CHAPTER IX

Conclusion

It should be evident from the foregoing chapters that the poets of the thirties launched themselves into the arena of social literature, with an essentially experimental, pioneering approach. The problems of the time were so crucial that these poets strongly felt for themselves the need to make their poetry an instrument with which to achieve their goal. Interlacing a number of elements like ideas from various spheres of the material world, emotions of grief and sympathy, as well as indignation and condemnation, perplexities arising out of the state of things as they were, and an acute sense of unease at their distance from the society which they would save, their verse appears to be complex, yet compelling.

The main preoccupation of these poets being to usher in a new social order based on equity and justice, they were keen to be in rapport with the masses, but their poetry of social criticism ended up by catering only to an imaginary audience. They remained, till the end, a small group of bright, young, sensitive intellectuals, idealistic Oxford products who submitted themselves, in the words of Day Lewis, "to the visiting angel, the strange new healer."

An attitude of ambivalence arising out of the intellectual and social conflicts that obsessed them, is indeed the most characteristic aspect of their poetry. As already shown in the preceding chapters,
these poets adopted the Marxist creed as an act of defiance against a decadent socio-economic order, but they soon realized the inadequacies of the doctrine, and their politics lost the primacy of a cause. Consequently, their poetic sensibilities began to take new shapes. A religious note began to surface in Auden's later poetry. In the case of the other poets as well, the developing tendency, by and large, has been one of affirming a liberal, undogmatic faith in moral, rather than political terms. Poetry began to be increasingly marked by a desire to show "an affirming flame".

It is now evident that the poets of the thirties had no myth of their own to impose upon their world. Marxism was no substitute. It did not give them a perspective that they did not already possess. These poets did not want, as Blake wanted long before them, "to create a system"; rather, they were enslaved, in a sense, by another man's doctrine. English poetry does not have a tradition of organizing its stuff into an exclusive scheme of social and political action as such. To the extent that it was attempted in the thirties, it was a deviation from the main stream. For, whatever his political or social aspiration, the poet cannot expect to swim smoothly with the current of technological and scientific progress. The poets of the thirties must have realized that poetry, derived from a single stream of culture as theirs, could not maintain its momentum indefinitely, and that the urge behind it was bound to peter out. Also, it must have become apparent to them that tricks of style alone could not carry them far. A negative approach of the poetry of the early thirties was that it did not have a large, free, and kindly view of man.
and his surroundings. It was only raucously critical and stridently exhortative. The history of English literature is not without instances of reactions on the part of the poets and other men of letters, to many a situation of social iniquity. The names of Blake, Shelley, and Dickens, amongst others, readily come to mind. It is to be noted that even without any avowed philanthropic assertions, they have left behind such works of intense social sympathy, good humour, strong critical sense, and visionary zeal, which the poets of the thirties, with all their avowal of a social conscience, can hardly match. It should be appreciated that a revolution or the cause of a social change does not get anything from the poet if, in the process of affirming his faith in the revolution or the cause, he ceases to exist as poet, or loses his characteristic abilities as poet. He must find his ideal in the revolution, must find "new life springing" there, or he must leave it alone. The poet would not remain true to himself if he allows himself to be violated by the thrill of apparent changes taking place around him, or allow his circumstances to compel him unwillingly to take up the position of a prophet who only predicts. Only by a spontaneous transformation of the poet's personal vision into a social vision, like Whitman's vision of the liberated self merging with the vision of democracy, or the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok's vision of the Beautiful Lady assuming the role of liberated Russia, can a poet truly serve the cause of social change. This, the poets of the thirties failed to effect. It would not be unfair to conclude that the private experience of these poets was not intense enough to become universal. All their achievement in the thirties can
be summarily labelled as annals of protest.

It will be apparent to any perceptive surveyor of the course of English poetry, that a reaction to the prevailing tone of the poetry of the thirties had set in the decade itself. Much of the later poetry of Auden, Day Lewis, and Spender bear testimony to it: the public voice was gradually being drowned by a private voice, thus establishing its links with the metaphysical and the romantic strains of the earlier ages.

Despite their desire to innovate new forms, these poets depended generally on the existing ones such as the didactic voice, the epistolary form, the song, and the like. It is their diction alone that bears their impress as a distinct group. It will also be noted that their poetry is, by and large, without echoes. However, their contribution to English poetry, on the whole, is not to be dismissed as inconsequential. They introduced a wide range of rhythm and imagery, and gave poetry a new realistic character by bringing it closer to the political scenes of their continent, and by making it a common vehicle for feelings of private and public insecurity.

Although disillusionment with their political creed had set in, and other influences came by to modify it, the fact remains that these poets presented a clear idea of the kind of life which they wished to see in Europe. Time-bound as they felt they were, in creating a new world order of peace and justice, they gave a prophet-like call to help revolutionize literature and society. But having lost their wager that this regeneration would take place in their own time, they were compelled to give up their outward voyage and to
make, instead, a sincere inward search of the self. Today, after half a century, it can be safely maintained that British poetry of the thirties could have attained a greater measure of conviction and appeal, had the poets played upon the reader's heart-strings.