CHAPTER ONE

Introduction
Absentism (1960s)

In 1960s and early 1970s a new attitude of poetry started to form itself in British poetry, which can be described as Absentist poetry. This new attitude according to Calvin Bedient is very significant and far removed from Romantic and Classical literature. Bedient points out that:

One kind of modern literature is both anti-Romantic and anti-Classical. Sceptical of everything (if only occasionally of its own scepticism), it thrusts aside even the darkened potential of the Classic view of life: the noble sense of the cost of virtue, of the limitations of happiness, of the fragility of hope. It is impatient to climb into its own negatives and drift beyond the point of return, free from disappointment at last (“Absentist,”18).

The main creed of Absentist poetry is to write about the hidden layers of meaning in life which fail to come to the forefront and are almost absent in our modern day. The Absentist poet depicts life with its inadequacies, and of people who suffer the disintegration of faith and Christianity.

Absentist movement of poetry of 1960s highlights the absence of peace and tranquility, lack of faith and, consequently suffers from the lack of being and lack of human consciousness. Absentism endeavours to warn mankind to be aware of his origin and not to lose himself in his pride of his achievements. Knowledge, science, discovery of the universe’s mysteries, the mysteries of his mind and psyche, analysis of his self-consciousness, all these make humans devoid of meaning and values. Thus what remains of a human being is something mechanical that automatically works without knowing what it is doing. The inauthenticity of man in modern life, his suffering of anxiety and anguish, absence of faith, failure of the past to guide him into
the future, and destitution of men in modern life, are the themes of Absentist poetry. Peter Childs believes that, modern man is "spiritually bankrupt" and "culturally fragmented". Man searches and researches for self-referentiality but the more he tries to find himself the less he achieves. Absentist poets in their poems trace, the problem of identity which reached its culmination in the 1960s and 1970s. But, these problems are not just related to our past but also the present time where in we confront these enigmatic problems.

To understand Absentist poetry one needs to trace its background, from where and when it began. To achieve this aim the thesis goes back to almost a century which is, from the last decade of the Victorian age. Absentism is a continuation of Modernism. Modernism is an important movement that started approximately a century ago. There is no unanimity between critics and anthologists as to when exactly Modernism started. In this Introduction, the stream of modern poetry during Modernism will be considered in order to contextualize ‘Absentist School of Poetry’. It also attempts to show how modern poetry in Britain after the Anglo-American Modernism of T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound stretches to the Modernism of Auden, Spender, MacNeice and other ‘schools’ and ‘groups’.

Two important elements influence Modernism in Britain; first, Symbolism and the verse libre in French, the second a hybrid Anglo-American Imagism. Peter Childs in his book *Modernism* claims that: “In poetry, Modernism is associated with moves to break from the iambic pentameter as the basic unit of verse, to introduce verse libre, symbols and other new forms of writing (3).”

Modernism generally is specified by the break of traditional rules in literature, art, architecture, film and painting. Nageswara Rao with regard to break from the tradition writes:
There is a way of being traditional which is modern. This consists of not of going into the tradition, but of reinterpreting it, in order that it might provide ways and techniques for seeing and transforming modern material. The modernists did not go back into tradition, they brought it forward as an instrument with which they could attack the present (8).

Modernism philosophically is based on the ideas of the great thinkers of nineteenth and twentieth century such as Sir Charles Lyell, T.E. Hulme, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. In his book: Aspects of Modern European Mind John Cruickshank says that the ones mentioned above are at the same time “destroyers and creators”. They are destroyers of what we call tradition, in order to change the whole universe for man. They are creators of “the tradition of the new”, new point of view and “new dimension to our view of ourselves” (2).

Philosophical Background

Absentist philosophy is rooted in the social and political situation of the twentieth century which initiated the form and growth during the early years of Modernism. ‘Absentist School of Poetry’ can be compared to a volcanic movement, in the 1960s and 70s. Absentist poetry did not emerge overnight or spontaneously. It was a product of decades of frustration and disillusionment.

The notion of Absentism in the poetry of Absentist poets: Thomas Kinsella, Geoffrey Hill, W.S. Graham and Ted Hughes has to do with the attitudes of scepticism of every thing, “disappointment” and “nothingness”. To elucidate this notion of Absentism and to trace the contours of these poets’s mental growth, one
should begin to find the main underpinning of Absentist philosophy which has roots
in the philosophy of modern time such as Existentialism and Nihilism.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was one of the influential philosophers on modern
literature. In *The World as Will and Idea* he portrays his pessimistic view of life and
universe. Actually, it was Schopenhauer who for the first time brings the issue of the
“will to power”. He was an atheist. So, for him the world was “only a physical
manifestation of an underlying cosmic reality … the will” (Childs 56). The will to
have more power, increased the human’s eagerness to power either with human
thought behind that or the force of desire and instinct. The pessimistic literature of
twentieth century nourishes upon Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882), ‘law of the survival of the fittest’, highlights the
absence of morality, humanity and religious beliefs in human life. He dehumanized
mankind and reduced him to a mere result of progressing “cyclical” movement. Darwin
connected the progenitors of man to apes.

Darwin’s argument that sex and natural selection were at the root of
human development suggested a different kind of species from the
previous belief in one unchanging humanity modelled in God’s image.
Humans were closer to animals than to a God, and nature was evolving
not static. This suggested different narratives of human history: not one
of a single progression towards a final judgment day; but a cyclical
movement within nature, in which reproduction and survival of the
fittest increasingly became recognised as the forces behind human
endeavour, not rational thought or spiritual belief (Childs 37).
He brings the principle of his revolutionary theory in *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Darwin’s theory has been the worst assault on God and religious faith of man. Frederic Nietzsche (1844-1900), perhaps is the most fundamental Absentist philosopher by bringing the concept of “God is dead” in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Although he was the follower of Kierkegaard, with regard to religion they were different. “God is dead, we have killed him” separates the human race from Christianity and other religious beliefs for ever. He brings the theories of the “Übermensch”: “Superman or Over man” which led him to the “will to power” in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to complete his existentialism. He recognizes that there is nothing to replace God and in the end we are confronted by nothingness as the core of our existence. In 1886 he added an article: “Essay in Self-Criticism” to his earlier book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and replaced ‘Superman’ by God. He gave importance to the individual and especially responsibility of an artist to “self-scrutinize”. He prefers the Dionysian (aesthetic pleasure) over the Apollonian (rational discourse). Art as “the actual metaphysical activity of mankind” replaced mortality and as a consequence the first secular literature in Modernism was born. In Modernism “natural selection replaced God’s ordering of creation and a human will to power eclipsed the Divine will” (Childs 55). The First World War (1914-18) washed away the remaining supernatural beliefs of people and they readily followed Darwin, Freud and Marx. In *The Will to Power* (1901), Nietzsche says life is an opportunity for man to possess the maximum power over the universe including man and animals. His ideas lead to the rise of “dictatorship, asceticism, self-punishment or sadism” in the political power of Fascism and Nazism. He believes that: “We moderns, we half-barbarians. We are in the midst of our bliss only when we are most in danger” (Childs
The Will to Power and his theory of Nihilism were the philosophical sources for the Second World War and other crises in Europe and around the world. Nihilism according to Nietzsche has two dimensions: “Active Nihilism”, the sign of increased power of spirit, and “Passive Nihilism” a sign of decreased power of spirit. “Active Nihilism” is the source of violently destructive wars and political crises. “Passive Nihilism” is the source of futility, resignation and cynicism. Arguably Nihilism in both its dimensions has direct effect on Absentism. Violence and the will to dominate along with scepticism and negation are underpinnings of Absentism.

The great philosophers of the time whose influence can be seen even today according to Abrams are Martin Heidegger and his followers Jean- Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. He writes:

After the 1940s ... there was a widespread tendency especially prominent in the existential philosopher of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd (Glossary 1).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), in his Existentialism tries to describe the concept of “being in the world”. He tries to answer the questions “what it is to be?” and “what is it to exist?” in his book Being and Time he explains the mood of the human being after reaching the level of the awareness of “being in the world”. It is a painful conscious of self-knowledge of being “worldish”. From these fundamental elements of Existentialism he moves on to give more details. He introduces “care”, “concern”,

57).
or “involvement” of being in the world. Then he establishes “Time” as a dimension of being in the world and being involved in the world. So human beings come to this awareness that his being is “temporal” and he is headed towards death. “To exist at all involves moving forward into a future which contains our inevitable death. This brings us to another of Heidegger’s central themes— the fact that the whole nature of our being is time-saturated” (Magee 63). Being aware of death gives more painful awareness of self; it gives “anxiety” and “conscience”. But Heidegger makes us ready for this possibility of death; it is from here which life appears. The question “since there is death, what meaning does my life have”, brings out the truth of life. The truth is that a being needs to search for a sense or a meaning of his existence.

