

the
matter
of
Britain

THE ARTHURIAN CYCLE

SHAKESPEARE

FRANCIS BACON

UTOPIANS AND LEVELLERS

WILLIAM BLAKE

THE BRONTËS

KINGSLEY AND RUSKIN

E M FORSTER

T S ELIOT

A L MORTON

Essays in a living culture

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SOCIALISM IN BRITAIN

THE MATTER OF
BRITAIN

Essays in a Living Culture

A. L. MORTON

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A.L.M.

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THE MATTER OF BRITAIN

The Arthurian Cycle and the Development of Feudal Society

I. ORIGINS

WHEN 'many noble and divers gentlemen of this realm of England came and demanded' of Caxton that he should print the history 'of the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christians, and worthies, King Arthur, which ought to be most remembered among us before all other Christian kings', his first reaction was cautious. He replied that 'divers men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur and that all such books as be made of him be but fained and fables'. However, his patrons were insistent and reminded him of the evidence for Arthur's historical existence:

First ye may see his sepulchre in the monastery of Glastonbury. . . . And in divers places of England many remembrances be yet of him and shall remain perpetually, and also of his knights; first in the abbey of Westminster, at Saint Edward's shrine, remaineth the print of his seal in red wax, in which is written PATRICIUS ARTHURUS BRITANNIE GALLIE GERMANIE DACIE IMPERATOR; item in the castle of Dover ye may see Gawain's skull and Cradok's mantle; at Winchester, the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword and many other things.¹

We cannot be certain that this 'evidence' was any more convincing to the hard-headed, businesslike printer than it is to us today. What it did and does prove was that a deep and wide tradition existed in the fifteenth century, and that Arthur was a hero in whom so general an interest existed that a book about him would certainly be profitable. And by some chance of which we know nothing Caxton had to hand a manuscript work by Sir Thomas Malory, of which a number of copies seem to have been in existence by 1488, suggesting that it had already won a certain acceptance.² This manuscript Caxton edited,

¹ Caxton: *Le Morte Darthur*, Preface.

² The study of Malory was placed on a new footing by the discovery at Winchester in 1934 of a hitherto unknown manuscript of his work. It has been edited by Professor Eugène Vinaver, and his text supersedes all previous ones. A three volume critical edition was published in 1947 by the Clarendon Press, and a single volume edition in 1954. All my quotations from Malory will be from this latter edition, which will be cited merely

and printed with the reservation that, 'to give faith and believe that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty'.³

To this volume, *Le Morte Darthur*, we shall have to return as the final form which the Matter of Britain assumed in English. But it was the end of a long process in which a doubtfully historical figure of the dark ages was transformed into the centre of a vast body of romance, tradition and pseudo-history. The subject of this essay is not the Arthur of history, about whom in truth little can be known, but the history of this process. It will attempt to explain it in relation to the growth and decay of feudal society, to trace the main stages of growth of the Arthurian Cycle and to attempt to show why it took the forms which it did at these different stages.

About Arthur himself history can say little more than is contained in the *Chronicle* of William of Malmesbury, compiled about 1125. He writes:

Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans, who became monarch after Vortigern, quelled the presumptuous barbarians by the powerful aid of warlike Arthur. It is of this Arthur that the Britons fondly tell so many fables, even to the present day; a man worthy to be celebrated not by idle fictions, but by authentic history. He long upheld the sinking state, and roused the broken spirit of his countrymen to war. Finally, at the siege of Mount Badon, relying on an image of the Virgin, which he had affixed to his armour, he engaged nine hundred of the enemy, single-handed, and dispersed them with incredible slaughter.⁴

William was among the soundest of the early chroniclers, and what he tells us is consistent with the view of the most recent historians that Arthur was not a king but the chief of a free-lance band of resistance fighters who formed a sort of flying column at the service of the British kings of the day. If we are correct in connecting Arthur with the battle at Mount Badon, he can be placed with reasonable certainty as flourishing in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. What is apparent is that William of Malmesbury was acquainted not only with the chronicles

as *Works*, as this is more likely to be accessible to the average reader. For the convenience of those with other editions I shall also give Book and Chapter references from Caxton's printed edition. I have modernised the language of these quotations throughout. When referring to Vinaver's three volume edition I shall distinguish it as *Works*, 1947. I refer in my text to Malory's work under the old title *Le Morte Darthur*, but it should be remembered that this is Caxton's title, not Malory's. When making other quotations I have referred whenever possible to editions easily accessible, such as those in the *Everyman* series.

³ Caxton, *op. cit.*

⁴ William of Malmesbury, Bohn Library, p. 11.

of Gildas and Nennius but also with a body of traditional stories current in Wales and the south-west of England. Some of these traditions are still reflected in obscure fragments of early Welsh poetry, and there is reason to think that similar traditions, for which no literary evidence survives, circulated in Brittany and Cornwall. It is of such tradition that William gives evidence in his other reference to Arthur. Reporting the discovery of the supposed tomb of Walwin (Gawain) towards the end of the eleventh century, he adds: 'The sepulchre of Arthur is no where to be seen, whence ancient ballads fable that he is still to come.'⁵

About a decade after William's *Chronicle* the Arthurian Cycle emerged from the realm of folk-memory and passing references in the chronicles with the appearance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the Kings of Britain*. Here Arthur appears at full length as a world-conquering monarch, with an elaborate court and surrounded by a band of champions. Gawain, Kay and Bedivere emerge from the shadows of Welsh gnomic verse into full-blown knighthood. Guinevere already has her traditional character of the faithless wife. Merlin is introduced, apparently for the first time. Both the birth and the passing of Arthur assume something like their final form.

Geoffrey's *Histories* was immediately and sustainedly popular, as is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts. Arthur became the fashion and within a couple of generations a whole romance cycle was coming into being, ousting the cycle of Charlemagne from general favour. Yet however popular Geoffrey's book may have been, this development would not have taken place but for very definite reasons, historical as well as social and literary.

In the fifty years or so before he wrote, the Norman-French penetration of Wales and also of Brittany had been going steadily forward. This was important for our subject in two ways. On the one hand, the Arthurian legend had been growing among the conquered, stimulating Welsh patriotism and providing it with the focus of a heroic past. There is very little evidence to suggest that the belief that he was not really dead but was waiting for the time when he would return to deliver his people, had existed before the age of conquest. On the other hand, this conquest brought the Norman-French aristocracy for the first time into contact with Arthurian legend, which could also be used, after suitable transformation, to serve the ends of the conquerors.

The Norman dynasty was a *parvenu* monarchy, only two genera-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

tions old. William I had been a mere Duke, to whom the stigma of the bastard of the tanner's daughter still clung. Yet this upstart dynasty now ruled not only over England but over much of France and all the easily accessible parts of Wales. It needed a myth, something comparable with what Virgil had done for the newly established Roman Empire or the Charlemagne Cycle for France. This myth Geoffrey supplied with his fabulous histories of the New Troy and his Normanised Arthur.

Geoffrey lived on the borders of Wales, and his immediate patrons were the Marcher barons who were carving out new lordships in this region. His *Histories* was dedicated to the most powerful of them all, Earl Robert of Gloucester, and, as a piece of political re-insurance, also to Robert's enemy, Stephen of Blois. There can be no doubt that he had a certain access to Welsh tradition. He may even have had, as he claimed, 'a certain most ancient book in the British language',⁶ though no trace of such a book or anything like it has survived, and at best it could only have provided him with a small part of his material. He may also have known something of Cornish and Breton tradition, though these have entirely disappeared: it is reasonably certain that such tradition must have existed and both areas play a considerable part in his story. At any rate, he was in a most favourable situation to assimilate and transform all these traditions and to Normanise them. In this connection it is significant that while he cannot entirely ignore the popular belief in Arthur's miraculous survival, he discounts it as far as possible. It is indeed remarkable how this belief continually forces itself into the histories and romances against the will and judgement of the literate scribe. It was a hope of the depressed classes and subject peoples, and it is precisely in those versions which are closest in form and feeling to the people, like Layamon's *Brut*, that it is most emphasised. In this respect the contrast between Layamon, writing in English, and Wace, writing a little earlier in Norman-French, is most marked. The sleeping Arthur is one of a long series of dead heroes whose return is popularly expected, from Charlemagne and Barbarossa to the Duke of Monmouth and Lord Edward Fitzgerald.⁷ Ultimately the idea links

⁶ *Histories of the Kings of Britain*, Everyman Edition, p. 1. Geoffrey's book, if it existed, may have been Breton rather than Welsh.

⁷ 'Once in seven years Earl Gerald rides round the Curragh of Kildare. His horse like Arthur's at Cadbury has silver shoes. They were half an inch thick when he fell asleep. When they are worn as thin as a cat's ear a miller's son with six fingers on each hand will blow a trumpet and Gerald will do battle with the English.' E. K. Chambers: *Arthur of Britain*, 1927, p. 225.

both with Jewish-Christian millenarianism and the primitive myths of the buried and reviving fertility god. An interesting form of the latter was the story of Bran the Blessed, whose head guarded London, and with whom Arthur is connected in one of the early Welsh triads.

Arthur had a further advantage for the Normans, in that he was a pre-Saxon hero, whose traditional role was one of conflict with Saxon invaders. In the twelfth century the English were a far from reconciled majority of the population. Suitably transformed, therefore, Arthur was a safe figure for the Normans to build upon, in a way that, for example, Alfred could not have been. When, later, an Alfred myth began to grow, it had a marked bourgeois and anti-feudal bias.

In Brittany a somewhat similar situation existed. During the tenth century it had been invaded by the Normans, but succeeded in preserving its independence under a native Duke till 1148, when the Plantaganet Geoffrey of Anjou renewed the attack. A second Geoffrey, son of Henry II of England, married Constance of Brittany, and there was a long struggle before he could establish his claim to the Duchy. It was just at this time that the Arthurian legend was rapidly growing. Alain de Lille wrote, only slightly later:

Go to the realms of Armorica, which is lesser Britain, and preach in the market-places and villages that Arthur the Briton is dead as other men are dead, and facts themselves will show you how true is Merlin's prophecy, which says that the ending of Arthur shall be doubtful. Hardly will you escape unscathed, without beingwhelmed by the curses or crushed by the stones of your hearers.⁸

It would be absurd, however popular Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories* may have been, to suppose that this alone was responsible for such feelings, though Alain is certainly writing some time after its appearance.

In 1187 Geoffrey and Constance had a son who was christened Arthur—an obvious attempt to placate Breton feeling, very much in the same way as Edward I tried to do later by creating *his* new-born son Prince of Wales. And only a couple of years after the birth of Arthur of Brittany the tomb of Arthur was most conveniently 'discovered' at the Abbey of Glastonbury, henceforth to be identified with the Avalon to which, Geoffrey of Monmouth had said, Arthur had been carried to be healed of his wounds. Once more we can see the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Norman-French ruling class trying to undermine the popular belief in Arthur's survival while retaining those features of the cult which suited their purposes—never with complete success.

Popular imagination was able to accept both tomb and survival, combining the really incompatible, as in a rhyme of the early fifteenth century:

At Glastonbury in the choir,
They made Arthur's tomb there,
And wrote with Latin verses thus
Hic jacit Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.⁹

One may guess that the monks of Glastonbury, who had already a first-class pilgrim attraction in the reputed shrine of Joseph of Arimathea, did little to discourage a belief that must have brought them considerable additional revenue. And later this fortuitous association of Arthur with Joseph may have helped to draw the originally independent Grail legend into the Arthurian cycle.

It is clear that this historical setting helped to foster the rapid growth of the tradition: for entirely different reasons it was most useful and acceptable both to Normans and to the Welsh and Bretons. But such factors, while explaining the rapid growth are still not entirely sufficient to explain the particular and remarkably different forms which it assumed in France and in England.

II. THE HEROIC AND THE ROMANCE

The twelfth century marked a turning point in the social evolution of northern and western Europe. The Dark Ages, which, as W. P. Ker says, 'might more honourably be called, and not less correctly, the Heroic Age of the North', were passing into the age of fully developed feudal society. The time of migration and invasion was ended, and life, at least for the ruling class, became more secure, more comfortable and more sophisticated. This new, more courtly, ruling class was no longer content with the framework of ideas which is found in the heroic poetry of the past, in *Beowulf*, in *The Volsunga Saga* or in *The Battle of Maldon*. It needed a new ethic, a new standard of manners and conduct, and a new idea expressing the sharpness of its separation from the masses whose life had altered much less.

In England, where the Norman Conquest only emphasised a separation of classes that was proceeding everywhere, the change can be illustrated by Bede's story of the poet Caedmon. Caedmon was a

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

keeper of horses in the Abbey of Whitby. There it was customary in the evening for the harp to be passed round the hall, so that all in turn might sing to it. Caedmon had no ability for doing this and so,

When he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose from the table and returned home. Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time.¹⁰

Bede goes on to tell us how an angel visited him and bestowed on him a gift of divine poetry. The interesting point is, however, that Caedmon, whose status was so humble that his sleeping place was in the stable, still had the right to sit in hall, and was expected to take his share in the common cultural life. This was in 680: it is perhaps difficult to picture such a situation in post-Alfredian England: it is quite impossible to imagine it after the Conquest, when the division of classes was reinforced by a barrier of language. The same sort of contrast is visible between the low, wooden, rambling and generally accessible houses of the Saxon nobility, and the horrifying stone keeps that spread not only over England but all north western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

It was among this feudal ruling class, increasingly elevated and isolated from the masses of the population, that the ideas of chivalry developed as a social cement. The warrior was becoming a knight: war, which was its own justification in the Heroic Age, now began to need a cover of morality. So first, the kindred group of tribal society developed into the band of warriors attached by personal loyalty to the war leader. And the band itself may be regarded as a transitional form bridging the gap between the kindred group and the feudal lord with his vassals. As feudal society developed, war became progressively less important as a source of wealth in comparison with the systematic exploitation of serf labour, and a correspondingly changed attitude towards war itself may be traced. The warrior fought for the sake of gain and needed no other excuse. The knight must at least appear to reconcile his warfare with the teachings of Christianity. So he must fight for justice, for honour, for his mistress or for Christendom. Such at least was the theory. As J. C. F. Hearnshaw wrote:

Thus the distinctive qualities of the chivalric knight in the Golden Age of Chivalry were at their best honour, piety and love;

¹⁰ Bede: *Ecclesiastical History*, Everyman Ed., p. 206.

at their worst ferocity, superstition and lust. The virtues of chivalry were courage, faith and devotion; its vices murder, intolerance, adultery.¹¹

He adds, however, 'There was, in truth, no Golden Age of Chivalry.'¹²

This was the period of the Crusades and of the foundation of the earlier, religious-military orders of knighthood. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem, which assumed its military character about 1118, the date also of the founding of the Templars, was the earliest of these. The Teutonic Knights were founded about 1128 and transferred their operations early in the fourteenth century to the Baltic lands where their war on the heathen coincided most conveniently with the acquisition of new fiefs. Similar orders were created in Spain towards the end of the twelfth century.

It was in these centuries that the Arthurian Cycle was being shaped and repeatedly transformed, reflecting a shifting and complicated interrelation of old and new forces. For if feudalism was a new stage, it grew out of its immediate past and for long preserved elements derived from that past.

The Arthurian Cycle flowered after, but not long after, the ending of the Heroic Age. The old themes and modes of the North were exhausted but not entirely forgotten. Arthur, the voyager to the unknown, slayer of giants and dragons, carries something over into the new age—after all, he was a hero of the sixth century even if remodelled to suit the ideas of the twelfth. Yet he had to be remodelled. By the twelfth century the Heroic Age was over, feudal society obliterating with its sharp class divisions the relics of tribal life. With these came a division of culture, and the heroic epic with a universal appeal was replaced by romance, the writing of court poets and clerics for a leisured ruling class. It has been suggested that while epic was composed for men, romance was written largely for women.¹³ The difference between the love of Sigurd and Brynhild and of Lancelot and Guinevere reflects such a change.

Nevertheless the material for romance came from the Heroic Age. Just as the Norman-French world was leaving that age finally and irrevocably behind it, it came upon the treasure house of Welsh and Breton tradition which it plundered and exploited just as it did the Welsh and Breton lands. As W. P. Ker has said, the French Romance

¹¹ *Chivalry. A Series of Studies*. Ed. Edgar Prestage, 1928, p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³ E.g. by Alfred Nutt: *Celtic and Medieval Romance*, 1899, pp. 16-7.

poets of the twelfth century were deliberately and professionally exploiting a vein and meeting a demand.¹⁴ In this process much was destroyed—romance might almost be called heroic poetry run to seed. But to say this would be to leave much unsaid: the romance poets enriched and embellished as well as plundered and vulgarised.

For good or ill this process was most complete in France and in the romances written in French, from Wace and Chrétien de Troyes to the makers of the Arthurian prose cycle. Here a degree of sophistication was achieved which left nothing but confused traces of the heroic mode. In England the story was quite different. Heroic literature had flourished in the lands never Roman, or where the Roman tradition was weakest and least preserved: it was these northern and western lands which were plundered for the material of romance, but which also, naturally, preserved most tenaciously something of their old character. So, in England the character of the Arthurian tradition, while profoundly modernised, was never entirely changed. Here, too, a strong popular culture was preserved, as is witnessed by the reappearance of vernacular alliterative poetry from Layamon to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Langland. This culture reacted strongly upon the character of the Arthurian matter in England.

So, from the beginning, a quite sharp difference existed between the French and the English Arthurian tradition. The French romance poets and prose writers were interested in personality, in individual adventures embroidered for their own sake, in personal relations and the increasingly complex artificiality of courtly love. In England the pseudo-historical basis which Geoffrey of Monmouth had given to the Arthurian matter was never lost, though constantly modified and elaborated by the French romance manner. And in addition to this, there is always an epic strain which the French stories entirely lack. The difference is shown from the start by the contrast between Wace, writing in Norman-French, and Layamon, writing in English. Both derive directly from Geoffrey of Monmouth, but the difference between the courtly Wace and the popular and epic style of Layamon is immediately obvious.

For one thing, Layamon never forgets that Arthur is represented as a British and not a French king, a fact that to Wace would have been almost without meaning. While we cannot, of course, speak of a British or an English nation in the Middle Ages, it is possible to see quite early, earlier than in most European countries, the rise of what

¹⁴ *Epic and Romance*, 1897, pp. 371-2.

may be called proto-national feeling. As bourgeois production relations developed within feudal society, this feeling grew stronger, till by the time of Malory and Caxton it plays an important part in the life and thought of the country. The Arthurian matter in England both fed upon and nourished this growing national spirit.

One example of the difference between Wace and Layamon, the more sympathetic treatment given by the latter to the idea of Arthur's return, has been mentioned already. No less interesting is Layamon's elaboration of the story of the founding of the Round Table. The idea of the Round Table, though it is to be found in Welsh tradition, undoubtedly drew much from the new Orders of Chivalry, which were being created in the twelfth century. Yet, in other respects it resembled closely the *comitatus*, the war band of the king or chief of the pre-feudal Heroic Age. The French tradition emphasises the former aspect, so that it becomes the central feature of a sophisticated royal court, like those which were everywhere growing, and a starting-point for fantastic adventure. Layamon stresses the primitive features, such as are found in Welsh tradition, and his account of its origin out of a murderous brawl over the distribution of food has the true epic flavour:

And the high-born men bare the meat even forth-right then to the knights; then towards the thanes, then towards the swains, then towards the porters, forth at the board. The people became angered, and blows were rife; at first they threw the loaves, the while they lasted, and the silver bowls, filled with wine, and afterwards with the fists approached to necks. . . . There was fight exceeding great; each man smote other; there was much blood shed, mischief was among the folk!¹⁵

The Round Table in fact embodied that heroic tradition of personal loyalty due from vassal to lord which feudalism inherited from the tribal past and which helped to form part of the cement of feudal society. It also embodied one of the contradictions of that society—the perennial problem of the king was to find some means of rewarding his fighters and retaining their loyalty without transforming them into feudal lords whose estates gave them a quasi-independence and an interest other than his own. Hence one of the great themes of medieval literature is the perpetual conflict between the interest of the feudal ruling class *as a whole* and the interest of the feudal lord as an individual,

¹⁵ Layamon's *Brut*, Everyman Ed., p. 210.

resulting in a complex interplay of loyalty and treason, honour and faith-breaking, which has no conclusion and, in the end, was one of the reasons for the decay of feudal society. The Round Table was an attempt on an ideal plane, as the Orders of Chivalry were on an actual plane, to resolve this contradiction, but it remained ideal, because the material basis on which Arthur's company rested is always left undefined. By the time of Malory this real conflict had become endemic and devastating, and it is Malory's treatment of this theme which gives *Le Morte Darthur* much of its vitality and its tragic force.

Malory lies at the end of three centuries of evolution in which the English and French Arthurian traditions had had time to interpenetrate and fuse. At its lower levels the English tradition suffered from the dull banality of the pseudo-chronicle, became a mere catalogue of names and battles, but at its best it had a compression and a dramatic force which the French versions quite lacked. When enriched by elements from France and from the Welsh and Breton wonder-tales, it could reach the heights of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written in a mixture of alliterative and rhyming verse this really great poem bridges the gap in more ways than one, lying as it does almost midway between Layamon and Malory. Malory, in whom the fusion culminated, used mainly French sources,¹⁶ but he used them in the English way. And it is significant that his last section, *The Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon* (Books XX and XXI in Caxton's printing), where he is using French and English sources simultaneously,¹⁷ is generally recognised as the supreme masterpiece of Arthurian literature.

III. GAWAIN AND LANCELOT

Nothing perhaps throws more light on the development of the Arthurian theme than the story of Gawain. As Walwain or Gwalchmai he is one of the earliest characters in the Cycle. He is Welsh in origin, with features that were remote and primitive and hard for the Anglo-Normans to accept. Many of these features he retained throughout, even in Malory's late fifteenth century version: his strength grows from dawn to noon and wanes as the sun sinks, his maternal relations are far more important than his paternal, and all have magical attributes, in general his adventures have a peculiar element of fantasy and even of the grotesque. He was originally one of Arthur's principal followers, and he was too prominent to be removed entirely. Instead, we find a

¹⁶ Eugène Vinaver: *Malory*, 1929, *passim*.

¹⁷ Vinaver: *The Tale of the Death of King Arthur*, 1955, p. xii.

progressive detraction, as new figures are introduced who usurp many of his attributes and adventures.¹⁸

One of the earliest and most important of these is his visit to the Otherworld. Such visits have a strongly mythological character and are of two kinds. One is by invitation of the Otherworld Queen, whom the hero often marries, as in the case of Bran or of Thomas the Rhymer. The other is in despite of the King, whose treasure is removed or captives released. Both types of visit are found in a confused form in versions of the Gawain story, but it is the second which is of special interest.

Such visits link on the one hand with the early Welsh references to Arthur in the extremely archaic poem *Preidu Annwfn*, which tells of a series of tragic raids upon the Otherworld in search of magical and life-giving treasures,

Three freights of Prydwen went we into it,
But seven came back from Caer Sidi,

and on the other with the popular medieval theme of the Harrowing of Hell. The widespread belief that Christ ravaged Hell between his crucifixion and resurrection, rescuing from torment the souls of the dead,¹⁹ has no place in the canonical books of the Bible, but is based upon a long account in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. It took an extraordinary hold upon the imagination of the people. It is to be found, developed in great detail, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, in the Miracle Plays, for example at Chester and Wakefield, and, most magnificently, in Langland's *Piers Plowman*,²⁰ as well as in many more scattered and casual references. It is a theme in which Christ appears as the champion of the oppressed, destroying death and liberating the captives, as well as personifying the victory of reason and order over chaos. Christ comes bearing the arms of Piers, the hero of the people, beating down the doors of Hell, which is depicted as a typical feudal castle garrisoned by the lords of the strong hand:

One resembling the Samaritan · and somewhat to Piers the
Plowman,
Barefoot on an ass back · bootless came riding,

¹⁸ For a general discussion of the part played by Gawain and Lancelot in the Cycle see Jessie L. Weston: *The Legend of Sir Gawain*, 1897, and *The Three Days' Tournament*, 1902.

¹⁹ In some versions the righteous dead, in others all souls in Hell. See W. Hone, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1821, pp. 44-71, and *Ancient Mysteries Described*, n.d., pp. 120-37.

²⁰ *Passus XVIII*, B Text.

Without spurs or spear · sparkling he looked,
 As is the way of a knight · that cometh to be dubbed,
 To get him gilt spurs · and slashed shoes.
 Then was Faith at a window · and cried Ah! son of David!
 As doth a herald of arms · when adventurers come to joust. . . .
 'Who shall joust with Jesus?' quoth I · Jews or scribes?
 'Nay', quoth he, 'the foul fiend · and Falsehood and Death.
 Death saith he shall undo · and bring down
 All that liveth or looketh · in land or water.
 Life saith that he lies · and layeth his life to wager,
 That for all Death can do · within three days,
 To walk and fetch from the fiend · Piers fruit the Plowman,
 And lay it where he liketh · and Lucifer bind,
 And beat down and bring down · bale and death for ever.'

The Harrowing of Hell theme,²¹ so potentially revolutionary, is found, I think, only in the literature that voiced the feelings of the lower orders, and it would perhaps have been surprising to find it attaching itself to the courtly Arthurian Cycle. Yet this nearly happened, because of the already existing connection of Arthur and Gawain with the Otherworld. I do not know that anyone has commented upon the close parallels between the recognised Harrowing of Hell literature and parts of Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*, yet these are far too striking to be accidental. Lancelot sets out to rescue Arthur's queen, and all the captives held by Meleagant (Malory's Mellyyagaunt) in his Otherworld kingdom. In the episode of his ride in the felon's cart he re-enacts Christ's journey to Calvary. He rolls away the stone from the sepulchre:

. . . You may be sure that to raise it would require seven men stronger than you or I. There is an inscription on it which says that anyone who can lift this stone of his own unaided strength will set free all the men and women who are captives in the land, whence no slave or noble can issue forth, unless he is a native of that land. No one has ever come back from there, but they are detained in foreign prisons; whereas they of the country go and come in and out as they please. At once the knight goes to grasp the stone, and raises it more easily than ten men would do who exerted all their strength.²²

And in language almost identical with that in which both *The Gospel*

²¹ The continued attraction of this theme can be seen in modern treatments by A. E. Housman (*Hell Gate* in *Last Poems* 1922) and E. M. Forster (*The Point of It* in *The Eternal Moment*, 1928, but written about 1912).

²² *Eric and Enid*, Everyman Ed., p. 294.

of *Nicodemus* and Langland describe the dismay of the devils on hearing of Christ's approach, Meleagant's squire calls to him:

Sire, sire, make haste! For the people of Logres have attacked in force the inhabitants of this land, and war and strife have already broken out; and they say that this country has been invaded by a knight who has been in many battles, and that wherever he wishes to go, no one, however reluctantly, is able to deny him passage. And further they say that he will deliver those who are in this country, and will subdue our people.

Afterwards Lancelot is praised by those he has freed much as Christ was by the souls in Hell:

Gentlemen, this is he who is to deliver us all from durance and misery, in which we have so long been confined, and we ought to do him great honour when, to set us free, he has passed through so many perils and is ready to face many more.²³

It is noteworthy that by this time Lancelot has replaced Gawain as the principal hero. Gawain is still too prominent to be left out, but has been given only a secondary role. By the time of Malory he has vanished from the episode, and along with him all the 'Otherworld' features. Mellyagaunt has become a common kidnapper and Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere is effected by quite mundane prowess: the cart which played such a symbolic part in Chrétien's poem has now become a merely tactical device to enable Lancelot to reach Mellyagaunt's castle after the wounding of his horse.²⁴ This, of course, is also in keeping with Malory's tendency to rationalise the story wherever possible.

The Harrowing of Hell vanishes from the Cycle to be replaced by the Grail theme to which it is undoubtedly related, for the Grail in one aspect is a christianisation of the magic cauldron of Anwen to capture which the traditional Welsh Arthur invades the Otherworld. Perhaps this is another example of the tendency already noted to make the Arthurian tradition safe from the point of view of the ruling class and the Church. The Grail theme, although a late addition to the Cycle, quickly came to occupy a central position in the hands of the Cistercian

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 299, 300. W. P. Ker cites an even more striking passage from an unnamed romance: 'Gawain turned and looked back; and behold, across the river, all the streets of the place were filled with men and women, rejoicing and singing in carol-wise: *The people that sat in darkness have beheld a great light.*' *The Dark Ages*, p. 50, in Mentor Books Ed.

²⁴ *Works*, p. 797 (XIX. 4).

redactors of the thirteenth century.²⁵ Soon it developed into a standard by which the worldly splendour and virtues of Arthur's court are judged and condemned. In the French romances the Grail Quest becomes the heart of the story and its failure leads directly to the final catastrophe.²⁶

In this process Gawain suffers further degradation. Originally the hero of the Grail Quest, he is gradually deposed in favour of Lancelot, of Percival (who was once, perhaps, Gawain's son, as J. L. Weston suggests, just as Lancelot in turn was deposed by *his* son, Galahad) and finally by Galahad. Professor Vinaver writes:

The case of Gawain is particularly interesting. He is one of the most famous knights of the Round Table, second only to Lancelot. Most devoted to his king, he is generous and noble, courageous and strong. He possesses all of man's earthly virtues and is very much loved and honoured by both 'countrymen and strangers': . . . But since God has no part in his career, his brilliant qualities do not help him, and he ends as a vile criminal. It was dangerous, perhaps, to make a sinner so attractive, and it was essential to show that his virtues and successes could lead to no result.²⁷

Nor are even his earthly virtues left intact. *Gawain and the Green Knight* is peculiar in representing him as the perfect example of knight-hood so late as the end of the thirteenth century, and this is another example of the influence of the English tradition, which was much slower than the French to adopt new viewpoints. Generally by this time he has been surpassed in prowess by a number of later comers, so that Malory is much more in line with the general view when he makes Sir Tristram, in a conversation about current rankings, place him well down the list:

'Sir,' he said, 'here lodged the last night sir Ector de Marys and a damsel with him. And the damsel told me that he was one of the best knights of the world.'

'That is not so,' said sir Tristram, 'for I know four better knights of his own blood. And the first is sir Lancelot du Lake, call him the best knight, and sir Bors de Ganys, sir Bleoberys de Ganys, and sir Blamour de Ganys, and also sir Gaherys.'

²⁵ Just at the time when Robert de Boron and others were elaborating the Grail theme, the question of the Eucharist was being hotly debated in theological circles. The definition of eucharistic doctrine was laid down by the Lateran Council (1215). The romance writers were thus making the most of a topic that was then highly fashionable. Charles Williams: *Arthurian Torso*, pp. 16, 61. For a general account of the Grail theme see Jessie L. Weston: *From Ritual to Romance*, 1920.

²⁶ Vinaver: *Malory*, pp. 70-3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

'Nay,' said his host, 'sir Gawain is the better knight.'

'That is not so,' said sir Tristram, 'for I have met with them both, and I have felt sir Gaherys for the better knight. And sir Lamorak, I call him as good as any of them, except sir Lancelot.'

'Sir, why name ye not sir Tristram?' said his host. 'For I account him as good a knight as any of them.'

'I know not sir Tristram,' said sir Tristram.²⁸

Elsewhere Percival, Pelleas and Marhaus are all placed above Gawain.

Nor is this all. Because Gawain was a primitive figure, with the character of the pre-feudal age still strong upon him, he came to seem by Church and feudal standards morally unacceptable. Originally he seems to have been the Queen's lover as well as her rescuer from the Otherworld.²⁹ Guinevere's character as the adulterous wife was certainly taken from the Welsh tradition, and the uncle-wife-nephew triangle was usual enough—as in the case of Tristram, Mordred and the Irish Diarmid. This story seems to have been dropped when it appeared contradictory to the idea of suitability for the chivalrous hero which Gawain became, before the later idealisation of courtly adulterous love gained currency. Then, however, the theme of Guinevere's adultery was revived in a modern, romantic way, but with Lancelot and not Gawain as the lover. Lancelot, indeed, seems to have taken on many of Gawain's original attributes.

Gawain, meanwhile, was no longer regarded as an especially edifying character, and was allowed to resume his old amoral nature. This created all sorts of contradictions which emerge clearly enough in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. On the one hand, he was too well established to be ignored: as Arthur's nephew and the head of a powerful clan he must be given a prominent place in the story—yet that place is equivocal. The killing of Lamorak and his gross breach of faith in seducing Ettarde after he had promised to win her for Pelleas³⁰ could not possibly be squared with the code of chivalrous behaviour: he is depicted as rash, passionate and bloody-minded, so that even his own brother condemns him:

For ever after sir Gareth had observed sir Gawain's disposition, he withdrew himself from his brother sir Gawain's fellowship, for he was ever revengeful, and where he hated he would be avenged with murder, and that hated sir Gareth.³¹

²⁸ *Works*, p. 415 (IX. 43).

³⁰ *Works*, p. 124 (IV. 23).

²⁹ Weston: *Legend of Sir Gawain*, pp. 73-8.

³¹ *Works*, p. 270 (VII. 34).

On the other hand, in Book V, describing the war of Arthur upon the Emperor Lucius, he plays a heroic role, and in the final Books, though his hatred of Lancelot and his determination to avenge the death of his kindred has tragic consequences, he rises to an epic grandeur and nobility towards which even his faults seem to contribute. It is perhaps significant that in both these sections Malory was following English as well as French sources. Part of these contradictions arise from Malory's method of work. Professor Vinaver has shown, as a result of his brilliant editorial work on the Winchester Manuscript, that Caxton's text created a false impression of unity. What seemed to be intended as a single work was in fact written by Malory as eight separate books, based on different sources.³² Each book is self-consistent in its interpretation of event and character, but little attempt is made to reconcile one with another. Malory was content to follow his sources, merely cutting what he felt superfluous and adding and adapting to suit his general idea of the nature of the story.

Nevertheless a total impression emerges. The more carefully one reads *Le Morte Darthur* the more one is struck by the part played by the often concealed but never really absent conflict between the two great rival groups in Arthur's court—the kindred and faction of Gawain and the kindred and faction of Lancelot. This was something which Malory, who had lived through and participated in the Wars of the Roses, the outcome of just such a feud, was particularly fitted to appreciate. Of all the versions of the Arthurian story his is the most sustainedly political, almost, one might say, the only political version. This is one of the reasons why his book has a reality and almost a topical quality which neither the pseudo-chroniclers like Geoffrey of Monmouth nor the pure romance writers ever attained.

This conflict is not merely one between individuals or interest factions: it is a conflict between two sets of ideas, two civilisations, two worlds. In it Gawain represents the old. He is Arthur's kinsman, all his deepest feelings are family feelings, his loyalty is the ancient loyalty of the blood bond. Friendship is an extension of the older kindred loyalty, and must give way to it when the two conflict. Love is an incident, and it is not by chance that he had always the character of a faithless lover.

Lancelot stands for the new, though in him, perhaps by reason of the archaic material from which the Arthurian Cycle was created, old and new also contend. His loyalty is the new loyalty of vassal for a lord, which, as we have seen, is feudal in form though still often pre-

³² *Works*, 1947, I. pp. xxx-xli.

feudal in content and heroic in expression. But this loyalty, in which old and new contend, is confronted with another obligation. His choice between loyalty and love, two absolute duties as the thought of the time conceived them, is thus also a choice between old and new. The claim of love is wholly individual, and represents a set of values wholly new. Lancelot, after a deep inner conflict, chooses the new, emphasising the sharpness of the difference between himself and Gawain, the man irrevocably rooted in the tribal past.

The climax is reached—and this is one of Malory's own contributions to the story—when in rescuing Guinevere from burning Lancelot is forced unwittingly to kill Gareth, who, as Gawain says: 'loved him better than me and all his brethren and the king both. Also I dare say, if sir Lancelot had desired my brother sir Gareth with him, he would have been with him against the king and us all. And therefore I may never believe that sir Lancelot slew my brethren.'³³

Gareth had been knighted by Lancelot, and was in a real sense an adopted blood-brother: his death set in motion a feud in which no compromise was possible:

'My king, my lord and mine uncle,' said sir Gawain, 'wit you well, now I shall make you a promise which I shall hold by my knighthood, that from this day foreward I shall never fail sir Lancelot until one of us have slain the other. And therefore I require you, my lord and king, dress you unto the war, for wit you well, I will be revenged upon sir Lancelot; and therefore, as ye will have my service and my love, now haste you thereto and assay your friends. For I promise unto God,' said sir Gawain, 'for the death of my brother, sir Gareth, I shall seek sir Lancelot throughout seven kings' realms, but I shall slay him or else he shall slay me.'³⁴

In this struggle the Round Table, an uneasy balance between two worlds, was finally destroyed. Here, as so often elsewhere, Malory is following the English tradition. For the French writers the heart of the Matter was the Grail Quest: for Malory, the Round Table, Kingship and the human tragedy of divided loyalty.

