does not make fire
any different. The processes of combustion are not fire,
they are thought-forms. H\(_2\)O is not water, it is a thought-
form derived from experiment with water. Thought-forms
are thought-forms, they do not make our life.
Our life is made still of elemental fire and water, earth and air:
by these we move and live and have our being.\(^3\)

Lawrence did not believe that the machine-made civilization of western Europe would last forever; he hoped that mankind would one day become tired of this artificial mode of life and return to a primitive form of living that was meant for him. This happy day is being expected in 'Terra Cognita':

Oh when man escaped from the barbed-wire entanglement of his own ideas and his own mechanical devices there is a marvelous rich world of contact and sheer fluid beauty\(^4\).

\(^2\) Aldous Huxley, (*The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* Introduction p. xv) cites the following conversation between himself and Lawrence which is both amusing and illuminating:

Lawrence: All scientists are liars, liars, liars.
Huxley: But look at the evidence. Look at all the evidence.
Lawrence: But I don't care about experience. Evidence doesn't mean a thing to me. I don't feel it *here*.

\(^3\) *Apocalypse*, The Viking Press, New York, 1932, p. 54.
\(^4\) 'Terra Incognita' *Last Poems*. 
Lawrence's political ideology was a subject of a good deal of commenting. Both Marxist and Fascist critics claimed him. He, in fact, lacked a clearly defined political ideology. We can even say that he hated both the idealism and materialism of political activities, and was suspicious of all movements which involved the masses. The greatest movement or revolution that he wanted was one in the relations between man and woman. But sometimes he feared that the condition he expected might be possible only through a political revolution, perhaps through a huge explosion of some kind, or perhaps 'a real bust up, quite purposeless and aimless' or may be

\[ \text{Damned loutish bolshevists,}
\]
\[ \text{Who perhaps will do the business after all}
\]
\[ \text{In the long run.}
\]

He was too idealistic to be subjected to dogmatic principles. His major concern was, as we have already mentioned, with the individual. He wanted to make the individual's life just as happy and natural as a flower or a vegetable:

\[ \text{Flowers achieve their own floweriness and it is a miracle.}
\]
\[ \text{Men don't achieve their manhood, alas, oh alas! alas!}
\]

\[ \text{Oh leave off saying I want you to be savages.}
\]
\[ \text{Tell me, is the gentian savage, at the top of its coarse stem?}
\]
\[ \text{Oh what in you can answer to this blueness?}
\]
\[ \text{Tell me! tell me! is there in you a beauty to compare}
\]
\[ \text{To the honeysuckle at evening now}
\]
\[ \text{pouring out his breath.}^1
\]

Lawrence wanted to adjust the individual to life in his own capacity, and bring about natural relationships in which he enjoyed greater freedom from want, and was not hostile to other men. He believed there would be no major improvement in the condition of humanity unless an entirely different concept of man was accepted, and the first thing to do was a recognition not of similarities, but of differences among men. His individualism was the starting point of his primitivism, and his hedonistic philosophy was deeply coloured by the theories of Freud. Briefly, we may say that the most distinct aspects of Lavrence's philosophy were naturalism, primitivism and hedonism. Illogical and narrow-minded though most of his ideas may be, he can be justified up to a point because he had assumed the guardianship of individualism at a time when this aspect of man was most seriously threatened.

\[ ^1 \text{ibid.}
\]
As will be seen from the passages quoted here Lawrence's treatment of his material was far from being reserved. His dominating sentiment was one of hate and anger, and the result was often close to blasphemy. This quality points to a lack of inner orderliness, and harmony between technique and material, and to a process of high tension and quick discharge. The ideal of achieving internal and external peace through a return to a primitive form of life is on the whole a futile conception. There is an abundance of evidence to support the thesis that primitive man is far from being free from anxiety, worry and unhappiness. The fact is that, many of Lawrence's complexes could be explained by Freud's theories of oedipus complex, sublimation, repression and psychological compensation. What Lawrence was probably trying to do was a fulfilment of his physical and spiritual desires through an artistic activity.

As for Herbert Read; he resembles Lawrence to a certain extent, but on the whole, neither his psychological problems were so deep nor his reactions so strong. Read is able to treat his subject with a greater reserve. Their point of agreement was a belief in the goodness of human nature and the justness of the laws of nature. Like Lawrence, Read had revolted against the mechanical civilization which was threatening to crush man's humanity and individuality. The most fundamental difference between the two was that while Lawrence used his poetry as a means of political propaganda, Read declined for some reason or other, from voicing his anarchic views in his poetry. Despite the fact that he had a well-defined political theory, we find no traces of it in his own poetical theory of poetry, we find no traces of it in his own poetical output. This was fortunate. His critical study *Poetry and Anarchism* (1938) was, however, an unfortunate attempt, and as such, one of the strangest documents of modern English literature. In this work Read explains how the poet will try to undermine the existing order of the society, and how poetry can be used as a destructive weapon. The following passage analyzes the poet's destructive philosophy and his powerful weapon, poetry:

