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POETRY

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An Outline of English Literature

NEW EDITION

G. C. Thornley and Gwyneth Roberts

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Chapter One

Old English literature

The Old English language, also called Anglo-Saxon, was the earliest form of English. It is difficult to give exact dates for the rise and development of a language, because it does not change suddenly; but perhaps it is true to say that Old English was spoken from about A.D. 600 to about 1100.

The greatest Old English poem is *Beowulf*, which belongs to the seventh century. It is a story of about 3,000 lines, and it is the first English epic.[1] The name of its author is unknown.

Beowulf is not about England, but about Hrothgar, King of the Danes, and about a brave young man, Beowulf, from southern Sweden, who goes to help him. Hrothgar is in trouble. His great hall, called Heorot, is visited at night by a terrible creature, Grendel, which lives in a lake and comes to kill and eat Hrothgar's men. One night Beowulf waits secretly for this thing, attacks it, and in a fierce fight pulls its arm off. It manages to reach the lake again, but dies there. Then its mother comes to the hall in search of revenge, and the attacks begin again. Beowulf follows her to the bottom of the lake and kills her there.

In later days Beowulf, now king of his people, has to defend his country against a fire-breathing creature. He kills the animal but is badly wounded in the fight, and dies. The poem ends with a sorrowful description of Beowulf's funeral fire. Here are a few lines of it, put into modern letters:

[1] *epic*, the story in poetry of the adventures of a brave man (or men)

alegdon tha tomiddes maerne theoden
haeleth hiofende hlaford leofne
ongunnon tha on beorge bael-fyra maest
wigend weccan wudu-rec astah
sweart ofer swiothole swogende leg
wope bewunden.
The sorrowing soldiers then laid the glorious prince, their dear lord, in the middle. Then on the hill the war-men began to light the greatest of funeral fires. The wood-smoke rose black above the flames, the noisy fire, mixed with sorrowful cries.

The old language cannot be read now except by those who have made a special study of it. Among the critics who cannot read Old English there are some who are unkind to the poem, but *Beowulf* has its own value. It gives us an interesting picture of life in those old days. It tells us of fierce fights and brave deeds, of the speeches of the leader and the sufferings of his men. It describes their life in the hall, the terrible creatures that they had to fight, and their ships and travels. They had a hard life on land and sea. They did not enjoy it much, but they bore it well.

The few lines of *Beowulf* given above do not explain much about this kind of verse, and it may be well to say something about it. Each half-line has two main beats. There is no rhyme.[2] Instead, each half-line is joined to the other by alliteration[3] *(middes|maerne; haeleth|hiofende|hlaford; beorge|bael; wigend|weccan|wudu; sweart|swiothole|swogende)*. Things are described indirectly and in combinations of words. A ship is not only a ship: it is a sea-goer, a sea-boat, a sea-wood, or a wave-floater. A sailor is a sea-traveller, a seaman, a sea-soldier. Even the sea itself *(sae)* may be called the waves, or the sea-streams, or the ocean-way. Often several of these words are used at the same time. Therefore, if the poet wants to say that the ship sailed away, he may say that the ship, the sea-goer, the wave-floater,

[2] *rhyme*, ending two or more verse lines with the same sounds. Two lines *rhyme* when each has the same vowel sound bearing the last stress (beat) – e.g. *pay* and *day* or *pay* and *weigh* as last words. Any sounds after that vowel are exactly the same – e.g. *meeting* and *beating;* but the sound before that vowel is different – e.g. *state* and *weight* are rhymes but *meet* and *meat* are not true rhymes.

[3] *alliteration*, two or more words beginning with the same sound.

set out, started its journey and set forth over the sea, over the ocean-streams, over the waves. This changes a plain statement into something more colourful, but such descriptions take a lot of time, and the action moves slowly. In Old English poetry, descriptions of sad events or cruel situations are commoner and in better writing than those of happiness.

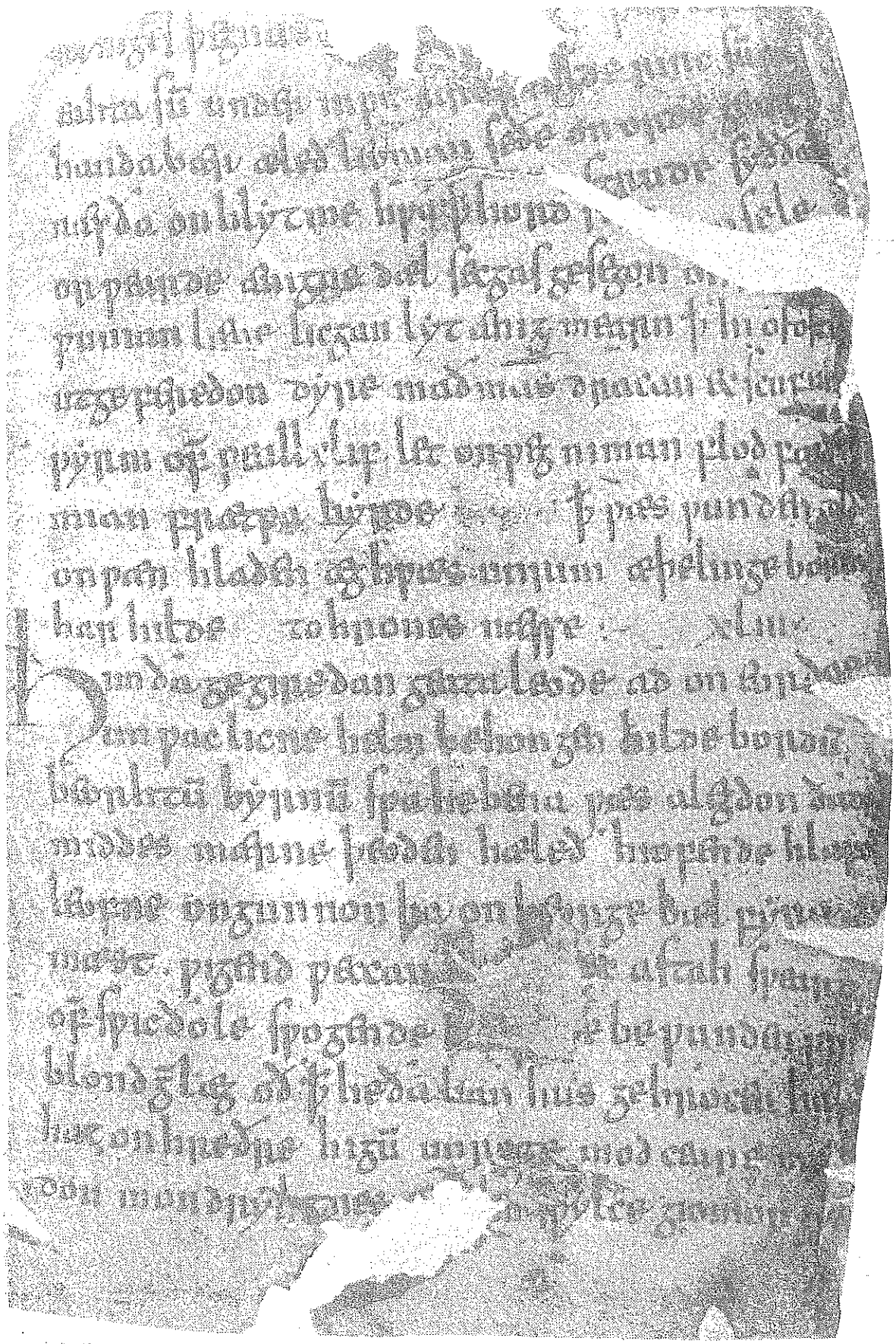
There are many other Old English poems. Among them are *Genesis A* and *Genesis B*. The second of these, which is short, is concerned with the beginning of the world and the fall of the angels[4]. It is a good piece of writing; the poet has thoroughly enjoyed describing God's punishment of Satan and the place of punishment for evil in Hell.[5] Most of the long *Genesis A*, on the other hand, is dull, and little more than old history taken from the Bible and put into poor Old English verse. Other poems taken straight from the Bible are the well-written *Exodus*, which describes how the Israelites left Egypt, and *Daniel*. Another poem, *Christ and Satan*, deals with events in Christ's life. There is a good deal of repetition in this work.

We know the names of two Old English poets, CAEDMON and CYNEWULF. Almost nothing now remains which is certainly Caedmon's work. He was a poor countryman who used to stay apart when his fellows sang songs to God; for Caedmon was uneducated and could not sing. One night an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to sing God's praise. When he woke, he was able to sing, and part of one of his songs remains.

Cynewulf almost certainly wrote four poems, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*,[6] *Christ*, and *Elene*. The last of these seems to have been written just before Cynewulf's death; for he says in it, 'Now are my days in their appointed time gone away. My life-joys have disappeared, as water runs away.' Cynewulf's poems are religious, and were probably written in the second half of the eighth century.

Other Old English poems are *Andreas* and *Guthlac*. The second of these is in two parts, and may have been written by two men. Guthlac was a holy man who was tempted in the desert. Another of

[4] *angel*, a servant of God in Heaven. According to old accounts, *Satan* and other angels disobeyed God and became the Devil and the Devil's servants in Hell.
[5] *hell*, the place for punishment for evil.
[6] *Apostle*, one of the twelve men chosen by Christ to preach to others.



A page from Beowulf including the lines given here in the text.

Part of a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript, showing Jerusalem

the better poems is *The Dream of the Rood* (the rood is Christ's cross.) This is among the best of all Old English poems.

Old English lyrics[7] include *Deor's Complaint, The Husband's Message, The Wanderer* and *The Wife's Complaint*. Deor is a singer who has lost his lord's favour. So he complains, but tries to comfort himself by remembering other sorrows of the world. Of each one he says 'That passed over; this may do so also.'

There are many other poems in Old English. One of the better ones is a late poem called *The Battle of Maldon*. This battle was fought against the Danes in 991 and probably the poem was written soon after that. It has been highly praised for the words of courage which the leader uses:

> hige sceal the heardra heorte the cenre
> mod sceal the mare the ure maegen lytlath
> her lith ure ealdor eall forheawen
> god on greote a maeg gnornian
> se the nu fram this wigplegan wendan thenceth.
> *The mind must be the firmer, the heart must be the braver, the courage must be the greater, as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord all cut to pieces, the good man on the ground. If anyone thinks now to turn away from this war-play, may he be unhappy for ever after.*

In general it is fairly safe to say that Old English prose[8] came later than Old English verse; but there was some early prose. The oldest *Laws* were written at the beginning of the seventh century. Some of these are interesting. If you split a man's ear, you had to pay 30 shillings. These *Laws* were not literature, and better sentences were written towards the end of the seventh century.

