

THE FURY AND THE GRACE: A STUDY OF THE POETRY AND  
THE POETIC DEVELOPMENT OF C. DAY LEWIS

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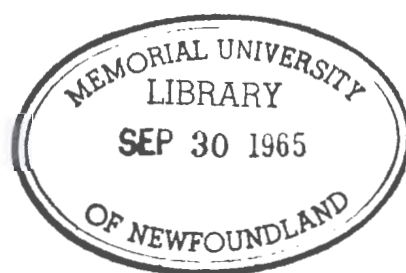
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**THE FURY AND THE GRACE: A Study of the Poetry and the  
Poetic Development of C. Day Lewis.**

**By**

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**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts, Memorial University of  
Newfoundland, April 10, 1965.**

## ABSTRACT

Chapter I: A brief survey of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties is made; special emphasis is given to the prevailing pessimism and to the Auden Group's reaction to it. This pessimism, reaction, and the personal background of Day Lewis are suggested to be important factors determining the nature of his poetry.

Chapter II: Day Lewis's shift from private to public interests is shown to be part of his contribution to the 'Thirties myth of a 'brave new world'. This early phase is a period of technical experimentation, of political enthusiasm and disillusion. Day Lewis's lyrical abilities are emphasized especially as they are evident in From Feathers to Iron.

Chapter III: The 'Thirties myth is continued by Day Lewis's glorification of the Republican cause in Spain. The poems in Overtures to Death centre on two themes: first, the heroism of minority groups; second, warnings of imminent global conflict. Day Lewis's style is now more direct, his tone more urgent, than in previous volumes.

Chapter IV: Day Lewis finds long sought human contacts in a world at war. Word Over All is perhaps his best volume: its themes are: first, praise of humankind in time of crisis, and faith in human perfectibility; second, essentially romantic poems commemorating a lost heroic age. His approach is to

use metaphor for the war-poems, and developed imagery for the reflective poems.

Chapter V: The poetic impulse behind Poems 1943-47 is Day Lewis's disintegrating marriage; and the best poems of this volume are on this topic. His affinities with Meredith are evident in both content and technique.

Chapter VI: Day Lewis's last three volumes -- An Italian Visit, Pegasus, and The Gate -- are largely restatements of earlier themes. These volumes show increasing care in technique, but they lack the emotional base of much of his earlier work. Pegasus is the best volume of the three.

Chapter VII: An attempt is made to account for Day Lewis's technical experimentation. His various styles are illustrated, and a final assessment of his poetic achievement is attempted. Day Lewis is a good poet in a minor poetic age: a poet whose reputation rests with his lyrics.

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## PREFACE

Cecil Day Lewis is certainly one of the most prolific and versatile writers of his generation. His varied work includes Communist propaganda, three novels, literary criticism, verse-translations, poetry, an autobiography, and finally, detective stories published under the pseudonym of Nicholas Blake. His reputation as a man of letters, however, rests upon his poetry and his literary criticism.

C. Day Lewis was born in 1904 and came of age during that uneasy time-gap between two world wars. His poetry reflects 'emotional disturbances' caused by private and public tensions, and often by an interplay between the two. His early phases, especially, reflect the pressures of his times. I say 'phases' because his poetry divides itself roughly into three groups: poetry of the 'Thirties, poetry of the war-years, and post-war poetry.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that his development has been an uninterrupted progression like that of, say, Yeats or Eliot: quite the opposite is true. Day Lewis's poetry is a series of 'new beginnings' in which familiar themes often recur and receive different treatment. Commenting on his own poetry, he wrote, in the Preface to his Collected Poems 1954:

... Perhaps these constant themes compose the personal tradition of a poet -- his one continuity, defining and preserving, through every change of language, every change of heart, what is essential to him.

In this essay ( a study of his poetry from 1925 to 1962, the translations excluded ), I have tried to show 'what is essential to him', and to show that his greatest success coincides with his treatment of these essentials. The task has not been easy. Poetry, especially modern poetry, is generally regarded as more concentrated and more complex than other modes of expression. Furthermore, straightforward thematic analysis would have been cumbersome because recurring themes would have necessitated endless reference back and forth among his different volumes. The alternative has been to treat each volume individually, somewhat in the manner of a review, with thematic analysis of that particular volume. There should not be and, I hope, there has not been, any deliberate alienation of exegesis and evaluation. But Day Lewis's susceptibility to poets whom he admires makes the task of tracing all his stylistic derivations formidable, tedious, and unrewarding. Consequently, I have postponed summarization and correlation of thematic and stylistic development until my final chapter. There, too, I have attempted to give some valid estimation of his poetry.

Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following persons at Memorial University: to Dr. Seary, Head of the Department of English, for encouraging me to pursue

graduate studies, and for his unfailing interest in my progress; to Dr. Francis, my supervisor, for his many just criticisms and kind suggestions; last but not least, to the Library Staff, especially to Miss Jean Carmichael, for their co-operation at all times.

D.R.B.

April 10, 1965.

## Chapter I

### ROMANTIC REBELS

Often we tried our breast against the thorn,  
Our paces on the turf: whether we flew,  
Why we should agonize, we hardly knew -  
Nor what ached in us, asking to be born.

C. Day Lewis.

'In a tricky, darkening decade we were a generation which had not vision equal to desire.'<sup>1</sup> This was Cecil Day Lewis writing in 1960. He was looking back at the 'Thirties; at a decade during which his poetic impulse and his social conscience had combined to produce poetry which has met with excitement, indifference, and objection. He was attempting to discover his identity through reminiscence and through a study of his poetic achievement. He was recalling a period in British history when he and his contemporaries had preached revolution, and had envisaged a world 'where the ties should be of flesh and blood, not of money and paper, and where the social system should have re-integrated the individual personality'.<sup>2</sup>

There is something naive about the manner in which the early Day Lewis condemned Capitalism and preached Communism as the social panacea, about the way he felt that a sociological change would re-integrate 'the individual personality'. But all this is in retrospect; and Julian Symonds has warned well:

What one has to remember always in thinking of a period, and what one can never quite convey in writing about it, is that things always bear quite a different appearance at the time [from] the artificial historian's neatness that is imposed upon them afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

Thus cautioned, we may more fully appreciate the 'climate' of the 'Thirties. Post-war Europe had already been subjected to unemployment, depression, extremist political propaganda, and terrible disillusionment. Capitalism seemed to have failed; to have militated against culture. Extreme radicals maintained that the masses were being mercilessly exploited by this system which, like Rappaccini's daughter, seemed to poison everything it touched. Day Lewis, the most militant of the Auden Group, asserted that

...the promethean fire of enlightenment, which should be given for the benefit of mankind at large, is being used at present to stoke up the furnaces of private profit.<sup>4</sup>

and

...we can only realize our strength by joining forces with the millions of workers who have nothing to lose but their chains and have a world to win.<sup>5</sup>

This image of union between intelligentsia and proletariat was the point at which the diverse strains of the 'Thirties myth converged. Meanwhile, several drastic events combined to precipitate these 'red' tendencies into a Popular Front. Perhaps most important of these events were the increased Fascist violence, the hunger march from Jarrow, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War: all in the year 1936. Among intellectuals Communism was as much a bulwark against Fascism as it was an attack on Capitalism. Either way the cause seemed heroic. More will be said later about the 'Thirties myth: one should note, though, that the Spanish War brought the first real hope

and perhaps the bitterest disappointment to this beleaguered decade. As the undecided issue dragged on towards the end of the decade it was felt that a victory for the Republican forces in Spain might yet counterbalance what had been lost with Munich. But this was not to be: and the most fearful premonitions about Munich were justified with the outbreak of World War II, in 1939. This, combined with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, marked the collapse of the 'Thirties movement.

## II

We are concerned mainly with the literary aspect of the 'Thirties movement; especially with the manner in which the Spirit of the Age influenced the poetry of C. Day Lewis. The 'Twenties and 'Thirties, then, had seen western democracy beset by disillusionment, depression, intellectual stagnation, conformity, Fascism, and war. In such periods of decadence and stress man has three choices: he can shut himself off in a world of escape, and look to the supernatural for solace; he can accept things as they are, believing that some inexplicable but benevolent power will prevail; or, he can set about preaching a gospel of reform. This last way was chosen by a small but vociferous segment of the upper middle class. Most influential in this group were W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice. This was the so-called 'Auden Group', the self-appointed saviours of society. These

## poets of the 'Thirties

...believed that a violent revolution alone --or, at least, a violent change in British life -- could save the country from becoming wholly degenerate and eventually going the brutal way of Nazi Germany. It was now believed that the poets in the Twenties had taken refuge in 'ivory towers', there to conduct meaningless experiments with words that had no relation to real life; the duty of the poet of the Thirties was to get in touch with the masses and ally himself with working class movements.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the activities of the Auden Group can hardly be classed as a 'movement' either political or literary. Its members had never issued any manifesto, though most of them had contributed to New Signatures, a left-wing publication edited by Michael Roberts. Indeed, it was not until 1947, and in Venice, that Auden, Day Lewis, and Spender first met as a trio.<sup>7</sup> Their affinities, however, must not be overlooked. Each was born in the first decade of this century; each belonged to the upper middle-class; each had gone to Oxford University; each saw oppression of individual rights as political traffic neither necessary nor desirable, and each independently rebelled against it. In their rebellion against the evils of contemporary society they were influenced, in both substance and medium, by the tumult of the previous two decades, and by the attitudes of preceding generations of poets.

The acknowledged 'immediate ancestors' of the 'Thirties poets were Hopkins, Owen, and Eliot.<sup>8</sup> Poetic ancestors, however, did not imply mere precedence in time:

We claim for these 'real ancestors' only this: that great men, heroes, men who had seemed to live at a higher pressure than the rest, can brim over into posterity.. Their immortality is not through lip-service and stone monuments, not in any act of memory; is not external to us, but works in our minds, our blood and our bones.<sup>9</sup>

Day Lewis continues:

So it is with a poet's real ancestors. They disappear into the darkness ahead, and he who follows finds that they are not merely the geographers but in a sense the creators of his poetic world.<sup>10</sup>

Here we have it: the living at 'higher pressure', and the creator-geographers of the poet's world: the tension and technique of poetry. Hopkins qualifies as an ancestor; but it is mainly through technique that he influences Day Lewis. With Owen it is different: his was the voice of a suffering generation; he was the spokesman for 'hearts made great with shot'. It is in the substance and tension of poetry that Owen most obviously influences the 'Thirties poets. In his notes for a preface to his poems, Owen left a fragmentary but noble message to the next generation:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.<sup>11</sup>

Day Lewis's subject, too, was to be war -- personal, ideological, and physical -- and with his fellow-poets he was to shape a heroic myth out of the conflict, the pity, and the necessity to warn. One may better perceive Day Lewis's sentiments if one examines his confessed response to Owen's poems:

When, ... I first read the poems of Wilfred Owen, I found myself at home with his language and his meanings, though I had suffered nothing of the agony from which they grew and had been too young to feel the pity that informs them.<sup>12</sup>



Owen was killed while leading his men across the Sambre Canal just a week before the Armistice was signed. Already another literary figure was making himself heard amid the tumult of the war-years. This was Mr. T. S. Eliot; and his poem, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917), was earnest of the direction twentieth-century English and American poetry would take. The substance of Mr. Eliot's poetry was as unconventional as the manner in which he expressed it. He was an innovator in every sense of the word; and the younger generation were eager to emulate his technique which, though it seemed unique at that time, really has affinities with Metaphysical prosody.

Eliot had been steadily moving towards a pessimism which caused him to see western civilization as a waste-land; and his poem, 'The Waste Land' (1922), is the image he saw in early twentieth-century London. The 'Twenties and Eliot's impressions of contemporary life seemed to cut off the 'Thirties poets from the main stream of English tradition. Stephen Spender writes:

We admired "The Waste Land", which set up a barrier between our generation and much modern poetry that preceded it and -- perhaps without our being fully aware of this -- set our generation the problem of getting out of the wastes.<sup>13</sup>

With brash over-confidence in simple social panaceae the 'Thirties poets set about 'getting out of the wastes'. They refused to accept Eliot's view of things. They believed his poems displayed an over-abundance of cynicism, frustration, and defeatism. They would have hesitated to associate Eliot with poets who 'weave phantasies out of their

own navels or run away into the woods'.<sup>14</sup> Eliot was articulate enough; but to the younger generation his articulation of the squalor of modern living seemed almost a perverted romanticism. Did he glory in it? or had he, like Pilate, washed his hands of social responsibility? Surely his satire on the small talk in 'Prufrock' --

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

--was a feeble attempt at exposing the pretences he perceived. The Auden Group did not accuse Eliot of running away, rather of remaining aloof. It was in this sense that the 'Thirties poets regarded Eliot as an escapist. Louis MacNeice puts it this way:

Yeats proposed to turn his back on desire and hatred;  
Eliot sat back and watched other people's emotions  
with ennui and an ironical self-pity.<sup>15</sup>

The 'Thirties poets did not intend to turn away, nor did they intend to sit back and watch. They wanted to be functional in a positive way. In images of idle docks, closed factories, and rusting rails they expressed their concern for a sick but not dying world. They felt that the onus was on them to deliver mankind from this many-headed monster of atrocity. They were shaping a heroic myth out of the 'Thirties (especially out of the situation in Spain) just as the Romantics had out of the principles behind the French Revolution. And, just as the Romantics had looked to Godwin, so the Auden Group looked to Marx. Like the Romantics, the 'Thirties poets were intensely enthusiastic about their mission. A distinctly Wordsworthian exuberance pervades the following excerpts from

Stephen Spender:

I grew up in an atmosphere of belief in progress curiously mingled with apprehension ... it seemed that I had been born on to a fortunate promontory of time towards which all other times led.<sup>16</sup>

and

Where we were particularly fortunate was in being young at a moment when it was possible to take up an attitude towards a human cause without losing our individuality.<sup>17</sup>

Their contributions 'towards a human cause' were diverse. Apart from their common contributions--poetry -- MacNeice and Auden each saw brief service in Spain, Day Lewis turned Communist, and the lyrical Spender oscillated between the humanism of Auden and the 'red' tendencies of Day Lewis. 'Thus the 'Thirties "movement" was really a kind of poetic conscience concealed within a social conscience developing in several directions.'<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, war in Spain had halted the spread of Fascism in England. Under the banner of the International Brigade members of the intelligentsia and the proletariat fought side by side. This was the contact the 'Thirties poets believed to be the remedy for contemporary social ills. It was unfortunate that it had to come through war. War unites countrymen in a common cause, and class distinctions pale into insignificance. Spain had become a symbol of hope, a little image of the world the reformers had envisaged. But somehow the 'Thirties myth never quite evolved. Munich, the collapse of the League of Nations, and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact had been devastating blows which would have shattered the hopes of the most incorrigible optimist. These and

lesser disappointments prevented the myth from progressing beyond the embryo stage. The basic reason for the failure of the 'Thirties myth was, I think, the absence of wholeheartedness in the poets. This is not to say that they lacked 'high seriousness': they were sincere enough; but they were plagued by a haunting sense of guilt, inadequacy, and ambivalence. They had missed the challenge of the Great War, and now to rise to heroic heights they must betray their class ties. Furthermore, they might not be accepted by the masses. Whereas Eliot trod his waste-land alone, the Auden Group might be forced to traverse a No Man's Land. Again, speaking for himself, Spender speaks for the group:

As I have decidedly supported one side -- the Republican -- in that [Spanish] conflict, perhaps I should explain why I do not strike a more heroic note. My reason is that a poet can only write about what is true of his own experience, not about what he would like to be true to his experience.<sup>19</sup>

David Daiches maintains that the 'Thirties poets

...are uncertain about their audience, their function, their attitude, their means of expression. And as men they see themselves cut off from the past of their civilization in a world where the twin evils of social misery and spiritual barrenness are prevalent.<sup>20</sup>

And, speaking for the modern poet, Day Lewis himself states:

So there arises in him a conflict; between the old which his heart approves and the new which fructifies his imagination; between the idea of a change of heart that should change society and the idea of a new society making a new man; between individual education and mass economic conditionment. At which end should one begin?<sup>21</sup>

He had already answered his query in part:

We shall not begin to understand post-war poetry until we realize that the poet is appealing above all for the creation of a society in which the real and living contact between man and man may again become possible.<sup>22</sup>

This, however, was only part of the problem; for,

In most poets there is an intermittent conflict between the poetic self and the rest of the man; and it is by reconciling the two, not by eliminating the one, that they can reach their full stature.<sup>23</sup>

So it is that the Romantic Agony experienced by the 'Thirties poets (and suggested in the preface to this chapter) derives not only from the climate of the 1930's but also from the temperament of the poets themselves.

In that admirably written and ruthlessly honest autobiography, The Buried Day, Day Lewis recalls how, a few years earlier, he had noticed that in his poetry

...certain characteristics keep cropping up -- hero-worship, fear, compassion, the divided mind, a prevailing sense of the transience of things: and how ... there runs through it all, an unbroken thread, the search for personal identity.<sup>24</sup>

These themes grew out of the personality and environment of the poet; or, more accurately, out of the contention between the two. And it is to this clash that we must now turn.

### III

Cecil Day Lewis was born at Ballintubber, Queen's County, Ireland, on April 27, 1904. He was the only child of the Reverend F. C. Day Lewis and the former Kathleen Blake Squires, both of Anglo-Irish stock. When Cecil was four years old his mother died, and he was left to the whims of an over-protective clergyman father. Accustomed to the close guardianship of his father and his aunt, Day Lewis was, in 1911, jolted out of his security by impending war:

My father was talking with some acquaintances in the club house after a game of golf. They spoke about the German menace; and though at that age I hardly understood what the word "war" meant, there was a sombreness in their tones which affected me with a vague sense of foreboding as I divined that grown-ups were not, after all, absolute masters of their fate and that the safe world they represented might not stay safe for ever and ever, amen.<sup>25</sup>

War was not, however, the sole cause of Day Lewis's disquiet: as the son of a curate he belonged to the privileged middle-class, and part of his phobia came from feeling himself to be a member of the 'lonely crowd'. Looking back over his life, Day Lewis could write:

My disposition has always been to conform; and though, time and again, I have been at odds with smaller or larger social units to which I belonged, the struggle has gone against my own grain too, and beneath the romantic rebel there has always been the man who longed to come to terms with society or wanted a society with which he could be reconciled.<sup>26</sup>

A youth whose extreme sensitivity had already been taxed by the death of his mother, by the moods of an unpredictable father, by the seclusion of a parsonage, and by dread of war, was now to be further troubled by the clash of philosophical theories met during his reading for the Honours degree at Oxford. More petulant than MacNeice, and not yet experienced enough to realize that Truth is not a human legacy, he was unable to shake off haunting confusion of metaphysics:

So blow the bugles over the metaphysicians,  
Let the pure mind return to the Pure Mind;  
I must be content to remain in the world of Appearance  
And sit on the mere appearance of a behind.

#### Autumn Journal

It was at Oxford, too, that Day Lewis began to realize that life was more than mere abstractions; and there he sought

the life of experience he so lacked. The idealism, the yearning for comradeship, and the longing to 'engage with the common mesh and moil' paved the way for his 'conversion' to Communism. Indeed, with his lack of religious faith his ambivalent nature sought authority. Hence, Communism took on a religious quality, and filled

...the hollow in the breast,  
Where a god should be.

This same doctrine he was later to renounce because of

...its pursuit of ends regardless of the corrupting or dehumanising effect of the means employed, its opportunist turns of policy, and the lies to which it committed one.<sup>27</sup>

But to return to 'the divided mind' and 'the search for personal identity' (opposite sides of the same coin, really): Day Lewis's dilemma<sup>m</sup> was, in part, the shift from feathers to iron; from cosy indifference to the harsh acceptance of social obligations. This meant conflicting emotions, hesitating between two allegiances; between the life he knew and the life he wished to assume. Side by side with this went another dilemma, the art-propaganda dichotomy --the relationship of art to life; how far can propaganda go and still be art? To limit the poet's subject-matter is to circumscribe the poet as a man. Most of us (since Wordsworth proclaimed the poet to be 'a man speaking to men') regard poets as the antennae of society, and agree that to this end, poets must record the hopes and fears, the ecstasies and agonies of their own times. Day Lewis was himself a personification of the ambivalence of his generation. There was, in him, the ro-

mantic rebel who longed for the past and who planned Utopian societies; there was in him, also, the classicist's defence of the status quo. From the broader vantage-point of late middle-age, Day Lewis has been able to understand a little better the 'selves' he never really knew:

It is not my conflict alone, surely, but a condition of being human: not "the blight man was made for", but the clash of irreconcilables which makes him and unmakes him.<sup>28</sup>

This conflict of the 'divided heart', this 'clash of irreconcilables' underlies and permeates much of Day Lewis's poetry. In one of his 'red' poems, 'Johnny Head-In-Air', he gives us a picture of his own mental and emotional anguish:

His arms were stretched to the warring poles,  
The current coursed his frame:  
Over the hill-cross, niched in night,  
They saw a man of flame.

Come down, come down, you suffering man,  
Come down, and high or low  
Choose your fancy and go with us  
The way that we should go.

That cannot be till two agree  
Who long have lain apart:  
Traveller, know, I am here to show  
Your own divided heart.

W. E. Yeats's famous dictum that 'Out of our argument with others we make rhetoric; out of our quarrel with ourselves we make poetry' is substantiated in the poetical works of Day Lewis. There both conflicts are present; the ramifications are many, the pangs often intense, the scars visible.



## NOTES

1 The Buried Day (London, 1960), p. 217.

2 Ibid.

3 The Thirties: A Dream Revolved (London, 1960), p. 155.

4 C. Day Lewis, (ed.), The Mind in Chains (London, 1937),  
p. 12.

5 Ibid., p. 17.

6 Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, The Long Week End (London,  
1940), pp. 299-300.

7 Stephen Spender, "It Began at Oxford", in The New York  
Times Book Review (March 13, 1955), p. 4.

8 C. Day Lewis, A Hope For Poetry (Oxford, 1934), 2nd. ed.  
1935, pp. 2-3.

9 Ibid., p. 4.

10 Ibid., p. 5.

11 This quotation may be found, sometimes with slight variat-  
ions, in many books on modern literature. I have quoted  
Owen as found in C. Day Lewis's edition of The Collected  
Poems Of Wilfred Owen (London, 1963), p.31.

12 The Buried Day, p. 85.

13 Op. cit., p. 4.

14 C. Day Lewis, "A Letter to a Young Revolutionary", New  
Country, ed. by Michael Roberts, (London, 1933), p. 26.

15 Modern Poetry (Oxford, 1938), p. 25.

16 World Within World (London, 1951), p. 1.

17 "It Began at Oxford", The New York Times Book Review,  
p. 5.

18 Ibid.

19 From his Introduction to The Still Centre, as quoted by  
him in The Creative Element (London, 1953), p. 153.

20 Poetry and the Modern World (Chicago, 1940), p. 195.

- 21  
22 A Hope For Poetry, p. 47.  
23 Ibid., p. 38.  
24 Ibid., p. 54.  
25 P. 24.  
26 C. Day Lewis, The Buried Day, p. 45.  
27 Ibid., p. 75.  
28 Ibid., p. 212.  
29 Ibid., p. 235.