One of the elements of Existentialism is “thrown-ness” (Geworfenheit), we are thrown into existence, and we did not choose to come to this world. Then our existence is imposed upon us. Life, as a task, along with its temporariness, is a dynamic phenomenon; “it never is but always is to be” (64).

Anxiety is in the core of our existence. Magee explains that “man’s attempt to run away from his own anxiety, to evade the reality of his own mortality, leads to something that constitutes another great Existentialist theme: alienation” (64). Anxiety stands as base for alienation. Alienation in its second meaning in Existential philosophy means “to be a stranger”. Alienation is the theme of modern literature, especially when it comes to the question of identity and lack of self-knowledge. It deals with the banality, emptiness and meaninglessness of human life.

Technology is another concern of Heidegger. Technology is what the modern civilization is committed to, without technology the modern life is not possible. Opposite to the technology of modern life, is poetry. To comprehend the relation between technology and poetry, one needs to go back to the language. Heidegger
points out the differences between technological language and the poetic language. In the point of view of technology, language is treated as a tool and an instrument which can be “manipulated and controlled” by the human’s will. But in the point of view of poetry, human’s will does not have any role in writing a poem, a poem needs to come by itself. Even as a reader the poem has to work on the reader, then one can understand it. The poetical language works free from the will of human being. Heidegger observes that in the technological language of the positivists and experimentalists, language was controlled by human’s will. An example of this idea is Francis Bacon believes that: “we must put nature to the rack, to compel it to answer out question” (qtd. in Magee, Men 67). It was in the seventeenth century that scientific experimentation created a huge gap between human beings and nature. Later in Victorian and modern time it continued and even lead to a break and distraction in human’s nature itself. To find the truth of life, man needs to submit himself to nature in a way that the Eastern philosophy of Buddhism and Hinduism, guide human beings to do.

Wanda T. Gregory in his article: “Heidegger on Traditional Language and Technological Language” which is based on a lecture by Heidegger in 1962, writes about the difference of these two languages. According to Heidegger technological language is “a language that is technologically determined by what is most peculiar to technology” (2). Metaphysics defines language in relation to thinking. Human beings think and convey information about objects. Thus language is a “medium” for expression. It becomes “scientific-technological knowing”. The other term of technological language is metalinguistics: a “technicalization of all languages into the sole operative instrument of interplanetary information”. Out of this metalinguistics comes out “Logistics”; the “unbroken rule of metaphysics”. The negative element of
this logistics is the destruction of logical tradition and the decay and dissolution of philosophy. Thus language reduces to a mere instrument to calculate information and manipulate objects, the example Heidegger gives is the use of abbreviations of words and the combinations of their initials.

“Language machines” is another form of technological language. Along with that we have translation machines, electronic brains, etc. This question will arise “what is the essence of language itself that it allows for its transformation into a technological language, into language?” (5). The essence of language is its ability to say and to show. This “Saying-Showing … is limited to the mere making of signs for the communication of information”. By interpreting language in this way we fall for the false attitude that we are the masters of language machine, but Heidegger says that it is the language machine which “‘takes language into its management and masters the essence of human being’” (qtd. in “Heidegger,” 6). Because language dominates over being; Wanda T. Gregory writes:

The interpretation and form of ‘language as information’ and of ‘information as language’ is, in this sense, a circle determined by language, and in language, within ‘the web of language’. Hence, Heidegger has referred to language as ‘the danger of all dangers’ that ‘necessarily conceals in itself a continual danger for itself.’ In fact, ‘we are the stakes’ in the ‘dangerous game and gamble’ that the essence of language plays with us (qtd. in “Heidegger,” 6).

Thus the essence of language is the essence of being. The essence of logos as Saying-Showing is the essence of identity of being as thinking and speaking. Then “thinking is in the service of language” (6) because human beings think with language and
words. “our ability to speak is what marks us as human being so that language is our very “foundation” of the human being” (7).

The essence of our being is in the danger of technological language. In such a situation Heidegger laments for a poet, “the poet is exposed to the divine lightnings. This is spoken of in the poem which we must recognize as the purest poetry” (Heidegger, *Existence* 308). Heidegger introduces the “traditional language” as “not-yet-formalized language”. It is the nature of language that lacks formalization. Therefore, traditional language or “non-technological” language is the language of poetry. It is connected to the original and “unspoken” truth. The poet writes about what is not spoken yet, what is not shown yet. Poetry according to Heidegger “does not, on principle, let itself be programmed” (9).

Being influenced by the Existentialism of Heidegger’s theory of ‘Being’ and ‘Dasein’, as infrastructure of Absentist idea of life and being, is the Absentist poet whose mind is always in “angst”, as he knows that he is “thrown into the world”. He knows that there is nothing beyond the world. What is absent? Peace, hope, humanity, moral values, faith and theology? But beyond all these elements the human being himself is absent. Certainly one is present in flesh and blood, but actually he is very absent from those values which make him a human being. As described by T.S. Eliot human beings became hollow men, “we are hollow men / we are stuffed men”. In the modern world, man is reduced to a tool, a robot, a machine, that works unconsciously.

Death and sin are the other forms of anxiety. Ambiguously modern man is always aware of the unsubstantiated form of his life; he does what he wants to do, meaning there is no reason for a man, as to why he is doing so. There is no sense of purpose. Thus, according to Heidegger we are what we think we are. So our essence
depends on our perception (interpretation) of our deeds. Such a sense is chaotic and Heidegger names it “Unheimlich”, meaning ‘disorientation’ and ‘displacement’.

The catastrophe of the century such as the crucial years of the world’s breakdown in the World Wars and the Holocaust and the extermination of Jews, and the conflict in Vietnam and Japan are the convulsions that caused the rise of Absentism and Absurdity in late twentieth century literature. In the classical period, man had hope though he knew it was fragile. He had happiness though it was limited, and he had the noble sense of virtue, whereas in modern life, man is impatient and has lost all these values. It is painful for him to face his negative attitude and goes beyond that, and set himself free from that. What he feels is vexation, as a mood of his time. He lost the way out from death and the way into being. The struggles between death and life make him frustrated. “The new writer feels the pangs of isolated selfhood and the consequent dread of nothingness.” Ecstasy, the Romantic vision of life, never can save him from his anxieties. “The only depth he knows in himself is the one in which he is drowning” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 18).

Some philosophers made human beings aware that the world is without any religious hope and vision. Almost hundred years later man realised the absence and lack of faith in God. Bedient in this regard writes about modern man:

His hand is on the naked wire and he is held there helpless, a celebrant of a sort but a grimly desperate one. ‘... The whole and every individual’, writes Schopenhauer, ‘bears the stamp of a forced condition. …’ It is Hughes’s distinction to be the poet of this truth. As a thinker he is a hangman, not a priest. (Eight 95)

What else is there to save man; love that is “clashing armies” and need to be saved from its own ignorance? Or faith? or “God is an Almighty Gnat” or identity that is
“disemboweled by analytical self consciousness”? So “the alien out-sidedness of space, the insubstantiality of time and identity, the isolation belying language and love –against these he lacks protection” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 18). The only thing remaining for him is his certitude about negation and disappointment. ‘Christianity’, ‘transcendental Romanticism’, ‘rational and evolutionary humanism’ are only advertised but are conspicuously absent. Man knows mere life which is existence.

The pessimistic idea in poetry is not a new theme in Absentist poetry. It is seen in Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and gradually developed in the poetry of the twentieth century and the poets of the World Wars and after that the poets of 1950s, 60s and 70s, in the poetry of Ted Hughes and other Absentist poets. Thomas Hardy believes that human destiny in the universe is ruled by chance. Such a nihilistic philosophy of life makes clear the aspects of human sorrow, loss or frustration. “The world and humanity are all part of one vast un-consciousness– ‘an ever unconscious automatic sense, unweeitng why or whence”’ (Ward 157). Incapacitated faith of God, the increase of the waste and frustration in human life are the moods of twentieth century poetry. The span between 1900 and 1970 are the crucial years of human changes from contentment to depression, from optimism to dissatisfaction, from faith to faithlessness where men are completely drowned in frustration, despondency and defeatism. A.C. Ward believes that:

