CHAPTER IV

C. Day Lewis, like other recent autobiographers, knows the limitations and also the freedom that the autobiographical form affords to the writer. Nearly all contemporary autobiographers have felt uncertain when it comes to re-enacting their past and presenting a "truthful" portrait of themselves. As C. Day Lewis puts it: "How far this book is truthful as a self-portrait, I cannot judge."\(^1\)

In what sense a portrait may be termed "untruthful" will be discussed later. C. Day Lewis like his contemporaries knows what role memory, selection, natural reticence play in the formation of one's self-portrait.

In *The Buried Day* he gives one version of the autobiographical process, wherein the autobiographer:

>... through the inner monologue that is his reflective commentary on experience, selects and subtly distorts the facts so as to make him more interesting or more tolerable to himself, in doing so he creates a personal mythology which, because it modifies him, does become representative truth."\(^{(TBD\ 243)}\)

In what sense C. Day Lewis creates a "personal mythology" for himself in *The Buried Day*, in order to represent truth, needs scrutiny.

There are instances in Lewis’s autobiography which clearly suggest his unwillingness to speak out everything. Lewis, it seems, has too refined a taste to hurt the feelings of others, particularly as far as his personal relationships are concerned. Regards this he explains, "Of these I shall say little or nothing where others concerned are alive." (TBD 26) He found autobiography to be a proper medium to create a "personal mythology," for, according to him, this form of narration, would enable him to give a truthful account of himself, and the scope will be much wider here where "less has to be left out" (TBD 26) about one’s life than in poetry or fiction. This of course implies that something "has to be left out."

When Lewis started exhuming a bunch of recollections from his buried past, he was surprised to learn that he found strata of bygone events buried deep down in his mind wanting to find release. As Lewis says the ideas must have been forming imperceptibly within him to emerge "with the compulsive force of waters that have stealthily massed behind a dam..." (TBD 26)

Creating a "personal mythology," is a task Lewis finds quite perplexing. In narrating his self-history, at the very outset, he states how he finds it difficult to choose between a real self and a "modified" self; he ultimately prefers to remain true to a "modified" picture
of himself. Describing his perplexity in a vivid image he states:

"What with all these sitters, each claiming to be me, jostling for the throne, and the need - for mere decency's sake - to touch in but lightly certain major features of my life, it is unlikely that the picture will be comprehensive." (TBD 242-243)

But he is confident at the same time that the picture in the end will be a "composite one." (TBD 243)

Modification of the self-portrait in his case, as defined by him, involves an effect amounting to distortion of facts, mainly through reticence. To this may be added the changes brought about by the effect of his coming into "collision with things and people." (TBD 240) C.Day Lewis knows well that nothing can be done about one's genes or childhood environment which definitely go to shape an individual. But living in the modern age he is constantly reminded that there are other factors also that go to mould an individual. Even though the "individual cannot be re-made," he is not "... condemned to an unalterable pattern." (TBD 243)

Throughout his autobiography C.Day Lewis gives us the impression of a man constantly seeking to arrive at an image of himself. He shows surprise at times at finding the difference between his past and present selves. The effort to find his present identity has led him not only to
analyse his own self but led him on to a further quest in order to define his relationship with the outside world. According to Lewis "inner and outer necessity" (EBD 243) calls forth latent characteristics of the individual. Lewis has learnt that "self-knowledge is most surely gained" (EBD 240) through contact with the outside world.

The Buried Pay presents the myth of the modern man constantly straining at putting his private and public selves together. For instance, when Lewis speaks of the First World War and its aftermath and the effect it has on his mind, this illustrates how public events affect individuals: " - this war I had lived through would soon be transmuted for me from history into myth." (EBD 85) This constant play of contrary pulls with all the resulting stress and strain becomes the underlying theme of Lewis's self-narration and as a consequence, The Buried Day embodies the representative truth of the self-historian, at least in some of its aspects.

C.Day Lewis knows that it is impossible to re-enact fully one's past life, that however honest and careful an autobiographer might be, at the most, he will be able to present only an "illusion of the past."² For the past

² See Barret Mandel's article "Full of Life Now" in which he says: "All autobiographers create an illusion of the past coming into life ... However convincing an autobiographical text may be, the past is always an illusion..." JAME'S OLNEY ed., Autobiography: Essays-Theoretical & Critical (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1950), p.63.
remains the past. Nearly all modern autobiographers voice their concern over the difficulties faced by them in seeking to present an accurate narrative of the past. C. Day Lewis expresses a doubt about the degree of precision attainable in autobiographical writings and refers to the autobiographer's "preternatural accuracy" (TBD 23) at recollecting past events. He complains that his "capacity for forgetting seems bottomless..." (TBD 24) and again "how much at the mercy of the insubstantial present" (TBD 24) he has to be while recollecting his past. Incidentally, he wanted at one stage to give the title "an essay in reminiscence," to his autobiography. (TBD 24)

C. Day Lewis's awareness of the impossibility of presenting one's past unimpaired by the present is reflected in the following statement:

"... there are so many thousands of days, so many layers of past selves buried within you, yet seldom able to recover one article of the hoard intact!" (TBD 24)

Even though things extracted from the buried past do not remain intact, this hardly distorts the truth the autobiographer is trying to present. As in the case of C. Day Lewis, even though he is conscious of his shortcomings, at times, regarding strict adherence to facts, he is able to represent the truth about himself.