The most interesting piece of prose is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, an early history of the country. There are, in fact, several chronicles, belonging to different cities. No doubt KING ALFRED (849-901) had a great influence on this work. He probably brought the different writings into some kind of order. He also translated a number of

[7] *lyric*, a poem – originally one meant to be sung – which expresses the poet's thoughts and feelings.
[8] *prose*, the ordinary written language, not specially controlled like verse.

Latin books into Old English, so that his people could read them. He brought back learning to England and improved the education of his people.

Another important writer of prose was AELFRIC. His works, such as the *Homilies*[9] (990-4) and *Lives of Saints*[10] (993-6), were mostly religious. He wrote out in Old English the meaning of the first seven books of the Bible. His prose style[11] is the best in Old English, and he uses alliteration to join his sentences together.

A model of a late Saxon village

[9] *Homily*, religious talk.
[10] *Saint*, holy man.
[11] *style*, manner of writing; one writer's special way of using language.

William Caxton, who lived from 1422 to 1491, offering a book from his press at Westminster to a lady.

Chapter Two

Middle English literature

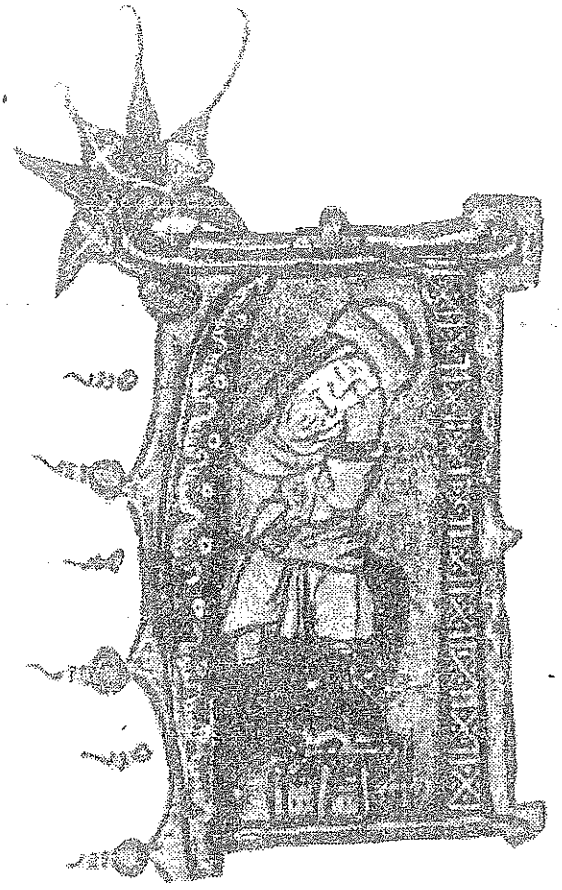
The English which was used from about 1100 to about 1500 is called Middle English, and the greatest poet of the time was GEOFFREY CHAUCER. He is often called the father of English poetry, although, as we know, there were many English poets before him. As we should expect, the language had changed a great deal in the seven hundred years since the time of *Beowulf* and it is much easier to read Chaucer than to read anything written in Old English. Here are the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*[1] (about 1387), his greatest work:

> Whan that Aprille with his shoures swote
> The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote
> *When April with his sweet showers has struck to the roots the dryness of March . . .*

There are five main beats in each line, and the reader will notice that rhyme has taken the place of Old English alliteration. Chaucer was a well-educated man who read Latin, and studied French and Italian poetry; but he was not interested only in books. He travelled and made good use of his eyes; and the people whom he describes are just like living people.

The Canterbury Tales total altogether about 17,000 lines – about half of Chaucer's literary production. A party of pilgrims[2] agree to

[1] *tale*, story.
[2] *pilgrim*, a person making a journey for religious reasons to a holy place.



An illustration from the opening of William Langland's Piers Plowman showing Piers Plowman dreaming

tell stories to pass the time on their journey from London to Canterbury with its great church and the grave of Thomas à Becket. There are more than twenty of these stories, mostly in verse, and in the stories we get to know the pilgrims themselves. Most of them, like the merchant, the lawyer, the cook, the sailor, the ploughman, and the miller, are ordinary people, but each of them can be recognized as a real person with his or her own character. One of the most enjoyable characters, for example, is the Wife of Bath. By the time she tells her story we know her as a woman of very strong opinions who believes firmly in marriage (she has had five husbands, one after the other) and equally firmly in the need to manage husbands strictly. In her story one of King Arthur's knights[3] must give within a year the correct answer to the question 'What do women love most?' in order to save his life. An ugly old witch[4] knows the answer ('To rule') and agrees to tell him if he marries her. At last he agrees, and at the marriage she becomes young again and beautiful.

Of Chaucer's other poems, the most important are probably

[3] *knight*, a man who – historically as a good fighter and leader in war – has the rank shown by the word *Sir* before his name.

[4] *witch*, a woman with unnatural (more than human) powers.

An early illustration of a party of pilgrims leaving Canterbury

Troylus and Cryseyde (1372-7?), and *The Legend*[5] *of Good Women* (1385). The former of these is about the love of the two young people. Shakespeare later wrote a play on the same subject, but his Cressida is less attractive than Chaucer's.

The old alliterative line was still in use in Chaucer's time, though not by him. *The Vision*[6] *of Piers the Ploughman,* mostly by WILLIAM LANGLAND, is a poem in this verse. It was written by a poor man to describe the sorrows of the poor. It looks a lot older than Chaucer's rhymed verse, though the two men lived at the same time. Langland sadly tells, as in a dream, how most people prefer the false treasures of this world to the true treasures of heaven. The characters in the poem are not as real as Chaucer's.

The alliterative metre[7] was used in several other poems, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1360?), one of the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Like others of these

[5] *legend,* story (usually one which has come down to us from ancient times so that we cannot be sure of the truth – adj. *legendary*).
[6] *vision,* something seen in the imagination as if in a dream; *a vision* is often a sight of things in the future.
[7] *metre,* the number and kinds of feet in the lines of poetry.

legendary stories, it tells of the adventures of one of King Arthur's knights (in this case Sir Gawain) in a struggle against an enemy with magic[8] powers as well as great strength and cunning. Sir Gawain finishes the adventure with all honour.

Perhaps the author of *Gawain* also wrote *Pearl* and *Patience*, two of the best alliterative poems of the time. Pearl was the name of the poet's daughter, who died at the age of two; but he is comforted when, in a dream, he sees her in heaven. *Patience* is the story of Jonah, who was thrown into the sea and swallowed by an immense creature of the sea, which carried him to the place where God wished him to go.

A good deal of Middle English prose is religious. The *Ancren Riwle* teaches proper rules of life for anchoresses (religious women) – how they ought to dress, what work they may do, when they ought not to speak, and so on. It was probably written in the thirteenth century. Another work, *The Form of Perfect Living*, was written by RICHARD ROLLE with the same sort of aim. His prose style has been highly praised, and his work is important in the history of our prose.

JOHN WYCLIFFE, a priest, attacked many of the religious ideas of his time. He was at Oxford, but had to leave because his attacks on the Church could no longer be borne. One of his beliefs was that anyone who wanted to read the Bible ought to be allowed to do so; but how could this be done by uneducated people when the Bible was in Latin? Some parts had indeed been put into Old English long ago, but Wycliffe arranged the production of the whole Bible in English. He himself translated part of it. There were two translations (1382 and 1388), of which the second is the better.

It is surprising that Wycliffe was not burnt alive for his attacks on religious practices. After he was dead and buried, his bones were dug up again and thrown into a stream which flows into the River Avon (which itself flows into the River Severn):

> The Avon to the Severn runs,
> The Severn to the sea,
> And Wycliffe's dust shall spread abroad,
> Wide as the waters be.

[8] *magic*, having the help of spirits or other more than human abilities to influence events.

Detail from the opening of Book 6 from the 1585 edition of Malory's Morte D'Arthur

An important Middle English prose work, *Morte D'Arthur* [= Arthur's Death], was written by SIR THOMAS MALORY. Even for the violent years just before and during the Wars of the Roses, Malory was a violent character. He was several times in prison, and it has been suggested that he wrote at least part of *Morte D'Arthur* there to pass the time.

Malory wrote eight separate tales of King Arthur and his knights but when Caxton[9] printed the book in 1485 (after Malory's death) he joined them into one long story. Caxton's was the only copy of Malory's work that we had until, quite recently (1933-4), a hand-written copy of it was found in Winchester College.

The stories of Arthur and his knights have attracted many British and other writers. Arthur is a shadowy figure of the past, but probably really lived. Many tales gathered round him and his knights. One of the main subjects was the search for the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. (This cup is known as The Holy Grail.) Another subject was Arthur's battles against his enemies, including the Romans. Malory's fine prose can tell a direct story well, but can also express deep feelings in musical sentences. Here is part of the book in modern form. King Arthur is badly wounded:

> Then Sir Bedivere took the king on his back and so went with him to the water's edge. And when they were there, close by the bank, there came a little ship with many beautiful ladies in it; and among them all there was a queen. And they all had black head-dresses, and all wept and cried when they saw King Arthur.

[9] *William Caxton* (1422?-91) set up the first English printing press in 1476-7. He printed not only the works of other writers but also books from other countries translated by himself into excellent English prose.

The first English plays told religious stories and were performed in or near the churches. Many events of religious history were suitable subjects for drama.[10] These early plays, called Miracle[11] or Mystery Plays, are in four main groups, according to the city where they were acted: Chester, Coventry, York and Wakefield.

The subjects of the Miracle Plays are various: the disobedience of Adam and Eve; Noah and the great flood; Abraham and Isaac; events in the life of Christ; and so on. They were acted by people of the town on a kind of stage on wheels called a pageant. This was moved to different parts of the town, so that a play shown in one place could then be shown in another. Often several Miracle Plays were being performed at the same time in different places. Here is a short bit of *Noah's Flood* in the Chester Plays:

GOD: Seven days are yet coming
For you to gather and bring
Those after my liking
When mankind I annoy.
Forty days and forty nights
Rain shall fall for their unrights[A]
And those I have made through my mights[B]
Now think I to destroy.

NOAH: Lord, at your bidding[C] I am true
Since grace is only in you,
As you ask I will do.
For gracious[D] I you find.

[A] wrongdoing [B] wonderful powers [C] orders [D] kind

Although the Miracles were serious and religious in intention, English comedy[12] was born in them. There was a natural tendency for the characters in the play to become recognizably human in their behaviour. However serious the main story might be, neither actors nor audience could resist the temptation to enjoy the pos-

[10] *drama*, stage plays; the writing of plays; adj. *dramatic*.
[11] *miracle*, an event produced by more than human powers.
[12] *comedy*, amusing plays; *a comedy* is a play meant more to entertain than to teach, usually one with a happy ending.

sibilities of a situation such as that in which Noah's wife needs a great deal of persuasion to make her go on board the ark.[13]

Other plays, in some respects not very different from the Miracles, were the Morality Plays. The characters in these were not people (such as Adam and Eve or Noah); they were virtues (such as Truth) or bad qualities (such as Greed or Revenge) which walked and talked. For this reason we find these plays duller today, but this does not mean that the original audiences found them dull. The plays presented moral truths in a new and effective way.

