

THE APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE IN THE POETRY OF TWO GENERATIONS

by

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The general tendency of the artists of the 'twenties, headed by T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and W.B. Yeats was to create a personal myth around the present and from there to approach society. Edwin Muir calls them the «lonely» or «homeless» generation because they stood alone against society and were painfully conscious of the loneliness of the individual. The typical hero of this period is the isolated individual who is an individualist, not because he believes in individualism, but because there does not seem to be any other way open to him. We have a picture of this individual in nearly all Virginia Woolf's novels, in Eliot's poetry and in Joyce's *Ulysses*. He presents a picture of helplessness, frustration and an utter lack of faith in the future regeneration of society.

Among this generation, however, there stands one who overcame his loneliness and romanticism and whose later poetry, as a result, is the most vigorous the twentieth century has known. The strength of Yeats's poetry is the outcome of his healthy and realistic attitude to life. He learnt to accept, after bitter experience, the different aspects of existence, the good and the bad, as part of a vast pattern. But before he was able to formulate his philosophy of acceptance, Yeats went through a line of development which differs much from that of modern poets in general, although it comes close to the development of the ordinary intelligent human being. The tendency of most of the artists of the twentieth

century has been to move from realism to romanticism, from an interest in the external world and its problems to a final recoil from its complications. Yeats, on the other hand, developed in the opposite direction : he started as a romantic escapist and gradually became, as the result of the interaction between him and the world of external events, a realist of the first order. 'The 'eighties and 'nineties of the nineteenth century are as far removed from the post-war (1914-1918) period and the 'thirties of the present century as is the world of the Sidhe from that of Crazy Jane in the poetry of W.B. Yeats. This change in the outside world is to a large degree responsible for the particular line of development in his poetry.

Yeats grew up in an Ireland of relative stability, an Ireland which, to all appearances, was still living in the eighteenth century. It was an agricultural country ruled by a landowning class which, although arrogant and snobbish, had not yet acquired the dullness and vulgarity of the commercial middle class. Yeats had spent his boyhood among this hearty and vigorous people who gained their vitality through direct contact with the peasant. The peasantry itself was living in close communion with the earth, its source of livelihood, and with the past. Ireland had not yet broken the link with the past ; she and her people were part of a long established tradition and the sense of unity and continuity was the essence of Irish life.

Yeats was part of this harmonious existence. His fiery imagination had been roused by Ireland's cultural tradition, particularly because as a boy he had listened enthralled to stories of his ancient land told by the peasants in their beautiful imaginative language. Celtic mythology, however, had captivated him in such a way as to blind him to the here and now. Irish landscape became, for him, an embodiment of the romantic world of the past ; the associations it roused were from Irish legend and history. The beauty of the present was seen, not as an embodiment of the world of reality, but as a world which evoked memories from the past. For Yeats, the imagination was altogether divorced from reality and the present.

During this early period, Yeats was a thoroughgoing roman-

tic aesthete for whom poetry was an expression of the beautiful and the timeless. He was the bard who wished « to pluck the silver apples of the moon and the golden apples of the sun ». Yeats, the romantic, is embodied in the hero of *Shadowy Waters* who sails through fairy seas in pursuit of a dream and an ideal love which is not of this earth,

But a beautiful unheard of kind
That is not in the world.

During this early phase of his development, Yeats's poetry was in keeping with and an expression of the romantic spirit of his people and their times. Gradually the Irish way of life and thought began to take on a different appearance ; the structure of society began to change. A new middle class with shop-keeping and materialistic values, antagonistic to the old leisurely and aristocratic way of life, was emerging. Yeats felt that this meant the destruction of the old ideals and beliefs which had held the community together and, therefore, the disintegration of society. It is these conditions which first brought Yeats face to face with reality.

Unable to shut out the world around him, the poet who had chosen to dwell in fairyland, cultivating the imagination and enjoying beauty for its own sake, began to express a certain uneasiness in his poetry. In *These Are the Clouds* there is a presentiment that the old aristocratic tradition is dying out and a foreboding of social revolution. A sense of evil which is gradually enveloping the old world is felt throughout the poem :

The weak lay hand on what the strong has done,
Till that he tumbled that was lifted high
And discord follow upon unison,
And all things at one common level lie.