As he gradually creates "a personal mythology" one
finds that it is "organised around leitmotifs of the total, integral experience."\textsuperscript{3} All throughout his autobiography C.Day Lewis's effort is to give meaning to his "mythical tale"\textsuperscript{4} which embodies "a divided mind" facing various hazards, both private and public, and in which ultimately his mind is no longer at variance with itself.

II

C.Day Lewis sets out to write his autobiography, with the chief purpose of gaining self-knowledge by creating a mythology of himself. He knows this cannot be done unless he brings into focus, not only the history of his own personal self but also that of his dealings with others. As he proceeds to chart his life-history, he naturally chalks out all the peak events of his life - the private as also the public sides. It is therefore interesting to look closely into the effects of these other factors, of people as also of events on C.Day Lewis.

\textsuperscript{3} Georges Gusdorf in his work \textit{Conditions and Limits of Autobiography} reports how Bertram calls Nietzsche's autobiography a "personal 'mythology.'" \textit{Autobiography: Essays-Theoretical and Critical}, p.48.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p.48.
One predominant feature that figures in *The Buried Day* is C. Day Lewis's "chronic malady, the divided mind." (TBD 212) The work presents the picture of a mind that is constantly at war with itself, yet is able to survive.

Born into a family where want and poverty were unknown, he hardly got a chance to face directly the hazards that were patent to the period through which he lived. Most of the well-to-do intellectuals of the period attended public schools which preached certain values which were in fact non-existent. When these young boys left public schools with "their traditions both of authoritarianism and of service to the community," (TBD 209) almost all of them were disillusioned because they realized now the disparity that lay between the sort of make-believe world in which they had lived so far, and the real world they would now be facing. Auden, the acknowledged leader of the group, also speaks of the "chaos of values" he saw around him. There was hardly any opportunity left to them when they might be of some "service to community." (TBD 209) One solution left to them was to join the left-wing movements of the period. C. Day Lewis, like his contemporaries, joined the

---

5 For instance, MacNeice, Auden, Spender; Isherwood, among others.

main stream of the intellectual climate during this time when he drew close to the Communists who tried to set the world right. One critic writes very aptly analyzing the situation in general:

"Any reader who recalls those years of anti-Fascism of the Popular Front, of the intellectuals' sick-hearted impotence in the face of Britain's inglorious role in that tricky darkening decade, will hardly need to question the pages which explain this pacifist poet's flirtation with Communism."

When C. Day Lewis joined the Communist Party it was not without hesitation, for he was torn between loyalty to two parties - the bourgeois camp he belonged to by birth, and the Communist Party he wished to join because of its many attractions. His membership of the Communist Party was not a lasting one. His break with the party is one more instance of his 'divided mind.' His close connections with the party made him aware of the "corrupting or dehumanizing effect of the means employed," (TRD 212) or of lies to which it resorted in order to bring about peace and order in society. These aspects of the life of an activist shocked him so much that in course of time he ceased to be a member of the party.

Lewis recalls that when he joined the party, in

7 "From Iron To Feathers," TLS, Friday (13 May 1960), 298.
theory he became "a traitor" (TBD 212) to his class. But the opportunity given to him as a member to "discover reality by acting upon it, not thinking about it" (TBD 212) was the strongest pull he felt towards the party. For him "this concept felt like salvation." (TBD 212) By the time his bond with the Communist Party was being sealed, he was a successful writer, a "respectable citizen." (TBD 212)

These comforts that he won did not bring him peace of mind. He felt guilty, for he realized he was enjoying a life that was being denied to his comrades. He felt like a person who did not rightly belong either to land or to water. About his position at the time he reflects:

Living in two worlds was dangerously near sitting on the fence. It certainly must have encouraged my own chronic malady, the divided mind." (TBD 212)

C.Day Lewis gave up his membership of the party, when he realized that the party's goal to set the "world to rights" (TBD 211) was only an illusion, and when he also detected the selfish motives of some of the party members who were mere "... figures of fun, philistines, self-deceivers, playing golf and bridge while their world crumbled beneath them." (TBD 210)

In The Buried Day, C.Day Lewis represents the dilemma faced by quite a number of well-to-do intellectuals of the 'thirties. On the one hand their sense of duty towards
society made them act in a particular manner and, on the other, they realized that no solution could be brought about in regard to the conditions that prevailed at the time. When the Spanish Civil War broke out the intellectuals felt themselves called upon to play a role and actively intervene and to change the course of events. C.Day Lewis's reply to Aldous Huxley's question as to what were the poets going to do about the Spanish Civil War, is well known. His reply: "We're Not Going To Do Nothing" speaks of his earnestness and his determination to work for a good cause, a sense of social responsibility which led him to join the International Brigade. At the same time, C.Day Lewis has an equally strong sense of responsibility as a writer; he believes: "the poet was a kind of transmitting station ... receiving the truth about reality and broadcasting it to the world." 