One of the best-known fifteenth-century Moralities is *Everyman,* which was translated from the Dutch. It is the story of the end of Everyman's life, when Death calls him away from the world. Among the characters are Beauty, Knowledge, Strength, and Good Deeds. When Everyman has to go to face Death, all his friends leave him except Good Deeds, who says finely:

> Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide,
> In thy most need to be by thy side.

Another kind of play, the Interlude, was common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The origin of this name is uncertain; perhaps the Interludes were played between the acts of long Moralities; perhaps in the middle of meals; or perhaps the name means a play by two or three performers. They are often funny, and were performed away from churches, in colleges or rich men's houses or gardens. One of them is *The Four P's.* In one part of this play, a prize is offered for the greatest lie; and it is won by a man who says that he never saw and never knew any woman out of patience.

The writers of these early plays are unknown until we come to the beginning of the sixteenth century. JOHN HEYWOOD wrote *The Four P's* (printed about 1545) and *The Play of the Weather* (1533), in which Jupiter, the King of the Gods, asks various people what kind of weather ought to be supplied. Heywood wrote other Interludes and was alive in Shakespeare's time.

[13] *Noah's Ark,* the great ship built by Noah to save two of each of God's creatures during the flood.

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Chapter Three

Elizabethan poetry and prose

Many imitators of Chaucer appeared after his death in 1400, but few are of great interest. More than a century had to pass before any further important English poetry was written. Queen Elizabeth ruled from 1558 to 1603, but the great Elizabethan literary age is not considered as beginning until 1579. Before that year two poets wrote works of value.

SIR THOMAS WYATT and the EARL OF SURREY are often mentioned together, but there are many differences in their work. Both wrote sonnets,[1] which they learned to do from the Italians; but it was Wyatt who first brought the sonnet to England. Surrey's work is also important because he wrote the first blank[2] verse in English.

In the form of the sonnet Wyatt mainly followed the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-74). In this form, the 14 lines rhyme abbaabba (8) + 2 or 3 rhymes in the last six lines. The sonnets of Shakespeare are not of this form; they rhyme ababcdcdefefgg.

Wyatt has left us some good lyrics. Here is part of a lover's prayer to his girl:

[1] *sonnet*, a 14-line lyric poem of fixed form and rhyme pattern.
[2] *blank verse*, verse without rhymes, usually in lines of five iambic feet (each | ˘ – |), e.g.
O gŏŏd | ŏld măn! | hŏw wēll | ĭn thēe[A] | ăppēars |
Thĕ cōn- | stănt[B] sēr | vĭce ŏf | thĕ ăn | tĭque[C] wōrld |
SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*
[A] you [B] never changing [C] old

And wilt thou leave me thus
That hath loved thee so long
In wealth and woe[A] among;
And is thy heart so strong
As for to leave me thus?
Say nay[B]! Say nay!

[A] sorrow [B] no

Surrey's blank verse, which has been mentioned, is fairly good; he keeps it alive by changing the positions of the main beats in the lines. Marlowe's famous 'mighty[3] line' is blank verse and much finer poetry, and Shakespeare improved on it. Milton made blank verse the regular metre of epic.

Before and during the Elizabethan age, the writing of poetry was part of the education of a gentleman, and the books of sonnets and lyrics that appeared contained work by numbers of different writers. A good example of these books is Tottel's *Songs and Sonnets* (1557), which contained 40 poems by Surrey and 96 by Wyatt. There were 135 by other authors[4]. Did these popular sonnets and lyrics express real feelings, or were they just poetic exercises? Some may be of one sort and some of the other. They differ a good deal. Some contain rather childish ideas, as when a man is murdered by love and his blood reddens the girl's lips. Some are very fine indeed.

One of the best sonnets of the time was by MICHAEL DRAYTON. It begins like this:

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part:
Nay[A], I have done; you get no more of me;
And I am glad, – yea[B] glad with all my heart
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.

[A] no [B] yes

The sonnets of Shakespeare, printed in 1609, were probably written between 1593 and 1600. For whom, or to whom, did he write them? Many of them refer to a young man of good family, and may be addressed to William Herbert (the Earl of Pembroke), or the Earl of

[3] *mighty*, of great power.
[4] *author*, writer.

Southampton. At the beginning of the 1609 collection, it is said that they are for 'Mr. W. H.' Other people mentioned in the sonnets are a girl, a rival poet, and a dark-eyed beauty. Here is one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

> Who will believe my verse in time to come,
> If it were filled with your most high deserts[A]?
> Though yet, Heaven knows, it is but[B] as a tomb[C]
> Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts.
> If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
> And in fresh numbers[D] number all your graces
> The age to come would say, 'This poet lies,
> Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.'
> So should my papers, yellowed with their age,
> Be scorned like old men of less truth than tongue;
> And your true rights be termed[E] a poet's rage[F]
> And stretched metre of an antique[G] song.
> But were some child of yours alive that time
> You should live twice – in it, and in my rhyme.
>
> [A] what you deserve [B] only [C] grave [D] verses [E] called [F] madness [G] old

The poet who introduced the Elizabethan age proper was EDMUND SPENSER. In 1579 he produced *The Shepherd's Calendar*, a poem in twelve books, one for each month of the year. Spenser was no doubt making experiments in metre and form, examining his own abilities. The poems are unequal, but those for April and November are good. They take the form of discussions between shepherds[5], and are therefore pastorals[6] – the best pastorals written in English up to that time. There are various subjects: praise of Queen Elizabeth, discussions about religion, the sad death of a girl, and so on. The nation welcomed the book; it was expecting a great literary age, and accepted this work as its beginning.

Spenser's greatest work, *The Faerie Queene* (1589-96), was planned in twelve books, but he wrote little more than the first six. The

[5] *shepherd*, a man who looks after sheep in the fields and open country.
[6] *pastoral*, concerning the life of shepherds (usually shepherds in an imaginary Golden Age living a simple, healthy and contented life in the open air).

'Queene' is either Queen Elizabeth or Glory as a person. There are twelve knights representing different virtues, and King Arthur is gentlemanliness. The knights' adventures are the basis for an allegory[7], but this is not clear. The greatness of the work is not in its thought or in its story. It is in the magic feeling in the air, the wonderful music of the verse, the beauty of the sound. Few people now read the whole thing; perhaps too much sweetness at once is more than the mind and spirit can bear.

Spenser invented a special metre for *The Faerie Queene*. The verse has nine lines; of these the last has six feet, the others five. The rhyme plan is ababbcbcc. This verse, the 'Spenserian Stanza'[8], is justly famous and has often been used since. Here is an example:

Long thus she travelèd through deserts wide,
By which she thought her wand'ring knight should pass,
Yet never show of living wight[A] espied[B];
Till that at length[C] she found the trodden[D] grass
In which the track of people's footing was,
Under the steep foot of a mountain hoar[E];
The same she follows, till at last she has
A damsel[F] spied[G] slow-footing her before,
That on her shoulders sad a pot of water bore.

[A] person [B] saw [C] at last [D] pressed down by feet [E] old and grey
[F] girl [G] seen

Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle in 1594 when he was over forty. The joy that he felt is expressed in *Epithalamion* (1595), an almost perfect marriage song. His *Prothalamion* (1596), written in honour of the double marriage of the daughters of the Earl of Worcester, contains the repeated line, 'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song'. Spenser also wrote 88 sonnets which were published in 1595 – with the *Epithalamion* – under the title, *Amoretti*.

The Elizabethan age produced a surprising flow of lyrics. Lyric poetry gives expression to the poet's own thoughts and feelings, and for this reason we tend to picture the lyric poet as a rather

[7] *allegory*, a story which teaches a lesson because the people and places in it stand for other ideas. (An example is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* – see page 67).

[8] *stanza*, a group of verse lines which rhyme in a particular pattern.

dreamy unpractical person with his thoughts turned inwards. As a description of the Elizabethan lyric poets, nothing could be further from the truth. We know few details of Spenser's life, but his friend SIR PHILIP SIDNEY was a true Elizabethan gentleman of many activities – courtier, statesman, poet, soldier. It is probably true that this man, accepted as the pattern of nobility in his time, refused a cup of water when he lay dying on the battlefield of Zutphen, saying that it should be given to a wounded soldier lying near to him. Sidney's book of sonnets, *Astrophel and Stella,* was printed in 1591 after his death. Most of the poems of another great Elizabethan, SIR WALTER RALEIGH, soldier, sailor, explorer, courtier, and writer, have been lost, but the short pieces which remain show a real gift for poetic expression.

Some of the best lyrics of the time were in the dramatic works. Characters on the stage were given songs to sing to please the audience and to give some relief when necessary. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* for example, there is a very sweet lyric: (see page 44)

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?

Shakespeare's longer poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece,* are both on the subject of love. The former of these was probably his first published[9] work. In both poems there is a kind of coldness, as if Shakespeare was only writing according to the rules, but without much feeling.

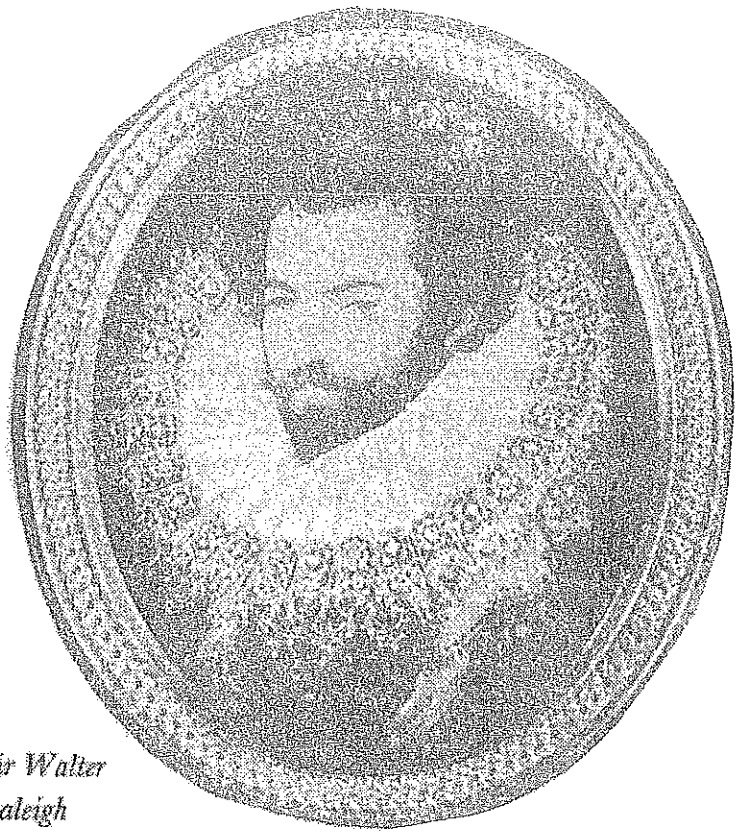
CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, the famous dramatist, was also a fine lyric writer. *The Passionate*[10] *Shepherd to his Love* (published in 1599) starts like this:

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales[A] and fields
Woods or steepy mountain yield.

