Chapter - One

INTRODUCTION

The cultural scenario of Britain after the second world war was chiefly characterized by the nationalization of art and the main task of the artists was to present the classless medium of common culture. The artists were called upon to describe the crippled condition of the nation with a view to bridging the gap between art and life. Cultural activities were regulated by various art associations like the Entertainments
National Service Association, and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. The BBC became the chief spokesman of the nation during the war years in order to glorify the non-political, natural, culturally open stance of Britain. It widened its range of programmes to include not simply high ‘culture’ but a much larger range of ‘light’ entertainment also.

After the second world war the cultural activists of Britain narrowed down their subject around London and to those provinces and regions which had remained on the periphery. The questions of control and creativity and censorship and permissiveness were for the time-being set aside. They threw away the garb of morality and forgot to think for the enrichment of the world. They received support and patronage from the government also because it thought that they could preserve the typical British attitudes and values which were threatened to be submerged by the growing popularity of foreign films.

The cultural activities in the fifties and sixties reflected the mood of change very clearly. Older values of life, mainly the legacy of the Victorian morality, were slowly giving way to a new frankness and boldness in cultural and aesthetic spheres. In literature specifically, the trend was towards avoiding any systematic account of ideas and beliefs. Novelists, dramatists and poets refused to preach; they were satisfied if they had succeeded in describing the details of their particular moods or fancies without bothering too much whether their descriptions conformed to conventional moral values and taboos. Writers enjoyed deflating the conventional values either through open
ridicule and satire or by shutting their eyes to them. The fifties, says a sociologist, “brought to a wider public awareness the ‘Movement’ of ‘Angry Young Men’. Novelists, poets, and dramatists evoked a mood, rather than proffered a programme or a consistent philosophy. It was a combative, irreverent, definant, edgy and ironic mood.”¹ It will not be amiss at this point to give a brief account of how the new mood was reflected in the literature of the period. Britain had lost much in the war, though military victory was on its side. There emerged a new national mood which showed an inclination towards stability and peace rather than adventure and strife. The writers looked back to the eighteenth century as a period when writers had concentrated their creative attention on their contemporary society and consequently English literature had achieved a peculiar English flavour. F.R. Leavis had become a spokesman of this Englishness during the forties and fifties and his advocacy for Englishness had its impact on the Movement writers.

These writers achieved the virtue of late-eighteenth century poetry, in particular of Denham, Pope, Johnson, Goldsmith, Thomas Gray and Cowper which is acknowledged by Donald Davie in his “Homage to William Cowper”.

A pasticheur of late Augustan styles,
I too have sung the sofa and the hare,
made nightmare ride, upon a private air
And hearths, extinguished, send a child for miles.²

The group shared “a common tone, suspicion of the large historical gestures, a belief that the intellect and the moral judgement must play a decisive part in
the shaping of a poem.” They were in their conscious reaction against elusive and obscure poetic style popularized by the modernists and returned to common sense and the qualities of restraint, regularity, discipline, intelligibility, perspicuity and economy of effect in poetry. They had a narrow attitude towards reality which resulted into a new provincialism, and which has been common refrain in the criticism of Movement poetry and fiction.

The modernists like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence were exiles, literally in fact, and their writings reflect their sense of isolation and their desire to strike roots or at least seek inspiration from cultures not their own. The period was remarkable for internationalism in every sphere of life. Political barriers were collapsing and a new era of trans-cultural and political organisation was rapidly emerging. The writer could not be immune to what was happening around himself. He was ready to give up his narrow political or cultural outlook and willing to experiment in exotic and alien ideas. The inter-war years were a period of new creative adventurism. Insularity in the name of compactness was given up in favour of complexity ensuing from the cultural mosaic that was a work of art. The Waste Land is the finest example of this complex, exploratory temper. Eliot had deliberately uprooted himself from America. So had Pound and earlier Henry James. They were all opposed to the current opinions in politics as well as literature. Eliot was royalist at a time when democratic socialism was in the air. Pound and Yeats were attracted to fascism. D.H. Lawrence rejected the entire European culture of the twentieth century as emaciated and sterile and pleaded for the
religion of the blood. All these writers had been witness to the collapse of traditional values and beliefs and had realized that immersion in the uncreating chaos was the only remedy to the spiritual and moral malaise that had stricken European civilization.

