CHAPTER VI

Poets on the Fringe: MacNeice and Others

Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis apart, there were in the thirties, many other sensitive voices on the fringe who felt that they had a personal responsibility for the victims of an unjust world. Acutely ill at ease at the sordid conditions then obtaining for the average man, these poets sought to arouse an awareness among the masses to improve their lot. A brief survey of their poetry reveals the kinship of most of them with the 'Auden Group' of poets in this regard, the difference of emphasis being only a matter of degree. Their poetry also reflects their indignation at the social and moral evil of the time, despair and sadness at the stagnant state of affairs of the suffering masses, fear and anxiety arising from the horrors of violence and war, and through it all, moments of hope for a better future. Foremost among the fringe-dwellers is Louis MacNeice (1907-1963), in whom one hears the voice of a keen pitiless critic of England of that decade. It deserves to be mentioned here that it was MacNeice alone among the 'MacSpaunDay' group of poets, who did not jump into the communist bandwagon.

MacNeice's poetry of the thirties reflects various notes of self-criticism, shock, pessimism, objectivity, and realism as illustrated by the passages quoted later in this chapter. There is no propagandist element, but expression of feelings and emotions, deeply
experienced. His poetry reflects a conscious and coherent attitude to life, a sincere concern for a world in crisis. It further reflects a self-assurance, which drives him to analyse modern life without allowing himself to be duped into believing in a utopian future.

Like all other socially conscious poets of the time, MacNeice also regarded the capitalist society in Britain as ineffectual and despicable, and considered the rise of Nazism as the most frightful event. However, unlike them, he cannot be considered to be an out-and-out orthodox left-wing poet. It is noteworthy that Michael Roberts did not include him in his two anthologies. The following remark of Walter Allen from the Introduction to MacNeice's Modern Poetry - A Personal Essay deserves consideration at this point:

... Macneice was left in a general way but he was certainly anything but a communist. What was immediately obvious in his verse, in contrast with the committed exuberance of Auden and Day Lewis and the fervour of Spender, were doubts and reservations. When one read his 'The Individualist Speaks' with its last line, 'But I will escape with my dog, on the far side of the Fair', it was difficult not to read into it a repudiation of all mass movements, whether of the Left or of the Right.¹

It is this very book which represents MacNeice's most important body of literary criticism, so essential for us to come to an understanding of his attitude and his poetry. The very first sentence of the Preface reveals the poet's commitment:

This book is a plea for impure poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him.²

He then observes that as an entertainer, the poet is tempted into
'escape poetry', and that as critic, he is likely to become so committed to a particular line of thought that his verse becomes propaganda. Hence he maintained,

Poetry ... should steer a middle course between pure entertainment('escape poetry') and propaganda ... The writer today should not be so much the mouthpiece of a community, (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct. In a world intransigent and over-specialized, falsified by practical necessities, the poet must maintain his elasticity and refuse to tell lies to order. Others can tell lies more efficiently; no one except the poet can give us poetic truth.3

In his autobiography, The Strings are False(1965), there appear a few illuminating passages which indicate his own stance in relation to communism. Two passages of considerable relevance are:

a) The strongest appeal of the Communist Party was that it demanded sacrifice; you had to sink your ego. At the moment there seemed to be a confusion between the state and the idolization of the state; but that was all right, it is written: 'the state shall wither away.' Young men were swallowing Marx with the same naive enthusiasm that made Shelley swallow Rousseau.

I had a certain hankering to sink my ego, but I was repelled by the priggishness of the Comrades and suspected that their positive programme was vitiated by wishful thinking and oversimplification. I joined them, however, in their hatred of the status quo, I (emphasis added)

b) While there were many motives driving the intelligentsia towards the C.P., there was one great paradox nearly always present: Intellectuals turned to Communism as an escape from materialism. Materialism, that is, in the popular sense - that materialism which in more easy and archaic pockets of the country bolsters up the physical comfort of individuals and which, in places where people think, had for so long acknowledged the prin-
ciple of enlightened self-interest, of mere utilitarianism, as man's only ideal in a mechanistic universe. Marx, too, postulated (and aggressively) a mechanistic universe, but with the aid of the dialectic he stood it on its head, brought back taleology ... Marx was to the poets of the thirties what Rousseau was to the poets of the Romantic Revival. This in spite of Marx's own warning against the romantic revolutionary.  