In The Buried Day Lewis speaks of his own experiences as a writer during this time of crisis and, also, the internal struggles of his mind, which are so much a part of his being, manifest themselves: "My conscience as an

---

8 Spender observes about poets of the 'thirties: "... they had certain ideas in common ... Their poetry emphasised the community, and overwhelmed as it was by the sense of a communal disease, it searched for a communal cure in psychology and leftist politics." Poetry Since 1939 (London: Longmans, Green & Co.Ltd., 1946), p.28.


artist and my social conscience became ever more difficult to reconcile." (TBD 222) This consciousness of his inability to bring about a proper balance between these irreconcilables is brought out not only in his autobiography but also in his other writings.  His consciousness as an artist has the upperhand presumably because he considered "felt experience" as the greatest truth one can achieve.  

The Spanish War gave Lewis a chance to overcome his doubts and perplexities; it enabled him to mingle with people irrespective of their class origins, especially with men from the middle class, and to stand on par with them and to share their suffering. Again, the Spanish War had set the stage for the emergence of the proletariat poet whose attitude to war was ambivalent. Hence these poets express hopelessness at the prevailing situation, and at the same time they are not devoid of hope for some solution that would save them from it all. Incertitude and optimism - these two poles go to define the state of mind of many of the young intellectuals of the 'thirties.

11 See C. Day Lewis's other writings, for instance - "Letters to a Young Revolutionary" (1933), A Hope for Poetry (1934), Revolution in Writing (1935).

12 In The Buried Day C. Day Lewis says that writing a poem gave him a chance "to explore areas of experience, ... which contained a greater wealth of poetic impulse and material than" he "found in the area opened up by the social conscience." (TBD 223)
In *The Buried Day*, the central concern of the autobiographer appears to be a study of his divided self, his split mind. Thus, speaking about his adolescent self, looking at it now in retrospect, Lewis speaks of the "discovery of those two contrasting selves" (TBD 80) within him: the active mind contrasting with an "oversensitive, timid" (TBD 81) self. During that phase, mainly because of the circumstances he found himself in, Lewis felt a tendency in him toward a kind of drift and disintegration. His father's calling, viz., as an army chaplain set up a sort of a distance between himself and other men, and so contributed to this feeling. This affected C. Day Lewis's life in both its personal as well as public aspects. For, on the one hand, he longed to form bonds of intimate friendship with people and yet, on the other, as he puts it, he found "intimacy difficult." (TBD 92) He felt an attraction "towards social or family groups," (TBD 92) and at the same time, at least during adolescence he felt reticent and socially uneasy. This "twofold isolation" (TBD 92) which, as he states, his father suffered from, was also a dominant trait during his adolescent years and it remained with him even late in life.

C. Day Lewis likens his period of transition from
adolescence to manhood, to the movement of a train passing through a dark tunnel. He pictures himself as a passenger in search of a destination he has yet to reach. For him, this "tunnel" (TEL 107) appears to be "a very long one," (TEL 107) for it was not an easy, smooth path that he treaded. His social uneasiness, his restlessness, as well as his spoilt relations with his father, were, he feels, the result of a constant war being waged within his own mind - where taking firm decisions or acting in a confident manner was not possible for him. Lewis's relations with his father had worsened to such an extent that he recalls how at one stage his father declared: "You have broken my heart," (TEL 105) and this made him feel so dejected that even late in life, this breach in relationship between father and son was not healed.

As with other autobiographers, a certain type of symbolism is recurrent with C.Day Lewis. Thus the use of the image of the train is a device which recurs in his narration of his adolescent period, his Oxford years, and later his years of maturity. C.Day Lewis finds a fitting expression of his wavering mind in this range of symbolism. For instance, when he speaks of his Oxford years, he says, restlessness was the leitmotif of those years. Even when he visited Oxford later on, he found it to be a sort of "transit camp" (TEL 157) for the undergraduates:
... a place where the present is particularly subject to the drag of the future, like a junction where you wait between trains, with your mind less on your book or your fellow passengers than on the next stage of the journey. (TBD 157)

C. Day Lewis's friendship with Mary and his decision to marry her was like preparing for a journey which, he felt, would not prove a pleasant one. Even while he was courting Mary, he realized that, in spite of the excellent treatment he received from Mary's family, they could not get him out of the "labyrinth" which his restless, unsteady mind led him into. This relationship was almost coming to the point of a standstill, but for Margaret, a psychiatrist, whose acquaintance with him was well-timed. By now, C. Day Lewis was beginning to realize that self-knowledge was worth acquiring. Margaret's help at this time must have been of special significance to him. He explains:

"Margaret gave me, in effect, when I was lost, a compass and a map of the country I was lost in - a map of myself." (TBD 150)

What C. Day Lewis appreciated in her was that though she did not give him a formal psychiatric treatment, she was responsible at least to a certain extent, in curbing him temporarily of his "chronic malady, the divided mind."

In The Buried Day, C. Day Lewis is reticent about his first marriage. A main cause of the failure of this marriage appears to be what Lewis calls a mind at variance with itself, unable to maintain a balance between his two selves, viz., his
private and public selves. In Lewis's autobiography, one gets evidence of his shortcomings which led to the break-up of the first marriage, when he confesses to his having shown negligence towards his wife. As he relates, he did not behave in this way deliberately. Here again his split mind was at work, goading him, on the one hand, to remain true to his duty as a writer, and on the other hand, to meet all those obligations on the personal side, the sense of responsibility he felt towards his wife. In the concluding pages of his autobiography C. Day Lewis gives us the impression of his being released from this constant conflict in his mind. The self-narrator at last appears to have got rid of his divided self and achieved selfhood, a sense of being, a feeling of wholeness.

