CHAPTER IV

Cecil Day Lewis: Enthusiast for an Egalitarian Social Order

The thirties saw the emergence of another forceful and realist poet in Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972), whose poetry, particularly of the early part of the decade, well reflects the period in crisis. Here we encounter a militant, thrashing out warnings and threats to a nation reeling under political, social, and economic iniquity. Coupled with this militancy is his tremendous hope and ardour for establishing an egalitarian social order. Basically, it is a search for order, in and around him, that underlies his insistence that man's hopes and aspirations must be tested by the touchstone of the external world. It is this kind of commitment, a desire to face the problems of his time, that projects the note of hope and optimism in his poetry of the thirties.

Day Lewis's attitude of social consciousness finds its expression also in his critical works, where he has discussed the role that poetry plays in building up the sensitivities of people in relation to their own time and social milieu. In A Hope for Poetry (1934), he defines the credibility of poetry in his time thus:

... it is difficult not to suspect that renewal of interest in poetry proceeds largely from an interest in the social connections to be found in much 'left-wing' work; that it is the communist or fascist tendencies, the up-to-dateness of the imagery, the preoccupation with specially modern problem which attracts and not the poetry itself.
He believed in the need for a new faith that would help bring about peace and harmony in a disjointed world, and, like Auden, he hoped for the regeneration of man within an ideal society. Thus, he explains that it is the poet's task to appeal for the creation of such a society where capitalism, the source of hatred and intolerance, and rift between man and man finds no place, and where love is the driving force in man. This is his social aim, so explicitly stated in these words:

We shall not begin to understand post-war poetry until we realize that the poet is above all for the creation of a society in which the real and living contact between man and man may again become possible. That is why, speaking from the living unit of himself and his friends, he appeals for the contraction of the social group to a size at which human contact may again be established and demands the destruction of all impediments to love.²

He explains that although a poet may be a revolutionary, his purpose is to maintain poetic individualism, otherwise his work will be reduced to sheer propaganda:

Propaganda verse is to be condemned when the didactic is achieved at the expense of the poetic: poetry, in fact, whatever else it may or may not be, must be poetry - a sound, if obvious conclusion.³

Born into a middle class world of privileges, Day Lewis, like Auden and some other poets of his day, faces the dilemma of valuing the things representing bourgeois culture, and a desire to communicate to the masses at large. He believes that the substance and language of his poetry should cater not to a coterie, but to a larger group, and that it is imperative for poets to build that kind of a
poetic sensitivity which will bring 'science' and 'poetry' together. In other words, he advocates contemporary poetry; one that will appeal to the masses and will also help them develop an awareness of their socio-cultural situation. The poet is himself preoccupied with the use of contemporary imagery; one that is fundamental to his conception of the modern world. And he has given it a rather positive value by using it in a social context, while reiterating "the poet's old business of bringing emotional order out of material and intellectual confusion."

Day Lewis believes that the poet's aim of achieving this 'emotional order' will be realized not by his attempt to make an exclusive impact upon the 'highly sophisticated reader', but by his ability to assimilate those ideas in the 'general consciousness', and he advocates what he calls 'personal poetry':

This kind of personal poetry is the antithesis of that to which we are most accustomed nowadays - the poetry which looks inwards to find images valid for the outward world and powerful enough to illuminate the anfractuous ways.

He then proceeds to explain this attitude:

... should not there be a poetry today which looks outward, which keeps its eyes firmly focussed upon the object, in the external world and, brooding passionately over that object, perceiving at last its value, its necessary part in the scheme of things, may disinterestedly reflect upon it an image of human virtue?

If poetry is still to do its civilizing work, that kind of poetry is needed. (emphasis added)

Day Lewis considers it imperative for poets to face the external world and then to project on it their sympathy. Thus, combining
their creative imagination with the outer world, their poetry may be a reflection of recreated reality.