MacNeice's poetry of the thirties projects a clear image of a man of common sense and cynicism towards modern society. Having no faith in the communistic creed of Auden and others of the early thirties, he thus addresses a communist:

Your thoughts make shape like snow; in one night only
The gawky earth grows breasts,
Snow's unity engrosses
Particular pettiness of stones and grasses.

('To a Communist')

He openly dissociates himself from those who proclaim the millenium, and passes his dictates:

Consult the barometer--
This poise is perfect but maintained
For one day only.

But he himself has no solution. What pervades his answers is a vague cynicism:

For we are obsolete who like the lesser things
Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads;
It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia
Or any other tunnel where the world recedes,
Or turn blind wantons like the gulls who scream
And rip the edge off any ideal or dream. (emphasis added)

('Turf Stacks')
Deeply disturbed by the socio-political instability of the time, MacNeice was overwhelmed by a sickening helplessness at the lack of concrete steps to preserve the liberties of Europe. His 'Eclogue from Iceland' sounds the self-pitying voice of an impoverished Europe:

Things are bad, there is no room
To move at ease, to stretch or breed—

Referring to Ireland, the poet says that it is a nation

Built upon violence and morose vendettas
The diehard countrymen like dray horses
Drag their ruin behind them.
Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking
Their greed is sugared with pretence of public spirit.

Europe as a whole is caught up in a frenzied wave of self-indulgence and a universal death-wish. The only saving grace is in those who dare go their own way, without selling their pride for physical comfort.

In 'An Eclogue for Christmas', the poet, assuming a double rural-urban personality (A-B), points with sarcasm to an unhealthy world of non-essential sweets:

The jaded calender revolves,
Its nuts need oil, carbon chokes the valves,
The excess sugar of a diabetic culture (emphasis Rotting the nerve of life and literature. added)

A - the urban side of the poet - complains that his cry for identity has been drowned by "years of drums and Hawaiian guitar" and that like modern art, his life has become abstracted:

I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century,
Posed by Picasso beside an endless opaque sea,
Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets,
Tentative pencillings, endless liabilities, no assets, Abstractions scalpelled with a palette-knife (emphasis Without reference to this particular life. added)

The only certainty is that of an end when the "Goths" will again "come swarming down the hill", and when all the trivia of contemporary culture will be razed. A thus expresses his apprehension of such a moment:

What will happen when the sniggering machine-guns in the hands of the young men Are trained on every flat and club and beauty parlour and Father's den?

B exposes the decadence of the countryside. The country gentry have turned alcoholic, ("Men who put beer into a belly that is dead") and women in tweeds who still try to hunt and farm, although

Greyness is on the fields and sunset like a line of pyres
Of barbarous heroes smoulders through the ancient air
Hazed with factory dust and, orange opposite, the moon's glare.
Goggling yokel-stubborn through the iron trees.

Cataloguing the sins of the middle class, B shows the decay of culture and the inherent triteness of modern life:

The country gentry cannot change, they will die in their shoes From angry circumstance and moral self-abuse, Dying with a paltry fizzle they will prove their lives to be An ever-diluted drug, a spiritual tautology. They cannot live once their idols are turned out, None of them can endure, for how could they, possibly, without The flotsam of private property, pekinese and polyanthus,
The good things which in the end turn to poison and pus.

This extract resembles much of the work of the other poets of the thirties, and is especially comparable with Day Lewis's criticism of social irresponsibility in The Magnetic Mountain:

Getters not begetters; gainers not beginners;
Whiners, no winners, no triers, betrayers;
Who steer by no star, whose moon means nothing.

Daily denying, unable to dig:
At bay in villas from blood relations,
Counters of spoons and content with cushions
They pray for peace, they hand down disaster.

'An Eclogue for Christmas' ends with the return of A-B to London, after a rural attempt at escape, to be anaesthetized by

... saxophones and xylophones
And the cult of every technical excellence,
the miles of canvas in the galleries
And the canvas of the rich man's yacht snapping and tacking on the seas
And the perfection of a grilled steak--

'Bagpipe Music' expresses in a speedy and slangy manner the poet's sense of despair and disgust at the capitalist system of Britain:

It's no go the merrygoround it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crepe-de-chine,
their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison.

The poet satirizes modern men who do not care for Eastern spiritual disciplines or new world religions, ("It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky") but manage to get by with "a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi". The poem ends on a threatening note of doom:
It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

MacNeice was fully aware of an impending catastrophe that would destroy all that men valued. In 'The Sunlight on the Garden', there lurks, beneath the surface lyrical grace, the poet's private fears which soon give rise to a blatant ominous note of approaching doom:

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels, upon it,
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying
Defying the church bells
And every evil iron
Siren and what it tells:
The earth compels,
We are dying, Egypt, dying.