The Movement poets, on the other hand, deliberately cultivated ‘Englandism’, ‘provincialism’, ‘regionalism’, ‘Londonism’, etc. When Larkin was asked if he read foreign poetry, he replied in the negative. John Press defined provincialism in this way:

“The provincial poet, in my sense of the term, is one who is primarily concerned with the values of his own cultural society, and who is largely indifferent to what lies beyond the world that he knows at first hand.”

Philip Larkin’s poetry was described as provincial poetry because of his deep love for dear old, bloody old England, he distrusted symbolism because it was the root cause of obscurity in arts and literature. Amis also pleaded for the same. He observed that “I used to be lumped into the Movement of the 1950s. No doubt, I have or had, something in common with some other poets lumped into.”

Davis wrote so many articles against those earlier writers who defended cosmopolitanism and he propogated provincialism and insularity not only through his critical works but also through his poems. Perloof describes the basic difference between British and American poetry of the period in terms of the complete detachment between the poets and readers. Donald Davie writes “One is tempted to say that from many years
now British poetry and American poetry have not been on speaking terms. But the truth is rather that they have not been on hearing terms. The American readers can’t hear the British poet. Neither his rhythms nor his tone of voice, and, the British readers only pretend to hear the rhythms and the tone of American poets since Williams Carlos Williams.⁶

In his essay “England as Poetic Subject”, Donald Davie defended English culture and civilization as the poetic subject. He admired heroic insularity of Philip Larkin. According to him “contemporary England is indeed a rich field of poetic subject.”⁷ He expressed the opinion that contemporary conditions for the poetic subject were different from those of the past. He says:

“This is the poet who wants to see his writing not any longer as a historical, an ethical or a social activity but a metaphysical and ultimately, yes, a religious activity. What he wants to write are poems that express and nourish elation.”⁸

The modernist poets were called isolationists due to their unattached relationship with their readers. Not only poets but novelists, dramatists and critics also did not care for their readers. In The Hidden God Clenath Brooks wrote:

“Eliot’s World is not a beautiful world. It is in large part an urban world where one hears ‘Rattling plates in basement kitchen’s where with morning hands raise’ dingy shades/In a Thousand furnished rooms” where the winter evening settles down/with smell of steaks of witherd leaves about your feet/And newspapers from vacant lots.”⁹

It is a world that is not only bored but neurasthenic.
In contrast to this modernist trend Movement poets feel a close attachment to their readers. Almost all the poets preferred ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ of the Modernists and ‘they’ of the sociological approach of the poets of the thirties. They always kept in mind their audience in their dramas and the characters in their novels belong to the common people.

Obscurity, in content as well as form is another eminent characteristics of the modernist poets. This was defended in the name of ‘wit’ by Eliot, ‘irony’ by Richards, ‘ambiguity’ by Empson and ‘intelligence’ by Leavis. They all championed the mythical method which was a euphemism for complexity and obscurity. Davie finds a common ground between Eliot, Pound and Yeats because all of them were very fond of using mythological sources. Sometimes, when no traditional mythology was available they invented private mythologies in order to express their responses in a complex poetic style.

Davie preferred Ezra Pound among all the great poets of the Modernist poetry because he alone among the modernists was capable of using a simple style even for complex emotional and intellectual situations. According to Davie “the enthusiasts for presentation, for embodiment, have been ill-advised in ignoring the part that authentic syntax can play in bringing about all that they hope for, by miming a movement of the mind or of fate.”\textsuperscript{10} Bernard Bergonzi has noted the changes in the poetic style of the Movement poets and related these changes to the contemporary national temper:

“The Movement poets wrote their poems on simple subject and in straight-forward manner, their ordinariness is due to the loss of
empire, the abandonment of nuclear arms, seuz, the consequences of 1944 Education act, the creation of National Health Service, the political tedium induced by large and growing similarities between the two major poetries.”