(iii)

As being a curate's son, C. Day Lewis was brought up in an atmosphere where religious rituals were a "natural part" (TBD 49) of his life. But his father did not impose on him any religious obligation like attending Sunday School. When C. Day Lewis joined the Sherborne School, however, things were different. There was an atmosphere of "facile religiosity" (TBD 111) about the public school students who were compelled to visit the chapel, for it was "the centre of school life." (TBD 112) If Good Friday fell during the
term time, the whole school was supposed to participate in gathering primroses for the chapel and the masters' wives decorated the chapel. C. Day Lewis writes he did not "look with any enthusiasm upon the Sherborne tradition." (TBD 112) He confesses that even though the authorities stressed that the felt centre of school life was the chapel, it actually was the playing fields. Obviously enough, these adolescents were likely to challenge anything that was forced upon them. C. Day Lewis was not an exception to this and was therefore not ready to accept religion so wholeheartedly. He found religion "ill-related with life." (TBD 113)

This sceptical attitude, first evident during his adolescent period, was not to undergo many changes even in later life. This is revealed, for instance, when he exposes the state of his mind during the time when he was contemplating marriage: "Though I had lost my faith, I had not discarded the Christian view of marriage..." (TBD 191) This statement has a reference to Lewis's first marriage. How and when exactly he lost his faith is difficult to guess, for there is no detailed discussion in The Buried Day. But the general state of affairs in his life was answerable for his indifference to religion, as was the case with numerous other intellectuals of his day.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) For instance, with Spender and Auden.
Towards the end of *The Buried Day*, realizing that he had about twenty years more to live, Lewis gets into a nostalgic mood and he thinks of the past and the future as being focused into "a historic present." *(TBD 239)*

It is then that he speaks of death and immortality. He admits, he is not afraid of death, but the act of dying frightens him and he hints at his disbelief in immortality:

> I have, at most, another twenty years or so to live. Extinction I do not fear; but I dread the act of dying; I hope that, when I come to die, if I have still no belief in immortality, I may at least recapture the docility of the child I once was...*" (TBD 239)

In *The Buried Day*, C. Day Lewis projects the attitude of the modern man who does not make a fetish of religion and yet cannot give it up totally. This attitude itself has a history in modern times and is reflected in much of the specifically, modernistic writing.

### III

In *The Buried Day* Lewis creates a "personal mythology" of his own self by delineating the various phases of his life against a definite background. He delights in looking back upon his own past self and comparing it with his present self, for the difference between the two is so large that at times he fails to recognize his past self as his own. For instance, when he recalls his Oxford days he observes:
If I could go back thirty-five years, and
meet the youth bearing my name who went up to
Wadham in October 1923, I wonder would I know
him? ... He gazes at me out of the photograph,
concealing with fantastic aplomb his anxiety,
his sense of inferiority, his almost total
cluelessness ... in some respects he is far
more of a stranger to me ... than my childish
or my schoolboy self. (TBD 156)

A common feature in almost all his recollections of his
past self is that they betray a sense of insecurity and a
self shaken to its roots by the internal and external
disturbances that he has to face. These features disappear
in course of time.

What Lewis attempts to do in his autobiography is to
point out the reasons that go to weaken an individual in
times of crises. In C.Day Lewis's case, he traces his basic
insecurity to his childhood days where he very much felt the
loss of his mother. He recalls: "How deeply the loss
impoverished my growing years or affected my disposition,
there is no means of telling." (TBD 20) Though Lewis's
father tried his best to fill the void left by the death of
his mother, he was of little help to him, emotionally. On
the whole, the passage from his childhood years to the
period of adolescence and manhood was a tough one for
C.Day Lewis. He was too sensitive a person not to record
the slightest disturbances caused by both internal and
external events. He mentions the impact of the public events
on the minds of people, and especially on the younger
generation. But Be pays equal attention to the inner disturbances caused by his strained relationships with his near relatives, e.g., with his father or his wife, Mary.

How he learns, gradually, to gain control over his whole being is worth noting. When Lewis looks back upon his past, he does not hesitate at all in speaking about the clumsy, awkward figure he must have made in his early years. On one occasion, he confesses:

"Even in my thirties and forties I sometimes came away from parties, my mind overcast by a sort of unfocused depression, disappointment, moroseness, which self-examination showed to be a cloak for the sense of social failure."

(EBD 60)

He explains that such a sense of "social failure" arises from his "basic insecurity." Time is a major healer for him which cures his diseased mind. Even though he did not have any formal psychiatric treatment, he does get rid of social uneasiness he so often speaks of in his self-history.