Day Lewis's autobiography, *The Buried Day*, is a retrospective self-examination of his poetic sensibilities, and his idealistic vision during the thirties, of a world cured of its political and social maladies. Here, the poet tells us of his relation to communism for, at least for a time, Day Lewis, like Auden, Spender and others, did find both critical interpretation of the socio-economic order, and political solution in communism. He explains his initial relation to this political ideology thus:

It was indeed possible, for myself and my friends, to believe that the capitalist system was obsolescent, that mass unemployment and fascism were evil things which must be crusaded against, that the nationalization of the means of production would cure a lot of our troubles, and that this would never be effectively done except under Communism; we felt "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need", or "freedom is the knowledge of necessity" to be concepts as inspiring as Christ's sayings in the Sermon on the Mount; we believed that a second world war was on its way. We were singularly fortunate, compared to the youth of today, in believing that something could be done about the social and political evils confronting us. Had we seen all the avenues blocked by mushroom-shaped spectres, we might well have thrown in our hands.

Day Lewis's communism had a sort of religious quality, as explained in the following passage:

We (referring to Rex Warner, Auden, Spender, MacNeice, and himself) had all ... lapsed from the Christian faith, and tended to despair of Liberalism as an effective instrument for dealing with the problems of our day, if not to despise it as an outworn
creed. Inoculated against Roman Catholicism by the religion of my youth, I dimly felt the need for a faith which had the authority; the logic, the cut-and-driedness of the Roman Church - a faith which could fill the void left by the leaking away of traditional religion, would make sense of our troubled times and make real demands on me. Marxism appeared to fill the bill. It appealed too, I imagine, to that part of me which from time to time revolved against the intolerable burden of selfhood and desired anonymity of a unit in a crowd.

There was also a romantic side to Day Lewis's communism. In his own words:

My susceptibility to the heroic ... joining up with my natural partisanship of the underdog to create a picture, romantic and apocalyptic, of the British worker was at last coming into his own. There was generosity as well as absurdity in this, for my friends and I did at least make some attempt to imagine the conditions we did not share, the unemployment and malnutrition which had been rotting the heart out of a million working class families, and we were prepared to help destroy a system that perpetuated itself by such hideous human wastage, even though our pleasant way of life would be destroyed in the process.

No less romantic was my idea of the enemy, the forces of reaction ... the System, that which exploited men and nature and perpetuated social injustice for the benefit of the few, personified itself in a figure of cunning, hypocrisy, and spiritual inertia.

Day Lewis admits that his leanings towards communism "came less from any intellectual conviction they afforded him than from his heritage of romantic humanism, a bent of mind quite incompatible ... with the materialism and rigidity of communist doctrine." Nevertheless, he continues, that "after joining the party he did have a real sense of tranquility, a conviction that he had obeyed his
His faith in communism may have been vacillating, but looking retrospectively at the situation in which a sensitive poet was placed, we cannot call his attitude altogether naive. In his own words again,

I was and remained sceptical about a good deal in communist theory and practice - at least I had hope: no one who did not go through this political experience during the Thirties can quite realize how much hope there was in the air then, how radiant for some of us was the illusion that men could, under communism, put the world to rights. 12

He feels that the basic fault in communist practice lies in its "pursuit of ends regardless of the corrupting or dehumanising effect of the means employed, its opportunistic turns of policy and the lies to which it committed one." But he was eventually confronted by the age-old moral problem in reality, so that, in course of time, it became easier for him to accept the idea that the end does not after all justify the means.

Day Lewis's social attitude and aim can be seen in all his long poems of the thirties. Referring to the first one of them, Transitional Poem(1929), Sean Lewis thus observes:

In so far as the MacSpaunDay poets were to create a poetic revolution, this was its first public manifestation. ... The work points the way to various 1930's preoccupations, arguing the relationship of loyalty and belief; stating the dilemma of the poet hesitating between allegiance to his relations and friends, and familiar middle class way of life, and his attachment to a philosophy of more or less revolutionary thought and action. 14

As early as Section 4 of Part One, the poem affords us a glimpse,
though vague, of the poet's stance against the decadence of society caused by the capitalist system:

Abraham, stint your tally
Of concubines and cattle!
Give place to me - capitalist
In more intrinsic metal.

The basic theme of *Transitional Poem* is the effort of the poet to come to terms with the world. Section 9 of Part Two shows the poet's dissatisfaction with those who are content to brood over their subjective chaos:

Then there came disgust
Of the former loon who could
Elbow a bridge and brood
From Chaos to last Trump
Over the imbecile pomp
Of waters dribbling past.