IV. MALORY AND FEUDAL DECADENCE

The Arthurian Cycle, like the idea of chivalry, took shape in the period of the consolidation of feudal society, at a time when a decent cover had to be found for a code of behaviour still essentially barbarous.

³³ *Works*, p. 834 (XX. 9).

³⁴ *Works*, p. 835 (XX. 10).

Chivalry was both such a covering and an organising force for social and military ends. 'The use of an organised knighthood,' wrote Vincent de Beauvais, 'lies in protecting the Church, attacking disloyalty, reverencing the priesthood, avenging the wrongs of the poor, keeping the country in a state of quiet.' Vincent, as a cleric, has his own emphasis—one may hazard the guess that the second and last of the uses listed were of the greatest practical importance.

The knightly Orders that were founded during the time when the idea of the Round Table was spreading, had a real military and social significance. But by the beginning of the fourteenth century the situation was changed. The Orders were growing rich and corrupt: in 1312 the Templars were suppressed amid a scandal of European dimensions, the full facts about which have never yet been fully determined. Underlying these changes were changes in military strategy and organisation which began to undermine the predominance of the knightly class.

Professional armies began to replace the horde of knights and their personal followings, upon whom no sort of order or discipline could be imposed. In these armies the knight still had his place, but he was no longer more effective than the heavily-armed professional man-at-arms who rode and fought beside him. With the increasing importance of the archer and the consequent tendency of the armoured knight to dismount and fight on foot, his importance was further diminished. The victories of the Flemish artizans over French chivalry were even more damaging than the English victories at Crecy and Poitiers, where the superiority of the new tactics and weapons was convincingly demonstrated. The development of artillery in the fifteenth century ended the security of the feudal nobility by rendering their castles obsolete.

As the practical importance of chivalry declined, its ornamental side increased in a riot of over-compensation. During the fourteenth century new Orders were founded: The Garter in 1349, the Annunciation in 1392, the Golden Fleece in 1429. These, unlike the earlier Orders, were decorative from the start. The real object of the Order of the Garter, as Professor Vinaver says, 'was to exhibit the brilliancy of Court festivals . . . At the procession "the Habits were so ordered that the more grave and civil being placed between those that are rich and gallant, entertained the beholders with a more delightful prospect"'. This was perhaps the most typical expression of the chivalric temper of the late Middle Ages. The ideal of a knight combining bravery,

generosity, and devotion was no longer a reality, and picturesque parades had taken the place of arms and prayers'.³⁵

The empty forms were preserved and developed in a way that seems almost farcical. J. Huizinga gives a striking example in 'the duel between princes, always being announced, but never carried out . . . In reading the summary of the carefully arranged preparations for these princely duels, we ask ourselves, if they were not a conscious feint, either to impose upon one's enemy, or to appease the grievances of one's own subjects. Are we not to regard them as an inextricable mixture of humbug and of a chimerical, but, after all, sincere, craving to conform to the life heroic, by posing before all the world as the champion of right, who does not hesitate to sacrifice himself for his people?'³⁶

At the same time, knighthood was growing more exclusive, and a division was appearing in the former knightly class, which, losing its military functions, had to look for new activities and discover more reasons for existence.

The precious and elaborate character of much medieval chivalry is accounted for by the fact that before the end of the thirteenth century the knightly ranks were closing. Royalty was claiming the sole right to confer knighthood; the ceremony itself was becoming a matter of great expense; and more and more descendants of noble families were drawing together to keep themselves above the large masses of military tenants who had increased with the growing subdivision of fees.³⁷

Thus, and this applies particularly to England, while the nobility and richer gentry were becoming mere courtiers, the lesser gentry were staying at home. Where they had once lived largely by consuming the produce of their estates and looking to war as a source of extra income from ransoms and plunder, they now began to produce wool and food for the market, often with hired labour instead of the forced services of the earlier middle ages. These changes were intensified by the prolonged economic crisis that set in during the fourteenth century. The gentry began to serve as Justices of the Peace and to interest themselves in the details of local government at a time when almost all government was local. If they left their counties for London, it was most probably to sit in Parliament or to institute some legal suit. They

³⁵ *Malory*, pp. 57-8.

³⁶ *The Wanting of the Middle Ages*, Pelican Books, pp. 96-7.

³⁷ *Prestage: op. cit.*, p. 52.

developed a passion for litigation, which did not prevent them from indulging in armed affrays and raids upon their neighbours when a convenient opportunity offered itself. For these purposes they commonly placed themselves under the protection of one of the great nobles, as Malory himself did with the Earl of Warwick.

It was in this age of the degeneration of feudalism that the Arthurian Cycle had its further development. The Grail Quest became the dominating feature, and the earthly glory and power of chivalry was more and more depreciated: in an age when it was losing its practical, mundane importance, it was not unnatural to feel that the approval of heaven was also withdrawn. As chivalry and knighthood were emptied of meaning, so the Arthurian Cycle, and romance literature generally, lost contact with reality, growing more spiritualised, with the predominance of the Grail theme, more precious, reflecting the artificiality of manners, and more fantastic and grotesque as adventures were elaborated without end and merely for the sake of elaboration. So an end was reached with the situation revealed by the only slightly exaggerated criticism of the romances by Cervantes' curate. Much earlier Chaucer had implied somewhat the same criticism in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and less directly by his complete disregard of Arthurian matter.

This dreary elaboration shows itself perhaps most clearly in the Book of Sir Tristram. Here we have the bones of a tale of heroic simplicity, which has made a constant appeal to poets,³⁸ and which was certainly originally a Celtic tale unrelated to the Arthurian Cycle. Once incorporated, it was blown up to gigantic proportions by the addition of every kind of irrelevant adventure, though it must be admitted that the Tristram section came to include some fine things like the story of Lancelot and Elaine. Malory having devoted more than a third of his total space to it without reaching an end, finally rebelled and broke it off without even such pretence of an excuse as he makes for cutting short the Lancelot section:

And because I have lost the very matter of Shevalere de Charyot I depart from the tale of sir Lancelot; and here I go unto the death of Arthur, and that caused sir Aggravayne.³⁹

³⁸ For example, Arnold, Swinburne and Hardy.

³⁹ *Works*, p. 816 (XIX. 13). It is hard to accept this excuse. Malory probably had access to the fine library of Greyfriars in London and could easily have found the manuscript if he had wished. See, Edward Hicks: *Sir Thomas Malory. His Turbulent Career*, 1928, pp. 65-6.

He says merely:

Here endeth the second book of sir Tristram de Lyonesse, Which was drawn out of the French by sir Thomas Malory, knight, as Jesu be his help. Amen.

But here is no rehearsal of the third book.⁴⁰

Malory's revolt against the direction which the romance had taken, was, I think, deliberate and conscious and tells us a good deal about his purpose and methods. It is shown not only in the kind of cutting already mentioned, but by his ruthless treatment of the Grail theme, from which he omits as far as possible all the theological and mystical matter and whose importance for the whole Cycle he undermines. It is shown no less by the heroic and epic note which he reintroduces, and the strong national feeling which pervades his work. What he seems to be trying to do throughout is to restore to the Cycle a sense of reality, to give it once more a contemporary significance.

For Malory was very much a man of his age, who nevertheless still believed in the value of knighthood and the idea of chivalry. Yet, being of his age, he felt that they needed refashioning, and this he set out to do in his recreation of the Cycle. We can see easily enough now that he was attempting a hopeless task, that knighthood, whatever it might once have meant, was something that had passed beyond the possibility of recovery, and that he could only think otherwise by shutting his eyes to whole aspects of reality. One example may be taken from the field of military technique, in which Malory obviously regarded himself as an expert. In his time this had already been revolutionised by the archer, and a second revolution was taking place in his lifetime by the introduction of artillery. Yet for all his practical sense he shows no realisation of these facts. Archers are mentioned only once, where Mellyagaunt 'Laid in an embushment of the best archers that he might get in his country, to the number of thirty to await upon sir Lancelot'.⁴¹ Artillery is also only mentioned once, in what must have been a conscious anachronism, when, Guinevere having taken refuge in the Tower, Mordred, 'laid a mighty siege about the Tower, and made many assaults, and threw engines unto them, and shot great guns'.⁴² Thus, the two innovations which in his own time had transformed the science of war, appear only as mean tricks employed by contemptible people, without a hint anywhere that they were already making the

⁴⁰ *Works*, p. 623 (XII. 14).

⁴¹ *Works*, p. 795 (XIX. 3).

⁴² *Works*, p. 860 (XXI. 1).

armour-clad knight obsolete. Yet Malory, who was a practical soldier, cannot have been unaware of this, and such contradictions are typical of his work.

So we have an epic story, shot through with the new practicality of the fifteenth century. Such contradictions are in keeping with what we know about his life.⁴³ His apparently criminal record, with his many imprisonments for riot, assaults and the like, has puzzled and disturbed some modern writers. On the face of it, it is inconsistent with his own professions:

‘What?’ said sir Lancelot, ‘is he a thief and a knight? and a ravisher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of knighthood, and contrary unto his oath. It is pity that he liveth!’⁴⁴

Perhaps these nice critics have distressed themselves unnecessarily. The fifteenth century in England was an age of private violence and of feuds among neighbouring gentry, and Malory undoubtedly shared this characteristic of his age. But on examination his exploits are capable of more than one explanation. His principal opponents seem to have been certain monastic establishments that had long been at odds with the surrounding countryside: Malory’s activities have more the appearance of those of a leader of a popular movement than of an ordinary criminal. Perhaps we might say that he saw himself rather as a knight-errant redressing a public wrong than as a bandit. His biographer, Edward Hicks, suggests that he may, like many of the minor gentry of the Midlands, have had Lollard leanings.⁴⁵ There is nothing in *Le Morte Darthur* which suggests this directly, but it is certainly not out of keeping with his deliberate writing-down of the sacramental element in the Grail Quest. It has been suggested, no less plausibly, by G. L. Kitteridge that the charges of rape that were brought against him were no more than a legal fiction.⁴⁶

⁴³ The identification of the writer with the Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire is not absolutely established, but may be regarded as certain enough for practical purposes.

⁴⁴ *Works*, p. 193 (VI. 10). A passage peculiar to Malory, with no parallel in his sources.

⁴⁵ Hicks: *op. cit.*, pp. 40-7.

⁴⁶ G. L. Kitteridge: *Sir Thomas Malory*, 1925. Quoted Hicks: *op. cit.*, pp. 52-3. Malory was charged with ‘feloniously raping Joan, the wife of Hugh Smyth’. Kitteridge comments: ‘Malory and his servants had searched Smyth’s house in vain. Smyth’s wife, who objected to the search, may have been roughly treated; perhaps she was forcibly removed from the dwelling while it was ransacked. That would have been *raptus*. Then, on the first of August, the search was repeated with similar violence and with complete success . . . On neither occasion is there any likelihood that Goodwife Smyth was actually ravished. The duplication of this particular charge is reason enough for rejecting such an idea: it is ridiculous to suppose that Malory actually ravished the woman twice.’

For the rest, it is on record that Malory served in the wars against France and Scotland,⁴⁷ and took part in the Wars of the Roses. As a follower of the Earls of Warwick he was presumably first a Yorkist and then a Lancastrian, and it was as a Lancastrian that he suffered his last imprisonment, which perhaps only ended with his death in 1471.

The discovery in 1934 of the Winchester Manuscript established the certainty of the conjecture, based on the final paragraph of Caxton's text, that his book was written in prison. While a prisoner he reflected upon his life and age, on the tragic outcome of the violence, disloyalty and civil disorder of which he had seen so much, and *Le Morte Darthur* is the fruit of this meditation. It was this above all which gave it the character of a serious political work. Again and again, from his rebuke to the English for being 'so new-fangill'⁴⁸ to the grim and vivid description of Arthur's last battlefield:

Then heard they people cry in the field.

'Now go thou, sir Lucan,' said the king, 'and do me to wit what betokens that noise in the field.'

So sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places; and as he went he saw and hearkened by the moonlight how that pillagers and robbers were come into the field to pillage and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bracelets and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead outright, there they slew them for their harness and their riches.⁴⁹

we are faced with this sense of a man writing not of the distant past but of what he knew.

It is this relation of the ancient Matter to his own experience which gives his work a quality that makes *Le Morte Darthur* a living book today, once we have learnt to look below the romantic trappings. Malory was looking to the ideas of chivalry and knighthood as the cement for a falling world, as they had once been the cement for a developing one. He thought of them as something that might preserve his class and all that it valued from the ruin which faced them. It was a vain search but not an ignoble one: in an age of treason, violence and greed he proclaimed a simple faith in the virtues of courage, faith and loyalty as the basis of social stability. But he was too much a realist,

⁴⁷ Vinaver suggests (*Works*, 1947, I. xxv) that Malory may have drawn Arthur with Henry V in his mind. This is at least more convincing than Tennyson's comparison with the Prince Consort!

⁴⁸ *Works*, p. 862 (XXI. 1).

⁴⁹ *Works*, p. 869 (XXI. 4).

and too much a man of his age not to be influenced by the new, common-sense money relations that were increasingly dominating the fifteenth-century scene. Thus, the final evidence which Ector offers Lancelot of Guinevere's love is that: 'it hath cost my lady the queen twenty thousand pounds the seeking of you'.⁵⁰ And neither Lancelot, the model of knightly behaviour, nor Malory himself, find it anything but proper that in rejecting Elayne's love he can say:

But because, fair damsel, that ye love me as ye do, I will for your good will and kindness show you some goodness. That is this, that wheresomever ye will set your heart upon some good knight that will wed you, I shall give you together a thousand pounds yearly, to you and to your heirs.⁵¹

Malory knows that marriage is a serious matter of fiefs and dowries, and at his most romantic realises that this must be so for the class to which he belongs in the conditions under which it existed. And if love and marriage were by no means the same thing, love itself was for him a matter of good sense and stability, far removed from the artificial tangle of the adulterous courtly love in which the romances were founded. His Lancelot and Chrétien's have little in common but a name and some superficial incidents. Chrétien's hero is a dummy to whom are affixed the sentiments and conventional attitudes of the courtly lover: he speaks and acts by the book—and what a book! Malory's Lancelot is a real person caught in a desperate tangle of conflicting loyalties and emotions from which he cannot escape without destroying both himself and the two people—Guinevere and Arthur—whom he most loves. He is, perhaps, the first true character, observed from the inside, in the whole of modern European literature.⁵²

His faith and devotion to his mistress are as unflinching as in any of the older romances, yet his attitude is at bottom as practical as Malory's own. When he is reproached by a lady, 'that ye will not love some maiden or gentlewoman,' he replies: 'Fair damsel, I may not warn people to speak of me what it pleaseth them. But for to be a wedded man, I think it not, for then I must couch with her and leave arms and tournaments, battles and adventures. And as for to say to take my

⁵⁰ *Works*, p. 616 (XII. 9).

⁵¹ *Works*, p. 777 (XVIII. 19).

⁵² T. H. White, in his modern Arthurian Cycle, *The Once and Future King*, brilliantly develops the Lancelot-Guinevere situation and Lancelot's character. Yet for the most part he only expands and brings fully to light what is already implicit in Malory's treatment. I regard his book as the one genuine and creative modern contribution to the Matter of Britain, with the possible exception of some of Morris' shorter poems.

pleasaunce with paramours, that will I refuse: in principal for dread of God, for knights that be adventurers should not be adulterers nor lecherous, for then they be not happy nor fortunate unto the wars; for either they shall be overcome with a simpler knight than they be themselves, or else they shall slay by mischance and their cursedness better men than they be themselves. And so who that useth paramours shall be unhappy and all thing unhappy that is about them.⁵³ And at the last Lancelot and Guinevere repent, not on moral or theological grounds of the sinfulness of their adulterous love, but because of its fatal practical and political consequences:

Through this same man and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain. Therefore, sir Lancelot, wit thou well that I am set in such a plight to get my soul-heal. And yet I trust, through God's grace and through His Passion of his wide wounds, that after my death I may have sight of the blessed face of Christ Jesu, and on Doomsday to sit on His right side; for as sinful as ever I was, now are saints in heaven.⁵⁴

Malory himself, in a famous passage that owes little to any of his sources, strikes the same note:

For, like as winter doth always erase and deface green summer, so fareth it by unstable love in man and woman, for in many persons there is no stability: for we may see all day, for a little blast of winter's mark, anon we shall deface and lay apart true love, for little or nought, that cost much thing. This is no wisdom, nor no stability, but it is feebleness of nature and great disworship, who-ever useth this.

Therefore, like as May month flowereth and flourisheth in every man's garden, so in like wise let every man of worship flourish his heart in this world: first unto God, and next unto the joy of them that he promised his faith unto; for there was never worshipful man nor worshipful woman but they loved one better than another; and worship in arms may never be foiled. But first reserve the honour to God, and secondly thy quarrel must come of thy lady. And such love I call worshipful love.⁵⁵

Love, in short, is justified in so far as it helps the knight to be more efficient. Tristram and Palomides fight well above their usual form at

⁵³ *Works*, pp. 194-5 (VI. 10).

⁵⁴ *Works*, p. 876 (XXI. 9).

⁵⁵ *Works*, pp. 790-1 (XVIII. 25).

a tournament where Isoud is among the spectators. It is to be deplored when it disrupts the social structure. Arthur ignores the love of Lancelot and Guinevere as long as he can, and when it is forced upon his notice, his distress is practical rather than romantic:

Wit you well, my heart was never so heavy as it is now. And much more am I sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company. And now I dare say there was never a Christian king that ever held such a fellowship together. And alas, that ever sir Lancelot and I should be at debate! Ah, Aggravayne, Aggravayne! Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou hadst and sir Mordred, thy brother, unto sir Lancelot hath caused all this sorrow.⁵⁶

Defeated, a prisoner, sick perhaps, Malory endowed his epic with the sense of failure and decay which he felt for his own life and his own cause. His heart broke with Lancelot's, knighthood as he understood it was passing with Arthur. And here, I think, lies the key to the unintended greatness of his achievement. He set out to glorify knighthood, to breathe new life into it, so that: 'chivalry becomes a useful discipline which, if properly practised, can make its adherents into "the sternest knights to their foes".'⁵⁷ If he had succeeded there would have been but one more obsolete treatise on medieval manners. But he failed because in his heart he knew that the world he valued and wished to revive was passing beyond recall. Feudal society was still to be a long time dying, even in England where the process of decay was most evident. But already the signs of doom were upon it, and gravely, magnificently and unwittingly Malory pronounced its funeral oration.

⁵⁶ *Works*, p. 833 (XX. 9).

⁵⁷ *Works*, 1927, I. p. xxvi.

SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORICAL OUTLOOK

I. THE DILEMMA OF HUMANISM

SHAKESPEARE lived at a time when the feudal customary and corporate society was disintegrating before the growth of bourgeois relations. Just because the feudal norms were for the first time threatened and questioned, men became more fully aware of them. What was Shakespeare's attitude? Did he welcome the new values? Did he regret the passing of the old? *Timon*, at least, suggests that he did, or, perhaps, that he was bewildered by problems to which no answer could be found. If, like Cervantes, he was a man astride between two worlds, the point is that for the first time there were two worlds pulling men in different ways. Shakespeare brought the sensibility of a great poet to bear on the problems of his age, but a poet is not necessarily a sociologist or a historian, and we have no right to ask him the same kind of questions, or to expect the same kind of answers, as we would of them. As Professor L. C. Knights says: 'Shakespeare, of course, was not a political writer in the sense in which Milton and Dryden were sometimes political writers . . . But he was deeply interested in the nature of kingship and authority, and in men's relations with each other in the sphere of public life; and if there is no Shakespearean political doctrine there is a recognizably Shakespearean manner in the dramatic presentation of political situations and problems.'¹

What, then, can we usefully discover from the plays about Shakespeare's attitude to public affairs, to history in the broadest sense? It is a commonplace that any political attitude must have a class basis: it does not necessarily follow that any individual must reflect the attitude of any single class. And I do not think that Shakespeare reflected the attitude of any one social class or group—feudal gentry, guild burgess, new bourgeoisie, or, still less, small master or artizan. He lived in a world alongside all of these and shares some of the prejudices, hopes and antipathies of them all.

Such a position was peculiarly possible to a man of Shakespeare's origin, education and profession, living in an age like the later sixteenth century. He was born in a prosperous, medium sized provincial town, of which his father was a prominent burgess (later he became less prosperous, which is probably why Shakespeare had to seek his fortune

¹ *Party Politics and the English Tradition*, 1954, p. 8.

in London). Such a family often faced both ways: no great gulf divided it from the smaller independent craftsmen, yet Shakespeare's connections were respectable enough for the College of Heralds to be able to grant him a coat of arms with at least some show of plausibility.

The educational system of the time facilitated such a social ambiguity. This was the great age of the foundation and growth of the grammar school. It is still a matter of dispute if and how far the old educational structure had been impaired by the Reformation.² What is certain is that by Shakespeare's time any loss that might have been suffered had been more than made good. Indeed, a prominent Elizabethan educationalist, Richard Mulcaster, complained in 1581 that there were too many schools,³ a view echoed by Bacon a generation later.⁴ To these schools the sons of the country gentry, who previously would more probably have entered as pages in a great household, now went in increasing numbers. They studied alongside the sons of tradesmen and yeomen, as well as an entirely new social group—the sons of the clergy. This 'grammar learning' was the common heritage of virtually the whole literate population, and forms the cultural background of its theatre. 'Behind the national drama of the age of Shakespeare and James I, stands the school curriculum and that method of approaching literature which was inculcated by masters in private and grammar schools and by private tutors. With that curriculum and that method the playwrights almost without exception, and the greater part of their audience, were familiar.'⁵

Just as Shakespeare and his audience, whatever their class origin, shared a background and education that had important common elements, so his position as a practical man of the theatre tended to cut across class frontiers. The sixteenth century poet-actor lived in the interstices of the class structure, above, below and beyond the bourgeoisie from whom he commonly sprung. The theatre lay, socially as well as geographically, between feudal Westminster and mercantile London, in a disreputable Bohemia which it shared with the brothel and the bear garden. The players were at once vagabonds who could consider themselves lucky to 'scape a whipping', yet also the servants, and often favoured and intimate servants, of the highest nobility.

² See Joan Simon, 'A. F. Leach on the Reformation,' *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, and Vol. 4, No. 1.

³ *Positions*, Ch. 37.

⁴ Spedding, *Life of Bacon*, Vol. IV, pp. 252-3.

⁵ L. C. Knights, 'Education and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare,' *The Criterion*, July 1932.

Shakespeare's relations with the Earl of Southampton were certainly of this character.

This was not only an age of the foundation of new schools, but of a new curriculum, unmistakably if hesitantly moulded by the outlook of humanism. The result was a generation in which the medieval ideas of order and degree, of a static and hierarchical universe, were in conflict with new ideas of change and progress, of social justice and the unfolding of new possibilities for humanity. Shakespeare, who had been brought up in the grammar learning, but not at the university, was a humanist of this sort, not an intellectual steeped in the classics, but a working actor-dramatist, widely read in the vernacular—into which the older classics as well as the contemporary literature of France and Italy were then being translated at an unprecedented pace—acquisitive and absorbent. He was not, as A. A. Smirnov points out, a 'closet humanist', but a humanist whose humanism had to stand the test of every day life. 'His reactions to the world around him, and to the changes in the political and social current of his time, were strong but complex. They found expression not in impulsive outbursts or obvious allusions to the evils of the times, but in profound internal upheavals and changed evaluations of humanity and the life process.'⁶

Shakespeare, therefore, was able to reflect not the standpoint of any single class but the conflicts and contradictions, the hopes and despairs peculiar to an age standing on the threshold of revolution. For this reason I find the attempts of some Marxist critics (at various times) to pigeon-hole him as a representative of the bourgeoisie, of the declining feudalists, of the section of the nobility becoming bourgeois, or of any other particular social group, all unsatisfactory. The very fact that a more or less plausible case can be made for all these views is perhaps enough in itself to arouse a suspicion that their adherents are on the wrong tack. Nor was the attempt of M. Levidov to present Shakespeare as a Machiavellian super-man any more convincing.⁷

Within these conflicts lies tragedy as he sees it. In *Lear*, *Timon*, *Coriolanus* and elsewhere he shows himself fully aware of the evils of his times, of poverty, exploitation, injustice, war. But though he sees them he can see no solution. The traditional society of feudalism is doomed and cannot recover. In any case he knows it too well to suppose that it has anything positive to offer—Hotspur, Hector, Corio-

⁶ Smirnov, *Shakespeare*, Critics Group, New York, 1936, pp. 25-6. In fact, obvious allusions to social evils are by no means uncommon in his writings.

⁷ 'Three Shakespeares,' *The European Quarterly* (Feb. 1935).

lanus, the representatives of that past, are magnificent but futile figures. The new bourgeois forces are themselves the cause of much of the evil. There is not, and will not be for centuries, any revolutionary movement of the exploited. Shakespeare can see their convulsive revolts only as something negative and destructive. None the less he does advance from blank hostility when writing of Cade's insurrection in 1590 to a real if critical sympathy with the grievances of the Roman plebs in *Coriolanus*.

To a sensitive man of the sixteenth century, to More for example, the onset of the new mode of production appeared as a catastrophe. This was inevitable. What was immediately apparent was the destruction of the old, the ruin of ancient families, the corruption of old customs, the growing power of money and the unscrupulousness with which that power was exercised. These were the generations during which usury was ceasing to be a deadly sin and becoming a way of life. To More, to Shakespeare, this was a tragic situation: only the ignoble, the newly enriched, the merchant, the monopolist, the usurer could rejoice in what change could be seen. It was not yet possible to see 'the change beyond the change' which in the end made the new mode a step forward. If we expect Shakespeare to have been able to see it we expect the impossible.

So he was forced back, as More had been earlier, upon a moral solution, and his criticism of society was primarily a moral criticism. Yet how radical it was we can see from *Lear*, where, by putting the same sentiment into the mouth of both Lear and Gloucester, he justifies us, for once, in assuming with certainty that the sentiment is his own. Thus Lear:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (III, 4.)

And Gloucester:

Heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see

Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly;
 So distribution should undo excess
 And each man have enough. (IV, 1.)

How truly radical this is may be appreciated by comparing it with the evident horror with which Spenser regards the same views put into the mouth of his Levelling giant:

Seest not how badly all things present be,
 And each estate quite out of order goeth? . . .
 Were it not good that wrong were then surceast,
 And from the most, that some were given to the Least? . . .
 Tyrants that make men subject to their law
 I will suppress, that they no more may reign,
 And lordlings curb, that commons over-awe;
 And all the wealth of rich men to the poor will draw.⁸

It is easy to recognise which is the people's poet and which the poet of the aristocracy.

Yet Shakespeare can only put his hopes upon a change of heart, especially among the powerful, upon the efficacy of compassion, justice, loyalty and good faith. With our hind-sight we can easily see that this was a utopian dream, that the immediate future lay with the new bourgeois exploiters. Yet all these are in themselves good things: confidence in the strength and possibility of human decency may be misplaced *in the short run*—in the long run it is the rock upon which we build our hope of a true society. It is in this sense that Shakespeare, like the other humanists of his day, can speak to our time and to the future.

The tragic and poetic tension in his work is the tension between two forms of society, two opposed worlds, at the very moment when that tension had reached its height and was about to break in open revolutionary conflict. Shakespeare could not resolve that conflict—only history, life, could do that. But he felt and expressed it in the highest degree and with an incomparable command of language, and he can communicate it to us. That is why we, standing at a new and even more absolute dividing point of time, can perhaps understand and appreciate him as no previous generation has been in a position to do.

II. KINGSHIP AND THE BIRTH OF A NATION

The rise of the bourgeoisie in the sixteenth century created an English nation. The Reformation, replacing a supra-national with a

⁸ *Faerie Queene*, Book V, Canto 2.

national church, the emergence of England as the leader of the Protestant forces of Europe, the progressive national struggle against Spain and the sense of purpose and mission which that struggle engendered, all form part of this process. One outcome was a new interest in history, not as a mere record of events but as having a meaning and conveying lessons of practical value. This new sense of history is embodied in the contemporary chronicles, on which Shakespeare drew so freely for his plays, and is nowhere better expressed than in *Henry IV, Part 2*:

There is a history in all men's lives,
 Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
 The which observed, a man may prophesy,
 With a near aim, of the main chance of things
 As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
 And weak beginnings lie intreaured.
 Such things become the hatch and brood of time. (III, 1.)

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Shakespeare began to work in the theatre about 1590, he turned first to the field of chronicle plays dealing with English history.

He may well have embarked upon the sequence *Henry VI* to *Richard III* for any one of a variety of almost accidental reasons: to satisfy an immediate popular demand, or to use up old material. But he put his best thought about English history into them, and they are his interpretation of how the Tudor, national state came into being. When, later on, as a mature and well-established dramatist, he came to write his second historical Tetralogy (*Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, 1595-9*) I can see no sufficient reason for his doing so other than that he felt impelled to complete his historical picture.

The two series taken as a whole, and there can be little doubt that they were meant to be taken as a whole, give as full an explanation as his sources and the dramatic medium allow of the whole range of modern history—a narrative, an exposition of principles (causation, order and degree, kingship, the relation of human affairs to the cosmic or divine forces, etc.) and a gallery of typical figures to illustrate social change as he saw it.

Shakespeare's choice of period for his history sequence was not accidental. In the series of plays which begins with *Richard II* he covered what was for him and his generation the core of modern history. Earlier times were for them barbarous and obscure, the period since

Bosworth was contemporary history, perilous ground for historian or dramatist. But in the deposition and tragedy of Richard II Shakespeare could see the beginning of what was for him the 'modern' world, the train of events leading to the new, national, Tudor monarchy and the new pattern of life. He interpreted the past in the light of the Tudor political settlement, and his view of this was coloured by what he knew, or thought he knew, of the fifteenth century.

In *Richard II* he presented a formal picture, stylised like a tapestry or illumination, of the old world of the high middle ages. Richard is 'that sweet lovely rose', a comparison that is at once an expression of a certain regretful admiration and a criticism of his inadequacy as a king. With his deposition the established order is shattered and a new age begins, dominated by new kinds of men, practical, realistic, hard and unprincipled, the kind of men in fact whom Shakespeare saw uppermost in his own time. The formal pattern dissolves into a kaleidoscopic picture of English life in *Henry IV*, and, as the curse of the usurpation of Bolingbroke works itself out, this hardens into a new pattern of dissention, defeat abroad, seemingly unending civil war, and, finally, the monstrous tyranny of Richard III and the synthesis of Bosworth, after which normality and order is reasserted. We need not concern ourselves with the question of how far this pattern corresponds to actual historical fact. The point is that it was Shakespeare's pattern and one which was imaginatively convincing to his audience.

If we find it difficult to accept Shakespeare's interpretation of history, we must remember that all interpretations of this period now seem naively moralistic. Shakespeare accepts the pattern drawn by Hall and Polydore Virgil of crime, counter-crime and resolution. He really believed in the possibility of an inherited curse and of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. His audience shared these beliefs. Yet there is a dualism, even a contradiction, in his plays between the divine and superhuman elements working out curse and retribution and the human and quite rational forces through which they take effect. Shakespeare seems at times uncertain which is the real motive force, but it may be significant that it is in the early plays that the superhuman forces seem strongest. As he matured the human and rational gained ground, and in his greatest plays his theme is, in the last analysis, the secular and humanist one of man shaping events, making his own history.

We have equally no reason to doubt that Shakespeare is sincere in his panegyric of Tudor monarchy, as when he writes:

Good grows with her: [*Elizabeth*]
 In her days every man shall eat in safety
 Under his own vine what he plants: and sing
 The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.
 God shall be truly known; and those about her
 From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,
 And by those claim their greatness, not by blood.⁹

Monarchy for the sixteenth century meant a strong, central government as opposed to chaos and anarchy, and the Wars of the Roses were still recent history. Civil strife, under the conditions of decaying feudalism, meant the resumption of fruitless gang wars between rival factions of the nobility. This was something no sensible person wanted, certainly not Shakespeare, who had drawn so vivid a picture of its consequences. In this respect he certainly reflects the outlook which had gained strength with the growth of the bourgeoisie. It was an outlook essentially national, and, in the conditions of the time, the monarchy, whatever its shortcomings, was the only possible focal point for this nationalism. And monarchy in the late sixteenth century was therefore a popular monarchy, reflecting the progressive part England was then playing in world politics.

It is not surprising, then, that kingship and the concept of kingship is so prominent in all Shakespeare's chronicle plays. We are presented with a brilliant gallery of typical representatives of kingship, their qualities personified in the traditional emblematic style which his audience would easily recognise. Thus we have Richard II, the rose, in whom the elegant and ceremonial aspect of kingship preponderated. He has only the outward show, not the reality of power, and it is his inadequacy which sets in motion the whole tragic course of events. His supplanter Bolingbroke (Henry IV) is the fox—in him craft and policy outweigh all other qualities. He is a more efficient king than Richard but his crime is greater and, in the end, produces more terrible consequences. Henry V and Edward IV are the sun kings: in them the element of power predominates, and between them comes the saintly Henry VI, the pelican, the most virtuous and the most disastrous of all. His famous shepherd soliloquy¹⁰ illustrates his unfitness for kingship no less than his goodness as a man. Finally the sequence ends with Richard III, the usurper and tyrant from whom kingly qualities are so entirely absent that he may justly be opposed and removed.

⁹ *Henry VIII*, Act V, Sc. 5. It may be worth noting that when Shakespeare wrote this, Elizabeth had been dead nearly ten years.

¹⁰ *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act II, Sc. 5.

This, of course, presented a real problem for a sixteenth century writer. Shakespeare had been brought up in, and I think in general accepted, the Tudor orthodoxy of the necessity of order and the absolute sinfulness of rebellion: yet the Tudor dynasty was itself the product of a rebellion that had to be justified. This could only be done by showing that Richard III was a monster, a usurper and no true king. Today this view has been widely questioned by historians, but if any one had any such doubts in Shakespeare's time he kept them to himself. There is no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare had any such doubts. Yet very strange and contradictory things were happening to the conception of kingship in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Feudal society had recognised, at least in theory, the right of the vassal to renounce his allegiance as a last resort, that is to say, it recognised the right to rebellion for the ruling aristocracy. This did not extend, of course, to the lower orders. The sixteenth century doctrine that even an evil ruler ought not to be resisted reflects, to a certain extent, the recognition by the bourgeoisie of the realities of feudal conditions, under which the power of an evil or unscrupulous ruler was still less harmful to the masses than a weakening of the central authority, which exposed them to private war and indiscriminate exactions. We can note in Shakespeare the extreme reluctance of the Scottish nobles to make war even upon Macbeth, who, like Richard III, had to be presented in an extraordinary light as monster and tyrant to justify such resistance. In the sixteenth century all the conflicting and localised loyalties which had characterised the earlier feudalism were being broken down and Leviathan was being born.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the rise of the bourgeoisie and of the idea of nationality is the final victory of the principle of strictly hereditary over elective monarchy. In early feudal times the two conceptions ran side by side because the king was *primus* but also *inter pares*. The head of the new national state had to be *sui generis*. The nation, developing with the growth of the bourgeoisie, required a greater degree of stability than elective monarchy provided. From about the fourteenth century the hereditary principle gained ground at the expense of the elective and by Shakespeare's time the idea of elective monarchy was not only dead but forgotten. For him John had usurped the throne rightfully belonging to his nephew, an idea which would have been quite foreign to the men of John's time. Now the king had attained a divinity that to seem divine had also to seem to

have been eternal. A faint trace of the old order may perhaps be seen in the right of the nobility to speak to the monarch plainly and roughly at need, as Kent does to Lear: it is one of the signs of Lear's growing un wisdom that he resents this frankness.

