CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION
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'The Age of Anxiety', predicted in the late nineteenth century and entered around 1914, is also the age of modern poetry. Usually the term "modern" applies to the literature written after World War - I. The war created tremendous influences on the socio-political as well as literary scene of England. The effect of machine on man, England's loss of power in the war, the decline in the economic system of the nation, the new emerging working class society, the change in education, and above all, the decline of faith in God and religious institutions - all these external circumstances changed the entire view of life and art in England.

War created both a sense of boredom in, and hopelessness about, human life. The relationship between man and society, and between man and Nature was broken. The human personality was scattered, fragmented and broken to pieces. The poets were in search of new themes, new content, new expression and new poetics to describe human life. But through the ferment, and consequent literary experimentation, there continued in
England, a subterranean, native flow of poetry, relatively little touched by unsettling influences from abroad. Simplicity and lucidity of expression, almost banished from the central literary scene, continued quietly to survive on the margins. Modernist writers Pound and Eliot (American), Conrad (Polish) and Yeats and Joyce (Irish) were all foreign writers, fully open to non-English currents like Freud and Jung. They used new techniques and experimental language for their poetry. Though this new mode of writing temporarily disturbed the English poetic tradition, the new emerging group of young poets called the Movement in the fifties brought back to centre-stage, the native English strain. Hardy had continued to write in traditional ways as if America and the rest of the world did not exist; Edward Thomas dwelt quietly on natural details as only the English can; and in the fifties Larkin came in, holding their banner high, and openly declaring himself to be anti-Eliot and anti-modernist.

Stephen Spender in his book called The Struggle of the Modern draws a very clear line between the 'modern' and 'contemporary'. Distinguishing 'contemporary' from the 'modern' he makes the following very important remarks:

Modern art is that in which the artist
reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom. The quality which is called modern shows in the realized sensibility of style and form more than in the subject matter.

Thus, according to Spender/Tennyson, Ruskin and Carlyle are not moderns because although they were aware of the effects of science and most contemporary in their interest, they remained within the tradition of rationalisation, unshaken in the powers of the conscious ego. They did not feel that they had been conditioned in their own natures by the values of materialist society and that they had somehow to reflect and respond to the effects of such conditioning in their art. Describing the modern writers' views of life Spender observes:

The moderns judged the world in which they lived by the most up-to-date developments of materialist thinking. The conscious Ego of Joyce, Pound and Eliot transforms the world to which it is exposed. The struggle of the modern is that they will direct the power of the surrounding world from evil into better courses through the exercise of superior social or cultural intelligence of the creative genius, the writer prophet.
The modern poets suffered a sense of breakdown with the past and sought to express that critically through new forms and techniques. They felt responsible to a past which had been degraded by commerce, a past of real values betrayed by war and mechanization. Eliot's *The Waste Land* proves to be the best example of modernism where he juxtaposes the values of the past with the present and considers the past as valuable compared to the present. The politics of such writers is usually highly conservative (e.g. Eliot and Yeats); their main concern is to retrieve what is of value from the past and re-formulate a new "high culture" as great as that which preceded it. Non-modern poets, called by Spender, contemporary, are different. Defining 'contemporary' he says:

"The contemporary belongs to the modern world, accepts the historic forces moving through it, its values of science and progress."

By this he does not mean that he is uncritical of the world in which he finds himself. On the contrary, he is quite likely to be revolutionary. The contemporary is a partisan in the sense of supporting partial attitudes. The modern sees life as a whole; while the contemporary sees it partially. Describing his views on art Hardy also echoes the views of Spender. He says:
Art is *seemings*; provisional impressions only. I hold that the mission of poetry is to record impressions; not "convictions". This means that there can be no final solutions.

The modern creates an impersonal work of art while the contemporary creates a personal world of art. Though the contemporary is involved in conflicts he fundamentally accepts the forces and values of present life. Spender's distinction clearly indicates that the modernists are interested in experiments in style, form and structure, while contemporary writers are not overtly self-conscious about the form or style. The modern poets see the world as a unity, hence they talk about global subjects and philosophical themes, while contemporary poetry, as Spender puts it, is a "personalist poetry of limited aims".