John Press's observation on the poem deserves attention:

Many of MacNeice's typical images and themes are here: the sinister ringing of church bells, the noise of sirens, which may be a reference to air-raid warnings but almost certainly is a reminiscence of the fog-horns calling from Belfast Lough: the premonition of political disaster; the savouring of transitory happiness, all the sweeter because it passes so quickly, the ingenuity of the rhyming scheme, the verbal dexterity, the rhythmical assurance, even in the allusion to Anthony and Cleopatra, all play their part in making this poem a memorable expression of MacNeice's complex, ironic view of himself and of the world in the shadow of approaching war.

This sense of foreboding of an impending disaster is a prominent
feature in MacNeice's poetry, and it is this aspect of his poetry that generally differentiates him from the overtly committed poets. His poems are pervaded with a sense of doubt and pessimism, sometimes sounding almost despairing:

We shall go down like palaeolithic man
Before some new Ice Age or Genghis Khan.

('An Eclogue for Christmas')

A few of the poems of Auden and Day Lewis also strike a MacNeice-like note of threat and fear. Day Lewis's *Overtures to Death and Other Poems*, already cited, is an example. In MacNeice's 'Morning Sun', the theme of doom is presented through the picture of the transformation of the radiant splashing of the fountain in the square to ghastly dust grey powder:

... the street fountain blown across the square
Rainbow trellises the air and sunlight blazons
The red butcher's and scrolls of fish on marble slabs,
Whistled bars of music crossing silver sprays
And horns of cars, touche', touche', rapiers' retort, a moving cage,
A turning page of shine and sound, the day's maze.

But when the sun goes out, the streets go cold, the hanging meat And tiers of fish are colourless and merely dead,
And the hoots of cars neurotically repeat and the tiptoed feet Of women hurry and falter whose faces are dead;
And I see in the air but not belonging there
The blown grey powder of the fountain grey
as the ash
That forming on a cigarette covers the red.
'Perseus' is pervaded with a sinister atmosphere of the living dead. The poet seems to lay down the thesis that the living are not really too distant from the long dead:

> Close your eyes,
> There are suns beneath your lids,
> Or looking in the looking-glass in the end room--
> You will find it full of eyes,
> The ancient smiles of men cut out with scissors and kept in mirrors.

Eventually, the swinging of the Gorgon's head leads to the stony death of everything living:

> Ever to meet me comes, in sun or dull,
> The gay hero swinging the Gorgon's head
> And I am left, with the dull drumming of the sun, suspended and dead,
> Or the dumb grey-brown of the day is a leper's cloth,
> And one feels the earth going round and round the globe of the blackening mantle, a mad moth.

The picture of an empty earth spinning like a mad moth around a "blackening" sun, is reminiscent of Eliot's 'Prelude' where the meaninglessness of modern life is presented through the picture of the "worlds" going round and round in a routine manner:

> The worlds revolve like ancient women
> Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

'Wolves' strikes a sad and despairing note through the flimsy efforts of the people to build a barrier against the enemies of freedom. All that can be done is to

> ... form a circle
> Join hands and make believe that joined
> Hands will keep away the wolves of water
> Who howl along our coast

and to blot out temporarily the howls with "talk and laughter".
In his short poem, 'Aubade', MacNeice's youthful dreams of an enlightened and happy world end in his realization of...

... a precise dawn
Of sallow and grey bricks; and newsboys crying war.

'Spring Voices' signals a warning that, behind all the joys of the season, are shady memories breathing down one's neck as a reminder of past dangers. The poet thus warns the people:

Keep the wind out, cast no clout, try no unwarrented jaunts untried before, But let the spring slide by nor think to board its car For it rides West to where the tangles of scrap-iron are; Do not walk, these voices say, between the buckling clouds alone Or you may loiter into a suddenly howling crater, or fall, jerked back, garrotted by the sun.

This poem compares well with Auden's 'The Witnesses' Part III, where a similar note of warning of danger lurking, is sounded:

... look! behind you without a sound The woods have come up and are standing round in deadly crescent.

The bolt is sliding in its groove, Outside the window is the black removers' van, And now with sudden swift emergence Come the women in dark glasses, the hump-backed surgeons and the scissor-man.

This may happen any day
So be careful what you say or do
Be clean, be tidy, oil the lock,
Trim the garden, wind the clock:
Remember the Two.  