Yet the new status which the monarch attained in the sixteenth century was from the start insecure. The new kind of interest in history which we can see, with the people as a positive force with rights and duties, leads directly towards revolutionary crisis. The fact that this happened at the same time as the new conception of monarchy made accommodation and compromise more difficult, and the conflict, when it came, sharper and more absolute. With the breaking up of feudalism two new and incompatible ideologies were developing. This was not understood at the time—both sides appealed to what they conceived to be the ancient laws and good customs of the realm in defence of what were really revolutionary innovations.

In Shakespeare we can see not only something of this contradiction but perhaps a change in his attitude, especially marked in the plays written after about 1600. Earlier he had voiced the orthodox views of the paramount need for authority and the wickedness of rebellion, nowhere more clearly than in the passage, now generally credited to him, in the play *Sir Thomas More* and probably written about 1595:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
 Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
 Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage,
 Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,
 Authority quite silenced by your brawl
 And you in ruff of your opinions clothed,—
 What have you got? I'll tell you, you have taught
 How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
 How order should be quelled, and by this pattern
 Not one of you should live an aged man.
 For other ruffians as their fancies wrought
 With self same hand, self reasons and self right,
 Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
 Would feed on one another. (Sc. 6.)

Even here a curious qualification may be noted. Lines 3-5 of this passage are, I think, a deliberate and unmistakable echo of the famous passage in More's *Utopia* describing the plight of the victims of en-

closures: 'They must needs depart away, poore, silly wretched soules, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherlesse children, widows, woeful mothers, with their younge babes, and their whole household small in substance and much in number.' If so, we must infer that Shakespeare is taking this opportunity to remind us that he is aware of social injustice as well as the need for authority.

From about 1600 his conviction of the paramount importance of order and authority seems to have weakened. We can note the much greater sympathy with which popular tumult is treated in *Coriolanus*, the contrast between the humanist radicalism of Hamlet and the traditional statecraft of Claudius and Polonius. And while disorder is still presented in *Lear* as opening the road to every kind of evil, the abuse of authority is shown as an evil in itself and one which corrupts the whole fabric of the commonwealth:

There thou mightest behold the great image of authority:
a dog's obeyed in office . . .

 Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's sword does pierce it. (IV, 6.)

The central theme of *Lear* is that of the king whose eyes are opened to reality by experience of the depths of suffering and poverty.

Shakespeare was a supporter of kingship: no other attitude was in practice possible to a man of his time, yet his support was not uncritical. If we examine the attitude to kingship which runs through all the history plays and appears more incidentally elsewhere we find that support for the principle of monarchy as it then existed does not prevent the keenest understanding of kingship in its practical application. Henry V has usually been regarded, with some justice, as Shakespeare's portrait of the ideal hero-king: yet generations of readers have found him far from perfect, and indeed positively distasteful as a man, and as a king his policy proved disastrous. There are some grounds for thinking that Shakespeare was not unaware of this. He saw also the need for a positive relationship, not one of mere subordination, between king and people. As his genius matured and the crisis of the age developed his criticism of authority grew sharper and his sense of social injustice keener.

III. SHAKESPEARE AND WAR

When Shakespeare came to London, England had been at war for some years and was to remain at war for many more. It is not surprising,

therefore, that war occupies so prominent a part in his history plays, as well as in a number of others. We shall find here also that his attitude was complex and changed markedly between the early and later plays.

About internal war there is little that need be said. Shakespeare regarded this as an unmixed evil, perhaps the worst from which a nation could suffer. As we have seen in the case of Richard III and Macbeth resistance to any lawful authority could only be justified by the most extraordinary circumstances. Foreign war was a different matter.

In his very first play (*Henry VI, Part 1*) the central theme is the loss of France in the last stages of the Hundred Years' War. Shakespeare deplors the disunity and mismanagement which led to defeat, the singlehearted soldiers, Salisbury and Talbot, are naively heroic and no doubts are expressed about the justice of the English cause. In this Shakespeare is probably expressing the general view of his time. We have to remember that this war was still a fairly recent memory—little more distant than the Crimean War is from us or Waterloo from the generation of 1914. That is to say, while it was not within living memory, there were still many who had heard accounts of it from actual participants. In a time when men depended less on written records and more on oral tradition than we do, it would probably be a more living memory, and, till the Armada year of 1588, England had not been involved in any major foreign war that could blur this memory.

In one respect Shakespeare gives a picture of the Hundred Years' War that has coloured and distorted popular views ever since. Reading back into the fifteenth century the developments of his own day, he portrayed it as a national rather than a feudal war, rather perhaps in the way Eisenstein recreated the epic of Alexander Nevsky in the light of the events of his time. This makes for effective drama though for doubtful history. A climax of absurdity is reached in *Henry V* with its four 'typical' soldiers, Gower the Englishman, Fluellen the Welshman, Jamy the Scot and MacMorris the Irishman. The implication of a 'British' nation is not only absurd for the fifteenth century but almost equally so for Shakespeare's own time, while even today the national position of Wales and Scotland is still a controversial matter and no one would deny that Ireland has always been a totally distinct nation.

In rather the same way Shakespeare distorts the historical position of Gaunt and York in *Richard II*. Here they are shown as types of the old feudal nobility, grave, responsible, substantial, in contrast to Richard who is the courtier noble—frivolous, cynical, Italianate, who

appeared in the late feudal period with the Renaissance absolutism. Shakespeare not only idealises the old aristocracy, who were in truth a bloody and ruthless crew, but errs historically in giving them a national consciousness. The Gaunt of history, with one foot in England, the other in Spain, could never have spoken in the way Shakespeare makes him do about

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise;
This fortress built by Nature for itself. (II, 1.)

This is an attitude of the late sixteenth century which had just seen the defeat of a sea-borne invasion, not of fourteenth century feudal magnates whose ambition was to win new territory in France or Spain. So far, then, Shakespeare's attitude to war appears one of approval and patriotic pride.

In *Henry IV, Part 1* a new note is struck. Here we meet war not as something heroically imagined but as a reality affecting the lives of common men. Falstaff describes his company:

My whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies, slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores; and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen; the cankers of a calm world and a long peace. (IV, 2.)¹¹

He adds:

Good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better: tush, man, mortal men, mortal men.

And a little later we are told:

I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered: there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive; and they are for the town's end, to beg during life. (V, 3.)

When Shakespeare contrasts the Talbots with Falstaff's ragged army and corrupt recruiting methods he is contrasting the unknown and idealised high-feudal past with the known present. He did not know how feudal armies were raised: he and his audience knew how armies

¹¹ This description is so close to Cromwell's of the early Parliament army as 'most of them old decayed serving men, and tapsters, and such kind of fellows', that one is tempted to guess that Cromwell in his unregenerate days at the Inns of Court may have seen a performance of *Henry IV*. At least it shows that Falstaff's picture was not mere caricature.

were raised, and thrown away, in the sixteenth century. They had all seen the crippled soldier begging at the town's end. In *Henry IV* we are constantly aware of the contrast between the imagined past and the intrusion of the unheroic present. Yet Shakespeare lived through the Armada crisis, in what now seems to us a heroic time. Are we to conclude that all ages are heroic, though they seem not to be so at the time, or that all are unheroic even though seeming heroic at a distance, or that heroic and unheroic are commonly so entangled as often to be found together not only in the same age but in the same man?

In *Henry V* we certainly seem at first sight to return to the heroic. Everyone knows the famous set pieces glorifying war and the soldier's trade. We need not doubt that they were written sincerely and that Shakespeare's audience rose to them. Yet when we examine the play more closely, contradictory and disturbing features emerge.

In particular the question of the justice of England's war with France is raised for the first time. There is, indeed, a hint at the close of *Henry IV* where the dying king advises his heir, that justice is not the only thing to be considered:

Therefore, my Harry
Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out,
May waste the memory of the former days. (IV, 5.)

As *Henry V* opens the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely are discovered discussing the threat to confiscate church property and planning a counter-measure. In the next Scene the Archbishop delivers a long discourse to the King to justify his claim to the French throne and advises him to press it, advice which Henry is only too eager to accept.

Today the whole thing appears entirely cynical, but we cannot be certain that Shakespeare, and still less his audience, saw it in the same way. No doubt the bishops, being Papists, could be permitted to use dishonest arguments, and a London sixteenth century audience, always thoroughly anti-clerical, would relish a thrust at the church. But the fact that Henry renewed the war for unavowed reasons, and on advice corruptly given, does not necessarily mean that his claim could not be justified. Also, the sixteenth century attitude to war was very different from our own. War was still regarded, if as in a sense an evil, as a proper and natural instrument of national policy. Once you could persuade yourself that you had a just cause, it could be presented as

glorious, not as a tragic necessity. Hotspur in *Henry IV* and the Bastard in *King John* stand for an older and still widely held view that war is the proper occupation of a gentleman. There is nothing to suggest that Shakespeare shared this opinion: about the justice of England's cause in France he may well have had some reservations.

After Agincourt Henry sees in victory the hand of God justifying his cause—just as Cromwell did centuries after. This is a dangerous and double-edged argument, as Milton had come to realise when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, and Shakespeare's audience hardly needed the reminder of the transitory nature of these successes with which he ended his play:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France and made his England bleed:
Which oft our stage hath shown. (*Henry V*, Epilogue.)

The failure would be, indeed, fresher in the Elizabethan mind than the victories.

This theme of the justice of the war is taken up again when Henry, disguised, says, rather smugly we feel, to some of his soldiers on the eve of battle:

Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the king's
company; his cause being just and his quarrel honourable.

To which the soldier Williams replies:

That's more than we know . . . But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place'; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afraid there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men die not well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection. (IV, I.)

Once again the question is left undecided. Certainly Henry's reply is unconvincing and slides evasively over Williams' arguments. Elsewhere in the play one may note the emphasis on the sordid aspects of

war in the scenes showing the plundering and cowardice of Pistol and his friends, and the Duke of Burgundy's eloquent picture of war's destructiveness with which it ends.¹²

If the attitude to war disclosed in *Henry V* is much more complex than at first appears, the contrast between *Henry V* and *Troilus and Cressida*—written only three years later—is really striking. We have to remember that since the Armada year, 1588, England had been continuously at war with Spain. The war had opened with immense enthusiasm and a resounding victory, it had seemed to many Englishmen a crusade against Popery and reaction. But by the end of the century it was dragging out miserably, with no prospect of a decision. Disunity among the leaders and mere incompetence had led to failure after failure. The decision in 1604 to make peace was on the whole both wise and popular.¹³

It is easy to see how topical, in 1602, a play set towards the end of the long siege of Troy might be, and I think that *Troilus and Cressida* is the most topical of all Shakespeare's plays. This may be one of the reasons why it is dramatically unsatisfactory. Shakespeare was perhaps too close to his theme to get it into proper perspective, and the result is a rather confused close-up on the wretchedness of war. In the Greek camp we see the feuds and jealousies of the leaders, mirroring exactly those of the English court and armed forces at the end of the century. The statesmanship is coldly cynical, the heroics stupid and suicidal, the fighting conducted more with the mouth than the sword, all human relationships have grown coarse and trivial under the stress of war. At the end Hector, the fine knight whose very high-mindedness has doomed his city to destruction, is caught unarmed and brutally slaughtered at the command of Achilles.¹⁴ And for this dreary picture of a war turned sour Shakespeare deliberately chose one of the great heroic stories of the world and a conflict traditionally ideal. It is as if he selected the most romantic symbol he could find to destroy the romantic view of war.

The whole play is marked by a terrible yet objective bitterness, with Pandarus and Thersites forming a mocking chorus. Like Falstaff they

¹² Act V, Sc. 2.

¹³ This is not to say that the subsequent policy of alliance with, and subservience to, Spain was either wise or popular.

¹⁴ Four years earlier, in 1598, Chapman had dedicated his translation of Homer's *Iliad* to the Earl of Essex, 'the most honoured now living instance of the Achillean virtues'. Essex was now dead, and Shakespeare surely identified his tragedy with that of Hector. There seems no inherent reason for introducing Hector's death into the play.

are anti-heroes, but without that core of healthy life which redeems him from complete ignominy. Yet Shakespeare does not mock with them, nor condemn men and women as such. Rather he condemns the evil circumstances which drive decent, honourable people to such straits. They are victims of war, of 'the times' against which Hamlet had railed in the play written only a year earlier.

For with *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare had entered his third period, that of the great tragedies. In a number of these the criticism of war finds a place. Hamlet's approbation of the military adventures of Fortinbras should not prevent us from detecting the irony with which Shakespeare writes of:

The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? (IV, 4.)

And he shows every sympathy with the disinclination of the Roman plebs to provide the pile of corpses on which Coriolanus can act the conqueror. We know nothing of this change in Shakespeare except what we can deduce from the plays themselves read in the context of the years in which they were being produced. And of course we know nothing of any personal factors that may have influenced him. Yet it seems permissible to suppose, taking into account the general shift towards plays of darkness and social criticism during the early years of the seventeenth century, that much of the reason for Shakespeare's sharp change from the cheerful patriotism of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and the relative light-heartedness of the comedies of the same years to a bleaker mood and a growing realisation of social injustice must be connected with the change in the relation of class forces which was taking place in those years. This is now widely recognised, but I think we should add also the experience of a war begun with great hopes that had grown pointless and wearisome.¹⁵ From his experience of this particular war Shakespeare would seem to have advanced to a condemnation of war in general and a criticism of society which had to make use of such a method of settling its differences.

¹⁵ We should remember also the savage, futile and even more costly war which was fought in Ireland throughout a great part of Elizabeth's reign. It was this war which led, indirectly, to the downfall of the Earl of Essex.

FRANCIS BACON—PHILOSOPHER OF NATURE

FRANCIS BACON belonged to one of the new families so typical of England in the sixteenth century. His grandfather was a prosperous Suffolk yeoman farmer, who grew rich, speculated shrewdly in church lands after the Reformation and was able to send his son to the University and put him to the law—almost the only field in which a man outside the aristocracy could then rise to great fortune and position. This son, Sir Nicholas Bacon, reached the top of the legal bureaucracy, and Francis was therefore reared at the court of Elizabeth I and destined from the start to a career in the service of the crown.

Yet Francis Bacon was never merely the courtier and bureaucrat, and the contradiction which marked his whole character and career and which makes him such a brilliant and fascinating figure showed itself at the very outset. At Cambridge University, to which he was sent as the modern and reforming university of his day, he came to a remarkable conclusion which coloured his whole life. His secretary, Dr. William Rawley, tells us:

While he was commorant in the university, about sixteen years of age, as his lordship hath been pleased to impart unto myself, he first fell into the dislike of the philosophy of Aristotle: not for the worthlessness of the author, to whom he would ever ascribe all high attributes, but for the unfruitfulness of the way; being a philosophy (as his lordship used to say) only strong for disputations and contentions, but barren of the production of works for the benefit of the life of man; in which mind he continued to his dying day.

The objection was less to Aristotle than to the set of dogmas into which Aristotelianism had been ossified by medieval thought, to Aristotelianism as the philosophy of feudal society. Bacon was a man of the new age of the rising bourgeoisie, who demanded from philosophy, or science as men were just beginning to call it, not a system of metaphysics but 'the production of works for the benefit of the life of man'. Knowledge was to be a social weapon. Bacon's ruling idea, as Professor Farrington says,

is simply that knowledge ought to bear fruit in works, that science ought to be applicable to industry, that men ought to organise themselves as a sacred duty to improve and transform the conditions of life.

From this conviction he never deviated and all his important writing centres upon it.

As a man of the new age Bacon shared fully its difficulties and contradictions, and in his particular generation they were perhaps at their zenith. Capitalism in agriculture and industry was growing within feudal society, but at first it grew under the shelter of the monarchy: the bourgeoisie was not yet ready to claim political power on its own behalf. But Bacon lived precisely at the moment when the decisive shift was taking place, and by the end of his life the alliance between crown and bourgeoisie was already breaking. His political fall was, indeed, a consequence of that break. Of this change he seems to have been unaware and to have remained throughout content to play the courtier, to seek office and perquisites and to participate without any conscious humiliation in all the meanness and corruption which his way of life entailed. For this he cannot perhaps be blamed: it was the way in which he was reared and he knew no other, yet it often involved him in actions which seem glaringly at odds with the high professions of his philosophic creed.

Behind this contradiction was another, still more profound, which lies at the very heart of humanism. Humanism fought to free man from superstition and ignorance, but also to free production from the restraints of feudal economy: the bourgeois revolution was waged for the ultimate advance of mankind as a whole, but also to secure for a new class the power to exploit and grow rich, and in this revolution meanness and nobility, cruel oppression and enlightened generosity are inextricably tangled. Of these elements Bacon's character seems also to be compounded.

So we find him, without conscious incongruity, prostrating himself before the great and lending his talents to the support of oppressive policies while yet voicing in *The True Greatness of England* his hope of a commonwealth,

Whose wealth resteth in the hands of merchants, burgers, tradesmen, freeholders, farmers and the like; whereof we have a most evident and present example before our eyes, in our neighbours of the Low Countries, who could never have endured and

continued so inestimable and insupportable charges, either by their natural frugality or by their mechanical industry, were it not also that their wealth was dispersed in many hands, and not engrossed in few; and those hands were not so much of the nobility, but most and generally of inferior conditions.

If his ultimate concern was the establishment of a new philosophy, his immediate energies were occupied with a personal struggle to ascend the political ladder. The death of his father while he was still a minor left him with only a younger son's portion and no settled career. His powerful kinsmen the Cecils were for some reason unhelpful and in his search for a patron he attached himself to the Earl of Essex. When Essex fell from favour he managed to disengage himself adroitly in a way his admirers have never found it easy to defend. It was not till the death of Elizabeth I and the accession of James I that he really began to prosper. From 1607 he climbed rapidly till in 1618 he became Lord Chancellor and was soon after raised to the peerage as Viscount St. Albans.

His fall was even more rapid. Always in search of a patron, he had now attached himself to the Duke of Buckingham, and when, in 1621, the Commons wished to attack Buckingham but dared not do so directly, they struck at him through Bacon. Charged with corruption, deserted by his patron, he was dismissed, fined and imprisoned. Though these latter penalties were soon remitted, his political life was over and till his death in 1626 he lived in retirement devoting himself entirely to his literary and philosophical work. It should perhaps be added that though the charges against him were clearly proved he was no more guilty than other public figures—certainly no more guilty than the majority of those who condemned him.

These details about his public career have to be given if we are to understand Bacon and his time: they can give little pleasure to his admirers and are certainly not the reason why he is remembered today. If we honour him after four hundred years, it is not of the learned Chancellor and the man of affairs that we think, but of the philosopher who declared:

The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible.

He revolutionised philosophy by directing it outwards to the objective

world of things. Man could only increase his knowledge, and his power over his environment, by studying nature:

For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh its web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of the thread and work, but of no substance or profit.

His whole quarrel with his predecessors, both Greeks and Schoolmen, was that they looked inward, whereas all true knowledge must come from observation and experiment. Plato's idealism is condemned even more harshly than Aristotle's metaphysic:

When you asserted that truth is, as it were, the native inhabitant of the human mind and does not come from outside in order to take up its abode there; when you turned our minds away from observation and away from things, to which it is impossible that they should ever be sufficiently attentive and obedient; when you taught us to turn our minds inward and grovel before our own blind and confused idols under the name of contemplative philosophy; then truly you dealt us a mortal injury.

Bacon therefore set to work, in a great series of books, both Latin and English, to outline the method by which the conquest of nature through the mastery of natural law might be accomplished. He set himself vast projects which were never completed, which no one mind *could* have completed, and his work survives like a splendid ruin in whose fragments the ground-plan of a palace for humanity can be discovered. Scientific knowledge was too little advanced in his day for the kind of construction of which he dreamed to be possible, and he himself was not always informed of the best knowledge which then existed. But he did at least lay down certain principles which have been permanently fruitful and entitle him to be regarded as the father of modern materialism.

First of these, perhaps, is the principle that the pursuit of knowledge is an active, not a passive process. Nature will not yield her secrets merely to contemplation, they must be forced from her. Nature must be worked upon, 'vexed' in Bacon's phrase, and every new level of material culture sets man to devise new and appropriate experiments. He learns not by thinking abstractly but by thinking about what has been revealed by acting.

From this he deduced that the philosopher ought to concern himself with the mechanical or industrial processes. Hitherto these had been neglected as too base to deserve the attention of the learned, and where progress had been made it had been made empirically by the actual craftsmen engaged upon production. Much had been learned thus, but progress had been slow and uneven. Only if the arts and crafts and the actual techniques of production were systematically studied could a rapid advance be made. One of the tasks which Bacon set himself was the compilation of a universal encyclopedia of nature, a task, naturally, beyond even his capacity, though we can see what he had in mind from the description of Solomon's House in *The New Atlantis*. Another project he put forward was the establishment of a great library, a botanical and zoological garden, a museum of natural science and a laboratory equipped for every sort of experiment.

Related to the conception of learning as an activity is the conception of practice as the test of truth. 'What is most useful in practice is most correct in theory', he wrote, and:

In natural philosophy practical results are not only the means to improve human well-being. They are also the guarantee of truth. There is a true rule in religion, that a man must show his faith by his works. The same rule holds good in natural philosophy. Science too must be known by its works. It is by the witness of works rather than by logic or even observation that truth is revealed and established.

It is only to be expected that there should be limitations in Bacon's thought and method. He gravely underestimated the complexity of the universe and the effort that would be needed to comprehend it, even suggesting that all essential knowledge could be contained within a single large book. He stood at the beginning of the first period of materialism when it was confidently supposed that the whole universe, from the solar system to the mind of man, was merely a vast and complex machine which could be mastered absolutely by a sufficient understanding of the laws of mechanics. To him and to his generation everything was both larger and simpler than life.

Yet he did not fall into the error of thinking that mechanical progress was in itself good, or an end, or would automatically add to human well-being. Man must choose to make proper use of it. From the same source which enriches life, he says in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*,

come instruments of lust and also instruments of death. For . . . the most exquisite poisons, as well as guns, and such like engines of destruction, are the fruits of mechanical invention; and well we know how far in cruelty and destruction they exceed the Minotaur himself.

This is something that we in the age of atomic power are better able to appreciate than Bacon himself.

Bacon's bold speculations evoked little response in his lifetime, and it required a revolution he would have abhorred to give them any practical effect, and then only on a limited scale. It was in fact under the Long Parliament in 1645 that the 'College of Philosophy' was founded by Samuel Hartlib, the Czech scholar Comenius and others, who admitted that their inspiration had been derived from *The New Atlantis*. After the Restoration of 1660 the College of Philosophy was merged into the Royal Society, and once again Sprat, Boyle, and others declared that this was an attempt to put into practice Bacon's vision of Solomon's House. If the Royal Society was in many respects a pale reflection of Bacon's original, it is true that in its early years at least a great deal of attention was paid by its Fellows to the practical crafts and the needs of industry.

It was in the eighteenth century, when Europe was on the eve of its next great revolutionary leap forward, that Diderot and d'Alembert embarked on their project of the great *Encyclopedia*. Here, once more, the debt to Bacon was direct and was acknowledged by Diderot in the *Prospectus*:

If we have come at it successfully, we shall owe most to the Chancellor Bacon, who threw out the plan of an universal dictionary of sciences and arts, at a time when, so to say, neither arts nor sciences existed. That extraordinary genius, when it was impossible to write a history of what was known, wrote one of what it was necessary to know.

Since that time the sciences have advanced beyond even the limits of Bacon's imagination, and have attained a complexity of which he could not have dreamed, and with this very advance we have ceased to look upon him in a direct sense as a teacher or inspirer. His writings have become historical monuments. This is inevitable, but we shall do well to remember that it is so only because we have moved so far along the path which he was the first to point out for us.

UTOPIA YESTERDAY AND TODAY

UTOPIA, as the name implies, is an imaginary and not necessarily an ideal commonwealth, but the idea of Utopia could hardly have arisen until the possibility of an ideal commonwealth, or at least of one more nearly ideal than any existing society, could be envisaged. In feudal society such a conception was impossible, since, though change could not of course in fact be avoided, it was regarded with suspicion. The feudal ideal was a static, hierarchic system, in which everyone had a rigidly defined status with recognised rights and obligations. Change was dangerous and ought to be avoided as far as possible. The best hope was that a regression into chaos could be prevented, and this was felt to demand a rigid discipline in which feudal lord and feudal church combined to keep serf and burgess in their appointed stations. Under these conditions the nearest approach to utopian thought as we understand it was the fantasy of the lower orders, a topsy-turvy dream world in which the need to toil was abolished and a magical abundance could be enjoyed by all. In most parts of Europe we can find traces of such a fantasy, taking many names and shapes, which may be generalised as the myth of Cokaygne. Such fantasies, naturally, did not commend themselves to, and were scarcely noticed by, the privileged or literate.

It is no accident, therefore, that Utopia coincides with the rise of the bourgeoisie within and in opposition to decaying feudal society, or that it arises directly out of humanism, the ideology of this new class. The humanists rejected the reactionary and pessimistic outlook of feudal catholicism, an outlook that saw this world only as a preparation for the next, man as a wretched creature tied and bound by the chain of his sins and existing society only as the poor echo of a more glorious past whose relics they saw around them. The humanists rejected, in effect if not explicitly, the dogma of original sin. They saw in the great advances in the technique of production, in man's ability to control his environment and his fate, the grounds for confidence in future human progress. The *idea* of progress was accepted because the *fact* of progress was for the first time unmistakable. They believed that man was capable of finding happiness on earth by his own efforts and by the exercise of reason. They saw man and nature not as an opposition but as a unity.

For the first time man became the measure, and the best among the humanists believed that the advance of the bourgeois order, which they tended to see rather as the triumph of a body of ideas, was the advance of humanity as a whole, breaking the chain of the past and entering upon a new freedom in which all could share. And in a sense, of course, they were justified. Yet here we approach the basic contradiction of humanism: that the bourgeoisie was indeed a progressive, but also an exploiting class, that while bourgeois society was an advance upon feudal society, it laid new burdens upon the masses.

The humanists looked for an epoch of peace and progress. In reality the fifteenth century opened a series of wars more destructive than any in the past, an age of peasant rebellions drowned in blood, of wholesale expropriations and the creation of vast slum populations living on the verge of starvation, of the plunder and extermination of colonial peoples throughout the world. The help of the masses was indeed enlisted by the bourgeoisie to destroy the feudal order, but their expectations were inevitably disappointed. So the age was at once an age of new hopes, and of new despair as these hopes were continually frustrated.

It was with this background that the early, classical Utopias were created, and all this is illustrated most clearly in the life and work of Sir Thomas More, the creator of the first, and, in many respects, the greatest Utopia. He looked upon the hope and despair of his age with an honest, far-seeing eye, and saw that the ruthless destruction of the old society could only be morally justified if it prepared the way for a true commonwealth, which must necessarily be classless and communist, because, as he wrote:

Where possessions be private, where money beareth all the stroke, it is hard and almost impossible that the commonwealth be justly governed and flourish prosperously. Unless you think thus: that Justice is there executed where all things come into the hands of evil men, or that prosperity flourisheth where all is divided among a few.

More's communism is, of course, far removed from that of our own time, and in many respects it looks backward upon an idealised past. Nevertheless he was able, by a remarkable feat of imagination, to see that the best of the past might be combined with the present advance of his time to prepare the way for a new world. Perhaps the fairest estimation of his achievement in this respect comes from that

other great utopian William Morris, who wrote in his introduction to the Kelmscott edition of *Utopia*:

In More are met together the man instinctively sympathetic with the Communistic side of Medieval society; the protestor against the ugly brutality of the earliest period of commercialism; the enthusiast of the Renaissance, ever looking towards his idealised ancient society as the type and example of all really intelligent human life; the man tinged with the asceticism at once of the philosopher and the monk; an asceticism indeed which he put forward not so much as a duty as a kind of stern adornment of life. . . .

But lastly we Socialists cannot forget that these qualities and excellencies meet to produce a sturdy expression of the longing for a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he forms a portion. This, which is the essence of his book, is the essence also of the struggle in which we are engaged. Though doubtless it was the pressure of circumstances in his own days that made More what he was, yet that pressure forced him to give us, not a vision of the new-born capitalistic society, the element in which lived the new learning and the new freedom of his own epoch; but a picture of the real New Birth which many men before him had desired; and which indeed we may well hope is drawing near to realisation, though after such a long series of events which at the time of their happening seemed to nullify his hopes completely.

More had indeed a remarkably clear vision of the 'New Birth', but no answer to the question of how it was to come about. And in fact there was then no visible force capable of effecting such a transformation of society. The bourgeoisie were still too weak and immature to act independently, even supposing that bourgeois society could lead directly to Utopia. Neither More nor any of the humanists dreamed of appealing to the masses, who in any case did not then constitute a revolutionary class. There remained the Prince, the enlightened despot, and nearly all the classical Utopias are represented as being the work of such a Prince. Yet the humanists were too shrewd not to realise the actual characters and interests of existing Princes. It is this dilemma which gives such force and poignancy to More's dialogue in the First Book of his *Utopia* on the desirability of the philosopher taking service under the monarchy: in his book, as in life, More finally decides in favour of this course, but with a clear understanding that what could be accomplished would be little enough. The philosopher must use all

his craft 'and that which you cannot turn to good, so to order that it be not very bad'. So he was driven to the unhappy conclusion with which he closes his book:

So I must needs confess and grant that many things be in the Utopian commonwealth, which in our cities I may rather wish for than hope after.

Faced with this problem it is not surprising that all the early utopians from More to Campanella (*City of the Sun*, 1602), Valentin Andreae (*Christianopolis*, 1619) and Francis Bacon (*The New Atlantis*, 1627) laid their main emphasis on education. They believed in the power of reason and that men in general only needed to be convinced of the correctness of their proposals to put them into practice. This emphasis on education is perhaps not unnatural in any case, given the training and background of the humanists, but it reflects also their lack of understanding (for which we would be foolish to reproach them) of the role of class conflict in the development of society. Since they could not appeal to the exploited it was inevitable that they should appeal to the enlightened. It was still centuries before the idea that the enlightened do not constitute a class could be formulated.

Christianopolis and *The New Atlantis* could not have been written without the example of *Utopia*, and Andreae and Bacon fall very short of More's deep understanding of the essential features of a true commonwealth, but their Utopias have an atmosphere of practicality which reflects the growing strength and confidence of the bourgeoisie by the opening of the seventeenth century. Andreae was a man of affairs and in his native town had, as Professor Helf says in his introduction to *Christianopolis*, 'founded a mutual protective association among the workmen in the cloth-factories and dye-works, and supported it from voluntary subscriptions of his parishioners and friends'. His Utopia has an almost terrifying likeness to Calvin's Geneva, which he had visited and been impressed by. Of Geneva he wrote:

Not alone is there in existence an absolutely free commonwealth, but as an object of pride a censorship of morals in accordance with which investigations are made each week into the morals and even into the slightest transgressions of the citizens—first by the supervisors of the wards, then by the aldermen, and finally by the magistrate, as the case demands. As a result, all cursing, gambling, luxury, quarrelling, hatred, conceit, deceit, extravagance and the like, to say nothing of greater sins, are prevented. . . . With our

bitterest tears we must lament that this is lacking and almost entirely neglected by us.¹

Bacon was much less interested in changes in the structure of society, or in moral questions, than in advances in technique and the extended control by man of his environment through the application of science. The end of our foundation, he wrote:

is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.

They both wrote at a time when the bourgeoisie in the Netherlands had already liberated themselves from the feudal Spanish Empire, and when in England a revolution was just about to begin. With this revolution Bacon would have had no sort of sympathy, but his work, as well as More's and Andreae's, had a profound effect on the new school of utopian thinkers which that revolution produced—on Samuel Hartlib, on James Harrington, on Samuel Gott, and perhaps, though less certainly, on Gerrard Winstanley.

In the air of revolution, Utopia seemed to be no longer a distant island or an enchanted dream, but a possibility that might take shape in England at a moment's notice. Utopia was seen as the direct and not the dialectical outcome of bourgeois society. With the exception of Winstanley all regard it as the result of a controlled and benevolent capitalism: the classless communism of More has given way to a free-enterprise paradise where property is widely distributed and learning and science encouraged. Hartlib looked confidently to a Parliament composed of gentry and merchants, and it was to the Long Parliament that *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria* was dedicated in 1641:

Whereas I am confident, that this honourable court will lay the corner-stone of the world's happiness, before the first recess thereof, I have adventured to cast in my widow's mite into the treasury; not as an instructor or counsellor to this honourable assembly, but having delivered my conception in a fiction, as a more mannerly way; having as my pattern Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon, once Lord Chancellor of England.

Harrington's *Oceana*, while it had its own special features, resembled Macaria in being a constitutional blue-print rather than a Utopia in

¹ Cited from M. L. Berneri, *Journey through Utopia*, p. 105.

the traditional sense. In both the element of fiction has been reduced almost to vanishing point.

With Winstanley we enter a new phase. Hartlib at the beginning and Harrington (rather less confidently) at a later stage of the revolution were assured that they were on the most direct road to Utopia. Now that kingly (that is, feudal) power had been ended, no obstacle remained to indefinite improvement. Winstanley, even in 1650, saw the situation differently:

[The] top bough is lopped off the tree of tyranny; and the kingly power in that one particular is cast out. But alas, oppression is a great tree still and keeps the sun of freedom from the poor commons still; he hath many branches, and great roots which must be grub'd up before everyone can sing Zion's songs in peace.²

If the promise of the revolution was to be fulfilled a further effort of a new kind was called for. Winstanley attempted to enact rather than to write his Utopia by calling upon the propertyless to occupy and cultivate the commons and waste lands communally:

Therefore if the rich will still hold fast to this property of mine and thine, let them labour their own lands with their own hands. And let the common people, that are the gatherings together of Israel from under that bondage, and that say the earth is ours, not mine, let them labour together, and eat bread together upon the commons, mountains and hills.³

In this way the curse of covetousness, to which Winstanley attributed man's fall, could be lifted and 'the earth become a common treasury as it was in the beginning'. However naive the means proposed, this was the first time that Utopia was to be the act of the people rather than of princes or philosophers.

Winstanley's attempt to form a utopian community met with no greater success than innumerable subsequent attempts, and after its failure he drew up a more formal Utopia in *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1651), a Utopia which follows More's social pattern very closely but has politically a more broadly democratic basis.

With the ending of the Commonwealth in 1660 utopian speculation also halted. From the mid-sixteenth century to the early nineteenth there is no important English utopian work with the solitary exception of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a utopia of despair of the

² Gerrard Winstanley, *Selections*, Ed. L. Hamilton, p. 83.

³ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

utmost power and subtlety which it would be useless to attempt to analyse here. In France, on the other hand, throughout the eighteenth century, utopias abound increasingly as we approach the epoch of revolution. Many of them take the form of the imaginary voyage which seems specially characteristic of French utopian literature, but one, Louis Mercier's *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1770), is noteworthy as being, I think, the first Utopia to be placed in the future rather than in some remote corner of the earth. This is a fashion that will be increasingly followed as the corners grow fewer and less remote and as the idea of social evolution replaces that of special creation.

And now two great and almost simultaneous events took place which seemed for the time to bring Utopia once more down to the earth. The French Revolution was one, the other was the establishment in the U.S.A. of a virtually pure bourgeois republic unhampered by feudal survivals such as no European revolution could entirely eliminate. Both events caused the most extravagant expectations. If the hopes and speculations of this time can be summed up in a single word, that word is *Reason*. To the bar of Reason everything was brought, kingship, religion, laws, customs and beliefs: whatever could not account rationally for itself was unhesitatingly condemned. In Reason was the key to Utopia, for if only the ideal society could be discovered and clearly demonstrated to be reasonable, no-one could seriously oppose it. 'Truth,' wrote Blake, 'can never be told so as to be understood and not be believed.' A standpoint that 150 years ago had been peculiar to a few advanced individuals like Hartlib now became universal dogma. That Reason itself had to be examined, that while, for example, it seemed reasonable to the capitalist that all men should be free to exploit and be exploited, this was by no means so self evident to the worker, was something still to be understood. It has taken us another 150 years to learn that Reason itself has a class basis.