## Chapter II

### BRAVE NEW WORLD

How grandly would our virtues bloom  
In a more conscionable dust  
Where Freedom dwells because it must  
Necessity because it can,  
And men confederate in Man.

W. H. Auden.

Cecil Day Lewis was the first of the Auden Group to publish a volume of poems. While still at Oxford, he published Beechen Vigil (1925). A faint humour informs his reminiscence of this achievement:

There is nothing quite like one's first book or one's first love, and in the case of the former this is often providential. Mine was called Beechen Vigil, and it contained amongst other juvenilia a poem entitled "Rose-Pruner" which my stepmother thought one of the finest gems of English poetry, and which Rex [Warner] used to declaim ruthlessly aloud whenever I got above myself. The publication of this book, and the inclusion of two of my poems in Oxford Poetry 1925 were quite enough to assure a young man with a temperament as sanguine as mine that he was a poet of accepted achievement; but London was less impressed than Oxford; for some years after this I continued to bombard the weeklies and literary magazines with poems, nearly all of which were rejected.<sup>1</sup>

Country Comets (1928), a second volume of poems, was published while its author was teaching in a preparatory school at Summer Fields, North Oxford. Clifford Dyment has noted that these early volumes

...are the work of a young man more familiar with

anthology pieces than with life. Nevertheless, they show quite clearly that from the very beginning Day Lewis was a lyrical poet who thought and felt in the same terms and took pleasure in the same things as people who are intelligent though not of the intelligentsia-- that he was, so to speak, a common man who spoke in poetry instead of in commonplaces. There is, too, some indication in these first books of two other qualities that were to be characteristic of much of his later work -- his conception of a book of verse as an entity rather than a miscellaneous assemblage of short poems, and his awareness that for him experience is synonymous with conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Before dismissing these volumes as juvenilia, one must add that Country Comets, in particular, anticipates several themes that permeate much of Day Lewis's later poetry. There are, for example, the conflict of ambition and inhibition in 'The Shadow Pimp', Marvellian themes of the brevity of life and the need for love in 'Between Hush and Hush' and 'To his Mistress', and the search for self in 'A Second Narcissus'. 'It is the True Star', one of the finest poems in this volume, anticipates the quieter poetry of the mature Day Lewis. Here, he relates how, in contemplating the firmament at night, he experienced a Wordsworthian reassurance of the unity and harmony of all things with the universe:

Then, lapped in that magnificence, I knew  
Suddenly how all creatures from one source  
Take breath and purpose, and again renew  
It with their greatness.

But this last is a deviation from the general pattern of Country Comets where doubt of identity and reflections on love are woven into nature-settings. One may, perhaps, best describe Country Comets as a search for personal identity through a cult of sex and scenery.

Transitional Poem (1929), has more to offer in both thought and design than the earlier volumes. This poem -- really a sequence of poems -- the first that Day Lewis could 'own to without embarrassment'<sup>3</sup>, epitomizes his mental flux during these early years. The central theme is the 'single mind'.<sup>4</sup> Around that theme are woven metaphysics, ethics, and psychology; and the whole poem is a blending of logic with lyricism. The erudite paraphernalia of this poem -- recondite allusions and footnotes -- are in the manner of Eliot, but the tensions, undercurrents, and lyricism are unmistakably Day Lewis's.

His quest for the single mind leads him along a line that is very pronounced in 'Thirties poetry: that of a past-present-future continuum. Believing themselves to be cut off from the English tradition, and suffering from a nostalgia for heroic action, the 'Thirties poets sought, through ancestor-worship, to hasten the millennium. Could one, by acknowledging present evils and by emulating great models from the past, map out the future? The 'Thirties poets believed so, and fervently set about their task. Day Lewis's indulgence in ancestor-worship can be seen in Transitional Poem where verbal echoes and stylistic devices may be traced back to the Metaphysicals. The poem abounds in Classical and Biblical allusions; its philosophy derives mainly from Spinoza; while its psychology suggests that the poet had at least a cursory knowledge of Freud.

The primary purpose of this chapter is not to discuss 'influences', but to trace Day Lewis's progress from egocentric speculation to social consciousness. Transitional Poem is one

step in that pilgrimage: it records his attempt, through dialectic, to pass from ambivalence to single-mindedness. The conflict in Transitional Poem is essentially a conflict between reason and instinct.

The poem is divided into four major parts, each having its own particular theme:

Formally, the parts fall with fair accuracy into the divisions of a theorem in geometry, i.e. general enunciation proof, corollaries .....<sup>5</sup>

The main argument is desultory, and difficult to follow; and a definitive interpretation cannot, perhaps, be given. The treatment, intended to be philosophical, is usually more satisfying and illuminating when lyrical. This in itself is a significant point.

Part I is an attempt to relate finite to infinite. It ends in a declaration that only the mind remains whole. Day Lewis begins with a poetic version of an idea from Spinoza:<sup>6</sup>

Now I have come to reason  
And cast my schoolboy clout,  
Disorder I see is without,  
And the mind must sweat a poison  
Keener than Thessaly's brew;  
A pus that, discharged not thence,  
Gangrenes the vital sense  
And makes disorder true.

The divided mind is diseased; and until it has been healed by discipline all thoughts will be tainted. All instincts must be controlled by reason, must be stamped by 'the tetragonal Pure symmetry of brain'. The poet has stated philosophically that reason must prevail over impulse. But, to depict his dilemma -- the conflict between these protagonists -- he resorts to lyricism:

I have a lover of flesh

And a lover that is a sprite:  
 To-day I lie down with finite,  
 To-morrow with infinite

.....

Twin poles energetic they  
 Stand fast and generate  
 The spark that crackles in the void  
 As between fate and fate.

Part I ends with an assertion that the mind outlives the body;  
 that only the mind remains whole.

Part II states that self-aggrandizement is a particular  
 barrier in the path to single-mindedness. Therefore, the poet  
 contemplates repudiating ambition:

If I bricked up ambition and gave no air  
 To the ancestral curse that gabbles there,  
 I could leave wonder on the latch  
 And with a whole heart watch  
 The calm declension of an English year.

But what of physical desire? Instincts cannot simply be  
 ignored, they must be subdued. Day Lewis seems to be advoc-  
 ating restraint, and pursuit of some spirituality that may  
 exist beyond the eros:

Adam must subdue  
 The indestructible serpent,  
 Outstaring it: content  
 If he can transplant  
 One slip from paradise  
 Into his own eyes.

Finally, he abandons his 'unequal struggle with the philosophers'<sup>7</sup>  
 and acknowledges Nature as ultimate teacher:

When nature plays hedge-schoolmaster,  
 Shakes out the gaudy map of summer  
 And shows me charabanc, rose, barley-ear  
 And every bright-winged hummer,

He only would require of me  
 To be a sponge of natural laws  
 And learn no more of that cosmography  
 Than passes through the pores.

.....

Let logic analyse the hive,  
 Wisdom's content to have the honey:  
 So I'll go bite the crust of things and thrive  
 While hedgerows still are sunny.

Possessed with Negative Capability, the poet will no longer risk losing an intuition by attempting to force it into a philosophical system. True wisdom, he feels, may be had from sensuous and mystical experiences.

Part III with its psychological explorations is, by turns, lucid and obscure. Conflict is almost everywhere symbolized by antitheses. For example, Achilles by Scamander -- the stream of two sources, one hot and the other cold -- represents Day Lewis's torturing awareness of love and hate, attraction and repulsion. But his establishing of an inner unity is not easily followed. He seems to share Meredith's philosophy of 'blood' and 'brain'; he will 'feed Austerity on warm blood'. Again it is Nature imagery that best illuminates the dilemma:

Yet nothing had such power  
 As prattle of small flowers within the brake  
 To mount the panic heart and rein it back  
 From the world's edge. For they, whose virtue lies  
 In a brief act of beauty, summarize  
 Earth's annual passion and leave the naked earth  
 Still dearest by their death than by their birth.  
 So we, who are love's hemispheres hiding  
 Beneath the coloured ordeal of our spring,  
 Shall be disclosed, and I shall see your face  
 An autumn evening certain of its peace.

Physical Nature, then, both spurs and curbs 'the panic heart'; it provides both impulse and restraint. His observations of Nature allow him to draw an analogy between the flowering earth and human copulation: what might have been rape becomes an 'act of beauty'. Passion disciplined by reason enhances the culmination of physical love. Day Lewis uses imagery here not



as ornament or as dress for thought but as a means of interpreting his own experience. The images do not merely support an argument, they are the genesis of a belief in spiritual development through physical love.

He relates briefly how, as an adolescent, he sought integrity in solitude only to find that spiritual development is nurtured by 'blind collisions' in the world of men. Finally, he returns to the 'single-mind':

Only at highest power  
Can love and fear become  
Their equilibrium,  
And in that eminent hour  
A virtue is made plain  
Of passionate cleavage  
Like the hills' cutting edge  
When the sun sets to rain.  
This is the single mind....

We must not be misled by 'equilibrium', nor by the ambiguity of 'cleavage'. The clue to this passage is 'cutting edge'; there must be complete severance. Only by fusion of 'blood' and 'brain' and 'spirit' can one attain that faith, religious or political, that precludes all doubts. 'Passionate cleavage' to love, for instance, would cancel out fear. In another instance Day Lewis writes:

I am convinced that fear in its widest sense, including self-distrust, distrust of others and a morbid craving for individual isolation is the greatest enemy to civilization. Love, the antithesis of fear, without imagination beats its wings in vain.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation not only supports my interpretation of 'passionate cleavage', it sanctions the idea of spiritual development coming from human contacts.

Part IV begins with 'the Word' which 'stands for the individual poetic impulse, as a part of the Logos in the theologian's sense of "mind expressing God in the world".<sup>9</sup> Behind 'the Word'

is the imagination which, to Day Lewis, as to the Romantics, is 'the greatest instrument of moral good':

... the poetic word, imagination's child, when it is made flesh, can be one of the most powerful agents in the world -- potent not only in the recreation of mood and vision, but towards moral ends.<sup>10</sup>

He is 'Resigned now but not reconciled':

The waves advance, the Absolute Cliffs  
Unaccountably repel;  
They linger grovelling; where assault  
Has failed, attrition may tell.

Youthful impetuosity ('assault') cannot denude Truth ('magnetic continent'; 'Absolute Cliffs') though experience may finally reveal the magnet.

Mechanical imagery is effectively used sometimes:

Where is the fool would want those days again  
Whose light was glad in pain  
And danced upon a point of wire?  
When the charged batteries of desire  
Had licence but to pass  
Into a narrow room of frosted glass?

and

I stretched a line from pole to pole  
To hang my paper lanterns on. Poor soul,  
By such a metaphysical conceit  
Thinking to make ends meet!  
This line, spun from the blind heart --  
What could it do but prove the poles apart?  
More expert now, I twist the dials, catch  
Electric hints, curt omens such  
As may be heard by one tapping the air  
That belts an ambiguous sphere.  
Put down the tripod here.

But these examples are exceptions. His recurring lyricism with its imagery from Nature seems to indicate what this quotation confirms: that his inclination and talents are for lyric poetry rather than abstract argument. He has, in effect, renounced dialectic as a means of attaining single-mindedness, and given promise of a new beginning. Life must

be studied from human contacts, not from the 'closet of the brain'.

Many of the poems in Transitional Poem belong strictly to the English tradition. In addition to passages already quoted one might mention: first, an echo of Donne's love-poems:

When her eyes delay  
On me, so deep are they  
Tunnelled by love, although  
You poured Atlantic  
In this one and Pacific  
In the other, I know  
They would not overflow.

second, a passage whose tone and texture are distinctly Wordsworthian:

Then I remember the pure and granite hills  
Where first I caught an ideal tone that stills,  
Like the beloved's breath asleep, all din  
Of earth at traffic: silence's first-born,  
Carrying over each sensual ravine  
To inform the seer and uniform the seen.  
So from this ark, this closet of the brain,  
The dove emerges and flies back again  
With a Messiah sprig of certitude --  
Promise of ground below the sprawling flood.

Looking back over Transitional Poem, one feels that Day Lewis has the sobriety of Wordsworth and the sensuousness of Keats. One notices, also, that he uses Nature not as a backdrop as Auden does; nor to point a moral as the Augustans did. He uses Nature imagery to interpret his experiences; not to point a moral, but to derive meaning and moral from experience. This is closer to the Romantic tradition.

One might object that the poem does not have the unity suggested by the poet's footnote<sup>11</sup>; and that the poem does not solve the problem of the divided mind. These are legit-

imate objections: though in answer to the latter charge one must remember that

Poetry does not solve problems; it seldom even suggests solutions: what it does is to present problems in a form at once detached and more intimate than that achieved by any other mode of thinking: it enables us to see both the wood and the trees, and ~~above~~ all, through its habit of metaphor and image, to see them in a universal context of which we too are part.<sup>12</sup>

If Day Lewis fails to reconcile instinct with reason, he does move steadily towards recognition of the human condition. This in itself is important: for now there will be two conflicts in his poetry. First, the conflict of Transitional Poem -- between instinct and reason -- will continue to pervade his later poems. Second, recognition of 'man's inhumanity to man' will be the genesis of his poetry in the 'Thirties.

### III

From Feathers to Iron (1939) is structurally and thematically more coherent than Transitional Poem. A less difficult, more personal expression, From Feathers to Iron is a series of lyrics recording the poet's experience during his wife's pregnancy. But, as Professor Bullough has noted, it 'is more than a series of lyrics; it is one developing experience seen from many sides'.<sup>13</sup> As such, it records Day Lewis's thoughts on physical and spiritual love, and how children complete the marriage; it records his alternating moods of anxiety and elation, and his acceptance of parental and social responsibility.

The primary theme is domestic love and parental responsibility. A secondary theme centres on acceptance of social

obligations. The two are not alien: in a passage that reveals both his own personality and the 'climate' of the 'Thirties Day Lewis writes:

For myself as a writer, the most potent element in the general situation was an interplay and ~~consonance~~ <sup>consonance</sup> between the inner and the outward life, between public meaning and private meaning. When, for example, I was writing From Feathers to Iron, as sequence of poems whose subject matter was my personal experience during the nine months before the birth of my first child, I found that my own excitements and apprehensions linked up quite spontaneously with a larger issue -- the struggle and joy in which our new world should be born -- and derived strength from it, so that I could use naturally for metaphors or metaphysical conceits the apparatus of the modern world, the machinery which, made over for the benefit of all, could help this world to rebirth. Certainly, though our new world was proved, like the young Wordsworth's, an allusion, the interplay of private and public meaning shed an atmosphere of exhilaration over the contemporary scene, giving familiar objects new value, or at least showing them up with the clarity, the apocalyptic, disturbing, attentive look of things seen in the brooding light before a thunderstorm.<sup>14</sup>

'Interplay and consonance between the inner and the outward life' is germinal to much of Day Lewis's poetry. Interplay between private meaning and social implications synthesizes the two themes of From Feathers to Iron. The public or social meaning in the poem may be summarized thus: "It is my duty, as a prospective father, "to set the house in order". Having accepted my obligation, I can only hope that the next generation may get themselves out of the waste-land'. The most emphatically political passage is spoken by the father to the unborn child:

But born to essential dark  
To an age that toes the line  
And never o'ersteps the mark.  
Take off your coat: grow lean:  
Suffer humiliation:  
Patrol the passes alone,  
And eat your iron ration.  
Else, wag as the world wags --

One more mechanical jane  
 Or gentleman in wax.  
 Is it here we shall regain  
 Championship? Here awakes  
 A white hope shall preserve  
 From flatterers, pimps and fakes  
 Integrity and nerve?

Clifford Dymont writes:

Crisis is the mood of this poem. Every line is urgent with a premonition of disaster and the need to avert it. The poem is, one could say, a serious call to a devout and holy life of altruistic action ....<sup>15</sup>

The private meaning of From Feathers to Iron is best understood through study of imagery, especially of images from Nature. Conception is represented by contact of sun with earth, pregnancy by winter, and delivery by summer. Spiritual love is seen as a 'metal-to-magnet affair'. All these are appropriate, but they are really only symbols. Far more significant are the developed images which allow the poet not merely to communicate with his readers but to understand his own experiences. One feels that his 'excitements and apprehensions', his thoughts on life and love and birth crystallize only when he becomes aware of a parallel in Nature. The stirrings of spring 'soar to a final theme' to herald new life and to allow him to appreciate more fully his wife's condition:

Earth wears a smile betrays  
 What summer she has in store.  
 She feels insurgent forces  
 Gathering at the core,  
 And a spring rumour courses  
 Through her, till the cold extreme  
 Sleep of grove and grass is  
 Stirred, begins to dream.

This 'paean of fertility'<sup>16</sup> is vivid, vital, and tender, the work of a delicate but controlled sensibility.

Spring freshness of an upland pasture epitomizes what

new life and innocence can mean to a harsh world. So he greets the unborn child:

As anemones that renew  
Earth's innocence, be welcome.  
Out of your folded sleep  
Come, as the western winds come  
To pasture with the sheep  
On a weary of winter height.

Of course, Nature may be used to communicate various moods: anxiety, as the father awaits his first-born --

Slow drip the seconds, time is stalactite,  
For nothing intrudes here to tell the time,  
Sun marches not, nor moon with muffled step.

-- and fear that the mother might die in childbirth --

Dropping the few last days, are drops of lead,  
Heavier hang than a lifetime on the heart ....  
... The parchment sky that hourly tightens above us,  
Screwed to a storm-pitch, where thunder shall roll and roll  
Intolerably postponing the last movement.

Images from Nature are used to express elation:

Now the full-throated daffodils,  
Our trumpeters in gold,  
Call resurrection from the ground  
And bid the year be bold.

.....

Now too the bird must try his voice  
Upon the morning air;  
Down drowsy avenues he cries  
A novel great affair.

Rhythm and word-choice alone do not explain the success of these passages. This is more than an exchange between poet and reader: a third and greater presence pervades but never obtrudes, seemingly sharing, and inducing one to share, the poet's moods. Such is the Pathetic Fallacy as Day Lewis himself understands it:

To speak of the 'pathetic fallacy' as a mere device in Romantic poetry is a gross underestimation of its importance. The extension of sympathy outwards into the natural world and deeper into man's mind brought new revelation of

the complex ties between man and nature, a general enriching of the pattern in which both figure. The 'pathetic fallacy' is, after all, no more and no less than a poetic way of uttering the belief that 'everything that lives is holy'.<sup>17</sup>

From Feathers to Iron has frequent mechanical images, though they are not, one feels, effectively used. For example,

Go not this read, for arc-lamps cramp  
The dawn; sense fears to take  
A mortal step, and body obeys  
An automatic brake.

seems to be a 'dissociation of sensibility', an estrangement of thought from feeling. The estrangement is even more violent when obstetrics are mechanized, or referred to in images of street-roiting:

Now is a charge laid that will split the hill-face,  
Tested the wire, the plunger ready to hand.  
For time ticks nearer to a rebel hour,  
Charging of barricades, bloodshed in city.

Such imagery is uncongenial to the tender theme of love and birth, and it gives the poem a discordant note.

The imagery in From Feathers to Iron shows two trends: first, Day Lewis's increasing interest in modern imagery; second, a continuation of the Romantics' use of image to interpret experience. Unlike Wordsworth, however, he does not strive for a cosmic view of things: instead, he reflects upon the English countryside, allowing it to illuminate his simple but profound emotions. This is decidedly suggestive of the Georgian poets. But Day Lewis's poetry is often controversial and urgent whereas theirs is more relaxed, often dreamy. Moreover, political implications give his poems a wider frame of reference. Consequently, his poetry is usually more vital than theirs.



From Feathers to Iron has many poems that suggest Auden's influence. Just how much these poets influenced each other is, of course, conjectural. However, they had become acquainted at Oxford, and Auden's Poems had been published in 1930. One might suggest that Auden's objectivity may have been partly responsible for Day Lewis's movement towards a less allusive style than he had shown in Transitional Poem. Traces of Auden's style and imagery are evident, especially in ellipsis, alliteration, and premonitions of disaster:

Like Jesuits in jungle we journey  
Deliberately bearing to brutish tribes  
Christ's assurance, arts of agriculture.

and

Is fighting on the frontier: little leaks through  
Of possible disaster, but one morning  
Shells begin to drop in the capital.

The best poetry in the volume, though, is essentially lyrical and owes nothing to Auden. The stanzas quoted to illustrate Day Lewis's handling of Nature, and his beautiful 'Do not expect again a Phoenix hour' are cases in point.

The title, From Feathers to Iron, is now self-explanatory. The poem traces Day Lewis's development from eros to agape, from self-sufficiency towards self-fulfilment, from cosy indifference to acceptance of social responsibility. Its thematic unity establishes a link between egocentric earlier poems and the altruism of The Magnetic Mountain.

## IV

A quest-motif is central to The Magnetic Mountain (1933). Day Lewis stands at the terminus of an era -- the present -- from which he will journey to the Utopia he foresees. A past-present-future continuum is suggested by railway symbolism. The track stretches out of the past and on ahead 'beyond the railheads Of reason' to a 'magnetic mountain', symbolic of the new society. He will make one last journey back along the track to ascertain what he must lose in abandoning the old order. After Part One, railway symbolism is of relatively little importance.

Part Two is really an allegory of his debate with self. He wishes to support whole-heartedly the proletarian cause, but certain loyalties link him with his middle-class upbringing. The First Defendant, his mother, represents family tradition; the Second Defendant is traditional education which, the poet maintains, is directed towards a Kiplingseque ideal of 'the White Man's burden' and Imperial Preference; formalized religion, the Third Defendant, rests its case on having been expedient in catering to all people. Day Lewis's answer, directed against a 'type' clergyman, is an outburst against the Church's lack of spirituality:

Oh subterranean fires, break out!  
Tornadoes, pity not  
The petty bourgeois of the soul,  
The middleman of God!

.....

Who mobbed the kestrel out of the air,  
Who made the tiger tame,  
Who lost the blood's inheritance  
And found the body's shame;

Who raised his hands to brand a Cain  
 And bless a submarine --  
 Time is up: the medicine-man  
 Must take his medicine.

(The arrogance of these last two lines is typical of a bravado that characterizes The Magnetic Mountain.) The Fourth Defendant, his wife, represents physical love: she does not understand that love is but one aspect of one's development. Finally, he realizes that these defective educational and social institutions have failed to prepare him for the reality of the 'Thirties; and his denunciation of them is curt and concise:

Theirs the reward of all  
 That live by sap alone,  
 Flourishing but to show  
 Which way the wind has gone.

Similar allegory is found in Part Three where loyalties to his background are presented as enemies of the new order. These are: physical lust without spiritual expansion; a cheating press which exploits a gullible public by dealing in the sensational; an embodiment of all the false gods men have sought in science; and lastly, the irresponsible idealist who advocates Art as an escape into a never-never land. Each speaks and is arraigned by the poet: he then urges immediate action:

Drug nor isolation will cure this cancer:  
 It is now or never, the hour of the knife  
 The break with the past, the major operation.