[A] river-valleys

Sir Walter Raleigh wrote another poem as the girl's answer:

[9] *publish,* to print and sell (a book) to the public.
[10] *passionate,* very loving; filled with strong feeling.



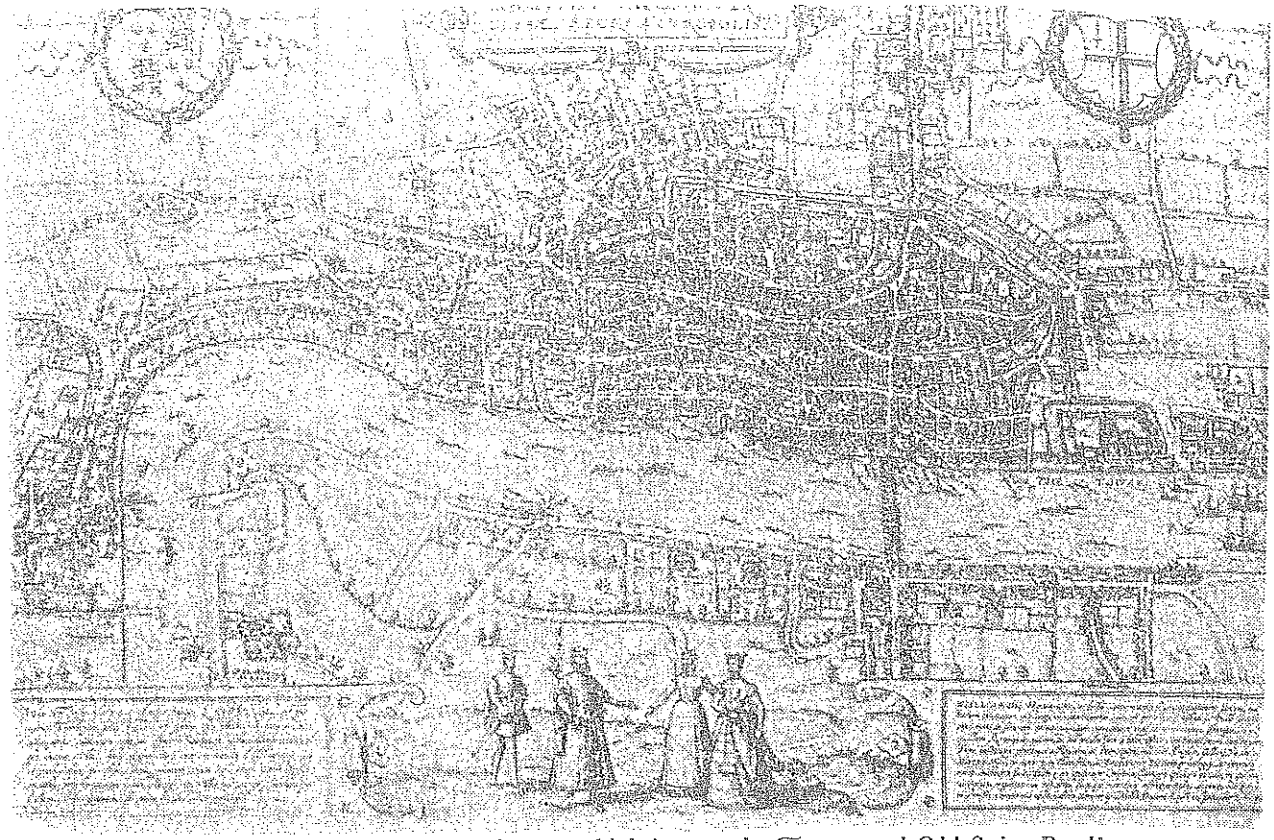
Sir Walter Raleigh

If all the world and love were young
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love.

As the songs and sonnets of the great Elizabethan age passed slowly away, the immense lyrical tide began gradually to lose its force. The age that followed, the Jacobean age, was less fresh – more interested in the mind than in heart or eye. A group of poets, known as the Metaphysical[11] Poets, wrote verse which was generally less beautiful and less musical, and which contained tricks of style and unusual images[12] to attract attention. These poets mixed strong feelings with reason, and the mixture is strange.

JOHN DONNE is the greatest metaphysical poet but it is difficult to find a complete poem by him which is faultless. He wrote many

[11] *metaphysical* (as applied to poetry), showing clever tricks of style and unlikely comparisons.
[12] *image*, a picture in the imagination; a writer uses *imagery* – produces in the reader's mind images or pictures of things, actions, etc., which may be compared with the things or ideas with which he is concerned – for certain effects, e.g. to give life and strength to a description.



An old map of Elizabethan London on which is seen the Tower and Old Saint Paul's

good things, but no perfect poem. His songs and sonnets are probably his finest work, but he is best studied in collections of verse by various poets. He wrote a lot of poor verse which these collections omit.

Donne was a lawyer and a priest, and he wrote religious poetry, though it is not his best. In metre Donne often put the main beat on words of little importance; yet he had his good qualities. Some of his beginnings, such as 'Go and catch a falling star,' are fine. He can say effective things in a few words: 'I am two fools, I know; For loving and for saying so.' Yet some of his lines are terribly bad:

> Here lies a she sun and a he moon there
> She gives the best light to his sphere[A]
> Or each is both, and all, and so
> They unto one another nothing owe.
>
> [A] ball like the moon

The dramatist BEN JONSON, known as 'Rare Ben Jonson', was a quarrelsome man, but fearless and honest. He has left plays, poems and prose. One of his best lyrics is *To Celia:*

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge[A] with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.

[A] drink to your health

It is time now to turn to the prose of this age, which took several very different forms. The translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579), SIR THOMAS NORTH is important. It is on the whole written in fine and noble English, and it had a wide influence on Elizabethan prose. It was used by Shakespeare as a storehouse of learning. Shakespeare used quite extensive expressions from it in *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* North was one of the best translators, with a good command of English words and the ability to weave them into powerful sentences. He did not translate directly from the Greek, but from a French translation by Amyot of Auxerre.

In 1589 RICHARD HAKLUYT collected and published *The Principal Navigations*[13], *Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation.* At this time there was a great deal of travel and adventure on the sea, and this book was enlarged in 1598, 1599 and 1600. It includes accounts of the voyages of the Cabots, Hawkins, Drake, and Frobisher, besides several others. Hakluyt left a lot of unpublished papers, and some of these came into the possession of Purchas.

SAMUEL PURCHAS published the Hakluyt papers under the title, *Purchas his Pilgrims* (1625), containing 'A History of the World in Sea Voyages and Land Travel'. This book deals with voyages to India, Japan, China, Africa, the West Indies and other places. Two other books by Purchas have titles which are almost the same, *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages* (1613) and *Purchas his Pilgrim, or The History of Man* (1619). Another important history book of this time was Holinshed's *Chronicles*[14] (1577). Though it is known by his name, several writers were responsible for the material in it.

A kind of novel[15] began in the Elizabethan age; Lyly's *Euphues*

[13] *navigation,* finding the way in a ship from one place to another.
[14] *chronicle,* history.
[15] *novel,* a book-length single story whose characters are usually imaginary.

(1578 and 1580) started a fashion which spread in books and conversation.

JOHN LYLY was employed at court. *Euphues* has a thin love story, which is used for the purpose of giving Lyly's ideas in various talks and letters. The style is filled with tricks and alliteration; the sentences are long and complicated; and large numbers of similes[16] are brought in. A short example of this style is, 'They are commonly soonest believed that are best beloved, and they liked best whom we have known longest.' The reader forgets the thought behind the words, and looks for the machine-like arrangement of the sentences. This kind of style was common in the conversation of ladies of the time, and most of those at court were at one time Lyly's pupils. Queen Elizabeth herself used it. Every girl of good family in those days learnt to speak, not only French, but also Euphuism. Even Shakespeare was influenced by this artificial style.

Another novelist was ROBERT GREENE, whose story *Pandosto* gave Shakespeare the plot of his play *The Winter's Tale*. Another, THOMAS NASH, a writer of very independent character, refused to copy Euphues or anyone else. His book *The Life of Jacke Wilton* was a picaresque novel, that is to say, a novel of adventure about men of bad character. Picaresque novels were first written in Spain and then copied elsewhere. The interest of the adventure is sometimes spoilt by long speeches which are made just when we want the speaker to do something instead of talking.

These Elizabethan 'novels' are of little value on the whole, and few people read them now. They did not lead on to the great novels of later years. They were a false start, and died out.

The prose of FRANCIS BACON is important. His *Essays*[17] especially are popular still. They first appeared in 1597 and then with additions in 1612 and 1625. The sentences in the earlier essays are short, sharp and effective; the style of the later essays is rather more flowing. Some of the best-known sayings in English come from Bacon's books, and especially from the *Essays*.

[16] *simile*, the use of an image – usually introduced by *like* or *as* – to make a comparison in one respect with the thing or idea described (e.g. 'the elephant looked as big *as a house*').

[17] *essay*, a composition of moderate length on a general subject; usually a number of the writer's personal ideas on the subject, and not a complete examination of the matter.

Here are a few, with the title of the essay:

> Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark. *(Death)*
> All colours will agree in the dark. *(Unity in Religion)*
> Revenge is a kind of wild justice. *(Revenge)*
> Why should I be angry with a man for loving himself better than me? *(Revenge)*
> Children sweeten labours[18] but they make misfortunes more bitter. *(Parents and Children)*
> If a man be gracious to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world. *(Goodness)*
> The remedy is worse than the disease. *(Troubles)*
> Stay a little, that we may make an end the sooner. *(Despatch)*
> Cure the disease and kill the patient.[19] *(Friendship)*
> That is the best part of beauty which a picture cannot express. *(Beauty)*
> Some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly. *(Studies)*
> A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds. *(Ceremonies and Respects)*

Other books by Bacon include *A History of Henry VII* (1622), which was written in a few months. *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) considers the different ways of advancing knowledge, and the divisions of knowledge, such as poetry and history. *The New Atlantis* (1626) contains social ideas in the form of a story. This story is of a journey to an imaginary island, Bensalem, in the Pacific Ocean. Bacon wrote several other books in English and Latin.