At this point all that seemed necessary was to sweep away certain negative restraints—monarchy, priestcraft, ignorance—by which men were coerced or deluded into denying Reason. Once this was done the rest would follow easily. The doctrine of human perfectibility might be absurd enough in some of the forms it took, yet it contained in itself the fundamental truth that human nature is itself the product of human life and the actual conditions under which that life is lived. An unending prospect opened out, and here, I think, is the new feature which marked the utopian speculation of this age. Earlier utopians had conceived a perfect commonwealth finished in all its parts and there-

fore eternally fixed. Now, progress was not merely the road to Utopia, it existed within Utopia, which, instead of having merely a geography, now has also a history.

The very extravagance of these hopes led to their swift and total disappointment. As Engels wrote in his *Anti-Dühring*:

In a word, compared with the glowing promises of the Enlightenment, the social and political institutions established by the 'victory of reason' proved to be bitterly disappointing caricatures. The only thing lacking was people to voice this disillusionment, and these came with the turn of the century.

We can trace the whole process of hope and disillusion typically expressed in the work of the great utopian poet William Blake; in the contrast between the unbounded expectations inspiring such early poems as *Europe*, *America* and *The French Revolution* and the sombre tone of the later *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, with their perspectives of struggle immensely complex and prolonged. More systematically, the utopian socialists, St Simon, Fourier and Owen, outlined the tasks necessary to complete a revolution they felt had halted halfway. It had removed some of the obstacles standing in the way of change: as a bourgeois revolution it had not even begun to set itself the task of ending the basic evil of society—the exploitation of man by man. The positive achievement of the utopian socialists lay in setting this objective before humanity and in analysing the defects of existing society; their weakness lay in their inability to see that further change could only be accomplished by the exploited themselves.

Nevertheless the idea of socialism was abroad, and as it spread among the masses it became transformed, ceasing to be utopian, beginning to be scientific. The turning point here, as in so many other respects, came with the year of revolutions in 1848.

It is impossible to go very far with the writing of a history of utopianism without realising that what one is really writing about is the history of a special aspect of the bourgeois revolution. The rise and decline of Utopia cannot be separated from the rise and decline of the bourgeoisie as a progressive class, since at every stage it reflects the hopes, beliefs and fears of the most enlightened members of that class. And it is by the middle of the nineteenth century that the decisive change is apparent. The main tasks of the bourgeoisie in the most advanced countries were accomplished, already the proletariat was appearing as its successor, including in its tasks those which the bour-

geoisie had proved incapable of carrying to completion. The Chartist Movement in Britain, the part played by the workers in the European revolutions of 1848, were the clear signs of this change, while with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* the mission of the classic utopians was ended.

In 1877 Marx wrote to Sorge:

Utopian socialism, playing with fancy pictures of the future structure of society, is now raging in a much more futile form, as compared not only with the great French and English utopians but with Weitling. Naturally utopianism, which *before* the time of materialistic-critical socialism concealed the germs of the latter within itself, coming now *after* the event, can only be silly—silly, stale and basically reactionary.⁴

Utopianism may be compared to a bridge, which, when one is on the far side of a river, is a means of crossing it, but which, when once crossed, leads only *backwards*. Marx, of course, is referring here particularly to Germany, but it is interesting that his letter was addressed to Sorge in the United States, for it was there that utopianism in its new form was to flourish most abundantly in the two succeeding decades. This was perhaps natural, since the U.S.A. was the purest form of bourgeois society that had yet been known. Seen from across the Atlantic at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the part played by slavery and indentured labour diminished by distance, this revolutionary democracy could easily be idealised. It was here that Southey and Coleridge planned to plant their Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna, while Blake saw it less as a geographical entity than as a symbol of the coming liberation of humanity. A whole host of utopian communities, Owenite, Fourierist, Icarian, Warrenite and the rest were drawn irresistibly thither as the place where their dreams could be realised. Similarly many of the literary Utopias of the age—Spensonia (1793), Lithconia (1802) and New Britain (1820)—appear to be little more than the logical developments of the free life of the American frontier, a life in which the freedom persisted after the hardships and barbarisms had been overcome. A steady stream of emigrants poured across the Atlantic in search of freedom and prosperity.

The belief that bourgeois society, given a clean start, could *become* Utopia was of brief duration. One by one the utopian communities

⁴ *Selected Correspondence*, p. 350.

founded, the development of capitalism, all the swifter for the absence of pre-capitalist restraints, produced the same kind of corruption and exploitation as in the Old World, often in an aggravated form. When Dickens visited the U.S.A. in 1842 his illusions were quickly shattered, and Lytton, writing his utopian fantasy *The Coming Race*, makes his hero speak with an almost Swiftean irony about the home of freedom:

I touched but slightly, though indulgently, on the antiquated and decaying institutions of Europe, in order to expatiate on the present grandeur and prospective pre-eminence of that glorious American Republic, in which Europe enviously seeks its model and tremblingly foresees its doom. . . . Fortunately recollecting the peroration of a speech on the purifying influences of American democracy, made by a certain eloquent senator (for whose vote in the Senate a Railway Company, to which my two brothers belonged, had just paid 20,000 dollars), I wound up by repeating its glowing predictions of the magnificent future that smiled upon mankind—when the flag of freedom should float over an entire continent, and two hundred millions of intelligent citizens, accustomed from infancy to the daily use of revolvers, should apply to a cowering universe the doctrine of the Patriot Monroe.

It was in this atmosphere of the exploded dream of a free petty-bourgeois society that the extraordinary outburst of utopian writing, of which Edward Bellamy is today the only remembered figure, took place: it is perhaps not often realised to what extent he was part of a school. The utopias of John Macnie (*The Diotheras*, 1883), Chancey Thomas (*The Crystal Button*, 1891) or Albert Chavannes (*The Future Commonwealth*, 1892) may be of slight value in themselves but they serve to remind us that the popularity of *Looking Backwards* was due less to any intrinsic merit than to the accuracy with which it reflected the fears of the American middle class, caught between growing monopoly and an increasingly militant working class. All these utopias are, to a greater or less extent, socialist, but their socialism bears a family likeness to the old German 'true socialism' of which Auguste Cornu wrote:

In fact, Marx said, this socialism did not reflect the progress of the proletariat but the state of mind of the German petty bourgeoisie, impotent but yearning, fearing alike the development of large-scale capital, and consoling itself with an emasculated humanism in which it found its own image idealised.⁵

⁵ *Science and Society*, Vol. XII, No. 1, p. 112.

Or, as Morris put it in his criticism of *Looking Backward*:

[Bellamy's] temperament may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistorical and unartistic, and it makes its owner (if a socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustices, miseries and waste of class society could be got rid of; which half change seems possible to him. The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class man of today, purified from the crime of their complicity with the monopolist class, and become independent instead of being as they are now, parasitical.⁶

Morris' critique in *The Commonweal* was followed by a more positive rejoinder. *News from Nowhere*, though there are clear indications that he was only giving final shape to something that had long been maturing in his mind, was also written to give what he felt to be a genuinely socialist forecast of the future in response to Bellamy's misleading one. It is by any standards the most important modern Utopia, and precisely because it is not, in the ordinary sense, utopian at all. Morris was not merely concerned to draw a delightful and moving picture of a communist England, though he does this with extraordinary success. He first shows how the classless society of the future might grow out of the class conflicts of the present, in this as in many other respects standing out in strong contrast to Bellamy, who envisaged socialism as growing directly out of the triumph of monopoly capitalism:

The nation organised as one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in place of all the other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens shared. . . . The change had been long foreseen. Public opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of the people was behind it. There was no more possibility of opposing it by force than by argument.

Deeply Marxist in his approach, if not always in matters of detail, Morris was remarkably free from that dogmatism which has been the darling sin of most utopians. What interested him was not the mechanical and institutional innovations which so delighted Bellamy but the historical movement from present to future and the quality of human living which may properly be expected in a classless society.

⁶ *Commonweal*, 22-6-89.

News from Nowhere is one of the really great socialist classics, and as such has had a wide influence, though as yet less wide than it has deserved, but it has had few successors and none which in any sense approach it. Such post-Morris socialist utopias as Anatole France's *The White Stone* (1905) or Robert Blatchford's *The Sorcery Shop* (1907) owe what merit they possess to the ideas of Morris which they do little more than present in a diluted and weakened form. More vital than either of these was Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907). He, even more than Morris, was primarily concerned with the problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism, and he presents a horrifying forecast of the development of monopoly capitalism in the direction of what we now call Fascism. His weakness, which may be the result of having absorbed Marxism in the vulgarised De Leonite form which prevailed in the U.S.A. of his time, lies in his inability to grasp the character and role either of a revolutionary party or a revolutionary class.

The utopias of Bellamy and his school were without exception flat, philistine and provincial. Yet even in their emasculated humanism they did stand for certain civilised values, and above all for a confidence in the essential decency of mankind and the possibility of human happiness. The same may be said of the many utopian writings of H. G. Wells, from *A Modern Utopia* (1905) to *Men Like Gods* (1922). Wells, who may be regarded as the last and most powerful representative of the school of Bellamy, stands at the very end of the long tradition of bourgeois humanism, when it had ceased to be a revolutionary creed reshaping the world and had degenerated into a complacent orthodoxy. After a lifetime spent in prescribing confident if sometimes contradictory nostrums, Wells seems in his last years to have realised the futility of them all: the tragedy was that he had nothing with which to replace them.

Man must go steeply up or down, and the odds seem to be all in favour of his going down and out. If he comes up, so great is the adaptation demanded of him that he must cease to be a man. Ordinary man is at the end of his tether.

So he wrote in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945).

After Bellamy and Wells utopianism had still a long way to fall as the bourgeoisie lost the last shreds of confidence in its mission as a progressive class. The classical utopias could all be plausibly regarded as in some sense the outcome of bourgeois society. Modern utopian writings only express the fears of a class without a future.

This decline has two stages, which, naturally, overlap somewhat in time. In the first, the future feared is that of a machine world, which is essentially the world of capitalism freed from its contradictions and then carried to its logical conclusions. In this world man is swallowed up in the machine. The most famous example is perhaps Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but the beginning of the fear may be traced quite early in such books as Percy Greg's *Across the Zodiac* (1880) or Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890). In both of these we find the significant complication that the unbridled growth of capitalism produces the ultimate disaster of a socialist revolution that threatens to destroy all civilisation. Yet in these books, and in a somewhat different and more deeply humanist way in E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, it is still a super-capitalism run riot which is the immediate enemy.

Since 1917, and still more since 1945, with their proof that socialism is not a dream but a workable reality, a further retreat may be observed. The fear is not now of a catastrophic failure of socialism leading to chaos, but of its success, and the typical utopia, or rather anti-utopia, is now the nightmare of a classless society. Indeed, Utopia today is either a classless society or it is nothing. It is this which is so terrifying, as Nicholas Berdiaeff revealed in a passage which Huxley quoted as a preface to *Brave New World*:

Utopias seem very much more realisable than we had formerly supposed. And now we find ourselves faced with a question which is painful in quite a new way: How can we avoid their actual realisation?

A painful question indeed, and one which is likely to demand more talent than our modern anti-utopians seem to possess. The method adopted in such books as Eugene Zamiatin's *We* (1924) or the later *Ape and Essence* of Aldous Huxley (1948) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is to induce an irrational fear in the mind of the reader (reflecting, no doubt, the fear in their own minds) that any major social change must lead to a world of corruption, misery and tyranny. Let us be content for ever with exploitation and injustice lest worse befall, is their argument. In such 'utopias' as these we see the final stage in the degeneration of utopianism, when, no longer content to create imaginary worlds in the abstract, it turns to slandering the actual transformation of the world which is now going on, a transformation which is making its traditional tasks for ever unnecessary.

Clearly the classical utopia has run its course and cannot be renewed,

while a class without a future cannot be expected to create positive utopias. What of those who are actively engaged in building socialism, or are fighting to achieve it? It seems likely that much of the thought and energy which once went into the fabrication of paper utopias will go into more practical and more satisfying tasks. Nor does the conception of society as a process of evolution lend itself readily to the concoction of formal blue-prints of the future: we can no longer think of Utopia as a completed project in the way the classical utopians were able to do. Nevertheless the problems of the future are perennially fascinating, for socialists perhaps even more so than for anyone else, and I think we may well see socialist utopias which trace lines of possible development, which suggest stages which may be reached and the way we may pass from one stage to another, and perhaps most of all, which attempt to imagine how man will change in a changing world. The greatest subject for utopian speculation may well remain what it has always been, the development of man himself rather than of institutions or things.

THE LEVELLER STYLE

MANY of us, when we think of the pamphlet literature of the English Revolution, think first, and often think only, of the work of John Milton. This is natural, since Milton's place not only as a poet but as a master of polemical prose has long been established. Nevertheless it can lead us to a false estimate of the vast and rich pamphlet literature of the age, for Milton was as far from being unique as he was from being typical, and, if his work is a peak, it is a peak only of one range among several. It may also be said to be somewhat outside the main current of English prose. Milton was a classical scholar, as much at home in Latin as in English, and even his English prose reads most often like the magnificent translation of a magnificent original. In so far as he is typical, he is typical of the learned writers who wrote for a limited audience similarly endowed, and whose work is heavily larded with Latin, Greek and even Hebrew, and weighted down with allusions and quotations from all the literatures of Europe.

But meanwhile a new reading public and a new kind of writer was arising, men with little or no knowledge of any language but their own. In the twenty years between 1640 and 1660 these men came to the front, and thousands of their books, pamphlets and newssheets poured off the press. The *Catalogue of Thomason Tracts*, the great collection in the British Museum, which is yet very far from being complete, lists nearly 15,000 pamphlets from these years, of which certainly the majority are by writers of this vernacular type. Of all the popular pamphlets, those written on behalf of the Levellers are among the most brilliant as well as the most important.

The Levellers were the party of the most advanced revolutionary sections of the lower-middle class, the independent peasantry, the smaller tradesmen and artisans and perhaps the journeymen of the bigger cities. They drew support above all from the masses of London, then at least ten times the size of any other town in England, and from the army, Cromwell's New Model, the plain men who knew what they fought for and loved what they knew.¹ After the defeat of the Royalists in the Civil War the Levellers demanded a radical transformation of the political and social structure, and, in *The Agreement of the*

¹ Carlyle: *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. Lomax, I, 154.

*People*² put forward the first comprehensive programme of bourgeois democracy, including manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, full guarantees of civil and religious liberty, abolition of all feudal privileges and the reform and simplification of the legal code. Such a programme was not realisable in the existing conditions and the Levellers were defeated, and, after the middle of 1649, declined rapidly in influence.

For several years, however, they had been at the centre of the revolutionary struggle, and one of the most important achievements of progressive historians in Britain and the U.S.A. during the past few decades has been a re-estimation of their role and importance and the reprinting of many of the host of superb pamphlets which they produced in the course of their campaigns.³ It so happened that three at least of the outstanding Leveller figures—John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn⁴—were also pamphleteers of the first order, each with a highly individual and strongly contrasting style of work. A hostile writer refers to one of their productions: *A Manifestation from Lieutenant Col. John Lilburn, Mr. William Walwyn, Mr. Thomas Prince, and Mr. Richard Overton, (Now Prisoners in the Tower of London) And others, commonly (though unjustly) styled Levellers*:—‘whose devout, specious, meek, self-denying, soft and pleasant lips favours much of the sly, cunning and close subtlety of . . . Mr. William Walwyn, who (as the Serpent that deceived our first Parents was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God made) is much more crafty than the rest of his bretheren, of whose curious spinning we have several reasons to presume this piece, for here is not the licentious provoking daringness of L.Col. Lilburns pen, nor yet the notorious profanness of Mr. Richard Overtons pen.’⁵ Allowing for the obvious

² Four documents, differing in important respects, were issued under this name. Two are reprinted in Gardiner: *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution*. All four are in Don M. Wolfe: *Leveller Manifestoes*.

³ The pamphlets of the Levellers are extremely rare and only survive in a few copies, sometimes a single copy, in great libraries. They were therefore virtually inaccessible till comparatively recently. In 1933 Prof. W. Haller published a number in *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution 1638-1647*, 3 vols., Columbia University Press. More material was printed in Prof. A. S. P. Woodhouse's *Puritanism and Liberty*, Dent, London 1938. In 1944 there appeared *The Leveller Tracts 1647-1653*, ed. by W. Haller and Godfrey Davies, Columbia University Press, and *Leveller Manifestoes*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, Nelson. These volumes taken together provide an adequate selection from the works of the most important Leveller pamphleteers.

⁴ Other Leveller writers, whom it is not possible to discuss here, include John Wildman, Thomas Prince and Samuel Chidley.

⁵ *Walwins Wiles*, p. 2.

prejudice here displayed, this is a reasonably just and accurate comparison: from the point of view of an opponent these were their distinguishing features. What they did share, apart from their common social and political outlook, was their vernacular humanism. All three were educated, widely-read men who had not been through the traditional classical discipline of the universities, but had been apprenticed to trades in their middle teens and had henceforth completed their education in accordance with their own interests and needs. This, undoubtedly, was one of the main reasons for their closeness to and immediate influence over their audience, most of whom had a background closely similar.

Of the three Lilburne was as much the most significant as a political personality as he was the least gifted as a writer. 'Martyr, folk-hero and demagogue' as Professor Haller calls him,⁶ he dramatised his struggles and wrongs in a flood of words that poured from him without respite and often, it would seem, almost without reflection. His enemies were fond of describing him as a 'man of a turbulent spirit, alwayes opposing, striving, and flying in the faces of all authorities, restless, and never satisfied whoever is uppermost . . . and that therefore it is very requisite that I be taken off, and that otherwise England must never look to rest long in peace; yea, so turbulent, that if there were none in the world but John Lilburne, rather than want one to strive withall, forsooth, John would certainly quarrel with Lilburne.'⁷ In all this there was some truth, but Lilburne was turbulent because he felt himself, as indeed he actually became, a symbolic figure. A pamphlet written in defence of his friend William Larnar is entitled *Everymans Case*: Lilburne felt everyman's case to be his own and his own everyman's: he was the representative of the whole body of the oppressed people demanding justice and the restoration of their stolen birth-right.

It is this which gave his writing its force and dignity, and at his best he could write with an unstrained simplicity, as when he subscribes himself, with neither boastfulness nor false modesty as: 'JOHN LILBURNE, that never yet changed his principles from better to worse, nor could never be threatened out of them, nor courted from them, that never feared the rich nor mighty, nor never despised the poor nor needy, but alwaies hath, and hopes by Gods goodness to continue, *semper idem*.'⁸ At times he uses homely, familiar ideas and

⁶ Haller: *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, p. 262.

⁷ Lilburne: *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, pp. 1-2.

⁸ Lilburne and others: *The Picture of the Council of State*, p. 23.

images to drive home his point, and a rhetoric which moves because it springs from the heart:

But as the Water-men at *Queen-hive* doe usually cry, 'Westward hough, hough,' so according to the present current of the times, most honest men have more than cause to cry in the Water-mens language, 'AEgypt hough, hough, the house of Bondage, slavery, oppression, taxation, heavy and cruell, wee can no longer beare it, wee can no longer beare it, wee can no longer beare it, wee are as much provoked and forced to cast off all our yokes and crosses from our shoulders (except only that of Persecution) as ever any people or Nation, though no People or Nation under heaven have been more free, beneficiall and helpfull to those whom we intrusted to help and deliver us from Oppression, which saith the *Wise-man*, is enough to make wise men mad.'⁹

Finally, in writing of his own experiences, or of current political happenings, he can maintain a clear narrative style which puts the course of events plainly before his readers. It was partly for these qualities, but above all for the sense of leadership and authority that runs through them, that his pamphlets were eagerly bought and read by the soldiers in the army and the common citizens of London, circulating in thousands, and sometimes in tens of thousands of copies.

Unfortunately, much of his writing falls woefully below these levels. There is a great deal of legalistic argument, overloaded with quotations and references to legal and theological authorities as well as to the Scriptures. In these passages the style becomes angry and involved: often a single sentence will run on for pages, till its beginning has been lost before the end is in sight. Yet, whether he is writing badly or well, it is always an unmistakable man who writes. Lilburne's style has always, like his character, something of the grandeur as well as a little of the absurdity of a national monument.

If Lilburne was the born leader, the Tribune of the People, Richard Overton was the dedicated freelance, the exuberant individualist who finds both freedom and happiness in surrender to a great cause. Like most of the Leveller leaders he began his public career as a defender of religious liberty who progressed thence by inevitable stages to political radicalism. Among his earlier works was the brilliant tolerationist polemic, *The Araignment of Mr. Persecution*, from which there is good reason to think Bunyan may have borrowed something for the trial scene of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

⁹ Lilburne: *England's Birth-Right Justified*, pp. 43-4.

Overton's style could be almost as verbose as Lilburne's, but in an entirely different way and for quite other reasons. Where Lilburne's writing staggers under its own weight, Overton's rushes and soars, towering fantastically at one moment, falling into ruins the next. It has a quality of delighted swashbuckling which leads him always from defence to attack, rejoicing to find a gap in the opposing line of battle through which he can plunge. Something of this aggressive quality shows itself in the titles which Overton gave his pamphlets: *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations, An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny, shot into the Prerogative Bowels of the House of Lords, The Hunting of the Foxes . . . by five small Beagles (late of the Armie)*¹⁰, and *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan*.¹¹

When Overton was arrested in 1649 there was taken up with him a certain soldier of the house who was found in bed with his (the soldier's) wife and who was told that 'he must get a Certificate from his Captain that he was married to her'. This was enough to set Overton away in his happiest vein:

Friends and Country-men where are you now? What shall you do that have no Captains to give you Certificates? sure you must have the banes of Matrimony re-asked at the Conventicle of Gallants at White-hall, or at least you must thence have a Congregational Licence, (without offence be it spoken to true Churches) to lie with your wives, else how shall your wives be chaste or the children Legitimate? they have now taken Cognizance over your wives and beds, whether will they next? Judgement is now come into the hands of the armed-fury Saints. My Masters have a care what you do, or how you look upon your wives, for the new-Saints Militant are paramount to all Laws, King, Parliament, husbands, wives, beds &c.¹²

Much more is involved here than high spirits. With the Levellers, revolutionary politics were, for the first time, bursting through the religious forms in which they had hitherto been veiled. The Calvinists had stood for the concentration of power in the hands of the godly

¹⁰ The Foxes are Cromwell, Ireton, etc. The Beagles, five troopers who had been cashiered from the Army for opposing them.

¹¹ Satirists at this time were fond of alluding to Cromwell as a bull. For example *A Hue and Cry after Cromwell*, published only a week later than Overton's pamphlet, says: 'He was brought up in the *Isle of Ely*, where for his agility of body he was called the *Townbull*; which made his Parents keep him for a *Breeder*, and not accustome him to the *Yoak*.'

¹² *The Picture of the Councel of State*, p. 31.

minority, the elect, which, in practice, meant the prosperous bourgeoisie. The Levellers stood for the rights of man, for the conception of politics as a continuous activity of the whole nation. 'The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he', declared the Leveller Colonel Rainborough,¹³ and by the same token, the greatest sinner as the greatest saint. This meant that politics must be secularised, and it was because he stood most conspicuously and outspokenly for this that his enemies found in Overton's pen the 'notorious profanness' of which they complained. To them he replied in a passage that shows that pen at its best:

As I am in myself in respect to my own personall sins and transgressions; so I am to myself and to God and so I must give an account; the just must stand by his own faith; But as I am in relation to the Commonwealth, that all men have cognizance of, because it concerns their own particular lives. . . . So that the businesse is, not how great a sinner I am, but how faithfull and reall to the Common-wealth; that's the matter concerneth my neighbour, and whereof my neighbour is only in this publick Controversie to take notice; and for my personal sins that are not of Civil cognizance or wrong unto him, to leave them to God, whose judgement is righteous and just.¹⁴

And in his last known pamphlet, written from prison in July 1649, he turns the tables completely upon his critics and puts into the most popular language that humanist rejection of the dogma of original sin without which no democratic political philosophy is really possible:

Mirth to you is like a Shoulder of Mutton to a sick Horse. . . . And now (my tender friends) I pray tell me what spirit is this? 'tis a *foul spirit*, away with it for shame; go purge, goe purge; one penniworth of the *Agreement of the people* with a good resolution taken morning and evening will work out this corruption. . . .

Mirth sure is of *Divine Instinct*, and, I think I may boldly say more naturall than Melancholy, and lesse savours of the Curse. Nature in its Creation was pure and good, void of corruption or anything obnoxious or destructive: all misery and mischief came in with the fall . . . in which number you may reckon Melancholy . . . and 'tis the root of the root of all wickedness, *Covetousnesse*, for when have you seen a Melancholy man that's not covetous? and a covetous man seldom proves a good Common-wealths man;

¹³ Woodhouse: *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 53.

¹⁴ *The Picture of the Councel of State*, p. 44.

yet this ill *Weed* is gotten into so religious esteem that all our *Religion* is turned into Melancholy.¹⁵

It is not surprising that Overton (who was also suspect of Atheism) was hated by the 'new-Saints Millitant'. What does seem strange at first sight is that his comrade William Walwyn was even more hated and more unscrupulously maligned. While Lilburne was the popular leader and Overton the outrageous pamphleteer, Walwyn seems to have combined the roles of organiser and philosopher. He avoided notice as far as possible, was an able committee-man, an adept at the drafting and promotion of petitions and manifestoes, while almost all his numerous pamphlets appeared anonymously, though the authorship of many of them must have been widely known. Their titles are just as characteristic as those chosen by Overton, and illustrate very clearly the difference of method between the two men—*The Power of Love, The Compassionate Samaritane, A Still and Soft Voice from the Scriptures, Walwyns Just Defence*—what could appear less aggressive or more disarming? Yet these and similar works aroused in Presbyterians and Independents alike a frenzy of rage both on account of their political and theological implications and because the smooth texture of their argument afforded so little with which an opponent could come to grips.

Like Lilburne and Overton Walwyn became a wholehearted advocate of religious toleration. But his demand for toleration did not, like that of most tolerationists of his time, spring from a desire that his own sect should be tolerated, but from a detachment then rare. Often one can sense him passing tacitly from the position that all forms of religion are good to the position that none are *very* good after all. Thus he can write:

I blush not to say, I have long been accustomed to read Montaigns *Essaies*. . . . And in his twentieth Chapter, pag: 102, he saies, speaking of the Cannibals, the very words that import lying, falshood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them.

These, and the like flowers, I think it lawfull to gather out of his Wildernesse, and to give them room in my Garden; yet this worthy Montaign was but a Romish Catholique: yet to observe with what contentment and full swoln joy he recites these cogitations, is wonderfull to consideration: And now what shall I say? Go to this honest Papist, or to these innocent Cannibals, ye Inde-

¹⁵ *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan*, pp. 3-4.

pendent Churches, to learn civility, humanity, simplicity of heart; yea, charity and Christianity.¹⁶

He seems to have belonged to no sect, and if he had any marked leaning it was towards such quietist, non-institutional groups as the Familists or Seekers, though he denies belonging to either of these.¹⁷ In *The Power of Love* he argues not merely that all men may be saved if they will, but, from the Calvinist standpoint, much more dangerously, that none will be damned, a doctrine with the most explosive political implications.

His practice appears to have been to go from Church to Church with his friends, hearing and afterwards criticising the sermons. This in itself would be regarded by the Ministers as a scandalous presumption on the part of a layman without a classical, university training. Walwyn's offence became greater when he elaborated a theoretical justification, advising the common man to trust to his own reason:

He that bade us try all things, and hold fast that which was good, did suppose that men have faculties and abilities wherewithall to try all things, or else the counsell had been given in vaine. And therefore however the Minister may by reason of his continuall exercise in preaching, and discoursing, by his skill in Arts and Languages, by the conceit of the esteeme he hath with a great part of admiring people . . . presume it easie to possesse us, that they are more divine than other men (as they style themselves) yet if the people would but take boldnes to themselves and not distrust their owne understandings, they would soon find that use and experience is the only difference, and that all necessary knowledge is easie to be had, and by themselves acquirable.¹⁸

He indulged freely in argument, and would infuriate the orthodox by such a question as 'How can you prove the Scriptures to be the Word of God?'¹⁹ In politics his method was the same: every position was subjected to the test of reason and utility, every argument built upon first principles:

I carry with me in all places a Touch-stone that tryeth all things, and labours to hold nothing but what upon plain grounds appeareth good and useful: I abandon all nicities and uselesse things: my manner is in all disputes, reasonings and discourses, to enquire what

¹⁶ *Walwyns Just Defence*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ Thomas Edwards: *The Second Part of Gangraena*, p. 25. Walwyn: *A Whisper in the Ear of Mr. Thomas Edwards*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ *The Compassionate Samaritane*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁹ *Walwins Wiles*, p. 5.

is the use: and if I find it not very materiall, I abandon it, there are plain usefull doctrines sufficient to give peace to my mind, direction and comfort to my life: and to draw all men to a consideration of things evidently usefull, hath been a special cause that I have applied my selfe in a friendly manner unto all.²⁰

Where Lilburne was accustomed to make his appeal to the supposed ancient laws of England, to Magna Carta and the legendary Saxon past, and Overton to a sturdy common sense, Walwyn would build upon what he regarded as the universal laws of nature. And he made his appeal in a personal, almost a confidential tone, and in a smooth, easy-running and civilised prose which stands almost alone in the seventeenth century. Many things about him are, and probably always will be, uncertain, since the fullest picture we have of him is drawn by his enemies, and many of their accusations against him, such as being an advocate of Communism, can neither be proved nor refuted. Walwyn replied to his attackers in a passage which shows that the art of the witch hunt, with all the refinements of the smear and the principle of guilt by association, has made but little advance since the seventeenth century:

If you observe any man to be of a publique and active spirit, (though he be no Independent or Separatist) he can never be friend to you in your work, and therefore you are to give him out, to be strongly suspected of whoredom, or drunkennesse, prophanesne, an irreligious person . . . or say he is suspected to hold intelligence with Oxford,²¹ or anything no matter what, somewhat will be believed. . . .

If you see any such man but once talking with a Papist . . . you may give out that very honest men suspect him to be a Jesuit: if any one but demand of you or any other, how you can know the Scriptures to be the word of God, give it out for certain that he denieth them, or if any put questions concerning *God* or *Christ*, or the *Trinity*, you have more than enough to lay accusations upon them, that shall stick by them as long as they live.²²

What we can at least say is that enough of Walwyn's own work remains to enable us to recognise a writer and thinker of exceptional boldness and originality, and a mind extraordinarily mature and civilised.

²⁰ *A Whisper*, p. 6.

²¹ Oxford was at this time the headquarters of the Royalists.

²² Walwyn: *An Antidote to Master Edwards His Old and New Poyson*, pp. 8-9.

Further, and this is true of the Levellers as a whole and especially of the three I have been considering, they were civilised in a new way. Whatever their limitations, they had reached a conception of man and his place in society, of the role of persuasion and the power of the written and spoken word, that was more accurate, more nearly a reflection of objective reality, than any other group of their time in any country. They wrote effectively not merely because they were exceptionally gifted or technically well equipped, though this can fairly be claimed at least for Overton and Walwyn, but because they wrote with a purpose clearly understood and deeply felt, and for an audience which they knew to be close and immediately responsive. These badly printed pamphlets, often printed illegally on little backstreet presses, strike home today as they did three hundred years ago because they are warm, generous and candid, because their authors knew exactly what they wanted to say and went to their work without hesitation or doubt or any pretension to the grand style. They stand near the head of one of the great streams of English prose, the stream which later was to include such mighty figures as Bunyan, Defoe, Paine, Cobbett and Shaw. They can fairly claim to be the fathers of the tradition of plain English writing dedicated to the service of the plain man.

THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL

A Study in the Sources of William Blake

I. THE POET AND HIS WORLD

BLAKE was born on November 28th, 1757, in Broad Street, Soho, in the heart of the squalid, compact London of the mid-eighteenth century. It was a filthy, disease-ridden city with the most violent contrasts of riches and poverty, yet still small enough for escape on foot to be possible even for a small child. Blake's early, and, indeed, much of his later poetry, is the poetry of a city child who knew and loved the surrounding country. Thus he writes:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (75)*

but also:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood. . . .

The Jew's-harp-house and the Green Man,
The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight,
The fields of Cows by Willan's farm,
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight. (463-4)

His whole life, with only one important exception, was passed in London, and he was never at ease away from it. Even the air of Hampstead, as he explains in one of his letters, 'always did, so I fear it always will' produce an acute bodily illness. (919)

Two facts about his background have an importance that cannot possibly be overstressed. First, he was born into the world of London dissenting radicalism. His father, James Blake, was a hosier, a small shopkeeper who most probably made many of the goods he sold. There is little evidence for the tradition that he was a follower of

* The figures in brackets are page references to *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Edited by Geoffrey Keynes, 1946 Edition.

Swedenborg: he may have been, but the first formal organisation of a Swedenborgian congregation in London did not take place till 1788—four years after James Blake's death. What is known is that William Blake and his wife were both foundation members of this congregation, though they did not long remain in it. James Blake was, however, certainly a dissenter, though of what persuasion is unknown. We really know very little of him except that he was wise enough to see that there was something in his son beyond his understanding, and that, instead of hating and repressing what he saw, he helped him to follow his own course. Blake was spared a formal education, and, instead of being forced into the family business, was apprenticed, at his own request, to an engraver.

This brings us to the second fundamental fact, that he alone of all the great English poets was, and remained all his life, a manual worker, one of the highly skilled craftsmen who formed a substantial part of the population of London in his time. Later in life he painted pictures, and engraved his own designs, as well as his poems, few of which were ever published in any other form during his lifetime, yet all the while he remained a working engraver, ready to accept and execute commissions from whatever source. At no time did all these activities bring him more than a bare living. It was from the craftsman's special standpoint that Blake regarded the rapid development of industrial capitalism in England:

And all the Arts of Life they chang'd into the Arts of Death
in Albion.

The hour-glass contemn'd because its simple workmanship
Was like the workmanship of the plowman, and the water wheel
That raises water into cisterns, broken and burn'd with fire
Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the
shepherd;

And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without
wheel,

To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours in
Albion

Of day and night the myriads of eternity: that they may grind
And polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious task,
Kept ignorant of its use: that they may spend the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,
In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All,
And call it Demonstration, blind to all the simple rules of
life. (517)

A machine does not in itself grow more evil by growing more complex, but the producer can still own a simple, uncostly machine. He cannot own a complex, expensive one. And Blake saw the growth of capitalism turning the whole man into a divided man, a *hand*. This theme of the division of man and his struggle to reintegrate himself, lies at the heart of all his symbolism. He came to it with the simple, angry vision of a man who is poor and works with his hands, and his bitterest hatred was reserved for those who created and defended what he knew to be an unnecessary and man-made poverty.

A certain Bishop Watson wrote a book attacking Tom Paine, in the margin of which Blake wrote furious comments. One of the Bishop's other works, of which a list is given, was *The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both Rich and Poor*. Blake wrote against this:

God made Man happy and Rich, but the Subtil made the Ignorant Poor. This must be a most wicked and blasphemous book. (751)

Such a comment helps us to find in Blake's poetry an actuality which that of his great contemporaries lacked. In the so-called Prophetic Books, as we shall see, symbol is piled upon symbol, mythical figures contend, unite and divide till the mind refuses to follow their mutations, but at their wildest these Books keep a foot upon the earth whose realities Blake knew only too well.

The Industrial Revolution was one of these realities; a second was the French Revolution which began when Blake was just over 30 and had not yet written more than a handful of lyrics. The Revolution clearly released some hitherto enchained power in him and under its influence most of his greatest work was produced, not only the *Songs of Experience* and many similar poems that remained in manuscript till long after his death, but the longer poems in which that influence is most directly visible. *The Book of Thel* was written in 1789, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *A Song of Liberty* in 1790, *The French Revolution* in 1791, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *America* in 1793, *Europe* and *The First Book of Urizen* in 1794.

Of these, *The French Revolution* as we have it is only a fragment of a longer work, and exists only in a single proof copy. Apparently the publisher took fright at its outspokenness and abandoned the idea of its publication. The remainder, which was almost certainly written, has vanished. None of the other works came even as close as this to ordinary publication, but were engraved by Blake himself and issued with lovely

hand-coloured marginal illustrations, somewhat recalling the illuminated manuscripts of the middle ages. This group of writings has in common a simple delight in the overthrow of tyranny and a confidence in the opening of a new age for France and the world. In them Blake voices, in his peculiar symbolic language, the hopes and beliefs which he shared with the radical circle of which he and Paine were active members. What is unique is Blake's dialectical thinking, for which no parallel exists anywhere in Europe at this date.