In the concluding stanza of this section the poet declares that "It is high time to renounce / This village idiocy", in effect, that modern poets should not cut themselves off from the mainstream of the social situation. In *The Poetic Image*, he puts forward the following question:

Can he the poet survive in the modern world except as a kind of village idiot, tolerated but ignored, talking to himself, hanging around the pub and the petrol pumps, his head awhirl with broken images, mimicking the movements of life in which he has no part?15

He believes, therefore, that poets must develop a sense of common imagination and fellow feeling in order to be able to get along in a turbulent world. Section 32 of Part Four gives hints of the poet's social concern and his leftist leanings through the analogy of nature:
The breath that scours the midday
Unseen, is manifest
In the embittered thorn -
Forcing the stubborn frame
To grow one way and point
His constancy and aim. (emphasis added)

For the tree, the very fact that "the leaf recurs / Is a sufficient
gauge", that it has roots somewhere. This is the analogy by which
the poet calls upon his reader to develop a sense of involvement in
the human condition then prevailing.

The poet's awareness of a stagnating social scene reminds
him of the rusting machinery of abandoned mines and the betrayal of
human owners by the earth. Thus he says in Section 33:

... I passed by a forbidding coast
Where ironworks rust
On each headland: goats crop the salted grass:
Steam oozes out of the mud. Earth has
No promise for proprietors.

In Transitional Poem, Day Lewis has established the premises
of a philosophy on the challenge of social responsibility: that, if
man is simply an animal part of nature, then he has no social respon­sibility; but if man is capable of shaping the world, then he is
responsible. Thus, this poem evidences the poet's attempt to make
poetry an instrument of social change.

In another poem, From Feathers to Iron (1930), the poet has
examined the question of social responsibility at the level of a newly
married couple expecting the birth of their first child. The poet re­lates the approaching birth of the child to the advent of a new
world. For the child in the womb, "Slow drip the seconds, time is
stalactite," - a situation which has a bearing upon the social stag-
nation of the poet's time. The new seed of their child lies in the older earth of his mother's body. Thus, in Section 12 of this poem, the poet concludes that they "seek a new world through old workings."

As the child's birth heralds a new beginning, it is a signal to all to begin working for a new world (Section 14):

> Now the full-throated daffodils,
> Our trumpeters in gold,
> Call resurrection from the ground
> And bid the year be bold.

The poet's sense of optimism for a better future finds expression in Section 15. He says that though now he is only a blade of grass on the prairie, he sees bright prospects ahead. He is hopeful that today's struggles will be solved, and that their children will inherit whatever has been achieved towards that end.

Day Lewis's deep social concern is noticed again in Section 16, where he hopes that their child will be a strong and determined agent of change, "... metal to bore through / The impermeable clay". He believes that human progress in time can only come with the gradual regeneration of man. It is a historical process which brings about an improvement upon past achievements; the future generation will take upon the task of building a new and better world. Raymond Tschumi has shown that Day Lewis has presented this process through a few symbols like the 'artesian well', the 'living water', the 'arable land', and the like.

The socio-political impact of the poem is felt through the poet's criticism of his age as the one that only "toes the line / And never o'ersteps the mark". His mind is troubled with the thought
that his child might become a "mechanical jane" or a "gentleman in wax" who will "wag as the World wags". In other words, he fears that his child may become a conformist in thought and outlook. But what he wants his child to be aware of is that

... It's time now to set house in order,
bury
The dead and count the living, consolidate
The soul against proved enemies.

(Section 21)

In Section 27, the poet thinks of death and salvation as symbolised by two classes of men - the cowards, who creep in the towns under a threatening sky, and those who venture out bravely towards the mountain summit, the latter reminding the reader of Auden's world of the Gang myth, in which travellers cross the frontier to live in mountains away from the ungenerate plain. Significantly, these travellers are always members of the younger generation. In Day Lewis's poem, too, it is "the young challenger, too tired to sidestep, / Hunches to give or take decisive blow."

In yet another long poem, The Magnetic Mountain (1933), the poet has given his prophetic call to man to shoulder the responsibility of shaping his world. This poem has a new tone, style, and freshness, and a jumble of ideas which the poet was eager to call 'revolutionary'. Rebelling against the middle class complacency, he says with sarcasm:

Professor Jeans spills the beans
Dean Inge tells you a thing
A man in a gown gives you a low-down.