Autobiographers record incidents that leave a deep scar on their minds. It may be just an ordinary childhood event, but they feel that such events linger on with them. The best way, they feel, of unburdening themselves is to narrate them in course of natural sequence in their self-histories. C.Day Lewis too is not free of such sore-spots. For instance, he speaks of his poor performance in Mathematics in Sherborne School. The event is quite
a normal one. But, its after effects were to be of some consequence in his case. As he states:

"This failure not only affected my other work: for years afterwards, the basic un-confidence which it had aggravated made it a small ordeal for me to meet new people, my fear of self-exposure, led me at Oxford and even later to pretend comprehension where I did not fully comprehend..." (TBD 118)

The effect of this failure was so deep-seated that years after this incident he felt quite disturbed to meet people cleverer than himself.

But fortunately for C.Day Lewis, he did not allow himself to be drowned in the sense of social insecurity he experienced. He made the best use of some moments in life that provided a foot-hold that would lead him to a place of safety. When human beings find that the world is too much with them, they have a tendency to take shelter in nature. C.Day Lewis recaptures in The Buried Day such moments when he has a feeling of "pure at-one-ness" (TBD 82) with nature, a feeling of bliss that he experienced in boyhood in his beloved Dorset. Such moments of exaltation he records again in his Oxford years. He says: "I could go on tirelessly for hours - merged into a feeling that I was porous to nature and at one with her." (TBD 169) These words register almost the same feeling of bliss as that which Wordsworth speaks of in his Prelude with reference to such withdrawals from society as brought him peace in the
past, Lewis did ultimately learn to face society. He realized that whatever ordeals he has had to face (both personal and impersonal), were not peculiar to him alone, but were shared by others too. He writes:

... my heart was sterile, like scorched earth. All this is a not unusual phenomenon in late adolescence; but until I was nineteen I had no-one to reassure me about it, so I suffered severely from the conviction that I was an Outsider in this respect too - a kind of human freak. (TBD 138)

There are moments of respite when Lewis switches over to an optimistic note. For instance, Lewis realizes that his years at Oxford were after all, not totally futile, and that his intellectual horizons were widening. (TBD 127) His consciousness of definite signs of improvement at the time is recorded in The Buried Day: "I must have been growing more presentable, a little more at ease socially." (TBD 173) He reiterates elsewhere about his Oxford years that he was more at ease now in society, but adds that "although my affection flowed freely towards those I felt at home with, my mind was still introverted, dreaming, idealistic..." (TBD 179) C. Day Lewis was now looking forward to the next stage of life. From then onwards life holds a different meaning for him, for he has realized that conflict is a way of life and therefore one must learn to live with it. He remarks that:

It is not my conflict alone, surely, but a condition of being human: not 'the blight man was born for', but the clash of irreconcilables which makes him and unmakes him. (TBD 235)
The self-analysis C. Day Lewis indulges in in *The Buried Day* has given him a feeling of wholeness, of integrity, a sense of being. The analysis has yielded him a good result. He has, after all, gained self-knowledge:

> If I understand people a bit better now, it is largely because my view of them is less fogged by the steam of introspection, and seldom interrupted by the old, frantic gesticulations of a mind drowning in self-pity or self-disgust." (TBD 240)

The self-history of C. Day Lewis therefore presents the picture of a man split between certainty and uncertainty, a man unable to choose between the class he belongs to and the class he wants to join. Inspite of all these odds, he had an impulse towards the new, the unknown, the migrations which so delusively promise a rebirth." (TBD 235) He has at last learnt to brush aside all these odds which are inevitable in the present age, and to lead a normal life.

The concluding chapters of the autobiography are written in an optimistic tone where C. Day Lewis gives one the impression that he has learnt to live a purposeful, and peaceful life by reconciling the past with the present, the inner being with the outer being, the private self with the public self. The self-portrait of the person who has no regrets or complaints about any strife or struggle, tug or tension, remains with the reader. Herman Melville's quotation which he chooses as an epigraph to the IIIrd part of *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933) seems to echo his own
feelings at the end of the autobiography. The quotation is: "But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still centrally disport in mute calm." In the post-script of his *The Buried Day* he writes:

I am happy, living in this place where old and new can be focused together into a historic present... At least I am learning to live with myself, to view in some kind of focus and in some degree to reconcile the contradictory elements that make up the man of whom this book is a portrait."(TBD 239)

To neglect this aspect of *The Buried Day* would be to miss the very quintessence of the work.

IV

As Clifford Dyment says,

In 1960 there appeared *The Buried Day*, an autobiography in prose which explains more explicitly than it is poetry's business to do the pulls and pressures of temperament, inheritance, environment, and experience which have made the poet what he is."

C. Day Lewis found a proper vehicle for the expression of some of his personal feelings and tensions as much in his poetry as in his autobiography; in fact, C. Day Lewis, it might appear, is more of a creative writer in his self-history than in his verse.