Part Four alternates between laboured optimism and bitter derision of middle-class society. The general tenor is that social amelioration is possible only through revolution. Day Lewis solicits support from three segments of the population: the leisured few who love England for her worthy traditions

and her rural beauty; those workers who have escaped disaster and are 'happy in a small way'; and those who have been exploited beyond endurance. He pledges himself to the cause of revolution: with them he will be precursor of a happier age:

For us to dream the birthday, but they shall act it --  
 Bells over fields, the hooters from the mine,  
 On New Year's Eve under the bridegroom's attic  
 Chorus of coastguards singing Auld Lang Syne.  
 Now at hope's horizon that day is dawning,  
 We guess at glory from a mountain height,  
 But then in valley towns they will be turning  
 Like infants' eyes like sunflowers to light.

The Magnetic Mountain differs from the earlier volumes in several ways besides being more overtly political. There is, for example, a marked departure from Day Lewis's earlier use of imagery. The poem abounds in scientific and technological data over which he seems to have little control. Instead of developing his images as a means of interpreting experience he simply extrudes metaphors.

Let us be off ! Our steam  
 Is deafening in the dome.  
 The needle in the gauge  
 Points to a long-banked rage,  
 And trembles there to show  
 What a pressure's below.  
 Valve cannot vent the strain  
 Nor iron ribs refrain  
 That furnace in the heart.  
 Come on, make haste and start  
 Coupling-rod and wheel  
 Welded of patient steel,  
 Piston that will not stir  
 Beyond the cylinder  
 To take in its stride  
 A teeming countryside.

This concentration of metaphor is a pastiche of the Metaphysicals, but it lacks the emotional and intellectual intensity of their poetry. It is a too obvious straining after contemporaneity.

Corresponding to the increase of mechanical imagery is a decrease in imagery from Nature. There is some symbolism -- 'winter' and 'glacier' represent arrested individual and social development; 'spring' and 'birth' symbolize release from that inertia -- but there are very few instances of happy marriage of thought and feeling. There is, perhaps, only one passage comparable to the better poetry of Transitional Poem and From Feathers to Iron. This is where a parallel is drawn between political insurrection and spring rebellion in Nature:

Look where ranks of crocuses  
 Their rebel colours will display  
 Coming with quick fire to redress  
 The balance of a wintry day.

Those daffodils that from the mould  
 Drawing a sweet breath soon shall flower,  
 With a year's labour get their gold  
 To spend it on a sunny hour.

We should remind ourselves that Day Lewis's propensity towards Nature coincides with his best poems of this early period. This may very well be a factor determining the merit of this and subsequent poetry.

Two aspects of The Magnetic Mountain have been exaggerated by most critics. First, the Marxist element in the poem has been overstressed. The poem is political in the widest sense and is definitely 'leftist', but at no time does Day Lewis propound any political philosophy: rather he emphasizes a humanitarian ideal that all are entitled to more than a mere physical subsistence. Second, undue importance has been given to the railway imagery as a unifying factor in the poem. Actually, there is very little railway imagery after Part One. Any unity the poem has must be attributed

to the quest-motif represented predominantly in terms of a kestrel image. Like Hopkins' windhover, it seems to symbolize some conception of indomitable spirit. The initial stanza has affinities with Hopkins not only in imagery but also in cross-rhymes:

Now to be with you, elate, unshared,  
My kestrel joy, O hoverer in wind,  
Over the quarry furiously at rest  
Chaired on shoulders of shouting wind.

Auden's influence is more pronounced now, especially in smug arrogance and the tilts at middle-class society. A stanza from each poet will illustrate:

Beethameer, Beethameer, bully of Britian,  
With your face as fat as a farmer's bum;  
Though you pose in private as a playful kitten  
Though the public you poison are pretty well dumb,  
They shall turn on their betrayer when the time is come.  
The cousins you cheated shall recover their nerve  
And give you the thrashing you richly deserve.

The Orators.

and

Scavenger barons and your jackal vassals,  
Your pimping press-gang, your unclean vessels,  
We'll make you swallow your words at a gulp  
And turn you back to your element, pulp.  
Don't bluster, Bimbo, it won't do you any good;  
We can be much ruder and we're learning to shoot.  
Closet Napoleon, you'd better abdicate,  
You'd better quit the country before it's too late.

The Magnetic Mountain.

Such Auden fads as 'frontier', 'Bogey-Man', 'Enemy', and the personification of characteristics -- 'Lipcurl', 'Swiveleye', etc., -- are handled with daring, but Auden's speed and cold detachment are lacking. Day Lewis's subjectivity and contemplativeness hinder him when he turns to satire. Dilys Powell, commenting on the imitative quality of this poem, has noted that

Mr. Auden's influence has falsified the tone of Mr. Day

Lewis's work; the flat or jeering statement which is often effective in "The Orators" seems forced in "The Magnetic Mountain".<sup>18</sup>

Critics have objected to Day Lewis's silly eulogies to Auden and Rex Warner --

Then I'll hit the trail for that promising land;  
May catch up with Wystan and Rex my friend, ...

--to his obscurity, and to the snobbery of his kestrel image.

There is no defence against the first of these charges. In answer to the second Day Lewis writes:

...In the face of this intolerable complexity [of a 'swollen, spiritually disorganized and heterogeneous' society], the sensitive individual feels compelled to retire upon himself, to create artificially for himself a world of manageable proportions: this is not necessarily psychological inversion, but may be a salutary act of antagonism to an environment whose complications are choking his life. This act -- a kind of starting again at the beginning -- is being performed in post-war poetry ... The poet now is seeking to find and establish that central calm, a point from which he may begin to work outward again; and in the process he is bound to be obscure, for he is talking to himself and to his friends -- to that tiny, temporarily isolated unit with which communication is possible, with whom he can take a certain number of things for granted.<sup>19</sup>

Day Lewis's poetry is not usually 'coterie' in the sense of private jokes among the select few. The obscurity of Transitional Poem is intellectual: From Feathers to Iron is lucid enough; and any obscurity in The Magnetic Mountain results from confusion rather than intention. Finally, the kestrel is not mere snobbery: it has affinities with Auden's hawk and Airman, and with Hopkins' windhover. In this and some subsequent poems the kestrel appears, in varying guises, as a symbol for heroic spirit.

The Magnetic Mountain is a derivative poem. Hopkins' and Auden's influences have been mentioned earlier. The frequent alliteration, dissonance, and assonance suggest Day Lewis's

study of Hopkins, Owen, and Auden. Occasional conversational rhythms may owe something to Yeats and Auden. Moreover, there are lines --

Lips that sealed up the sense from gnawing time  
Now beg the favour with a graveyard grin.

and

Spoon out the waters of comfort in kilogrammes.

-- which are puerile pastiche of Eliot's

And breastless creatures under ground  
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

and

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.

We get the best poetry when Day Lewis follows his natural bent: when he is breezy but not belligerent; and when he returns to Nature. In contradistinction to the arrogance already mentioned, there are passages which, though not his best poetry, are nostalgic ( in the Greek sense ) without being sentimental:

Father, who endest all,  
Pity our broken sleep;  
For we lie down with tears  
And waken but to weep.

And if our blood alone  
Will melt this iron earth,  
Take it. It is well spent  
Easing a saviour's birth.

and

An age once green is buried,  
Numbered the hours of light;  
Blood-red across the snow our sun  
Still trails his faint retreat.

.....

Eyes, though not ours, shall see  
Sky-high a signal flame,



The sun returned to power above  
A world, but not the same.

These stanzas suggest the archetypal theme of sacrifice before reward, and thereby acquire a religious connotation.

The Magnetic Mountain is the most animated piece of sustained propaganda in the Day Lewis canon. The poet has assumed an alien role and, as so often happens in such cases, there are instances of bad judgment and naivety. Yet the debilitating effect of these errors is lessened, one feels, by a 'swimmers into cleanness leaping' attitude. It was shown in Chapter One that the 'Thirties poets were both enthusiastic and apprehensive about their role in society. These antipodal moods are so blatant in The Magnetic Mountain that Francis Scarfe questions Day Lewis's sincerity. There is, Scarfe maintains, 'a gloomy note which seems less natural and less spontaneous. It is the gloom of an optimist at a funeral, feeling it his duty to pull a long face'.<sup>20</sup> This is clever writing, but not, I think, perceptive criticism. Professor Bullough may be quoted as a corrective: 'Finally, in a series of lyrics he [Day Lewis] extols a social effort governed by the twofold conception of man as soarer and earth-bound'.<sup>21</sup> This 'twofold conception of man' represents individual freedom and social obligations; represents what man might be and what man is. Such a conception is born of a belief in human perfectibility and knowledge of man's inherent weakness. This 'twofold conception of man' underlies the changing moods of The Magnetic Mountain.

The Magnetic Mountain marks the zenith of Day Lewis's 'leftist' poetry. True, he continued to write political poems,

but they lack conviction. Perhaps he had learned that Shelleyan aspiration alone is not enough: that it is one thing to diagnose a malady, another thing to remedy it. Moreover, the changing 'climate' of the 'Thirties was to dampen his zeal for Communism, and never did he give forth that mixture of bravado and nostalgia that is The Magnetic Mountain.

## V

It would be absurd to suggest that one phase of a person's mental and emotional development ends at an arbitrary date and without any merging of old and new. Day Lewis was never again to write with the gusto that characterizes The Magnetic Mountain, yet his next two volumes of poetry<sup>22</sup> -- A Time to Dance (1935), and the verse-drama, Noah and the Waters (1936), -- have much of the old political slant. He seems, in these works, to be languidly consolidating a 'leftist' position that is no longer congenial to him. The period between The Magnetic Mountain (1933), and Overtures to Death (1938), marks a transition in Day Lewis's life and writing.

A Time to Dance is divided into two parts: a series of lyrics; and a lengthy title-poem. The lyrics deal mainly with Day Lewis's split allegiance: loyalty to his middle-class upbringing, and loyalty to the proletarian cause he wishes to support. It may be that his dilemma is no longer so acute as it was and that he feels the need for an involute technique to add tension to his poetry. In any event, there is increasing evidence of Hopkins' influence in A Time to Dance. It must be mentioned, however, that Hopkins' success derives from the

opposite procedure whereby the intensity of his experience dictated 'new' rhythms and a highly individual idiom.

The lyrics have little to add to the theme of self-conflict already permeating Day Lewis's poetry. A Time to Dance begins, appropriately, with 'Learning to Talk' where a domestic incident -- a child's learning to speak -- corresponds to the Auden Group's speaking hope to a beleaguered people:

Though we fall once, though we often,  
Though we fall to rise not again,  
From our horizon sons begin;  
When we go down, they will be tall ones.

Day Lewis is propounding a triumphant Life Process where death and birth are reciprocal. Every birth involves a death, and every death involves a birth. This is true of civilizations and individuals alike. This theory is, of course, a restatement of the sacrifice-before-reward theme.

Such optimism is always tempered by an awareness that alliance with the proletariat means betrayal of family, class, and a whole way of life. This sense of disquiet is noticeable in 'Moving In', a poem whose first line -- 'Is it your hope, hope's hearth, heart's home, here at the lane's end?' -- obviously derives from Hopkins. Day Lewis seems uneasy lest he exploit the proletarian cause for literary purposes, lest he use his talents for personal aggrandizement:

No private good will let you forget all  
Those, time's accessories, whose all is a leaden arc  
Between work and sleep; who might have been  
men, brighter metal,  
Proudly reaped the light, passed peacefully into dark.

These undertones of doubt become more audible in 'The Conflict' and 'In Me Two Worlds', and continue unabated in 'Johnny Head-In-Air'. Believing society to be decadent, and aspiring to rejuvenate it, the poet unites symbols of waste-land and quest

-- symbols, from time immemorial, associated with spiritual pilgrimage -- and depicts society's 'trek from progress':

Along a stony watershed  
 Surly and peaked with cold  
 I saw a company straggling over,  
 Over an endless wold.

The wanderers come to a fork-road: to the right there is comfort for the privileged few; to the left, life for all who are willing to win it. Johnny-Head-In-Air stands at the branch-roads and points in both directions; he is unable to direct them:

That cannot be till two agree  
 Who long have lain apart:  
 Traveller, know, I am here to show  
 Your own divided heart.

Johnny is, in a sense, a Christ figure; and, as such, he reminds us not only of the Crucifixion but also of the Temptation. The Wanderers' encounter with Johnny Head-In-Air has affinities with Eliot's Hanged Man, and, ultimately, with the disciples' passage to Emmaus (Luke, 24). This evocative figure is used, I believe, as a means to an end, to a secular purpose: to give greater authenticity to the question of dilemma and decision. We must not be tempted into a narrowly religious interpretation of the poem. Johnny represents modern man, especially middle-class man; and his personal conflict epitomizes Day Lewis's own dilemma.

'The Ecstatic', an exquisite lyric reminiscent of Hopkins' 'The Sea and Sky Lark' and 'The Caged Skylark', seems anomalous in this section. However, it expresses Day Lewis's hope of achieving some power of communication; thus it reflects back to 'Learning to Talk'. 'The Ecstatic' ends with the statement that after poetic ecstasy comes peace. This en-

dorses a belief, common among poets, that poetry is a means of establishing order over chaos. And the poem itself immediately follows the conflict of 'Johnny Head-In-Air', and immediately precedes the peace of 'Poem for an Anniversary'. Perhaps the best explanation of its anomalous quality lies in the subject of the poem: the skylark symbolizes irrepressible spirit, and, as such, the poem is a harbinger of 'A Time to Dance'.

'A Time to Dance' is a lengthy poem whose structural symmetry helps to gloss over its thematic irregularity. The subject of the poem is man's indomitable spirit, but there are three major movements -- saga, elegy and propaganda -- each with its own theme, framed between an introductory poem and an Epilogue.

Since Day Lewis dedicates the poem to the memory of his friend, L.P. Hedges, one might expect mourning. However, it is the poet's expressed intention 'to sing not a dirge' but 'a lilt emphatic'. He begins with a narrative of two airmen, Parer and McIntosh, who, after World War I, flew home to Australia in 'a craft of obsolete design, a condemned D.H. nine'. This saga provides an 'objective correlative' for his immortalizing of man's heroic spirit just as the death of five Franciscan nuns provided an 'objective correlative' whereby Hopkins could explore his own spiritual experience. Both 'The Flight to Australia' and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' have the same narrative theme -- endurance, the courageous struggle of humans against the elements. This may have suggested to Day Lewis the possibilities of Hopkins' Sprung Rhythm. However, Day Lewis's theme is also continuance of

life on earth, an enthusiasm for retreating horizons. Therefore, he must avoid the astringency of Hopkins. His lines lack the emotional intensity and sureness of rhythm that we find in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland':

Thou mastering me  
God! giver of breath and bread;  
World's strand, sway of the sea;  
Lord of living and dead ....

Conversely, 'The Flight to Australia' is most exciting in its strident lines, informal in their use of assonance, half-rhyme and internal rhyme, and in those instances when the counterpointed rhythms are imposed upon the primary movement of the verse to give a more dramatic effect:

Air was all ambushes round them, was  
avalanche earthquake ....

and

How soft drifts of sleep piled on their senses deep  
And they dug themselves out often: how the  
plane was a weight that hung  
And swung on their aching nerve ....

Hopkins' technique derives from Anglo-Saxon prosody. It is natural, therefore, to find similarities between Old English poetry and the airmen saga. This is true not only of the heavily alliterated verse but also of the manner in which epithets are added:

...against the tainter of air, the elusive taunter.

Enrichment of incident by imaginative language is essential to good narrative poetry. Day Lewis's language is vivid and masculine rather than rhetorical, and this augurs well for his future as a narrative poet. On the other hand, the airmen saga seems too much an artefact: the over-abundance of detail and the sometimes involute technique seem out of proportion with the depth of thought

and emotion, and sometimes tend to suppress the poet's resilience.

The next major movement is an elegy to Hedges. The lines are slower and more formal than in the saga, but they are not heavy. Day Lewis's purpose is to extol 'The spirit of life that nothing can keep down'; this theme, supported by some metaphors of soaring wings and burning deserts, establishes a continuity with the narrative. However, the elegy is an entity in itself, and is written in the tradition of all great English elegies: personal loss becomes public loss; a particular death prompts reflections on death in general; and tragedy becomes triumph. In this respect the elegy closely parallels 'Lycidas', even to verbal echoes. Yet Day Lewis is too wry to be tempted into Milton's pastoral convention: social and moral abuses are attacked through modern imagery:

Was so much else we could have better spared --  
Churches, museums, multiple stores: but the bomb  
Fell on the power-house: total that eclipse.

And, in the midst of conventionally elegiac language, he uses a characteristically modern simile<sup>23</sup> -- juxtaposition of the concrete with the abstract:

Here he was last seen  
Walking familiar as sunlight ....  
Walking

Continuance of life is Day Lewis's theme; and to equate 'life with life's negation', he alludes to metempsychosis, to the Romantic belief in the individual soul's contributing to a World Soul, and to pagan fertility myths. Since he wishes to hymn new life the fertility myths have special appeal: for, 'it is not merely the untimely death [of pagan deities] which

is lamented, but the restoration of life which is celebrated'24 which immortalizes these rituals. Resurrection, dying into life, is everywhere emphasized:

For I knew, at last wholly accepting death,  
Though earth had taken his body and air his breath,  
He was not in heaven or earth: he was in me.

and

For my friend that was dead is alive ....

All elegies of this type derive from religious rituals of ancient cults: the Adonis myth is a prime example. The resurrection theme explicit in these rituals permeates both Christian and pagan literature from the New Testament through 'Lycidas' and 'Adonais' to 'The Waste Land'. Christian doctrine does not necessarily enter into this poem: Day Lewis is raising the Hero-figure to loftiest heights where mortals may aspire to immortality. He concludes the elegy with an easy transition into political propaganda:

Lay laurels here, and leave your tears to dry --  
Sirs, his last wishes were that you should laugh.  
For those in whom was found life's richest seam  
Yet they asked no royalty, one cenotaph  
Were thanks enough -- a world where none may scheme  
To hoard, while many die,  
Life; where all lives grow from an equal chance ....

The final movement of 'A Time to Dance' is unadulterated Communist drum-thumping, most of which Day Lewis has wisely omitted from his Collected Poems (1954). In fact, only three bitter-sweet parodies are included, and these are out of context of the poem.

These parodies are designed to excite sympathy for the underprivileged; and their quiet, seemingly unruffled surfaces make the social castigation all the more incisive. The first, modelled after Jane Eliot's 'The Flowers of the Forest', is



an attack on Capitalist war-mangers. Two stanzas will illustrate:

I've heard them lilting at loom and belting,  
Lasses lilting before dawn of day:  
But now they are silent, not gamesome and gallant--  
The flowers of the town are rotting away.

There was laughter and loving in the lanes at evening;  
Handsome were the boys then, and girls were gay.  
But lost in Flanders by medalled commanders  
The lads of the village are vanished away.

The second poem skilfully parodies Marlowe's idyll, 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love', and it graphically portrays the crippling effect of poverty on love and marriage:

I'll handle dainties on the docks  
And thou shalt read of summer frocks:  
At evening by the sour canals  
We'll hope to hear some madrigals.

.....

Hunger shall make the modest zone  
And cheat fond death of all but bone --  
If these delights thy mind may move,  
Then live with me and be my love.

The final poem of this group:

Oh hush thee, my baby,  
Thy cradle's in pawn:  
No blankets to cover thee  
Cold and forlorn.  
The stars in the bright sky  
Look down and are dumb  
At the heir of the ages  
Asleep in a slum.

The hooters are blowing,  
No heed let him take;  
When baby is hungry  
'Tis best not to wake.  
Thy mother is crying,  
Thy dad's on the dole:  
Two shillings a week is  
The price of a soul.

parodies both lullaby and Christmas carol, and it is the more trenchant because of the chasm it suggests between contemporary society and the Christian ideal. Any originality these clever

pieces may have lies in Day Lewis's adaptation of his models to produce exactly opposite states of being from those intended in the originals. He succeeds in creating in the reader a sense of righteous indignation, while he himself remains detached. Such control, restraint, irony, and understatement are alien to a poet who, until now, has generally failed at satire. The secret of his success here is that in strict emulation of other poets' styles he is working, as it were, outside himself. This allows him a detachment which he usually does not possess.

The remainder of this section attempts, rather listlessly, to integrate propaganda and poetry. The result is a decline into a slough of pastiche, of Marxist catch-cries and aphorisms, and Auden-like browbeating of middle-class society. A classic example of Day Lewis's poetic degeneracy is the naive 'Yes, why do we all, seeing a Red, feel small?', which incidently, is patterned after an equally ingenuous line by Hopkins: 'Yes. Why do we all, seeing of a soldier, bless him?'

A Time to Dance adds little to Day Lewis's reputation as lyricist: it does give promise of a talent for narration; and at times, as in the saga and the elegy, it reveals increasing mastery over technique. However, he is still too susceptible to the influence of those whom he admires. Consequently, what should be assimilation is often mere imitation.

## VI

Noah and the Waters (1936), a verse-play in the tradition of medieval moralities, is a failure. Day Lewis has since all

but disowned this work, and only the Prologue and a couple of Choruses are included in Collected Poems. 'This issue is the choice that must be made by Noah between clinging to his old life and trusting himself to the Flood.'<sup>25</sup> Noah represents the responsible few who must now decide between an inert culture (the 'Burgesses' -- an obvious pun.) and revolution (the 'Flood'). Noah's dilemma is ~~supposed~~ to create the tension requisite to drama.

Choice 'between two claims irreconcilable' is stressed from the Prologue onwards, but dramatic tension is lacking. The Characters are Marxist puppets; and there are times when the play becomes farcical and thereby negates its serious theme. Actually, the choice is so one-sided as to be no choice at all, and so the play fails to communicate a real dilemma. Reading the play, one is constantly reminded of Day Lewis's dictum:

...words must drink blood before  
they can communicate with the  
living .... Let your poem be a kiss  
or a blow, echo is no answer.<sup>26</sup>

Noah and the Waters is just another of those political plays which created brief interest during the 'Thirties.<sup>27</sup> It is neither a kiss nor a blow: just a faint echo. That is, it lacks conviction. The reason for this is hinted at when Noah announces his decision to join the Flood:

I was always the man who saw both sides,  
The cork dancing where wave and backwash meet,  
From the inveterate clash of contraries gaining  
A spurious animation ...  
-- Who saw both sides and therefore could  
take neither ....

Apparently intended to show that his (Noah and the poet are one) decision is not a rash one, this actually suggests something which Day Lewis might not then have wished to acknowledge:

the struggle he was having not to see ~~both~~ sides'. It is significant, I think, that the following dialogue occurs in one of his autobiographical novels published just one year earlier:

Anthony: 'It's a great mistake to make out ~~that~~ all one's political opponents are unscrupulous ruffians. You ought to give them credit for meaning well -- even if they are fools.'