Part One has an epigraph of social pilgrimage from Rex Warner, "Come then, companions, this is the spring of blood, / Heart's hey-
day, movement of masses, beginning of good". This is suggestive of the poet's call to all who are willing to be comrades in a new movement. Like the spring, it represents a new beginning and heralds a new world of good life.

The poet's revolutionary fervour manifests itself in his exhortation to the pilgrims to develop "Iron in the soul", and to have their "spirit steeled in fire". The magnetic mountain is the pilgrim's goal of a classless society, where

Compass and clock must fail,
For space stands on its head there
And time chases its tail,

and the poet's hope for a new world of good life shows up in the description of the conditions atop the mountain. There the travellers will find "iron for the asking" which will save the workers from all adverse winds. The mineral will form "Girders to take the leaden / Strain of a sagging sky". There is enough raw material to enrich the life of the individual, but the important thing is that there is enough material also to construct a cantilever bridge right across the chaos of time.

Part Two of this poem is a re-examination of the moribund past, and it reflects the poet's hope of establishing a new social order. But in his quest for real values, the poet has to deal with the defenders of the old order. The First Defendant (Section 7) is a mother, who advises her son to live the common run of life. But the son, echoing Christ's reply to His mother, when she urged Him to perform his first miracle at the marriage of Cana - 'Woman ... my time is not yet come' (John:2:4), tells his mother that,"This is a
separate country now" (Section 8) and hence she is to demand no ata-
vistic rites to prolong her own life by transfusing young blood into
her veins. A similar instance of the betrayal of native instincts is
to be seen in Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*, where the
mountain climber's mother betrays him at first with a lie, and even-
tually destroys him by the truth.

The Second Defendant, representing public school education,
is a typical bourgeois, who deems it proper to protect the esta-
blished order "Against blood-epidemics, against / The infection of
faith and the excess of life." (Section 9). In the following Section,
the poet stresses upon the defenders of the status quo that

Men are wanted who will volunteer
To ... 
Get in touch with living and raise from
the dead:

The poet's disgust at the spiritually decadent society surfaces in
Section 11, where he presents the Third Defendant, who represents
established religion or the priest of religious infidelity, always mis-
interpreting the scriptures to his own advantage. In Section 12, the
poet condemns the dark activities of the clergymen, and asserts that
the time is up for all such nonsense, - "The medicine-man / Must
take his medicine" - in other words, he must heal himself first.

The Fourth Defendant appearing in Section 13 represents the
superficial class who follow the fashion of the day, but are unable
to adjust itself with the changing situations of life.

This Auden-like diagnostic approach is seen further in the
exposure of the enemies of society. The First Enemy is sensuality,
that is detrimental to the health of society. The Second Enemy is the
Journalist, who drugs people's mind with cheap and floundering thrills. The poet regrets that those who fall a prey to such journalistic snares fail to recognise the unsatisfactoriness of their lives. This theme is also to be found in The Ascent of F6, where Mrs. A exposes the mere sensationalism of much of the reading material to the public (I.ii). Day Lewis's disparagement of the media is full of satire:

They tell you all's well with our lovely England
And God's in our capital.

(Section 20)

Pseudo-science is the Third Enemy (Section 21) that tries to usurp religion and spirituality - an attitude which reduces everything to rational knowledge, and the cry of the soul is unacknowledged.

Section 23 presents the Fourth Enemy as a dreamer, and now the poet sees himself as an enemy to society, for his tendency to shirk the responsibilities of a sick world, and to seek refuge in a private world of ephemeral beauty. The poet tells this weaker side of himself to reject the temptation to escape, to face reality, and to "lose identity" among the common men. Thus, in Section 24, he proposes hard work for himself and relevant settings for his poetry. He is resolved to "Wring / A living from despair / And out of steel a song". This is how Day Lewis envisages his poetry to serve as an instrument of social change.

Section 27 of Part Four presents a wryly humorous list of all those who are going to be left behind in the sick old world. They are:

Lipcurl, Swiveleye, Bluster, Crock and Queer,
Mister I'll-think-it-over, Miss Not-to-day,
Young Who-the-hell-cares and old Let-us-pray,
Sir Apres-moi-le-deluge.