The fate of *The French Revolution* was a foretaste of the repression that was gathering over England. From 1793 there was a series of arrests, trials, transportations and penal Acts which broke up the London Corresponding Society, forced Paine into exile and made the open expression of radical opinion almost impossible. On the title page of Bishop Watson's attack on Paine Blake wrote:

To defend the Bible in this year of 1798 would cost a man his life. The Beast and the Whore rule without control. (750)

In his symbolic language the Beast was the repressive State and the Whore the Established Church. We shall discover later what he meant by defending the Bible. In this atmosphere of violence and censorship Blake, like many others, went underground, his writing becomes progressively more cryptic, his myths continually more involved. 1800 to 1803 were the only years which he spent out of London.

But it was not only the censorship which oppressed him. The French Revolution followed its course, with the big bourgeoisie more and more firmly in control behind a military dictatorship. After Thermidor the Republic degenerated into the Directory, the Directory into the Empire. Europe was plunged into a war of which no one could foresee the end. It was no longer easy to see the clear issue between freedom and tyranny, the bright hopes of 1789 were evidently not being fulfilled. Blake began to turn away from politics in the narrower sense, realising that the struggle was of a different and more complicated character than he had once supposed. So, in 1809, he wrote:

I am really sorry to see my Countrymen trouble themselves about Politics. . . . Princes appear to me to be fools. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be fools; they seem to me to be something Else besides Human Life. (629)

If this were all, Blake would only be one more romantic revolutionary, who, like Wordsworth, Southey and many others, recoiled

before the harshness of revolution. But this was not all. Because Blake was a working man he never lost his class passion or his faith in a revolutionary solution. He continued to see life from below, and up to the end his writings are full of explosive comments about kings, Tories, priests and the oppression of the poor by the rich. And because he was a true poet he had a profound imaginative grasp of what was going on in his own country. England as well as France was changing in these years.

Under the stimulus of war, capitalism was developing at an unprecedented pace. The last peasantry were being expropriated by the enclosures, the long death of the hand weavers was about to begin, everywhere sprang up the Satanic Mills. Oppression was changing its face and Blake was one of the first to recognise a new enemy. Behind the familiar king and priest he saw the newer power of money and he recognised a new form of Satan's gospel in the writings of Parson Malthus, the bastard science of whose 'Principle of Population' seemed to doom the vast majority of the human race to a perpetual and ever-increasing misery. When Blake seems sweeping in his condemnation of science it is the science which has made itself the justification of poverty and oppression which he has in mind.

It is the sense of these new developments which makes Blake's later poetry unique. In one sense the imagery grows mistier and more involved, in another it grows smokier and more evil, reflecting the hideous growth of industrialism. The generalised, Ossianic images of the earlier books are supplemented by images of forge, loom and furnace. Vala, wife of Albion, laments *among the Brick kilns*

O Lord, wilt thou not look upon our sore afflictions
 Among these flames incessant labouring? Our hard masters laugh
 At all our sorrow. We are made to turn the wheel for water,
 To carry the heavy basket on our scorched shoulders, to sift
 The sand and ashes, and to mix the clay with tears and
 repentance. . . .
 Furrow'd with whips, and our flesh bruised with the heavy
 basket. (273)

As Dr. Bronowski says:

Although Blake's knowledge of industry was uncertain, his vision of it was not. It is an astonishing vision. The reader must turn the pages of the last prophetic books himself, at random: and find everywhere the same sooty imagery, the air belched by industry.

Men of letters, whom the machine keeps clean, have groped through this sulphurous rhetoric for the names tidily listed in the books of mystics. The names are there, and they are worth the finding. But Swedenborg the mystic had been an inspector of mines; Paine the deist planned iron bridges; Blake the poet lived in the Industrial Revolution bitterly, in the decay of his engraver's craft. The oratory of *Vala or the Four Zoas*, of *Milton*, and of *Jerusalem* is loud with machines, with war, with law; with the cry of man preying on man; and with the rebellious mutter of working men.¹

The years in which Blake was writing and engraving *Milton* and *Jerusalem* were also years of the greatest hardship and poverty. Though he is now universally recognised as one of the supreme English engravers, Blake's style was then regarded as old fashioned and eccentric; commissions grew fewer and the old friends and patrons who had been prepared to pay small sums for his original work died or drifted away. On more than one occasion he was swindled by shady dealers.

'I am hid,' (770) he wrote about 1808, and

The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents and Genius, But whether he is Passive and Polite and a Virtuous Ass and Obedient to Noblemen's Opinions in Arts and Science. If he is, he is a Good Man. If Not, he must be Starved. (779)

Blake might indeed have been starved, but for his good fortune in meeting in 1818 the young artist John Linnell, through whose help he was able to live while drawing and engraving his great series of illustrations to the Book of Job and to Dante. It was about this time that he wrote his last important poem *The Everlasting Gospel*. It is, for him, a new kind of poetry, in which his elaborate symbolism is abandoned for the barest and most direct statement with complete success. In it Jesus appears as the last of his series of Promethean heroes at war with the Satanic forces of repression. The date of this poem is noteworthy. It is often suggested that Blake in his later life modified his ideas, coming closer to those of orthodox Christianity, yet the fact is that in this work of his old age they are expressed with the greatest clarity and sharpness. It is clear also, from the condition in which the text has reached us, that the ideas in *The Everlasting Gospel* were a

¹ *A Man Without a Mask*, 85-6. Ray Watkinson in his article 'Blake, the Artist and the Man' (*World News*, IV, 47) denies that engraving was a declining craft. This is probably correct but does not affect the general value of Dr. Bronowski's work. My debt to his book will be obvious to everyone.

constant preoccupation, something to which he constantly returned and never ceased to reshape.

Through Linnell, Blake met a number of young artists, who came to look upon him as their master, calling the two rooms off the Strand in which he lived 'The House of the Interpreter'.² None of the men who came under his influence at this time escaped being profoundly influenced, and this is especially true of Samuel Palmer who today is beginning to be recognised as one of the greatest of English painters. In a letter to Gilchrist, Blake's first biographer, Palmer gave a description which is certainly enthusiastic but which agrees in the main with all other contemporary accounts:

He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence; an atmosphere of life, full of the ideal. To walk with him in the country was to perceive the soul of beauty through the forms of matter; and the high, gloomy buildings between which, from his study window, a glimpse was caught of the Thames and the Surrey shore, assumed a kind of grandeur from the man dwelling near them. Those may laugh at this who never knew such an one as Blake; but of him it is the simple truth.

He was a man without a mask; his aim single, his path straight-forwards, and his wants few; so he was free, noble and happy. . . .

His eye was the finest I ever saw: brilliant but not roving, clear and intent, yet susceptible; it flashed with genius, or melted in tenderness. It could also be terrible. Cunning and falsehood quailed under it, but it was never busy with them. It pierced them, and turned away.³

It was these young men who passed on to Gilchrist, to Rossetti and to Swinburne their knowledge of Blake. Gilchrist's *Life*, which appeared in 1863, led to the publication of editions of some of his works, and presently to a whole literature of commentaries and interpretations of very unequal value. The period of total neglect was followed by the period in which Blake became a literary and artistic fashion. Is it too much to hope that we are now entering the age of understanding?

II. THE DIALECTIC VISION

As a young man Blake had stood firmly with Paine and Priestley, with the Deists and free-thinking radicals in defence of the French

² Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, 1863. 300 in Everyman Edition, 1942.

³ Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, 1863. 301-2 in Everyman Edition, 1942.

Revolution. He never abandoned his faith in the Revolution or ceased to treat his old allies with respect: yet their deepest thoughts were not his thoughts. He had many hard things to say about the Deists and the thinkers of the Enlightenment to whom they were closely related, yet in defending Paine against Bishop Watson he could write:

Christ died as an Unbeliever and if the Bishops had their will so would Paine . . . but he who speaks a word against the Son of man shall be forgiven. Let the Bishop prove that he has not spoken against the Holy Ghost, who in Paine strives with Christendom as in Christ he strove with the Jews. (755)

Years later, according to Crabb Robinson, Blake

warmly declared that all he knew was in the Bible, but then he understands by the Bible the spiritual sense. For as to the natural sense, that Voltaire was commissioned by God to expose.⁴

He acknowledged the positive merit in Voltaire and Paine of attacking orthodox Christianity, which, to him, was 'Satan's Synagogue'. He condemned them, as he condemned Bacon, Newton and Locke, not so much because they were rationalists as because they were *mechanical* materialists. This mechanical materialism was the doctrine of capitalism in its age of growth and was accepted almost universally by both progressives and reactionaries. It had indeed, like capitalism itself, a progressive and a repressive face. William Godwin, for example, the philosopher of the most advanced radicals, still saw and thought in terms of the sovereign individual, governed by pure reason, without ties and without environment, a social counterpart to the eighteenth century atomistic science. Blake hated and attacked this atomism which isolated men within society, dividing him from his fellows. He understood that a man's thinking must depend on his class position:

Does he who contemns poverty and he who turns with abhorrence
From usury feel the same passion, or are they moved alike?
How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant?
How the industrious citizen the pains of the husbandman?
How different far the fat fed hireling with hollow drum,
Who buys whole cornfields into wastes, and sings upon the heath!
How different their eye and ear! how different the world to them!
(197-8)

The creator in Blake's mythology, Urizen, creates by division and measurement, and is frequently identified with Newton and Locke,

⁴ Arthur Symonds, *William Blake*, 1907, 267.

who share with him the symbolism of wheels and of the mathematically ordered stars. The starry wheels of Newton become the mill wheels of Satan:

O Satan, my youngest born, art thou not Prince of the Starry
Hosts
And of the Wheels of Heaven, to turn the Mills day and night?
Art thou not Newton's Pantocrator, weaving the Woof of Locke?
To mortals thy Mills seem everything. (378)

Yet it would be wrong to class Blake with the irrationalists. He did not condemn reason but the isolation and blind worship of reason.

The Treasures of Heaven are not the Negations of Passion, but Realities of Intellect, from which all the Passions Emanate Uncurbed in their Eternal Glory,

he wrote (649-50), and

Go, put off Holiness And put on Intellect. (558-9)

By Intellect he understood the whole of man's faculties, including both reason and imagination, properly co-ordinated. Reason uncontrolled, man's 'spectre', Blake saw as an enslaving force, delivering over society into the hands of the rich, the elaboration of *laissez faire* into a social religion. It was because they provided the philosophy for capitalist exploitation that Locke, Newton, Voltaire, all the thinkers of the Enlightenment, were condemned. Yet because Blake was himself a naturally dialectical thinker, he saw that this very mechanical materialism, while it was being used to enslave humanity, had yet within itself a potentially liberating force:

Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau:
Mock on, Mock on: 'tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright. (107)

Blake's dialectic method is implicit in all his work, in his mythology, his conception of man and society, in his view of history as a constant process of struggle and the reconciliation of opposites. But it is most clearly stated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the book in which he repaid his debt to Swedenborg:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. . . .

Energy is Eternal Delight. (182)

Blake saw that we live in a world of division, and that division cannot be healed by pretending that it does not exist. He believed in brotherhood, but *not* that all men here and now are brothers: brotherhood could only be won by casting out error, by conflict and resolution. 'God keep you and me', he wrote in the last year of his life, 'from the divinity of yes and no too—the yea, nay, creeping Jesus—from supposing up and down to be the same thing, as all experimentalists must suppose.' (927) If the forgiveness of sins is one pole of his thought, the casting out of error is the other. 'Severity of judgement is a great virtue' is his comment on one of Lavater's *Aphorisms*. (707)

This dialectic, Blake's two-fold and three-fold vision, as opposed to 'Single vision and Newton's sleep' (862) gives a new social quality to his central myth of the fall from innocence and the age-long struggle towards a new synthesis of innocence and experience. Innocence is Blake's term for the whole man in whom reason and imagination are integrated, as well as for primitive classless society. This state he calls Beulah, a state existing in time but before history, a state of social, sexual and intellectual simplicity in which neither law nor morality had a place, a kind of spiritualised Land of Cokaygne. Beulah is, if you will, an idealisation of the peasant past to which there is no return, though fallen and divided man has always been troubled in his visions by the daughters of Beulah. It is Zion remembered by the waters of Babylon. With the division of society into classes man was divided also against himself: history and psychology is the record of these divisions and conflicts. Blake understood that the way forward is through experience. Man embraces knowledge, conflict, suffering and evil, and with them all he builds a new state, Jerusalem, in which innocence is included on a higher level.

Jerusalem is the entirely utopian symbol of all the later Prophetic Books. In them we find the Giant Albion who, in Blake's three-fold vision, is at once England, the world and mankind. Albion has been betrayed by his children, who have rejected Jerusalem and chosen Babylon. He

is cast forth to the Potter, his Children to the Builders
 To build Babylon because they have forsaken Jerusalem.
 The walls of Babylon are the Souls of Men, her Gates the Groans
 Of Nations, her Towers are the Miseries of once happy Families,
 Her Streets are paved with Destruction, her Houses built with
 Death.
 Her Palaces with Hell and the Grave, her Synagogues with
 Torments
 Of ever-hardening Despair, squar'd and polish'd with cruel skill.
 (461)

Albion and his children have the power to choose Jerusalem, but they have preferred Babylon, the wilderness of squalor and exploitation which Blake saw the rulers of England creating around him. Yet the choice was continuous, and the world of the Prophetic Books is not only a world of building but a world of unending wars.

If Jerusalem is utopian, it is a utopia of a new kind. It is not an island to be discovered or a kingdom to be given laws, but a city to be built. And it is one of a vast series, rising and being destroyed throughout time. Each building becomes the starting point for a new fall and division and the founding of a new city. Because Blake cannot think otherwise than dialectically history can never come to a conclusion.

So for the first time we arrive at the beloved republic not by abstract speculation but by the transformation through struggle of what actually exists. This is shown clearly in the interactions of the figures of Blake's fantastic mythology. The conflict within and around man is symbolised by the conflicts between Urizen-Jehovah, the creator and oppressor, the god of things as they are, and a series of Promethean figures—Los, Orc and Fuzon. These figures, with their sons, daughters, wives, friends, enemies, spectres and emanations form a bewildering world which no one has yet fully comprehended, and any attempt to describe it briefly must necessarily be a gross over-simplification. Part of the difficulty arises because, while they stood for definite things to Blake, we have often only the vaguest clue as to what he meant by them. But still more it arises because they are genuinely mythological

characters and not allegorical dummies each with a single label neatly attached.

Often they are or appear self-contradictory just because they are real, so that their behaviour and relationships, even their very natures, change with circumstances. Thus Urizen, who is the cold creator, creating without love and binding his creation with the chain of the law and moral codes, is the father of Los, symbol of prophecy, the eternal smith bringing order out of chaos. He creates in anger and love, and therefore 'kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'. (563) But Los is in turn the father of Orc, the spirit of revolutionary terror and passion, the destroyer of oppression and error. Los shares the nature of both his father and son, and perhaps mediates between them, but because he is a living symbol dialectically and not mechanically conceived, he is never a mere compromise, a half-way house, between them. On the contrary, at one moment he will behave like Urizen, at another like Orc, at a third in a way that would be impossible to either. Similarly, Urizen is not only a figure of evil, the cruel father of men: he is also the 'Ancient of Days Striking the First Circle of the Earth' who appears in one of Blake's most magnificent designs, the skilled craftsman fabricating the universe. Like Voltaire and Newton he has a positive as well as a negative role, and in the end he is even capable of self-transformation:

So Urizen spoke: he shook his snows from off his shoulders and
arose

As on a Pyramid of mist, his white robes scattering
The fleecy white: renew'd, he shook his aged mantle off
Into the fires. Then, glorious bright, Exulting in his joy,
He sounding rose into the heavens in naked majesty,
In radiant Youth. (352)

Blake sees the battle as fought simultaneously on a number of planes, as a conflict of cosmic forces but no less as a conflict in society and in the minds of men. Nor is it a mechanical clash of right and wrong. It is a dialectical interpenetration of opposites, a conflict of iron (Urizen represents the 'iron law of wages', Malthus' 'principle of population', the new iron machinery of factory production) and fire. Orc is consumer as well as liberator, destroying both the good and evil to create the better, while Los, who in the earlier Books is Time and Prophecy, comes more and more to stand for metallurgy, the new creative technique of the age, in which fire and iron are creatively

brought together. Los is complex because he is a true revolutionary symbol:

The blow of his Hammer is Justice, the swing of his Hammer
 Mercy,
 The force of Los's Hammer is eternal Forgiveness. (553)

His female counterpart, Enitharmon, begins as Imagination, but she also becomes transformed into an industrial symbol: to her belongs the loom, and she, like Los, is at times corrupted and becomes a repressive force.

Out of the tormented fragments of divided Albion Los and Enitharmon build Golgonooza, a bright city of art and science rising out of a waste land:

Here, on the banks of the Thames, Los builded Golgonooza,
 Outside of the Gates of the Human Heart beneath Beulah
 In the midst of the rocks of the Altars of Albion. In fears
 He builded it, in rage and in fury. It is the Spiritual Fourfold
 London, continually building and continually decaying desolate.
 (500)

Golgonooza is not Jerusalem, but it is not therefore to be despised. It is the positive side of bourgeois civilisation and culture, a battle won for order out of chaos, in the teeth of the Beast and the Whore. Yet in the end it too has to be overthrown to make way for Jerusalem. The historical symbolism of this seems clear today: one can only speculate how far Blake was consciously aware of it. Not entirely perhaps, but surely to a certain extent, and just because his myths are true myths they are capable of an extended validity and application.

Jerusalem is the outcome of the struggles of the Prometheans, of Divine Humanity, but precisely of their struggle to transform Urizen, who represents the material world as well as its creator: iron is none the less iron because it becomes molten, but it can then be shaped to the service of men. It is when he comes to describe this Jerusalem that Blake is least successful. After hundreds of pages it remains an abstraction veiled in a bright fog of words:

O lovely mild Jerusalem! O Shiloh of Mount Ephraim!
 I see thy Gates of precious stones, thy Walls of gold and silver.
 Thou art the soft reflected Image of the Sleeping Man
 Who, stretch'd on Albion's rocks, reposes amidst his Twenty-eight
 Cities, where Beulah lovely terminates in the hills and valleys of
 Albion,

Cities not yet embedded in Time and Space; plant ye
 The Seeds, O Sisters, in the bosom of Time and Space's womb,
 To spring up for Jerusalem, lovely shadow of Sleeping Albion.
 (550)

Blake was faced with a problem he could never solve. The new world of smoke and wheels and misery in which nevertheless new hopes and potentialities were beginning to arise, and which it is his peculiar glory to have been the first to grasp imaginatively as a whole, yet left him bewildered and helpless. In this, as in other respects, his special position as a skilled craftsman in an age passing into mass production, was both a strength and a weakness. He saw that there must be a solution, but too few terms of the equation were given for him to be able to find it, so all the Prophetic Books are full of confused battles that never come to a climax and of the building of fabulous cities only that they may be destroyed. In one sense this is because, as a dialectician, he knew that history never ends, and in another because, as a utopian, he could not see clearly the next step.

The remoteness and abstraction which we feel in Blake's conception of Jerusalem is also in part due to the shapelessness which is the great defect of all his longer poems. Blake, who could compress more meaning into a couple of lines than any other poet, tended to lose his sense of direction in the vast epics in which he tried to expound, with far too many details and endless repetitions, his whole conception of the scheme of things. When he is content to write simply (500)

Jerusalem is called Liberty, among the Children of Albion.

we can see at once that its building is directly related in his mind to the contemporary situation. He emphasises this repeatedly by stressing the identity between Jerusalem and London. Jerusalem is to be built not in some remote place but in Lambeth, Paddington and Islington. And that the work is to be done not in some distant future but proceeds already is made clear when he descends to explain his purposes in plain prose: the end of the golden string is already in man's hand.

I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the Liberty of both mind and body to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination. . . . Answer this to yourselves, and expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labours of Art and Science, which alone are the labours of the Gospel. Is not this plain and manifest to the thought? Can you think at all and not pronounce heartily That to labour in Knowledge is to build up Jerusalem, and

to despise Knowledge is to despise Jerusalem and her Builders? . . . Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly and publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem. (535-6)

Because he spoke so constantly of vision, prophecy and inspiration his thought has been often misunderstood. He never pretended that his visions were objectively real: they were real only because he saw them. He rejected entirely any suggestion that they came, or could come, from outside the world which he knew, and his quarrel with orthodox religion was not only that it denied the imagination but that it claimed an other-worldly sanction for its pretensions, bribing men with 'allegorical' promises of reward or punishment in some future life. This false vision is

The lost Traveller's Dream under the Hill. (579)

Vision to Blake meant no more than an honest man looking at the world. True,

A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees (183)

and Blake saw many things that seem strange to most of us.

I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is far more beautiful than the Sun and a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes, (835)

he wrote to a certain Rev. Dr. Trusler who had ventured to question the authenticity of his vision, and later he elaborated the same thought:

'What,' it will be Question'd, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it and not with it. (652)

Such passages easily can be and often have been misunderstood, but when we understand what he meant by God and when we remember how he despised the worship of money, it is not difficult to see that Blake is really expressing his sense that the sun is the true source of life and wealth upon whose powers man depends. His expression of this idea may be thought eccentric, but it is neither irrational nor in-

sane, and what he is saying is no more than a plain truth which his contemporaries only too often neglected.

III. THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL

The symbolism of the Prophetic Books often seems both grotesque and obscure because Blake was not able to relate his reality to that of every-day life. But sometimes it is deliberately obscure because he was secretive and did not wish his meaning to be too readily understood. We have seen how the repression under which he lived forced him to conceal his thoughts and to retreat farther and farther into them. But this is only part of the truth. The repression was real, the danger of speaking out was considerable, but the tendency to retreat was there from the start. It may have been, as Dr. Bronowski suggests, a personal peculiarity, but still more, I believe, it was a characteristic of the obscure and often persecuted sects in the midst of which Blake grew up. These sects tended to regard themselves as the possessors and guardians of a secret doctrine, not to be lightly revealed to the uninitiated.

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
 Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy:
 Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
 Mine has a snub nose like to mine:
 Thine is the friend of All Mankind,
 Mine speaks in parables to the Blind:
 Thine loves the same world that mine hates,
 Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates. . . .
 Both read the Bible day and night,
 But thou read'st black where I read white. (133)

What was this doctrine, which could only be disclosed in parables? And how did Blake come to share it?

While his peculiar mythology is his own, there is a body of ideas within it for which sources may be found, and a great variety of suggestions have been made as to these sources. Among them are the teachings of Swedenborg, of Jacob Boehme, of the Jewish Kaballa and the early Gnostic heretics. It is quite possible that any or all of these may have influenced Blake at first, second or third hand: certainly he acknowledges a debt to Swedenborg and Boehme. The point is, I think, that Swedenborg, Boehme and many others share a common tradition, in which Blake also had a share. Before we begin to search

the ends of the earth we would do well to look on his own doorstep, and see if it is not possible to find what we are looking for in the teachings of the Antinomian sects who flourished in England, and above all in London, during the revolutionary decades of the seventeenth century.

Though the name Antinomian was sometimes applied in the seventeenth century to a particular sect, it can also be used more broadly for a variety of sects and groups, not united in beliefs or by organisation but holding a set of related doctrines and often not easily to be distinguished from one another. Thus Thomas Edwards, an extremely hostile witness, writes of the interconnections of these sects in 1646:

The Sect of Seekers grows very much, and all sorts of Sectaries turn Seekers [and soon] all the other Sects of Independents, Brownists, Antinomians, Anabaptists will be swallowed up by the Seekers *alias* libertines . . . and the issue of these Sects and Schisms will be, that all will end in a loosenesse and licentiousness of living.⁵

After 1646 the confusion probably became greater rather than less, with the rise of new sects like the Ranters, Quakers and Muggletonians, all of whom were to a certain degree antinomian.

It is not possible to prove that Blake borrowed directly from any of these, to show, for example, that he had read any of the works of Muggleton, or of Abiezer Coppe the Ranter. What can be shown is that he and they shared a common body of ideas and expressed those ideas in a common language. We can show, too, that many of the sects of the seventeenth century, Quakers, Muggletonians and Traskites, for example, did survive in London till Blake's time. And it is certain that they persisted most strongly, as they had sprung up originally, among the artisans and petty tradesmen of the thickly-peopled working-class quarters. These were exactly the social circles and the geographical areas in which Blake was born and in which his whole life was passed. When, therefore, we find, not in one or two isolated cases but throughout his work, the closest similarities between his thought and the thought recorded among the sects a hundred years earlier, there seems to me the strongest presumption that he was the heir to a tradition and that to understand this tradition will help us to understand Blake himself.

So far this has not been attempted, except in the special case of

⁵ *Gangraena*, II, 1646, 14.

Milton. This has been explored thoroughly by Professor Denis Saurat, and I do not propose to go over any of the ground he has covered.⁶ In any case the relationship of Blake and Milton was one of antagonism as well as admiration. The much more popular tradition of Antinomianism was that in which Blake shared fully and which provided him with a general framework of ideas.

And first of all, it was a tradition of revolution. The Seekers, Ranters and the rest flourished when England had overthrown the feudal order in a civil war and when it seemed to thousands that a new age was about to begin. Their ideas, fantastic as they sometimes appear to us, were a reflection of their hopes: in essence they were political ideas in a religious form. A new age was indeed beginning, but it was not the age they had expected. Even during the Republic they were often persecuted, and after the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 they were driven underground, preserving their faith in little, obscure conventicles, treasuring subversive pamphlets in old cupboards, holding the ideas of the revolution, as it were, in suspension, until towards the end of the eighteenth century, the world seemed ready for them again. Like Los, they 'kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'.

In fact, the language of revolution was changing, and the old ideas were barely intelligible to the men who listened to Paine and Thelwall, and mere crazy nonsense to the more sophisticated followers of Bentham. Nevertheless they did provide a means of communication for a great poet: Blake's tragedy was that he was speaking a language which was already becoming obsolete. He was the greatest English Antinomian, but also the last.

Before going on to consider in detail his debt to the seventeenth century it will be as well to summarise the group of doctrines that make up Antinomianism in the broad sense. They are closely related, but can conveniently be taken under four main heads.

First, there is the group of ideas dealing with the nature of God and with his relation to man. All the Antinomians believed that God existed in man, most that he existed in all created things, and many that he had no other existence. Blake held this last opinion.

Second, there is the conception that the moral and ceremonial law is no longer binding on God's people, that it was the result of a curse which has now been lifted and that the orthodoxy which attempts to impose it is anti-christian.

Third, and closely related to this, is the whole complex of ideas

⁶ *Blake and Milton*, 1920.

associated with the phrase, the Everlasting Gospel, a phrase which Blake took as the title of his last great poem.

And fourth, arising from all these, there is the symbolism of the destruction of Babylon and the building of Jerusalem, a symbolism with which Blake's work is packed and whose relevance to an age of revolution hardly needs emphasis.

All these doctrines are so interconnected that it is hardly possible to follow each thread separately. It will be convenient to start with the idea of the Everlasting Gospel, around which the rest seems to adhere and which lies so much at the centre of Blake's thought. The origin of this doctrine goes back to the twelfth century Italian mystic Joachim of Flora. He taught that the history of the world fell into three ages, those of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost. The first was the age of fear and servitude, and ended with the death of Christ, the second was the age of faith and filial obedience, and the third, which was to be expected shortly, was the age of love and spiritual liberty for the children of God. The scripture of the first age was the Old Testament, of the second the New Testament. In the coming age of the Spirit the full truth of the Everlasting Gospel will be revealed, not in a new sacred book but in a new revelation of the spiritual sense of the Bible with which God will illuminate the hearts of men. In this age God will be within man and therefore all existing forms of worship, ceremonies, churches, legal and moral codes will become superfluous. Instead of appearing as a force from without, God will now be within, and the unity of God and man will be fully accomplished.

This is precisely the doctrine to which Blake refers when he writes:

God Appears and God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day. (121)

and we can find it equally clearly in the beliefs which Samuel Fisher ascribes to the Ranters:

Till Christ Come [means to the Ranters] His coming into men by his Spirit, or in such full measures and manifestations of his Spirit into men's hearts, that they may be able to live up with him in spirit, so as no more to need such lower helps from outward administrations . . . to preach, break bread, to build one another in faith, search the Scriptures, etc., 'twas a way of God for men's edification till Christ the morning star shined, to which men did

well to take heed, as unto a light that shined in a dark place, but now the day has dawned and the day star arises in men's hearts, yea, the day breaks and the shadows flee away; and Christ comes as a swift Roe and young hart upon the mountains of Bether.⁷

From twelfth century Italy to Blake's England seems a long journey, yet it is one that we can follow almost step by step. Joachite ideas are to be found in France among the followers of Amalric of Bena at the end of the twelfth century and among the German Brethren of the Free Spirit in the thirteenth.⁸ In the sixteenth century the Familists and the closely related 'Spirituels' appear in Germany and Holland. Robert Barclay says of these 'Spirituels' that they

held that they were called to inaugurate the last dispensation. The dispensation of Moses and Christ was to be succeeded by that of the Holy Spirit, or of Elias, and this last time had come. The Apostles, and after them the Church, had only known the Lord 'in a figure'. The times were now come in which the knowledge of a new spiritual and living Christ—mystically hidden from the time of Christ and the Apostles—is now immediately revealed to the Christian.⁹

Of the Familists' teacher, Henry Nicholas, Ephraim Pagitt writes:

This deceiver describeth eight throughbreakings of light (as he termeth them) to have been in 8 several times, from *Adam* to the time that now is, which (as hee saith) have each exceeded other. The seventh he alloweth Jesus Christ to be the publisher of, and his light to be the greatest of all that ever were before him; and he maketh his own to be the last and greatest, and the perfection of all, in and by which Christ is perfected, meaning holinesse; he maketh every one of his Familie of *Love* to be Christ; yea, and God, and himself God, and Christ in a more excellent manner, saying that he is godded with God and co-deified with him, and that God is hominified with him. These horrible blasphemies with divers others, doth this *H. N.* and his Familie teach to be the Everlasting Gospel.¹⁰

Thomas Munzer, the leader of the great peasant insurrection in Germany in 1525, was another who came under the influence of the

⁷ Samuel Fisher, *Baby Baptism meer Babyism*, 1653. Quoted from Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, 1909, 470-1.

⁸ William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, 1868, I, 148-9.

⁹ Robert Barclay, *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, 1876, 415.

¹⁰ Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography*, 1645, 77.

writings of Joachim. 'This doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel worked on Munzer like the interior fires in a volcanic land', writes Richard Heath.¹¹ Through Munzer it affected the whole Anabaptist movement in Germany.

Another channel of Joachimite ideas was Jacob Boehme, whose works began to appear in English translations in the 1640s. Several were published by Giles Calvert, who was first a Ranter and afterwards a Quaker. Blake refers to Boehme several times and was probably acquainted with some of his writing at first hand.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the Familists were well established in England, where they presently merged with the Seekers and other antinomian sects. By the time of the Revolution Joachimite ideas, in various forms, were widespread. Thomas Edwards, whose *Gangraena* is an encyclopedia of the 'Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time', mentions those who declare:

That by Christ's death, all the sins of all the men in the world, Turks, Pagans, as well as Christians committed against the moral Law and first Covenant, are actually pardoned and forgiven, and this is the everlasting Gospel.¹²

and that

There is a salvation that shall be revealed in the last times, which was not known to the Apostles themselves.¹³

It is of particular interest that the first of these passages links the phrase the Everlasting Gospel with the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, exactly as Blake links it over a century later.

In a very cursory study of the pamphlet literature of the time I have found six places where the phrase 'the Everlasting Gospel' is used.¹⁴ No doubt a more thorough search would reveal others. In any case, the doctrine for which it stood was far more widespread, and is to be found, in a more or less complete form, in the writings of such men as John Saltmarsh, William Erbery, Thomas Collier, Tobias Crisp and John Eaton among many others. With the appearance of the Ranters

¹¹ Richard Heath, *The English Peasant*, 1893, 371.

¹² *Gangraena*, I, 22. ¹³ *Ibid.* I, 28.

¹⁴ *Gangraena*, I, 22 and 34. Pagitt, *Heresiography*, 77. Gerrard Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals*, 1648 (Sabine, *Collected Works of W.*, 122.) Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 1650, Preface. Richard Huberthorne etc., *The Testimony of the Everlasting Gospel witnessed through Suffering*, 1654.

about 1649 English Antinomianism assumed its most uncompromising form.

IV. BLAKE AND THE RANTERS

The Ranters as a sect were bitterly attacked and persecuted from the start, were soon crushed, and have never since been given the attention which they deserve. No doubt the behaviour of many of them was extravagant, and they often expressed their views in ways which shocked their contemporaries, but at their highest, in the work of such men as Coppe, Joseph Salmon and the near-Ranter Richard Coppin, there is a fervour and a wild poetry that is both moving and effective.

Perhaps the clearest account of Ranter doctrine is to be found in *The Smoke of the Bottomless Pit* by John Holland (1651). Though this is, as the title indicates, a hostile account, there is little in it that cannot be fairly deduced from acknowledged Ranter writings: Holland appears to be sincere when he says in his Preface that he does not intend

to make their persons odious in any way, much lesse to stir up any to persecute them barely for their judgements; for when I consider what the Scripture saith, I find it is not God's method to deal with Spiritual enemies with carnal weapons.¹⁵

This is an attitude of restraint extremely rare in the anti-Ranter literature of the time, much of which is of the lowest kind.

The main body of the pamphlet summarises Ranter teachings on a number of points, and it is instructive to compare some of these with Blake's views about the same subjects.

First Concerning God

They maintain that God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature, as in another, though he doth not manifest himself so much in one as in another: I saw this expression in a Book of theirs, that the essence of God was as much in the ivie leaf as in the most glorious Angel.¹⁶

This may be compared with Blake's statements in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that

God only Acts and Is in existing beings or Men (188)
and

The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those

¹⁵ Holland, 1.

¹⁶ Holland, 2.

who envy and calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God. (191)

The belief which Blake shared with the Ranters that God only exists in existing beings or men can be followed logically to the conclusion that only God really exists, but equally logically to the opposite conclusion that what we call God is no more than a form of the movement of matter. Both he and they did in practice manage to combine both conclusions, and it is difficult to see that when Blake spoke of God, or, as he liked to do, of Divine Humanity, he meant anything more than the quality in man which distinguishes him from the animals—his intellect, his imagination and his capacity for pity.

Since God existed in man, and was entirely good, the Ranters argued that all human acts were performed by God and so could not be sinful. Hence, the moral law could have no validity for them.

Concerning the Commandments of God they say that all the Commandments of God, both in the Old and New Testaments, are fruits of the Curse, and that all men being free from the curse, are also free from the Commandments. . . . Concerning sinne, That there is no such thing as that which men call sin, that sin and holinesse are all one to God, and that God delights as much in the one as in the other.¹⁷

So Blake's Jesus in *The Everlasting Gospel* (it must be remembered that he is not the historical Jesus of Joachim's second age, but the spiritual Jesus of the third) overthrows the Moral Law:

He laid His Hand on Moses' Law:
The Ancient Heavens, in Silent Awe
Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole,
All away began to roll:

declaring meanwhile:

'Good and Evil are no more!
Sinai's trumpets, cease to roar!
Cease, finger of God, to write!
The Heavens are not clean in thy Sight.
Thou art Good, and thou Alone;
Nor may the sinner cast one stone.
To be Good only, is to be
A God or else a Pharisee. . . .' (139-40)

¹⁷ Holland, 4.

The effect of these doctrines, even in the crude form in which they were held by the Ranters, still more as Blake developed them, is to emphasise the dignity of man:

God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is. (148)

So the Ranters say:

Concerning man, that man cannot either know God, or beleeve in God, or pray to God, but it is God in man that knoweth himself, believes in himself, and prayeth to himself.¹⁸

This passage Blake seems almost literally to paraphrase in *The Everlasting Gospel*:

‘If thou humblest thyself, thou humblest me;
Thou also dwell’st in Eternity,
Thou art a Man, God is no more,
Thy own humanity learn to adore. . . .’ (138)

And in *Jerusalem* he wrote:

Then Los grew furious, raging: ‘Why stand we here trembling
around
Calling on God for help, and not ourselves, in whom God dwells,
Stretching a hand to save the falling Man?’ (487)

Antinomianism can be a negative and inhibiting creed, but in favourable circumstances it may engender a pride that is a truly revolutionary virtue.