In MacNeice's 'Ode', the threatening images come forward through
Unanalysed scent and noise, the fly on the pane,
The tulips banked on the glass-and-black hearse
A memory of a cock crowing in the dark like a curse
The remembered hypnotism of an aeroplane in June—

The buzzing of the fly on the pane is the augury of the coming of the bombers and hence of war and destruction.

In 'Homage to Cliches', MacNeice observes that a banal society harbours the danger of death. Behind the frivolous activities within a bar, the "gin and lime or a double scotch", there lies a hidden door leading up a belfry stair, where eight bells hang within a womb of stone. One may be deceived into believing that the chime of bells is the "final music". But ringers are getting ready to toll the bells rather than to chime. The poem ends on a note of grim finality:

Somewhere behind us stands a man, a counter
A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol
Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy
This whole delightful world of cliche and refrain—

MacNeice's awareness of the coming catastrophe prompted him to express his complex feelings in Autumn Journal (1938), a poem marked by a deep humane sense, as well as a note of merciless sarcasm directed at the so-called democratic and peace-loving West. He points out that there is no time now for queries as to whether "Cobb has bust the record", whether the "Australians have lost their last ten / Wickets" or about "Autumn fashions". For the situation is one of nightmarish reality:

... what we mean is Hodza, Henlein, Hitler.
The Maginot Line,
The heavy panic that cramps the lungs and
presses
The collar down the spine.
And when we go out into Piccadilly Circus
They are selling and buying the late
Special editions snatched and read abruptly
Beneath the electric signs as crude as Fate.
And the individual, powerless, has to exert
the
Powers of will and choice
And choose between enormous evils, either
Of which depends on somebody else's voice.

Such is the atmosphere of threat, fear, and uncertainty, that is
irresistably conjured up through evocative reference to everyday
matters shadowed by crisis:

To-day they were building in Oxford Street,
the mortar
Pleasant to smell.
But now it seems futility, imbecility,
To be building shops when nobody can tell
What will happen next. What will happen
We ask and waste the question on the air;
Nelson is stone and Johnnie Walker moves his
Legs like a cretin over Trafalgar Square.
And in the Corner House the carpet-sweepers
Advance between the tables after crumbs
Inexorably, like a tank battalion
In answer to the drums.
In Tottenham Court Road the tarts and negroes
Loiter beneath the lights
And the breeze gets colder as on so many other
September nights.

The poet sees the Munich Crisis of 1938 as something which the
people called upon themselves, thanks to their complacency towards
the rise of Hitler. He holds the policy of appeasement, pursued for
long by the British and French governments, responsible for this. As
such there is no use repenting, and there is no escape:

And at this hour of the day it is no good saying
'Take away this cup';
Having helped to fill it ourselves it is only
logic
That we should drink it up.
Nor can we hide our heads in the sands, the
sands have
Filtered away;
Nothing remains but rock at this hour, this
zero
Hour of the day.

Regarding Spain, the poet confesses in the same poem that on his
visit there, his attitude was that of a tourist who enjoyed the
trippers' sights, generally ignoring the sullen faces and the
threatening graffiti:

... the standard of living was low
But that, we thought to ourselves, was not
our business;
All that the tripper wants is the status quo
Cut and dried for trippers.
And we thought the papers a lark
With their party politics and blank in-

But he adds that later he recognised that no one in the world could
afford to ignore Spain, "That Spain would soon denote / [Their]
grief, [their] aspirations;" and that "... [their] blunt / Ideals
would find their whetstone, that [their] spirit / Would find its
frontier on the Spanish front, / Its body in a rag-tag army." The
poet is full of satirical dispraise for the people in general, in-
cluding himself, for taking a hypocritical stance under the grave
situation of the world:

But one—meaning I—is bored, am bored, the
issue
Involving principle but bound in fact
To squander principle in panic and self-
deception—

And we who have been brought up to think
of 'Gallant Belgium'
As so much blague
Are now preparing again to essay good
through evil
For the sake of Prague;
And must, we suppose, become uncritical,
vindictive,
And must, in order to beat
The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,
A howling radio for our paraclete.

He is critical of his former bourgeois attitude when he could think that,

... victory for one implies another's defeat,
That freedom means the power to order, and
that in order
To preserve the values dear to the elite
The elite must remain a few.