I have tentatively put the three poets under consideration in this thesis in a non-modernist category, and, somewhat uncomfortably, along with the "contemporary" according to Spender, though in point of fact, only Larlin properly belongs there. I have suggested that Hardy, Edward Thomas, and Larlin are 'English' poets in a special sense, in that they exude an 'Englishness' which this study has sought to pinpoint. This work is a tentative effort to consider them.
as native English poets in their attitude to life and art, in their rejection of experiment, and their faith in the transparency of the linguistic medium. English poetry has generally maintained this stance, and the density and opaqueness of French Symbolist poetry are, it would be true to say, on the whole alien to the English tradition.

To summarise the characteristics of a native English poetic tradition, one may use following phrases and idioms: 'Realistic and honest attitude to life and art'; 'simple and plain in the use of language', 'graphic in vision'; 'acute and precise in observation'; 'direct and appealing in communication', 'detached, yet involved with life'. All these characteristics are beautifully depicted in the poets under consideration in this work.

I have divided the study of these poets into three different areas and tried to establish that these poets are traditional in their attitude to Nature, life, and in their use of language.

The nature poetry of Hardy, Edward Thomas and Larkin depicts various moods and colours of nature; and by evoking these they describe the various shades of human life. They describe Nature with loving accuracy and direct attention outward from the consciousness to the natural world. Larkin's short lyric 'Absences' in
the volume *The Less Deceived* is the best example of this attention to the natural world. Edward Thomas's 'October' is another.

Hardy, Edward Thomas and Larkin are realistic not only in their attitude to nature but also in their attitude to life. These poets are considered pessimistic or melancholic, perhaps because they are acutely conscious of the present world's problems. Boredom and hopelessness and our inability to cope with human realities are beautifully projected in their poems. Though at first glance their poems seem "simple" and narrow in their subject, under that guise lie universal themes like fate, time and the conflict between ideal and real. Through their poems they project their affection, for literary, moral, social and religious English traditions. Both Hardy and Larkin face the sad reality of a largely rootless twentieth century. In this sensing of England's radical crisis Hardy and Larkin stand with Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Eliot and many other important voices in modern British literature. Like them, Hardy and Larkin recognize that the issues of man's relationship to his past and tradition have become critical in this age. "The same impulse which guided Yeats in his search for an authentically Irish past and which guided Eliot in his embrace of an older tradition has guided these poets in the writing of most of their poems". They share with
the modernists the anxieties of the modern world, but they **respond** differently; they handle them differently. Limiting of geographical and cultural scope is common to all the three poets in this thesis. They find that English life is sufficiently complex, subtle and problematic and do not find it necessary to think of other worlds. They portray modern man's internal world; in and through their external landscapes they manage to evoke a sense of the whole life style of the English people. They describe life as it is without excessive romantic or imaginative colouring and bring the ordinary common person to the foreground. A new mythical figure, the ordinary man next door, emerges from the work of these poets. Unlike the people of Eliot's world, the human person need not know many languages, or be acquainted with Europe's high culture. He is much more insular, almost provincial, but his miseries and joys, expressed in explicitly regional terms, raise him to a universal plane.

If Dante's *Inferno* is about a vision of darkness in hell, Hardy and Larkin's poetry is about the vision of darkness on the earth. Like Dante's dead men, the living men of our time suffer in darkness or in an area where brightness is invisible. Their concern however is not with life after death but the tragi-comedy of man's life on earth. Though these poets are typically English, in a larger sense they deal with the universal
themes that all great poets have handled. All of them appear to be looking for an "unfenced existence".

In terms of language they are committed to portraying life in the language of the people, presenting ordinary experience in an unusual way. They have a Wordsworthian project to cast a new light over the familiar. Their vocabulary is simple, yet highly suggestive. Their poetry emphasizes thoughtfulness, plain language, moral consciousness and reason. As Kuby observes:

cryptic, esoteric, erudite, allusions and disconnected images, or eccentric vocabulary are not characteristics of Larkin's poetry.

These remarks of Kuby apply equally to Hardy and Edward Thomas.