---


15 Clifford Dyment in "Writers And Their Work: No. 62," p. 44.
This should point to the relevance of *The Buried Day* for a proper understanding of C. Day Lewis's poetry. It might be worth while then to juxtapose Lewis's autobiography and his poetry and attempt to show how the two are interrelated. As a critic in *The Times Literary Supplement* observes regarding Lewis's work,

> Sometimes the prose narrator will take us to the brink, as when he stands with his stepmother at his father's deathbed and discovers 'not for all the first time or the last - what a poor substitute pity is for love, how agonizingly and ineffectually it strains to become what it cannot be.' But he does not, in prose, push us over the edge. No; when he wants to do that, he does it in his poetry.\(^\text{16}\)

In *The Buried Day*, Lewis's main objective is a delineation of the stages of his progress, both as man and writer. His keen sensitivity betrays itself in his autobiography, for instance, when he begins his autobiography with the statement, "My earliest memory is a smell of bacon," (TBD 15) this is closely followed by another statement about his "visual recollection" of a "recurring image of a white china cup in a green wood." (TBD 15) Such instances are perhaps the result of Lewis's poetic bent of mind which marks his self-narration. He is able not only to recapture with his poetic eye the object of the past, but also to re-enact the precise manner in which the object connects him

\(^\text{16}\) "From Iron To Feathers," *TLS* (13 May 1960), 297.
also with the "tone of experience." This is also what he does in his verse, very much in keeping with his own statement in *The Poetic Image*: "The poet's re-creation includes both the object and the sensations connecting him with the object, both the facts and the tone of an experience."  

The *Buried Day* gives us a re-projection of the past in which one of his governing metaphors is that of a tunnel. His own progress through life is likened to the experience of passing through a dark tunnel and finally emerging out into the light with much relief. In all that he narrates in his self-history, his mind is seen to be constantly at variance with itself, and this seems to guide his actions and in turn the whole course of his life. The pressure of this shifting mind looms large specially over the "Sherborne," "Edwinstowe" and "Oxford" periods in his autobiography. And strikingly enough, the "poetic triptich" (so termed by Clifford Dyment) comprising *Transitional Poem* (1929), *From Feathers to Iron* (1931) and *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933), written nearly three decades ago also shows the same state of the poet's mind during the early years of his life. For instance, his growing awareness of the real state of affairs in Sherborne results in his strong criticism of

---


18 Ibid., p.23.
the public school system. He complaints bitterly about "... the system of values under which we lived - a system that was, it seems to me now, distorted by having to rest upon two sets of dualisms." (TBD 123) His "Edwinstowe period" too was not a tension-free one for, along with his "psychological tensions," (TBD 137) there came his "social conscience," (TBD 145) and with this his consciousness of being socially inadequate. The real world of this colliery township seemed unreal to him. He must have felt the "pulls of temperament" very much, particularly so because of his strained relations with his father. All these causes ultimately resulted in a "central negativism or emptiness" (TBD 153) he experienced within himself.

All that he narrates especially in his "Sherborne," "Edwinstowe" and "Oxford" chapters in his autobiography, would appear just a re-statement of the personal and public conflicts expressed in Transitional Poem. Clifford Dyment remarks:

"Transitional Poem is the key to all Day Lewis' work, for it provides many of the clues necessary to an understanding of the two kinds of 'war' to be found in his poetry - the objective war ... where the struggle is that of one class against another, one political ideology against another; ... and the subjective war ... where the conflict is an interior one, the struggle to achieve tranquillity of a man whose mind is a chamber of ceaseless debate."** 19

Transitional Poem contains autobiographical over-tones where one finds the poet-narrator recounting his clumsy school-boy period, his tension-laden adolescence, and finally his arrival as a man who has achieved social ease and comfort and recognition. No sooner does he cast off his "schoolboy clout," then he becomes conscious of disorder without and wants to set it right. He knows that unless all evil is stamped out, no peace may be attained. Lewis represents a young man's incertitude, his inexperience when he states:

But to assail love's heart
He has no strategy,
Unless he suck up the sea
And pull the earth apart. 21

His consciousness of the transient adolescent period is expressed in the following lines:

Farewell again to this adolescent moon;
I say it is a bottle
For papless poets to feed their fancy on
Once mind sucked there, ... 22

But he finally has learnt

... to comprehend
The form of things, ... 23

Ultimately he has achieved the poise of manhood as reflected in the lines:

21 Ibid., p.14.
22 Ibid., p.40.
23 Ibid., p.42.
So from a summer's height
I come into my peace;
The wings have earned their night,
And the song may cease.  [24]

In The Buried Day Lewis recalls similar stages in his life when he says:

My own tunnel was a very long one.
Just as I had clung to the state of childhood, arriving at Sherborne with a child's innocence and ignorance, so my adolescence would protract itself through Sherborne, into Oxford and beyond, and it would not be till my thirties that I should effectively throw it off and emerge into the clearer air, the wider, more settled prospects of manhood.  [107]

While the 'tunnel' is the chief defining metaphor of his earlier years in his autobiography, the 'divided mind' figures symbolically in the later half, mainly in the chapters "Teaching years" and "The Thirties: Musbury." As seen in The Buried Day, in spite of getting over the uncertainty and insecurity of his school-days and undergraduate years, he still did not fully learn to face life with confidence till late in life. Both, on a personal and an impersonal level, he found decision-making very touchy chiefly because of his "divided mind." His eight years' stay in Summer Fields provided him with some professional experience as a teacher and he found the school "exceptionally good."  [183] His stay next at Cheltenham, as a teacher

24 Ibid., p.54.
again, proved comparatively to be a trying time for him. For in this conventional public school, he was supposed to give an account of every little thing he did, acts like, wearing a green shirt (TBD 195-196) or writing love poems for his wife (TBD 197), a feature which he disliked for it curbed his personal independence. By now tensions developed in his mind caused not only by his own private affairs but also by public events.