The Movement poets narrowed their poetic field and consequently, their poetry became simple as well as straightforward. They also rejected the principle of tradition as the guiding principle of poetic sensibility. Philip Larkin has said “A poet’s only guide is his own judgement.” Special targets for their attack are the celebrated modernist texts such as Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Pound’s *Cantos* and Yeats’ *The Tower*. Amis called for poetry as “free from the grime of history”. Neo-romantics made on excessive use of Christian and Biblical myths which was repudiated by the Movement poets.

The Movement poets believed that “Modernism had been near destruction of an English poetic tradition”. But fortunately Thomas Hardy came into light to show the right path for the coming generation. Davie says that the charge of insularity against the Movement poets was related to their open rejection of Modernist poets. They championed Thomas Hardy and the war poets like Wilfred Owen because while encountering the tragic predicament of humanity they had not sacrificed the qualities of simplicity and transparency in their verse. The Movement poets discovered a deep spiritual affinity not only with Hardy and Owen but also with the poets of the eighteenth century who had clung steadfastly to rationalism and commonsense and had deep respect for syntax and linguistic order.
The Movement poets were critical of the modernist poetic tradition because of its neglect of the qualities of unity and order in poetry. The modernists showed preference for free verse and composed their major poetical works in it. They justified their choice of free verse in the name of the chaos and complexity of contemporary civilization. The Movement poets admired the ordered syntax and rational outlook of the Augustans. Amis talked about the desire to be lucid if nothing else, and a liking for strict and fairly simple verse form. In Articulate Energy Davie said:

“Systems of syntax are part of the heritable property of past civilization, and to hold firm to them is to be traditional in the best and most important sense.”

Most modernist writers had embraced religious orthodoxy in order to escape from the disappointments and defeats of contemporary civilization. They turned to Roman Catholicism because they believed that most of the evil that afflicted Western civilization had come with the beginning of Protestantism during the Renaissance. The distance between the modernists and the Movement poets in their attitude to orthodox christianity can be seen in Philip Larkin’s “Church Going” which was published in The Spectator on 18 November, 1955; and which Conquest included in his New Lines. It is the representative of the Movement group regarding their attitude towards religion and social identity. Larkin is of the opinion that there is no sense of an after-life. His ‘Next, Please’ suggests that ‘in the wake of death no water breed or break’. In the ‘Huge Artifican’ Amis considers God as a novelist. It does not mean that they did not talk about
Christianity or God, but they did not look upon them as saviours of mankind in moments of crisis.

When there is no worthwhile received tradition, there is born a mood of cynicism among writers. A similar situation confronted the Movement poets. They could not write about social or political ideals because they distrusted all kinds of idealism. The movement poets were conscious of the reality of contemporary Britain and they as poets did try to share their awareness with their readers. Didacticism, melancholy and a kind of satiric reductionism were used for this purpose.

The Movement poets were also aware that modernist poets had laid great store by technique and as a result of over-emphasis on technique, linguistic and syntactical monstrosities which obstructed communication were looked upon as signs of bold experimentalism. This experimental poetry left the Movement poets cold. Larkin has confessed:

“I would say that I have been most influenced by the poetry that I have enjoyed—and this poetry has not been Eliot or Pound or anybody who is normally regarded as modern—which is a sort of technique word, isn’t he? The poetry I have enjoyed has been the kind of poetry you would associate with me. Hardy—preeminently, Wilfred Owen, Auden, Christina Rossetti, William Barnes; on the whole people to whom technique seems to matter less than content, people who accept the forms they have inherited but use them to express their own content.”

The poetry of the thirties had also reacted against the complexity and obscurity of modernist poets and asserted that they had no time to be difficult or
experimental. They had lambasted Eliot and other modernists and had championed poets like Owen, Houseman and Edward Thomas. Geoffery Thurley says:

“Though Auden was a marxist but his early marxism was guided by less political and social than personal and moral factors. Thus we find in Auden’s social poetry a varient of the ironical theme class guilt is bested forth by means of irony and a consistent self qualification.....”