Hardy and Larkin are on the side of simplicity. They disagree with Eliot's view that poets in our civilization must be difficult. Larkin accepts Hardy as his master after publication of The North Ship only because he desires to speak in the language of the common man. Larkin's simplicity is based on a conception of art similar to Tolstoy's:

What distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that
its language is understood by all, and that is affects all without distinction. I have mentioned three conditions of contagiousness in art, but they may be all summed up into one, the last, sincerity, i.e. that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feeling. The more an artist has drawn it from the depths of his nature, the more sympathetic and sincere will it be. And this same sincerity will impell the artist to find a clear expression of the feeling which he wishes to transmit ... It is always complied with in peasant art and this explains why such art always acts so powerfully; but it is a condition almost entirely absent from our upper class art.

The difficulty avoided by Hardy, Thomas and Larkin is not the difficulty of complex texture or meaning, but difficulties that would require, for their comprehension, special education in a given subject. Their poems are not simple in the usual sense, but in the sense that they can be understood by applying knowledge derived from one's own life experiences and one's own introspections. The underlying assumption is a shared human condition of which the poems speak. Linguistically "ordinary language is
extraordinarily manifold in its suggestiveness." This attitude on the part of Hardy, Edward Thomas and Larkin is firmly traditional, and is clearly reflected in their views on art also. They remain merely observers of life. As Hardy remarks:

Avoid involvement, be merely curious rather than committed, observe rather than act, that is the safe, sure way.

All the three poets observe the world outside; simultaneously they explore the inner psyche of the human being. Their poetry is a celebration of moments of vision. They think that the poet's commitment is not to a sustained interpretation of life, but rather, an accurate rendering of human experience.

Wallace Stevens once said:

After one has abandoned a belief in God poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption.

Larkin too has said something similar:

In a humanistic society, art and especially modern or current art, assumes great importance and to lose touch with it is
parallel to losing one's faith in a religious age.

Christianity promised to human beings an assurance that their individuality and personal worth would be cherished. This is what, to Hardy and Larkin, art promises. It is the

rough-tongued bell ... /
whose individual sound insist,
I too am individual ...

Christianity also promised the preservation of all experience in the eternal memory of God. To these poets, art is a kind of 'eternal memory' a preservation of experience. Establishing Larkin's greatness as a poet, Kuby remarks:

In the twentieth century, public life has become inescapably internal. Larkin's poems seem more appropriate to the age even than The Waste Land.

This remark of Kuby is very convincing for, though both Hardy's and Larkin's poems superficially deal with simple common experiences, at another level they deal with universal problems.

Hardy's, Edward Thomas' and Larkin's attitude to
life and art, their penetrating insight, and their simplicity and lucidity of expression clearly establish their relationship with the native English poetic tradition. Their poems reflect an anti-modernist stance in terms of philosophy and language.

I return, finally, to the title of this thesis: The Native English Poetic tradition with special reference to Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas and Philip Larkin. The implication of the title is that there is a tradition, a mainstream, despite all divergent tributaries. Just as in the genre of the novel, realism is the British tradition, so too, one may say, with some justification, that British poetry has certain leading characteristics which mark its native character. These have been discussed in the first chapter.

In this conclusion I only wish to say that I am fully aware of the problems inherent in the phrase 'native English tradition'. Reflections on British painting, certainly on British fiction, lead one to infer that the national genius tends to observe details accurately, rather than engage in symbolic projections. One only has to keep in mind any painting by John Constable (18th century English painter) and contrast it with, say, the mystery that shrouds a painting by Leonardo da Vinci's (16th century Italian painter), to understand the difference. The philosophic tendency
Towards empiricism (rather than metaphysics, as in Europe) supports the rootedness in actual fact under discussion.

I have argued along this line in chapters 1 and 2. The first defines Englishness and the second deals with Nature. In both chapters I stress the observing, recording habit of the English poet.

Chapter 3 deals with pessimism, a feature not quite so obviously related to the trend I describe above. But reflection indicates that an honest and clear-eyed acceptance of life's painful realities is not unrelated to the accurate recording process mentioned above. It leads to a bleakness which I have called Pessimism.

Chapter 4, Poetic Diction and Traditional Verse Forms, suggests a satisfaction with simple words and conventional verse form, a determination to be 'English' in these matters, rather than go in for the experimentation of 'foreign' versifiers.

Keeping in mind that these generalisations are somewhat sweeping and open to question, I still suggest that the three poets considered in this thesis offer an understanding of 'Englishness' which is of some interest.