Percy: 'That's the typical bourgeois attitude. You want to play the game according to a set of idealistic rules so that you won't feel uncomfortable when you win. We can't afford spiritual luxuries like that.'

Anthony: 'Nor can you afford to tell lies. They always come back on you in the end.'<sup>28</sup>

This dialogue represents Day Lewis's wrestling with his two loyalties. It reveals his distrust of his 'leftist' philosophy at this time. And, looking back over his poetry, one does detect a 'spurious animation' behind his political partisanship. Philanthropy is one thing: Communism another.

What remains to be said? Mental and emotional grapplings have led Day Lewis from avowed chaos in Transitional Poem to professed stability in The Magnetic Mountain; from sincerity in From Feathers to Iron to insincerity in Noah and the Waters. It is now evident that, towards the end of this early period, he is writing as he believes the occasion demands and not as his poetic impulses dictate: that he has lost the faith and exuberance which enlivens The Magnetic Mountain; that his last attempts at political verse are empty gestures. In spite of references to self-conflict, he now fails to generate the tension that animates poetry. Having lost his early zest and being not yet fully disillusioned, he seems poetically stagnant. Parts of both The Magnetic Mountain and 'A Time to Dance', and almost the entire verse-play, are

listless, empty, easy, and generally false.

Day Lewis needed some impulse to spur him to such good poetry as the lyrics in From Feathers to Iron. Disillusion is often a source of poetic inspiration: and disillusion was imminent. Events of the decade had shaken his faith in Communism as a means of social amelioration. Already the war-clouds were gathering over Europe. What had he that would equip him for the next phase of his life? He had retained his sense of justice, and his faith in human nature; he had talent; and, above all, he was learning that 'Freedom is more than a word'.

## NOTES

1. The Buried Day, p. 168.
2. C. Day Lewis, Writers and Their Work (London, 1955), no. 62, p. 15.
3. The Buried Day, p. 185.
4. Author's notes to Transitional Poem, in Collected Poems 1928-1933 (London, 1936), p. 55:

The central theme of this poem is the single mind. The poem is divided into four parts, which essentially represent four phases of personal experience in pursuit of single-mindedness.... As far as any definitions can be attached to these aspects, they may be termed (1) metaphysical, (2) ethical, (3) psychological; while (4) is an attempt to relate the poetic impulse with the experience as a whole....

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.:
 

"I would warn you that I do not attribute to nature either beauty or deformity, order or confusion. Only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or ugly, well-ordered or confused."
7. The Buried Day, p. 185.
8. "Imagination", in Life and Leisure Pamphlets (London, 1936), no. 4, pp. 4-5.
9. Notes to Transitional Poem, p. 56:
10. C. Day Lewis, "Imagination", in Life and Leisure Pamphlets, no. 4, p. 2.
11. Notes to Transitional Poem, p. 56:
 

...the parts [ of this poem ] fall with fair accuracy into the divisions of a ~~theorem~~ in geometry, i.e. general enunciation, particular enunciation, proof, corollaries....
12. C. Day Lewis, "George Meredith and Responsibility", in Notable Images or Virtue (Toronto, 1954), p. 41.
13. The Trend of Modern Poetry (Edinburgh, 1934), 3rd. ed., 1947, p. 202.

14. The Buried Day, pp. 218-219.
15. C. Day Lewis, p. 24.
16. Geoffrey Bullough, op.cit., p. 201.
17. The Poetic Image (London, 1934), p. 206.
18. Descent From Parnassus (London, 1934), p. 206.
19. A Hope For Poetry, p. 37.
20. Auden and After (London, 1942), p. 7.
21. The Trend of Modern Poetry, p. 203.
22. Published separately in Great Britain, these two works, along with a commentary, "A Revolution in Writing", were published as a single edition in America in 1936. I have used the American edition.
23. Cf. Eliot's  

Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent....

and Auden's  

Will Ferdinand be as fond of a Miranda  
Familiar as a stocking?
24. Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York, 1957), p. 8.
25. 'Author's Foreword' to Noah and the Waters.
26. Preface to the Second Edition of A Hope For Poetry (1935).
27. Auden and Isherwood collaborated in three verse-plays -- The Dog Beneath the Skin (1935), The Ascent of F6 (1936), and On the Frontier (1938). The first two of these are far superior to Noah and the Waters.
28. Starting Point (London, 1937), p. 231.

## Chapter III

### REVEILLE

Today the autumn tints are on  
The trampled grass at Marathon.

E. J. Pratt.

In his Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in 1951, Day Lewis asked:

Those of us [poets] who cannot accept either of the two dogmas predominant in our time, Christianity's and Communism's -- how are we to help build?<sup>1</sup>

He then answered his own question:

By remaining faithful, first, to Wilfred Owen's belief that 'All a poet can do today is to warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful'; searching patiently after the meaning of our personal experience, as it stirs, weak and inarticulate, beneath the creative heart. Second, we may be able to do something after Philip Sidney's recommendation -- the feigning of 'notable images of virtue'.<sup>2</sup>

The former condition -- necessity to warn and its corollary of being truthful -- is incarnate in Overtures to Death (1938). Inspiration and impetus for this volume came from the threat of Fascism and from events in Spain. Moreover, it was in 1938 that Day Lewis severed all connections with the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> The 'two dogmas' had failed him.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the poet of Overtures to Death is not a young optimist guiding a new world struggling out of the womb: he is a sober young man desperately imploring his fellow countrymen, not to build Utopias but to 'defend the bad against the worse'. Gone now are the jeering note and the easy idealism of the



earlier phase: replaced by disillusionment with the Communist masquerador, and by premonitions of disaster more frightening than decadent society and political revolutions. Essentially, Overtures to Death 'strikes a tragic note, indignant and ominous, though not despairing'.<sup>5</sup> The poet is struggling as in a labour of love.

Overtures to Death has three major themes: warnings of imminent war, speculation on the human condition, and furtherance of the heroic myth. If there is a constant, it is the poet's search for self; his attempt to see himself in relation to a terribly distressing world. Except for a few personal and reflective poems, Overtures to Death is instinct with concern for humanity; and behind the forebodings one detects urgency and sincerity, and faith in the individual. The key-note is struck in the very first poem, 'Maple and Sumach'. In this sonnet, autumn leaves, 'drenched with the life-blood of the year', are compared with the thousands of young men threatened with annihilation by war. Leaves and man share the same transience: the pathos is that leaves enjoy a 'sovereign hour' whereas doomed youth falls 'short of pride'. An autumnal setting and mood, and consistent imagery of fire and blood all contribute to the effect of Day Lewis's invocation for power to speak the word --

O light's abandon and the fire-crest sky  
Speak in me now for all who are to die!

'February 1936' is pregnant with impending doom. Heavy, progressively lengthening lines in the manner of Hardy, and monotonous rhymes contribute to the general mood:

Whether to die,

Or live beneath fear's eye --  
Heavily hangs the sentence of this sky.

.....

We cannot meet  
Our children's mirth, at night  
Who dream their blood upon a darkening street.

Stay away, Spring!  
Since death is on the wing  
To blast our seed and poison every thing.

Day Lewis's concern is chiefly for the innocent, for those who will be victims of air-raids. Appealing to parental instincts, he puts the proposition squarely before us in 'Bombers':

Choose between your child and this fatal embryo.  
Shall your guilt bear arms, and the children you want  
Be condemned to die by powers you paid for  
And haunt the houses you never built?

But with all his hatred for Fascism, and with Europe perilously close to war, Day Lewis does not impute the blame to Germany. The 'Thirties poets had learnt from the soldier-poets of 1914-18 that men-at-arms do not blame the other side, but rather the non-combatants at home who are insensitive to the carnage. The 'Thirties poets were right in condemning social abuses, though they had exaggerated the image of a doomed world. Now, for the first time, they really stood to lose everything. However, they had long foreseen war of one kind or another, and they refused to panic now.

Day Lewis's love for English traditions drives him into satire against public apathy. In 'Newsreel', he compares contemporary Englishmen to fish which

... in their tank electrically heated  
Nose without envy the glass wall ....

He continues with a quiet but devastating attack on those dreamers, those sleep-walkers who are so easily beguiled:

There is the mayor opening the oyster season.  
 A society wedding: the autumn hats look swell:  
 An old crocks' race, and a politician  
 In fishing-waders to prove that all is well.

Next, he abandons satire and resorts to shock tactics in an attempt to arouse a lethargic public: first, in sex-imagery --

See the big guns, rising, groping, erected  
 To plant death in your world's soft womb.  
 Fire-bud, smoke-blossom, iron seed projected --  
 Are these exotics? They will grow nearer home.

and then in a gruesome picture of what the air-raids would later verify --

Grow nearer home -- and out of the dream-house stumbling  
 One night into a strangling air and the flung  
 Rags of children and thunder of stone niagaras tumbling,  
 You'll know you slept too long.

Less direct and only slightly toned down, Day Lewis's indignation is expressive of the sentiment shown by Ardsley, the ex-serviceman in Somerset Maugham's For Services Rendered:

I know that we were the dupes of the incompetent fools  
 who ruled the nations. I know that we were sacrificed  
 to their vanity, their greed and their stupidity. And  
 the worst of it is that as far as I can tell they haven't  
 learnt a thing. They're just as vain, they're just as  
 greedy, they're just as stupid as ever they were. They  
 muddle on, muddle on, and one of these days, they'll  
 muddle us all into another war.<sup>6</sup>

And, from such disgust Day Lewis looks back to the beginning of the decade:

We who in younger days  
 Hoping too much, tried on  
 The habit of perfection,  
 Have learnt how it betrays  
 Our shrinking flesh ....

This about-face is even more apparent in the title-poem, 'Overtures to Death'. Day Lewis, once the harbinger of a new world, has suffered an ironic reversal of roles: he is now a negotiator with Death. As negotiator Day Lewis proves his versatility and virtuosity: the half-rhymes, internal rhymes,

internal rhymes, rhyming couplets and free-verse of this dramatic monologue belong to the English literary tradition, and are less derivative than much of his earlier work. Similarly, he is turning again to images from his own experience. 'Overtures to Death' has its origin in the death of Day Lewis's father<sup>7</sup>; certain facts from the poem indicate as much.

The ordinary anguish,  
The stairs, the awkward turn,  
The bearers' hats like black mushrooms  
Placed upon the lawn.

compares with a prose description of his father's funeral:

A day or two later, my father went to his own church for the last time. It was a burning, brilliant morning. The grass verge of the drive opposite the front door was spotted with black mole-hills -- for so my sun-dazzled eyes at first saw the bowler hats which the bearers had deposited there before entering the house  
....<sup>8</sup>

His father's sudden passing may have increased Day Lewis's awareness of the inevitability of death. However, this is not his prime concern: he acknowledges that all things die in due course, but argues that demise precipitated by profiteers and war-mongers is out-of-nature. With these 'damned auxiliaries' of Death 'Our war is life itself and shall not fail'. Hence, the usual attack on old-line politicians:

They came to us with charity,  
They came to us with whips,  
They came with chains behind their back  
And freedom on their lips.

A grim humour often plays over the surface of 'Overtures to Death'; this is especially true of Poem 5 which has echoes of Emily Dickinson's terse statements:

Death doubts it, argues from the ground.  
The spirit turns away,  
Just laying off, for evidence,  
An overcoat of clay.  
(Emily Dickinson)

Thus he resigned his interest  
 And claims, all in a breath,  
 Leaving us the long office work  
 And winding-up of death ....  
 (C. Day Lewis.)

At first, such frivolity seems to make the poem too facile: it is as if Day Lewis, and not Death, were the Jester. In this 'light' treatment, however, lies the poem's strength: ironically, the incongruity of theme and technique causes us to look more closely at the poem. We now perceive that behind the apparent flippancy is a genuine fear that irresponsible politicians 'will muddle us all into another war'.

Never one to extol the Death-Wish, Day Lewis ends his poem on an optimistic note. He still has faith in human perfectibility; even in an age when

...love's a cripple, faith a bed-time story,  
 Hope eats her heart out and peace walks on knives,  
 And suffering men cry end to this sorry  
 World of whose children want alone still thrives.

Hope may be deferred, but it is not rejected. Out of dire necessity will come a quickening of the conscience:

Then shall the mounting stages of oppression  
 Like mazed and makeshift scaffolding torn down  
 Reveal his unexampled, best creation --  
 The shape of man's necessity full-grown.  
 Built from their bone, I see a power-house stand  
 To warm men's hearts again and light the land.

## II

Day Lewis is moving from partisan politics to la condition humaine; from rhetorical doggerel to poetic intensity; from doctrinaire poetry to poetry of flesh and bone. Reflections on the human condition provide the second theme of Over-

tures to Death. This does not mean a distinct alienation of themes: any concern with humanity can be included in such broad phrasing. But there are, in this volume, two instances where Day Lewis explores human nature and exposes our inhumanity without any reference to war or to the ego. In 'Sex-Crime', he points to the razor-edge between love and hate in physical liaison, and to the inexplicable motives that prompt us:

...who knows what nice proportion of loathing  
 And lust conjured the deep devil, created  
 That chance of incandescence? Figures here prove nothing.  
 One step took him through the roaring waterfall  
 That closed like a bead-curtain, left him alone with the  
 writhing  
 Of what he loved or hated.  
 His hands leapt out: they took vengeance for all  
 Denials and soft answers....

He castigates society for its smug complacency: 'The news Broke a Sunday inertia ...'; and, in remarkably consistent geological imagery, continues to attack society's it-can't-happen-to-us attitude:

Most see it as an island eruption, viewed  
 From the safe continent; not dreaming the same fire pent  
 Within their clay that warps  
 The night with fluent alarm, their own wrath spewed  
 Through the red craters of that undistinguished corpse.  
 All that has reached them is the seismic thrill:  
 The ornaments vibrate on the shelf; then they are still.  
 Smugly we settle down  
 Into our velvet and legitimate bed,  
 While news-sheets are yet falling all over the town  
 Like a white ash. Falling on one dead  
 And one can never be whole again.

'Sex-Crime' is a trenchant commentary on human nature, its weaknesses and its ambiguities. We are left with the uneasy feeling that we are accomplices of the so-called sex-maniac: that coiled within our nature is

...the curse that needs  
 Only a touch to be articulate.

In 'The Bells that Signed', Day Lewis directs his satire at institutions which form the very core of our society. His double-barrelled attack is directed at the Church's degeneracy and at the abused marriage institution:

The bells that signed a conqueror in  
Or franked the lovers' bed, now mean  
Nothing more heavenly than their  
Own impulse and recoil of air.

A bell-buoy image is used to suggest that marriage-bells may either herald new life or merely draw attention to human viciousness. Wistful regret informs the second stanza:

But still at eve, when the wind swells  
Out of the west, those rocking bells  
Buoy up the sunken light, or mark  
What rots unfathomed in the dark.

The final stanza suggests man's betrayal of his sacred vows, both Christian and marital:

Broods the stone-lipped conqueror still  
Abject upon his iron hill,  
And lovers in the naked beds  
Cry for more than maidenheads.

Love seems anomalous in a harsh modern world: even the best seems illusionary. This preoccupation with a theme that is both domestic and universal provides a link between Day Lewis's earlier love-poems and his later, more intimate treatment of deteriorating husband-wife relationships.

### III

Ancestor-worship and the heroic myth were parts of the 'Thirties search for self; a means of their establishing continuity with English tradition. Ancestor-worship is self-explanatory: but 'myth' and its derivatives may cause some

speculation. Therefore, I shall define 'myth' as E.M.W.

Tillyard did in The Clarke Lectures (1959-60):

...the universal instinct of any human group, large or small, to invest, almost always unconsciously, certain stories or events or places or persons, real or fictional, with an uncommon significance; to turn them into instinctive centres of reference; to make among stories A, B, C, D, all roughly having the same theme or moral, one, and one only, the type. Made thus typical, the story becomes a communal possession, the agreed and classical embodiment of some way of thinking or feeling.<sup>9</sup>

The 'Thirties poets were shaping a myth -- the brave new world -- but this was a concept, an intangible thing. 'Give me the ocular proof', demanded the sceptic. The poets had an answer: Spain -- a modern Thermopylae instinct with heroic courage against overwhelming odds.

In spite of his earlier preoccupation with mass-movements, Day Lewis's accolades have always been for minority groups: half a dozen Oxford intellectuals, two Australian airmen, a handful of Basque fishermen; and, later, the Home Guard of World War II. (It is significant that, despite his talent for narrative poetry, Day Lewis did not write a poem on the Dunkirk episode, or on any other mass achievement.) 'The Volunteer' and 'The Nabarra' are his poetical contributions to the beleaguered Spanish Republicans, to the 'Thirties heroic myth.<sup>10</sup>

'The Volunteer' is a little poem purposing to express the attitude of an English volunteer in Spain. The fifth stanza --

Shine to us, memoried and real,  
Green-water-silken meads:  
Rivers of home, refresh our path  
Whom here your influence leads.



--. reminiscent of Rupert Brooke, is acceptable. Stanzas four and five are banal. The strength of the poem lies in the first three stanzas:

Tell them in England, if they ask  
What brought us to these wars,  
To this plateau beneath the night's  
Grave manifold of stars --

It was not fraud of foolishness,  
Glory, revenge, or pay:  
We came because our open eyes  
Could see no other way.

There was no other way to keep  
Man's flickering truth alight:  
These stars will witness that our course  
Burned briefer, not less bright.

Epigrammatic forcefulness, verbal economy, and sincerity of tone stamp these lines into one's memory. This is more than conventional patriotism: nor is it the propaganda of a hate-campaign. It epitomizes Day Lewis's belief in sacrifice: there is a finality in these stanzas; a sense of the inevitability of sacrifice.

'The Nabara', a verse-saga of naval heroism, is based on an episode related in G.L. Steer's The Tree of Gernika.<sup>11</sup> Briefly, the story is this: On March 5, 1937, four Spanish Government trawlers, manned by simple fishermen, were conveying through the Nationalist blockade the Galdames, a ship laden with refugees and with nickel. They were intercepted by a Nationalist cruiser, the Canarias, which, in turn, was escorting a captured Estonian arms ship. While the Canarias attempted to capture the Galdames, one of the trawlers made an audacious and successful attempt to recapture the Estonian ship, whose cargo was vital to the Government forces. Meanwhile, the other trawlers attacked the cruiser and held it at

bay while the Estonian and her trawler-escort steamed away.  
The Basque fishermen fought on against desperate odds until  
only the Nabara was left, and

...of the fifty-two that had sailed  
In her, all were dead but fourteen --  
and each of these half killed  
With wounds.

These survivors, still refusing to surrender, manned a boat  
and pulled for shore,

But the strength of the hands that had carved  
them a hold on history  
Failed them at last: the grenades fell short  
of the enemy,  
Who grappled and overpowered them,  
While Nabara sank by the stern  
in the hushed Cantabrian sea.

The poem adequately substantiates its moral: 'Freedom  
is more than a word'. Supporting this is a line from the  
poem, which also serves as preface to the poem: 'They pre-  
ferred, because of the rudeness of their hearts, to die  
rather than to surrender'. However, the didacticism is con-  
trolled; and, although Day Lewis is still anti-fascist, he no  
longer prescribes Communism as an antidote to Fascism.

Day Lewis's reference to the Basque fishermen and the  
families --

...hearts grown sick with hope deferred  
And the drain of their country's wounds  
...in the face of aid evaded  
And the cold delay of those to whom  
freedom was only a word.

-- is really self-condemnation. And, to make the accusation  
more succinct he adds a footnote suggesting comparison with  
Byron's comments on 'Non-Intervention' in The Age of Bronze:

Lone, lost, abandoned in their unmost need  
By Christians, unto whom they gave their creed,

The desolated lands, the ravaged isle,  
 The fostered feud encouraged to beguile,  
 The aid evaded, and the cold delay  
 Prolonged but in the hope to make a prey: --  
 These, these shall tell the tale, and Greece can show  
 The false friend worse than the infuriate foe.

'The Nabara' is in the heroic tradition of 'Agincourt' and 'The Revenge', but it is also different from each. Day Lewis's poem commemorates not the characteristics of a particular nationality, but the common man's defence of home; and, as such, it lacks the colour and glamour of 'Agincourt'. Moreover, 'The Nabara' has a historical immediacy which is lacking in both 'Agincourt' and 'The Revenge'.

The heavy lines and minute details of 'The Nabara' are less delightful than the more spirited 'Flight to Australia', but they are not less appropriate to the particular event. These approximate to the stubborn resistance of a people whose inherent love for liberty transcends life and death, and needs no patriotic propaganda to spur it to action. The kestrel spirit and the airman-image of 'A Time to Dance' have been metamorphosed: what emerges now is not man's soaring spirit but man's defiant will.

'The Nabara' is so much an organic unity that isolated quotation can never do it justice. F.W. Dupee has written the ultimate tribute to this saga of naval heroism:

Remembering the tragic confusion of Spanish politics, one has to suspend a lot of disbeliefs in order to accept fully Lewis's enthusiasm for the do-or-die spirit of the protagonists; one can only say that somehow he does make [one] accept it.<sup>12</sup>

Surely, this is the power of poetry: that it makes us suspend even our cynicism over this apparent waste of heroic effort, and transforms tragedy into glorious victory-in-defeat.

## IV

There is, in Day Lewis's poetry, a haunting feeling that the monstrosities which plague mankind spring from the 'shallow heart'.

When madmen play the piper  
And knaves call the tune,  
Honesty's a right passion --  
She must call to her own.

'That is why the true Poets must be truthful', Wilfred Owen had said. But to be truthful one must know oneself; and now in images of crystals, pools, and mirrows, Day Lewis seeks his identity. And, whether the subject be love or poetry, there is always a nostalgia for 'A harvest I could not have':

From husk of woods unspoken  
I'll winnow a ripe seed:  
From woods where love was shy to trespass  
I'll learn the airs I need.

Oh here and unlamenting  
Her graceful ghost shall shine --  
In the heart mature as fruited fields,  
The singing words of pine.

'Passage from Childhood' is a good example of Day Lewis's meandering among labyrinthine memories to reflect on his many personalities. There are, for instance, the personifications of confidence and the contradicting sense of hesitancy: there is the child of extreme sensitivity:

Quick to injustice, quick he grew  
This hermit and ~~contented~~ shell.  
Self-pity like a thin rain fell,  
Fouling the view....

There are particular episodes, too:

Lying awake one night, he saw  
Eternity stretched like a howl of pain  
He was tiny and terrible, a new pin  
On a glacier's floor.

When he was eight or nine years old, and recovering from diphtheria, Day Lewis had a vision of eternity:

I saw something like a glacier -- the "glassy floor" of the hymn, perhaps -- cold, shining, and extending illimitably beyond me, empty save for one object in the midst of it -- the head of a pin. Waking, I knew the pin was me and the glacier was the life eternal. I began sobbing in hysterical despair; ... I could not be comforted but cried again and again, "I don't want to live for ever."<sup>13</sup>

'Passage from Childhood' ends in acceptance of self-conflict. Two metaphors are introduced: the 'glacial sleep' -- symbolic of arrested emotional relationships; and the fatal draught, 'deep questioning' -- symbolic of the disturbing power of the intellect when applied to emotional affairs:

Now, beyond reach of sense or reason,  
His life walks in a glacial sleep  
For ever, since he drank that cup  
And found it poison.