The disruption produced between 1914 and 1918 by the War might not of itself have unseated Romanticism, which had prevailed in literature and in the general conduct of life since the last years of the eighteenth century. It was post-war economic and spiritual depression, and deepening dejection in a world impermeable to optimistic idealism in the nineteen-thirties … (196).
The political predicament, economic crises, clashes of cultures and surrounding environments are only the surface phenomena of Absentist poetry. At the same time if we go to the depth of the idea of Absentism, we see the crises started from man, going down to the roots of his essence, the cynical idea, the absence of values, making him sick. Kinsella believes that; “it is we who have, from our inner wills, brought chaos, and we who must, from our inner wills, brings new order” (qtd. in Fitzsimons, “Sea,” 335). Now it has percolated from the surface to deep down. It is not social, rather individual. It involves the question of identity. Kinsella, the avant-garde poet of the Absentist movement, contends with the crises of identity, not only related to the time that British conquered Ireland and humiliated his nation, but also because it deals with the problems of human inauthenticity. Inauthenticity of man becomes a dilemma for philosophers, psychologists and poets. The war transformed its fronts and the individual is against himself. Man although is in his house, with his family (if still there is a family), is alienated from everybody, and even from himself. It is a kind of “Solidity of a particular person in particular places” (Harmon 86). Absentism not only deals with the absence of values and meaning, but also the Absence of consciousness and being, absence of man from himself. Man all of a sudden found himself rootless, alone, estranged and lost in the world. The poets of 1960s and 1970s are aware of the absences and lacunae. They are the poets in the ‘destitute time’. In the poetry of this age they react deeply to the abyss and absence of time. Shaver in his review of Poetry, Language, Thought by Heidegger about Holderlin writes:

Holderlin held a triptychal view of history. He saw a past in which man enjoyed proximity and communion with the godhead. Present man, i.e., modern man, however, has lost this relationship; he has been abandoned by the godhead, and left in the abyss of night to “wait and
watch” for the possible future return of the divinities. Man’s station is a precarious position in which the total burden of the world is placed on the shoulders of man himself. As the result of the default of the gods, man exists in a destitute time; he is challenged by the very destitution of his time not to surrender to an easy nihilism. He must hold out and dwell in holy night, which is the presence of divine absence (745).

In literary history, 1922 became a landmark in Modernism, it was in this year; simultaneously some magnificent works such as James Joyce’s Ulysses, T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”, Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room, and Katherine Mansfield’s The Garden Party were published. These explosive works announced Modernism, not only in the literary field but also in the fields of culture, art, economics, politics, etc. The implication of these works along with other experimental works of literature reflect the negative influence of war, doubt about tradition, harsh realities of human and individual isolation. Peter Childs in Modernism affirms that:

The Modernists who followed after World War I were more noticeable for their pessimism and their sense of a failed, fragmented society, in which the uncomprehending individual was swallowed up by huge forces outside of personal control, leaving many writers with the sense that they should withdraw into their art and an intense, aesthetic world where sense, shape and other could be achieved (27).

Absentist Poetry and its Literary Background

The political troubles, economic hardships, clash of cultures and spiritual depression ruined the life of the masses. The writers of the period could not but react to these
with deep concern and a great sense of urgency. Therefore, one can observe that in
“The Waste Land” and in other modern literary phenomena, the writer was anxious
with ‘philosophical speculation’, ‘linguistic innovation’ and ‘misanthropic despair
overlaid with humour’. But before 1920s there were some poets who paved the way
for Modernist poetry to emerge. Between the Victorian age and Modernism, there is a
gap of thirty to forty years. Kanadey mentions that there were four poetic phases.
They are Decadents of 1890s, the Edwardians (1901- 1910), the Georgians (1912-
1922) and finally the First World War poets.

The Decadents (1890s)
The Decadence movement started in the last two decades of nineteenth century with
the work of French poet Charles Baudelaire. Theophile Gautier in his “Notice”
summarised the characteristics of the Decadence in Baudelaire’s “Flowers of Evil”.
This poem bursts with morbid pessimism;

Oh death

Pour us your poison and let it strength us!

We wants, such is the fire that burns our brains,

To plunge in to the depths of the abyss, hell or heaven, what does it matter?

To the depths of the unknown to find something new (Baudelaire 14).

B.W. Wells explains the mood of the Decadence poetry; it is a “poetic expression of a
state of weary yet restless reaction from the confidence of scientific determinism, a
sort of literary hyper-aesthesis, rising at times to a real emotional hysteria” (20). To
achieve “the systematic defragments of all the senses” as Arthur Rimbaud said, the
Decadence writers attempt drugs and sexual experimentation (Abrams, Glossary 43).
The Decadence movement was not a negative movement for its exponents but later it turned out to be the darkest literature of the ages. Decadent writers believe that to achieve a “strange sensation” they need to follow an elaborate and an artificial style in art since art is opposite to nature and biological nature of human beings and the norms of morality. They try to direct art into a completely bizarre direction away from the human’s instinctual nature. Joris Karl Huysmans in his novel A Rebours (1884) introduces a degenerated society with the pessimistic, violent and gloomy philosophy of the restless and discontent men in their worn-out and ruined life.

The Victorian writer Thomas Hardy in his novels especially in Jude the Obscure writes about the human beings in the age of doubt and absence of faith. He portrays the isolated individuals away from God and morality. In spite of the “meliorist” that Hardy believed he is, his novels and his poems are pessimistic and deals with the disastrous fate of his characters. In the poem “Hap”, he depicts sorrow and loss in human’s life:

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: “Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!”

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
Half-eased in that a powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed (Hardy 7).

With this background the writers and the poets in the Decadence period are drowned in the mood of sadness and disbelief in the power of a benevolent God. On
the other hand, scientific progression and positivism mesmerised human beings. The rise of detective and science fiction gave power to human beings beyond capacity. But the positivism followed by pessimism, disappointment and frustration of man and the mood of sarcasm grew like fungus. In England the Decadent Movement is evident in the poems of Arthur Charles Swinburne and in the work of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson. The Decadent movement came under the direct influence of French literature and culture. It was a reaction to the bathos of literature of 1890s.

Arthur Symons (1865-1945) introduces Symbolism of the French poets such as Rimbaud, Mallarme and Baudelaire in his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). The techniques of Symbolism greatly influenced the leaders of Modernism such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound.

**Edwardian Period (1901-1910)**

The Edwardian period was the age of carelessness and the flashiness about literature, “a vulgar age of conspicuous enjoyment by those who could afford it” (Sokhanvar 973). Poetry especially in this period was in its lowest level, it was “deeply conservative and insular” (Childs 94). According to Peter Childs Edwardian poets are William Watson (1858-1935), W. E. Henley (1849-1903), Laurence Binyon, Edmond Thomas, Henry Newbolt, John Masefield, W. E. Housman, and Alfred Austin. Childs introduces Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) the two maverick poets, who had influence on the later English poetry.
Imagist Poets (1902-1917)

Imagism was an Anglo-American movement in poetry under the influence of Ezra Pound (1885-1972), T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) and F. S. Flint (1885-1960). They were influenced by French Symbolist poets, Japanese haiku, and the poetic theory and the philosophical idea of T. E. Hulme. Imagists practised free verse, and the new stylistic principle. The Imagist poets went under some fundamental revisions, the poets felt that poetry needs more intellectual aesthetic and more complex language; irony, wit and pun along with the colloquial language as the elements which were absent in the Victorian and Georgian periods. They reverted to Classicism, since their poetry was based on “concrete visual metaphors” and “definite visual flashes or images” (Childs 98). Hard images along with their fight against facile and emotional ideas bring them closer to the Absentist poets.

Ezra Pound’s ‘A Few Don’ts for Imagists’ (1913), Des Imagistes (1914) and A Retrospect (1918) and also Amy Lowell’s three volumes of Some Imagist Poets (1915-17) were the other important works for Imagist poets. John Gould Fletcher and Richard Arlington and Hilda Doolittle were other important figures of this short lived Imagism. The Imagist movement, which originated in London and was prominent in England and America from around 1909 to 1917, was crucial to the development of Modernist poetry. Many English and American poets were influenced by Imagism, such as D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Conrad Aiken, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens.

Georgian Poets (1911-1922)

John Masefield (1878-1967), Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas and Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) are the most important poets of this period. They wrote delicate lyrical poetry, often concerned with nature and the rural area. Their style was a break from the poetry of the late nineteenth century, and the Decadence which had evolved from aestheticism. Kanadey writes “The limitedness of the Georgian poets’ range of feeling, the vagueness of their emotions, the superficiality of their interest and their stereotyped techniques have been generally accepted as their shortcomings” (119).

Georgian poetry was simple and easy to understand; it had a warm and emotional mood and a plain language. They were not interested in religion and philosophy. This period was peaceful and stable until the World War I broke out. Their pastoral English life and style was in contrast with the life and style of their next generation of the trench poets. Under the calm surface of this period, radical writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats emerged and overshadowed all the literary movements before 1920s.

The War Poets

Rupert Brooke a young soldier poet in his poem “The Soldier” shows the idealistic image of war, which in the beginning of Great War many think like him:

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed y the rivers, blest by suns of home (105).