The new Ireland was unpleasantly different from the Ireland of Yeats's youth, the Ireland he had imagined and sung of in his poetry. It was a noisy, angry, discordant place. The shock

which this new aspect of his country caused Yeats helped to develop in him the more natural human feelings of scorn, pride and disgust all of which are absent from his early poetry. These feelings enabled him to see his country in a clear light. The « Red Rose », the « Rose of all Roses » and the « Rose of all the world » had turned into a quarrelsome crowd, thus killing the old spirit of Ireland. And disillusionment, a note so far alien in Yeats's work, makes its appearance in *September 1913*:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide ;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave ?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Romantic Ireland had died with the idealist O'Leary and now romantic Yeats was also dying. In *A Coat* he promises to discard all his former trappings. As early as *The Green Helmet* the elaborate and concentrated use of mythology has disappeared; the style has become simple and direct and the imagery is vivid. Yeats's aim has now become

To write for my own race
And for the reality.

This opportunity was given to him with the political developments in Ireland and the Irish Nationalist movement. The Easter rebellion of 1916 thrust him forward on to the path of realism. The old Celtic mythology gives way to a new set of values derived from and embodied in the heroes of the movement and the new Ireland they hoped to bring to birth. The heroism and self-sacrifice of the leaders of the movement won the admiration and gratitude of the Irish people. Yeats, who was in Dublin at the time of the outburst, was personally touched by the rebellion for a

mong the leaders were many whom he knew and loved. And both poet and nationalist heroes were caught up in the fight for Ireland in this new phase of her history.

The Celtic twilight dissolves into the light of day. Yeats exchanges his embroidered coat for a workaday coat as he descends into the most real of all realities—the world of politics and action; the past is now left behind. The scene of his poem *Easter 1916* is that of Dublin with its eighteenth century architecture and the « people coming from counter to desk ». The people are shown in their simplicity ; they are seen as they really are with no halo of romance surrounding them. There is the Countess Markiewicz who « spent her days in ignorant good will », and her « nights in argument », the schoolmaster Pearse and Connolly his friend, and MacBride « the drunken vainglorious lout ». All have their part in that casual comedy which suddenly turns into tragedy, making heroes and heroines of them. Although Yeats was not altogether in favour of shedding blood and was inclined to think that it was needless, his sympathy goes out to the heroes of the movement :

We know their dream ; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead ;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died ?
I write it out in verse —
Macdonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly :
A terrible beauty is born.

The old Ireland had been beautiful in its mystery, but the new Ireland was beautiful in a terrifying way. This was a strange new country, alive and struggling for life not lost in the world of dreams and romance. Its people resembled neither the simple-hearted peasant with his legends of a past glory, nor the aristocracy with its polished manners and cultural heritage ; they were a people stained with blood through action. It is they who supply

Yeats in his later years with a fresh set of symbols of immediate significance and appeal. In this way his brooding sense of the past as embodied in Celtic mythology becomes a developed consciousness of history in the making with actual living heroes. Taken as a group the poems *September 1913*, *Easter 1916* and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* vividly present a phase of Irish history as seen, felt and related by an Irishman.

This struggling world of blood and action, however, soon threatened Yeats with disillusionment and he cut himself off from the world of politics and public affairs, burying himself in his ancient Galway tower to live amidst old memories and dreams. He had not yet fully developed as an artist and was still unable to reconcile himself to reality with all its disappointments. It is during this period that disillusionment weighs him down and a tired old age feeling creeps over Yeats, not unlike T.S. Eliot's feeling in *The Waste Land*. The absence of anything positive to cling to accounts for the sense of emptiness in this poetry. As Yeats withdraws from the world, creeping back into himself, he sees from the roof of his ivory tower armies «fighting and plunging to emptiness» and «phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's fullness and of the coming Emptiness». Yeats now echoes Eliot's weariness, exhaustion and pessimism all of which are the result of his disgust with the turn of events, both in Ireland and in Europe :

We are closed in, and the sky is turned
In our uncertainty.

He is painfully conscious that «many ingenious lovely things are gone». The voice of the tired old man speaks of the solidity and beauty of the past which has now become a subject for brooding :

We too had many pretty toys when young.

The link with the past has snapped and the continuity is broken.