This recalls Meredith's Modern Love, and is precursory to Day Lewis's agony when, in subsequent volumes, he attempts to analyze his own disintegrating marriage.

## V

Overtures to Death shows that Day Lewis has been purged of his earlier tendencies to excessive metaphors, and to eclecticism. His political views are still liberal, but they are no longer extremely radical. His poems, now cast in more balanced and conventional forms, are less uneven and more direct; less belligerent yet more penetrating. There is too much at stake now for him to risk obscurity as a fad: he no longer clogs his verses with half-assimilated technical and

scientific data; and, consequently, so-called 'coterie' poetry finds no place in this volume. Day Lewis now records the things that need recording: he writes now not only because the occasion demands it, but because the poem demands to be written. Moral truth and poetic truth have become one.

Overtures to Death is, in every respect, an advancement over his earlier poems. Suffering seems to be the fountain-head of good poetry; and there is increasing evidence of Day Lewis's suffering. Disillusionment with political ideologies, frustration over man's inability to cope with Frankensteins of his own invention, impatience with mortality and indignation at his own outraged ideals, and fear of impending disaster -- all these contribute to Day Lewis's disquiet, and are manifest in his poems.

For a decade he has experienced two dramas being enacted simultaneously: a somewhat spurious class-conflict, and a genuine personal conflict, <sup>which</sup> has paled into insignificance before the prospect of global war. From acute sufferings of soul have come discipline and fortitude: from them, too, have come a realization that the demons of the mind are never totally subdued; that such personal battles end 'Not with a bang but a whimper'. In an age of anxiety Day Lewis has plumbed the depths and has been strengthened by the ordeal. He has been turning again to poetic integrity and to artistic individualism, to 'The shape of man's necessity full-grown'.

The poet's task is to warn; to be truthful. Day Lewis is too realistic to endorse unequivocally Shelley's dictum that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. But

poets have another task: 'the feigning of notable images of virtue'. In memorable language Day Lewis maintains that the poet's task is 'to incline our hearts towards what is lovable and admirable in humankind'.<sup>14</sup> This was to be his task during the next decade when he was to write some of his finest poetry. The poet had come of age.

## NOTES

1. The Poet's Task (pamphlet, Oxford, 1951), p. 23.
2. Ibid.
3. For an account of Day Lewis's connections with the Communist Party see The Buried Day, Chap. 10, esp. pp. 222-25.
4. Day Lewis's disbelief in established religions is obliquely suggested in The Buried Day: Chap. 3, in particular.
5. H.J.C. Grierson and J.C. Smith, A Critical History of English Literature (London, 1944), 2nd. ed., with revisions, 1947, p. 517.
6. Quoted by Vivian De Sola Pinto, Crisis in English Poetry (London, 1951), p. 188.
7. Rev. Day Lewis died suddenly, July 29, 1937. Cf. Day Lewis's lines in 'Overtures to Death':  
  
A hand came out of August  
And flicked his life away....
8. The Buried Day, p. 155.
9. Some Mythical Elements in English Literature (London, 1960), p. 10.
10. Auden's "Spain", MacNeice's Autumn Journal, and some of Spender's poems are other contributions to the heroic myth.
11. Author's footnote to the poem, Collected Poems (London, 1954), p. 191.
12. "Verse Chronicle: Lewis and MacNeice", The Nation, Oct. 13, 1935, p. 380.
13. The Buried Day, p. 53.
14. The Poet's Task, p. 24.



## Chapter IV

### THE GLORY AND THE DREAM

We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering....

William Wordsworth.

Cecil Day Lewis had long prophesied war: first, class-war; later, global conflict. He showed no hysteria when the terrible prospect of a world at war became the reality of 1939-45:

For me there is no dismay  
Though ills enough impend.  
I have learned to count each day  
Minute by breathing minute --  
Birds that lightly begin it,  
Shadows muting its end --  
As lovers count for luck  
Their own heart-beats and believe  
In the forest of time they pluck  
Eternity's single leaf.

Nor did he sit back with a smug I-told-you-so expression. There is no greater patriot in English literature than he: yet he refused to expend his talents to engender fanatical patriotism and national hatreds. Patriotism was, to him, synonymous with Love, with universal kindness. Like Owen earlier, he was spokesman for suffering humanity: Owen, for men-at-arms; Day Lewis, for the innocent, passive victims of the Blitz, for 'the roofless old, the child beneath the debris'. Like Owen, also, he showed no animosity towards the other side: he states his views quite succinctly in 'Where are the War Poets?'

They who in folly or mere greed  
 Enslaved religion, markets and laws,  
 Borrow our language now and bid  
 Us speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our time,  
 No subject for immortal verse --  
 That we who live by honest dreams  
 Defend the bad against the worse.

Three inferences may safely be made from these stanzas: first, that, at heart, the 'Thirties poets were liberals rather than radicals; second, that their condemnation of those in authority was unmitigated; third, that they sensibly recognized the gradations between good and evil in moral issues.

Word Over All (1943) is a natural sequel to Overtures to Death. In that volume Day Lewis's invocation was 'Speak in me now for all who are to die!' Now he is struck 'Dumb as a rooted rock' by the prospect of

Millions fated to flock  
 Down weeping roads to mere oblivion --

and he seeks words with which to comfort and sustain the sufferers. These war-poems show two other things about his attitude at this time: first, that he seeks a triumphant pattern behind this, to use Arnold's phrase, 'immense moving, confused spectacle' of war; second, he seeks to establish a new humanism through art. The 'Word' is all important: the title, the preface from Whitman --

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
 Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage  
     must in time be utterly lost,  
 That the hands of the Sisters Death and Night  
     incessantly softly wash again, and ever again,  
     this soiled world.

-- and lines from the poems themselves suggest that Day Lewis regards war as a form of purging the world. He seems to regard Love as the force behind human existence; and, paradox-

ically, to regard war as Love's 'bloody correction'.

This preamble over, we may turn to the war-poems found in Part Two of Word Over All. In a sense these poems are poems on Love, assertions that Love is the one way of giving permanence to an impermanent world:

Yet words there must be, wept on a cratered present  
To gleam beyond it:  
Never was cup so mortal but poets with mild  
Everlastings have crowned it.

Amid the greatest physical and spiritual desolation Europe had ever experienced the poet must make himself heard: but he must speak truthfully. He must not 'weave Voluble charms' about political Utopias or about the hereafter:

I who chose to be caged with the devouring  
Present, must hold its eye  
Where blaze ten thousand farms and fields unharvested,  
And hearts, steel-broken, die.

Apart from the ship-wreck image in stanza one, images in the title-poem are not developed: rather there is a series of metaphors. Perhaps this is because

Metaphor is the natural language of tension, of excitement, because it enables man by a compressed violence of expression to rise to the level of the violent situation which provokes it....<sup>1</sup>

These metaphors -- 'heart-sunderings', 'heart's all-harrowed ground', 'hearts, steel-broken', and 'the cratered present' -- recall Owen's vivid, though more repulsive, description of No Man's Land:

No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon,  
chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode  
of madness.<sup>2</sup>

They cluster to the theme-image of a shrapnel-riddled heart, and demand a humanism founded not on Marx or Freud, but on Love:

All I have felt or sung  
 Seems now but the moon's fitful  
 Sleep on a clouded bay....

In 'The Assertion' another series of war-horrors culminates in a proclamation that 'men are love'. The paradox is developed further:

Love's the big boss at whose side for ever slouches  
 The shadow of the gunman: he's mortar and dynamite;  
 Antelope, drinking pool, but the tiger too that crouches.  
 Therefore be wise in the dark hour to admit  
 The logic of the gunman's trigger.  
 Embrace the explosive element, learn the need  
 Of tiger for antelope and antelope for tiger.

This is more than a belated Tennysonian protest against 'Nature, red in tooth and claw'. Love and war are opposite yet complementary: beyond their external manifestations each sheds light upon what is noblest in the other. Imagination, that 'instrument of truth', may give intuitions of this complex pattern. It is the poet's task to make the word become flesh:

He [the poet] is in the world, we may say, to bear witness to the principle of love, since love is as good a word as any for that human reaching-out of hands towards the warmth in all things, which is the source and passion of his song. Love is this to him first; but it is more; he apprehends it as a kind of necessity by which all things are bound together and in which, could the whole pattern be seen, their contradictions would appear reconciled.<sup>3</sup>

But not even tragic poetry or heroic stoicism can alleviate the guilt that war imposes upon the sensitive mind. Day Lewis is willing to accept the harsh necessity of war but not without a haunting sense of guilt:

But oh, what drug, what knife  
 Can wither up our guilt at the root  
 Can cure our discoloured days and cleanse the blood of  
 life?

This rhetorical question gives a new voice to the doubt

of the soldier in King Henry V:

...I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument?

(Act IV, sc. I. )

Without imputing the blame to either side, Day Lewis is seriously questioning the justice of war. Perhaps this accounts for his refusal to glorify war in the manner that poets, from the Anglo-Saxon 'scop' to Rupert Brooke, have tended to do. Day Lewis had learned from Owen, and now from experience, the horrors of war. To sanction these atrocities would be to disobey his moral conscience; to remove himself from them would be to evade the human condition. This conflict is the motivation behind his war poetry.

Some of these poems are occasional, but they have message and meaning that are applicable wherever and whenever common men defend their common lot. 'Watching Post' and 'The Stand-To' are two such poems. The poet, with his company of Home Guard, stands watch during the fateful summer and autumn of 1940:

Destiny, History, Duty, Fortitude, Honour -- all  
The words of the politicians seem too big or too small  
For the ragtag fighters of lane and shadow, the love  
that has grown  
Familiar as working-clothes, faithful as bone to bone.

Blow, autumn wind, upon orchard and rose! Blow leaves  
along  
Our lanes, but sing through me for the lives  
that are worth a song!  
Narrowing days have darkened the vistas that  
hurt my eyes,  
But pinned to the heart of darkness a  
tattered fire-flag flies.

Despite its sober tone, this is a love-poem, too: love of life, of home, and love for one's fellowmen -- simple folk, modern

counterparts of, though more vital and more valiant than, Shakespeare's village soldiers. 'The lone wolf who wanted only to run with the pack'<sup>4</sup> has at last found the contact he sought; found it in a community of common feeling that transcends intellectual affinities. And through this contact his earlier courage finds its fulfilment: chastened but not defeated, disillusioned but not despairing, he could write

The Cause shales off, the Humankind stands forth  
A mightier presence,  
Flooded by dawn's pale courage, rapt in eve's  
Rich acquiescence.

Most of these poems are simple and passionate, and are informed by compassion. There is, too, a sense that war, even with its inhuman, almost hopeless wastefulness, is nobler than failure to face war. Words, not even the most inspiring words, can win peace or wholly assuage war's grief and guilt. Yet the poet may do something to increase man's vision, patience, and fortitude. There is nothing ornate or rhetorical about these poems, nothing to detract from feeling and thought. The statements are concise without being elliptical; profound without being obscure: and what the poet has lost in exuberance he has regained in emotional directness.

## II

War had forced Day Lewis to view, with an unjaundiced eye, the human condition; it had also given him contact with his fellow-countrymen. War had still another rewarding effect upon him:

...though I did write some "war poems" in 1939-45, the main effect upon me of the emotional disturbance of war was that, for the first time in my life, I was able to

use in poetry my memories of childhood and adolescence. It was as though a seismic upheaval had thrown up to the surface of my mind strata of experience previously inaccessible to me as a poet.<sup>5</sup>

While Day Lewis could, and did, face reality, the 'seismic upheaval' also forced him into pensive moods. Perhaps this is a natural reaction, a means of relief when the thews have been strained almost beyond endurance. In any event, this 'emotional disturbance' precipitated poetry that is essentially Romantic. I do not mean the more aggressive Romanticism that probes for eternal verities: ~~instead it is~~ the quest for identity of a rather toned-down Romantic hero. Less egotistical than his earlier poems on this subject, the quest for self, through reflections on love, Nature, and time, forms the substance of Parts One and Three of Word Over All.

The effect of love on personality is the theme of 'The Lighted House' and 'The Album'. The latter poem shows also the devastating effect of time:

...scanning these scenes at your heyday taken,  
I tremble, as one who must view  
In the crystal a doom he could never  
deflect -- yes, I too  
Am fruitlessly shaken.

I close the book;  
But the past slides out of its leaves to haunt me.  
And it seems, wherever I look,  
Phantoms of irreclaimable happiness taunt me....

Scanning old photographs and reflecting upon his wife's 'decline' into the vale of years', the poet reads something of his own history. But love has its own recompense:

Then I see her, petalled in new-blown hours,  
Beside me -- 'All you love most there  
Has blossomed again,' she murmurs,  
'all that you missed there  
Has grown to be yours.'

'~~Ennui~~ of youth', mutability, mortality, and incessant probing of 'the buried day' are themes of most of these poems. 'The desire Going forth meets the desire returning.' There are a few cliches and platitudes, and the usual euphemisms for death, but the poet is primarily concerned with answering his eternal query: 'Who are I?' His quest is not that search for childhood innocence that permeates Dylan Thomas's poetry: rather it is self-discovery through resurrection and revaluation of his ~~buried~~ selves. 'Strata of experience previously inaccessible' are now made meaningful by ordinary incidents. Cornet music, for example, takes him back to boyhood, and brings revelation:

Strange they [notes] could tell a mere child  
           how hearts may beat in  
 The self-same tune for the once-possessed  
 And the unpossessed.

By intuition the child has already grasped what the man has painfully learned: that nostalgia is as much a longing for what might have been as it is regret for what has been and is no more.

Reminiscence and revaluation continue in 'O Dreams, O Destinations', a sonnet-sequence on childhood and youth. Certainly one of the finest poems Day Lewis has ever written, it traces his emotional development from infancy to his disillusionment in the 'Thirties. He draws upon his imagination and his technical resources to recreate the 'legato dream' of infancy. For enfants there is no extreme brilliance and no total eclipse, so the poet carefully chooses his words to create this vague, hazy world. By using nasals, sibilants, and liquid consonants, he creates a drowsy atmosphere approp-



riate to the situation revisited. Time, to infants, is as vague as the humming in a sea-shell: time is

...the humming pole of summer lanes  
Whose sound quivers like heat-haze  
endlessly....

(For his account of the genesis and development of the second sonnet, see Poetry For You, pp. 35-38.) Together, these two sonnets imply the moral that Gray points in 'Eton College': that children are unaware of their fate, and that adults are reluctant to disillusion them.

The Eden myth of Sonnet 3 provides a means of speculating on fallen innocence, and of reiterating his earlier conclusions on ambition and its resultant disappointment when man 'casts the image of his joys Beyond his senses' reach'. From youthful ambition it is a short step to intolerance:

Our youth\time passes down a colonnade  
Shafted with alternating light and shade.  
All's dark or dazzle there....

This image catches the uncompromising moods of youth. Sonnet 5 is an extension on this theme and introduces youth's impatience for revelation, for 'the spark from heaven to fall'. In retrospect Day Lewis realizes that although no apocalypse occurred revelation is to be found in Nature, in

...the rose  
Mounting vermilion, fading, glowing again....

Sonnet 6 is a complete renunciation of idealism without action. Verbal echoes from Coleridge may not be coincidental: Day Lewis's earlier dream world, like Coleridge's opium dreams, has been shattered on harsh reality:

Ah, not in dreams, but when our souls engage  
With the common mesh and moil, we come of age.

The transition has been from romanticism to reality, from

'shadowplay' to maturity. This is an acknowledgement that much of his earlier aspiration and energy had run into false channels:

Lost the archaic dawn wherein we started,  
The appetite for wholeness: now we prize  
Half-loaves, half-truths -- enough for the  
half-hearted,  
The gleam snatched from corruption satisfies.  
Dead youth, forgive us if, all but defeated,  
We raise a trophy where your honour lies.

There is no puerile attempt at extenuation or exoneration: just an admission of more limited objectives, and an apology for unfulfilled promises. But the poet is unsubdued: Nature is the elixir. 'The old illusion' returns, and

...the heart follows it and freshly yearns:  
Yearns to the sighing distances beyond  
Each height of happiness, the vista drowned  
In gold-dust haze, and dreams itself immune  
From change and night to which all else is bound.

Amid flowering Nature the heart catches a visionary glimpse of universal harmony, a glimpse that momentarily assuages the hurt inflicted by disillusioning time. The moment is sublime:

The truth of flesh and spirit, sun and clay  
Singing for once together all in tune.

The final sonnet is a recapitulation of all Day Lewis has learned about the instability, impatience, and ambiguity of youth. There is, at once, the desire

To travel like a bird, lightly to view  
Deserts where stone gods founder in the sand,  
Ocean embraced in a white sleep with land:  
To escape time, always to start anew.

and the longing

To settle like a bird, make one devoted  
Gesture of permanence upon the spray  
Of shaken stars and autumns; in a bay  
Beyond the crestfallen surges to have floated.

Youth desires mobility to survey life in its extremities of

time and place: youth also yearns for stability. The conclusion,

Alas, the bird flies blind,  
Hooded by a dark sense of destination:  
Her weight on the glass calm leaves no impression,  
Her home is soon a basketful of wind.  
Travellers, we're fabric of the road we go;  
We settle, but like feathers on time's flow.

somewhere between painful pessimism and wry resignation, points to the gulf between dreams and destinations. And between these extremes is life itself.

Howard Moss has noted that, in these sonnets

...the inclinations to remorse, the intellectual dogma, and the guilt are gone: we have instead the beautiful articulation of general experience, informed in every way by the poet's sensitivity and craft.<sup>6</sup>

The key phrase in this valid appraisal is 'the beautiful articulation of general experience'. This sequence conforms to Milton's demand that poetry should be 'simple, sensuous, and passionate'. But equally important is the universality of its theme -- the passing of a golden age. The wistfulness which informs these poems is common to all men; it differs only in degree. With its universality of theme, its wistfulness and its gentle pathos, 'O Dreams, O Destinations' is a memorial to a lost 'archaic dawn' of youthful energy and challenging ideals. Yet it is a self-revelation: through a golden haze of retrospection Day Lewis is renewing and re-viewing his lost youth. By looking more closely at the buried selves, he understands how much his views have changed; how constant have been his instincts. This, I believe, is the ultimate message the poem has for him.

The quest continues in most of the remaining poems; but, in a way, they are anti-climactic. In 'The Innocent', the In

Memoriam stanza is admirably suited to the theme of lamentation for lost youth:

I built a house of crystal tears  
Amid the myrtles for my friend:  
He said, no man has even feigned  
Or kept the lustre of my years.

'The Rebuke' concludes the volume, and is an endorsement of all that has been studied in this section:

Where are the sparks at random sown,  
The spendthrift fire, the holy fire?  
Who cares a damn for truth that's grown  
Exhausted haggling for its own  
And speaks without desire?

The real anguish in this poem is not the repudiation of a hollow political dogma, nor the acknowledgement that his participation in the Communist Party 'was a lie, a heart-felt lie'. The real regret is over loss of youth and loss of a time when belief was possible.

Looking back over Day Lewis's poetry, we notice that anomalies in one volume seem to herald a new theme for succeeding volumes. For instance, the 'pure' poetry of Transitional Poem anticipates From Feathers to Iron, and the more bellicose stanzas of From Feathers to Iron are earnest of the belligerence of The Magnetic Mountain. Now we have three anomalous poems with a common trait: 'Jig', 'Hornpipe', and 'The Fault' -- the last with its connotations of blame and severance -- each hinting at disquiet in domestic love. A stanza from 'Hornpipe' prefigures this new theme and also shows Day Lewis's skill with hidden rhymes and with cadences of popular songs:

If I could keep you there with the berries in your hair  
And your lacy fingers fair as the may, sweet may,  
I'd have no heart to do it, for to stay love is to rue it  
And the harder we pursue it, the faster it's away.

His disintegrating marital relationship with its accompanying

anguish is a major theme in Day Lewis's future volumes. We may regard these poems as precursors of that theme.

It would be superfluous to comment further on the lack of chauvinism in Word Over All; and to elaborate on Day Lewis's refusal to condemn or to vindicate a world where, in Owen's phrase, 'God seems not to care'. Similarly, after the quotations and commentary of this chapter, it is hardly necessary to point out that the poet is speaking in his own voice. If he has no time to experiment with new techniques and prefers instead to work in traditional forms, it is also true that he is confident enough to forsake his earlier emulation and eclecticism.

There is an apparent discrepancy between the swift procession of metaphors in the war-poems, and the developed imagery of the reflective poems. One should not be disturbed by this; at least not after Day Lewis elucidates the function of metaphor and image:

Metaphor is the natural language of tension, of excitement, because it enables man by a compressed violence of expression to rise to the level of the violent situation which provokes it. Images are, as it were, a breaking down of the high tension of life so that it can safely be used to light and warm the individual heart.<sup>7</sup>

Metaphors in war-poetry are justified. But what about developed images in other poems written in time of war? Are these not evidence of escapism? Day Lewis has clarified this, too. In his handling of image -- the poetic image -- the poet grapples with reality:

Now, in a day of monsters, a desert of abject stone  
Whose outward terrors paralyse the will,  
Look to that gleaming circle until it has  
    revealed you

The glare of death transmuted to your own

Measure, scaled-down to a possible figure  
the sum of ill.

Let the shield take ~~that~~ image, the image shield you.

And, in another instance:

The image is a drawing back from the actual, the better  
to come to grips with it: so every successful image is  
the sign of a successful encounter with the real.<sup>8</sup>

The images in 'O Dreams, O Destinations' and in kindred poems are not symbols of escape. They are conventional images revitalized by the poet's earnest quest for reality. Seen in this perspective, the incongruent images of Word Over All become a composite image of the poet himself. A common, urgent cause enhanced by man's resistance and resilience cleansed, as it were, 'the doors of perception' and allowed the poet clearer vision than he had hitherto experienced. From this 'wider view of humanity' emanates Day Lewis's compassion and magnanimity. Such greatness of soul is born of human contacts and is a reflection of the best in humankind, brought forth in times of greatest stress. The poet himself emerges symbolic of this Greater Love; and looms as the dominant image in Word Over All.

## NOTES

1. C.Day Lewis, The Poetic Image (London, 1947), p. 99.
2. From Edmund Blunden's "Memoir" for the 1931 edition of Owen's poems. Reproduced by Day Lewis in his Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen (London, 1963), p. 160.
3. The Poetic Image, pp. 36-37.
4. The Buried Day, p. 92.
5. C.Day Lewis, "The Making of a Poem", in Saturday Evening Post, (January 21, 1961), p. 67.
6. "Noun to Flesh and Bone", in Poetry, No. 11, vol. LXVII, p. 99.
7. The Poetic Image, p. 99.
8. Ibid., pp. 99-100.