But very soon this sweet dream of war changes by those who experienced war and wrote about it. They portray the absurdity and horror of war. In his “Glory of Women” Siegfried Sassoon writes:

You can’t believe that British troops “retire”

When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,

Trampling the terrible corpses- blind with blood

O German mother dreaming by the fire,

While you are knitting socks to send your son

His face is trodden deeper in the mud (100).

Well established poets such as Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas were quite mature in being not deceived by the nationalist, propagandist and illusionistic idea of war, so what they wrote about the war was harsh and bitter reality of war rather than the old-fashioned Victorian bravery and honour of the glories of war.

Thomas Hardy’s “Channel Firing” written in 1914, is a poem about the horror of war. The speakers are the skeletons in the church yard which the gunfire “loud enough to waken the dead”, awaken them. They think it is “the Judgment-day” but

God called, “No;

It’s gunnery practice out at sea

Just as before you went below;

The world is as it used to be:

All nations striving strong to make

Red war yet redder” (287).
The poem depicts the falling state of human civilization when in its two last lines the poet mentions historical places such as “Stourton Tower”, “Camelot” and “Stonehenge”, the places which during history witnessed many wars and massacres.

A group of British soldier-poets who became prominent during the First World War, the best-known being Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Edward Thomas (1878-1917) Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) were referred to as the War Poets. The main impact of their poetry came through its depiction of the horrors of war, bringing the reality of events home to the British public. They were the war poets who washed out the dream like Georgian poetry which was a vague and disillusioned patriotic image of war. They brought first hand experience of the realities of warfare.

As Jon Silkin believes we do not separate a group as war poets because of “alteration in literary attitudes”, but gather them as a group for the new circumstances and terrifying situations that they went through, they utter the greatest ferocity of their age in their language and words (Silkin 165).

Separate from the groups of poetry there were some individual iconic figure, who had their influence on Absentist poetry.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

He is the most well-known Absurd writer. He became famous after publishing his Metamorphosis (1915) and The Trial (1945). In his Metamorphosis, the hero changes to a cockroach, to show how a human being is transformed to a bizarre existence, an isolated creature, a being without meaning, without value, a piece of nothingness. The same idea of Absurdity emerged in the plays of Samuel Beckett.
Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

According to Calvin Bedient, Beckett can be considered “an unexceptional Absentist”. In his Murph (1938), Waiting for Godot (1955), and also in The Unnamable (1960), he successfully portrays the irrationalism, helplessness and absurdity of modern life. The loneliness and the meaninglessness of life which is expressed in these works are painful.

The Absurdity of Beckett as an Irish man in self exile is more universal compare to Thomas Kinsella’s Absentist poetry which preoccupied with the historical context of Ireland. The Godot in Waiting for Godot, according to Absentism is an ever absent being which never comes but in absurdity of Beckett there is hope and human beings are still waiting. Beckett portrays human beings thrown in the world with the scattered of hope, aim, purpose and faith, expecting a survival.

The other writers of this mood are: Tom Stoppard with his play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1966) and Travesties (1974), Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961), Thomas Pynchon’s V (1963), David Grossvogel’s The Blasphemers: The Theatre of Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, (1965) and Arnold P. Hinchliffe’s The Absurd (1969). Absentist poetry draws its inspiration from the avant-garde of modernism such as W.B. Yeats (1865-1936), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972). Later on in 1960s it gets its full strength in the poetry of Thomas Kinsella, Geoffrey Hill, W.S. Graham, and Ted Hughes. The Absentist School of Poetry continues almost the same path of modernism to change the tradition of versification that was started forty years ago in the poetry of Eliot, Yeats and Pound.

Bedient introduces T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), as a “quasi-Absentist”, since he provides a model for Absentist forms. Eliot alters the principles of traditional verse by breaking norms of versification; he presents hesitation, reluctance and frustration in
the format of the poem itself. Eliot was Pound’s fellow American expatriate. He was influenced by Pound’s Imagism. In his poems “Gerontion” (1920) and “The Hollow Men” (1925), his lines have suspended breaks. Especially in “The Hollow Men”, the poem itself has no form and it is like a broken stone. The lines are asymmetrical, and the stanzas are totally different in form from one another. After Great War literature and poetry like the human mind and life suffer from the chaos and crises as a result of war. Eliot endeavours to bring back order to life and literature of scattered man. Absentist poetry as modern poetry lacks “the unity of thought and feeling” and therefore, it tries to become a new literature of absence. The language of Absentist poet is vague and ambiguous, its mood is of sadness and disappointment, its style has irregular verse, broken sentences and asymmetrical lines, and it is the literature of inadequacies. Absentism is a literature which drowns in banality and laments its absence of values. Absentist poetry is four decades farther from Eliot’s “Prufrock” and it has its own etherized characters. Absentism in poetry is a belated movement compared to the concept of Absentism in painting, music, and fiction. In other words, the multiform ranges of Absentism in different literary genres appear in different ways. In fiction it is anti-novel and anti-hero resembling Kafka’s character. In drama it is Absurdity and in poetry it is Absentism. An abstract about similar concepts of Absentism in fiction and drama, followed by Absentism in poetry will be discussed in full length.

After the main stream of modern poetry in Britain, the next decade saw another poetic movement emerge, as a reaction to the problems and bathos of their time. They are famous as Auden Group, as W.H. Auden was their leader.
Auden Group (1930s)

Pylon Poets: a name given to British poets of the 1930s included W. H. Auden (1907-1973), Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Louis MacNeice (1907-1963), Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937), and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972). The nick-name originated in response to Stephen Spender’s poem ‘The Pylons’ as they included industrial artifacts such as pylons in their descriptions of landscape. The thirties Poets or ‘Auden Group’, began their work by publishing in the New Signatures (1932) and the New Country (1933). An important poetic anthology of the early thirties, the names of the members of Auden Group are linked for sharing the same themes, images, diction and the same reflections against the catastrophe of their time. The hegemony of three decades of British poetry in 1930s was challenged by this Group. They had a romantic tendency, and compared to the previous poets, they were more optimistic. It was twelve years after the war and after society had gradually recovered that they had some optimistic idea for a better future, although “in the prevailing cultural context and socio-political situation they could not have acted differently and there was in them a sense of vocation and purpose …” (Xii, Sasidharan).

The waves of intellectual communists on one side and the gradual disintegration of traditional and spiritual values, on the other side made them non-conformist poets of the thirties. The ‘Auden Group’ was concerned about the social and political aspects of human life. In that decade there were events like the worldwide economic depression and unemployment, the Spanish war and Fascism, the rise of Nazism and the beginnings of the Second World War. So as “revolutionary poets” after T. S. Eliot, their poetry was anxious about the absurdity of social crises. Being involved in social problems they selected their themes from the world of politics, national and international events. Hatred of the human condition reflected itself in violently
clashing images and broken syntax. They were eager to express their anxious attitudes rather than stick to a technique or an artistic innovation. Spender in his *Creative Element* comments, “regarded as a literary phenomenon the movement of 1930s reflected a shift from individualist vision towards an ideological orthodoxy based on political creed” (qtd. in Sasidharan 23). This is the reason that 1930s is famous as the “red decade”.

The Auden Group brought new attitudes to English poetry. In their simple language there was experimentation with language and rhythms. At the same time there was energy, excitement and animus in their poetry. As quoted by Sasidharan in *The Angry Young Men of Thirties* (1975), Eton Edward Smith noted that while the poets of 1920s focused on themes removed from reality, “the poets of 1930s represented a return to the objective world outside and the recognition of the importance of the things men do together in group political action, social structure, and cultural development.”(80) Like other generations after Modernism, they were influenced by T. S. Eliot and other poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wilfred Owen. But at the same time their movement “was a reaction against the rigid formalistic spirit of 1920s. It was in a very real sense also a fine continuation of Modernism” (Sasidharan 16). But still they were not able to fill the gaps in poetry. The next poetic movement after Auden Group, formed based on the Absence of religious motives and mythology, which was ignored by the Auden Group.