The butchery which took place during the Irish Rebellion has much to do with Yeats's disillusionment and his temporary

retreat from the world of reality. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* we get a vision of this bloody violent Ireland from which he is shrinking:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot free.

The world of public affairs, of action and of the senses, as Yeats has come to see it, is no longer for him ; it is a place only for the young. « That is no country for old men » he says in *Sailing to Byzantium*. His desire now is to be gathered into the artifice of eternity » never to « take bodily form from any natural being ».

One would have thought that by this time Yeats had reached the final stage of his development and that he would have ended by turning his back on reality and escaping into the past he had loved as a young man. But he was too vigorous a poet to do that. He still felt attracted to the actual world of life and struggle. Even the post-war world which inspired Eliot with *The Waste Land*, a poem of almost complete negation, produced from Yeats's pen *The Second Coming* from which hope in the future is not absent. The picture of the modern world which Yeats presents is one of confusion and disintegration :

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer ;
Things fall apart ; the centre cannot hold ;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.....

Yet he is not driven to despair, for the future holds for him «The Second Coming», the promise of a new world and a regeneration. The secret of his faith and his final acceptance of the disorder of the modern world lies in a highly elaborate pattern into which he fits past, present and future, relating them to the whole of eternity. The Wheel of Time is the symbol he gives this scheme which is based on ancient and Indian philosophies combined into a personal myth. In his Wheel of Time the conflicts and discords of life form the pattern of existence ; apparent frustration

and failure are part of the eternal process. Variety and conflict go to make up life and movement. Yeats sees time and eternity as complementary ; neither can exist without the other. The world of Becoming is put into action by the world of Being, and the world of Being derives its pattern and meaning from the world of Becoming.

With the aid of this personal myth Yeats was able to plunge into the midst of reality and to face the ugliness of the present without falling into despair or trying to escape. Like Eliot who approaches the modern world from «the still centre of the turning world », so Yeats sees it through the pattern of his Wheel of Time, thus giving it meaning.

There is little or no conflict at all in Yeats's later poetry. The reality with which he is confronted in his later years and the ideal which captured his imagination as a young poet have been fully reconciled. This explains the vigour and youth of the later Yeats who seems to grow younger with the passage of time. He now accepts the temporal world with all its impurities :

What matter if the ditches are impure ?
What matter if I live it all once more ?

I am content to live it all once again
And yet again if it be to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of the blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men. (1)

Everything has its place in the pattern and must be accepted. Unlike the young Yeats who went in search of an ideal world, the older Yeats does not attempt to transcend the temporal. To be part of the struggle, to fight against hidden destiny is man's fate. Out of the conflict within the individual himself : between the body and soul and between the intellect and the imagination ; and out of the struggle between the individual and the external

(1) *A Dialogue of Self and Soul.*

world, emerge the beauty and variety of life together with its force and pattern. All we can do is to accept this determinist pattern.

Thus Yeats who was once a dreamer of dreams, now blesses « the bloody arrogant power » of the man of action. He has been won over to « the mire and blood » and has rejected the stainless moon whose purity nothing can blemish. He is fully aware of the consequences of the choice he has made. This is apparent in his poem *Among Schoolchildren*. By this time he is « a sixty year old smiling public man » inspecting a school kept by nuns. As he watches the girls he remembers the woman he loved. He sees a picture of her as she might have been as a child. Back in the present, however, he sees her as she really is, an old woman :

Her present image floats into the mind - -
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat ?

Beauty is transient, it decays with the decay of the body. Even divine beauty is symbolised by « perishable objects ». Nevertheless, Yeats comes to the conclusion that « body » must not be « bruised to pleasure soul ». All that really counts are the instinctive and simple joys of life represented by the « blossoming of the chestnut tree » and « the body swayed to music ».

Crazy Jane is the exponent of Yeats' final phase of development and his vigorous acceptance of life with both its ugliness and its beauty. When the Bishop deplores the loss of her virginity and advises her to give up this « foul sty » and live in a « heavenly mansion », she retorts :

Fair and foul are near of kin,
And fair needs foul.

In the same way Yeats is able to accept the confusion and disorder depicted in *The Second Coming* and the disintegration of Ireland. For in this fragmentary picture of the present, the artist can see order, and as the Wheel of Time turns, the opposing

forces of the present resolve into harmony ; out of the anarchic state of the present appears « the second coming ». Until this happens, Yeats believes that it is the task of the artist to maintain the order which the individual, caught in the struggle, fails to discern. In this way Yeats both accepts and transcends the temporal ; he transcends it by accepting it.