Auden, too, has in The Orators made a similar list of people, drawn from the proletariat as well as the upper class (Ode IV from 'Six Odes'). The proletariat are the "Fitters and moulders, / Welders and welders,/ Dyers and bakers / And boiler-tube makers". As for the upper class, the - "Majors, Vicars, Lawyers, Doctors, / Advertisers, Maiden Aunts", he concludes that "They're all in a funk but they daren't do a bunk". Day Lewis is indignant at those with an "assured income" - the bourgeois English who do not favour any change. In Section 32, the poet sounds them a warning - one that aims didactically at a 'zero hour' of revolution:

Listen. Can you not hear the entrance of a new theme?

This Section reveals Day Lewis trying to embrace the working class or the lower middle class background in a comradely spirit, though, with the use of imagery that is rather contrived and merely decorative. He points out that clinging on to what one is used to, means getting into a rut, but he suggests a remedy to this, though in somewhat vague terms:

We can tell you a secret, offer a tonic; only
Submit to the visiting angel, the strange new healer.

Section 33 is a scathing satire against all those who have corrupted the land. This is a pretext for Day Lewis to attack his contemporaries, most of whom are people of liberal professions. They are:

... the yellow yes-men,
Pansies, politicians, prelates and pressmen,
Boneless wonders, unburstable bouncers,
Back-slappers, cheer-leaders, bribed announcers
Broadcasting All-Clear as the raiders draw near.

Day Lewis's initial faith in communism as the only instrument for a revolutionary change in society, slackened towards the later part of the thirties. In Section 34, the poet says that what he sees ahead is not a utopian haunt, but only "a world that has ceased to be bought and sold / With traitor silver and fairy gold".

In The Magnetic Mountain, Day Lewis has tried to reconcile his private faith with political ideology, though on the immediate surface, the mountain is the communist state. In The Buried Day, he wrote,

The positive beliefs I was moving towards in the earlier Thirties, did not ramify from any central faith, they were rather substitutes for a faith, heterogenous ideas which served to plug the hollow in the breast where God should be.\textsuperscript{17}

This, indeed, is the predicament that The Magnetic Mountain implies.

Comparing Day Lewis with Auden, Dilys Powell comments:

The work of Mr. Day Lewis shows a talent less self-willed, less boisterous, less robust; a talent which left to itself might even have kept aloof from politics.\textsuperscript{18}

Like most poets of the thirties, Day Lewis, too, was a romantic rebel, but it is easy to understand that the attraction of communism, with its ideology of a classless society, at a time of acute social and economic crisis, was irresistible to all socially conscious writers.

The high hopes proclaimed in The Magnetic Mountain certainly showed the poet's generation the way out of the social and spiritual malaise of the day. The poet is optimistic of a better world emerging:

In happier times
When the land is ours, these springs shall
irrigate
Good growing soil until it teems,
Redeemed from mortgage, drilled to obey;
But still must flow in spate.

(Section 31)

In this new world they will ask

Not for pity's pence nor pursy affluence,
Only to set up house again:
Neither a coward's heaven, cessation of pain,
Nor a new world of sense,
But that we may be given a chance to be men.

(Section 34)

Another of Day Lewis's work, *A Time to Dance*, is considered by David Daiches to be the "most mature statement of the poet's revolutionary position". In one of the poems included here, 'A Warning to those who Live on Mountains', the poet warns all those who enjoy the high-favoured, privileged places of his age, who "Make nothing of the distance to nearest or next world", of the pent-up wrath of the lowly - "Impatient grow the people of the plain, / They wait for a word".

'The Conflict' presents the theme of conflicting worlds representing the class war or at all events the rivalry between revolution and reaction. Under such a critical stress, neutrality is no longer possible:

Yet living here,
As one between two massing powers I live
Whom neutrality cannot save
Nor occupation cheer.

Socialism seems to be the only answer, and propagandist ideas find expression. The lines,
The red advance of life
Contracts pride, calls out the common blood,
Beats song into a single blade,
are a call to the union of the workers of the world.

However, although the poet believes that "only ghosts can live / Between two fires", his conflicting mind does not allow him complete acceptance of socialism. He rallies "the red advance" as if from outside; the object of the struggle is himself. The "tilting deck" from which he sings "To keep men's courage up" is his own disequilibrium.