Apocalyptic School of Poetry (1940s)

The Apocalyptic School of Poetry was a movement in British Poetry which flourished in the late 1930s and early 1940s, with Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) as its foremost poet. The main poets behind the movement were Henry Treece (1911-
1966), George Granville Barker (1913-1991), W. S. Graham (1918-1986), and J. F. Hendry (1912-1986). They reacted against the Auden Group and his followers, the politically-oriented realist poetry of the 30s by drawing inspiration from mythology and the non-rational or anti-rational motives. They were audacious and used violent language along with the play of the subconscious mind in their poetry. Their work is generally regarded by critics as having little merit, being vastly inferior to that of Dylan Thomas. The Apocalyptic Poets took their name from the anthology of *The New Apocalypse* (1939), edited by J. F. Hendry and Henry Treece. The Apocalypse originally is the last book of New Testament, also known as the Revelation of St. John. It is a book purporting to reveal the future or final things: a revelation or disclosure. Religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, believe in historical eschatology. Eschatology in Judaism deals with the final destiny of the Jewish people and the world. In Christianity, they believe the end will begin with the return of the Messiah to establish the kingdom of God. Among Shiites in Islam it is believed that the Mahdi or restorer of the faith will come to inaugurate the last judgement, in which the good will enter heaven while the evil will fall into hell. Religion and religious attitude along with the endeavour of the poets to save them in the age of dread of destruction of civilization are significant themes in apocalyptic poetry of the forties. The expectation of an impending revolution in religion shows the absence of a Saviour who will come after the whole world is destroyed by the violence of human beings. The Apocalyptic vision of the end of the world emerges in the poetry of Christian authors, in the UK in 1940s. But one can observe the idea of the Apocalyptic even in different poets of dissimilar ages such as Classical pagan literature to Romantic and to Modernist poetry. One finds *Odyssey*, *Aeneid* and *Divine Comedy* as Apocalyptic poetry. William Franke in his book *Poetry and
Apocalypse (2009) writes that Milton and Blake followed Dante’s “a new sense of history as the arena in which the final truth of human existence is revealed” (20).

In Romantic poetry we have Wordsworth: who in his poem the Prelude asserts that:

I would record

How, in tyrannic times, some unknown man,

Unheard of in the Chronicles of Kings,

Suffer'd in silence for the love of truth. (Prelude 6)

In Modern poetry we have W.B. Yeast’s “The Second Coming”, which refers to Christ’s second coming and the time for establishment of order in the world. Yeats says that:

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi…

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stone sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour came round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Yeats 211)

“Behind Yeats’s poem”, points out Dyson, “is the upsurge that is still producing our modern chaos the explosion against civilization itself, the oppressive deadness of civilization, the spiritless materialism of it, the stupidity of it”(103). Another example for The Apocalyptic Poet is T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”, an example of Absentist poem as well as Apocalyptic, where he asserts:
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper (Eliot 59).

The above poems are concerned with millennialism of Christ. In 1940s, Henry Treece, J.F. Hendry, Thomas Kinsella and G.S. Frazer were recognised as apocalyptic poets. At the same time Dylan Thomas also dealt with the themes of war, violence and cruelty of men. So in the effect of such themes, their language is filled with disrupted syntax and clashing metaphors. “The spectre of death and destruction was uppermost in the public mind and the forties needed a new poetic idiom. This was supplied by Dylan Thomas, the apocalyptic poets and poets of the Celtic Renaissance. Their neo-platonic poetry of visionary intensity and thundering rhythms fulfilled a religious need and affirmed life amidst death and decay and disintegration” (Ramanan 3).

The Apocalyptic poet was filled with nostalgia for the past, when men were under the influence of the order of nature. But in the contemporary condition of their world, they suffered from the absence of the order of nature and regulation. The only thing he felt and saw were chaos, violence, war and complete destruction. The poet tries to find a way out of all these disasters. Their poetry is through examples and messages about the alienation and loss of personal individuality which show we are dehumanized. At the same time the apocalyptic poets, share a basic attitude to transcend today’s society and search what can save men of tomorrow. They endeavour to demonstrate the utopia that after eschatology, there will be harmony, hope, and order. Like the past, there will be a future.
They are written in the persona of the visionary poet-prophet. “The Bard”, who present, past, and future sees; they incorporate the great political event of their age in suitably grandiose literary forms, especially the epic and ‘the great Ode’; they present a panoramic view of part history in a cosmic setting, in which the agents are in part historical and in part allegorical or mythological and the overall design is apocalyptic; they envision a dark past, a violent present, and an immediately impending future which will justify the history of suffering man by its culmination in an absolute good (Abrams, *Natural 332*).

Absentism and Apocalyptic Poetry both deal with violence, cruelty, brutality and social crises. While the Absentist poet applies the present time and the depth of the crises that men drown there, apocalyptic poets go a few steps further and talk about re-creation after The End, while peace and the realm of good will be the only Kingdom in the world. What Absentism portrays is the past, and history that is ruined; the present that is the ‘sea of disappointment’; and the future, that is not going to be better than now and the past. There is no Utopia for the Absentist poet to give him hope and no nostalgia to build hopes on. “The present is the lit fuse of the future, the fuse burn on, the expected illumination does not come. The present is too fine a point to support a whole being” (Bedient 23). This is the main reason why Absentism is skeptical of every thing. Apocalypse were criticised by their next generation, Linda M. Shires writes “the poets of the fifties insisted that the forties was a decade of punch-drunk apocalyptic writers, a time of irrational excess, poetry solely of myth and dream. They dismissed the period as drowning in the illogical unconscious storms of such poets as Henry Treece, J.F. Hendry, and Dylan Thomas” (qtd. in Lopez 15).
The Movement (1950s)

The term given to a generation of British poets who came to prominence in the 1950s, of whom the best-known were Philip Larkin (1922-1985), Robert Conquest (1917- ), and Donald Davie (1922-1995). For the first time J. D. Scott, the editor of the ‘Spectator’, talked about The Movement Poets. Donald Davie’s *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) was a manifesto for The Movement. Their style was against the free form and romantic and emotional tone of poets such as Dylan Thomas and W. S. Graham; they initiated a style of verse which was intellectual, witty, and carefully crafted. Other Movement poets include Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, D. J. Enright, and John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings and John Holloway. In *Articulate Energy* (1955), Davie discusses the innovative techniques of the modern poets which they deployed in their poetry. Philip Larkin’s *The North Ship* (1945), Thom Gun’s *Fighting Terms* (1945) and *A Sense of Movement* (1958), Elizabeth Jennings’ *A Way of Looking* (1955), *A Sense of the World* (1958), Enright’s *Poets of the 1950s* are some of the books associated with The Movement. Their work gained prominence in the anthology *New Lines* (1956), edited by Robert Conquest. Donald Davie was the substantial theorist and critic in the Movement group, but the role of Conquest was significant as a propagandist. In his Introduction to *New Lines*, he establishes the way in which the other critics and the audiences would see the Movement. Tony Lopez is of the opinion that:

The worst of the mannerisms in [W. S. Graham] case is the hieratic solemnity with which he takes his own poetic vocation. For he is one of those poets who make the writing of poetry into the subject of the poems they write. The commonsense view is that this drastically limits the importance and the interest of what they write; and I think this is
true. Yet if once we admit, as Mr. Graham seems to require, that a poem is an artefact, not a communique, it is difficult to complain about the materials that go into it— it is the making that counts, not what it is made of. (16)

Donald Davie tries to relieve the Movement from the influence of ‘symbolist-Modernist aesthetic’. He believes that diction of a poem has to be selected from the language of people as Shakespeare and Hopkins did. “These poets can be said to use language rather than diction”.

The unique feature of the Movement poets is that they write poetry as a “statement” which is easy to understand, poetry, in their point of view, “is a piece of intelligible communication, something Larkin, Conquest and the other Movementeers expect poetry to be” (Ramanan 42).

The Movement is prominent for its ever most restricted, rationalist and empiricist poetry of their time. They were famous as Movementeers because they believed that there must be a movement from the poet to the poem and from the poem to the reader. Poems have to be able to convey the feeling of the poet to the reader, which is possible only when the language of a poem is closer to the language of people. They use ordinary language with a neutral tone and select themes from everyday life but still it was too sophisticated for the ordinary reader. Their readers never were among ordinary people but rather were poets and the poetically educated elite. One of the most important characteristics of Movement poetry is the importance of the reader. For the first time in modern British poetry the role of the reader as one side of a triangle; poet, poem, and reader comes to the fore. An emotional concept is that what a poet feels, a constructed verbal device, that is the poem and the reader
who recreates the poet’s experience. Philip Larkin in his book *The Pleasure Principle* (1983), asserts that poetry, is “born of the tension between what (the poet) non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who has not had his experience” (Ramanan 39). This person is the reader who is able to recreate the poet’s experience and understand the non-verbal feeling and construct the verbal device that is the poem. So for Movementeers “Poetry”, as Davie pointed out “is based on a contract between writer and reader; and as Larkin pointed out the reader is required if only to complete the experience of the poem” (Ramanan 36).

In 1945, gradually society recovered from the war. After some changes, there was peace and society developed. In 1950s, the post war era, the British were witness to the economic growth. In comparison to some decades earlier, in 1950s there was more of a tendency towards poetry. Like 1917, when the Tripos was established in Cambridge the poets of 1950s, too, tried to recreate “order out of social anarchy, culture out of nature and English awareness amongst the Philistines” (Ramanan 20).