By the time Yeats had reconciled himself to reality in its different forms, another group of young poets found themselves confronted with the same problem which first came to Yeats's notice during the Irish Rebellion and later with the chaos and disintegration of the post-war world. Yeats, however, had grown up in a more limited world and was introduced to society and its problems gradually and in small doses. He was not altogether taken by surprise and was, therefore, slowly able to adjust himself to the new conditions. The positive values of Celtic mythology give way to the positive values of fighting Ireland and her heroes, and these are finally superseded by Yeats's own personal myth. Thus Yeats is well armed in his descent into the world of public affairs and action.

On the other hand, the life which the poets of the 'thirties knew from the start was lacking in pattern and harmony. The tired and lonely 'twenties which the Eliot generation had experienced and which drove its members into an ivory tower came to a sensational close with the outbreak of the 1929-1931 economic crises. With modern civilisation crumbling wherever he turned there seemed to be nowhere the artist could escape. Compared with this new menacing life, Yeats's world was comparatively sheltered and limited. Public events now forcibly imposed themselves upon the younger generation who had never enjoyed the luxury of positive values. The economic crises revealed the flimsiness of the whole social, political and economic structure of society. It brought to light an unforgettable state of chaos which

proved even more oppressive than the fragmentariness and discord of the post-war years. The feeling was growing that there must be something fundamentally wrong with an economic system so full of paradoxes as to allow people to starve in the midst of plenty.

The necessity of establishing order into such a state of universal disorder was generally recognised everywhere in the 'thirties. In England and America reform increased and a serious attempt was made to improve the economic status of the individual. In both Germany and Italy efforts were directed to bringing the economic and social system under control. Finally, there was Russia who, earlier in the 'twenties, had realised the need for economic planning and was now, as a result, enjoying some semblance of order and a relatively stable form of existence, even while the States and Europe were groaning under the weight of the economic crises. Thus, the spotlight was being focused on economics.

It was equally being directed upon politics. This is apparent in the growing strength of the militarist states of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy whose policy of aggression threatened to plunge the world into war. In short, the general atmosphere of the 'thirties was one of action and political tension which the artist could hardly ignore. For as Stephen Spender, the poet, says :

When the very existence of civilisation is threatened by war and oppression, politics become either an affirmation of life or an alliance with death. More than this in innumerable ways, even when men are unaware of it, the activity of their lives assumes a political aspect. Although they may be indifferent to politics and politicians they cannot ignore the contemporary history which feeds or starves them, breeds and shoots them (1)

(1) *The Destructive Element.*

Thus, as with Yeats earlier in the century, the external world forced itself upon a group of young poets who accepted the challenge plunging knee-deep into the world of politics, economics and social reform. Unlike the older generation of the 'twenties who saw life mainly as a collection of private problems, the poets of the 'thirties, headed by W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender, learnt to trace every evil to a political or economic cause. Like the Eliot generation they were in revolt against their society which was a denial of all human values ; but contrary to them, the Auden group chose to immerse itself in society and tried to get to the root of the trouble which was causing so much unhappiness in an age where everything seemed to be set for the happiness of the individual. A sense of responsibility towards society characterises these young writers. They sought to utilise their poetry as a propaganda weapon to refashion the outer world, the material world of factories with the ugly conditions they imposed on life and the world of economic crises which left so many destitute.

And here we note an important difference between the Auden group and Yeats. Yeats had grown up towards the end of the nineteenth century which was still an age of individualism. Therefore, when he went in search of positive values and meaning in the external world of public affairs, he ultimately found them in a personal myth. Whereas Yeats had turned inwards in his search, the young poets of the 'thirties turned outwards. The chaos and disorder they experienced were too universal to allow for a private solution. This they found in Marx's materialist view of history. « Dialectic Materialism » offered a simple explanation for a diversity of things : the movement of history, the development of the family, the ideals of romantic love, the conflicts of bourgeois family life, the neuroses of the middle class and the position of the proletariat in society. All this appeared in the form of an objective interpretation of the human world, creating order and meaning where before there had been disintegration and hollowness. Marxism supplied the Auden group with a set of values for which the Eliot generation had had to go to the past.