How he copes with these dual strands of conflict finds expression particularly in the chapters "Teaching Years" and "The Thirties: Musbury" in The Buried Day. Lewis explains in his self-history, how he found an outlet to his mental tensions in From Feathers to Iron which deals with the dual function he was called upon to fulfil during that particular period. He writes:

"... the most potent element in the general situation was an interplay and consonance between the inner and outer life, between public meaning and private meaning. When, for example, I was writing From Feathers to Iron, a sequence of poems whose subject matter was my personal experience during the nine months before the birth of my first child, I found that my own excitements and apprehensions linked up quite spontaneously with a larger issue - the struggle and joy in which our new world should be born - and derived strength from it, so that I could use naturally for metaphors or metaphysical conceits the apparatus of the modern world, the machinery which, made over for the benefit of all, could help this world to rebirth." (TBD 218)

The passage, as though, forms a résumé of the whole sequence of poems. From Feathers to Iron alternates between optimism
and pessimism. A dual tone of certitude and incertitude lingers throughout the work. The amount of expectancy, excitement, uneasiness that goes with the birth of the son on a personal level is also extended further and becomes a public issue. C. Day Lewis depicts the general temper of the period both in *The Buried Day* and *From Feathers to Iron*. People hopefully looked out at the time for a healer, for a new world that would bring about a regeneration. This concern of the people finds expression in lines like:

> But we seek a new world through old workings,
> Whose hope lies like seed in the loins of earth.

Or again:

> Now the full-throated daffodils
> — Call resurrection from the ground
> And bid the year be bold.

*From Feathers to Iron* exposes albeit at an impersonal level and in an implicit manner, the phase of life which marks his transition from immaturity to maturity, just as *The Buried Day* records the same phase of life at a personal level and in a more explicit manner. The fact of his having two sons makes him aware of his added responsibility. Mary and he were keen on giving them a good upbringing as far as their middle-class means allowed them, and also with the help of their "curiously-assorted smatterings of psychology" (*TBD 201*)

---

26 Ibid., p. 78.
that came their way. Moreover, C. Day Lewis was cautious of not repeating the same behavioural pattern that his father practised with him, resulting in a spoilt relationship between the two. At another level, From Feathers to Iron and The Buried Day represent the growing awareness on the part of the intellectuals of the day of the hopeless economic situation, with slump making itself felt, and of the search for a solution.

The chapters "Teaching Years" and "The Thirties: Musbury," also throw light on C. Day Lewis's "ceaseless debate" in the mind that occasioned his poetic work, The Magnetic Mountain. In both the chapters, the autobiographer speaks about the general temper of the period and how public events cast a shadow on personal problems; for instance, he speaks of how he felt when his job was threatened and "how insecurity could fasten on the mind, setting up a corrosive anxiety." (TBD 206) He came to respect the working-class people all the more sincerely, those "who at this time of widespread unemployment risked victimisation for their political beliefs." (TBD 206) It was at this time that Lewis felt drawn to the Communist Party along with his like-minded friends - Spender, Auden, MacNeice, Rex Warner - who sought to tackle problems of their day. (TBD 209)

This constant pre-occupation with the private and public issues also forms the subject-matter of The Magnetic
Mountain. The work marks a period of transition. The magnetic mountain symbolizes a new land, promising happiness to the sick generation. The bountiful land that they are seeking is yet to be discovered where there is "a mine of metal," enough to make him rich. The speaker in the poem is bent upon finding the place with a host of friends:

"Then I'll hit the trail for that Promising land;
May catch up with Wystan and Rex my friend,
Go mad in good company, find a good country, Make a clean sweep or make a clean end." 28

C. Day Lewis, as seen in The Buried Day and also in The Magnetic Mountain, knew like other sensitive youngsters of his generation that the political situation was hopeless. Like a majority of his contemporaries he looks upon Communism as a solution to sweep aside the cobwebs of his age; he eagerly looked out for a healer, a savior as reflected in the lines:

"Know you seek a new world, a savior to establish Long-lost kinship and restore the blood's fulfilment." 29

The Magnetic Mountain is more a poem of escape because the poet is unable to specify clearly the destination the explorers are in quest of. The poet gives the impression that they are in search of a place which is free from the

27 Ibid., p.109.
28 Ibid., p.111.
29 Ibid., p.150.
want, decay and desire, tormenting them at present. In The Buried Day C. Day Lewis also refers to the same problems but with a difference. The reason perhaps lies in the fact that The Buried Day is a re-narration and hence a maturer vision has crystallized with the passage of time.