## Chapter V

### ...AND LOVES BETRAY

...we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped;  
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;  
And they were music till he flung them down,  
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown  
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!

— George Meredith.

Poems 1943-47 makes little reference to the objective global war and its aftermath. War is still a theme, but now it is a purely subjective war caused by, and reflecting, all the regret, remorse, and shame arising out of Day Lewis's own disintegrating marriage.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his marital problem provides the greatest impulse for, and is the major theme of, this volume. There are, of course, other themes which we will consider first.

Only two poems in the volume deal directly with the folly of war and with human suffering contingent on World War II. These two -- 'In the Shelter' and 'The Misfit' -- may be regarded as an extension of Word Over All. The former is a description of a little girl's love for her doll -- a love that transcends fear and death. Day Lewis recalls the experience and uses it to reiterate his faith in human nature: where such love is, there is reassurance:

Dear sheltering child, if again misgivings grieve me  
That love is only a respite, an opal bloom  
Upon our snow-set fields, come back to revive me  
Cradling your spark through blizzard, drift, and tomb.



'The Misfit', resembling Owen's war-poems in both content and attitude -- a mingling of irony and passivity -- is a quiet protest against the waste and stupidity of war. A young conscript from 'the west-country' brings with him something of the peaceful countryside he has left behind. Innocence and total lack of animosity mark 'him off from the herd to be branded for soldiering'. The last stanza of Owen's 'The Send-Off' --

Shall they return to beatings of great bells  
In wild train-loads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to still village wells  
Up half-known roads.

-- with its implicit protest, is not more poignant than Day Lewis's similar treatment of the same theme:

I saw him not after. Is he now buried  
Far from pastures buttercup-strewed,  
Or tending his beasts again with the  
    same rude  
Rightness of instinct which then had  
    brought him  
So quaintly dressed  
In his Sunday best  
For the first step along the Calvary road?

Protest is here, too: a protest that is reinforced by Christian connotations. The imagery suggests a parallel between the donnee of this poem and Palm Sunday as a prelude to Good Friday. This is a variation on the familiar theme of sacrifice: 'Each man died for the sins of the whole world'. The image that the poem leaves is not that of a killer, but that of a victim. Yet it is, paradoxically, a triumphant poem, an endorsement of Owen's vision of victory-through-passivity recorded nearly two decades earlier:

Already I have comprehended a light which will never  
filter into the gogma of any national church: namely

that one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill....<sup>2</sup>

This was the last time Day Lewis was to treat directly the theme of universal carnage; to advocate patience and endurance until men's hearts are turned against war. And, in his final gesture, he succeeded in speaking across the years to his beloved Owen of the 'Pity of war distilled', and in speaking in a language Owen would understand.

## II

The search for personal identity continues in this volume, primarily in such poems as 'Juvenilia', 'Sketches for a Portrait', 'New Year's Eve', and 'The Neurotic'; and secondarily in a group of occasional poems to Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Walter de la Mare, and Edmund Blunden.

'Juvenilia' is a quest-poem that leads the poet back through the poems of his youth:

So this is you  
That was an I twenty-five years ago --  
One I may neither disown nor renew.  
Youth of the smouldering heart, the seamless brow,  
What affinity between you and me?

But the self who wrote these juvenilia is now a ghost:

...gone is the breath of dawn,  
Clinker the dreams it fanned:  
These bones, anonymous now and trite,  
Are a message scrawled on the sand  
That only in dying could a self indite.

However, since Day Lewis has known 'the Phoenix hour' before, his lamentation for lost youth is not devoid of promise. At times he seems to accept, almost philosophically, the anguish

of weakening marital ties:

May not the grave of rigored love  
Be but one more abyss  
Between two peaks, appointed to compel me  
Along the chain of light?

Out of adversity may come greater understanding of the psyche:  
out of intense internal conflict may come renewed poetic impulse.

In 'Sketches for a Portrait', he seeks meaning from the past: from a sheltered life on a 'well-shaved lawn' where

Morning brought tears and daisies, afternoon  
A tennis party. Athletic clergymen. Flannels --  
The uniform of a class, of a way of thinking,  
Or of not thinking....

from his contact with the unemployment and the privation of coal-mining towns:

...I looked for a lost ball  
In the laurels, they smirched with pit-grime....

The search ends with the present 'where hunter And hunted  
face the effacing and are one'.

Eliot's influence is still detectable. First, there are the so-called 'modern similes': 'arguments jangling like glass', and 'pin me To the sand like a star-fish'; both of which have their archetypes in 'Prufrock'. Second, there is Eliot's technique of incorporating into his own work words and phrases from other authors. The stagnation of Prufrock is evident in the spiritual paralysis depicted in 'The Neurotic':

Death mask of a genius unborn:  
Tragic prince of a rejected play:  
Soul of suffering that bequeathed no myth:  
A dark tower and a never-sounded horn. --  
Call him what we will, words cannot ennoble  
This Atlas who fell down under a bubble.

Such spiritual paralysis is engendered by too acute introspect-

ion.

The occasional poems may be considered purely literary exercises (Day Lewis and Auden have each written a number of such poems); or they may suggest Day Lewis's transfer of allegiance from Eliot and Auden to models more congenial to his own talent. The latter speculation is substantiated by the success with which he catches the essential quality of each poet he commemorates: Emily Bronte's burning passion for freedom; de la Mare's half-dreamy, half-magical mood; and Hardy's sense of cosmic irony -- an irony that arises from the chasm between human ideals and the natural and social forces that destroy them. This sense of the tragicomical in the human situation, and of cosmic irony between promise and result, between aim and achievement, pervades several poems in this volume, perhaps most noticeably 'The Unwanted'.

Day Lewis's elegaic poems are expressions of ancestor-worship; of tracing out soul-felt affinities between himself and his 'poetic ancestors'. Ancestor-worship is central to his search for personal identity; it is a means of self-realization. In a commentary on W.B. Yeats, he stated that ancestor-worship is

...that feeling of infinity for another person, whether dead or alive, which reveals to a man some truth about himself, and arouses him to emulation.<sup>3</sup>

and

A poet's ancestors are those other poets who, from time to time, provide the medium through which he can realize a new theme, explore a virgin field of subject-matter. They are what the literary critic calls 'influences'.<sup>4</sup>

These statements, one believes, are not just designed to spike

the guns of his critics: they epitomize his philosophy of art as a means of self-realization.

### III

Agony of indecision, the chaffing fetters of old loyalties, and a burning desire for freedom, all vitalize the essential theme of Poems 1943-47: the poet's agonizing attempt to find release from a petrifying marriage relationship -- a release that can never be whole for one

Who bears old trothings like a chain abroad  
And wears a new love like a knotted cord  
Over his brow at home....

Quite clearly, even in 'Juvenilia', Day Lewis's real concern is not for the past but for the present: to glean some reassurance from a disconcerting experience -- his disintegrating marriage and its accompanying agony. 'Married Dialogue', one of the finest poems in the volume, is an excellent representation of this theme:

SHE: Once I watched a young ocean laugh and shake  
With spillikins of aspen light.  
I was your sail, your keel. Nothing could overtake  
Love trimmed and stiffened aright.  
But now I drown, a white reef in your wake.

HE: No reef I saw. If we were shoaled,  
It was the ebbing of some tide within.  
But aching I behold  
Fingers upon a gunwale blue with cold,  
And one too weak to draw you in.

This is Meredith's Modern Love theme all over again. Not only do both poets make occasional use of ship-wreck imagery to portray marital disintegration, but their belief is basically the same: successful marriage depends on emotional

bonds. Meredith had written,

In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
We are betrayed by what is false within.

Day Lewis endorses it:

...If we we shoaled,  
It was the ebbing of some tide within.

Like Meredith, also, Day Lewis sees both sides of the issue and thereby suffers double anguish:

HE: Oh perverse heart, that can forgive  
All error and misuse  
But show yourself no mercy -- must you grieve  
As for a fault when love-knots lose  
Their angel hues?

SHE: Oh piteous heart, how could I blame  
You that your sighs accuse  
My lack? But would that we two were the same  
As when we thought love aye renews  
Our dawns and dews!

To use Modern Love as a 'touchstone' in evaluating Day Lewis's treatment of this theme throws interesting light on both poets. It emphasizes Meredith's wealth of imagery, and his masculine treatment of a tender subject. It reveals Day Lewis's greater sense of justice (none of his poems are shrill or vindictive as some of Meredith's sonnets are), and his more comprehensive appreciation of the woman's suffering. In 'The Woman Alone' we have the wife's willingness to save the marriage:

If only tears can float a stranded heart,  
If only sighs can move it, I will grieve.

We have, also, the terrible hopelessness that follows when she realizes that efforts to restore love by the will alone are futile:

Alas, hull-down upon hope's ashen verge  
Hastens the vessel that our joined hands launched,  
Stretching my heart-strings out beyond endurance.

Ah, will they never snap? Can I not climb  
The signal hill, and wave, and mean goodbye?

The anguish that informs this stanza comes from failure to find emotional release from a relationship grounded in instinct. The partners have failed to keep pace in spiritual development: the springs of affection have dried up; yet each remembers happier days together. She, realizing that their marriage is doomed, wishes release. But marriage-vows, once synonymous with the 'heart-strings', are not easily broken:

Ah, will they never snap? Can I not climb  
The signal hill, and wave, and mean goodbye?

Divorce is not really the answer: the real bond exists not in Statute Books but in the heart. For the partners there is no total release. This is what makes their position intolerable.

Personal crises often prompt poems questioning a cruel and malignant Fate. 'The Unwanted', though otherwise an anomaly, is such a poem. One child, conceived in the summer of love, is born misshapen: the other, the unwanted, a product of lust, is 'divinely formed and fair'. The implicit question is 'Why?'

'Ending', 'The Revenant', and 'Meeting' all question a Fate which ordains harsh endings to promising beginnings. These poems are instinct with anguish; informed by the tragedy of what-might-have-been:

'Two loves which might have bloomed at the  
zenith always  
Are meeting again.'

The protest 'Merciless God, to mock your failures so!' is underlain by a love-relationship which promised so much, briefly fulfilled that promise, then petrified, but which allows no final release. Again we are reminded of Meredith:

...we are two reed-pipes, coarsed stopped:  
 The God once filled them with his mellow breath;  
 And they were music till he flung them down,  
 Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown  
 Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death.

But pity must not be mistaken for love. Pity without  
 love cannot sustain the marital union; and any show of recon-  
 ciliation through remorse alone is, to use Meredith's phrase,

...a lifeless vow  
 To rob a living passion.

Day Lewis makes this clear in 'The Revenant', a poem based on  
 the Orpheus myth:

What strand of his love was the weak one,  
 Or how it befell  
 That a song which could melt the Dark One,  
 Death's granite lord, with its spell  
 Saved not his meek one  
 Moved not his meek one to step from the last of her  
 Terrors, no man may tell.  
 He felt the cord parting,  
 The death-wound smarting:  
 He turned his head but to glimpse the ghost of her.

This conscious attempt to lead the wife from the abyss was a  
 tenuous endeavour; the glance towards her was in pity rather  
 than in love. Two things are implicit in this poem: first,  
 that pity must not be mistaken for love; second, that marriage  
 cannot be saved solely by any act of the Will. 'Love cannot  
 be renewed by an act of will or an aspiration of conscience.'<sup>5</sup>

'Buzzards over Castle Hill' is another variation on the  
 theme of tragic love. Meredith's image had been two

...rapid falcons in a snare,  
 Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.

Day Lewis's image of three buzzards is infinitely more sug-  
 gestive:

...you might well surmise  
 They are earth-souls doomed in their gyres to unwind  
 Some tragic love-tangle wherein they had  
 mortally pinned....



He then dismisses the thought; but with the poet's sureness of touch he has left the image which dominates the poem and which stamps itself indelibly upon the reader: the image of three lovers emmeshed in a 'tragic love-tangle'.

Finally, Day Lewis realizes that 'the wrong is mixed', and he makes no attempt to blame the wife nor to extenuate the husband. Rather, in 'Seen from a Train', a poem characterized by Christian imagery, his mingled shame and regret are painfully articulate:

But year after year in another's eyes  
I have caught the look that I missed today  
Of the church, the knell, the cedars -- a ray  
Of the faith, too, they stood for,  
The hope they were food for,  
The love they prayed for, facts beyond price --  
And turned my eyes away.

The best poems in this volume deal with slow heart-break and dissolution. Poems 1943-47 is the first of Day Lewis's mature poetry to be wholly free from partisan politics. There are ultimate questions, to be sure, but they are non-partisan and the poet attempts no easy solutions. Some of his poems are reminiscent of Hardy, but the debt to Hardy is not an oppressive one. And if he fails to match Hardy's appeal it is because he lacks Hardy's cosmic view. Whenever Day Lewis attempts cosmic questions the supporting emotion and imagery run thin. This, I believe, is true of his 'New Year's Eve'. Moreover, Day Lewis's lacks Hardy's craving for faith:

...Yet, I feel,  
If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
"Come; see the oxen kneel,  
  
"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb  
Our childhood used to know,"  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.  
  
('The Oxen')

Begun while the Second War was still raging, Poems 1943-47 has only two or three war-poems. Moreover, there are very few poems on any subject except Day Lewis's marital problem. This suggests that the emotional disturbance of his disintegrating marriage is the inspiration for this volume. It suggests, also, that his marital problem may have limited the scope of his poetry. On the other hand, this narrowing, along with increased emotional pressure, seems to have given his poetry a new force. Technically, his poems are direct and non-illusory; the images are few but apt.

If some poems in the volume fail to impress us it is because they are too remote from our common experience. This is not to suggest that they are 'coterie' poems, but that they are too personal. One exception among such poems is the hauntingly beautiful 'Minor Tragedy'. A few other poems seem to lack emotional base. 'New Year's Eve', in spite of its occasional good lines and its impatience at mortality, is forced and the imagery is tenuous.

Day Lewis is always best in his lyrics, especially when he treats some tender subject. The best poems in this volume are the occasional poems and poems of heart-break. The later group, although intimate, finds an echo in every bosom. 'Married Dialogue', in particular, is a remarkably even poem: it barely misses the 'grand style' -- the sustaining of a lofty tone for a theme commensurate with it -- and it never approaches bathos. Its real success is in the 'compassionate detachment' with which the lovers view their estrangement: sentiment never degenerates into sentimentality.

In a commentary on Meredith, Day Lewis emphasized that

Poetry does not solve problems; it seldom even suggests solutions: what it does is to present problems in a form at once detached and more intimate than that achieved by any other mode of thinking: it enables us to see both the wood and the trees, and above all, through its habit of metaphor and image, to see them in a universal context of which we too are part.<sup>6</sup>

This latter 'power' of poetry is of paramount importance.

It accounts largely for the failings and the successes of Poems 1943-47. The weak poems are those which we are never really allowed to enter: the good poems are those in which we discern

Infinite passion and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.

## NOTES

1. I have no doubt that the poems of this nature are products of Day Lewis's personal suffering in a relationship that led to his divorce in 1951.
2. From Owen's letter to his mother, May 2, 1917, as quoted in Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. by C. Day Lewis, (London, 1963), p. 22.
3. Notable Images of Virtue, The Chancellor Dunning Turst Lectures, (Toronto, 1954), p. 75.
4. Ibid.
5. Op. cit., p. 32.
6. Ibid., p. 41.

## Chapter VI

### INDIAN SUMMER

[In my work] certain characteristics keep cropping up -- hero-worship, fear, compassion, the divided mind, a prevailing sense of the transcendence of things ... there runs through it all, an unbroken thread, the search for personal identity.

C. Day Lewis

Since 1947, Day Lewis's poetry has been largely a re-statement of his earlier themes. An Italian Visit, the first volume after Poems 1943-47, was published in 1953.<sup>1</sup> An excerpt from Jasper More's The Land of Italy serves as preface, and suggests a search for personal identity:

... an Italian visit is a voyage of discovery, not only of scenes and cities, but also of the latent faculties of the traveller's heart and mind ....

Basically, An Italian Visit is an intellectual exercise; an attempt by Day Lewis to examine his own 'personalities' as they are represented by the trinity of Tom, Dick, and Harry. Tom, the hedonist, lives in and for the present; Dick is a nostalgic idealist who dwells on the past; Harry, the practical, analytical man, lives for the future. The poem begins with a 'Dialogue at the Airport' where, before embarking on this quest to determine 'what is the phantom, what the real', each speaks a cadenza clarifying his particular motive for making the trip.

Tom has no wish to probe eternal mysteries or to tangle

himself 'in humanity's Fretted heart-strings'. Rather, he will 'browse on the skin of things' in the manner of his counterpart in Poem 17 of Transitional Poem:

Let logic analyse the hive,  
Wisdom's content to have the honey:  
So I'll go bite the crust of things and thrive  
While hedgerows still are sunny.

Dick, who believes 'Ancestor-worship's a form of self-searching', will attempt to discover his identity from a myriad of experiences half-imagined, half-remembered. Harry's modus operandi will be art and analysis.

Part I is too long and too dull for the purpose it serves. The conversation is too fluent, and the idiom, though in character with the speakers, is the by-now-threadbare idiom of the 'Thirties Poets. Only occasionally do we find a memorable line such as 'And the babe's ephemeral laughter chimes with eternity'.

Part II, 'Flight to Italy', is distinctly superior poetry. Here we have descriptive narration enlivened by lyricism. The verse is not forced: it is the result of genuine emotions disciplined by the poet's technical control:

The winged bull trundles to the wired perimeter.  
Cumbrously turns. Shivers, brakes clamped,  
Bellowing four times, each engine tested  
With routine ritual. Advances to the runway.  
Halts again as if gathering heart  
Or warily snuffing for picador cross-winds.  
Then, then, a roar open-throated  
Affronts the arena. Then fast, faster  
Drawn by the magnet of his idee fixe,  
Head down, tail up, he's charging the horizon.

Such awe is inspired by the power of the air-craft. There is also a moment of fear while flying over the Alps:

Below us -- oh, look at it! ...

The atrocious Alps are upon us. Their  
 ambush --  
 A primeval huddle, then a bristling and  
 heaving of  
 Brutal boulder-shapes, an uprush  
 of Calibans --  
 Unmasks its white-fanged malice to  
 maul us.  
 The cabin grows colder. Keep height,  
 my angel!  
 Where we are, all but terra firma is safe.

These developed images and sustained metaphors are highly emotive and vividly descriptive. Yet there is no apparent significance in these experiences, apart from the journey itself; no apparent relationship between these experiences and his avowed search for self. Even his tendencies towards self-analysis are subordinated to his interests in lyricism and narration. All this indicates that Day Lewis is a poet rather than a psychologist.

Part III, 'A Letter From Rome', begins with a wry commentary on the 'Thirties poets.

... We who 'flowered' in the Thirties  
 Were an odd lot; sceptical yet susceptible,  
 Dour though enthusiastic, horizon-addicts  
 And future-fans, ...

The irony of it all is that Day Lewis has not completely outlived the 'Thirties tendencies; least of all his tendency towards self-analysis. The sight of St. Peter's for example, sets him speculating on his attitude towards established religion:

... Faith perhaps,  
 Though unconscious, is not yet dead, its  
 breath still clouding  
 The glass of aesthetic perception ....

'Faith' -- the word has been gaining currency in Day Lewis's recent works. His religious background seems to be superimposing itself upon his agnosticism. But one suspects

that the search for self is inter-twined with a yearning for a positive creed. And so he pays tribute to an age when faith was possible. Garden and villa now

... mirror  
Too clearly our lack of prospect or tenable premise.  
The cardinals and princes who adorned them,  
Lords of an age when men believed in man,  
Are as remote from us as the Colosseum  
Where high-tiered beasts howled down professional  
heroes,  
Perhaps -- it is a comfortless thought -- remoter.

At last the 'visitors' find fellowship as they tour the  
General Protestant Cemetery:

Here is one corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever garden suburb. See,  
In their detached and smug-lawned residences,  
Behind a gauze of dusty shrubs, the English  
Indulge their life-long taste for privacy.  
Garish Campagna knocks at the back door,  
Rome calls en grande tenue: but 'not at home'  
Murmur these tombs, and 'far from home they died,  
The eccentric couple you have come to visit --  
One spitting blood, an outsider and a failure,  
One sailing a boat, his mind on higher things.'  
Somewhere close to the pyramid a loud-speaker  
Blared zazz while we lingered at Keats' shabby  
mound,  
But the air was drowned by the ghost of a nightingale;  
The ground was swimming with anemone  
tears  
Where Shelley lay.

We could feel at home here, with  
This family of exiles. It is our people:  
A people from whose reticent, stiff heart  
Babble the springtime voices, always such voices  
Bubbling out of their clay ....

We may question certain word-choices in these lines --  
the bathos of 'garden suburb'<sup>2</sup>, and the harshness of 'spitting  
blood', for example -- but there is no denying the nostalgia  
that pervades the whole passage. Even the jibe at death --  
'the English Indulge their life-long taste for privacy' -- is  
typical of the English refusal to be cowed by dwelling too  
long on the painful or the hazardous. But this mingling of



the vulgar with the sublime accentuates the poet's awareness of public apathy towards art, and adds to his feeling of affinity with Keats and Shelley.

'Bus to Florence' is overdone, and the images are tenuous. It is an academic exercise, and only the introductory poem deserves mention:

I sometimes think the heart is ne'er so dead  
As where some vanished era overspread  
The soil with titan foliage, scattering down  
Eternal rubies when its bloom was shed.

.....

Yet still the Arno navigably flows,  
And saunterers past Ponte Vecchio's  
Jewel shops cast a shadow: here is still  
A taste for life, a market for the rose.

The sense of transience, the desire for pleasure, and the 'Rubaiyat' stanza all contribute to a fatalistic atmosphere. However, the speaker is not merely a fatalist amid the ruins; nor is he an irresponsible pleasure-seeker. His request is still

... that on me some long-dead master may  
Dart the live, intimate, unblinding ray  
Which means one more spring of the selfhood tapped,  
One tribute more to love wrung from my clay.

And if I miss that radiance where it flies,  
Something is gained in the mere exercise  
Of strenuous submission, the attempt  
To lose and find oneself through others' eyes.

There is no questioning the success of this poem. Nor is there any doubt that, for Day Lewis, 'Ancestor-worship's a form of self-seeking'.

Part V ends with a series of poems written after the manner and matter of Hardy, Yeats, Frost, Auden, and Dylan Thomas. Day Lewis's virtuosity needs no further mention. However, technical skill alone cannot make a 'true' poem. The pastiche

of Yeats is a failure. It is, an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, a reconstruction of Yeats' words and phrases, but it lacks the intensity of Yeats' poems.<sup>3</sup>

The best sustained poetry of the whole volume is the beautiful and tender 'Elegy Before Death':

Our sun is setting. Terrestrial planes shift  
And slide towards dissolution, the terraced gardens  
Quaver like waves, and in the garden urn  
Geraniums go ashen ....