Expressing his desire for universal equality and justice, he says:

But the final cure is not in his past-dissecting fingers
But in the future of action, the will and fist
Of those who abjure the luxury of self-pity
And prefer to risk a movement without being sure
If movement would be better or worse in a hundred
Years or a thousand when their heart is pure.

He deprecates the complacent and those who shirk their duty, and is hopeful that, eventually, he will have the courage to pursue a belief in the equality of humanity. In a tone and manner like that of Day Lewis, he says:

None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives,
Are self deceivers, but the worst of all Deceits is to murmur 'Lord I am not worthy'
And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall. But may I cure that habit, look up and outwards
And may my feet follow my wider glance First no doubt to stumble, then to walk with the others
And in the end—with time and luck—to dance.

MacNeice's outspokenness on current affairs, coupled with a sense of deep sarcasm, is obvious in the following lines:

The sun may shine no doubt but how many people
Will see it with their eyes in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine?

And again in,

But once again
The crisis is put off and things look better
And we feel negotiation is not vain—
Save my skin and damn my conscience. (emphasis added)

Thus Autumn Journal is a record of the doubts and dissensions of a dark period, and is an exposure of the attitude of those who have lost their values by killing their conscience. However, on rare occasions, the poet's latent hope for a better world to come does not escape the reader's attention. The following is an instance of the poet's belief in the ultimate triumph of humanity:

Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice
Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
And while a man has voice
He may recover music.

He dreams and prays for

... a possible land
Not of sleep-walkers, not of angry puppets,
But where both heart and brain can understand

The movements of our fellows;

...

Where the waters of life are free of the ice-blockade of hunger
And thought is free as the sun,
Where the altars of sheer power and mere profit
Have fallen to disuse,
Where nobody sees the use
Of buying money and blood at the cost of
blood and money,
Where the individual, no longer squandered
In self-assertion, works with the rest,
endowed
With the split vision of a juggler and the
quick lock of a taxi,
Where the people are more than a crowd.

Thus it is that although MacNeice states explicitly his indecision to adopt a definite communistic stand, with regard to the political and social disturbances of the period, he was, nevertheless, profoundly affected by an awareness of an approaching catastrophe, for which there seemed to be no practical solution. A study of his poetry of the thirties in general, and Autumn Journal in particular, helps us arrive at the conclusion that, basically, MacNeice's shouldering of his share of responsibility lay in the criticism of his age, and in thus creating an awareness among the populace to strive to work for a better world, by maintaining the true values of life. We may conclude that MacNeice with the goodwill of the Liberal, has fought a lost battle against the tide of events of the time.

The element of fearful feeling about the future as evident in Louis MacNeice's poetry is also noticed in the poetry of Julian Bell (1906-1937). The title poem of his last volume, Work for the Winter (1936), compares well with MacNeice's 'Sunlight on the Garden'. The diction and the imagery of the poem are symbolic of the instruments of war, and the mood of the winter evening is evocative of the mood of pervasive despair. Compare, for instance, these lines:

But now take stronger tools
Axe, fire, plough
Metal sheathed in despairs, winter is fast
come on us ...

... for us only
Iron the sky
The bite of wind and frost
Flashing bite of the axe.®

The following lines from the poem titled 'Nonsense' also indicate the poet's apprehensions:

The banker turns his gold about
But that won't sell the rye.
Starve and grow cold without,
And ask the reason why
The guns are in the garden
The battle's in the sky.®

One of the most original poets of the decade who did not believe in the creed of Auden and his followers, is Sir William Empson (1906-1984). One has only to go through any of the stanzas of the poem 'Just a Smack at Auden' to see how he sneered at what he considered to be the romantic and idealistic notions of communism:

Shall we make a tale, boys, that things are
sure to mend,
Playing bluff and hale, boys, waiting for
the end?
It will be born stale, boys, stinking to
offend.
Dying ere it fail, boys, waiting for the end.10

This attitude of the poet, however, must not lead us to believe that the poet was unaware of the risks of the war looming large in the minds of all the people of the world. In 'Courage means Running', the poet observes that fear has become too deeply ingrained in man for him to escape from it:

To escape emotion(a common hope) and attain
Cold truth is essentially to get
Out by a rival emotion fear. We gain
Truth, to put it sanely, by gift of pleasure
And courage, but, since pleasure knits with pain, both presume fear.

Then, in a defeatist, though calm and ruminative mood, the poet regrets the failure of man to preserve traditional values and virtues:

As to be hurt is petty, and to be hard
Stupidity; as the economists raise
Bafflement to a boast we all take as guard;

As the wise patience of England is a gaze
Over the drop, the "high" policy means clinging;
There is not much else that we dare to praise.