W.H. Auden made a clear cut difference between the individual and society:

...... the difference between the individual and society is no slight, since both are so insignificant, that the latter ceases to appear as a middle God with absolute rights, but rather as an equal subjects.”

The poets of the thirties were characteristically antimodernist, realistic, readerly and metonymic.

Auden too, cast an obvious shadow on the Movement and Robert conquest is right when he says:

“Who can escape that large and rational talent? But in his case, it mainly a matter of technical inference. There is little of the Auden tendency to turn abstractions into beings in their own right.”

On the whole we come on this conclusion that the Movement poets were against the political idealism of the thirties but they did admire their effort to distance themselves from the modernists. F.W. Bateson admires the Movement poets because they were very much conscious about their ancestors’ mistakes. “I find Larkin and Davie immensely worth reading, not because their poems are better than Auden’s or Empson’s
but because they have had the intelligence to learn from their elder’s occasional mistakes.\textsuperscript{21}

The reactionary mood of the Movement poets is not confined only to the Modernists and the poets of the thirties. They expressed similar attitude towards the poets of the forties also. The poets of the forties gave an uninhibited expression to their emotion without bothering whether these emotions were in good taste and whether they would appeal to the reading public. Nothing was forbidden for them in subject matter and in syntax. They wrote with uncontrolled bardic energy and the best poet of the forties, Dylan Thomas, was castigated by the spokesmen of the Movement. Robert Conquest attacked Dylan Thomas and other poets of the time and declared that these poets “were encouraged to regard their task simply as one of making an arrangement of image of sex and violence tapped straight from the unconscious (a sort of upper-middle brow equivalent of the horror-comic), or to evoke without comment the naivetés and nostalgias of childhood. C.B. Cox who quotes these words of conquest goes on to observe that the Movement poets were not interested in a new language which could satisfactorily express the turbulence of their psyche or the bewildering and complex nature of the social experience. The Movement poets were extremely warry of poetry as an inspired and frenzied utterance which frightened the readers into meek submission by its sheer primitive energy. For them poets were just like civilized and cultured neighbours who spoke with wit and perspictivity. Referring to Davie’s book \textit{Articulate Energy} published
in 1955 only two years after Thomas’s death Cox rightly says that the Movement poets were in reaction against every kind of excess whether of emotion or expression:

In his brilliant book *Articulate Energy* (1955), Donald Davie accused Thomas of indulging in “pseudo-syntax”, abandoning the task of articulation so that the objects to which he refers, tumbled pellmell together, can no longer be identified.... Davie placed Thomas among those modern poets who fail because their work falls into isolated units. The sentences that seem to drive forward in time through their verbs do no such things, for the poems proceed by repetition rather than by the establishment of proper syntactical arrangements between beginning, middle, and end. For Davie, the abandonment of syntax testified to a failure of the poet’s nerve, ‘a loss of confidence in the intelligible structure of the conscious mind, and the validity of its activity.”

Cox gives a fair representation of the Movement attitude towards the poetry of the forties in general and Dylan Thomas in particular. Reviewing Thomas’ *Collected Poems* in the year of the poet’s death, John Wain, himself a no mean Movement poet and critic minces no words in his criticism. Admitting that Thomas was a “fine, bold, original and strong poet”, he points out that Thomas’ poetry suffer from two major drawbacks. The first is his limited subject matter which Wain sums up as childhood, the viscera and religion. The first is well handled. As for the second Wain regrets that Thomas “has added almost no good love poetry to the language, because he always seems to treat sexual love as an affair of glandular secretions and mingling fluids.....” About the theme of religion, Wain says that his poems on this subject are his worst: “he never succeeds in making me feel that he is doing more than thumbing a lift from them.” Thomas’ second
and his gravest, from the Movement point of view, flaw is “the suspicion... that his writing is ... quasi automatic.” Amplifying his point further Wain remarks:

It is perfectly possible to furnish even his wildest pieces with ‘meaning’ (i.e., a paraphrasable content or a set of alternative paraphrasable contents), but the growing doubt remains as to whether the writer really cared whether it meant anything precise or not."