The Authorized[20] Version[21] (A.V.) of the Bible appeared in 1611. The history of the English Bible is important. In Old English several translations of *parts* of the Bible were made, but the first complete translation was Wycliffe's. WILLIAM TYNDALE translated the New Testament from the Greek, and part of the Old Testament

[18] *labour*, hard work.
[19] *patient*, a person receiving treatment for an illness.
[20] *authorized*, having the support and agreement of the person or people with the power to order or forbid something.
[21] *version*, a book translated from another language (especially one of several different translations).

from the Hebrew. He was later burnt to death for his beliefs, but he is remembered for his careful and important work on the translation. The Authorized Version depended a great deal on Tyndale's work. Several other translations were made in the sixteenth century, including a complete Bible (1535) by Miles Coverdale.

A meeting was held in 1604 to consider a new translation. Forty-seven translators were appointed, and they worked in groups on different parts of the Bible. The work was finished in 1611 and the result, depending chiefly on Wycliffe and Tyndale, was called the *Authorized Version,* though in fact no one authorized it.

The language is beautiful, strong and pure, very unlike Euphuism. Most English writers are influenced in some way or other by the words of the A.V.

Here are a few sentences from *Ecclesiastes,* Chapter 12:

> Remember now thy Creator[A] in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh[B] when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain.
>
> [A] maker [B] near

Timber or *Discoveries* (1640) by the dramatist Ben Jonson, is a collection of notes and ideas on various subjects. Until Jonson wrote this book, nothing had appeared to make clear the true work of a critic, his aims and limitations. Jonson says that a critic ought to judge a work as a whole, and that the critic himself must have some poetic abilities. Jonson is the father of English literary criticism. His critical ideas are not limited to this book, but appear elsewhere. He has some interesting things to say. He thought that Donne, 'for not keeping of accent [proper beat], deserved hanging'. He was not pleased with the Spenserian stanza or with Spenser's language. When he was told that Shakespeare had never 'blotted a line' (=crossed a line out), he wished that he had 'blotted a thousand'. Jonson's ideas were much influenced by the classics,[22] and this explains much of what he says.

[22] *classics*, the work of the great writers of the past.

Chapter Five

John Milton and his time

It is generally agreed that the English poet second after Shakespeare is JOHN MILTON, born in London and educated at Christ's College, Cambridge. After leaving the university, he studied at home in Horton, Buckinghamshire (1632–7), and was grateful to his father for allowing him to do this instead of preparing for a profession. He lived a pure life, believing that he had a great purpose to complete. At college he was known as The Lady of Christ's.

It is convenient to consider his works in three divisions. At first he wrote his shorter poems at Horton. Next he wrote mainly prose. His three greatest poems belong to the last group.

At the age of 23 he had still done little in life, as he admits in a sonnet:

> How soon hath time, the subtle[A] thief of youth
> Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
> My hasting days fly on with full career[B]
> And my late spring no bud[C] or blossom[D] showeth.
>
> [A] secretly clever [B] at full speed [C] young flower [D] full flower

Among his other sonnets, he wrote one on his own blindness:

> When I consider how my light is spent
> Ere[A] half my days, in this dark world and wide,
>
> [A] before (I have lived)

And that one talent[B] which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent[C]
To serve therewith[D] my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide[E]
'Doth God exact[F] day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly[G] ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur[H], soon replies, 'God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke[I], they serve him best: his state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding[J] speed[K]
And post[L] o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

[B] ability (to see) [C] wishing [D] with it [E] blame me [F] demand
[G] foolishly [H] complaint [I] service [J] orders [K] run [L] rush

Milton's studies at Horton were deep and wide. One of his notebooks contains pieces taken from eighty writers – Greek, Latin, English, French and Italian. At the same time he was studying music.

L'Allegro (the happy man) and *Il Penseroso* (the thoughtful man) (both 1632) are usually considered together. (The word *Penseroso* should be *Pensieroso* in good Italian.) In the first the poet describes the joys of life in the country in spring; outside in the fields in the morning, but at home in the evening, enjoying music and books. In the second poem, which is set in the autumn, he studies during the day and goes to a great church in the evening to listen to the splendid music.

Comus (1634), also written at Horton, is a masque, and *Arcades* (1633?) part of one. The music for these was written by Henry Lawes, a musician to King Charles I. *Lycidas* (1637) is a sorrowful pastoral on the death by drowning of Edward King, who had been a student with Milton at Cambridge. In one part the poet argues that some men might think it useless to study hard, but the hope of fame drives the spirit onwards:

Were it not better done, as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles[A] of Neaera's hair?

[A] confusion

Fame is the spur[B] that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity[C] of noble mind)
To scorn delights and live laborious[D] days.

[B] driving force [C] weakness [D] hard-working

Milton's prose works were mainly concerned with church affairs, divorce[1], and freedom. Many of them are violent in language, and have neither literary value nor interest for modern readers. The arguments about religion we may neglect entirely. The divorce pamphlets[2] were mainly the result of his own hasty marriage (1643) to Mary Powell, a girl of seventeen. (It was not a success.)

His best prose work is probably the *Areopagitica* (1644), *A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*. This is good writing, and it contains little of the violent language of the other pamphlets. Calm reasoning and smooth words go together, and the style is fairly simple. Milton's sincere belief in the importance of freedom of writing and speech fills the book with honest feeling. Here are three sayings taken from it:

Opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.

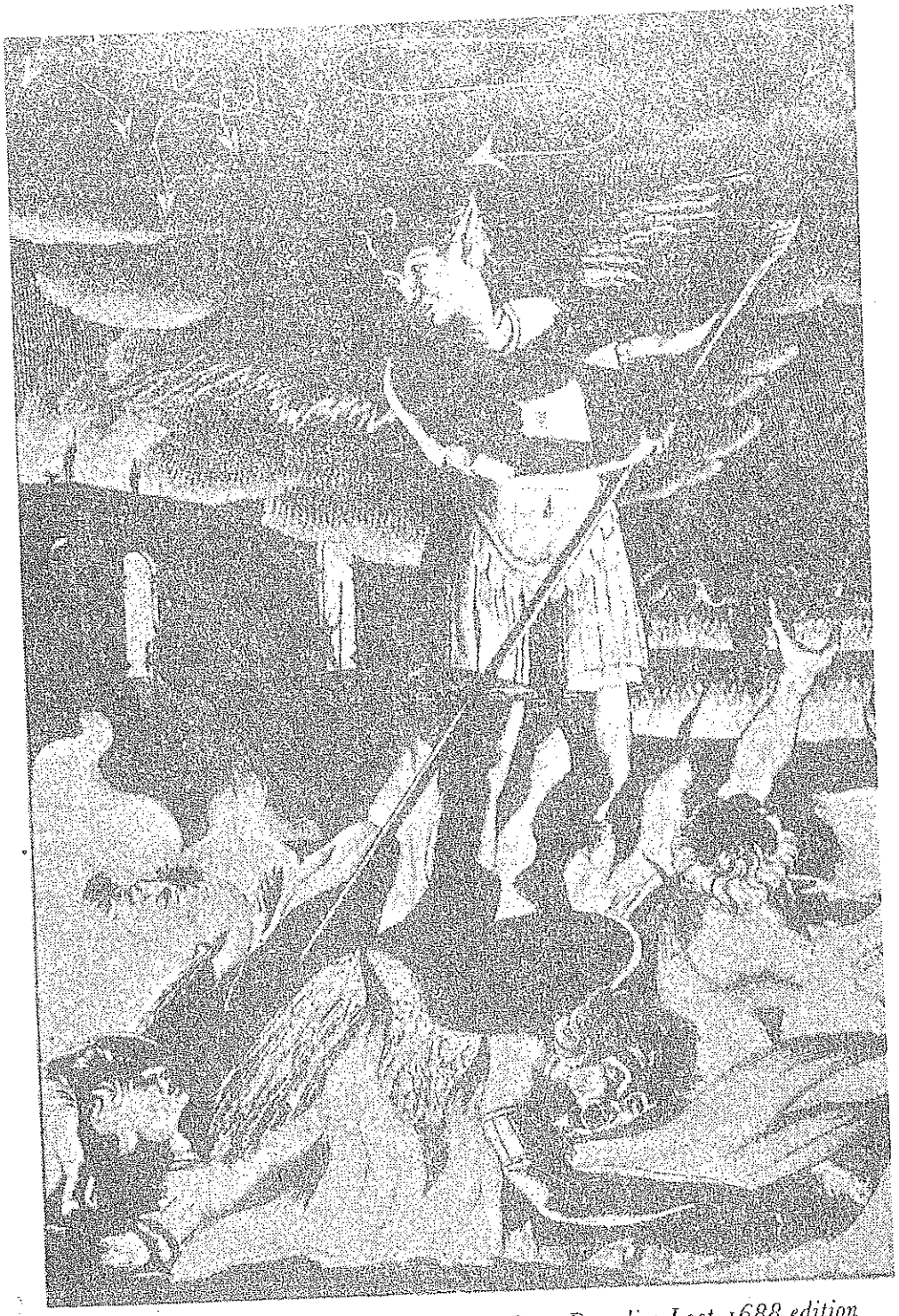
He who destroys a good book kills reason itself.

A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit.

The English civil[3] war between Charles I and Parliament (Cromwell) began in 1642 and lasted until 1646; and it was followed by the second civil war, 1648-51. During these years Milton worked hard at his pamphlets, supported Cromwell, and became a minister of the government. His eyesight began to fail, and by 1651 he was totally blind. He became unpopular when Charles II was made king (1660), but it was from this time onwards that he wrote his three greatest works.

He considered several subjects for his great poem, and at one time wanted to write on King Arthur; but he finally chose the fall of the angels, the story of Adam and Eve, and their failure to keep God's

[1] *divorce*, ending a marriage while both husband and wife are alive.
[2] *pamphlet*, a composition in a few pages on a particular subject.
[3] *civil* (war), between people of the same nation.



The fallen angels are driven into hell, from Paradise Lost 1688 edition

commands. This great epic poem, *Paradise*[4] *Lost* (first printed in 1667 and sold for £10) was planned in ten books, but written in twelve. The scene is the whole universe, including Heaven and Hell. Milton's splendid voice can be heard here at its best, in the great

[4] *paradise*, Heaven.

blank verse, strengthened by his immense learning and ornamented by all the skill of a master poet. Hell is described like this:

> A dungeon[A] horrible[B], on all sides round
> As one great furnace[C] flamed – yet from those flames
> No light, but rather darkness visible[D]
> Served only to discover sights of woe[E]
> Regions[F] of sorrow, doleful[G] shades, where peace
> And rest can never dwell[H], hope never comes
> That comes to all.
>
> [A] prison [B] terrible [C] fierce fire [D] which can be seen [E] sorrow
> [F] places [G] sad [H] live

Paradise Lost contains hundreds of remarkable thoughts put into musical verse. The following are some of these:

> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
>
> (Book 1, 254.)