'In Me Two Worlds' also adumbrates the advancement of communism. It describes the conflict between the old world and the new. The poet belongs to the old world, but the rebel within him heralds the victory of the new over the insolent power of the dead:

The armies of the dead
Are trenched within my bones,
My blood's their semaphore, their wings
Are watchers overhead.

The armies of the dead will be wiped out by the hosts that "tap (his) nerves for power, (his) veins / To stain their banners red".

However, what the poem eventually reflects is not a sense of triumph, but of doubt:

So heir and ancestor
Pursue the inveterate feud,
Making my senses' darkened fields
A theatre of war.

'Johnny Head-In-Air' illustrates the dilemma of the poet who is fond of the past, but, at the same time, finds the future very attractive. About this dilemma, Day Lewis says in A Hope for Poetry:

So there arises in [the poet] a conflict;
between the old which his heart approves
and the new which fructifies his imagination;
between the idea of a change of heart that
should change society and the idea of a
new society making a new man; between in-
dividual education and mass economic con-
ditionment. At which end should one begin?20 added

At the "road's crest", Johnny stretched on a signpost, points
his arms to the opposite directions of the east and the west. The
travellers' decision will be crucial towards a life that will either
devitalize their human spirit, or one that will offer justice and
peace after a long and arduous struggle:

Traveller, know, I am here to show
Your own divided heart.

E.E. Smith rightly views Johnny as the identification of Day Lewis
as a poet, and also as crucified Christ.

In the title song of A Time to Dance, the poet suggests that
it is only with the kind of gallantry displayed by Lieutenants Parer
and M'Intosh, that men will be able to join the band of superior in-
dividuals moving towards the new land. Towards the end of the poem,
the poet says that it is time to stop waiting for individual utopian
days; it is time, rather, to look forward to a world where "none
may scheme / To hoard, while many die", a world where "all lives
grow from an equal chance".

Day Lewis's dilemma, whether to renounce the bourgeois sta-
tus quo and actually join the working class to work for a radical
betterment of society, is very well represented by Noah in Noah and
the Waters(1936). The two voices of Noah speak out the two sides of
his nature, viz., his commitment to the workers to build a better
world, and his fear of the working -class revolution. It is an ex-
tremely difficult choice for Noah, but eventually, he does make a
decision to side with the Flood and they "go out in a running fight"
against the reactionary bourgeoisie.

The poet invites the reader to view "this ploughland" (the
world), whose soil has been made fertile by the "unregarded sweat"
of the feudal serfs. The reader must read "between the furrows" to
recognize the "desperate appeal" of all those whose labour earned
only dire poverty: to hear "the young corn whisper / The wishes of
men that had no other voice". Only then will the poet be "able to
know the difficult / Birth of [their] new seed", and his task will be
to "bear [his] part of the harvest". The poet's consciousness of the
social disparity comes forth in the following stanza, which is an il-
lustration of the ways in which the down-trodden workers are ex-
ploited for the benefit of the bourgeoisie:

They failed you never, for that they were
always the disregarded.
Ubiquitous to your need they made the bar-
ley grow.
Or bore you to new homes; they kept you
hale and handsome.
Of all flesh they were the sign and sub-
stance.

The poet exposes the bourgeois reactionary, who are averse to all
kind of changes. The three Burgesses, representing the bourgeois re-
actionary, are fully aware that "there's much in [their] country
that needs cleansing", but they cannot allow the workers' revolution
(symbolized by the flood) to disrupt their comfort, as they are not
at all prepared to compromise with less than what they are used to.
Neither are they prepared to give up their private interests, nor the
welfare of their own families. So, finally they turn on the challenging
threats of oppression.

The answer to such threats is a call to the violent waters of the world to flood together against the reactionary forces (cf. 'Workers of the World, unite' - Communist Manifesto). Noah's unwillingness to surrender to the established order, and, at the same time, his hesitation to join a workers' revolution which will inevitably wipe out the established order with its exclusive privileges, presents a predicament which in essence is the same as the one faced by Day Lewis, Auden, and Spender in their time.