These enthusiastic young writers, provided with an unlimi-

ted faith in their abilities and stored energy, accepted the external world at its face value: chaos, wars, revolutions, economic crises, along with the poverty and misery of modern life. And they presented these subjects in their poetry from a fresh angle.

Society is a living theme in their works and the individual is seen primarily in his relationship to society. He becomes first and foremost a social creature, the « horizontal man », as Auden calls him, in contrast with the « vertical man ». This particular preoccupation with society in its different aspects and with the individual as a social and not a private creature is apparent in Auden's poems and plays written in the 'thirties. Here his approach is quite different from that of the lonely Eliot generation. A comparison between *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, written in collaboration with C. Isherwood, and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* will bring out the essential difference between the two generations. The theme of both these plays is war, suffering and the frustration of human beings. Typical of his generation, Eliot tackles the subject psychologically. Although he has a clear view of Thomas a Beckett's position in society, he concentrates on the private individual and his private problem ; he deals with the inward conflict of a Beckett living through a period of unrest and with the internal struggle which takes place between the passions and self-discipline. In *The Dog Beneath the Skin* the theme is handled from the point of view of the relationship between social responsibility and individual freedom. The fast bond between the individual and society forms the centre of this and Auden's other works written in the 'thirties. This play ends with a final emphasis on such a link : « To each his need ; from each his power ». Eliot, on the other hand, regards society as a hindrance to the individual. This is likewise the attitude of D.H. Lawrence who sees society weighing down on the individual until he is no longer able to act and develop naturally, while Yeats is the one member of his generation who accepts the conflicts and struggles, the blooshed and the frustration, all as part of a glorious pattern. The Auden group also sees them as part of a harmonious whole, and demands that we do not try to escape from society and its problems. We should take life in both our hands and act for we are the tools of history ; we should

fight and struggle to change the society which is causing the frustration of the individual and establish a new society to help him live a fuller life. These poets are continuing the message of Bernard Shaw.

Their interpretation of society is more comprehensive than that of their predecessors. They feel that a picture of society which does not take into account industrialism and the life and thought of the working class is incomplete. They know that equally incomplete is a picture which fails to show those in control of the working class. Therefore, they set out to write of the decaying world of unemployment, rotting industry and agriculture :

I see barns falling, fences broken,
Pasture not ploughland, weeds not wheat.
The great houses remain but only half are inhabited,
Dusty the gun-rooms and the stable clocks stationary. (1)

The individual worker is unemployed, poor, hungry and lives a life of emptiness :

Moving through the silent crowd
Who stand behind dull cigarettes
The men who idle in the road
I have the sense of falling light ;

They lounge at corners of the street
And greet friends with a shrug of shoulder
And turn their empty pockets out
The cynical gestures of the poor ;

Now they've no work, like better men
Who sit at desks and take much pay
They sleep long nights and rise at ten
To watch the hours that drain away.

(1) *The Dog Beneath the Skin.*

I'm jealous of the weeping hours
They stare through with such hungry eyes
I'm haunted by their images,
I'm haunted by their emptiness. (1)

This is the same world which Eliot saw, but here the resemblance ends. The tone in Spender's poem is sympathetic rather than cynical and he does not draw the grand figure of Eliot watching from above with a cynical smile the little dolls below moving to their doom. Spender, along with the other members of the group, approaches the present with a more practical purpose than Eliot's; his aim is to change it. He and his group look towards the future and by so doing apply to their poetry Edward Upward's theory of the novel and how it ought to portray life:

If a novel were to be written describing with complete faithfulness the surface of life in England to-day, the slums, the luxury, the power of the capitalist minority, the political ignorance of the exploited majority — such a novel would be untrue to life. It would show only one side of the picture, and not the most important side; it would be pessimistic, would represent militant socialism as a comparatively insignificant movement having not more than a few thousand adherents: it would distort the future and misrepresent the past. (2)

The faith of the Auden group in the future was based mainly on Marx's interpretation of history which provided it with a pattern for an apparently chaotic world. The incoherent present became merely a phase in the embracing process of history. According to Marx and to these poets, the movement of history is forward; there can be no return to the past, as Eliot and his generation suggest. The isolated individual who tries to cut himself off from history and society is doomed to failure; for the