> Better to reign[A] in hell than serve in heaven.
>
> [A] rule
>
> (Book 1, 263.)

> For who would lose
> Though full of pain, this intellectual[A] being
> These thoughts that wander through eternity[B]?
>
> [A] of the mind [B] endless time
>
> (Book 2, 146.)

> Long is the way
> And hard, that out of hell leads up to light.
>
> (Book 2, 432.)

> So farewell[A] hope, and with hope farewell fear.
>
> [A] good-bye
>
> (Book 4, 108.)

Like Marlowe, Milton understood the beauty of proper names. There are many examples of this in *Paradise Lost*. Here are three:

> Thick as autumnal leaves that strow[A] the brooks[B]
> In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades
> High over-arched embower[C]
>
> [A] cover [B] streams [C] form a roof
>
> (Book 1, 302)

All who since ...
Jousted[A] in Aspramont or Montalban,
Damasco, or Marocco, or Trebisond,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore
When Charlemain with all his peerage[B] fell
By Fontarabbia.
[A] fought as knights do [B] nobles (Book 1, 582)

As when to them who sail
Beyond the Cape of Hope and now are past
Mozambic, off at sea north-east winds blow
Sabaean odours[A] from the spicy[B] shore
Of Araby the Blest.
[A] smells [B] sweet-smelling (Book 4, 159)

Paradise Regained (published 1671) is more severe, less splendid than *Paradise Lost*, yet occasionally it also shows the same use of names. These call up rich images for the reader to whom they are familiar, and add to the power and beauty of the sound when the lines are read aloud:

Of faery damsels[A] met in forest wide
By knights of Logres[B] or of Lyones[B],
Lancelot,[C] or Pelleas,[C] or Pellenore.[C]
[A] spirit-like girls [B] countries in the stories of King Arthur
[C] knights of King Arthur's Round Table Book 1.)

Samson Agonistes (1671), a tragedy on the Greek model, describes the last days of Samson, when he is blind and a prisoner of the Philistines at Gaza. He is forced to go away to provide amusement for the Philistine lords; but later a messenger arrives to say that Samson has pulled down the whole theatre on their heads and his own. Milton had now been blind for about twenty years, and about three years later he died. Samson's sorrows no doubt reminded him of his own, and some of the lines of *Samson* probably reflect Milton's personal feelings:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on.

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze[A] of noon
Irrecoverably[B] dark, total eclipse[C],
Without all hope of day.

And I shall shortly[D] be with them that rest.

[A] brightness [B] without cure [C] darkening [D] soon

LYRIC POETS. Though Milton towers above all other poets of the time, several lyric-writers have left us sweet songs.

RICHARD LOVELACE wrote *To Althea, from Prison* ('Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage') and *To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars,* which includes the famous words, 'I could not love thee, Dear, so much, Loved I not honour more'.

SIR JOHN SUCKLING was a famous wit[5] at court. He is a light-hearted and often careless poet:

Out upon it![A] I have loved
Three whole days together,
And am like to love thee more
If it prove[B] fair weather.

[A] curse [B] is

ROBERT HERRICK was considered by the men of his own time to be the best living lyric poet. He writes well about the English country and its flowers. His love songs are also sweet:

I dare not ask a kiss;
I dare not beg a smile;
Lest having that or this,
I might grow proud the while.

No, no, the utmost[A] share
Of my desire shall be
Only to kiss that air
That lately kissed thee.

[A] greatest (TO ELECTRA)

[5] *wit,* the ability to use language in a clever and amusing way; *a wit,* a person respected for this ability; adj. *witty.*

17 Century

Chapter Seven

English poets, 1660–1798

Most of DRYDEN's poetry – chiefly satire and translations – is written in his excellent rhymed couplets. Yet an early poem, *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), is in four-line stanzas. It describes the chief events of 'The Wonderful Year', 1666. These events are the war against Holland and The Great Fire of London. The work is unequal. The first part (about the war) is not as good as the second (about the fire).

Dryden's great satire, *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) uses a Bible story as a basis on which to attack politicians. Another of Dryden's satires, *MacFlecknoe,* (1682) attacks a rival poet, Shadwell. A bad poet whose name was Flecknoe had recently died; and in this poem Dryden treats his own enemy Shadwell as Flecknoe's son. Flecknoe is made to say:

> Shadwell alone my perfect image bears[A]
> Mature[B] in dullness from his tender years.
> Shadwell alone of all my sons is he
> Who stands confirmed[C] in full stupidity.
> The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
> But Shadwell never deviates[D] into sense.
>
> [A] is exactly like me [B] developed [C] fixed; rooted [D] changes direction

Dryden's splendid command of the heroic couplet helped him to write biting satires. This kind of scorn, together with the polished and forceful verse, has seldom been bettered by others.

Among Dryden's best short poems are two songs, not in heroic metre: The *Ode for Saint Cecilia's Day* (1687) and *Alexander's Feast* (1697).

Dryden's translations, which he wrote in the later years of his life, included the (Latin) satires of Juvenal, the whole of Virgil (which brought him £1,200) and parts of Horace and Ovid. From the Greek he also translated parts of Homer and Theocritus.

ALEXANDER POPE, a follower of Dryden in verse but not in drama, used the couplet as a smooth but steely tool. His health was bad, and he thought of life as a long illness. While still young, he wrote his *Essay on Criticism* (1711). Like much of his work, it contains sayings often remembered today:

A little learning is a dangerous thing.

True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance

Where'er you find 'the cooling western breeze[A]'
In the next line it 'whispers through the trees'.
If crystal[B] streams 'with pleasing murmurs[C] creep'
The reader's threatened, not in vain, with 'sleep'.
Then at the last and only couplet fraught[D]
With some unmeaning thing they call a thought,
A needless Alexandrine[E] ends the song
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

[A] gentle wind [B] clear [C] soft sounds [D] loaded [E] an Alexandrine is a line like the last with 6 instead of 5 feet

Pope's delightful poem *The Rape of the Lock* [=The stealing of the hair] (1712-4) takes a light subject and treats it as important. Lord Petre had cut off some hair from Miss Arabella Fermor's head and the two families had quarrelled violently. Pope tried to end the quarrel by writing this 'heroic' poem, describing the event in detail; but he only made the quarrel worse.

Pope also translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer. His *Imitations of Horace* (1733-9), in the heroic couplet, are sometimes

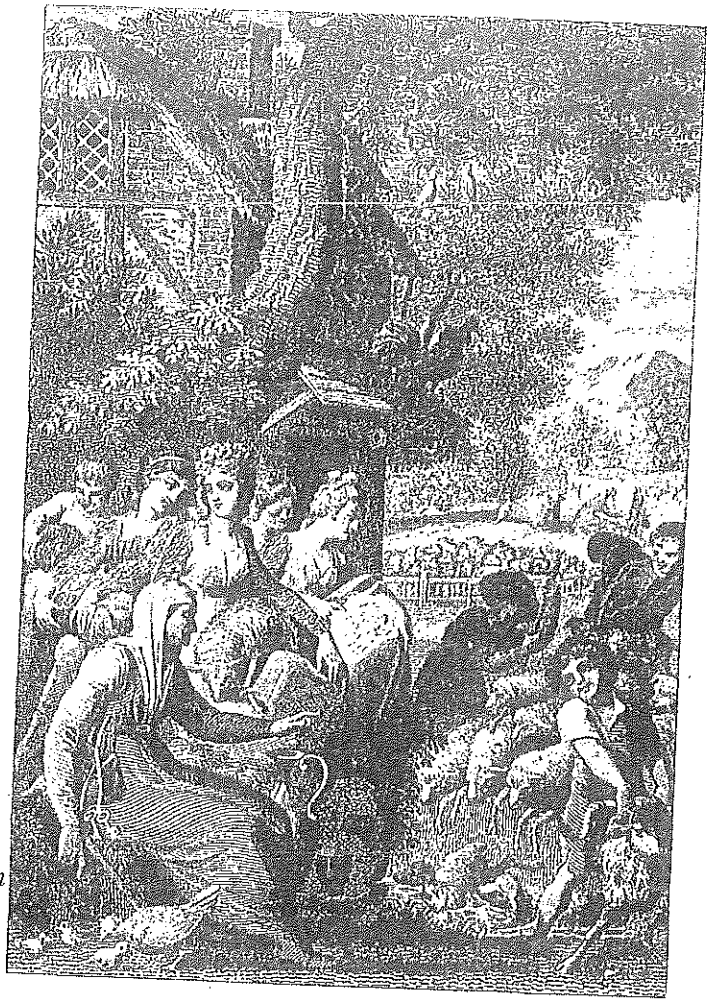
very bitter. In his satire *The Dunciad* (1728), an attack on dullness, he laughs at poor poets who are writing for their bread – a cruel thing to do. The work gives little pleasure now. His later poem, the *Essay on Man* (1732-4), shows that he knew little philosophy, but the verse has the usual polish. He wrote four *Moral Essays* (1731-5), the first about the characters of men and the second about the characters of women ('Most women have no characters at all'). The last two essays deal with the proper use of riches.

The same heroic metre was used by OLIVER GOLDSMITH in two poems which are, and deserve to be, popular. These are *The Traveller* (1764) and *The Deserted Village* (1770). The 'village' is an Irish one, whose people have been driven away by bigger landowners. The poem charmingly describes a life which has now gone for ever:

> There in his noisy mansion[A], skilled to rule,
> The village master kept his little school.
> A man severe he was, and stern[B] to view;
> I knew him well, and every truant[C] knew.
> Well had the boding[D] tremblers learned to trace[E]
> The day's disasters[F] in his morning face.
> Full well they laughed with counterfeited[G] glee [H]
> At all his jokes, for many a joke had he.
>
> [A] big house [B] severe [C] runaway [D] anxious [E] see [F] terrible events
> [G] false [H] laughter

The eighteenth century is often called The Age of Reason. Order was important in men's thoughts, and the comfortable town was usually preferred to the wild mountains. The heroic couplet is well suited to verse based on reasoning, but it must not be thought that there was no other sort of poetry. A return to thoughts about nature and more lyrical subjects began early.