These lines also indicate a sense of helpless acceptance by the poet of a situation that seemed to declare to him that his world was coming to an end.

This sense of loss and despondence can also be traced in the poem 'This Last Pain'. The poet is sad to find that nothing positive can be done for the "damned" and as such they should leave things to take their toll. In the notes to his Collected Poems(1955), Empson discovers the "idea of the poem" to be the capacity of human nature to "conceive divine states which it cannot attain". It is on this note of sarcasm regarding make-belief, combined with a feeling of despair, that the poem ends:

Feign then what's by a decent tact believed
And act that state is only so conceived,
And build an edifice of form.
For house where phantoms may keep warm.

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there,
And learn a style from a despair.

In 'Rolling the Lawn', the poet ironically connects the English bour-
geois fetish for flat lawns with "flat despair". One can no longer look for "daisies", and at best can only grope for its roots. Thus the poet concludes:

World, roll yourself, and bear your roller,
soul.
As martyrs gridirons, when God calls the roll.  

This crest-fallen mood, so discernible in Empson's poetry, brings to mind a similar mood as expressed in Spender's 'The Prisoners', where, as already cited, he expresses deep sympathy for men who cannot ever escape from a walled-in hostility.

John Lehmann (1907-1987) also voices in his poetry his fear of a catastrophe and his concern for the suffering of man. His poem 'The Young Girl to her Lover', reveals the poet's doubts as to whether the things he values will eventually withstand the horrors arising out of the socio-political instability. The girl is aware that escape into a world of romance is no answer to the glaring instances of inhumanity and suffering. For her "the words / Are hunger, and injustice and misrule", spelt for her lover, "like a rival's name".

Bernard Spenser (1909-1963) does not bring to light any public-school leftist leanings in his poetry of the thirties. Nevertheless, one does perceive the poet's sincere concern for the sufferings of man in an inhuman world. In 'Greek Excavations', he discovers among the pottery and the coins,

The minimum wish
For the permanence of the basic things of a life,
For children and friends and having enough to eat
And the great key of a skill;
The life the generals and the bankers cheat.  

George Barker(1913- ) portrays in his poetry the pathetic effect of the slumping economy of England. Having embodied all the aspects of a world in crisis, he projects the truly tragic essence in his poetry. In 'Summer Idyll' he portrays clearly, through an effective use of nature imagery, the state of the poverty-stricken lot:

... under the streams  
Winter lies coldly, and coldly embedded in  
The corn hunger lies germinally, want under  
The abundance, poverty pulling down  
The tautened boughs, and need is the seed.  

In 'Epistle I', Barker presents in the form of a dialogue with his ghost, another distressing report of the plight of the needy. In the penultimate stanza, we have the lines:

... I rose from  
The woe-womb of the want-raped mine,  
Empty hunger cracked with stomach's thunder.

The concluding lines of the poem present a generalization of the poet's own unenviable situation, and indicate an enlargement of his sympathy, for he writes:

... by being miserable for myself I began,  
And now am miserable for the mass of man.  

His 'News of the World II' is clearly symbolic of a world that has lost every sphere of peace:

In the first year of the last disgrace  
Peace, turning her face away,  
Coughing in laurelled fires, weeping,  
Drags out from her hatcheted heart  
The sunset axe of the day.

Similarly, in 'News of the World III', the poet reports of "the serried battalions of lies and organizations of hate".
John Cornford (1915-1936), in his poem 'Full Moon at Tierze:
Before the Storming of Huesca', fervently states his Republican symp-
pathies against the forces of fascism:

O understand before too late
Freedom was never held without a fight.

Freedom is an easily spoken word
But facts are stubborn things.
Here, too, in Spain
Stand by our guard in Huesca's plain
Swear that our dead fought not in vain.

...

Raise the red flag triumphantly
For communism and for liberty.22

Another poem, titled 'A Letter from Aragon', reveals an anarchist
worker's revulsion against war, which, the poet maintains, is waged
only by mean profiteers at the cost of humanity at large:

... 'Tell the workers of England
This was a war not of our own making,
We did not seek it.
But if ever the Fascists again rule Barcelona
It will be a heap of ruins with us workers
beneath it.' 23

'Landscape' by David Gascoyne (1916-), projects an alarming
image of fear of an impending war, confusion, and bewilderment. The
landscape is one of "crowds and flags" and "clouds like acrobats"
swinging "on an invisible trapeze". What follows is the inevitable
stamp of the

... histories of darkness on the wall,
While walls fall inwards, septic wounds
Burst open like sewn mouths, and rain
Eternally descends through planetary space.24

To the poet, there is no answer, no solution to such a spate of poli-
tical evil,
Only a dusty statue lifts and drops its hand.