Blake Morrison points out that:

> By the end of 1952 something approximating to a movement had certainly developed: contacts had been made, friendships formed, correspondences begun. More importantly, statements and poems contributing to the formation of a group aesthetic had appeared in various small press and little magazine outlets; few of the poets consciously ‘subscribed’ to a programme, but all helped to further it in one way or another. (41)

Movement poetry was against the complexity and obscurity of the modern poetry. Their work “is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and, like modern philosophy, is empirical in its attitude to all that comes” (Sokhanvar 1139).
Although Movement poetry was the third generation after Modernism, yet it was in some lines diverse from them. For example, as opposed to T. S. Eliot, they do not apply ‘polyglot of tones’ or allusion to myth, religion and tradition, they also do not experiment. They are not concerned with “the political obsession of Marxist 30s” and “the lush loose emotionalism of 40s”. “The 1950s, while often regarded in retrospect as a period of cultural conformity and complacency was marked by the emergence of vigorous anti-establishment and anti-traditional literary movements” (Abrams, Natural 148).

Larkin in The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse (1973) points out his position against Modernism. For him an English tradition is not from Yeats, Joyce and Beckett as Celtic and Irish writers, and T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as American poets but from writer like Thomas Hardy and the nineteenth century poets. He believes that it was First World War that interrupts this tradition when many poets died in the war. Morrison in his book The Movement points out; Larkin portrays the monument of the youth of 1914 which died in the Wars and also a lament for the loss of ‘pure English poetic tradition’. The Movementeers completely ignore the Modernist writers and poets such as Pound, Joyce and Beckett. With regard to Joyce they believe that “Ulysses was importantly a reworking of classical myth, rather than a radical unworking of the English language” (Lopez 14). Davie observes that Beckett’s poems are: “a mish-mash of Joyce and Eliot”. Thus they cut off the Modernist poets and writers from the tradition of the British literary arena and misrepresent the poets of 1940s.

With this literary background, one finds that the Absentist movement of poetry of 1960s is a few steps ahead of their previous generation such as Auden Group, Apocalypse and the Movementeers. Ted Hughes believes that the movement poets
were still under the control of tradition with its “terrible magnetic power of the
tradition to grip poets and hold them”. He says:

One of the things [the New Lines] poets had in common I think was the
post-war mood of having had enough … enough rhetoric, enough
overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the
id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new
worlds. …. The second war after all was a colossal negative revelation.
… It set them dead against negotiation with anything outside the
cosiest arrangement of society. They wanted it cosy. It was a heroic
position. …. Now I came a bit later. I hadn’t had enough. I was all for
opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there. (Faas,

*Unaccommodated* 201)

Absentist poets try to escape from any influence of politics like the Auden Group did;
escape the religious issues of Apocalyptic poetry and also avoid the nationalism and
Britishness like Movementeers.

What we call Absentism, a poetical movement in Britain, dates primarily from the
early 1960s. It begins as a reaction in a changed world to “the persistence of the
mainstream tradition from the 1950s.” Absentism is also known as ‘Cosmopolitan’
movement in poetry without concern for ‘Celtic’, ‘Scottish’ or ‘English’, since the
four main avant-gardes of Absentism belong to three different nations. That is the
reason why Absentism is not a pure British movement, but Anglo-Irish. Absentism
deals with the concept of absence, lack, and inauthenticity in man. Absentist poets
find this lack at the core of every thing.

The fundamental thought process of Absentist is unconditional skepticism of
every thing. This kind of skepticism goes through the roots, reaches down to the
deepest contemplation, philosophy, faith and beliefs of man and widens the gap between man and his world. Man in the Absentist world is an isolated individual, like Kinsella’s hero of *Tain*: “the bronze hero / sagging half covered off his upright” (323). When man tries to put himself aside from this alienation he shatters his life by analytical self-consciousness. He finds a lack in the centre of his consciousness.

Absentism is a post-religious literature. ‘Post’ in the sense of ‘after’ and ‘beyond’, so Absentism is beyond religion. In the Absentist world, religion does not have the same responsibility as it had in Classical, Romantic and or even in the modern period. Devotion for God in Romantics or Transcendentalists is very essential since man searches his release and freedom in God and Nature. But now in the Absentist era “the universe is not governed by divine love but by power” (Hirschberg 88). The position of God and Christianity for an Absentist poet and in the Absentist world is shaken. In Modernism we have lack of faith but this is totally different from the absence of faith in Absentism. T. S. Eliot, in his “Hollow Men” shows people who have lost their faith. Christian beliefs have not been blamed, instead he blames the person himself because they “torture themselves with knowledge of a numinous other realm- and please themselves by hanging back from it.”(18) But in Absentism, man has lost belief in the pure spirituality of God and Christianity, since religion cannot save him from the morass, he drowns there. He is aware of the false promises of Christianity. So God as an almighty does not exist for him any more. The only thing he knows is himself who drowns in himself. In the Absentist world death is “reduced to a philosophical negation”. The Absentist poet “shows that death is empty, that life is death”. This kind of nonexistence of faith for modern man of 1960s onwards is, as Calvin Bedient says “irremediable and insuperable”. Aspects such as ‘human
consciousness as an absence of being’, ‘lies of rational consciousness’, ‘vexation of men who has dropped from Christianity’... are motivations for Absentist poetry.

Power and Violence

Violence has come under attack by the manifesto of Absentism. Brutal violence as Absentist philosophy finds out is at the center of every power. Violence is a potentiality of human beings. All the Absentist poets are fascinated by violence from two different points of view. One, violence is an essential element of power; the other, violence is an abnormal manner of human beings. From the first murderer in history of mankind, when Cain killed his brother Abel, violence and brutality has been ingrained in man. During the course of civilization the form and the intensity of violence has changed, yet it dominates man and will be with him forever. In Absentist poetry, violence portrays humans with ‘killer-instinct’. Human being, has potential for violence, and is ‘capable of every evil’.

Violence is the finally and painfully exposed nerve of life. It is a presence so abhorrent ... that he [absentist poet] wishes it absent. Indeed, it feels like an absence, however impure an absence, in asmuch as his emotions fend it off. Violence is metaphorically at a crossroads: as sensation, it is immediacy, but as act its aim is the negation of being. It both constitutes and annihilates reality. It is what alone is left to embrace, but what cannot be embraced—a spiritual dilemma. Those seeking relief in it need relief from it. It exacerbates scepticism, if not of being then of the value of being. (Bedient, “Absentist,” 19)

As the result of violence in Absentist poetry, we hear more about despair and despondency than about life and survival, more about fragments and chaos than about structure and order. Man has hunger for having authority over nations, nature and
flora and fauna. He has hunger for power and aggression which is part of the sad story of twentieth-century experience. Violence is inseparable from the world of man.

Thomas Kinsella and Ted Hughes in their Absentist poetry deal with the violence and cruelty of man toward man, man toward animals and cruelty of man toward nature. In the Absentist world man is not any more part of nature and acquaintance with animal and nature. He tries to conquer every thing, even himself, and the only device he uses is violence. However violence is also a negation of being and absence of being.

What Ted Hughes in his collections creates especially in Wodwo has a paradoxical meaning; violence for him “is a guarantee of energy of life”. He says that “The role of this word ‘violence’ in modern criticism is very tricky and not always easy to follow” (Faas, “Ted Hughes,” 5). A.E. Dyson believes that: “for Ted Hughes power and violence go together”. Violence for him is representation of the instinct of power in man. When men lost every thing they had, they go back to their origin, at least like an animal. Geoffrey Hill, too, like an Absentist poet, in his masterpiece Mercian Hymns (1971) deals with power as an essential element of Absentist indirectly related to violent behaviour of man during history. Offa’s coins are only an object of power and the collection embodies power and violence in the form of poetry. The principal theorist of Absentism according to Bedient is Thomas Kinsella an Irish poet. He is the avant-garde of Absentist poetry.

Chapterisation

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One: “Introduction” includes a philosophical and literary background to Absentism, followed by an over view of Modernism and the place of Absentism among other poetic movements.
Chapter Two examines the Absentist poetry of Thomas Kinsella. Kinsella’s poetry is distinguished both by its technical strength and by subject matter. While other poets deal with a similar topic, Kinsella is celebrated for his originality of perspective. The subjects discussed here particularly deal with Absentist themes such as history, nihilism, scepticism, sterility, lack of identity, absence of love and isolation, a mood of despair with regard to the contemporary civilization, quest for order and incapacitated faith in Christianity. What comes out of his poetry is a world drained of all colours. Boredom, fear and corruption fill his poetry. The death of faith is one of the significant motives of Absentist poetry and Kinsella as well as Hughes and Geoffrey Hill expose this lack in their poetry. In the absence of faith one observes that the unconditional skepticism infiltrate every thing, even the Bible and religion.