Pope said that 'The proper study of mankind is man', but JAMES THOMSON chose as his special study *The Seasons*, on which he wrote four poems in blank verse: *Winter* (1726), *Summer* (1727), *Spring* (1728) and *Autumn* (1730). These poems, which were very popular, drew pictures of woods, fields, birds, deserts, and so on. Yet Thomson was unable to escape altogether from the poetic



An illustration from James Thomson's poem The Seasons showing Summer

Below: an old illustration for the opening verse of Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

language of the eighteenth century, which meant using unnatural and fixed phrases instead of the usual and natural word. Thomson's other good poem was *The Castle of Indolence* [1] (1748), written in the Spenserian stanza. It is perhaps better poetry than that in *The Seasons*. It is a poet's dream, and the sleepy language has a special beauty.

A group of poets who turned away from the bright tea-table chose death for their subject. They are sometimes known as the churchyard school of poets. EDWARD YOUNG was one of them. His *Night Thoughts,* written in good blank verse, was at one time very popular. Its subjects are life, death, the future world, and God. It is unequal, dark, sad, and filled with strange imaginations. He calls man:

> A worm. A god. I tremble at myself
> And in myself am lost.

In the ninth book he says,

> From human mould[A] we reap[B] our daily bread ...
> Whole buried towns support the dancer's heel[C].
>
> [A] decay [B] cut corn [C] back of foot

ROBERT BLAIR was another of this school, and he also used blank verse. In his poem *The Grave* (1743) he begs the dead to come back and tell us something about the grave:

> Tell us, ye dead! Will none of you in pity
> To those you left behind disclose[A] the secret?
> Oh that some courteous[B] ghost would blab[C] it out
> What 'tis you are and we must shortly[D] be!
>
> [A] tell [B] polite [C] tell [D] soon

THOMAS GRAY was a greater poet than these. His *Elegy* [2] *Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750), one of the most beautiful and famous of English poems, describes his thoughts as he looks at the graves of

[1] *indolence,* laziness.
[2] *elegy,* a sad poem for the death of a particular person or the loss of some loved place or thing.

country people buried near the church at Stoke Poges. He wonders what they might have done in the world if they had had better opportunities; but they did not go out into the great cities:

> Far from the madding crowd's ignoble[A] strife[B]
> Their sober[C] wishes never learned to stray[D];
> Along the cool sequestered[E] vale[F] of life
> They kept the noiseless tenor[G] of their way.
>
> [A] not noble [B] struggle [C] calm [D] wander [E] sheltered [F] valley [G] course

Or again:

> Full many a gem[A] of purest ray serene[B]
> The dark unfathomed[C] caves of ocean bear;
> Full many a flower is born to blush[D] unseen
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
>
> [A] precious stone [B] calm [C] unexplored [D] redden

Gray's ode,[3] *The Bard*[4] (1757), is intended as a sad song by a Welsh poet, addressed to King Edward I, who put all the Welsh poets to death. He curses Edward and all his race. The ode shows that Gray, like Marlowe and Milton, could use proper names with skill; combined with vowel-music this skill can produce lines like these:

> Cold is Cadwallo's tongue
> That hushed[A] the stormy main[B]
> Brave Urien sleeps upon his craggy[C] bed.
> Mountains, ye mourn[D] in vain
> Modred, whose magic song
> Made huge[E] Plynlimmon bow his cloud-topped head.
>
> [A] made quiet [B] sea [C] rocky [D] be sad at a time of death [E] immense

We may not like the idea that Cadwallo's tongue is 'cold' but there is no doubt that Gray could write great poetry. Notice, too, his use of alliteration.

[3] *ode*, a lyric poem addressed to a person or an idea; Gray's *The Bard* is a Pindaric ode, following an exact pattern of stanzas and rhymes, but this classical form is seldom used in English odes.
[4] *bard*, poet.

As a schoolboy Gray went to Eton. In his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (1742) he thinks of the boys still at school and of their present happiness and the troubles that are waiting for them in life:

> Still as they run they look behind;
> They hear a voice in every wind,
> And snatch[A] a fearful joy
>
> Alas![B] Regardless[C] of their doom[D]
> The little victims[E] play!
> No sense have they of ills to come,
> No care beyond today.

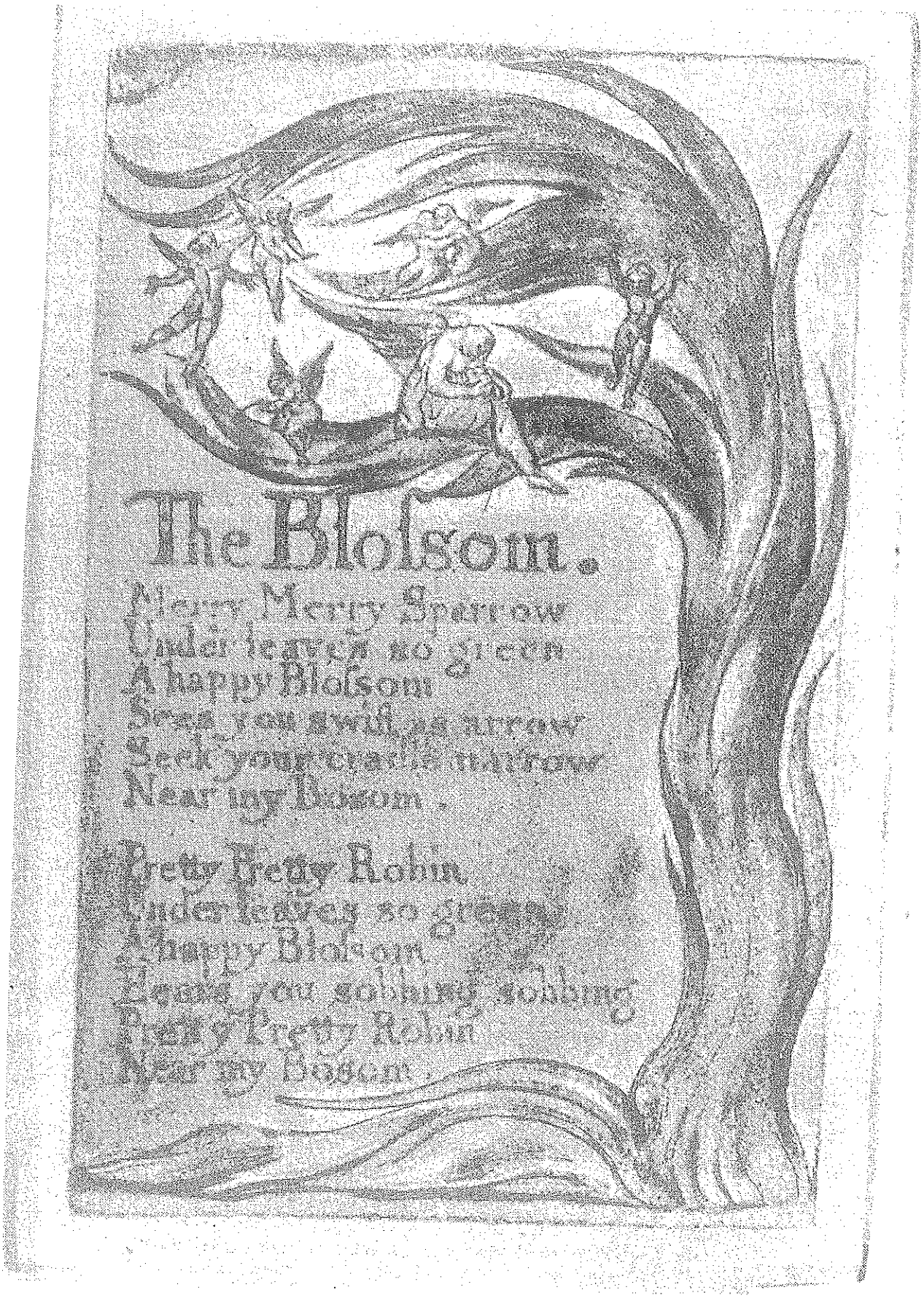
[A] catch [B] Oh! [C] not caring about [D] fate [E] persons who will be sacrificed

Gray's other poems include an *Ode on a Favourite Cat* (1747), which was drowned. In later life he learnt Icelandic and wrote poems on Icelandic and Celtic subjects. He is also famous for some fine letters.

Other poets turned to the past when they tried to escape from the polished orderliness of the eighteenth century. Thomas Percy's *Reliques*[5] *of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) brought to light many old poems from the darkness of the past. A stranger book was *Fragments*[6] *of Ancient Poetry* (1760) by JAMES MACPHERSON. He pretended that he had found some old poems by a poet, Ossian; but he wrote most of them himself. In much the same way THOMAS CHATTERTON invented a fifteenth-century poet, Thomas Rowley, whose poems he pretended to have. The trick was discovered, but the poems are good in spite of that – better, in fact, than some poems that Chatterton wrote under his own name.

WILLIAM BLAKE, a poet and an artist, illustrated[7] the works of Young, Blair, Gray and others. Much of his poetry has hidden meanings that are hard to understand. He did not believe in the reality of matter, or in the power of earthly rulers, or in punishment

[5] *reliques*, remains.
[6] *fragments*, bits.
[7] *illustrate*, to make pictures of scenes, characters or actions described in a book; the *illustrations* may explain, add interest to, or just ornament the printed words.



A page illustrated by Blake from the original version of his poems The Songs of Innocence and Experience

Chapter Nine

Early nineteenth-century poets

The main stream of poetry in the eighteenth century had been orderly and polished, without much feeling for nature. Heroic couplets were used for this verse, but various writers had broken away from the form and the thought. In spite of this, the publication of the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*[1] (1798) came as a shock. The critics considered the language too simple and the change too violent. This important book – the signal of the beginning of the romantic age – was the joint work of WILLIAM WORDSWORTH and SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, often known, with Southey, as the Lake Poets, because they liked the lake district in the north-west of England and lived in it.

Wordsworth was a poet of nature, and had the special ability to throw a charm over ordinary things. Coleridge, on the other hand, could make mysterious events acceptable to a reader's mind. Neither of them used the old language of poetry much.

Wordsworth was so filled with the love of nature that, in later editions of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800-2), he said that the language of poetry ought to be the same as the language of a simple farm-worker. Yet he could not keep to this idea himself; his imagination led him far beyond the life and thoughts of a countryman.

Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*[2], appeared in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. An old sailor describes some strange misfortunes that happened to his ship. It was in the ice of the

[1] *ballad*, a simple poem in short stanzas telling a story.
[2] *mariner*, a sailor.

after death. His best known works include *Songs of Innocence* (1787) and *Songs of Experience* (1794). The second is darker and heavier than the first; but it does contain some good poems. Here is a verse from *The Tiger:*

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal[A] hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry[B]?