Gascoyne's poem, 'The Sacred Hearth', dedicated to George Barker, reflects the sad predicament of the common man being caged in a hostile environment from which the poets of the time sought release:

A neighbour strangeness ever stands to home... where poet's art
Is how to whistle in the dark, where pockets all have holes,
All roofs for refugees have rents; we ought to know
That there can be for us no place quite alien and unknown,
No situation wholly hostile...

The poetry of Charles Madge (1912-) shows his concern for a transformation of the world for the benefit of the underprivileged classes. His expectation that a revolution will be the answer to the political and social ills, is expressed in 'Instructions', the penultimate stanza of which is indeed typically contemporary with the poet's mention of day to day things. The note of exultation is obvious:

Back of the streets and houses, back of all we had,
Back of our rooms, furniture, systems, words said,
The flow went on; we feel it now; the future was in our bones
And it springs out, bursts in drums, trumpets and saxophones.

On quite a different level, somewhat in the lines of Barker and Empson, Madge, in his poem titled 'Loss', points to the impoverishment the world over, and the sadness it entailed:

As in Vienna now, the wounded walls
Silently speak, as deep in Austria
The battered shape of man is without shade.

So, time in metaphor, tomorrow falls
On Europe, Asia, and America,
And houses vanish, even as they were made.

For yesterday is always sad, its nature
Darker than love would wish in every feature.²⁷

William Plomer (1903-1973) has written poems that are largely satirical and urbane. His poem titled 'The Caledonian Market' launches an attack on the middle-class bourgeois life-style of the thirties in a manner that brings to mind the best of Auden's satirical verse:

Where are the lads in their tight Norfolk jackets
Who roistered in pubs that stayed open all day?
Where are the girls in their much tighter corsets
And where the figures they loved to display?
Where the old maids in their bric-a-brac settings
With parlourmaids bringing their dinners and teas?
Where are their counterparts, idle old roues,
Sodden old bachelors living at ease?
Where the big families, big with possessions,
Their standards of living, their errors of taste? ²⁸

The voice of the thirties is also heard in the poems of Randall Swingler (1909- ). In 'Poem', he exhorts his comrades not to give in to despair because,

... already the lands live; where men
Spread forth their life like an orchard and
opening flower
Where the factories and the growing machines
Compact as coral, no longer devour their flesh and time--
There all we fight for, is already growing.²⁹

His 'Prelude to Revolution' which begins in a pure lyrical vein soon gives way to a political statement:
Vehement in their fear we saw the middle-
class withdraw
To patch up their old house, benignly dis-
regarding
The landslip near the garage and the empty
well
Discovered under the floor.
...
Plunging through those unheroic ruins, bugle
to lip,
Coarser we seem than once, uprooting the
dung hill,
Until by barest poetry unthinking we arrive
At true delight of the sun, the elemental
touch.30

His poem called 'The New World This Hour Begets', as suggested by
the title itself, is a rousing call for action:

We shall not know again
That gorgeous flush of love
...
'Till our free spirit, waking
To its discovery, spans
This vacuum of purpose
And changes the itching hand.

It is time the late bud broke,
The leaves of love uncurled,
To submerge the whimpering self
Amid the living world.

To ride the storm, go on
And let the dead lament,
Expand the trade-routes, settle
New regions of content.31

The poem titled 'In This Mid-Winter' by Sylvia Townsend Warner
(1893-1978) is a quiet and effective portrayal of the wasteland
created by the forces of war:

In this midwinter, shepherds, not a lamb possibly.
No green thing, green not even on winter coat church yard yews.
Air-borne, a poison gas let fall accidentally
On our uplands has blasted the penned pregnant ewes— 32

Her 'Red Front', as the name suggests, is indeed bold and shocking:

Comrade, are you cold enough,
Lean enough, bold enough ...
...
Can your cunning foot the swamp
Where you tread on the dead?—
Red! Red! 33

'Hymn' by Rex Warner (1905-1986) is an outburst against social inequities, much akin to that of Auden and Day Lewis. He warns the middle class of dire consequences if they do not step down from their bourgeois comforts. The youthful exuberance for a revolutionary change of order comes through in the refrain, as quoted in P.106,

Come then, companions, this is the spring of blood,
Heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good. 34

It is noticed again in the poem titled 'Light and Air', where, like Auden, he professes the death of the old order and the renewal of the new:

let us begin to imagine how life blows restless, resistless round our shuttered shacks.