(1) Stephen Spender, from *Poems*

(2) As quoted by Philip Henderson in *The Poet and Society*

worth of the individual lies primarily in his capacity as a member of society and history. Auden gives expression to this belief when he says :

Do not imagine you can abdicate,
Before you reach the frontier, you are caught. (1)
and

All sway forward on the dangerous flood
Of history, that never sleeps or dies. (2)

These poets, unlike their predecessors, were suspicious of the past. They regarded the inability to catch up with our times and the falling back into a time no longer ours as the cause of the misery and disorder of the present :

Man is changed by his living ; but not fast enough.
His concern to-day is for that which yesterday did
not occur.
In the hour of the Blue Bird and the Bristol Bomber,
his thoughts are appropriate to the years of the
Penny Farthing (3)

The urgent call to modern man is, therefore, « alter your life ». The message of the Auden group is action :

I say, stamping the word with emphasis,
Drink from here energy and only energy
As from the electric charge of a battery,
To will this Time's change. (4)

Now is the «time for the destruction of error»; «it is time

(1) From *Poems*

(2) From *Look Stranger*

(3) *The Dog Beneath the Skin*

(4) Stephen Spender, *Poems*

for some new coinage people have got so old ».

Need I remind you (says Auden) we're not living in Ancient Egypt ? Time's getting on and I must hurry or I'll miss the train. You've got some pretty difficult changes to make. We simply can't afford any passengers or skirmishers. I would like to see you make a beginning before I go, Now, Here. (1)

The address is made to the worker, the man who has suffered most from the existing economic system, who has least reason to be attached to anything out of the past, and in whose hands, according to Marx, the future lies. The proletariat is urged to rise and give the death blow to capitalism and by so doing establish an economic system based on order and justice :

Hands off ! The dykes are down.
There is no time for play.
Hammer is poised and sickle
Sharpened. I cannot stay. (2)

Suddenly the hopes of these young writers take concrete shape with the outbreak of the Spanish civil war:

On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe,
On that tableland scored by rivers,
Our thoughts have bodies. (3)

Now the forces of reaction and those of the future come into conflict as the armies of the generals and the republic face one another on the battle field. The enthusiasm of the young English writers was so great that some of them took up arms and died in the fight. Ralph Fox, John Cornford, Julian Bell and

(1) *The Orators.*

(2) Day Lewis, *The Magnetic Mountain*

(3) W.H. Auden, *Spain*

Christopher Caudwell are a few who expressed, in action, a mood which had become widespread among their contemporaries. The Spanish war was the culmination of their hopes :

To-morrow, perhaps the future...
to-day the struggle
To-day the inevitable increase in the chances of
death. (1)

The Republican armies, however, were defeated ; and the faith of the Auden group in the future dwindled. They gradually began to realise that their propagandist poetry which they had hoped would heal the « waste land » had proved a failure. Spender says that the fault with these poets lies in the fact that politics had become so much of an obsession with them, that it had taken on the form of an end in itself rather than a means to a non-political goal. Politics came before poetry with them ; and they treated political subjects not poetically but politically. They were turned too much outwards and their poetry was dependent on external events, more than was healthy for it. Spender says :

To invoke action in poetry is insufficient, for it puts poetry at the mercy of something outside poetry, which has to happen in order that the poem may be fulfilled.

The final conclusion at which Spender arrives is that

Poetry cannot take sides except with life, nor can one dictate to poets their subject matter.

Thus the Auden group failed where Yeats succeeded. Unlike Yeats they failed to adjust themselves satisfactorily to their world. Their ready-made solution which they accepted as a basis for their faith in life and society had not been sufficiently absorbed to stand them in good stead at the hour of their gravest need, that is at the defeat of the Republicans in Spain and the final out-

(1) *Spain*

break of war in 1939. After this they tended to turn their backs on reality, each escaping from the world of public affairs in his own different way. The private world of the individual which they had rejected in the 'thirties began to take a more prominent place in their poetry ; and so, in a way, they ended up by joining the Eliot generation of lonely artists. Yeats alone remains the one poet of the twentieth century who, not only ended as the poet of life despite its uglier aspects, but whose poetry took on a healthy universality denied to that of the other poets of the first part of the century.

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