As God in Man becomes a heroic symbol, so heaven and hell, and all rewards, threats and sanctions outside human life become symbols of unreality:

They teach that there is neither heaven nor hell but what is in man.¹⁹

In this spirit Blake declares that the ‘Treasures of Heaven are nothing other than ‘Mental Studies and Performances’ (535) and of hell:

I do not believe there is such a thing literally, but hell is the being shut up in the possession of corporeal desires which shortly weary the man, for ALL LIFE IS HOLY. (717)

It was this freedom from other-worldly fears which made it possible for him to write with such freedom and high spirits of Hell

¹⁸Holland, 4.

¹⁹*Ibid.* 6.

and Devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and when he praises Milton for being 'a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it', (192) he differed only in degree of sophistication from the Ranter who is alleged to have said:

he hoped to see the poor Devil cleared of a great many slanders that had been cast upon him.²⁰

Nearest of all to Blake is that strange genius, Abiezer Coppe, now remembered, if at all, for the acid little biography allotted to him by Anthony Wood.²¹ Unlike Blake, Coppe followed the logic of his Antinomianism into grotesque excesses, and this, as Blake knew, is one of the dangers of Antinomianism. The Everlasting Gospel is no guide for fools:

The Wicked will turn it to Wickedness, the Righteous to Righteousness, (463)

he wrote, much in the spirit of Tobias Crisp's solution of the same problem:

The grass and pasture is so sweet that he [God] hath put a beleever into, that though there be no bounds in such a soule, yet it will never goe out of this fat pasture to feed on a barren common.²²

Nevertheless, as he also knew,

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. (183)

and Coppe in his two main writings *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1650) and his Preface to Coppin's *Divine Teachings* (1649) arrived by this road at a wisdom not entirely unlike Blake's own.

A Fiery Flying Roll, with its symbolic and sometimes fanciful treatment of heaven and hell, of inspiration and of the ways of God with man, with its bizarre expressions of a genuine fervour, and its almost sulphurous atmosphere of spiritual war, constantly reminds us both of the Prophetic Books and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Coppe insists that the new world of the Everlasting Gospel can come only in agony and conflict:

But behold, behold, he is now risen with a witnesse, to save Zion with vengeance, or to confound and plague all things into himself; who by his mighty Angell is proclaiming (with a loud voyce) That

²⁰ Holland, 6.

²¹ *Athens Oxoniensis*, 1692, II, 367.

²² Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, 1643, Sermon II, 39. This work was reprinted in 1691, when it attracted considerable attention in dissenting circles.

Sin and Transgression is finished and ended; and everlasting righteousness brought in; and the everlasting Gospell preaching; Which everlasting Gospell is brought in with most terrible earth-quakes, and heaven-quakes, and with signes and wonders following.²³

Just so Blake insists that the building of Jerusalem which is called Liberty begins with the Harrowing of Hell:

The God of this World raged in vain:
 He bound Old Satan in his Chain,
 And bursting forth, his furious ire
 Became a Chariot of fire.
 Throughout the land he took his course,
 And traced diseases to their source:
 He curs'd the Scribe and Pharisee,
 Trampling down Hypocrisy:
 Where'er his Chariot took its way,
 There Gates of death let in the day,
 Broke down every Chain and Bar;
 And Satan in his Spiritual War
 Drag'd at his Chariot wheels: loud howl'd
 The God of this World: louder roll'd
 The Chariot Wheels, and louder still
 His voice was heard from Zion's hill. (134)

In this conflict the natural man is consumed and destroyed in order to be born again:

Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth
 Must be consumed with the Earth
 To rise from Generation free:
 Then what have I to do with thee? (79)

Coppe describes this from his own experience with an extraordinary vividness:

First, all my strength, my forces were utterly routed, my house I dwelt in fired; my father and mother forsook me, the wife of my bosome loathed me, mine old name was rotted, perished; and I was utterly plagued, consumed, damned, ramm'd and sunk into nothing, with the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe) out of which I came naked, and whereto I returned again naked. And lying a while there, rapt up in silence, at length (the body or outward forme being awake all this while) I heard with my out-

²³ *Fiery Flying Roll, Preface, 1.*

ward care (to my apprehension) a most terrible thunderclap, and after that a second. And after the second thunderclap, which was exceeding terrible, I saw a great body of light, like the light of the Sun, and red as fire, in the forme of a drum (as it were) whereupon with exceeding trembling and amazement of the flesh, and with joy unspeakable in the Spirit, I clapt my hands, and cryed out, *Amen, Halelujah, Halelujah Amen*. And so lay trembling, sweating and smoking (for the space of half an houre) at length with a loud voyce (I inwardly) cryed out, Lord, what wilt thou do with me; my most excellent majesty and eternall glory (in me) answered and sayd, Fear not, I will take thee up into my everlasting Kingdom. But thou shalt (first) drink a bitter cup, a bitter cup, a bitter cup; whereupon (being filled with exceeding amazement) I was throwne into the belly of Hell (and take what you can of it in these expressions, though the matter is beyond expression) I was among all the Devils in hell, even in their most hideous crew.

And under all this terrour and amazement, there was a little spark of transcendent, unspeakable glory, which survived, and sustained itself, triumphing, exulting and exalting itself above all the Fiends.²⁴

What was consumed, in each case, was not sin but holiness, the 'dark self-righteous pride' of Blake's phrase. It was upon the tongue of the 'rich learned Pharisee' that Jesus wrote 'with Iron pen', 'Ye must be born again.' (136)

Which Pharisee, in man is the mother of harlots, and being the worst whore, cries whore first: and the grand blasphemmer, cries out Blasphemy, blasphemy, which she is brimfull of. . . .

But the hour is coming, yea now is, That all his carnal, outward, formal Religion (yea of Scripturely cognizance, so far as its fleshly and formal) and all his fleshly holiness, zeal and devotion shall be, and is, set upon the same account, as outward drunkenness, theft, murther and adultery. . . .

Yea the time is coming, That zealous, holy, devout righteous, religious men shall (one way) dye, for their Holines and Religion, as well as Thieves and Murtherers—for their Theft and Murther.²⁵

Blake, Coppe and all Antinomians condemned formal Christianity because it based itself on this pharisaic holiness and set up arbitrary standards by which it accused and condemned. Blake had two common terms for the orthodox church, both of which were also current

²⁴ *Fiery Flying Roll*, Preface, 2-3.

²⁵ Coppe, Preface to Richard Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, 1649.

among seventeenth century Antinomians. First he called it Rahab, just as Coppe called it 'the well favoured Harlot',²⁶ and Roger Crab 'that House of the Whore's merchandise'.²⁷

That is why, according to Edwards,

An Antinomian Preacher in London on a Fast Day said it was better for Christians to be drinking in a Ale-house, or to be in a whorehouse, than to be keeping fasts legally.²⁸

And why Blake wrote in one poem:

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
But the Ale-house is healthy and friendly and warm. (74)

and in another turns from the serpent-polluted church

. . . into a sty
And laid me down among the swine. (87)

Blake's other term was Satan's Synagogue, for his Satan is 'the Accuser who is the God of this World' who is 'worship'd by the Names Divine of Jesus and Jehovah'—in fact the God who is worshipped by orthodox Christians. (579) (He is on no account to be confused with the friendly Devils of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) In just this sense Richard Coppin, on trial at Worcester for sundry blasphemies, was charged:

First that I should say, That they were evil Angels (meaning the Ministers who preach the Gospel of Christ) that told people of damnation, and that such ought not to be heard or believed.²⁹

Orthodox Christianity was not merely a corruption of Christianity as Blake understood it, but its absolute inversion, and it was in no rhetorical sense that he wrote:

The Modern Church Crucifies Christ with the head Downward.
(650)

From another point of view Satan-Jehovah was a form of Urizen, the ice-cold creator, and in this connection there is a curious parallel between Blake and the Muggletonians, another Joachite sect who certainly survived in London in some strength at Blake's time.³⁰

²⁶ *Fiery Flying Roll*, Part II, Ch. 8.

²⁷ *Dagon's Downfall*, 1657, 4.

²⁸ *Gangraena*, II, 146.

²⁹ Coppin, *Truths Testimony*, 1653, 31.

³⁰ The Muggletonians were sufficiently flourishing in 1820 to bring out an expensively produced edition of the *Collected Works* of Reeves and Muggleton in 3 Volumes.

According to them there were three Ages or 'Records', those of Moses, of Jesus and of Reeves and Muggleton, and these were the Records respectively of Water, Blood and Spirit:

This Record of *Moses* upon Earth is that Record of Water, answering and bearing Testimony to that one God the Father and Creator of all things both in Heaven and Earth.³¹

Now water was also the element of Urizen, and in the second of his *Songs of Experience* Blake wrote:

Prison'd on wat'ry shore,
 Starry Jealousy does keep my den:
 Cold and hoar,
 Weeping o'er,
 I hear the father of the ancient men. (69)

The resemblance may be accidental, but it is extremely probable that Blake had met Muggletonians, especially as their doctrines are in some ways very similar to those of his early master Swedenborg. It is, indeed, Swedenborg and the Muggletonians who complete the living chain connecting the age of Joachim of Flora with that of Blake.³²

In many of his *Proverbs of Hell* Blake voices his detestation of this restrictive holiness:

He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.
 Prisons are built with Bricks of Law, Brothels with Stones of
 Religion.
 As the Caterpillar choseth the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so
 the Priest lays his curses on the fairest joys.
 Damn braces. Bless relaxes. (183-4)

Coppe, once more, provides the best parallels:

[I] had rather heare a mighty Angell (in man) swearing a full-mouthed Oath . . . cursing and making others fall a-swearing, than heare a zealous Presbyterian, Independent or spirituall Notionist pray, preach, or exercise.

³¹ Ludowick Muggleton, *The Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit*, 1699, Part III, Ch. 11. A posthumous work.

³² Swedenborg announced that the third age of the spirit was to begin in 1757. It is to this that Blake refers, half humorously, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent, the Eternal Hell revives. And lo! Swedenborg is the Angel sitting by the tomb.' Blake, undoubtedly, was entertained by the thought that this was the year of his own birth. On Blake and Swedenborg, see J. G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake*, 1948.

Well, One hint more; there's swearing ignorantly, i'th darke, vainely, and there's swearing i'th light, gloriously.³³

And:

Kisses are numbered among transgressors—base things—well! by base hellish swearing, and cursing . . . and by base impudent kisses . . . my plaguy holiness hath been confounded, and thrown into the lake of brimstone.³⁴

The last phrase reminds us that Blake, who had written of

The Spectre of Man, the *Holy Reasoning Power* (442)

wrote also:

Each man is in his Spectre's power
Untill the arrival of that hour
When his humanity awake
And cast his own Spectre into the Lake. (108)

Indeed, the resemblances between Blake and Coppe are so numerous and so striking that it is tempting if unprofitable to wonder if Blake had not seen somewhere a copy of *A Fiery Flying Roll*. No proof is ever likely to be forthcoming, and the *Roll*, which was burnt by Order of Parliament in 1650, cannot have been common. Yet the very fact of its burning would induce those who valued it to preserve it the more carefully, and I do not think that it is at all impossible that Blake, considering the circles among which he moved in London, may have stumbled on a copy in the house of some friend who belonged to an old dissenting family. The probability that he knew men who had preserved the doctrines of Coppe and the Ranters must surely be much greater.

In this context it may be worth looking afresh at the old story of Blake and his wife being found by Thomas Butts sitting naked in their garden at Lambeth.³⁵ Coppe, it was said, was accustomed:

to preach stark naked many blasphemies and unheard of villanies in the daytime, and in the night be drunk and lye with a wench that had also been his hearer stark naked.³⁶

³³ *Fiery Flying Roll*, I, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.* II, 2.

³⁵ Gilchrist, *op. cit.* 97. The truth of this story, which both puzzled and shocked Blake's nineteenth century admirers, has been denied. But the evidence in its favour seems to me much better than that against it. Butts was one of Blake's oldest and steadiest friends, the last man to invent or circulate such a tale if it were untrue. Linnell and Palmer, who denied it, were certainly close friends, but did not meet Blake till about twenty years later, and their denials seem to have had little more basis than that it did not square with their estimate of his character.

³⁶ Wood, *op. cit.* II, 367.

This he denied, declaring that the pamphlets in which such charges were made were:

scandalous and bespattered with Lyes and Forgeries, in setting me in front of such actions which I never did, which my soul abhors; such things which mine eyes never beheld, and words which my tongue never spake, and mine ears never heard.³⁷

There is no need to doubt the sincerity of this denial, or that many similar accusations made against the Ranters were equally false. Nevertheless, when all allowances have been made for malice and exaggeration, I think there is sufficient reason to believe that they did at times practice what may be described as a kind of ritual nudism.³⁸

This would certainly be in keeping with Ranter doctrine. Clothes were a token of the loss of innocence, of the knowledge of good and evil which came from the fall, and of the curse which accompanied this knowledge. A return to nakedness was symbolic of the lifting of the curse and the abrogation of the moral law. Some argued that the curse had never existed, or the law ever been valid, since the sin of Adam was visited on him alone and not on the whole of mankind.³⁹ For them, as for Blake, original sin was an invention of the Churches, the gospel of Satan.

At any rate, Adam in innocence, in Beulah, as Blake might have said, was naked and unashamed; it was upon the fallen Adam that God placed clothes: for the regenerate Adam of the new time they were no longer necessary except for purposes of use and comfort. It is therefore interesting at least that when Thomas Butts found Blake in the garden (and Blake's garden, with the vine which he refused to prune, was itself symbolic) he was greeted with the words:

'Come in! it's only Adam and Eve you know!'⁴⁰

Gilchrist may have been right in supposing that they were 'reciting passages from *Paradise Lost*, in character', but this reference to Adam

³⁷ *A Remonstrance . . . of Abiezer Coppe*, 1651, 6.

³⁸ See: *The Ranters Declaration*, 1650, *The Routing of the Ranters*, 1650, Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found*, 1660, 28. Compare Engels: 'It is a curious fact that with every great revolutionary movement the question of "free love" comes into the foreground. With one set of people as a revolutionary progress, as a shaking off of old traditional fetters, no longer necessary; with others as a welcome doctrine, comfortably covering all sorts of free and easy practices between man and woman.' (*The Book of Revelation*. In *Marx and Engels on Religion*, 1957, 205.) Blake, clearly, comes into the first category; both were to be found among the Ranters.

³⁹ *Gangraena*, I, 24.

⁴⁰ Gilchrist, *op. cit.* 97.

is too characteristic of the thought of Blake and of the earlier Antinomians to be so easily accounted for. The third Adam was part of the Ranter Mythology. So John Robins, 'the God of the Shakers', was asked in prison:

Why do your followers term you the third *Adam*? To that I answer particularly (said he) in the behalf of myself. So I am, for these reasons. The first *Adam* was made a living soul, the second, a quickening spirit, and in this law stands all the council of God the Father. The first, the servant of Death appointed; the second, the Son of life therewith foreordained. And I am the third *Adam* that must gain what the first lost.⁴¹

Whether the story is true or not, it is entirely consistent with the whole of Blake's work both as poet and artist. The naked human form was his supreme symbol of the divine in man and of the liberation of the spirit, and even when his figures are draped, as much of the form as is possible is revealed. In this he was not uninfluenced by the fashions of the age. It may be worth recalling that the years he spent at Lambeth (1793-1800) correspond roughly with the years in which the influence of the French Revolution on clothes, especially women's clothes, was at its height. It was then the fashion to wear light, close fitting and sometimes almost transparent dresses: there has never perhaps been a period in which women wore so little. The French sense of liberation swept across the Channel in spite of the war and the politically repressive government. The effect on Blake's art may be seen in such a picture as *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, painted about 1810. Blake's *Virgins* wear dresses that, with minor alterations, would have been by no means conspicuous in fashionable society a few years earlier. Similarly, his illustrations to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), almost his only drawings of contemporary subjects, show how closely his style was suited to, and perhaps influenced by, the costume of the period.

Finally, in considering this story of Blake in the garden, we should not forget the element of humour and fantasy in his make-up, or the very unconventional ways in which it found expression. He loved to startle and provoke and to say and do things, which might still convey his most serious beliefs, in a half-jesting manner. He probably enjoyed the confusion of the worthy Mr. Butts. And here, too, we can find a link with the Ranters, who also were in the habit of flouting conven-

⁴¹ G. H., *The Declaration of John Robins*, 1651, 5.

tion and expressing their doctrines in the coarsest kind of jesting. Blake, in such a poem as *When Klopstock England defied* (103), is related closely enough to the Ranter who, it was said,

sitting in his cups (with the rest of his companions) evacuating *wind backwards*, used this blasphemous expression, let everything that hath breath, praise the Lord.⁴²

V. JERUSALEM IS CALLED LIBERTY

We have seen already something of what Blake made of the symbols of Jerusalem and Babylon, symbols that perhaps present themselves inevitably in a revolutionary age to men whose principal reading is the Bible. Here, too, he was following a well-established tradition.

The Seeker William Erbery links the coming of Jerusalem with the third age of the Everlasting Gospel:

I hear a sound of the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven among you; and one of you saying that one Form should knock out another till Christ come, etc. I am come in the Spirit of Love, with meekness and fear, to give an account of the hope that is in me, to my owne Country first, where I hold forth nothing but the new Jerusalem, in which God shall gather all the Saints first, even those who look for his coming; in which he will so appear in power and glory, dwelling in the midst of them, that many Nations will joyne to the Lord in that day; and these Northern Nations, I believe to be the first fruits of the world; for the Nations of them that are saved, shall walk in the light of the new Jerusalem, and men shall dwell in it, and there shall be no more destructions, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited. . . . this new Jerusalem being the third dispensation differing from the Law and Gospel-Churches, yet comprehending both, as the glory of the Gospel was above that of the Law, and darkened the light thereof, even as the rising Sun doth the Moon when it shines at the full.⁴³

What is especially interesting is to see how, under the stimulus of revolution, Jerusalem and Babylon develop from religious symbols—which they had always been—into social and political symbols. This is already well marked in a sermon attributed to the Baptist Hanserd Knollys:

Babylon's falling is Sion's raising. Babylon's destruction is Jerusalem's salvation. . . . It is the work of the day to cry down

⁴² *The Ranters Religion*, 1650, 8.

⁴³ *A Call to the Churches*, 1653, 35-7.

Babylon, that it may fall more and more; and it is the work of the day to give God no rest till he sets up Jerusalem as the praise of the whole world. Blessed is he that dasheth the brats of Babylon against the stones. Blessed is he that hath any hand in pulling down Babylon. . . .

God uses the common people and the multitude to proclaim that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. As when Christ came at first the poor received the Gospel—not many wise, not many noble, not many rich, but the poor—so in the reformation of religion, after Antichrist began to be discovered, it was the common people that first came to look after Christ.⁴⁴

Later, Richard Blome complains of the Anabaptists, using the term loosely to characterise all the advanced sects, that:

Babylon they would overthrow; and within Babylon, they included all Magistracy and civil Government, and all wealth and greatness; A great quarrel they had with the Babylonian Gold.⁴⁵

Just so Edwards had complained earlier that the Sectaries were saying:

That Christ would destroy not only unlawfull Government, but lawful Government, not only the abuse of it, but the use of it; he was destroying both Monarchy and Aristocracy.⁴⁶

And an anonymous (and premature) obituary poem to the Baptist preacher Vavasour Powell began:

Here Propagation lies, that did aspire,
Like Phaeton to set the world on fire,
Cry'd down Order, and the Ministerial Call,
And thought to give this Government a fall:
She would have caused the Gentry flock in Swarms,
To beg relief like Cripples without Armes . . .⁴⁷

We are now very close to Blake's portrait of Jesus the Revolutionary, as he appeared to Caiaphas:

He mock'd the Sabbath, and he mock'd
The Sabbath's God, and he unlocked
The Evil Spirits from their Shrines,

⁴⁴ *A Glimpse of Sions Glory*, 1641. Quoted from A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, 1938, 233-4.

⁴⁵ *The Fanatick History*, 1660, 19.

⁴⁶ *Gangraena*, I, 9.

⁴⁷ Quoted from William York Tindall, *John Bunyan Mechanick Preacher*, 1934, 10. The 'epitaph' was written in 1654, but Powell died in Lambeth Prison in 1670.

And turn'd Fishermen to Divines. . . .
 He scorn'd Earth's Parents, scorned Earth's God,
 And mock'd the one and the other's rod;
 His Seventy Disciples sent
 Against Religion and Government:
 They by the Sword of Justice fell
 And him their Cruel Murderer tell. (142)

The political implications of Antinomianism are surely clear enough. God exists in man—in all men, and, as Richard Coppin insisted, fully in all men:

God is all in one, and so in everyone; the same all which is in me, is in thee; the same God which dwels in one dwels in another; and in the same fulness as he is in one, he is in everyone.⁴⁸

If this is so, the poorest and most ignorant men are as likely to read his intentions as the rich and learned. As Blake put it:

Christ and his Apostles were illiterate men; Caiaphas,
 Pilate and Herod were learned. (825)

For this reason the Antinomian sects of the seventeenth century led the battle for the right of all to preach, against the determination of the Presbyterians and others to preserve the monopoly of the pulpit to the formally ordained and university trained ministers. At a time when revolutionary ideas were constantly finding religious forms, the demand for the freedom of the pulpit was a political demand.

Nor did it stop there. Since God was in all men, or, as others argued, since Christ died for all and not merely for the elect, it seemed to follow that all were entitled to vote and to have a full share in the political life of the nation. It is not by accident that Walwyn and Overton were among the first and most determined defenders of the rights of the Mechanic Preachers, or that the Antinomian sects were the main nursery of the Levellers. The men of the New Model Army who sang:

The Lord begins to honour us,
 The Saints are marching on;
 The Sword is sharp, the arrows swift
 To destroy Babylon,

were the same men who wore in their hats and treasured in their hearts
The Agreement of the People.

⁴⁸ *Divine Teachings*, 8.

Interest in Jerusalem was not confined to its symbolism. Just as later the utopian socialists tried to set up socialist Utopias, so the Jerusalem enthusiasts tried to hasten the day of the Lord by earthly assistance. In 1650 the Ranter Thomas Tany (Tawney?) announced that he had been commissioned to gather the Jews together in Jerusalem:

And Jerusalem shall be built in Glory, in her own land, even on her own Foundation, as the Lord hath shown mee, though it seeme never so impossible in the Judgement of Men.⁴⁹

Some years later Tany was drowned in a small boat which he had built himself and in which he was attempting to sail to Jerusalem.⁵⁰

Blake himself seems to have believed that England was the original home of the Jews, and two of his friends, William Owen Pughe and William Sharp, were connected with the sect of the British Israelites and with Joanna Southcott, whose writings were also full of Jerusalem symbolism. Through them, he almost certainly met Richard Brothers, who proposed to rebuild Jerusalem in accordance with a plan divinely revealed to him. Sharp tried, unsuccessfully, to enlist Blake into the Southcottian sect.⁵¹ Blake, like many men of wide reading who have had no formal education, tended to be eclectic, but there was a core of good sense in him which rejected this type of extravagance. The positive use which he made of this floating body of ideas may be seen from the Preface *To The Jews* which opens Chapter II of *Jerusalem*.

A practical application of the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel, of a very different kind, is to be found in the writings of the Ranter Joseph Salmon. After a general statement of the doctrine, explaining how each manifestation was swallowed up in a later and higher one, he proceeds to apply this to the political situation as it was in 1649. God, having destroyed the Monarchy, first manifested himself in the Parliament. Then:

We see in a short time, he layes aside that glorious show and Idol (the Parliament) and cloathes himself with the Army.⁵²

His will now is that the Army lay aside their swords, and cast themselves upon him. God will give victory out of suffering and humility:

⁴⁹ *I Proclaim the Return of the Jews*, 1650. Broadsheet.

⁵⁰ Alexander Gordon, *The Origin of the Muggletonians*, 1865, 24.

⁵¹ Ruthven Todd, *Tracks in the Snow*, 1946, 54-5.

⁵² *A Rout, A Rout: Or some part of the Armies Quarters Beaten up*, 1649, 3.

he is coming to make you free to suffer a blessed Freedom, a glorious Liberty, a sufficient recompense for the loss of all outward glories . . . when you are become the children of the new birth, you shall be able to play upon the hole of the Aspe, and to dwell with the Cockatrice in his den, oppression and tyranny shall be destroyed before you.⁵³

For Salmon, also, Jerusalem is called Liberty.

One more similarity of outlook between Blake and the Ranters deserves attention. Both lived in a revolutionary age, but most of their writing comes from a time when the revolution was in retreat. There is a hint of this even in the passage just quoted from Salmon, which dates from February 1649, when the Levellers were already beginning to feel that they had been outmanoeuvred by Cromwell. But the main period of Ranter activity was from the later part of that year and in 1650, after the crushing of the Levellers in the Burford campaign. Similarly most of Blake's creative life was spent after the crushing of the English Jacobins and after the transformation of the situation in France which followed the death of Robespierre. So in both cases we have a genuine revolutionary ardour tempered by the realisation that victory was to be deferred and might be long in coming. We have already seen how Blake reacted to this situation by retreating into the obscurities of his mythology. Jerusalem, indeed, whatever else it may have meant to him, remained in his mind a democratic republic based on the principle of human brotherhood, as may be seen from a number of references to republicanism and the French Revolution scattered through his later writings. But he was less and less able to connect the building of Jerusalem with the practical realities of life in a corrupt and Tory-ridden England.

In just the same way Coppe, who defended the Levellers and clearly sympathised with their political aims, can see no human means by which those aims can be reached. Nevertheless, in the Preface to *A Fiery Flying Roll* he speaks of the coming of the new Jerusalem as imminent, but goes on to explain that it will come by the direct intervention of God, that Levelling will not be accomplished by sword or by spade (a reference to the followers of Lilburne and Winstanley respectively), but:

I the eternall God, the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveller am comming (yea even at the doores) to Levell in good

⁵³ *A Rout, A Rout: Or some part of the Armies Quarters Beaten up, 1649, 11.*

earnest, to Levell to some purpose, to Levell with a witness, to Levell the Hills with the Valleyes, and to lay the Mountaines low.

For Lo I come (saith the Lord) with a vengeance, to levell also all your Honour, Riches etc. to staine the pride of all your Glory, and to bring into contempt all the Honourables (both persons and things) upon the earth. For this Honour, Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity etc. hath been . . . the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed, from the blood of the righteous Abell, to the blood of the last Levellers that were shot to death. *And now (as I live saith the Lord) I am come to make inquisition for blood.*⁵⁴

Coppe's despair is reflected in the fact that *A Fiery Flying Roll* appeals to, and speaks in the name of, the lowest strata in society—the slum population of London, not excluding its criminal fringe of beggars, whores and pickpockets. This is true of no other document of its time. He offers the remarkable conception of God the Highwayman (the highest figure in the criminal world) demanding restitution from the rich like some urban Robin Hood:

Thou hast many bagges of money, and behold I (the Lord) come as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my hand, and like a thief as I am—I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat.⁵⁵

Coppe knew that this depressed class could never be a revolutionary force, but he turned to them because he felt instinctively that the middle and lower middle classes, rotted with holiness, could never carry the revolution further. The ease with which Cromwell had routed the Levellers in the Burford campaign was itself a proof of this. In such a situation, victory could only come by a miracle, in which men might perhaps participate but which they were powerless to initiate. For this reason the Ranters, however admirable their intentions, were entirely ineffective politically, and their energy was wasted on crazy extravagances which exposed them to police action and alienated many possible supporters.⁵⁶

Blake was a wiser and a saner man than Coppe, but he too was faced with somewhat the same dilemma. While his deepest hatred was reserved for the ruling class, there is sufficient evidence that he was

⁵⁴ *Fiery Flying Roll*, I, 4.

⁵⁵ *Fiery Flying Roll*, II, 2.

⁵⁶ The discredit into which the Ranters fell was perhaps one reason for the success of the Quakers, who enrolled a number of former Ranters, and, at the beginning, resembled them much more closely than they are now ready to admit.

repelled by the smugness and commercialism of the artisans and tradesmen from among whom the radicals of his day were drawn. Living only in London, he had no means of knowing that a new working class was in process of formation in the industrial north. In any case, it was not till after his death that this new class began to be politically effective. Blake no more than Coppe could see any new class ready to undertake the building of Jerusalem. Therefore he remained a utopian, and could do no more than make the typical utopian appeal to men of sense and good will:

Let every Christian, as much as in him lies, engage himself openly and publicly before all the World in some mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem. (536)

It is much that in such a situation he never gave up hope, never became embittered, never felt that poverty and neglect was too high a price to pay for the maintenance of his integrity. This is his glory as a man. As a poet, his importance from our point of view is that he came just in time to give the ancient tradition of English Antinomianism its most splendid expression. A generation later that tradition had virtually disappeared and its disappearance has been one of the main reasons for the obscurity which we find in his poetry.

As I said at the outset, Blake is a difficult poet, and no good is done by pretending that he is not. But I think that part of the difficulty has been created by ourselves, through forgetting the tradition in which he wrote. By rediscovering this tradition, and seeing him in relation to it, we do not remove the difficulties, but we do begin to equip ourselves to grapple with them.

GENIUS ON THE BORDER

Charlotte Brontë 1816-55: Emily Brontë 1818-48:
Anne Brontë 1820-49

I

THE centenary of the death of Charlotte Brontë takes place at a time when her reputation stands well above that of most of the novelists of her period, while her sister Emily, almost unknown during her life, is now universally regarded as a poet of outstanding quality and as the author of one of the handful of English novels of absolutely the first order. Even Anne, the youngest sister, though her talents were slighter, produced two novels which are still deservedly read for their simplicity and candour. This is, therefore, a convenient opportunity to try to see the significance of the Brontë family and to try to place them in due relation to their age and environment. If genius, in one sense, cannot be explained in such a way, it is often possible to understand its form and direction, to discover why a certain woman, born in a certain time, place and class, should have written *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* rather than *Middlemarch* or *Wives and Daughters*.

Much has been written to little purpose about the 'miracle' of the Brontës, but, if there is one thing which it is tempting to regard as miraculous it is the very fact of their being reared in a West Riding parsonage at all. Yet this was something that was never allowed to escape to the surface of their minds: the one thing which could never be mentioned was the fact that the Rev. Patrick Brontë, perpetual curate of Haworth, had once been Pat Brunty, a barefoot peasant boy running around a poor cabin in the County Down. Mr. Brontë was, naturally, reticent about his early years, but we do know that he took the English side during the great Irish rising of 1798, and that a few years later—aged twenty-five—he came to England and was able to enter St. John's College, Cambridge, and prepare for the Church. It is only speculation, but perhaps not unjustifiable, to think that he may have found his own country uncomfortable, and that the help he must have had to enable him to go to the University may have been in the nature of a reward for his attitude in 1798.

In any case, he appeared in England as a staunch Tory and Protestant—both of which he remained all his life. Mrs. Gaskell, in her

famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, records the fact, of which much has been made, that he became unpopular among the workers because of his uncompromising opposition to the Luddites, and then adopted the custom, which he never abandoned, of carrying a loaded pistol. But this is by no means all that we know of his public life, and the commonly accepted picture needs considerable modification. Mrs. Gaskell, having recorded the Luddite episode, goes on to say:

Many years later, during his residence at Haworth, there was a strike; the hands in the neighbourhood felt themselves aggrieved by their masters and refused to work; Mr. Brontë thought that they had been unfairly and unjustly treated, and he assisted them by all the means in his power to 'keep the wolf from the doors', and avoid the incubus of debt. Several of the more influential inhabitants of Haworth and the neighbourhood were mill-owners; they remonstrated pretty sharply with him, but he believed that his conduct was right and persevered in it.

It may safely be said that clergy of the Established Church who were bold enough to face the disapproval of their richer parishioners by supporting strikers were rather less numerous a century ago than they are today.

Mrs. Gaskell tells us later that he carried on an agitation for a proper water supply for Haworth 'instead of the weary, hardworking housewives having to carry every bucketful for a distance of several hundred yards up a steep street. But he was baffled by the ratepayers'. 'Ratepayers', as we know, is a common euphemism for the richer inhabitants of a neighbourhood. Finally, we learn from another source that, while a curate at Dewsbury, he was active in the defence of a young man falsely accused of desertion from the army.

His daughters may have inherited his Toryism: they certainly inherited also his fine sense of justice and the courage which made him follow inflexibly the path along which that sense of justice seemed to point. And Toryism, in the complex class relations of the early nineteenth century, could assume many forms, from the brutally repressive creed of Eldon and Castlereagh, through the paternalism of Shaftesbury to the almost ferocious Tory Radicalism of Sadler, Oastler and J. R. Stephens. Stephens indeed, with his vision of a society based on Altar, Throne and Cottage, was capable of a violence of language that none of the genuine revolutionaries of the age could outdo.

There is nothing to suggest that Mr. Brontë's Toryism was quite of this type, yet it is clear that while his attitude to the Luddites shows

a conviction that the workers should be kept in their place, he did not regard that place as necessarily the one which their employers allotted to them, all the more as these employers were probably Whigs. Beyond this he did not go, but for Charlotte and Emily this was a starting point, and his view was probably very close to that expressed by Charlotte in *Shirley*:

Every human being has his share of rights. I suspect it would conduce to the happiness and welfare of all, if each knew his allotment, and held to it as tenaciously as the martyr to his creed.

About Charlotte's social and political ideas we know a certain amount from *Shirley* and from her many letters: about Emily's we know almost nothing directly, though there are hints such as that contained in a letter from Charlotte to W. S. Williams:

In some points I consider Ellis [Emily] somewhat of a theorist: now and then he broaches ideas which strike my sense as much more daring and original than practical; his reason may be in advance of mine, but certainly it often travels a different road.

The note of caution, almost alarm, here, is all the more remarkable since Williams was a Radical and Republican, to whom 'advanced' views would hardly be alarming.

One thing is clear: from their earliest years the Brontë children were exceptionally alive to the world about them. They read and talked precociously, and of politics as much as of anything else. We know, for example, that the *Leeds Mercury* was taken at the Haworth parsonage in 1830 when it published a long letter from Richard Oastler which opened his campaign against the horrors of child labour in the worsted factories. Haworth lay in the worsted area and it is long odds that Charlotte, then fourteen, read and discussed this letter. David Wilson, in his article *Emily Brontë: First of the Moderns*¹ rightly stresses the fact that Haworth was not a quiet backwater but a rapidly growing industrial township and a part of one of the main industrial centres of Britain.

Charlotte Brontë, the oldest of the family to survive childhood, was born in 1816; Anne, the youngest, in 1820. They grew up, there-

¹ This brilliant article, which appeared in *The Modern Quarterly Miscellany*, describes in more detail than I have space for the West Riding background of the Brontës. It has been of the greatest value to me, though I quite often venture to dissent from Mr. Wilson's conclusions.

fore, in the second, and in many ways the most important, phase of the industrial revolution. It was not the age of the primary inventions, of the first introduction of power-driven machinery and of the factory system, but rather of the consolidation and victory of that system, of the development of full-scale capitalism with its accompanying cycle of boom and slump and of intense and continuous class conflict. Early in the century came the Luddite riots: there followed in succession the Radical agitation of the Peterloo period, the struggle around the Reform Bill of 1832, the growth of trade unionism in the early thirties, the fight for improved factory conditions and against the Poor Law of 1834, and, finally, the Chartist movement from 1838 to 1848. In every one of these the West Riding was a storm centre.

So we have four perceptive children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne, growing up in a robust, swiftly-changing world. Their early life coincided almost exactly with the period of the most rapid growth of Haworth's population—from 3,971 in 1811 to 5,835 in 1831. During most of this time they were at home, learning something from their father and aunt (their mother was dead) and a great deal from each other. In time they evolved an extraordinary fantasy world, or rather, two such worlds, since quite early Charlotte and Branwell established a claim to Angria while Emily, followed by Anne, seceded to their own world of Gondal. Similar on the surface, both being full of war, intrigue and wild passions and crimes, the two worlds were in reality very different. Angria was Byronic-escapist, Gondal ballad-heroic, so that while Charlotte's fantasy life coloured all her work at one remove, often to its detriment, Emily's greatest poems were nearly all Gondal, and there is reason to think that *Wuthering Heights*, for all its Yorkshire setting, is in essence a Gondal tale.