Listen to bang of shutters, whistle in the iron of air aiming at lungs, running through rotten timbers,
rocking the roof, whistling a wintry air,
that we may make way for ruin and rebuild houses to welcome air, ready for the light of (emphasis spring.35 added)

In 'Chorus IV', he expresses the hope that a revolution will bring about some remarkable social changes in many spheres of life:

we shall listen to our own voices and shall
mind our business,
some leaders to command, others happy to lend a hand,
all able to enjoy women and the company of men,
not needing tarts (chirpie-girls) and beer as we needed them before
when without work we became hard and our beds were hired.

Lines as the above are certainly not uncommon in the poetry of the thirties.

'Animal Crackers in Your Croup' by Roger Roughton (1916-1941), goes a step further in visualizing the future on a utopian level:

TOMORROW REVOLT will be written in human hair
TOMORROW the hangman's rope will tie itself in a bow
TOMORROW virginia creeper will strangle the clergy
TOMORROW the witness will tickle the judge
TOMORROW this page will be found in a womb
TOMORROW the lovers will answer the palace
TOMORROW KARL MARX will descend in a fire-balloon

... 

TOMORROW a cloud will follow the bankers
TOMORROW a child shall rechristen our London as LONDON
TOMORROW a tree will grow into a hand
Yes listen
TOMORROW the clocks will chime like voices
TOMORROW a train will set out for the sky
National papers please reprint

'Europe a Wood' by Geoffrey Parsons (1910- ), hints at a working class uprising by means of an analogy of the swaying of trees:

The motion is that of trees swaying in unison
To the prevailing wind. Bend or be broken.
...

The message is merely the speaking wind amplified:
That draught from a vacant space flutters the leaves
In the octave of assent, a murmured acceptance.
But of late, observers with sensitive ears report
Recalcitrant undertones, rustles of defiance. 38

A.J.S. Tessimond (1902- ) in 'The British', echoes the common anguish of the people living under the severe stress of a turbulent world:

We are a people living in shells and moving Crablike; reticent, awkward, deeply suspicious;
Watching the world from a corner of half-closed eyelids,
Afraid lest someone show that he hates or loves us,
Afraid lest someone weep in the railway train.39

Finally, it will be worthwhile to take note of a poem by the sharp-eyed social historian, Sir John Betjeman (1906- ). His poem 'Slough', with its eye for detail, and sympathy for the underdog of a dishonest society, comes easily to one's notice:

Come, bombs, and blow to smithereens Those air-conditioned, bright canteens, Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans Tinned minds, tinned breath.40

The last line is an obvious reference to those wallowing insensitively in a synthetic world of luxury at the cost of others who do not have even "grass to graze a cow".

It should now be amply clear that in the nineteen thirties, the voice of social concern was heard in the poetry not only of the major poets of the time, but also in that of quite a few others who are not as well known. This, then, shows how the literary atmosphere of the thirties was generally surcharged with a keen sense of social awareness which manifested itself now in the form of a protest against inequities, now in the expectation of a better deal for all.
The various forms of this awareness - critical, optimistic, or cynical - have been discussed in the foregoing chapters, and, therefore, they need no fresh reiteration here. The relevance of the fringe-dwellers lies in the fact that they indicate the extent of the entire situation, and the collective spirit. The indignation was not that of a vocal minority only, it was very much that of the decade as a whole. The writers of the period, the poets in particular, thus demonstrated their adherence to the old tradition of the writer's involvement in the crucial events of his day.
Notes and References


2. 'Preface' to the above.

3. ibid.,

4. The Strings are False. (Faber and Faber, London, 1965) P. 146

5. ibid., P. 169


7. The English Auden. P. 130


11. ibid., P.56

12. ibid., P.57

13. ibid., P.102

14. ibid., P.33

15. ibid., P.8


19. ibid., P.272

21. ibid., P.49


23. ibid., P.152


27. **The Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936).** ed. Michael Roberts. (Faber And Faber, London, 1965) P.262


29. **Left Review** 2 (July 1936) 514

30. **Reconstruction: Six Poems.** (Blackwell, Oxford, 1933) P.16


33. *Left Review* 1 (April 1935) 255


35. ibid., P.177


38. ibid., P.99