Noah and the Waters is a poem that is more constructive than radical in intent. Raymond Tschumi observed,

> Rather than in an indefinite bettering of man, he (C. Day Lewis) believes in a new beginning which is suggested in Noah and the Waters. The doctrinal element is less and less obtrusive, and it is obvious that his poetical thought is at its best when free of any political or didactic implications.22

Day Lewis's serious concern for the unfortunate social conditions of his time, is seen again in Overtures to Death and Other Poems(1938). The title itself makes it apparent that the sense of something sinister permeates the atmosphere of the poems. And it is only in two poems, appearing in this collection, 'The Nabara' and 'The Volunteer', that one discerns the poet's hope and faith in man to rejuvenate society. Inspired by the Spanish Republican ideals, Day Lewis, in 'The Nabara' urges man to act resolutely and without fear. He attacks those who are neutrals and escapists, and satirizes them as "ghosts" - "engaged to keep eternity's long hours". He pays high tributes to the martyrs of freedom:

> ... they preferred
In the rudeness of their heart to die rather
than to surrender ...

The poem reveals the conventional heroism of the man in the small out-gunned rebel cruiser. On the subject of freedom, the poet announces, in continuation of the above lines:

Mortal these words and the deed they remember, but cast a seed
Shall flower for an age when freedom is man's creative word.

Similarly, in 'The Volunteer', Day Lewis has paid high tributes to those who fought for Spain, and declared that there was no way left for honest men but to fight fascism in the dark hour of civilization:

Tell them in England, if they ask
What brought us to these wars,
To this plateau beneath the night's
Grave manifold of stars -

It was not fraud or foolishness,
Glory, revenge, or pay:
We came because our open eyes
Could see no other way.

The rest of the collection projects the poet's desperate anxiety and fear of the impending violence of the class struggle, and over the international ruin which was inevitable with the advent of another world war. The note is one of angry accusation and corrosive irony over the menace of war and destruction.

The poems in the first half of the volume are rife with the presentiment of death. In 'Maple and Sumach', the autumn setting symbolizes the dying out of human vigour. The vivid leaf colours are seen by the poet as the dying of light, and the "fire-crest sky" as a warning to the world that it is about to die.

'Newsreel' attempts to jolt the habitues of "dream-houses" to
reality. During the thirties, cinema, for the masses was one form of getting away from the deplorable state of affairs. Even amidst the grave crisis of depression, unemployment, and extreme poverty, people frequented the cinema to be in a dreamland of comfort and security, and watch

...the mayor opening the oyster season:
A society wedding: the autumn hats [that]
look swell:
An old crocks' race, and a politician
In fishing-waders to prove that all is well.

When they see the huge warplanes screeching hysterically in the long power-dive, they fall asleep like "gannets", in other words, they resist the warning sounded by the aircrafts. The poet questions the people watching the big guns rising up on the screen, whether they realize that their shells will soon fall on their own homes. The poet urges them to wake up from their trance, to see, and know for themselves, the ugly truth of the prevailing violence:

Grow nearer home - and out of the dream-
house stumbling
One night into a strangling air and the
flung
Rags of children and thunder of stone niagaras tumbling,
You'll know you slept too long.

'Regency Houses' shows the poet's disapproval of the faded values of a condemned society, represented by the old elegant houses. He regrets that people do not really care to free themselves from the shackles of the old order and that they are satisfied to sink in the rut:

Are we living - we too,
Living extravagant farce
In the finery of spent passions?
Is all we do and shall do
But the glib, habitual breathing
Of clocks where time means nothing,
In a condemned mansion?

At a time when the call for political commitment failed to achieve the correct response, and faith in a historical future also proved ineffectual, the poet could only feel indignation and self-torment, as he foresaw a terrible end for humanity. The title poem of the volume portrays seven faces of death.

In the first overture, Day Lewis points to the post-war generation of 1920, as attracted by death, and seeking it in various ways:

Some of us went to look for you
In aeroplanes and fast cars:
Some tried the hospitals, some took to vice,
Others consulted the stars.

The poet's sense of fatalism is felt strongly in the second overture, where we are told of the upper class members sleeping in the handsome shells of their dead culture, compelled to wait for the final ordeal, to be executed by death, the bailiff. The poet is indignant at the "criminal agents of a dying will" - the despoilers of society who bring unnatural death to the weak and the poor. Thus, in the third overture he says:

It is they, your damned auxiliaries, must answer
For the self-slain in the foodless, fireless room.