Kinsella’s poetry presents “despair without an exit; verse with despondency apparently in its very bones” (Bedient, “Absentist,”19). He is in crisis regarding the notion of history; his historical consciousness is pernicious, since his history is a colonized one; suffers from long years of British oppression. Thus a ghostly abstractness attacks his sense of history, in history ‘terrible thing[s] happened’. History and politics of Ireland, is an inevitable condition for an Irish poet. He can ignore his past but he can not deny it. The importance of the present is only to serve the past. Kinsella doesn’t believe in progressive movement of history any more. In this case he follows Heidegger’s consideration of history as a descending movement. The mind of Kinsella is pre-occupied with the pernicious history and mass culture in Nightwalker and Other Poems (1968), his poetry depicts people drowning in emptiness and nothingness. “Nightwalker”, can be compared with “The Waste Land”. It portrays dissolution of values and culture to gain a level high and pure to save man out of moral disgusts that alienate his consciousness. The founder theorist of
Absentist poetry, Thomas Kinsella, in his “Nightwalker” claims that even our culture has failed to “grasp something real, pure, and great enough to break one out of the moral disgusts that isolate consciousness, killing animal faith” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 19).

In the Notes from the Land of Dead (1973), man begins to dig consciousness. He is concerned not only about the mere hollowness he feels inside, but also of the outside and bareness of terror. All are absent, the mind to control him from inside, the culture and environment to guide him from outside, the history and the past to shed light on the way for future, all are absent. It seems that life of man has opened upon emptiness, and he is thrown into the world. Like Kafka’s character, his protagonist is a creature without perception, as if he deserves it. Thus he, the Absentist man, resigns life, which is fraught with sterility and boredom. All of his sufferings are about ‘mass culture’ and of ‘mass human wills’ and the result of them is Dublin, “a pure negativity spreading without felt or recognizable end”.

Thomas Kinsella, a committed poet is not just a mere observer of the society’s problems, but one who gave succinct expression to the aspirations of his people and country. He is concerned about society and people, although people for him are “the sea of white faces” or “Mob of shadows”. These are the epiphanies of human meaninglessness. Being engaged in the depth of “Hesitant, cogitating, exit”, he takes the reader along into the heart of mere shallow emptiness and staleness.

This nothingness forces consciousness back on itself. The consequent isolation and claustrophobia … proves sometimes frantic, sometimes apathetic. Consciousness is terror relieved by emptiness, emptiness relieved by terror. Boredom and fear jostle and alternate in the concentration camp of subjectivity. (Bedient, “Absentist,” 19)
His poetry is full of disappointment. Hope appears rare and only as formal irony. The sense of despair is reflected in the flattened meter, lack of vowels; assonance and alliteration are a series of disconnected sections. It is purely Absentist and it implies that life ‘fails to add up’. Anthony Cronin regards the exhaustion of modern men of wars says: “Dublin in the late nineteen-forties was an odd and, in many respects, unhappy place. The malaise that seems to have affected everywhere in the aftermath of war took strange forms there, perhaps for the reason that the war itself had been a sort of ghastly unreality” (qtd. in Fitzsimons 20).

Chapter Three “Geoffrey Hill” (1932- ) explores the Absentist elements in Hill’s poetry. The chapter focuses on Mercian Hymns (1971) and the other Absentist poems of Geoffrey Hill. Hill like Kinsella is an extremist Absentist poet, but at the same time his Absentism is at variance with the Absentist idea of Kinsella. Their difference comes from their attitude towards time. History and the past engulf Kinsella in themselves. But for Hill, it is the present that occupies his mind more to itself. Hill has faith in the present he “hunts and his hunger intensifies everything.” History with its irrationality is dissolved in the present, so the idea of time, present and past become one. Time is repeating itself, especially in Mercian Hymns; time is a series of broken occasions. In his essay “The Public and Private Realms of Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian Hymns” David Lloyd says that; “History in Mercian Hymns is not chronological; instead, the present moment is enriched by all the past simultaneously. From the first hymn, the events of Mercia over the last twelve centuries are never treated as a linear development; there are no pure ‘moments’ of history” (Lloyd 30).

But what is the aim of the poet to produce a volume of an accumulation of events? Hill wants to free his verse from the chain of time in order to put events and evidences side by side to show the ‘absence of Overall’. “Overall” is a key element in the
Absentist idea of Hill in *Mercian Hymns*. In *Mercian Hymns*, as a religious hymn, man suffers from the lack of spiritual supreme power, like God. The Absence of the almighty God is a part of the meaning of ‘Overall’. Bedient asserts that “*Mercian Hymns* is a Godless book, hymning, if anything, the thrilling horror, the maimed splendour of human life” (“Absentist,” 21).

*Mercian Hymns* (1971), is a collection of thirty prose-poems which, is Hill’s masterpiece. Two themes of this work apparently are history and childhood because self and self-interest, by the help of these two elements show itself. In the history of King Offa, self-interest is magnified and diluted. In childhood’s ignorance, excitements, and self-interest are glamorized and betrayed. Childhood is the era of ignorance-excitements that the King Offa “begs ‘Exile or pilgrim’ to set him ‘once more upon that ground: [his] rich and desolate childhood’”. The world of the child and his imagination, in this poem can be the childhood of the poet or the childhood of King Offa. The forgotten kingdom of Anglo-Saxon and King Offa, are the other themes of this masterwork of Absentism, but at the same time it is a paradigm for “emptiness; decay; intolerable stillness; ennui exploding into slaughter” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 21).

Calvin Bedient points out that *Mercian Hymns* is ‘a collage of the sacred and the profane’ (22). The title of the book conveys that it is a book of hymns, but it is everything except religious hymns. Offa Rex’s law, his sword along with images from his childhood, his grandmother and Ceolred and Albion two school friends, and in the end his death all make up the story of *Mercian Hymns*. Hill creates a thrilling story as an attempt to produce a wholly modern Absentist poem. Hill, a craftsman Absentist poet creates this story out of a small world of humans, yet mysteries beyond this
world bother him. This small and mysterious world of *Mercian Hymns* is the world of absence.

In the memories of the past, we cannot find anything innocent. Like fellow Absentist poets, Kinsella and Hughes, Hill deals with power and its consequent violence, as a potentiality of human’s nature. He believes that man is a self-centered creature and his nature is out of unruliness. He does not know any power beyond human beings which can control them, thus this is the lack of supreme power like God, as a ruler, as a center, and as an authority over man.

As much as man in the modern life tries to get back to spirituality, he is separated from it more, like, absence of faith and God in *Mercian Hymns*, but still “the volume is a sum beyond its parts. It is throughout the dereliction of a whole-not of an Overall, to be sure, but of a system of arrangement” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 22). If we consider two systems for this book, as Bedient did, there is first a chronological system and the other topical. If the chronological system has a historical narrator, then the topical system deals with any theme that opens discussion in the poem. Hill, by the way of narrating the story, disrupts the chronology of events as “in hymn XI Hill temporarily treats Offa as dead, after having just brought him back to life, in introducing a triad of hymns … on Offa’s surviving coins” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 22). The same disruption happens when Hill talks about different subjects, which are not quite related in this poem such as childhood and history together. Along with *Mercian Hymns*, other collections such as *For the Unfallen* (1959), *King Log* (1968) have some individual poems deal with the theme of Absentism. Hill’s *For the Unfallen* (1959), as *Mercian Hymns*, is another collection of Absentist poetry with its characteristic dialectics. The title of the collection is a paradox. In the *For the Unfallen*; one can not find any unfallen creature. Very significantly, this collection
starts with the Genesis, a ballad poem about creation of the universe by God in seven days. On the second day of creation, a murder takes place exactly like the story of Cain and Able where, he says “there is no bloodless myth will hold.” So once more cruelty, violence and brutality of man show the proof of Absence not only in the twentieth-century, but as being an inherent aspect of man demonstrating itself to us.

The themes of Absentist poetry such as Great Wars and disasters, the ambition of man for power and its consequent violence, the failure of man’s history and in one word the whole human kind is questioned of its cruelty. Bloom believes that:

[Hill’s...] subject is human pain, the suffering of those who both do and sustain violence, and more exactly the daemonic relationship between cultural tradition and human pain. ... His subject, like his style, is difficulty: the difficulty of apprehending and accepting moral guilt, and the difficulty of being a poet when the burden of history, including poetic history, makes any prophetic stance inauthentic. (1)

Chapter Four is titled “W.S. Graham” (1918-1986), examines Graham’s Absentist ideas in his poetry. It deals with the idea of language as “an active force” and language as “constructed space”. In most of the poems which deals with exploration of language, he talks about the processes of writing and the relation between the writer and the reader. From language themes he goes to the idea of self and his attempts of self-exploration. Fragmentation of self and crisis of identity are parts of the multi-dimensions of Absentist poetry.