The Movement poets felt that if the great fault of the poets of the thirties was that they effected an alliance between Marx and Freud, Thomas was guilty of the sacrilege of marrying the Old Testament and Freud, probably under the influence of D.H. Lawrence.

F.W. Bateson and Kingsley Amis in “Anti-Romantics” and “Against Romanticism” respectively attacked the neo-romantic poetry lambasting the poets for their lack of artistic control over their material and their failure to convey a precise and intelligible meaning through their poems. The neo-romantics anti-intellectualism was singled out for pointed repudiation and they were accused of creating ‘nice noise’ in the name of melodiousness. The followers of Thomas used his work as an excuse “to kiss all meaning good bye. All that mattered was that the verse should sound impressive.”

Typical Movement poetry represses and ridicules sentimentality and feeling which formed the major substratum of the bulk of neo-romantic poetry. Movement poetry is a “model of restraint; the tightness of its form enacts the speakers’ evocain of controlled meaning. In place of welsh howl comes English stiff upper lip. They reacted against what Harold Blooth said ‘clear imaginative space for themselves.’
The treatment of childhood is another typical point of contrast between the neo-romantics and the Movement poets. Larkin’s “I Remember, I Remember’ revises Thomas’ ‘Fern Hill’. Here Larking disassociated himself from any kind of sentimental treatment of childhood. Davie also felt the necessity of this revision and wrote “A Baptist childhood” in which he rejected Thomas’ joyful and heedless ways and said “when some were happy as the grass was green I was as happy as a glass was dark.”

The long sentences of Thomas in his “Fern Hill” such as “All the sun long it was running it was lonely, the hay Fields high as the house, the tunes from chimneys, it was air/And playing, lonely and waterly can be contrasted with Larkin’s “I Remember, I Remember’ which is controlled, simple, straightforward and portrays child in a clear, transparent and intelligible style:

Our garden, first: where I did not invent Blinding theories of flowers and fruits And was’not spoken to by an old hat And here we have that splendid family I never ran to when I got depressed, The boys all biceps and the girls all chest.

They not only reacted against Dylan Thomas but also against W.R. Rodgers, Edith Sitwell and a group of poets known as Neo-Apocalypse and their Freudian obsessions. Amis wrote in a review: “Thinking is a notoriously difficult exercise, and there are always indicements to giving it up as soon as convenient.” The neo-romantics laid emphasis on the importance of the subconscious mind. This stance was rejected by the Movement poets who emphasized the role of the conscious mind
which works through reason and argument and respects order and restraint in human utterance.

As against the neo-romantic predilection for energy and frenzy, the Movement poets laid considerable stress on controlled syntax and meaningfulness. John Wain’s “Eight Types of Ambiguity” is another typical poem attacking the neo-romantics not because of their choice of subject, but because of their handling of that subject. He treats of the evanescent emotional experience, love, and tries to subject it to a dispassionate and witty treatment and disassociates it from the vagueness and illogicality’ of poets like Dylan Thomas and W.R. Rodger’.30

Another major contrasting theme is nature which we find in Wain’s ‘Reason for not writing Orthodox nature poetry’ Amis’ ‘Here is Where’, Davies’ ‘Oak opening’, Enright’s ‘Nature poetry’ and Conquest’s’ ‘Authorer’. Here in these poems nature is seen not as an autonomous organism but as something which spread out before man for his observation and pleasure.

Thus, Movement poetry, by distancing itself from the major poetic movements of the twentieth century which is regarded only as various extensions of the early nineteenth century romanticism, constructed for itself a new poetics.

This new poetics had hardly anything new in the strict sense of the word. Its newness lay in the fact that certain poetic methods and modes which bad fallen into oblivian after the Romantic movement were revived. The revival itself was not merely for the sake of revival. There was an urgent necessity, so the Movement poets thought of
rehabilitating those methods and modes because only by doing so English poetry could catch the rhythms of life of the post-second world war England. Much had to be ridiculed in the contemporary life and by ridiculing the surviving vestiges of romanticism English poetry could recover its lost tradition, the tradition which looked upon poets not as singers in isolation but as architects and builders of the national culture.

References


8. Ibid., p. 123.


23. Ibid., p. 11.