I realize that form, pattern, and order are essential aspects of existence; but in themselves they are the attributes of death. To make life, to insure progress, to create interest and vividness, it is necessary to break form, to distort pattern, to change the nature of our civilization. In order to create it is necessary to destroy; and the agent of destruction in society is the poet. I believe that the poet is necessarily an anarchist, and that he must oppose all organized conceptions of the State, not only those which we inherit from the past, but equally those which are imposed on people in the name of the future. In this sense I make no distinction between fascism and marxism. ¹

It is understood from the above passage that the poet's function is to oppose all forms of organized government which exercised pressure on man, and preserve individual freedom and values. Such doctrinaire forms of government as Capitalism, Fascism, and Marxism defied the values that the poet wished to preserve and promote. He writes in *Poetry and Anarchism*:

Government is force; force is repression, and repression leads to reaction, or to a psychosis of power which in its turn involves the individual in destruction and the nation in war. War will exist as long as the state exists. Only and anarchist society can offer these economic, ethical and psychological conditions under which the emergence of a peaceful mentality is possible.¹

Read seems to be totally unaware of the fact that his anarchistic theory of poetry is too narrow minded, since when a state of complete anarchy is realised, that is when the poet's dream comes true, there will not be any need for him. Having completed their task, would poets just disappear, or would they be liquidated as they would no longer have any valuable function? These are some of the questions that one feels inclined to ask regarding all political theories of poetry.

The fact is that Read's *Poetry and Anarchism* was a reaction to such extremist movements as Communism and Fascism at a time when they were involved in a relentless struggle against each other. Earlier Read had made himself a reputation as a reserved and balanced literary critic, who believed that art was beyond political considerations of all kinds. In the *Meaning of Art* (1931) we find a satisfactory explanation of the reason why there are no references to anarchism in his own poetry:

The ultimate values of art transcend the individual and his time and circumstance. They express an ideal proportion or harmony which the artist can grasp only in virtue of his intuitive powers. In expressing his intuition the artist will use materials placed in his hands by the circumstances of his time. . . . The true artist is indifferent to the materials and conditions imposed upon him.²

Another explanation of the reason why Read's anarchistic views find no expression in his poetry is that many people are dual-natured, and in the production of a highly cultured man such as Read we should expect to

¹ *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 75.
² *The Meaning of Art*, Faber & Faber, 1931, p. 224.
see an expression of his dual personality; when he is concerning himself with politics the material side of his nature tends to predominate, and when he is concerned with poetical expression the spiritual side of his nature manifests itself. Thus, in both of these activities in turn he is able to express effectively both sides of his nature. The explanation for such a schism in his mind might be found in a subconscious fear of freedom that he believed an anarchistic society might possess. At any rate Read does not seem, at this stage of his literary career, to have been able to reach a solution of his own ideological conflict. In the next generation, that is the generation of the 30's we shall witness a sharpening of such conflicts. Such violence had the ideological conflict assumed by 1939 that many writers were impatient with the abstract nature, and ineffectiveness of poetry, and therefore, resorted to political propaganda which promised more definite and quicker results.

Half-digested and vague political ideas and goals have always done serious harm to poetry. It is for this reason that periods of revolution are not favorable to poetry, because, as T.S.Eliot says they put 'pressure upon the poet, both direct and indirect, to make him overconscious of his beliefs'.

In conclusion I maintain that the use of a political formula to describe human relationships, which are not restricted to politics alone, but cover very wide fields as well, results in narrow-mindedness and shallowness. The two English writers that we examined in this article made futile efforts to use literature as a means of propagating their own individual philosophies, one through his verses and novels, the other through his criticism. This distinction must be made between thought and art: thought is the product of the mind, and it addresses to the mind; whereas art is a product of the heart, and it is the heart which understands its language best. It must also be added that the heart has many problems which the mind cannot grasp. This is the field in which the artist can work most fruitfully.

1 The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Harvard Uni. Press, 1933, p. 129.

Eliot is of the opinion that the artist who is also a thinker will not be able to fuse his thoughts with his feelings. According to him a work of art should be judged intrinsically with reference neither to intent nor to effect. It seems that Eliot does not regard poetical thinking as original as thinking done by professional philosophers. In his opinion poets should merely use thoughts poetically, and readers of poetry should suspend both belief and disbelief in ideas expressed poetically, but they should merely try to understand. Eliot, then, finds it impossible to discard the ideological content, but at the same time he maintains that our agreement or disagreement with this content has nothing to do with the beauty of a poem.