This combination of an extraordinarily intense interest in the stirring external world, and an extraordinarily intense fantasy life, must be stressed because it is the first of the contradictions which went to shape the Brontë genius. But it is only the first.

I have spoken of the industrial character of Haworth. Yet many writers from Mrs. Gaskell onwards have stressed the wildness and isolation of the Brontë environment. The truth lies not between but in the fusion of these views. Though Haworth is a part of the West Riding textile area, it lies upon its extreme edge. To the east and south-east are Bradford and Halifax, to the west nothing but moors that even today are empty and barren. And the parsonage, at the top of the township, is on the very frontier, so that a turn to right or left from

its door would take the Brontë children immediately into one of two quite different worlds.

They lived thus on a frontier: geographically as well as in time, since in their own lives this region was being transformed. Two worlds called to them, the old world of the ballad north on the moor, the new world of capitalist construction, and proletarian struggle, in the already thickly populated valleys. The important thing, perhaps, is that each of these worlds was, in its own way, a heroic world which could attract a generous and lively imagination. One of the things to which their work owes its peculiar quality is their response to this challenge and contradiction. In *Wuthering Heights*, above all, Emily achieved a complete synthesis between the world of industrial struggle and the ballad world.

Culturally, too, they found a similar contradiction. They were reared in a house where Dr. Johnson was regarded as the unqualified master of English prose, but also in the great age of Byronism, of extravagant romanticism and wild poetry. So the Duke of Wellington, that outstanding relic of the age of reason, was converted into a Byronic hero in the person of his fictitious son Zamorna.

Finally, in this connection, the Brontës were on the frontier by reason of their ambiguous class position. I have referred to Mr. Brontë's Irish origins. This had been left behind, but what exactly had been achieved? As a beneficed clergyman of the Established Church he was, of course, technically a gentleman, but a clergyman with a large family, a small living and no influence was on the very margin of gentility. The bare subsistence of the family depended on his life and health (Charlotte rarely wrote a letter without its little bulletin on 'Papa's health') and so Branwell had to seek a subordinate position as a railway clerk and the girls to become governesses, treated as inferiors by coarse, newly-enriched manufacturers or illiterate squireens whom they, with their cultural and intellectual standards, despised. And the governess of this time, the one member of the household who was neither servant nor one of the family, was in a pre-eminently frontier position. Above all, the governess was *alone*.

Only too often, a frontier is a battleground. Those who live there must be prepared to fight or go down. Branwell failed to fight. Charlotte, Emily and Anne fought implacably all their lives and the record of their fight is in their work.

II

Charlotte's first novel, after she had abandoned her Angrian fantasy world, *The Professor*, was of a kind new in England, a novel written from below, not of course from a proletarian standpoint—that was not possible, but from that of someone forced to fight for the mere right to exist. As she said in her Preface:

I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work their way through theirs—that he should never get a shilling he had not earned—that no sudden turn should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station.

Because she saw the world from inside and underneath, her work often has a chaotic character, as if we had a plum's eye view of a pie. But she is able to give us a vision of the true nature of pie which we could get in no other way. A good example of her method is the account of Sunday at Lowood School:

At the close of the afternoon service we returned by an exposed and hilly road, where the bitter winter wind, blowing over a range of snowy summits to the north, almost flayed the skin from our faces. . . .

How we longed for the heat and light of a blazing fire when we got back! But, to the little ones at least, this was denied: each hearth was immediately surrounded by a double row of great girls, and behind them the younger children crouched in groups, wrapping their starved arms in their pinafores.

In all her work, Charlotte put the case of the individual against the world, the poor, the friendless, the unprivileged. In *The Professor* she puts it coldly and objectively, in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, passionately. All her heroines are forced to fight for the right to exist. Because the Brontës were isolated on their frontier, neither workers, nor, in a real sense, gentlefolk, the fight is always an individual fight for personal and isolated ends, for a place in society, to preserve their integrity, for the rights of the heart. This was inevitable in the circumstances. Isolation and suffering developed their sense of the power of the fate by which they felt themselves doomed. This is why they took Cowper's poem *The Castaway* as a statement of their own case:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,

We perish'd each alone:
 But I beneath a rougher sea,
 And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

Their quality was shown in the courage with which they faced their fate, in their unending battle and in the frankness with which they recorded it.

Charlotte's novels use shock tactics, carrying us away despite reason and judgement. It may have been this which contemporary critics resented, seeing here, in work obviously feminine, an abandonment of the negative role which the age assigned to women. For the first time in England a writer asserts with power that women have lives that are an end *in themselves*, and not only as the complement of the lives of a series of men—fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Yet Charlotte was never bold enough to carry this idea through to the end: if she had been, critics might not have dared to attack her as they did. And it was this shrinking at the last which made Mary Taylor, who loved her the most discerningly of all her friends, cry out on her, 'You are a coward and a traitor', because she did not maintain with Mary's fearless logic the thesis that neither creed, race nor sex had anything to do with the final value of the human spirit. Yet Charlotte was neither a coward nor a traitor—she arrived at her truth by a different road from Mary, and in the implicit feeling of her novels goes much further along the road than her conventional Victorian consciousness would ever admit. She was supremely equalitarian for all her little snobbishnesses, and that is why the *Quarterly Review* cannot be entirely derided for finding in *Jane Eyre* the smell of Chartism, writing:

Altogether the autobiography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and the privations of the poor, which, so far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment. There is a proud and perpetual asserting of the rights of man for which we find no authority in God's word or in his Providence. There is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilised society has, in fact, at the present day to contend with. We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code—human and divine—abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has written *Jane Eyre*.

—adding delicately that the author ‘must be one who for some sufficient reason has long forfeited the society of her sex’.

Charlotte resented this criticism, but her complaint was always at the charge of unwomanliness rather than of Chartism, and it is interesting that she was delighted with a review written by Sydney Dobell which spoke of ‘the youthful ambiguity of her politics’ and ‘the unmistakable hatred of oppression and determination to be free’. Charlotte was not a radical, still less a revolutionary: there is nothing to suggest that she sympathised with the aims of the Luddites or the Chartists. But she not only pitied the sufferings of the masses—these sufferings made her angry because she saw that they were man-made and avoidable.

And she was far more open minded, both in religion and politics, than is often supposed. For a Tory and Churchwoman her friends were a remarkably mixed lot, including the republican Taylors, from whom the Yorke family in *Shirley* were drawn, W. S. Williams, an old member of the radical group which had included Leigh Hunt and Keats, the unitarian Mrs. Gaskell, and the freethinking Miss Martineau. Her letters often show a keen realism when discussing political affairs, as when she wrote to Williams in March 1848:

Are the London republicans, and *you* amongst the number, cooled down yet? I suppose not, because your French brethren are acting very nobly. The abolition of slavery and of the punishment of death for political offences are two glorious deeds, but how will they get over the question of the organisation of Labour! Surely this will be the sand-bank on which the vessel will run aground if they don't mind.

Yet Charlotte found it difficult to sympathise with a revolution in France because of her firm persuasion that the French were by nature clever, immoral and superficial:

With the French and Irish I have no sympathy. With the Germans and Italians I think the case is different—as different as the love of freedom is from the lust of license.

III

Her social ideas, both positive and negative, can perhaps best be studied in *Shirley*. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* Charlotte presented herself and her own case—suitably disguised.² In *Shirley* she presented the rest

² It is noteworthy that only in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* does she write as a woman. *Shirley* is written in the third person. *The Professor* and the early Angrian romances in the first person, but as a man.

of the Brontë family and the outside world as objectively as she was able. It is this wider objective and its partial success which makes *Shirley* perhaps the least successful but the most interesting of her novels. She began, I think, with the intention of telling a plain tale of Yorkshire life, 'as unromantic as a Monday morning', but her work was interrupted by the death of Emily (December 1848) and thereafter her dead sister took fuller and fuller possession of the book as Charlotte tried to give her all the things she was denied by life. (It is characteristic that she never here, any more than in life, stopped to ask if they were the things Emily *wanted*.) In the same way, but to a lesser degree, Anne became increasingly identified with Caroline Helstone, while there was far more of Mr. Brontë in the Rev. Helstone, that 'clerical Cossack', than could ever be admitted. For the rest, the book is crammed with scarcely disguised portraits of friends and neighbours.

The result is a patchwork, with a lumbering, over-elaborate plot, perhaps partly the result of Charlotte's anxiety to please and give good value. And in *Shirley* her greatest weakness is most apparent. It is evident from her comments on Jane Austen and from her introduction to *Wuthering Heights* that she was the inhabitant of a sort of half-world, a limbo between prose and poetry, with a foot in each yet seldom quite at home in either. As a result she was never able to enjoy the unqualified mastery which Jane Austen and Emily enjoy in their respective worlds, and at her worst she falls into bathos, into language which is neither prose nor poetry but rhetoric. In *Shirley*, when she is not writing with the intensity and passion she attains in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, rhetoric trying to be poetry is all too common.

Yet this ambiguous status, within limits, was also a source of strength: living and working, once more, on a frontier, she was able at times to link the two worlds, and in *Shirley* she compensated for her frequent lapses by succeeding in this respect to a greater extent than anywhere else. And the strength of *Shirley* lies, above all, in its firm and delicate understanding and statement of the class relations of an observed society.

On the face of it, *Shirley* is an historical novel, a story of the Luddite riots that took place before Charlotte was born. But this is only part of the truth. Dr. H. Heaton in *The Economic Background of 'Shirley'* writes:

I am informed that Charlotte wanted to use the Chartist Movement as her background, but was told that the events of that agitation were too near and burning to be fit for treatment; she

therefore took the Luddite riots, and was able to draw her material from the recollections of her father and others who had been at close quarters with the dark doings of 1811-12.

Charlotte was at school near Halifax, and, later, teaching at Dewsbury, during much of the period of the Reform Bill agitation, the Poor Law struggles and the opening phase of Chartism. Halifax, a Chartist stronghold, was also the scene of one of the most notable Poor Law riots: Hartshead Moor, only a few miles away and the place of Mr. Brontë's second Yorkshire curacy, was the scene in 1838 of one of the greatest Chartist torchlight rallies. It must have been events such as these which reminded Charlotte and her friends of the earlier Luddite days. And, finally, it was early in 1848, at the time of the last great Chartist revival, that she began work on *Shirley* itself. It is clear that while the details of the book may have been historical, the feeling and atmosphere were taken at least as much from what Charlotte had seen for herself in her most impressionable years.

Similarly, when she writes about the factory children, she must have had in mind the contemporary exposures of Oastler in his campaign against 'Yorkshire slavery' in the worsted mills:

The mill windows were alight, the bell still rung loud, and now the little children came running in, in too great a hurry, let us hope, to feel much nipped by the inclement air. . . . Mr. Moore stood at the entrance to watch them as they went by; to those who came rather late he said a word of reprimand, which was more sharply repeated by Joe Scott when the lingerers reached the work-rooms. Neither master nor overlooker spoke savagely; they were not savage men either of them, though it appeared they were rigid, for they fined a delinquent who came considerably too late. . . .

Child-torturers, slave-masters and drivers I consign to the hands of jailers; the novelist may be excused from sullyng his pages with their deeds. . . . I am happy to be able to inform my readers that neither Mr. Moore nor his overlooker ever struck a child in their mill.

It was eight o'clock . . . the signal was given for breakfast; the children, released for half an hour from toil, betook themselves to the small baskets which contained their allowance of bread. Let us hope they had enough to eat; it would be a pity were it otherwise.

The whole passage is written with a deceptive quiet, but the feeling of bitterness cannot be mistaken. Charlotte knew, and wanted her readers to be aware that she knew, that thousands of children in her own

neighbourhood were overworked, underfed and often brutally ill-used. She makes it clear that Moore's humanity was *exceptional*, but that even in this exceptional case things were far from well. She knew precisely the character of the bourgeoisie:

Tradesmen, when they speak against war, always profess to hate it because it is a bloody and barbarous proceeding; you would think, to hear them talk, that they are peculiarly civilised—exceptionally gentle and kindly of disposition to their fellow-men. This is not the case. Many are extremely narrow and cold-hearted, have no good feeling for any class but their own, are distant—even hostile to all others; call them useless; seem to question their right to exist; seem to grudge them the very air they breathe, and to think the circumstance of their eating, drinking and living in decent houses quite unjustifiable.

Her language may be more temperate than that of Kingsley, or even Mrs. Gaskell, but her condemnation is, if anything, more absolute.

IV

Charlotte's views on almost everything are preserved in hundreds of her letters: what Emily thought has to be deduced from her poems and from *Wuthering Heights*: no easy task. Her sole recorded direct utterance is in a letter from Mary Taylor to Mrs. Gaskell, and that is really no more than a characteristic refusal to commit herself:

One time I mentioned that someone asked me what religion I was of (with a view to getting me as a partisan) and that I had said that was between God and me. Emily (who was lying on the hearth-rug) exclaimed, 'That's right!'

A further difficulty is created by the fact that almost all her poems are dramatic, that is to say, are attributed to one or another of the characters in the great Gondal cycle. Many imaginative children create fantasy worlds, sometimes in great detail, but Emily is unique, I think, in being the only great creative writer who never abandoned her fantasy but made it the vehicle for her mature work. Fantasy for her was not an escape but a gateway into reality.

Gondal was a huge island lying somewhere in the North Pacific, bleak, mountainous and rough, very similar in climate and scenery to the Pennine region as Emily knew it, and divided among a number of warring principalities. Later the Gondals conquered and colonised Gaaldine, a luxuriant and tropical land far to the south. They carried

their feuds with them, and the exploitation of Gaaldine produced endless wars, and unnatural conflicts which returned to plague Gondal itself. It is tempting to think that Emily saw here something of the nemesis of imperialism. As she matured these conflicts assumed an increasingly social character: Emily seems to become obsessed with a King versus People theme, an inner conflict between the claims of loyalty and liberty which may well reflect a conflict between her family toryism and a growing realisation of the fact of oppression. Two long poems written towards the end of her life, in 1845-6, relate to the Republican-Royalist wars in Gondal. It is worth asking if this is a positive reaction to Chartism, even though we do not have the evidence to answer this question. Miss F. E. Ratchford comments:

The literary career that began in revolt against Branwell's pointless battles [in the Angrian fantasy-world which he shared with Charlotte] ended in denunciation of wars in general as senseless and debasing.

Yet these poems have a personal and passionate intensity which is often baffling: they are dramatic but it is hard to regard them as anything but a direct expression, in some sense, of Emily's own experience. Perhaps the Gondal form served her for the same purpose as the mask which Mr. Brontë once placed on the faces of his children when asking them questions they might otherwise have been constrained in answering—they gave her a boldness of utterance based on a sense of anonymity. This was surely a part of another shared Brontë contradiction, desire for fame struggling with a desire to escape notice, and the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, under which their work was published, were masks of the same order.

Virginia Moore points out that the people of the Gondal myth were *heroes* and that this was Emily's release into the heroic: 'Emily is up to her old trick of enlarging the world.' This is true, but in *Wuthering Heights* she discovers a new 'trick' of seeing the world as it is, not enlarged, and still discerning the heroic in it. This is the difference between the Gondal world and that of the ballads, for though the Gondal poems have many ballad qualities they are 'Scottified' and the outline weakened, like an over-enlarged photograph (or like *Ossian*). But in *Wuthering Heights* as in the ballads the outline remains clear and sharp and the heroism is therefore this-worldly. It is perhaps nearer to Clark Saunders than to anything else in the language.

Its theme is the conflict of two societies, the bleak, upland society

of *Wuthering Heights*, of Heathcliff and Catherine, of struggle and endurance, and the rich, comfortable lowland society of Thrushcross Grange, of the Linton's and of secure enjoyment. The conflict is *real* but it can be resolved, and once the gulf has been bridged a new creation is possible in which both have a part. This is expressed symbolically in the persons and relationships of the younger Catherine and Hareton, but it cannot happen till the first world, in the person of Heathcliff, has the power to destroy the other. Once he has this power, the will to destroy vanishes and the creative synthesis can take place.

I think that *Wuthering Heights*, and Emily's work in general, can best be understood in relation to that of Blake, her closest parallel in English literature. What has seemed to many the mysticism of both Emily Brontë and Blake is really their dialectical method of thought. They both see the world in terms of the conflict of opposites and its resolution, and this is the theme of *Wuthering Heights*.

Wuthering Heights cannot be understood if it is read as a moral tale, a conventional novel with hero and villain, in which the good are to be approved and the wicked condemned. Heathcliff and Cathy sin—according to the world's judgement—and Emily accepts this judgement as valid, at least consciously, but she sees and insists that there is another standard by which their conduct is not only inevitable but right. Like Blake, she has the ability to live on two planes (or planets!) at the same time. She does not condemn the standards of Nelly Dean, or of Charlotte, any more than she condemns those of Heathcliff—she merely insists that they are different and can only be reconciled after an inner harmony has been achieved. This harmony corresponds *in quality* to the social synthesis of a classless society. The way to it is not by submitting the passion and loyalty of the heart to the government of reason, but by following them to the end till they themselves attain reason. So Blake wrote, 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise', and Emily,

I'll walk where my own nature will be leading:
It vexes me to choose another guide.

David Wilson suggests that in *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff, and to some extent Catherine, symbolise the working class, and there is a sense in which this may be true. What I think certainly true is that in this novel personal relations are raised to a peculiar level of intensity by which their individual character is transcended. Emily does not *substitute* social for personal relations, but raises all human relations to

a level at which they acquire a social and universal significance. For her, love is not the purely personal emotion it remains for most novelists, but something akin to solidarity, like the force which binds members of a clan—or a class. This is to say that she does not look at human relations in a bourgeois way at all. This is how Catherine speaks of Heathcliff:

I have no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if that wicked man had not brought Heathcliff so low, I wouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. . . .

My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I have watched and felt each from the beginning . . . my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary.

Catherine's betrayal of Heathcliff is a self-betrayal, and from it the tragedy of *Wuthering Heights* proceeds.

v

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily parted from the main literary stream of her age. Charlotte's work, even at its best, was weakened because she wrote within a romantic tradition that was, by the mid-nineteenth century, degenerate, unreal, florid and, in the contemporary sense, Gothic. This degenerate romanticism resulted in a loss of form, and Charlotte's novels are badly and loosely constructed. What saves them is the depth and truth of their feeling, which overcomes all the handicaps imposed by a false convention, and the energy which transmits itself to the reader.

Emily was saved from many difficulties because, like Blake, she was immunised from all current moral and social fashions and not only stood outside all coteries but was actually unaware of their existence. Consequently, her genius was able to follow its own line, without being distorted by the pressure of contemporary conceptions. *Wuthering Heights* is, in the first place, what was extremely rare in England during this period, a technical triumph, a novel constructed on an unusual but almost flawless pattern. But it was more than this, it entirely escaped from the degenerate romanticism in which Emily had been brought up and with which many of her poems are still coloured.

In *Wuthering Heights* she triumphed because she was able to grasp and accept the universe as a whole. Yet her acceptance was not passive, it had nothing in common with acquiescence. Rather, she was able so to use, master and transform her experience that acceptance became a critical weapon. Setting her tale in the simplified, pre-industrial world of the ballad north, she uses its standards to express her profoundest convictions about life in her own time.

Yet, when all has been said about Emily's unique quality, and the differences between her genius and Charlotte's in particular, it is necessary to stress their underlying kinship. Some enthusiasts, in their anxiety to prove that Emily was a swan, which she certainly was, have felt it necessary to prove that the rest of her family were geese, which Charlotte most certainly was not. And their kinship can easily be demonstrated by one small example.

After Emily's death Charlotte edited a selection of her poems and included, under the title *The Visionary*, three stanzas from a longer poem. And, to make this a poem complete in itself, she added two more stanzas of her own. Not only did these pass unchallenged as Emily's, till they were shown from an examination of the manuscripts to be by Charlotte, but they have more than once been quoted as peculiarly characteristic of Emily by critics who have stressed the differences between herself and Charlotte.³

Today, a century after Charlotte's death, we begin perhaps to have a truer picture of their relative positions. The early neglect of Emily, the more recent denigration of Charlotte, are now past, and we see them (and, for that matter, Anne) as branches of the same tree, springing from the same environment and fighting the same untiring battle with adverse circumstances, a battle in which they became, perhaps unintentionally, the representatives of many thousands of the unhappy and the oppressed. Their weapons and powers were different, but their battle and their courage were the same. It is for this courage that they are still loved and honoured by countless men and women who do not think of them primarily as literary figures but as kindred spirits travelling the same road.

³ Notably by Mr. Charles Morgan.

PARSON LOT

ON April 12th, 1848, two days after the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common, a remarkable proclamation appeared upon the hoardings of London.

WORKMEN OF ENGLAND (it began) You say that you are wronged. Many of you are wronged; and many besides yourselves know it. Almost all men who have heads and hearts know it—above all the working clergy know it.

It went on to discuss the workers' just demands for freedom, asked if they believed the Charter would give it to them, and ended, somewhat unhelpfully,

Workers of England be wise, and then you will be free, for you will be fit to be free.

This manifesto was the work of Charles Kingsley, clergyman, poet and novelist, and forms the first chapter of the curious history of the Christian Socialist Movement in England. It is a Movement easily enough dismissed, a combination of the typical Feudal Socialism of which Marx had written only a few months before:

half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very hearts' core, but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history,

with the typical Petty Bourgeois Socialism which,

aspires either to restoring the old means of production and exchange, and with them the old property relations and the old society, or to cramping the modern means of production within the framework of the old property relations.

With the correctness or applicability of Marx's objective analysis few of us are likely to quarrel, but when we have said this, have we said all that need be said? And, further, this having been said, are we entitled to draw the conclusion, as Theodore Rothstein appears to do, that the work of Kingsley and his friends was a clever and insidious device, that, 'they upbraided the rich to gain the confidence of the

poor' with the object of detaching the workers from political action? I do not think so, nor do I think that any study of Kingsley in his life and writings lends support to any such conception of deliberate craft.

Faults he had in plenty. He was insular, snobbish, opinionated and at times hysterical, but these are not the characteristic failings of the crafty man. Confused and self-contradictory he certainly was, and totally incapable of comprehending the march of modern history, for all that he ended his days as its Regius Professor at Cambridge, yet he stands out as a man of great courage and transparent honesty, and I do not believe that his effect, or that of his group, on the working-class movement was wholly or indeed mainly harmful.

The son of a Church of England clergyman, Kingsley was in 1848 Rector of Eversley in Hampshire and his concern over social questions had already brought him into touch with a group of young men who had gathered round the Rev. F. D. Maurice, and which included also J. M. Ludlow, Thomas Hughes and E. Vansittart Neale, all of whom were to make a definite contribution to the Trade Union or Co-operative movements. What distinguished them from most men of their class and generation was a burning desire to make the idea of God a reality by enlisting religion in the battle for social justice. They had seen, and been sickened by, sweating, slum housing, the adulteration of the food of the workers, the long hours and low wages generally prevailing and they were sensitive enough to realise that these things were the result of a radical defect in society and could not be attacked in isolation. Kingsley spoke for them all a little later in a famous sermon:

The business for which God sends a Christian priest in a Christian nation is, to preach freedom, equality and brotherhood in the fullest, deepest and widest meaning of these three great words; that in as far as he does, he is a true priest, doing his Lord's work with his Lord's blessing on him; that in so far as he does not he is no priest at all, but a traitor to God and Man.

It took more courage than we can now easily recognise to speak like this in 1851, just as it took courage to write, as he did in *Alton Locke* a year earlier:

Nine tenths of the improvement has been owing not to the masters but to the men themselves, and who among them, my aristocratic readers, do you think have been the great preachers of temperance, thrift, charity, self-respect and education. . . . The Chartists, the

communist Chartists: upon whom you and your venal press heap every kind of cowardly execration and ribald slander.

Unfortunately in politics courage and good will are not enough, and we have to enquire in what practical forms this genuine desire to help the workers was able to find expression? When the group came into the open, to publish its periodicals, *Politics for the People* and *The Christian Socialist*, to which Kingsley under the name of Parson Lot was a leading contributor, what policy was put forward, what battles were fought?

At first the policy was nebulous. The slogan 'Be wise and you will be free' is repeated in various forms, and, while sympathy is expressed in general terms for the Charter, while, indeed, Parson Lot writes in one article, 'My only quarrel with the Charter is that it does not go far enough in reform' at the next moment it is attacked as a 'Morrison's-pill-measure', a quack nostrum that cannot touch the real evils of the times. Again, at one point he seems to imply that the working men are as fit for the franchise as their 'betters', at another that they must wait for it till they are wiser, and at a third that it is not after all worth fighting for, being but the 'twenty thousandth part of a talker in the national palaver'.

When the Movement began to look as though it might die away for lack of practical proposals, Ludlow returned from Paris full of enthusiasm over the co-operative workshops that had been established there, and henceforward Association became the key-word. The Society for Promoting Working Mans' Associations was formed, with the object of establishing productive associations which ultimately, it was hoped, might supersede competitive capitalism. This was the old utopian dream in a new form, but a number of associations were in fact set up and in the long run the movement towards association developed in two main directions, that of Co-operative Societies and that of Trade Unionism, both of which were then entering a new phase. The productive societies, as might have been predicted, had short and unhappy lives: on the Trade Union question there was more hesitation and some differences of opinion. Some of the group, notably Ludlow, Hughes and Neale, were wholehearted supporters, giving much useful service, for example to the Engineers in the great lock-out of 1852. Kingsley, once again, could not quite make up his mind. In general he was sympathetic, but strikes, and still more, violence of any kind, always made him uneasy. 'Emigrate rather than strike' was one of his sayings.

Years later he wrote a pamphlet called *What Then does Dr. Newman Mean?* which got him into very deep and very hot water. And often enough we feel impelled to ask 'What then does Mr. Kingsley Mean?', for few men so honest can ever have landed themselves into such a tangle of contradictions. Yet, paradox as it may sound, the contradictions arise from the honesty. Kingsley wished to do right and to speak the truth; but for him, with his background and his limitations, what was right and true? It was impossible for him to say in general, and hence he tackled every question empirically as it arose. What he could see at a glance he saw clearly, and he spoke his mind about it with sometimes embarrassing vigour, but he seldom thought anything out to the end and often what seemed to him to be thought was only feeling in the guise of thought. So it was perfectly possible for him to feel two things with equal intensity of conviction which, logically, were mutually exclusive. Many people, like Mr. Guy Kendall in his *Charles Kingsley and his Ideas*, have found this contradiction so hard to resolve, that they are forced to conclude that Kingsley's beliefs changed, that he had first a 'Radical' and afterwards a 'Tory' period.

Thomas Hughes, who knew him, perhaps, better than anyone else at this time, denied this, and, I think, with justice. Certainly as late as 1856 we find him writing:

I am the prophet of the coming convulsion; I cannot cry peace, peace when there is none. I see all things in Christendom drifting towards the hurricane circle of God's wrath and purifying storms.

Once again we are reminded of Marx's words: 'half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future . . .' And here, I think, lies the solution of the problem.

Like many of his generation and class Kingsley was *both* Radical *and* Tory. He believed in the worker: he believed in the aristocrat: he hated and distrusted the classes between. This comes out amusingly when he writes of Browning:

He will never be a poet. He was born and bred a Dissenter of the *trois états* and though he is a good fellow nothing will take the smell of tallow and brown sugar out of him. . . . If he had been born a gentleman . . . or a hard-handed working man in contact with iron fact, he might have been a fine poet.

More directly to the point, he declared, as Marx did, that the Manchester School,

pretend to be the workmen's friends by keeping down the price of bread, when all they want thereby is to keep down wages.

He went on to draw the conclusion, which Marx certainly would never have drawn,

that the real battle of the time is . . . not Radical or Whig against Peelite or Tory—let the dead bury their dead—but the Church, the gentlemen and the workmen against the Manchester School and the shopkeepers.

It was left to Morris in Chapter XVIII of *News from Nowhere* to extract the grain of sense from this fantastic notion and to express it in socialist terms. It was only natural, holding such views, that Kingsley should write in 1850, which by any reckoning was in the very middle of his 'Radical' period, 'I believe the Crown has now too little and not too much power', on the grounds that Crown and Lords were a necessary counterpoise to the influence of capital in Parliament. So, too, it was possible, without any change of views or any dishonesty, for him to become Chaplain to the Queen and a personal friend of the Prince Consort, as he did in 1859.

Yet if Parson Lot was still alive it is perhaps true that he had moved a little into the background. Kingsley was by now a tired and in some ways a sick man. His vast store of mental energy had led him to overdrive himself, and, like many parsons with large families, the pressure of poverty was hard upon him and had forced him to divert much of this energy into the trade of novel writing. But, more fundamentally, he was a disappointed man. He had entered the battle in 1848 with great hopes, but his efforts seemed to have led to nothing. Association seemed to have failed, but instead of blaming himself and asking if the fault was not in the methods followed, he lost faith in the working class and concluded that they were not yet ready to be saved—a conclusion to which Saviours have always been rather prone. His beliefs were not so much abandoned as put in storage for a time that never came. As he wrote to Hughes:

My heart was and is in it, and you'll see it will beat yet; but we ain't the boys. We don't see half the bull's eye yet, and we don't see *at all* the policeman which is a going on his beat behind the bull's eye, and no thanks to us.

Meanwhile there were the novels, praised above their merits in his day, unduly neglected in ours. Kingsley himself, like many poets,

valued his poetry more highly than his prose: 'I feel like an otter in the water instead of an otter ashore.' Actually his poems hardly justify this preference, yet in a sense it was well founded. As a novelist in the ordinary meaning of the word he had almost every possible failing. He had no sense of the spoken word in dialogue, he was at once lifeless and involved, his plots creaked and his points were all made in so laboured and long winded a fashion that one sees them far too soon. Yet when he stops trying to write a novel and is content to tell a tale his work does begin to acquire a quality that is akin to epic poetry. He is able to slip off the accumulation of a thousand years and move into the stream of a simpler world. His merits and defects as a writer are, indeed, just those he revealed as a politician.

For this reason I think the best of his prose writings are those farthest removed from novels in the ordinary sense. In *The Heroes* he re-tells some of the Greek myths as well as they have ever been told in English before or since. In *The Water Babies* he gets right away from time and place into a world of fantasy where all his pet notions are at home. Yet in this very same book we find his finest descriptions of English landscape. With these I want to praise what has always seemed to me the best of his novels though one that has never had any serious consideration. In *Hereward the Wake* also the epic quality is strongest. It deals with that moment in time when the magical North overlaps the North of historic fact, the borderland of saga and fact. Kingsley is enough of the barbarian to convey something of the true feeling of this protean age and to charge his work with so overmastering a sense of Fate that we no more mind knowing how the tale is going to end than we do with the Volsunga Saga or one of the great ballads. And if he has Christianised his Fate, after all he was a Christian and no more than any other writer can be expected to create except in terms of his own beliefs.

Something of the same quality can be observed when he writes from a living indignation as he does in *Alton Locke*, the story of a Chartist tailor and poet, based perhaps on that of Thomas Cooper who wrote in Stafford Gaol *The Purgatory of Suicides*. *Alton Locke* stands at the end of a notable series of novels dealing with the great question of the relation of the classes in England, a series that includes the *Sybil* trilogy (1844-47), *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Shirley* (1849). As a novel it can hardly be compared with any of these. It is both incoherent and inconclusive, with a 'solution' that solves nothing at all and some of the most preposterous characters and incidents that can be imagined.

Yet here and there scenes and episodes stand out as if caught in a great flash of forked lightning which prints them on the memory for ever. Such scenes, for example, are the meeting in the frozen fens, the death of Jemmy Downes, Sandy Mackaye's shop, and the tour round hell on which he takes Locke to teach him his duty as a man and his mission as a poet.

And in one very important respect *Alton Locke* is an advance on all its predecessors: it shows a much clearer understanding of the point of view of the worker and especially of the most class-conscious worker. Though Chartism is finally condemned, it is for the first time in English fiction treated seriously and with sympathy. Throughout, there is a sense of the *rightness* of class solidarity which we should look for in vain in any of the other middle-class writers of the time. Kingsley says:

I do not think the cry 'Get on' to be anything but a devil's cry. The moral of my book is that the working class man who tries to get on, to desert his class and rise above it, enters into a lie, and leaves God's path and his own—with consequences.

In such a passage as this we see the highest point reached by the Tory Socialist. As compared with, say, Ludlow or Hughes, who were content to do useful work within very definite limitations, Kingsley both aimed at more and achieved less. It was his tragedy that he could never pass beyond this point, never quite erase the old feudal coat of arms, and, as a result, all his direct work ended in failure and disillusion, as the people 'deserted with loud and irreverent laughter'. His Association was no more successful than Ruskin's Company of St. George, and for the same sort of reasons, but by his writings he was, like Ruskin, one of those who helped to prepare the ground from which a genuine socialist movement was to spring a generation or so later.

THE CONSCIENCE OF JOHN RUSKIN

IN almost any second-hand bookshop of the older style you may be certain to find a shelf, very high up, very thick with dust, containing a fine selection of the works of John Ruskin. They are seldom disturbed, and their titles, Latin or Biblical as often as not, rather conceal than reveal the quality of their contents. If the bookseller is of the generation of his shop he will certainly shake his head and murmur: 'Ah, yes, a wonderful writer but there seems no call for him today.'

In short, we do not now read Ruskin. Yet eighty, and even forty years ago, there was hardly a young man of any seriousness who did not look to him as a master. William Morris and Tom Mann and hundreds of socialists of their time began by reading Ruskin. If the best of them went on to read Marx and soon passed beyond their first teacher, he never lost their love and respect.

Today we begin with Marx and never reach Ruskin and our socialism is perhaps the poorer for it. We are never likely to give him the unquestioning reverence which he had from many of his contemporaries, but we should at least remember with gratitude the debt which socialism in Britain owes him.

Ruskin was the only child of wealthy and over-fond (though by no means over-indulgent) parents, who very early determined that their son was a genius and should be a bishop. At Oxford he decided instead to be an art critic. The immediate success of *Modern Painters* reconciled his father to this change of profession. From the start, his criticism was of a new and potentially dangerous kind. Instead of looking at a picture as a thing in itself bounded by a frame, he looked at it as the result of a man's work, and very soon as the product of a man at work in society. As Morris put it: 'The essence of what Ruskin then taught was . . . that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life.' When he passed from painting to architecture he found this belief powerfully reinforced.

From this it was a logical step to conclude that a really great art, in the sense of a great national school or tradition of art, can only arise from a just and righteous society. And he began to perceive, with increasing horror and despair, that no such art was to be found in nineteenth century England nor, indeed, in modern Europe at all. He

concluded, therefore, that English society was neither just nor righteous, and began to enquire in what respects precisely it fell short.

He was now about forty, recognised everywhere as the highest authority in his own field. Everything he had to say was accepted with what we now feel to have been excessive deference. It was a different matter when he turned from the criticism of art to the criticism of society. Beginning a study of Political Economy, he soon discovered that what passed for an objective science was in fact no more than an elaborate system of special pleading for capitalism, in which the peculiar relations resulting from bourgeois society were solemnly elevated into eternal laws.

In 1860 he began to publish in the *Cornhill Magazine*, edited at that time by Thackeray, a series of articles attacking this bogus science in a most damaging, if sometimes amateurish, way. The conclusions to which he seemed to be driving were that a society based on competition was a society based on robbery, and that the special injustice of modern society lay in degrading the worker into a thing, by treating his labour power as a commodity whose price ought to be competitively determined. This was in fact to attack the whole sacred structure of accepted class relations.

Hardly had the series begun when there was a ferocious outcry in all orthodox quarters, pressure was brought to bear on the editor and publisher of the magazine, and after only four articles had appeared (they were afterwards published in book form as *Unto This Last*), the series was abruptly closed. Ruskin set to work on a new and more systematic attack. Two years later, Froude began to publish it in *Frazer's Magazine*. Once more there was a storm of protest, and once more Ruskin was forcibly silenced.