This poem is more than a philosophical speculation on death, more than a questioning of mortality or a triumphant hymning of new life. It prefigures Day Lewis's anguish over the dissolution of his first marriage. Like its sunset setting, the poem symbolizes the last and lingering ray of a dying love, cherished most as it fades away:

... Each day's a livelier  
Paradise when each dawn is a reprieve.

... I would let all else slide,  
Dissolve and perish into the old enigma,  
If that could keep you here, if it could keep  
Even your sad ghost at my side.

... It is love's way  
To shine most through the slow dusk of adieu.  
Long may it glow within us, that timeless,  
halcyon halt  
On our rough journey back to clay.  
Oh, may my farewell word, may this your elegy  
Written in life blood from a condemned heart  
Be quick and haunting even beyond our day.

In these last poignant lines of beautiful elegaic poetry, Day Lewis succeeds in conveying the heart-break of love's slow dissolution. It is a particular yet a universal sentiment. Born of the agonized heart and clothed in memorable language, it will always be 'quick and haunting' to sensitive readers. This is a return to 'poetry of feeling'; tender, wistful, and painful, but never mawkishly sentimental.

'The Homeward Prospect' is a return to the drama of self-discovery:

TOM: ... We go home enriched

DICK: Sobered

HARRY: Lightened:  
Lightened of one illusion, and therefore  
one truth the richer.

TOM: Enriched with extravagant draughts  
of the strange: after them, soberer.

DICK: Sobered through sense of gain, by knowledge of  
loss enlightened --

Establishing thematic unity has often been one of Day Lewis's problems. His return to analytical dialogue makes one acutely aware of a lack of consistent development of themes suggested at the beginning of An Italian Visit. Instead of a dialectical search for self we have a collection of vaguely connected experiences.

An Italian Visit is the fulfilment of the 'Thirties creed of poetry as reportage. But, unlike the 'Thirties poems, it is not nearly so dependant upon shock tactics. The idiom is conversational, colloquial, -- sometimes too much so. The descriptions are vivid, accurate, and detailed -- though minute detail is not always an ultimate virtue. In this poem the narrative form is often strained by too much detail, and the dialogue fails to generate that tension requisite to good dramatic poetry. The aim of self-discovery through narration, introspection, and lyricism is noble enough, but too often it does not quite succeed and we are deprived of that fusion of fact with feeling which animates good narrative poetry. Only 'Flight to Italy', the Keats-Shelley passage, and 'Elegy Before Death' meet this last test. 'The "imaginative emotion" which

should control the poem gives way to [a] flair for detail, ambitious virtuosity, and readable words.'4

## II

Pegasus and Other Poems (1957) is divided into three parts. Part One consists of four poems based on Greek legends. These poems are at once narrative, allegorical, psychological, and didactic. Their success in due, in part at least, to Day Lewis's handling of images: in the happy juxtaposition of conceit with conventional image, for example:

The mountain shivers from flank to snowy top,  
Shaking off eagles as a pastured horse  
Shakes off a cloud of flies ....

The moral of 'Pegasus' indicated Day Lewis's awareness of imagery: Bellerophon learns, as he stalks Pegasus, that art is a discipline. Art is both 'brute and angel', both fury and grace; and only he who is devoted, sensitive, alert, and patient can succeed in marshalling fact, feeling, and image into a poetic pattern.

In 'Baucis and Philemon', one of his finest narratives, Day Lewis revitalizes a rather sickly story of connubial bliss. The action basks in a flood of golden light -- golden years, autumn leaves, sunset, wedding-ring -- and mortals and immortals move on the same plane:

They helped each other up the slow hillside  
Like pilgrims, while the two gods went before.

Sentiment can degenerate into sentimentality, so the poet must maintain a careful detachment from his tender subject.

Day Lewis achieves this detachment partly by careful attention to homely details and colloquial expressions, and partly by allowing 'echoes' from other poets to give him 'emotional distance' from his subject. In a sense, he uses the styles of other poets as a kind of 'objective correlative'. Eliot's influence is obvious in

His hands hung down like dry leaves  
and

... the memories  
I stored against these winter nights ....

However, Dylan Thomas, not Eliot, is the greatest influence on this poem. Detachment from a tender subject recalls 'After the Funeral', where both sentimentality and bombast are avoided by constant reference back and forth between the actual dead woman and the monumental figure of the mythical Ann. Day Lewis's handling of images is also reminiscent of 'After the Funeral'. Philemon's hands that 'hung down like dry leaves', and Baucis' hands that 'Knuckled like bark, palmed thin as a saint's relics, ... rested from love', recall Thomas's lines to Ann:

I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands  
Lie with religion in their cramp ....

The parallels do not end there. 'After the Funeral' concludes with images of fox and fern merging, each acquiring some quality of the other:

The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love  
And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill.

A similar phenomenon occurs in 'Baucis and Philemon' where human and arboreal images not only complement each other, but merge as one:

They climbed that hill each evening of their lives  
 Until, one day, their clasped hands uttered leaves  
 And the tired feet were taken underground.  
 'Goodbye, dear wife,' he called as the bark closed round,  
 And his branches upheld the cry in a carol of birds.  
 She yearned to his oaken heart, with her last words  
 Sweet as lime blossom whispering on the air --  
 'It's not goodbye.'

'Ariadne on Naxos' is another beautiful poem informed in every way by the poet's sensitivity and craft. Day Lewis calls it a dramatic monologue, but the monologue is framed between an introductory and a concluding stanza. By turns lyrical and philosophical, the poem alludes to his first marriage, to the anguish that will always linger for the estranged partners. It is said of Ariadne that

She walks a knife-edge here, between the woe  
 Of what is gone and what will never go.

The monologue itself begins with Ariadne's implicit questioning of false love:

Last night, beside the myrtle,  
 You said 'For ever', and I saw the stars  
 Over your head, and then the stars were lost in  
 The flare and deluge of my body's dawn.  
 False dawn. I awoke. Still dark. Your print  
     upon me  
 Warm still ....

But if Ariadne is symbolic of grief and mourning she is also symbolic of joy and celebration. The poem ends in beautiful and haunting resignation: in some intuition that love's victims 'are betrayed by what is false within'; and that love's ultimate triumph is in forgiving:

Our lonely isle expands  
 Into a legend where all can dream away  
 Their crimes and wounds, all victims learn  
     from us  
 How to redeem the Will that made them so.

It was mentioned earlier that these poems are allegorical.

This is true: behind the narrative there is a two-fold autobiographical significance. First, three of the poems treat the theme of courtship and marriage. These, no doubt, reflect the agonies and ecstasies of Day Lewis's first marriage. Second, images prompted by his memories allow the poet to comment on the stern ordeal of art, and on how the artist must woo and win favour of the gods if he is to win immortality. 'Pegasus' is clearly a commentary on art; 'Psyche' ends with the moral that the art-god's love 'is given but never earned'; immortality comes unexpectedly to Baucis and Philemon; and finally, after her ordeal, Ariadne is visited by Dionysus:

But on that island a pale girl, awoken  
By more than sunlight, drew her quick, first breath  
Of immortality, seeing the god bend down  
And offer a hoop of stars, her bridal crown.

Part Two of Pegasus is a miscellany of topics; and the poetic treatment is equally diverse: there are the flippancy and grim irony of 'Seasonable Thoughts for Intellectuals', and the painfully ironical exploration of personality quirks in 'Almost Human'. In this latter poem, Day Lewis returns to a theme he had explored in 'Sex-Crime' -- that neurosis is a property of humanity. There are, also, three very fine elegaic poems written to Meredith, Dylan Thomas, and Noel Newton-Wood.

'George Meredith, 1861' is a lamentation over spiritual rather than physical death. 1861, the date of Mary Meredith's death, marks the spiritual death of her husband. Her demise was a last and painful reminder of a love which died just earlier. Meredith, refusing to allow himself to be hurt again, shut himself up in 'fruitless policies of brain'. Once the emotions have been stifled the source of poetry dries up. This

is what Day Lewis lamented when he wrote<sup>of</sup> Modern love: 'the greatest tragedy of this tragic poem is that the poet lies in it, buried alive'.<sup>5</sup>

Part Two ends with 'Final Instructions', a poem addressed to aspiring poets. The moral implicit in 'Pegasus' is now made explicit: the poet must attune himself to the human situation and with 'patience', 'joy', and 'disinterestedness', record and articulate what is inarticulate to less sensitive hearts. Art is a ritual wherein the celebrant can only offer his sacrifice before the god and hope for acceptance.

You are called only to make the sacrifice:  
Whether or no he enters into it  
Is the god's affair ....

The elegies are the best poems in this part. Generally speaking, the other poems are emotionally thin, and barren of imagery. Moreover, Day Lewis falters most noticeably when he tries to be objective. His best poems are those lyrics in which he trusts to his impulses for motives, to natural phenomena for imagery, and to his good sense for control.

Part Three of Pegasus consists of personal poems written with a directness that recalls Hardy and Yeats. Most of these poems are informed by poignant wistfulness and by an increasing yearning for faith. Looking at a photograph of the house where he was born, Day Lewis reaches back across half a century to his immediate forbears:

I put up the curtains for them again  
And light a fire in their grate:  
I bring the young father and mother to lean above  
me,  
Ignorant, loving, complete:  
I ask the questions I never could ask them  
Until it was too late.



A photograph of him and his father trudging to church fills him with indignation at paternal overprotectiveness, and with shame at his own extreme resentment:

Oh, black frost of my youth, recalcitrant time  
When love's seed was benighted and gave no ear  
To others' need, you were seasonable, you were  
In nature: but were you as well my nature's blight?

That was thirty years back. The father is dead  
whose image  
And superscription upon me I had to efface  
Or myself be erased. Did I thus, denying him,  
grow  
Quite dead to the Father's grace, the Son's redemption?

These stanzas have two interpretations; the one arising from the other. First, there is the son's rebellion in defence of individuality; second, there is the suggestion that Day Lewis's agnosticism may well be a reaction to the overemphasis on religion during his childhood and adolescence:

Did I thus, denying him, grow  
Quite dead to the Father's grace, the Son's redemption?

Ungenerous to him no more, but unregenerate,  
Still on a frozen earth I stumble after  
Each glimmer of God, although it lights up my lack,  
And lift my maimed creations to beg rebirth.

Forgiveness has come, but there is still a lack of faith -- a lack that is surpassed only by the yearning for belief. This theme is continued in 'Christmas Eve':

'Yet would it not make those carolling angels weep  
To think how incarnate Love  
Means such trivial joys to us children of unbelief?  
No. It's a miracle great enough  
If through centuries, clouded and dingy, this  
Day can keep  
Expectation alive.

It is reiterated again in 'The Great Magicians', where he deplores

... the hollow in the breast  
Where a God should be --

and admits the 'wholeness' of an earlier, faith-filled age.

'Moods of Love', is a sonnet-sequence developing the theme that 'Familiar loving groves its own decline'. It moves from disillusioning remarks on the illusive power of passion and of sensual gratification to a triumphant statement of love's fulfilment. This is a return to the love poetry of Transitional Poem and From Feathers to Iron. Sonnet 5 is especially illustrative of this kind of poetry, not only in imagery but also for its assertion that the passionate act has meaning beyond the physical.

Inert, blanched, naked, at the gale's last gasp  
 Out of their drowning bliss flung high and dry  
 Above the undertow, the breakers' rasp,  
 With shells and weed and shining wrack they lie.  
 Or, as an isle asleep with its reflection  
 Upon the absolute calm, each answers each  
 In the twin trance of an unflawed affection  
 That shows the substance clear, the dream in reach.  
 By one arched, hollowing, toppling wave uptossed  
 Together on the gentle dunes, they know  
 A world more lucid for lust's afterglow,  
 Where, fondly separate, blind passion fused  
 To a reflective glass, each holds in trust  
 The other's peace, and finds his real self so.

Day Lewis then argues for instinct over prudishness lest the idolizing of past ecstasies 'divorce Body from mind'.

'Love is the venturing on.' 'If change alone is true -- ...  
 Inconstancy's a law.' But by expounding this idea of love as exploration, Day Lewis does not condemn marital fidelity:

But chance and fretting time and your love change her  
 Subtly from year to year, from known to new:  
 So she will always be the elusive stranger,  
 If you can hold the present self in view.

Find here, in constant change, faithful perceiving,  
 The paradox and mode of all true loving.

Individuals change and new personalities are born. If the lovers live the present and refuse to be stifled by cravings

for 'the buried day', they will find each other always new, always fresh, always endearing.

The volume ends, appropriately, with 'Last Words', a poem of speculation on some definitive statement of the poet's own life. Similar in structure to Auden's 'Reader to Rider', the poem ~~gives~~ asks the questions first and then answers them in the last stanza. Day Lewis would have three speakers represent the three stages of his life: childhood, youth, and maturity. The answers would be simple and modest:

Let this man say,  
Blest be the dew that graced my homespun web.  
Let this youth say,  
Prairies bow to the treadmill: do not weep.  
Let this child say,  
I hear the night bird, I can go to sleep.

Pegasus is a volume embracing divers topics and treating most of them in masterly fashion. Many of the themes are recurring themes but the treatment is fresh and the diction is definitely superior to that of An Italian Visit. There is a greater control of imagery than is generally found in the earlier poem; and, with the exception of Part Two, the poems in Pegasus have sounder emotional base, and happier fusion of thought and feeling. Part Three, though modest in scope, has some simple, stirring poems. The one other interesting thing about the volume is Day Lewis's apparent yearning for faith, a longing that is further emphasized in his next volume.

### III

The Gate (1962) shows the usual range of topic and treatment. Before examining the religious poems, which

constitute the major theme of this volume, we will consider briefly the nature of the volume as a whole.

There are still poems reflecting the anguish of marital dissolution. The best of these is 'A Meeting'. 'Sheepdog Trials in Hyde Park', with its images of guidance and control, resolves itself in the relationship between the art-god, the poet, and his sense-data: in the marshalling of images into a poetic pattern. 'Travelling Light', written in iambic tetrameters the better to convey youthful impetuosity, is a marine allegory. It reflects upon youths' impatience at their elders' love for possessions. Youth feels that possessions are mere status symbols, and that pursuit of material things impedes spiritual development when men live too long 'immersed in their own element'. The poem ends with an acknowledgement that, in later life, material possessions do have special significance:

Let's say they're given us to console  
The heart for being no longer whole,  
For the loss of each wide hour --  
The course in view, the wake in flower --  
When being rose to utmost power.

As we grow older material possessions become 'extensions and supports of our own personalities'.<sup>6</sup>

There are two dramatic monologues in the manner of Browning. These are sharp, detailed, and authentic. The first is a fictional narrative of a man who is haunted by the fact that he has betrayed his own brother and his own daughter in their respective crises. The poem is shot through with the speaker's desperate fear of emotional situations; and, in this respect, it typifies the 'Thirties poets' guilt at their own ambivalence.

'Not Proven', the second dramatic monologue, is based on the actual trial of Madeleine Hamilton Smith who was tried, in 1857, for the murder of her lover. (She was not convicted, and she died in the United States in 1928.) Miss Smith speaks from her death-bed where she relives the hectic and harrowing days of her trial. In so doing, she castigates, not without justification, her false lover, her father, and hypocritical Victorian social mores.

Two poems at the end condemn man in his folly, and solicit him to learn the ways of peace. 'The Unexploded Bomb' is a modernized version of a La Fontaine fable, an allegory criticizing the major powers' handling of nuclear energy. In 'Requiem for the Living' (note the irony of the title), Day Lewis uses the movements of the Requiem Mass to make an eloquent appeal to mankind:

Free us from fear, we cry. Our sleep is fretted,  
Anxious we wake, in our terrestrial room.  
What wastes the flesh, what ticks beneath  
the floor would  
Abort all features, desecrate the tomb.

Day Lewis has always been humanitarian, and in recent volumes there is a distinctly religious trend to many of his poems. One must not assume that Day Lewis, like the late T.S. Eliot, will necessarily become a confirmed Christian. One cannot, however, ignore the religious turn of his poetry. As mentioned earlier, it is the major theme of The Gate.

'Bread and Wine', the initial poem in this volume, is an obliquely religious poem based on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper:

Our dirt, our drought have grown  
That heady stuff they pour you:

It is our hunger makes the bread,  
We who are blessed and broken for you.

These staple foods ignore,  
Take, or spit out like phlegm;  
But do not think to isolate  
What was absorbed in making them.

The poem is a commentary, though not a bitter one, on exploitation of human resources. It depicts a plane where the humanitarian and the religious meet; it suggests the obligations of both philanthropy and religion.

'The Christmas Rose' and 'The Newborn' both offer 'a vision of rebirth'. The latter, written during Day Lewis's excitement at the birth of his son, recalls Poem XVIII of From Feathers to Iron, though the recent poem is more optimistic. The even verbal texture of the poem, its deep feeling, and its apt imagery, account for the poem's success. Day Lewis abandoned the four-line stanzas of his first draft because he felt the form was too facile for the poem's deeper meaning, and would not allow sufficient detachment from his 'still raw paternal emotions'<sup>7</sup>:

Soon lips and hands shall grope  
To try the world; this spect of clay  
And spirit shall begin  
To feed on hope,  
To learn how truth blows cold and  
loves betray.

But it is also a poem of hope, of celebration of new life, and is, in this sense, religious:

Every newborn seems a reviving seed  
Or metaphor of the divine,  
Charged with the hugh, weak power of grass  
To split rock. How we need  
Any least sign  
That our stone age can break, our winter pass!

Just how far Day Lewis can enter into the religious 'experience' of these poems is, of course, conjectural. He himself

admits that 'The Gate' is a religious poem but 'obviously the poem of an agnostic -- one who is, in a sense, "outside the picture" -- but an agnostic whose upbringing was Christian.'<sup>8</sup>

The gate, in the painting and in the poem it prompted, is, for Day Lewis, a symbol of faith. But there is no path to the gate, and therefore no means of grace for an outsider. 'The ghost of one who often came this way' symbolizes 'the once-felt presence of deity in the human scene'.<sup>9</sup> The atmosphere of expectancy culminates in a fervent wish:

... all I would ask is  
Not that the gate should open, but that it should  
Stay there, holding the coloured folds together.

Day Lewis asks 'that we should retain the sense of some power at the centre of things, holding them together'.<sup>10</sup> Faith is the key to an ordered existence.

Finally, Day Lewis's last volume has none of the offensive pastiche that marred, say, The Magnetic Mountain. If he is indebted to any models it is to Browning and Hardy -- Browning for the dramatic monologues, and Hardy for the practice of using an ordinary incident to point a moral: 'Walking Away' is an example. The themes are authentic Day Lewis themes, and there are no instances of harshness or bad taste. Instead, the verses are controlled and finished, and the imagery, though not elaborate, is appropriate.

Yet, there is definitely something missing from these poems, something necessary to lift the verses into inspired poetry. Most of the earlier volumes, no matter how recurring their themes, seemed animated by some particular stimulus -- the search for self, his wife's pregnancy, the Fascist threat, World War II, and his disintegrating marriage. The

impulse behind The Gate is an interest in religion. But, as he has pointed out, it is the religion of an agnostic with a Christian background. However, his emotions, instead of being in violent collision, are strangely diluted, and his poetry is neither strongly religious nor violently agnostic.

Day Lewis has always been a 'poet of conflict', and some of his good poems have their genesis in his personal conflicts. Unfortunately for his last volume, the clash between faith and scepticism is feeble and it fails to generate vital poetry. Furthermore, he has moved away from his quieter poetry reflecting the English country-side and its effect upon his own personality. Too many poems in this volume are controlled and precise but lacking spark. They are little more than neat arrangements of beautiful words. At the age of fifty-eight, Day Lewis, like the lion in his poem, seems to have lost his fire.



## NOTES

1. All of ~~this~~ poem except Part V was written during 1948-49.
2. The General Protestant Cemetery is located outside the city proper. This may have been the information Day Lewis wished to convey. However, his choice of 'garden suburb' in this context is unfortunate because it invites comparison with Brooke's phrase 'That is forever England'.
3. "Poetry as Reportage", in The Times Literary Supplement, no. 2666, March 6, 1953, p. 152.
4. Ibid.
5. C. Day Lewis, Notable Images of Virtue (Toronto, 1954), p. 52.
6. C. Day Lewis, "The making of a Poem" in The Saturday Evening Post, January 21, 1961, p. 67.
7. Ibid., p. 68.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

## Chapter VII

### THE FURY AND THE GRACE

... the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself ... alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

- - William Faulkner.

Enough of science and of art;  
Close up these barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

- - William Wordsworth.

Events of the past two decades have obscured the details of the 1930's. However, such major happenings as the Depression, Hitler's rise to power, the collapse of the League of Nations, the Spanish Civil War, Munich, and the outbreak of World War II clearly define the character of that uneasy and fateful decade. The anxieties and tensions of this period brought forth the best qualities as well as the most naive enthusiasms of the 'Thirties poets who deplored existing social conditions, and who prescribed a remedy -- Communism.

History has proved them wrong in their easy solutions, just as the Romantics were wrong about the French Revolution. But these 'Thirties poets were right in decrying social ills; and they were right in believing that something had to be done to alleviate human misery. Where would they begin?

Their position was precarious; their problems were many and complex. First of all, having come of age during that uneasy time-gap between two world wars, they felt guilty of

missing the challenge of World War I. Second, although they preached class-warfare and revolution they somehow sensed the futility of seeking solutions in violence. Third, they were uncertain of their approach -- whether it should be psychological or political. Fourth, they had to ally themselves with proletarian causes, thus betraying their own class without assured acceptance by the masses. Finally, there was the discrepancy, clearly outlined by G.S. Fraser, between art and propaganda:

Communist poetry requires a use of the symbolism of the great suffering masses: or rather, it does not require symbolism or allegory at all but a direct appeal to these masses, a direct praise of them, and a tone of practical exhortation, a direct description of their activities and suffering. And it must make no cultural demands on the masses that would give them a sense of inferiority or weaken them in the struggle. This is why strictly orthodox Communist poetry is so hard to write, or why when something is written which, from the Communist point of view, answers this prescription, it more often than not does not appear to us to be poetry: but something else, rhetoric, propaganda, an official hymn  
 ....<sup>1</sup>

We may forego discussion of the more personal problems of these poets: what must be stressed is their sense of isolation in an alien world, though they themselves were linked by common sympathies. This isolation accounts for the obscurity of some of their early works. Youthful naivety and obscurity tell against them: but their essentially positive attitude towards life and their belief in literature as an instrument of moral good are commendable, indeed necessary.

They turned away from the prevailing introspection and the interest in the isolated individual; they rejected the murky polarities of Lawrence and the mystical ecclesiasticism of Eliot, and sought a central apprehension of life in an altruistic Utopian idealism which, though superficially Marxian, owed more to Shelley and Morris. Their optimism and vigour came like a breath of fresh air after a generation of self-love and self-disgust, of

determinism and frustration.<sup>2</sup>

Day Lewis and his contemporaries revolted against Eliot's attitude, not against his technique. They acknowledged as their immediate poetic ancestors Hopkins, Owen, and Eliot.