C. Day Lewis's The Buried Day reveals that during the years he wrote it, he was learning to take bolder steps when faced with the problem of choice. He had, for instance, during this time almost taken a decision as to whether his married life came first or his devotion to politics as a member of the Communist Party. Again, he had to make his choice, whether he should remain true to himself as a writer or to his role as a political activist. This apparently was a sign of maturity, and an examination of A Time To Dance (1935) shows that it is a work marked by the same quality. Though the poem was intended to be a "last tribute to Lionel Hedges," (TBD 216) his friend, the poem hardly has an elegiac tone. Far from it, it ushers in spring, a new life. C. Day Lewis so wishes to keep alive the enthusiastic spirit of his friend who is no more. Two poems in A Time To Dance, viz., "The Conflict" and "In Me Two Worlds" are political poems as he asserts in his autobiography. He observes about these poems that "though they end with a confident statement of the choice made, are ... of the divided mind." (TBD 213)

C. Day Lewis's political leanings are laid bare in
The Buried Day, and these are also the subject-matter of Noah and the Waters (1936). In this verse play, the problems faced by Noah are very much those of the "creator" of Noah. In his autobiography, Lewis is faced with the problem of choosing between the two camps - the bourgeois or the poorer class. He finds it difficult to make up his mind as to which side to take. Like most of his companion-writers, he chose to join the Communist Party, and sought to resolve the issue, but like most of them, he ultimately broke away from the party. C.Day Lewis cites the Communist manifesto to preface Noah and the Waters and it also serves as a formula to understand the verse play. Noah's hopes, choice, disappointment - all speak of the writer's disturbed state of mind when he wrote it. Noah is afforded two voices in the political parable - one representing the bourgeois (Burgesses in the play) and the other wanting to break away from the class (Flood). The work takes the form of a morality play, and the morality that the characters preach is not the ethics of the medieval ages, but belongs very much to the modern period. In the poetic drama, the

30 A version of the Communist Manifesto prefaces Noah & the Waters. It is as follows: "Finally, when the class war is about to be fought to a finish, disintegration of the ruling class and the old order of society becomes so active, so acute, that a small part of the ruling class breaks away to make common cause with the revolutionary class, the class which holds the future in its hands..." (London: The Hogarth Press, 1936). See Preface.
first Burgess threatens the workers of dire consequences if they do not comply with his orders, but they are not carried away by tall promises, for they ring hollow. One of the Burgesses threatens them:

"There is only one thing you waters understand and that is the whip ... we shall call in Waters from abroad: they will roll you up and drive you away to chaos." 31

But the Flood knows too well the consequences of submitting to the ruling class:

"No! Your profit is our loss, Your life is our death." 32

Noah does make his choice in the end but it is not made abruptly. It comes gradually "like anaesthetic drops." 33

Noah who represents the modern man resembles very much the Biblical Noah, a chosen savior of the people who actually makes no choice but performs the task assigned to him.

Keeping in mind the political parable and the views of the hero offered therein, one finds that the autobiographer's political views hardly seem to have changed when he returns to the same subject in a different form and after a lapse of about more than two decades.

Towards the end of Lewis's autobiography, in the

32 Ibid., p. 35.
33 Ibid., p. 48.
section "The Postscript," the narrative takes almost an unexpected turn. The author of *The Buried Day* has at last learnt to ignore the "clash of irreconcilables" and to take things in a realistic manner. This change of attitude becomes possible because of the maturity he has attained. To think of C. Day Lewis's poetry in this regard, *An Italian Visit* (1953), is a later work throwing light on his poetic maturity. The work is chiefly a book of travel. The experiences of the three travellers, Tom, Dick and Harry, are the poet's own. In the course of their travels, the travellers have learnt to accept reality, of course in their own individual manner. Clifford Dyment has a word of praise for the poem, referring specially to the poetic growth of C. Day Lewis in comparison to his earlier works, when he remarks: "... in mood it turns away from the old austere ... spirit to an acceptance of a more genial way of life..." The *Buried Day* gives us the same impression of the autobiographer who has now learnt to accept reality like the three characters in *An Italian Visit*; he too like the three travellers appears "sobered," "enriched" and "lightened" in the later part of the autobiography.

While taking C. Day Lewis's autobiography in relation

---

34 Clifford Dyment, "Writers And Their Work: No.62," p.36.
to his poems, one cannot but notice that in both the forms
of writing, the writer shows signs of gaining maturity, and
he emerges as a person who has learnt to live a relaxed and
tension-free life. The Gate, the volume of poems which
appeared in 1962, two years after he wrote his autobiography,
moves with the same leisurely pace as the end of the
self-narration, where he poses as a leisurely thinker,
sitting back to recollect events of the past; for instance,
the poem "Getting Warm - Getting Cold" is composed in
remembrance of the childhood days of his son and daughter.
"The Newborn" composed during the period which also marked
the birth of his second son, reminds one of his earlier work
From Feathers to Iron. "The Requiem for Living" throws light
on his own yearning for solitude expressed earlier in
The Buried Day and also in The Lyric Impulse (1965). 36

Both in The Buried Day and in his poems, C. Day Lewis
is preoccupied with the problem of striking a proper balance
between his private and public selves. C. Day Lewis, it
appears, finally attains his aim - the single-mind he is in
pursuit of, or the self that is no more a split one. A close
examination of The Buried Day in juxtaposition with his
poetry reveals that Lewis's autobiography is more than
"a record full of names, memories, attitudes spanning the

36 See C. Day Lewis's The Lyrical Impulse (London: Chatto
past forty years of troubled life in British soil and political history; it is also a quiet reticent work of art in its own right." 37

37 "From Iron To Feathers," TLS (13 May 1960), 297.