Believing passionately in the importance of what he had to say, he found that it was impossible to get a hearing whenever he tried to tell capitalist society that its commercial ethic was only the old sin of usury in a new guise. Driven inwards, his anger and disgust became more and more transformed into an agony of conscience.

As a member of the ruling class, he felt a personal responsibility for all the oppressions and atrocities, all the sins of commission and omission, of which it was guilty. In this situation, and in this state of mind, he began in 1871 to print and publish himself, *Fors Clavigera*, a series of monthly 'Letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain'.

The rich would not hear him—perhaps the poor might. *Fors*

Clavigera is in some respects the finest of all Ruskin's work. Sometimes incoherent and often perverse, there are few books in the language that approach its range and power. Certainly it was, of all his writings, the one from which he hoped most.

Yet from the start he imposed upon himself a fatal handicap. He spoke to the people always from above, never with the sense that it was from themselves that salvation must come. So that, though he could diagnose the ills of society, his suggested remedies were always inadequate or inapplicable—and in his heart he knew it. Years later he wrote to a friend:

Don't you know that I am entirely with you in this Irish misery, and have been these thirty years?—only one can't speak plain without distinctly becoming the leader of Revolution? I know that Revolution *must come* in all the world—but I can't act with Danton and Robespierre, nor with the modern French Republican or Italian one. I *could* with you and your Irish, but you are only at the beginning of the end. I have spoken—and plainly too—for all who have ears to hear.

He wrote *Fors*, therefore, with an ever growing sense of guilt that finally deepened into despair and madness. The key is struck in the very first Letter:

I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else I like, and the very light of the morning sky, when there is any—which is seldom, nowadays, near London—has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly.

That was in January, and already the war between France and Prussia, and the siege of Paris, stood high among the miseries which troubled him. With the Commune, his agony of conscience that spring became unbearable.

This is of extreme importance, because for people of Ruskin's generation, and indeed for long after, the Paris Commune was a touchstone, just as the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union have become the touchstone in our own time. That is why the celebration of the Commune was for so long a point of honour to the old socialists. It is, therefore, interesting to see in some detail how Ruskin stands this test, and to find that he is perhaps the only leading public figure in

England who wrote with sympathy and some understanding about the Commune while it was still taking place.

He first refers to it in Letter VI, written towards the end of May, and obviously not at all understanding the principle involved in the attempt to disarm the National Guard:

All mouths are very properly open now against the Paris Communists because they fight that they may get wages for marching about with flags. But what do the upper classes fight for, then? What have they fought for since the world became upper and lower, but that they might have wages for walking about with flags, and that mischievously?

He goes on to speak of reports then reaching England of the destruction of the art treasures of Paris by the Communards. These reports, which he could not then know to be untrue, naturally filled him with horror. Nevertheless he insists firmly that the people were only acting as they had been taught to act by their 'betters'.

In the next Letter he returns to his theme. He does not, he says, altogether understand the new Parisian Communism, being himself: 'a Communist of the old school—reddest also of the red'. This might be misleading. Ruskin himself always denied being a socialist, and a few Letters later in *Fors* declares himself, with equal sincerity, 'a violent Tory of the old school—Sir Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's'.

His Communism was of the kind that will be recognised by readers of the third section of *The Communist Manifesto*, and, like More's, from who he claimed to derive most of it, it may be summed up in the phrase, 'everything *for* the people, nothing *by* the people'. It was, nevertheless, an act of real courage at such a moment to avow himself a Communist at all, and he proceeds in the same Letter to discuss war and the war of classes:

The first reason for all wars, and the necessity of national defences, is that the majority of persons, high and low, in all European nations, are Thieves, and, in their hearts, greedy of their neighbours goods, lands and fame. . . . And the guilty Thieves of Europe, the real source of all deadly war in it, are the Capitalists—that is to say, people who live by percentages on the labour of others; instead of by fair wages for their own. The *Real* war in Europe, of which this fighting in Paris is the Inauguration, is between these and the workmen, such as they have made him. They kept him poor,

ignorant, and sinful, that they might, without his knowledge, gather for themselves the produce of his toil. At last, a dim insight of the fact of this dawns upon him; and such as they have made him he meets them, and *will* meet.

If this is language more appropriate to the Jacquerie of the fourteenth century than to the modern class struggle, Ruskin leaves us in no doubt whose cause he regards as just.

He makes his views clearer still in the next Letter (VIII), written at the end of July, when the earlier reports, heavily biased against the Commune, were being corrected by news of the Government's Terror, too wholesale to be entirely concealed. There was news, also, of the success of a Government loan:

Everybody in France who has got any money is eager to lend it to M. Thiers at 5 per cent. . . . So there is great acclaim and triumphal procession of financiers! and the arrangement is made; namely, that all the poor labouring persons in France are to pay the idle rich ones 5 per cent. annually, on the sum of eighty millions of sterling pounds, until further notice.

Ruskin observes that a great part of this loan will go to provide an army, whose chief function will be to keep 'William' more firmly than before where he belongs:

And they have got him down, now, they think, well for a while, poor William, after his fit of fury and petroleum: and can make their money out of him for years to come, in the old ways.

And then, using a device of which he was always a master, that of the contrasted newspaper reports, he works up to his climax:

Did you chance, my friends, any of you, to see the other day the 83rd number of the *Graphic*, with the pictures of the Queen's concert in it? All the fine ladies sitting so trimly, and looking so sweet, and doing the whole duty of woman. . . . Surely we are safe back again, with our virtues in satin slippers and lace veils; and our Kingdom of Heaven is come again, *with* observation, and crown diamonds of the dazzlingest. . . and vulgar Hell reserved for the canaille as heretofore. Hell shall be didactically portrayed, accordingly (see page 17). Wickedness going to its poor Home—bitter sweet. Ouvrier and pétroleuse—prisoners at last—glaring wild on their way to die.

Alas, of these two divided races, of whom one was appointed to teach and guide the other, which has indeed sinned deepest—

the unteaching, or the untaught?—which are now the guiltiest—these, who perish, or those—who forget?

Ouvrier and pétroleuse; they are gone their way—to their death. But for these, the Virgin of France shall yet unfold the oriflamme above their graves, and lay her blanched lilies on their smirched dust. Yes, and for these the great Charles shall rouse his Roland, and bid him put trump to lip and breathe a point of war; and the helmed Pucelle shall answer with a woodnote of Domrémy; yes, and for these the Louis they mocked, like his master, shall raise his holy hands and pray God's peace.

'Not as the world giveth.' Everlasting shame only, and unrest, are the world's gifts. These Swine of the 5 per cent shall share them duly.

We are inevitably reminded of Marx, with his 'monstrous gnome' and his 'storming heaven'. The fact that Marx was a revolutionary and *understood* the Commune, while Ruskin was not revolutionary and did not, makes his tribute all the more remarkable.

He began, I think, with the intention of condemning. He could not condemn, because he saw on the one side heroism and self-sacrifice, and on the other nothing but bestial greed and bestial cruelty springing from guilty fear. So he turned aside from his condemnation to utter the blessing that his natural generosity and deep human feeling could not withhold.

With another upbringing, he, too, might have joined in the storming of heaven. As it was, he could never get a clear sight of the road. Rather he saw his task as that of Theseus in the Twenty-third Letter of *Fors*, who must penetrate the Labyrinth, kill the Minotaur Commercialism and retrace his steps. Lacking a clue, he perished in the twisted ways, but, perishing himself, he was able to set thousands on the true path.

AN ENGLISHMAN DISCOVERS INDIA

A FLAT mediocrity pervades the city which E. M. Forster has created as the scene of *A Passage to India*:

Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. . . . As for the civil station [the English quarter], it provokes no emotion. It charms not, neither does it repel. It is sensibly planned, with a red-brick club on its brow, and farther back a grocer's and a cemetery, and the bungalows are disposed along roads that intersect at right angles. It has nothing hideous about it, and only the view is beautiful; it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky.

Such is the setting: the people and the events are hardly more remarkable. The former are middle-class English and Indians. No one is very rich or very poor, outstandingly wicked or outstandingly virtuous, none are more intelligent or more stupid than one would expect to find in such a place. Nor are there any heroisms or oppressions, no one is particularly cruel or violent, and the centre of the plot is a crime that was never committed. Yet in this setting and within these limits the most profound human emotions are experienced—pity, terror, love, hate, fear and exaltation, friendship and the final loneliness of the soul in the waste places. And out of it all Forster has contrived one of the very few novels of our time which have the unquestionable stamp of greatness.

How has this been done? Not, most certainly, by the mere plot, which is as ordinary as the scene. To the compact, second-rate little English community of Chandrapore come two strangers: Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore. Adela is expecting to marry Ronny Heaslop, the son of Mrs. Moore by a first marriage. They refuse to accept the prevailing view that India and Indians are outside the range of human

sympathy, and are full of a vague desire to 'see India'. They do meet some Indians, including a young doctor, Aziz, and they are encouraged by an English teacher, Cyril Fielding, who stands alone in his determination to treat Indians as equals. From their friendship with Aziz comes a party to visit the Marabar Caves, the one notable feature of the district.

These caves have a sinister but never fully explained quality, which makes them, and the visit to them, the centre of the book. Above all, they have an echo:

'Boum' is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum' or 'ou-boum'—utterly dull. Hope and politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce 'boum'. Even the striking of a match starts a little worm coiling, which is too small to complete a circle, but is eternally watchful. And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently.

In one of these caves Mrs. Moore experiences a nightmare vision, the vision of the negative side of that India she is trying to discover, a vision which stuns, crushes and finally destroys her. Later in the day Adela has a hysterical panic in another cave, and rushes out to accuse Aziz of attempted rape.

Her hysteria spreads through the whole English community and Aziz has to stand trial in an atmosphere of intense emotion which naturally produces its counterpart among the Indian population. Fielding alone, whose friendship with Aziz is one of the main themes of the book, is able to resist this hysteria and remains firm in his conviction of his friend's innocence. At the trial Adela, suddenly realising that she has been mistaken, withdraws her charges and Aziz is released amid scenes of riotous enthusiasm. His accusers are reprimanded, Fielding is promoted, Adela returns to England, Mrs. Moore dies. Such is the barest outline of the plot: it gives no indication at all of the substance or quality of *A Passage to India*.

This neat, hard, conventional little plot is indeed no more than the *occasion* for the book. It is rather like a stone thrown into a pond, and quickly disappears from sight: the real book is, as it were, the concentric rings so produced, spreading from the centre till the whole surface of life is covered and disturbed. It is the vehicle for a profound exploration of personal and social relationships, not only of the special

relations existing in a colonial country like the pre-war India but of problems that are permanent and universal. And, to underline the fact that the plot is only a small part of the whole, we have the lovely and difficult part III, which forms a sort of coda, adding nothing to the plot but exploring and illuminating the questions it has raised.

In order to see what these questions are we ought to go back a little, and to ask what sort of a man Forster is and what are his beliefs about life and society. Like Chandrapore, he presents at first sight nothing extraordinary. He is now 86 years old, a member of an intelligent, liberal, upper-middle-class family. He had a creditable record at Cambridge University, and, between 1905 and 1910 produced four excellent novels of which the last, *Howard's End* is the most important. His next, and only other, novel, *A Passage to India*, did not appear till 1924. In addition he has written short stories, critical essays, a biography of his friend G. Lowes Dickinson and other miscellaneous works. A small enough total output for one who has always made a profession of letters, yet it is not too much to say that he is not only the most considerable of living English writers but the only one who is indisputably of the first rank.

This is in part because of a sheer technical supremacy, of his balanced and civilised style, the precision of his judgements, his complete mastery of his chosen medium and material. These things mark the expert and mature novelist. His real importance as a writer springs, I believe, rather from the quality of his attitude to living. Life, he says, is real, not a school. It does not teach us, it changes us. It is this sense of reality which is the outstanding characteristic of all his novels. The people are real people to whom things really happen, who suffer, triumph, and, sometimes, are destroyed. There is waste, chaos, chance, and, including and transcending these, a unity, a purpose and a cohesion, a 'vital mess' out of which good and evil perpetually arise.

Within this 'vital mess' men exist as individuals and as social beings. For Forster the central problem is how they are to establish valid contacts with each other and at the same time preserve their individuality. In almost all his books this problem arises in some form: man exists in society divided by class, by nationality, by diversity of culture—the existence in India of two peoples, the ruling and the ruled, is only a special case of a universal schism—in what way, and under what social conditions, can men enter upon the valid and satisfying human relationships without which they do not attain the full stature of human dignity? Forster, who all his life has been a champion of

freedom and justice, would reply first of all 'only in a free and democratic society will this be possible'. Yet it is necessary to go further and to discover what is implied by such a society. In 1939, standing as he believed upon the edge of catastrophe, he wrote in a pamphlet called *What I Believe*:

So two cheers for Democracy; one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only love the Beloved Republic deserves that.

So that it is really a question of terms. There is formal democracy, the means, the institution, something worth defending and something which Forster has never failed to defend against its open enemies and its false friends. But it is chiefly to be valued because it alone can provide the conditions for the growth of the true democracy, the 'Beloved Republic'. Democracy in this sense means to Forster the understanding that other people are as real as oneself. He condemns the English characters in *A Passage to India* not because they are unjust or oppressive but precisely because they fail so conspicuously to reach this understanding. Ronnie Heaslop is not a bad man. To his fellow countrymen he is capable of generosity and even of nobility, yet he fails and we are left in no doubt as to the cause of his failure:

Every day he worked hard in the court, trying to decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly, to protect the weak against the less weak, the incoherent against the plausible. . . . One touch of regret—not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart—would have made him a different man and the British Empire a different institution.

It is this failure of the heart, Forster calls it elsewhere 'the undeveloped heart', which lies at the root, which makes human relations impossible, which stands in the way of the Beloved Republic. The whole drama of *A Passage to India* is played before an oppressive, inescapable background of brutal sunlight, gathering in strength as the hot season descends. The sun is both a character and a symbol, the symbol of power without beauty and intellect without love, a master from whose dominion there is no escape. In this atmosphere human relationships, even within the closed group of the ruling race, wither and are formalised, while real friendship between Indians and English becomes almost impossible. Even the friendship between Fielding and

Aziz, valuable and important as it is, is kept alive only by constant effort and fails in the end of full flowering.

The complete honesty with which it analyses the psychology of a colonial society, the waste, the frustration and the bitterness which inequality produces upon both sides, is one of the book's most valuable qualities. For it is not the English alone who are stunted by this false relationship. If, as Acton said, power corrupts, so equally does powerlessness, and the Indian characters are not idealised to afford a cheap and easy contrast with their rulers. On the contrary, they are frequently bitter, suspicious, unstable and lacking in moral force. Their powerlessness has engendered the very qualities which may seem to justify the arrogance and lack of sympathy with which they are treated. Yet they are alive, their mess is a vital mess, while the English community, more efficient perhaps, is condemned by its lack of roots to a sterile rectitude.

This is the aspect upon which Forster dwells most. *A Passage to India* is not in the ordinary sense a political book, though the questions with which it deals are of course of great political importance. This is perhaps partly because it was written in 1924, when the Indian national movement was still in its early stages, and because the material for it was collected by Forster during his still earlier visits to India in 1910 and 1922, visits which he later described in *The Hill of Devi*. But even more, perhaps, because Forster does, rightly or wrongly, tend to see the problem rather as a personal than a political one. And when, at the end of the book, the political issue is raised sharply, it is raised in a personal form and we pass out of the tyranny of the sun into the shade of the Beloved Republic.

Aziz, embittered by his experiences, has renounced the English and all their works, taking refuge in a backward Native State. Here, in a final meeting with Fielding, they argue about the future. Aziz says:

'Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out you fellows double quick . . . and then'—he rode against him furiously—'and then', he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends.'

'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately, 'It's what I want. It's what you want.'

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the birds, the carrion . . . they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices 'No, not yet', and the sky said 'No, not here'.

T. S. ELIOT—A PERSONAL VIEW

I

THE death of T. S. Eliot must have set many people now in their fifties and sixties turning over old memories. Of the three indisputably major poets writing in English in the twentieth century—Hardy, Yeats and Eliot, Eliot, though perhaps the least in stature, was nevertheless the most influential. And it was, I think, by my particular generation, those who were young in the 1920s, who grew up not during, but immediately after the first world war, that his influence was most deeply felt. If, therefore, I speak here about myself, it is not I hope from mere egotism, but because I believe my reaction may have been typical, and because I believe that in recalling Eliot's impact as I remember it, and by trying to evaluate that impact, I may be able to say something useful about Eliot himself.

When in 1923, at the age of 20, I first came upon *The Waste Land*, I was already a socialist, or rather, perhaps, was feeling my way, with many hesitations, towards socialism. To anyone but a fully conscious revolutionary Britain and Europe at that time seemed a desperate chaos: we indeed welcomed the October Revolution but were far from understanding its significance. Elsewhere the revolutionary wave was ebbing. We saw hunger and misery and unemployment everywhere. At the same time I was beginning to try to be a poet and was seriously concerned with poetic problems. There seemed little enough that could help me. The cosiness which was characteristic of much of the poetry of the preceding decades had no relation to the grim realities of our post-war world. Hardy already belonged to an age that was past, and Yeats, greatly as I admired his work, still did not seem quite relevant to our problems. Owen and Rosenberg, the best of the war poets, would have meant something, but for some reason did not come my way till rather later.

What came was *The Waste Land*, and its impact was all the greater because of its difference from anything then current. As Edgell Rickword wrote in a historic review:

If there were to be held a Congress of Younger Poets, and it were desired to make some kind of show of recognition to the poet who has most effectively upheld the reality of the art in an age of

preposterous poeticising, it is impossible to think of any serious rival to the name of T. S. Eliot.¹

From *The Waste Land*, like most of my contemporaries, I passed on to the criticism contained in *The Sacred Wood*, and was surprised to find it so urbane and rational, at times, even, a little prim. Only after some interval did we discover the earlier poems, though these had been published in 1917 and 1920. They reinforced but did not add materially to the impression created by *The Waste Land*. We were, however, delighted by the almost impudent wit they sometimes revealed:

The hippotamus's day
Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
God works in a mysterious way—
The Church can sleep and feed at once.

Or:

I shall not want Capital in Heaven
For I shall meet Sir Alfred Mond:
We two shall lie together, lapt
In a five per cent Exchequer Bond.

This line of approach was, I think, general among my contemporaries. We met Eliot first in his most demanding, and, I still think, his most impressive work.

We found in *The Waste Land* not all that was there, but rather the things we most needed at the time and could find nowhere else. Above all we found the most eloquent expression of what horrified us most in the modern world—on the one hand its desolation and squalor, on the other, the anarchy and instability of which we were perhaps over-conscious. The very obscurity of the poem, its strange and unexpected transitions, which were much more startling in the early 1920s than they seem today, mirrored exactly what we ourselves were feeling.

And the central, unifying myth of the Waste Land perishing from lack of life-giving water seemed peculiarly appropriate to the modern world, to the dreary cities packed with men who were enslaved by things, who lived *dry* lives in which their work had had all meaning drained from it by the labour discipline of capitalism. The Waste Land gained an extra reality by being localised in modern London:

¹ *The Calendar*, Vol. II, No. 10, Dec. 1925.

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many.
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

After the genteel rusticity of so much of the minor poetry of the early twentieth century this new poetry of the city came as a revelation of what was possible.

We felt that here at last was a poet who shared our concern about the condition of the world, who was not prepared to pretend that all was well, or to take refuge from reality in some make-believe world of his own. And here, perhaps, what we can now see as a negative feature of Eliot's outlook helped. Alick West has placed his finger on this:

The poem finally leaves us where we were. In which respect it is in striking contrast to its sources. As we have already indicated, the idea of the waste land is taken from primitive fertility ritual. . . . In the old ritual there was the *purpose* of making the land fertile; in the old romances the fertility was restored. In *The Waste Land* the land remains waste. The Fisher King of the old legend appears at the end of Mr. Eliot's poem still in the same plight as at the beginning.²

This may well be so, but this was perhaps just what appealed to us in 1923. Europe was still a waste land and any contrived appearance of a solution would have offended and repelled us. We were feeling our own way towards a solution, or many of us were. We were not prepared to have a ready-made solution foisted upon us. Thus Eliot's bleak pessimism was one of the things which compelled our respect.

The Waste Land came to our generation as a liberating experience for these and other, more directly poetic, reasons. One was its extension of our poetic frontiers. By the end of the nineteenth century English poetry had grown extremely narrow. It was assumed that only certain subjects were 'poetic' and that these should be treated in a style and language that were in fact those of romanticism in the last stages of degeneration. Romanticism, which had once been a liberating and revolutionary force, had now become a stifling orthodoxy. Eliot was

² *Crisis and Criticism*, p. 32.

not, of course, alone in feeling this or in wishing to restore to poetry a lost robustness. Hardy, for example, and Owen, in their very different ways, had been moving in the same direction. But it was with the publication of *The Waste Land* that the turning point was reached, and later, in *Homage to John Dryden*, Eliot supplied a theoretical defence for his innovations. Henceforth it became less and less possible to restrict the subject matter of poetry, or to demand that the poet should only use a diction traditionally accepted as poetic. The matter of poetry could now be anything the poet was capable of digesting, and, broadly speaking, a poet is as good as his digestion. It is no fault of Eliot that some of his admirers habitually attempted to use matter they were incapable of assimilating. Bad poetry can be written to any formula, and it is perhaps true that Eliot's poetic influence has been least fruitful among his more enthusiastic disciples.

Of course, as with so many of his other innovations, there was a less happy side which was perhaps not so apparent to us in the 1920s as it should have been. While it was good at this point for the hold of a stale and degenerate romanticism to be broken, Eliot, whether he knew it or not, was attacking the whole romantic tradition not only for these reasons but as Alick West has shown³ precisely because romanticism had a revolutionary aspect and was still potentially a revolutionary force. For this reason it was easy for Eliot's influence to become, at a later date, an orthodoxy as restrictive and more reactionary than the one he had helped to destroy. There is a continuity as well as a contradiction between Eliot as a liberating force and Eliot as a pillar of the establishment.

But, immediately, the blinding success of his new poetic methods was what held our attention. Whatever other reasons there may have been for his success, it would not have been possible without his superb professionalism, the seriousness which he brought to the trade of being a poet. *The Waste Land* succeeded first because it comes off as a poem, because of the precision of its language, the vividness and inevitability of its images, standing out all the more sharply because of the frequent obscurity of the thought. All this, as became even clearer when the earlier poems were taken into the account, could only come from a long preoccupation with the mastery of a technique. As Rickword says:

It is by his struggle with technique that Mr. Eliot has been able to get closer than any other poet to the physiology of our sensations

³ *Crisis and Criticism*, Ch. IV.

(a poet does not speak merely for himself) to explore and make palpable the more intimate distresses of a generation for whom all the romantic escapes had been blocked.⁴

There was a further contradiction in *The Waste Land* which only became apparent to most of us a good deal later. There can be no mistaking Eliot's agonised concern over our post-war chaos, however mistaken we may feel some of its manifestations to have been. For him, in truth, 'London Bridge is falling down'. But for him, also, London Bridge is, in the last resort, the whole structure of bourgeois culture and values, which, however critical of many aspects of bourgeois society he may be, are the only ones he knows or can imagine. Consequently, he can see only the negative aspects of the changes taking place in his world. This became increasingly obvious with time, but we ought, perhaps, to have seen the evidence for it in *The Waste Land* more quickly than most of us did. As with so much else, the October Revolution provided a touch-stone. And to Eliot, it meant nothing but a new kind of barbarism threatening all that he understood by civilisation. This appears particularly in Section V, *What the Thunder Said*, one of the themes of which is, as he explains in a note, 'the present decay of eastern Europe':

There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From the doors of mudcracked houses

he writes, and:

Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air.

More than this, the Land is Waste because the King (already, anticipating Eliot's later development, a *sacred King*) has become impotent to exercise his functions, because it is ungoverned. He hopes, though he dare not expect, that someday the traditional order may re-establish itself. Here already the conservatism, the desire to repose upon authority, which came to dominate his thinking, is implicit. The difference between his later position and that apparent in *The Waste Land* is perhaps that, desiring a refuge, a rock under whose shadow he could rest,⁵ he cannot see where to look for it.

⁴ *The Calendar*, loc. cit.

⁵ *The Waste Land*, lines 24-6.

The consequence is a terrible and increasing tension. In his next poem, *The Hollow Men* (1925), this tension approaches a breaking point. No one could live permanently in this nightmare world, in 'death's dream kingdom'.

This is the dead land
 This is the cactus land
 Here the stone images
 Are raised, here they receive
 The supplication of a dead man's hand
 Under the twinkle of a fading star.

This was the nadir, the turning point, and to us at the time Eliot's future development seemed to offer genuinely alternative possibilities. Would he be able to move out of 'this valley of dying stars' into alliance with the progressive forces of the time, towards a solution in human terms, even towards Marxism, or would he try to find his solution elsewhere? Today it seems obvious that his whole past, the cultural background of the Anglican Boston intellectual, made a positive solution impossible for him, but at the time we waited with some hope. *Ash Wednesday* (1930) gave us our answer.

The tension was to be resolved, or rather, perhaps, evaded, by a retreat from reality into mystical religion. Yet the retreat was an unwilling one. As he climbs the twisted stair he sees as through a window a vision of the reality he is leaving that has always seemed to me unbearably poignant:

. . . a slotted window bellied like fig's fruit
 And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
 The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
 Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
 Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
 Lilac and brown hair;
 Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of
 the mind over the third stair,
 Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
 Climbing the third stair.

Of all Eliot's poems *Ash Wednesday* is the most moving and the most personal. Elsewhere, Eliot indeed speaks, but he speaks through some dramatic figure, who is at once himself and not himself, through Prufrock, through the old sailor in *Gerontion*, through Tiresias and even through the scarecrow of *The Hollow Men*. Here alone he speaks

entirely for himself. He was never to do so again. In the subsequent short poems, in the *Quartets* (for all their technical dexterity) and even more in the series of plays which occupied so unprofitably his later years, the retreat into aridity goes on unchecked:

Ash on an old man's sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
Dust in the air suspended
Marks the place where a story ended.
Dust inbreathed was a house—
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.
The death of hope and despair,
This is the death of air.⁶

It is the tragic story of the defeat of a great poet, and all the more tragic because it was self-inflicted and because Eliot himself cannot have been unaware of it. In 1940, speaking about Yeats, he said:

But in fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity. There is another and even worse temptation: that of becoming dignified, of becoming public figures with only a public existence—coat-racks hung with decorations and distinctions, doing, saying and even thinking and feeling only what they believe the public expects of them. Yeats was not that kind of poet.⁷

Is it possible that he did not pause here to ask himself silently how he stood by this reckoning? Yet through this defeat something remained, a certain poetic integrity which he continued to serve, and in serving which, as he said upon the same occasion, the poet is 'at the same time rendering the greatest service he can to his own nation and to the whole world'.⁸

II

In 1927, before writing about Eliot had become a major literary industry, I published an essay on his poetry, an essay which today I must regard as uncritical and wholly inadequate.⁹ Eliot, however, wrote to me appreciatively about it, saying that I had noted some features of his work which other critics had ignored. Soon after we

⁶ *Little Gidding*, 1942.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁹ *The Decachord*, Vol. II, No. 12, March 1927.

met, and for the next ten years I was a regular contributor to *The Criterion* of which he was editor. We lived in increasingly different worlds, and our personal contact was slight, but it would be unjust not to refer here to the invariable kindness and encouragement which I received from him at a time when this meant a great deal to a young man still unknown and just beginning to be a writer. This disinterested helpfulness to someone whose ideas were in every way opposed to his own was typical of Eliot and earned him the personal regard of many who disagreed most strongly with all that he came to stand for. I should add that during all the years of my association with *The Criterion* I had complete freedom to express in it a viewpoint which Eliot must have thought entirely mistaken.

This leads us to a further contradiction. The editorial policy of *The Criterion* was avowedly reactionary. Eliot's high Toryism was shared by many of his contributors, and the foreign contributors especially, with whose long, boring and pretentious cultural-political articles the journal was too often weighted down, were drawn from the extreme right in France and Germany. *The Criterion's* policy was the defence of the West and of Christian values—slogans with which we are too familiar today for it to be necessary here to dwell on their implications. Yet alongside all this it contained a remarkable amount of positive and even actively progressive writing, both critical and creative—Hugh MacDiarmid's *Second Hymn to Lenin* to give only one example.¹⁰

Dr. Leavis even goes so far as to declare that it became the 'organ' of 'the young poetical Communists and fellow-travellers and their friends'.¹¹ This is absurd. An examination of the contents of any selection of issues during any period of *The Criterion's* existence will show that, however loosely one might define 'Marxist', the contributors who could be included under such a head were never more than a small minority. I think it is correct to say that I was the only actual Communist who contributed regularly, though others did so from time to time. All the same, it is true that *The Criterion* did provide a platform for a number of young writers who were at that time sympathetic to Communism and whose viewpoint differed radically from its general policy. I believe that Eliot was perfectly sincere when, writing in 1948 about his editorship, he claimed:

¹⁰ *The Criterion*, No. XLV, July 1932. I may perhaps claim some indirect share in the credit here. I remember in 1927 talking enthusiastically to Eliot about MacDiarmid's recently published *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and from what he said then MacDiarmid's work was evidently still unknown to him.

¹¹ *New Bearings in English Poetry*. Peregrine Books Ed., p. 187.

The ideas with which you did not agree, the opinions which you could not accept, were as important to you as those which you found immediately acceptable. You examined them without hostility, and with the assurance that you could learn from them. In other words, we could take for granted an interest, a delight, in ideas for their own sake, in the free play of the intellect. . . . It was our business not so much to make any particular ideas prevail, as to maintain intellectual activity on the highest level.¹²

I believe also that there was more in this than toleration. The characteristic qualification 'not so much' in the passage quoted above is a sufficient reminder that Eliot was no Liberal with abstract ideas about freedom of speech. Nor was he ever anything but hostile to Marxism. Yet he could never, during this period at least, quite escape from it. Constantly, and especially in his editorial comments which were a regular feature of *The Criterion*, he returns to examine it, to engage in polemic. And it is noteworthy that however much he condemns it, he treats it always with respect, as the one secular political philosophy which demands serious intellectual consideration. This is in marked contrast with the contempt with which he treats Liberalism, or what he once called 'the Mensheviks of the London School of Economics'. Thus he writes:

About certain very serious facts no one can dissent. The present system does not work properly, and more and more people are inclined to believe that it never did and that it never will; and it is obviously neither scientific nor religious. It is imperfectly adapted to every purpose except that of making money; and even for money-making it does not work very well, for its rewards are neither conducive to social justice nor even proportioned to intellectual activity. . . . Secondly, no one who is seriously concerned can fail to be impressed by the work of Karl Marx. He is, of course, much more cited than read; but his power is so great, and his analysis so profound, that it must be very difficult for anyone who reads him without prejudice on the one hand, or without any definite religious faith on the other, to avoid accepting his conclusions.¹³

It is hardly necessary to add, perhaps, that the paragraph which follows this begins 'But . . .' Again, he writes:

Our present danger is that our public men will be divided into trimmers and men of principle; that men of principle, men who

¹² *Selected Prose*, p. 244.

¹³ *The Criterion*, No. XLIV, April 1932.

refuse to listen to that siren song that the true spirit of Britain is 'the spirit of compromise', must become either extreme Tories or extreme Communists, with (no doubt) a respect for each other that they cannot feel for the trimmers, and perhaps in consequence a sense of relief at having something positive to fight. There is a very practical sense in which it is possible to 'love one's enemies'; and the Tory of to-morrow and the Communist of to-morrow will perhaps love each other better than they can love the politicians.¹⁴

It would be possible to quote many more such passages. In these years Eliot seemed obsessed with Communism (or, rather, with Marxism, since it was the ideas behind Communism with which he was concerned). He returns to it again and again from various angles, and always there is this unwilling respect. I cannot escape the conclusion that there was some part of his mind which recognised in Marxism that alternative path which he had been unable to take at the crisis of his development in the late 1920s. I associate this unwilling respect with the unwilling retreat from reality which I mentioned earlier.

Eliot's declaration that he stood for Catholicism, Classicism and Royalism¹⁵ has perhaps been more often quoted than it deserves: no doubt it was sincere: equally doubtlessly it was intended to be provocative. His comment some years later suggests that he felt he had been more than successful here:

Catholics, and especially Anglo-Catholics . . . are qualified as bigoted reactionaries, or as reckless socialists, according to the disposition of the hostile critic and the tendencies of some individual Catholics whom he has in mind. I think that the virtue of tolerance is greatly overestimated, and I have no objection to being called a bigot myself; but that is an individual concern. But I am the more careful in the matter, because some years ago I made, wisely or unwisely, a brief announcement of faith, religious, political and literary, which became too easily quotable.¹⁶

The statement in question was perhaps a rash attempt to summarise in a phrase attitudes which, as I have tried to indicate, are really extremely complex.

Eliot's social-critical positions—the belief that the preservation of culture, which he has tended to interpret very narrowly, depends upon

¹⁴ *The Criterion*, No. XXXVII, July 1930.

¹⁵ In the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, 1928.

¹⁶ *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 1936, p. 129.

a small elite, the increasing stress laid upon the importance of authority and tradition—have proved deadening both to himself and to those readers who have been so misguided as to swallow him whole. Yet his particular judgements have often been brilliant and have proved fertilising. It is important, too, to distinguish between some of his original positions and the way in which he later developed them.

Thus, much that he had to say in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* was a most salutary attack on the decadent romantic conception of the artist as a special kind of person without social relations or responsibilities. In place of the idea of the artist as an isolated individual whose business was merely to express his personality it proposed the idea of him as an essential member of society, responsible and moulded by a past which constituted a unity with a present continually changing. The artist, by helping to change the present, changed the past also:

The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for the order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.¹⁷

It is easy to see that such a conception, with its sense of historical movement, of the positive relation between the artist and society, and the further implication that man by his own acts creates his environment, is capable of development in a way not inconsistent with Marxism: it is no less easy to see why it was difficult, if not impossible, for Eliot to develop it in this way. Even in this early form one feels that the emphasis falls rather upon conformity and order than upon change. As D. M. Garman remarked in a review of *After Strange Gods*:

There has always been a suspect morbidity about Eliot's preoccupation with tradition, even when his preoccupation was enabling him to render a very real service to criticism.¹⁸

Throughout the whole of his subsequent work this initially fertile

¹⁷ *The Sacred Wood*, 1920, pp. 44-5.

¹⁸ *The Left Review*, Vol. I, No. 1, Oct. 1934.

conception of tradition is progressively weakened by identifying it with authority, with Anglican orthodoxy and with the defence of 'christian values' which turn out in the end to be no more than bourgeois values. Tradition thus understood becomes merely a dead hand.

Eliot's influence has suffered some strange transformations. For years he had, as Yeats wrote in another connection, 'young men's praise and old men's blame'. He was regarded, on the one hand as the embodiment of all that was morbid and dangerous in English poetry, as a cultivator of ugliness for its own sake, and on the other as the bringer of new health and seriousness. He ended as English poetry's Grand Old Man, as a high Tory and a central figure of the literary establishment. Yet in a sense his later development was implicit even in his beginnings, more obviously, perhaps, in his criticism than in his poetry. He was never in any real sense a leader of revolt, but rather a standard around which certain forces of revolt gathered. His influence in the 1920s was probably more far-reaching and liberating than he intended or would ever have wished.

Conversely, even in his later years that influence was never wholly reactionary. What he had done could never be undone. Much of the fire went out of his poetry and it became progressively more arid, yet a certain integrity, an essential dignity, remained. His criticism lost its vigour and clarity, his commentary on social problems degenerated, as Garman puts it, 'into a method of avowal and retraction which is frequently completely negative'.¹⁹ Yet even in his more obscurantist pronouncements there remains a core of social concern whose sincerity one is forced to recognise even while rejecting entirely both his diagnosis and his nostrums. It hardly seems possible in such a case to reach a balanced estimate of his influence on English literature and thought. Yet I for one am compelled to say that he stands high among those men of our time who once helped me to a better understanding of the contemporary world. There is much that I must reject, and I do not find it difficult to detect and discard what seems worthless. There remains a considerable remnant without which my mind would have been both narrower and poorer and for which I can only be grateful.

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

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