Day Lewis first phase is most interesting for its range of topics and for its technical experimentation. The ultimate assessment of this poetry may yet be made by Time.

## II

Transitional Poem is Day Lewis's first literary success. Essentially metaphysical and psychological in content, it represents his struggle for single-mindedness; it depicts the struggle between instinct and reason; it portrays the dual personality that acts and then questions its actions. Naturally, such poetry is likely to be obscure; that is, it may fail to communicate. In Day Lewis's case the obscurity arises from lack of experience, from the complexity of the problem, and from attempting to define the indefinable, to limit the infinite. This is decidedly reminiscent of English Metaphysical poetry. And in that tradition, too, are many of his love-poems:

When her eyes delay  
On me, so deep are they  
Tunnelled by love, although  
You poured Atlantic  
In this one and Pacific  
In the other, I know  
They would not overflow.

Solution to metaphysical problems would seem to demand dialectic. Day Lewis is most successful, however, in those

lyrical passages where he alludes to the English countryside. Human copulation, for example, takes on new significance when he finds its parallel in Nature:

Yet nothing had such power  
As prattle of small flowers within the brake  
To mount the panic heart and rein it back  
From the world's edge. For they, whose virtue lies  
In a brief act of beauty, summarize  
Earth's annual passion and leave the naked earth  
Still dearer by their death than by their birth.  
So we, who are love's hemispheres hiding  
Beneath the coloured ordeal of our spring,  
Shall be disclosed, and I shall see your face  
An autumn evening certain of its peace.

Nature means something entirely different to him from what it does to Auden, who writes,

To me art's subject is the human clay,  
And landscape but the background to a torso.

Nor does Day Lewis use Nature as the Augustans did -- to point a moral. He is closer to the Romantic tradition of using Nature to interpret his own experiences.

Transitional Poem ends with the poet's adopting a more humanitarian attitude, and with his reaching out for human contacts. This attitude intensifies in From Feathers to Iron, a poem that is less allusive and more coherent than Transitional Poem, and in content and expression more congenial to the ordinary reader. His wife's pregnancy is the subject of this poem, and its twin themes of parental and social responsibility are developed by interplay of private and public meanings.

This early period is, for Day Lewis, a period of experimentation in poetic techniques. He is neither bound to, nor adverse to, rhymes; and he is reasonably competent with blank verse, couplets, trimeters, tetrameters, and pentameters. His verbal eclecticism derives from Eliot; his use of assonance

and dissonance recalls Owen, and his frequent heavy alliteration echoes Anglo-Saxon prosody, Hopkins and Auden. The experimentation extends to imagery and diction. MacNeice, writing a little later, maintained that

Our diction must have vigour, be familiar enough to be recognizable, new enough to be arresting .... should be masculine but not exhibitionist.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes the diction seems deliberately unpoetical and the result is disappointing:

Go not this road, for arc-lamps cramp  
The dawn; sense fears to take  
A mortal step, and body obeys  
An automatic brake.

Such straining after modernity crowds out all emotional and imaginative appeal which the idea of 'a new beginning' might otherwise have. In contradistinction to such unpoetical diction and imagery we have, in the same volume,

Her thoughts are pleiads, stooping low  
O'er glades where nightingale has flown:  
And like the luminous night around her  
She has at heart a certain dawn.

This is conventional poetic diction and imagery; and no one would deny its superior quality.

The best poetry in From Feathers to Iron owes nothing to Auden, Eliot, or the Anglo-Saxon 'scops'. It occurs when Day Lewis reflects on the English countryside and allows it to interpret his experiences for him. His natural bent is towards lyricism: and he is never naïve nor harsh in his treatment of ambition, love and beauty. 'Now She is Like the White Tree-Rose', 'Rest from Loving and be Living', and the well-known anthology piece, 'Do not Expect again a Phoenix Hour' are examples of his best lyrical expression.

His landscapes are usually quiet and unruffled, closer to the Georgian tradition. But the supporting imagery often approaches the Pathetic Fallacy as the Romantics used it:

Earth wears a smile betrays  
What summer she has in store.  
She feels resurgent forces  
Gathering at the core,  
And a spring rumour courses  
Through her, till the cold extreme  
Sleep of grove and grass is  
Stirred, begins to dream.

Mother Earth and the expectant mother are one. In such poetry Nature pervades, but never obtrudes, seemingly sharing and inducing one to share, the poet's moods. From Feathers to Iron contains the very best poetry of this early period. It is the poetry of one whose sensibility is not violated by philosophical speculation or by political dogma.

From Feathers to Iron provides a thematic link between the egocentric Transitional Poem and the altruism of The Magnetic Mountain, a poem that is humanitarian rather than Communist, but whose approach is extremely left-wing. The Magnetic Mountain is a most derivative poem: the more influential models being Hopkins and Auden. It would be tedious and unrewarding to indicate all the 'echoes' in this poem. One might mention, as an example, the use of Hopkins' rhythms and imagery:

Now to be with you, elate, unshared,  
My kestrel joy, O hoverer in the wind,  
Over the quarry furiously at rest  
Chaired on shoulders of shouting wind.

Sometimes there are instances of Hopkins and Auden combined: Hopkins' use of compound words, and Auden's climatic arrangement of pat phrases:

Peerless on water, Oh proud our palace,

A home for heroes, the latest of her line;  
 A beater to windward, obedient to rudder,  
 A steamer into storm, a hurricane-rider,  
 Foam-stepper, star-steerer, freighter and fighter --  
 Name her, release her, anoint her with wine.

Most of the Auden fads -- 'frontier', 'Enemy', 'Bogey-Man', and the personifications of physical characteristics -- are so obvious as to be offensive. Day Lewis's attempts at satire are patterned after Auden's jeering jibes and saucy tilts at the bourgeoisie. But Day Lewis's talent is not inclined towards satire: his greatest success has been in those quiet lyrics notably absent from this volume.

Just why Day Lewis should write such 'jackdaw' poetry is difficult to say. Perhaps he was merely experimenting in order to develop his own style. His affection for Hopkins and Auden seems to suggest otherwise. Probably he felt the need for 'high seriousness', for sincerity, and therefore turned to Hopkins. On the other hand, he seems to have believed in satire as a corrective for human folly, and so he turned to Auden. In any event, although he is aware of human possibilities for both good and evil, he is uneasy about how to attain the perfect society. He leans too heavily upon his models, and allows the political creed of revolution to violate his sensibility. Yet it is this same faith in revolution that gives the poem a gusto which is often its one saving quality. But poems 28, 32, and 36 are among the best poems in The Magnetic Mountain, and their success indicates that Day Lewis is most effective as a poet when he is breezy but not belligerent.

A Time to Dance and Noah and the Waters, the last two volumes of this early period, really represent a transition in



Day Lewis's life and writing. They add little to, indeed they sometimes detract from, his status as a poet. The lyrics of A Time to Dance continue the theme of self-conflict, -- a theme that becomes most articulate in 'Johnny Head-In-Air' where images of wasteland and wanderer combine to depict the spiritual pilgrimage of both the poet and his generation.

The title-poem of the former volume proves two things: first, that Day Lewis's natural bent is for lyricism; second, that he has the ability to write good narrative poetry. This ability for narration is exemplified in the airmen saga. The 'influences' here are mainly Hopkins and Anglo-Saxon prosody --

Air was all ambushes round them, was  
avalanche earthquake ....

-- and the language is masculine and vivid, but not rhetorical.

Noah and the Waters, a verse-play, needs no further comment.<sup>4</sup> Like the political part of 'A Time to Dance', it is mainly propaganda, doggerel, and rhetoric: the product of a 'spurious animation'. One must make these criticisms, but one must not be deluded into judging a poet by proportion of his bad verse. If such were the criterion, Gray would be a greater poet than Wordsworth.

This marks the end of Day Lewis's first poetic phase -- a phase that is certainly the most interesting even though it does not include his best poetry. What are we to make of his achievement? First of all, his tendency towards emulation and eclecticism is consistent with his belief in hero-worship as a means of developing one's own poetic style. Second, it

may arise from a conscious attempt to establish himself with a heterogeneous reading public. Hence the poet ranges far and wide: from learned allusions to colloquial expressions, from 'coterie' poetry to popular song. If the latter speculation is correct, Day Lewis failed on two accounts: first, his sense of isolation made some of his poetry obscure; second, he is too learned and too poetical to content himself with mimicking the cadences of popular songs. His best poetry has an essentially private, almost pastoral quality, as if the sensuousness of a landscape were more vital to him than political crises.

His attitude has changed, too. Towards the end of this period, especially after The Magnetic Mountain, there is a distinct lack of vigour and of genuine enthusiasm in his work. Not only has he become disillusioned with the Communist masquerader, he seems to be learning what Eliot already knew: that removal of a few war-mongers and profiteers would not eradicate the myriad ills that plagued society. He would now have been more receptive to Eliot, especially to the Thunder's message in 'The Waste Land' -- repentance and resignation: 'give, sympathize, and control'.

### III

Day Lewis spent his first phase helping to promote a heroic myth -- the political ideal of a 'brave new world'. During the Spanish Civil War, this myth magnified and just as rapidly collapsed. Overtures to Death contributes to the

'Thirties myth, though it is, in some ways, an ironic reversal of Day Lewis's role (Note the ironic title). There are a few reflective, nostalgic poems but no overtly optimistic ones; and, generally speaking, romantic themes are subordinated to the inevitability of death, and to heroic sacrifice. 'The Volunteer' and 'The Nabara' especially eulogize the heroism of minority groups. The former is an epigrammatic statement of the inevitability of sacrifice.

It was not fraud or foolishness,  
Glory, revenge, or pay:  
We came because our open eyes  
Could see no other way.

There was no other way to keep  
Man's flickering truth alight:  
These stars shall witness that our course  
Burned briefer, not less bright.

The latter, a narrative of naval heroism, points the moral that 'Freedom is more than a word', and exemplifies both sacrifice and defiance. Its heavily aggressive lines laud not man's soaring spirit but man's defiant will.

The Spanish Civil War was but a prelude to World War II; and, by 1938, Day Lewis knew that global conflict was imminent. Hence, the necessity to warn; to shock people out of their hypnotic slumber. Images from Nature are now used as foils -- the peaceful countryside is in contrast with the ominous atmosphere enshrouding it. Modern imagery is still found --

... I see a power-house stand  
To warm men's hearts again and  
light the land.

-- but it is controlled and directed: there is nothing exhibitionist about it.

These poems of warning are urgent and sincere: informed by the poet's indignation at social abuses and public apathy, and by indignation at his own outraged ideals. Satire and shock tactics are his means of arousing a lethargic public. He must now be understood. Consequently, allusive and 'coterie' poetry have been dispensed with, and Day Lewis has purged himself of his earlier tendency towards excessive metaphor. The poems are less derivative, and he has achieved an economy of language that recalls Emily Dickinson.

The best poems in Overtures to Death equal and sometimes surpass those in From Feathers to Iron, but they are usually of an entirely different nature. The earlier poems are reflective and sensuous: the more recent ones are emotionally charged and emotionally direct. As an entity Overtures to Death is at least an equal to From Feathers to Iron, and an advancement over the other earlier volumes. Its poems are more even and more direct, less belligerent yet more penetrating. More and more Day Lewis is learning to speak in his own voice.

With the collapse of the 'Thirties myth Day Lewis was again forced to seek a cause through which he could establish his relation to a harsh, cruel world. Word Over All (1943) shows his accepting, though not without mental and emotional conflict, the harsh necessity of war: to sanction war meant violating his moral conscience; to remove himself from its actuality meant evading the human condition. He therefore seeks a triumphant pattern whereby Love and war might be reconciled. Disillusioned with his social and political ideas, he

is now inspired by the fortitude of individuals in national crisis:

The Cause shales off, the Humankind  
                   stands forth  
 A mightier presence.

War had allowed him closer contacts with his fellowmen. 'Watching Post' and 'The Stand-To' are poems inspired by these contacts -- contacts which confirmed his instinctive faith in man. This faith, made articulate by the poetic word, will precipitate a humanism based not on Marx or Freud but on Love:

Yet words there must be, wept on a cratered  
                   present  
 To gleam beyond it:  
 Never was cup so mortal but poets  
                   with mild  
 Everlastings have crowned it.

'Word Over All', 'The Poet', and 'Ode to Fear' are the best poems of this nature. The language is simple and urgent; there is nothing ornate or rhetorical, and the poems are instinct with compassion. Though Day Lewis seldom, if ever, approaches Owen's grandeur of language, he is, like Owen earlier, spokesman for suffering humanity.

But the 'emotional disturbance' of war had another effect on Day Lewis's poetry: it laid bare 'strata of experience previously inaccessible' to him, and allowed him to indulge in quiet Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> This was really a search for personal identity -- a search which revealed how greatly his ideas had changed yet how steadfast had been his instincts.

Another aspect of this Romanticism is an oscillation between desire for mobility and desire for stability:

To travel like a bird, lightly to view  
 Deserts where stone gods founder in  
     the sand,  
 Ocean embraced in white sleep with land:  
 To escape time, always to start anew.  
 To settle like a bird, make one last devoted  
 Gesture of permanence upon the spray  
 Of shaken stars and autumns; in a bay  
 Beyond the crestfallen surges to have floated.

'O Dreams, O Destinations' and 'The Rebuke', the best poems of this kind, are memorials to lost youth, to a time when epic idealism was possible. Cast in traditional forms and having an authentic voice, these poems are 'simple, sensuous, and passionate', the exquisite articulation of universal experience.

Word Over All is, I believe, the most consistently good volume of poems Day Lewis has ever written. The emotions are genuine, the language is direct, the tone is authentic. His technical approach has been to use metaphors in the war-poems and developed images in the reflective poems. Metaphor is swift and violent, 'the natural language of tension': imagery is 'a breaking down of the high tension of life so it can be safely used to light and warn the individual heart'.<sup>6</sup> No statement of poetic purpose, no pages of exposition could be more revealing of the essential Day Lewis.

#### IV

Poems 1943-47 marks the beginning of Day Lewis's final phase. This is the first volume to be wholly free from politics. The search for self continues, but it is the poet's disintegrating marriage which really provides the poetic

impulse behind this volume. Marital problems have narrowed the range of his poetry, but they have also provided the true force and emotional tension of Poems 1943-47. 'Married Dialogue', 'The Woman Alone', and 'Buzzards Over Castle-Hill' are the best poems on this painful topic.

The 'influences' now are Eliot, Hardy, and, above all, Meredith. Day Lewis's affinity with Meredith arises from their common experience -- the agony of marital dissolution. This heart-felt affinity dictates the style of Day Lewis's poems of marital stress -- he resembles Meredith in both argument and imagery. He does not exhibit the emotional intensity or the technical accomplishment of Modern Love, but he does reveal greater emotional balance and a greater sense of justice. For example, though he has no peaks of poetic grandeur comparable to Meredith's

In tragic hints here see what evermore  
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

he also has none of Meredith's sloughs of morbidity, invective, braggadocio, attitudinizing, and demoralization. The secret of his success is a desire not to hurt another, and a sense of 'compassionate detachment' which allows him to treat, without sentimentality, an extremely personal and tender subject.

Since Poems 1943-47, Day Lewis has introduced no strictly new topics. His recent works have been mainly restatements of his earlier themes, and we need survey them only briefly. An Italian Visit is a return to the 'Thirties quest-poetry, and to his attempts at writing a long poem. Its imagery is vivid and evocative. The emotion, though it sometimes runs

thin, suggests a yearning for faith in what seems to the poet a faithless age. The best poetry in the volume is an elegy to love, 'The Elegy Before Death'; poignant, tender, wistful and painful, it is characteristic of Day Lewis's beautiful lyrics. However, there are three serious criticisms of the volume: first, the dialogue in the first and last parts fails to generate that tension essential to good dramatic poetry; second, the sequence of experiences pertaining to the visit means more to the poet than his avowed search for self; third, the poem fails as a good narrative because it lacks thematic unity.

Pegasus is a definite improvement over An Italian Visit. Its reminiscent poems and its allegorical narratives bear witness to Day Lewis's comprehensive understanding of human nature, and to his understanding of the nature and problems of art. In this latter instance, there is no divorce of theory and practice. The narratives, based on Greek legends, and enhanced by imaginative and emotive language, are among Day Lewis's best poems.

The Gate, Day Lewis's last volume, exhibits his usual good sense. There is, also, increasing evidence of a search for faith. Unfortunately, though the poet exhibits technical skill, most of the poems lack vitality. His yearning for faith is dampened by his agnosticism, yet neither his faith nor his agnosticism is sufficient to animate his poetry. He seems to have lost his fire.



Day Lewis's experimentation in technique has different explanations. First, Hopkins, Owen, and Eliot were all receiving recognition (Hopkins and Owen posthumously) just as Day Lewis was beginning his literary career. Naturally, a young poet would be impressed by their achievements, and would be stirred to emulation, especially one who believed in ancestor-worship as a means of self-realization. Another reason is that Day Lewis believed that poetry should be functional, should not be escapist art. By striving after Hopkins' astringency and Eliot's erudition, Day Lewis might avoid a too facile style. Owen's grim realism suggested a means of portraying the social malignities which Day Lewis and his contemporaries intended to remedy. Furthermore, Day Lewis has always had a clear conception of the nature and function of poetry. Such understanding made him aware of the gulf between ambition and achievement, between dream and destination. This uncertainty, this modesty, is most acute when he assumes a new role in society, and when he explores new subject-matter in poetry. He protects himself by working, as it were, outside himself, by bolstering his style with stylistic gestures of other poets. This is one of the factors determining the success of his poems: he is best only when he follows the dictates of his own talent.

On the other hand, why does Day Lewis generally abandon one model for another? Actually, with the exception of Hopkins, he has never completely abandoned a model. Rather, by long practice, he assimilates other poets' techniques into his own poetic style. Again, his attitudes to different pro-

plems have always established affinities with poets of similar experience --his affinities with Owen were most pronounced during the war-years; during his marital dissolution his affinity was with Meredith -- and these affinities of experience tend to dictate stylistic emulation. All this does not adequately account for his general discarding of Hopkins and Eliot towards the end of his first phase. Three other possibilities might be mentioned: first, he probably felt inadequately equipped to pursue the techniques of these masters; second, and more probable, he realized that Hopkins and Eliot had exhausted the possibilities of their respective styles; third, the changing political climate demanded more direct, more urgent expression.

Any poet's achievement may be considered under two headings: his poetry as a whole; and his best poetry. Generally speaking, Day Lewis lacks the speed, detachment, and wit necessary for satire; he is too contemplative to be successful with dramatic poetry; he is too intellectually honest and too instinctively poetical to succeed with popular verse and political propaganda. He has never fulfilled his promise as a narrative poet; and there are two reasons for this. First, he is essentially a lyric poet; second, he has always been plagued by the problem of establishing unity in longer poems. 'A Time to Dance' and An Italian Visit, his two most ambitious attempts at narrative poetry, testify to this weakness.

His wrestling with diverse political and social problems have been acts of conscience rather than spontaneous impulses. He has always believed that the poet should be committed to recording the tensions of his age, and so he has often violated his sensibility to meet what he believed was a demand.

Consequently, he has often, especially in the early phase, suffered from 'dogmatic paralysis' -- the forcing of each experience to support a preconceived doctrine.

Although much of his poetry is slick pastiche or else mere 'sound and fury', Day Lewis's work is not without grace, charm, and conviction. The war-poems are emotionally charged and urgent; the poems of heart-break are tender, poignant, and wistful. The essential quality of his best poetry, however, reveals his propensity to Nature:

Then I remember the pure and granite hills  
Where first I caught an ideal tone that stills,  
Like the beloved's breath asleep, all din  
Of earth at traffic ...

(Transitional Poem)

Earth wears a smile betrays  
What summer she has in store.  
She feels insurgent forces  
Gathering at the core,  
And a spring rumour courses  
Through her, till the cold extreme  
Sleep of grove and grass is  
Stirred begins to dream.

(From Feathers to Iron)

As anemones that renew  
Earth's innocence, be welcome.  
Out of your folded sleep  
Come, as the western winds come  
To pasture with the sheep  
On a weary of winter height ....

(From Feathers to Iron)

In later volumes, too, Day Lewis's best poetry often coincides with his use of images from Nature. 'O Dreams, O Destinations' is a case in point. His most recent volumes lack much of the fervour and gusto that characterized his early work, but his technical control is usually more masterly. Sometimes, however, he strikes that happy harmony of imagery,

diction, and emotion. 'Baucis and Philemon', 'Ariadne on Naxos', and especially 'The Newborn' are noteworthy examples:

Every newborn seems a reviving seed  
 Or metaphor of the divine,  
 Charged with the hugh, weak power of grass  
 To split rock. How we need  
 Any least sign  
 That our stone age can break, our winter pass!

Welcome to earth, my child!  
 Joybells of blossom swing,  
 Lambs and lovers have their fling,  
 The streets run wild  
 With April airs and rumours of the sun ....

Day Lewis is most successful when he speaks in his own voice of topics congenial to his talent. The reason for his success is simple: he is, at heart, a sensitive man who wants only to respond to quiet stimuli found in Nature, and to allow these to interpret his personal emotions and experiences. One can only regret that he has not written more of these quiet, often plaintive lyrics on ambition, beauty, and love.

Day Lewis cannot be considered a major poet. To qualify as a major poet one must, I believe, meet three conditions: first, one must have written at least one long poem generally achieving the 'grand style' -- the sustaining of a lofty tone for a theme commensurate with it -- second, one's work must have a mythopoeic quality, with the myth developed in either a long poem, or as a unifying thread in one's shorter poems; third, one's poems must have an 'adhesive' quality, that is, an abundance of memorable lines. Day Lewis qualifies in the last instance only: he is a good poet in a minor poetic age. He began primarily in the tradition of the Metaphysicals; he ended somewhere between the Georgian and the Romantic traditions. Less cosmic and less accomplished than the Romantics

and Hardy, he is more vital than the Georgians. He owns something to all three.

Finally, the corpus of Day Lewis's poetry to gain immortality is likely to be small. The early poems, as entities, will have no more than historical interest. The love-poems of Transitional Poem, the best lyrics of From Feathers to Iron, selected poems from Word Over All -- especially the beautiful 'O Dreams, O Destinations', -- 'Married Dialogue' and 'The Elegy Before Death' are likely to be included in an anthology of twentieth-century English poetry. Even this is a noteworthy achievement in an age that has not been especially sympathetic to poetry. A good poet, Day Lewis is essentially a lyric poet. The final evaluation of his work will be made by Time. But one thing is certain: his reputation as a poet rests with his lyrics; for there, and only there does he speak consistently in his own voice; only there is he in harmony with himself and his universe, that ultimate harmony of

... flesh and spirit, sun and clay  
Singing for once together all in tune!

## NOTES

1. The Modern Writer and his World (London, 1953), p.238.
2. Geoffrey Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry , p.189.
3. Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay (London, 1938),pp. 151-52.
4. See pp.47-49 of this Thesis.
5. See note 5, p. 84, of this Thesis.
6. See note 7, p. 84, of this Thesis.

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