The seventh poem shows that death has become a familiar phenomenon for the poor and deprived section of society. The poet points to the injustices which the capitalists have meted out to the workers:

... they took the land and the credit,
Took virtue and double-crossed her;
They left us the scrag-end of the luck
And the brunt of their disaster.

So now is the time for the workers to even old scores by becoming
Death's agents:

When the time comes for a clearance,
When light brims over the hill,
Mister you can rely on us
To execute your will.

John Lehmann, reviewing *Overtures to Death and Other Poems* in the
*Daily Worker*, observed as follows:

The chief impression which the collection
gives is of painful, rigourously honest self-
examination, of bitter foreboding, of impend-
ing disaster for the life around him, of
struggles to decode questions of choice and
action which experience has shown to be far
harder and more complex than first enthu-
siasm counted.23

The first period of Day Lewis's work shows him as an opti-
mist, with tremendous faith in the power of the human mind. His is
a troubled conscience, recording the ills that have beset society; the
denial of benefits of the new technology to the shabby towns of an
industrial wasteland; the pathetic plight of the poor and the down-
trodden; the heartless antics of the complacent and the ill-disposed;
and the bourgeois predicament, with a view to stirring the con-
science of the public to work for a better human condition in the
future.

Day Lewis is attracted by the ideals of communism which aim
at a classless society. But in his quest for a utopia, he wavers bet-
ween communism and a religious feeling, the latter becoming the
staying power in later years. He is actually far from communism,
because he is opposed to the Marxist doctrine of all transcendent
values. And, like Auden, he believes in a radical change of human nature rather than a change in the conditions of life. There is in fact no proposal in his poetry for any coherent economic or social system. The future that he foresees is rather vague:

... travellers by this boat
Nothing to rest the eyes on
But a migrant's horizon.

(The Magnetic Mountain)

What is more definite is his satire aimed at the established order to show them the way for a change of heart. The later years of the thirties show Day Lewis as less aggressive, and presenting his argument more concisely than before. His experience in the Home Guard provided him with a poor image of utopian dreams of a community. His attitude at this stage is more precise, and is summed-up perfectly in his short poem 'Where are the War Poets?' in the collection Word Over All (1943):

They who in folly or mere greed
Enslaved religion, markets, laws,
Borrow our language now and bid
Us to speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our times,
No subject for immortal verse -
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.

The spirit of this poem represents the spontaneous reaction to the war, of the thirties poets. They are not allured by the romantic halo of war, but are determined that things will be better after the war. They no longer look for magnetic mountains for all men to live in brotherly comradeship. They have realized that their cause has waned; as such, only a generalized concern for humanity is left.
Thus, a study of Day Lewis's poetry of the thirties shows that various aspects have gone into the making of its texture, and that the emphasis is not even. Although his poetry of this period mostly portrays a vehemence and a militancy of approach, as well as a tremendous optimism for a better world, nevertheless, it also gives us glimpses of a man perplexed in a world of confusion and anxiety. One senses the unease of the poet, caught in the dilemma of writing for the common people, while quietly cherishing the comforts of a bourgeois culture. One sees in Noah the poet's dilemma of whether or not to join the tidal wave of the workers' uprising. Johnny-Head-in-Air has revealed his ambivalence of attitude - though he finds the future very attractive, he still reveres the past. All this naturally reveals an important outlook - that of self-criticism. As early as 1929, in *Transitional Poem*, the poet reproaches himself for wishing to escape into his private world instead of losing his identity among the masses. One comes across a note of disillusion in Day Lewis's political creed. Like all other intellectuals who, for a time, upheld communism as the panacea for the political and social ills of the time, but later realized its impracticability in real life, Day Lewis also, came to reckon with the failure of the 'Auden Group' to provide England with a truly popular poetry. As such, in the later years of the decade, he too, like Auden, develops his poetry towards a more Catholic humanitarianism.
Notes and References


2. ibid., P.38

3. ibid., P.49


5. ibid., P.153

6. ibid., P.154


8. ibid., P.209

9. ibid., P.210

10. ibid., P.211

11. ibid., P.211
12. ibid., P.211

13. ibid., P.212


22. op. cit., P.232

23. "The Advance of G. Day Lewis". (Daily Worker, October 19, 1938) P.7