Absence of self-consciousness causes fragmentation of family, the smallest unit of society. The failure of marriage where love is not a guarantee for happiness and joy and fragmentation of self and family do not stop just there, but cause the destruction
of society too. These are the reasons that Graham thinks that in modern times, social order has shattered human values. For him destruction of social order is like an attack from outside. That is why he is more and more misanthropic and more idiosyncratic. In modern life, culture, law, religion and language are various kinds of social rules that control human life. But sometimes without our awareness they change our nature, and life, in a horrible way. Absentist poets such as Kinsella and Hill dread this of human nature. There are two reasons for that; the first relates to the sinful essence of man, that guilt and violence are inherent in him. The second is opposite to the first. It relates to the systems of our society and laws. The difference between Graham and other Absentist poets comes from this point that, “Unlike Hill and Kinsella, Graham dreads not human nature but only the social ordering of human nature” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 22). Language as a kind of social order has bounded and restricted human beings by its limitation and boundaries. Graham wants to find himself beyond all these obstacles. He wants to find his place as an individual in the great structure of the world and also a place for language. He digs till he finds “a startling vacuum of self consciousness”, then he drowns himself in it, and reaches silence. A self that is idiosyncratic, and separated from society, looks at the world from an angle outside the world, and what he seeks is wholeness in self; he tries to find his self, to construct self as whole. The idea of whole-as human and as a being, whole, as the entire universe is fragmented. He tries to put his ‘particles’ beside each other to make a whole, like his poem that is a collage of bits and parts. This is a quest for him. In this search, he drowns in himself, and finds 'the vacuum of self consciousness' and absence of being. Lack of the self conscious here is like self imprisonment. To save the self, he wants to explore his being, and his identity that is wasted. Time in Absentist poetry “is a fraudulent dimension for being. Being is whole and direct, time scatters and defers.
The present is the lit (sic) fuse of the future, the fuse burns on, the expected illumination does not come. The present is too fine a point to support a whole being” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 23).

Graham’s poetry is an affirmation to the fragmented identity in the hands of time. The past is absent, while the present is only a lack of guarantee and security and the future is not there. The self is not present in the moment. Being belongs to somewhere but is shattered in the consequence of absence of time and identity, “we have come to the wrong wood” (Graham 254). While the bases of existence break down, certainly the Being breaks down too. The poet feels anxious when he tries to establish order in his writing. But writing is the only way to take him out of these absences. That is a way out of these absences. “He writes poetry simply to shelter in its ‘constructed space’ from the unconstructed space of both language and the world” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 23).

In this chapter, The Nightfishing (1955), Malcolm Mooney’s Land (1970) and Implements in Their Places (1977) will be discussed.


In Hughes’s “Nature Poems”, human beings are absent thus they are disconnected from the great chain of creation. The intellect of man has become a major weakness as it is misdirected and misguided. This huge gap between refined
intellect and raw instinct separated human being from his pure energy of life. In this thesis “Nature Poems” and “Animal Poems” portray the scattered connection of human beings from animals and nature. In “War Poems”, the attribution of Hughes about war is different from the war poets of 1910s. Ted Hughes depicts the will to live as a powerful force which is common among animals and human beings. In these types of poems Hughes shows human beings as mortal beings in contrast to nature and its survival after destruction. Man’s will to survive wars brings out violence nature of him. As a result of wars and violence, and the absence of faith Man’s identity has scattered. The “wodwo Poems” portray this fact of modern life, the poem “Wodwo” and “Gog” are two examples of human beings with broken identity.

The chapter attempts to make clear why Hughes brings mythology to his poetry. Mythologization does not have a fixed form. In Hughes’ poetry it deals with the ability of the poet to go beyond the myth, and repossesses it, adds to it and makes a device out of it, in order to express his poem. Like the modernist poets such as W.B. Yeats. Lillian Feder points out that:

Critical controversy over myth and the diversity of poetic experimentation in its use reflect the vitality of myth as a means of expressing a variety of contemporary approaches to the inherited past, to time, history, and the yearning for order and meaning in a skeptical age. (4)

Absentism, as the fourth generation of Modernism, follows the same path as that of Modernism. As Modernists the Absentist poets are “anti-historicism, because truth is not evolutionary and progressive but something requiring analysis. It focused on the micro-rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social”
Like modernism they have rejected historical values and historical knowledge, as it was of ‘linear development’. The collapse of historical values could be one of the reasons that the leaders of Modernism like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot turn back to mythology.

Rand Brandes points out that: “Hughes uses a number of strategies to get outside of time by disengaging his poems from historical and temporal contexts. His dominant strategy is myth; he would agree with the early Roland Barthes that myth ‘evaporates history’ and is ‘de-politicized speech’” (Brandes 38).

History has not only completely failed to present any solution for him in modern life, but also failed to promise a better future too. History for Absentist poets such as Hughes, Kinsella and Hill become a nightmare, “History, with its lessons, is only a haunting, as ‘Voices, far away, die in the cold’” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 19). The Absentist poet breaks away from the past and being thrown into the chaotic present portrays a world with a fragmented structure, and order. Absentist poets “need to break up the continuities of history, to disrupt the linear; to shed routine, and that goal was to look at experience with the vision of the timeless, or mythic” (Quinones 29). The emptiness and futility of history made the Absentist poet to turn to mythology. Nietzsche points out that myth is timeless, ordered, original and a universal story, which helps the poet to tell his story through already accepted ones. Myth gives “the stamp of the eternal” to transient life. This is the role that history has failed to present. For an Absentist poet, history is a kind of eternal absence whereas myth is always present. It is with us in our blood, in our culture, in our religion, and our language. Making use of mythology in poetry is a kind of reordering and reorganization of ourselves and our society, where man is chained to the uncertain, and separated from what relates him to his identity, to history, to religion, from which he tries to emerge,
which seems impossible. When man rebuilds himself along with his universe, the poet takes shelter under the order and logic of myth, to extricate himself by connecting to the origin of being. Eliot looks at “myth as an ordered principle of art. Myth would lead the poet to the organic society and also order the disparate, complex and chaotic experience of modern life” (Ramanan 28).

For Ted Hughes, myth becomes one of the important concerns in his Absentist poetry. He uses myth differently to reinforce Absentist preoccupation. The myth itself is not important, but being engaged with Absentist themes, makes it a unique oeuvre. As a modernist, Hughes is a faithful follower of Yeats’ attitude to myth. Peter Childs asserts that:

> Yeats turned to mythology for his structuring principles, submerged personality in multiple selves, championed the sheer energy of amoral and largely destructive or authoritarian Nietzschean forces, and, like many novelists, fabricated a vast and dense symbolical mytho-poetical world of his own. (Childs 97)

Lack of faith, absurdity and fragmentation of rational thought are basic roots that an Absentist poet such as Hughes builds his personal myth of Crow on, and this descends from the master of myth-makers, W.B. Yeats. In the poetry of Yeats as observed by Lillian Feder, he uses a myth to construct “superhuman power created out of human weakness, despair, frustration and chaos” (73). In the same way in Absentist poetry of Crow, the myth of Crow is built on despair, frustration, and chaos. Peter Childs observes that, “for the Modernists themselves, however, the point of using myth was to compensate for the dissatisfying fragmentation of the modern world: to create a controlling narrative that could be mapped onto, and make sense of, the rapid social changes of modernity” (Childs 198). Absentist poetry in general and myth in Absentist
poetry in particular has a symbolic language, which is an appropriate medium to communicate. Absentist poetry compared to contemporary poetry is more ambiguous and complex. The multi-level language of myth is the best language to talk about Absentist inspiration that comes from the complex mind of Absentist poets and the Absentist world. The poet is able to delve into the meaning and be touched by the essence of ideas. In Crow, Hughes rewrites the Biblical history of creation in the language of a Crow. He asserts: “Songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that’s the basis of the style of the whole thing” (Faas, Unaccommodated 208).

Chapter Six is “Toward Conclusion”

It draws on the argument of the thesis regarding the contradictory co-existence of Absentist features in ‘Kinsella, Hill, Graham, Hughes’ poetry. Moreover, the chapter takes Absentist poets beyond modern poetry and highlights the significance of their contribution both thematically and stylistically to the literary sense of their time.

Absentist poetry opens a new avenue through the depth of the poem. With the help of Absentist philosophy readers understand the nature of the conflicts which the Absentist poet had been engaged with running through the composition of the poems to the world that the poet lives in and the consequence of his poems. This thesis pursues an analysis and interpretation of the absentist poetry; in a way to open a new horizon into the world of literature. One should not forget that literature is an interpretation of life and by application of Absentism, the poet, interprets life with a new aspect and new experience. One feels that a full investigation like the present one will have to be done in order to consider each of these poets separately.
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