[A] undying [B] perfect shape

ROBERT BURNS was a Scottish farmer whose lyrics became famous. (The second edition of his poems brought him £500.) He wrote hundreds of songs and lyrics, and among them *Mary Morrison, John Anderson* and *The Banks of Doon* are famous. His love-songs include 'My love's like a red, red rose'. He had a deep understanding of animals and love for them. Even a mouse brought a gentle poem from his pen.

One more eighteenth-century poet is worth our special notice: WILLIAM COWPER's verse shows the beginning of the swing away from the formal classical style of Pope towards the simpler, more natural expression which we shall see in Wordsworth and Coleridge (p. 91). These lines are from Cowper's long poem, *The Task*[8] (1784):

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters[A] fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa[B] round,
And, while the bubbling[C] and loud-hissing[D] urn[E]
Throws up a steamy column,[F] and the cups,
That cheer but not inebriate,[G] wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

[A] window covers [B] comfortable seat [C] boiling [D] making a boiling sound
[E] large tea vessel [F] narrow cloud of steam [G] act like strong drink

[8] *task*, a piece of work to be done.

South Pole when he shot a great bird; for this crime a curse fell on the ship. The wind failed, the water-supply ended, and all the other sailors died of thirst. The old mariner was then left:

Alone, alone, all all alone,
  Alone on a wide, wide sea,
And never a saint[A] took pity on
  My soul in agony[B].

The many men so beautiful!
  And they all dead did lie.
And a thousand thousand slimy[C] things
  Lived on, and so did I.

[A] Holy spirit [B] great pain [C] oily

The mysterious surroundings of the silent ship are described in Coleridge's magic words. At last the mariner, seeing God's creatures in the moonlight, blesses them. This breaks the curse and he is able to return home.

Two other important poems by Coleridge (not in the *Lyrical Ballads*) are *Christabel* (1816) and *Kubla Khan* (1816). Neither was finished, but there is again magic in each. Christabel finds the beautiful lady Geraldine in a wood and brings her home. Geraldine claims to be the daughter of an old friend of Christabel's father, who has quarrelled with him. But this is not true, because she is in fact an evil spirit in the form of Geraldine. This poem is one of the most beautiful in English. Among the more noticeable lines are the following, which refer to the quarrel:

And constancy[A] lives in realms[B] above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth[C] with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.

[A] faithfulness [B] kingdoms [C] angry

Once when Coleridge was staying in Devon, he fell asleep while reading in *Purchas his Pilgrims* (see page 30) about Kubla Khan's great building in Xanadu. On waking he knew that he had dreamed

several hundred poetic lines on the subject, and he began at once to write them down. Unluckily he was interrupted, and was never again able to remember the rest:

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately[A] pleasure dome[B] decree[C],
> Where Alph, the sacred river ran,
> Through caverns[D] measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.
>
> [A] proud [B] building [C] order [D] caves

The buildings were set among gardens, rivers and forests, and caves of ice. All this is described in words which produce a strange and magic picture.

Wordsworth's part in the *Lyrical Ballads* was more difficult to perform successfully than Coleridge's; for he had to make ordinary things seem wonderful. He wrote more than half the book, and his love of nature is immediately clear. In *Lines Written above Tintern Abbey,* the poet returns to a scene of his boyhood, sits under a tree, and looks at the lovely views which he used to remember when far away:

> But oft in lonely rooms and 'mid[A] the din[B]
> Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
> In hours of weariness[C], sensations[D] sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.
>
> [A] among [B] noise [C] tiredness [D] feelings

Among his best sonnets are *Westminster Bridge,* an emotional view of London asleep, and *London,* 1802. The latter is a cry for help in the troubles of the world: 'Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour. England hath need of thee'. Well known among other short poems are *The Daffodils, The Solitary Reaper,* and *Lucy.*

The *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*[3] (1807) is longer and more important. The poet finds a basis of faith in memories of childhood, before the business of the world has shut off the view of heaven:

[3] *intimations of immortality,* signs leading one to expect a life without end after the present life.

Shades of the prison-house[A] begin to close
  Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds[B] the light, and whence[C] it flows,
  He sees it in his joy

[A] (the world) [B] sees [C] from where

In the same poem Wordsworth expresses his belief in the idea that, as well as going to a life without end, we come from another life:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter[A] nakedness[B],
  But trailing[C] clouds of glory do we come
  From God, who is our home.

[A] complete [B] bareness [C] pulling

The Prelude, a record in fourteen books of verse of Wordsworth's own progress in poetry and thought, was written during the years 1799-1805. In it he remembers his schooldays, his time at Cambridge, his visits to London and France, and his life in France during the Revolution. *The Excursion* (1814), in nine books, is the middle part of a great philosophical work which he planned but never completed.

GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON, was a romantic figure, but his poetry was much influenced by the classical form of Pope. Byron dressed splendidly, went to fight for the freedom of Greece, satirized many sides of English life, and hated all false and insincere talk. He died of fever at Missolonghi (Mesolongion, in western Greece), but his body was brought home to England for burial.

Byron's poetry, though powerful, lacks the finest poetic imagination. His words mean only what they say, and have no further magic. Though he was influenced by the eighteenth century, his satires lack Pope's polished perfection and command of words. His verse possesses neither Wordworth's power of suggestion, nor Coleridge's mystery; but, except when he wrote carelessly, it is often strong and beautiful.

Childe Harold (1809-17), written in the Spenserian stanza, tells the story of a man who goes off to travel far and wide because he is disgusted with life's foolish pleasures. (The man is, in fact, Lord Byron.) The different places that he visits give the poet an opportunity to describe what once happened in them. Thus, in Belgium, the poet remembers the recent battle of Waterloo and the officers' dance that took place in Brussels just before it:

> There was a sound of revelry[A] by night,
> And Belgium's capital had gathered then
> Her beauty and her chivalry[B], and bright
> The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men.
> A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
> Music arose with its voluptuous[C] swell,
> Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again,
> And all went merry as a marriage bell.
> But hush[D]! Hark[E]! A deep sound strikes like a rising knell[F].
>
> [A] enjoyment [B] brave officers [C] giving pleasure [D] be silent [E] listen
> [F] slow, sad ringing of a bell

In 1812 and the following years Byron wrote several narrative poems about the East. In *The Giaour* [= the Christian] (1813) a slave, Leila, is thrown into the sea by her master Hassan. In revenge her lover, the Giaour, kills Hassan. *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) is a tragic love story. *The Corsair* and *Lara* (1814), both in heroic couplets, are stories of love, fighting and death.

Don Juan (1818-24), a long poem of astonishing adventure, is also a satire which attacks some of Byron's enemies. It starts with a shipwreck, and continues with its later results; but the main story is often left so that the poet may put forward ideas on various subjects. It contains the beautiful lyric which begins as follows:

> The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece,
> Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
> Where grew the arts of war and peace,
> Where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung.

Byron wrote a number of short poems which are popular. *The Assyrian Came Down* is learnt at school. His plays are not very good,

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY was a greater poet, of good family, restless, and rich. He struggled against the causes of human misery and against accepted religions. He saw goodness in the whole of nature, and he wanted all men to be free. His first important poem, *Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*[4] (1816) is in blank verse and shows Wordsworth's influence. It expresses joy in the universe and sorrow for the violent feelings of men. *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) is a cry of impatience at the cruelty of the world, but it is too long (5,000 lines). The reader's love of freedom is dulled by too much language, and the poem is written in the Spenserian stanza, which is not suitable. *The Cenci* (1819), a shocking but honest tragedy, has some dramatic power. *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), another play (on the Greek model), deals with the human struggle against the power of false gods. The argument is dull, but the lyrics are beautiful.

Adonais (1821), one of his best poems, is an elegy on the death of Keats. One of his finest sonnets, *Ozymandias,* expresses the uselessness and the shortness of all earthly power. His lyrics are among the best in the language, and include *The Cloud* (I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers), *To a Skylark* (Hail to thee, blithe[5] spirit), *The Indian Serenade* and *Stanzas Written in Dejection*[6] *near Naples.* The famous *Ode to the West Wind* gives expression to his wild and free imagination:

> If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
> If I were a swift[A] cloud to fly with thee;
> A wave to pant[B] beneath thy power, and share
> The impulse[C] of thy strength, only less free
> Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
> I were as in my boyhood, and could be
> The comrade[D] of thy wandering under heaven!
>
> [A] fast [B] breathe heavily [C] driving power [D] companion

Shelley loved the wild wind, but JOHN KEATS loved beauty and rest. A friend in 1813 gave him Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to read, and this awoke his poetic powers. He studied the poets and he studied nature

[4] *solitude,* being alone.
[5] *blithe,* joyful (like the song of the high-flying *skylark*).
[6] *dejection,* great sadness.

but his poetry was popular because he attacked false ideas, and because the eastern scene was unusual in his time. He could give memorable form to ideas that were already in his readers' minds:

> Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
> 'T is woman's whole existence. (DON JUAN)

and he makes us laugh with his sharp satire – sometimes using intentionally bad rhymes:

> But – Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual[A],
> Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked[B] you all?
>
> [A] interested in things of the mind
> [B] ruled by continuous complaints
>
> (DON JUAN)

but he very seldom takes us to the stars.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
drawn by Soord

John Keats who lived from 1795-1821 drawn by his close companion C. A. Brown

too. He could write lines in Wordsworth's manner, but with more music, such lines as 'A little noiseless noise among the leaves.'

His early poem *Endymion* (1818), in four books, is based on old ideas: the old gods, the love of the moon-goddess for a shepherd, Venus and Adonis, Glaucus and Scylla. It was violently criticized, but he did not lose faith in himself. In 1820 he published *Lamia* (in which a snake is changed into a beautiful girl). *Isabella* was in the same book. It is taken from a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Isabella is the daughter of a proud family of Florence (Firenze). Lorenzo falls in love with her, and her brothers kill him. She finds his buried body and puts his head in a flower-pot. Her brothers notice that she spends a lot of time with this pot, and they steal it. When they find the head in it, they feel guilty and escape. *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, which belongs to this time also, is based on the idea that on that night girls may see their lovers in dreams.

Hyperion (1818-9) was never finished. Hyperion is the old sun-god. The young Apollo, god of music and poetry and the sun, is introduced, but there the poem ends. It contains several examples of the stillness in some of Keats's poetry:

> No stir of air was there
> Not so much life as on a summer's day
> Robs not one light seed from the feathered grass,
> But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.
>
> And still they were the same bright, patient stars.

The same effects may be found in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*[7] (1819), a description of the figures on its side, which will never move:

> Heard melodies[A] are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter.
>
> Fair youth beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
> Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare.
> Bold lover, never, never, canst thou kiss.
>
> When old age shall this generation[B] waste
> Thou shalt remain, in midst[C] of other woe[D]
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayest,
> 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' – that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
>
> [A] music [B] people of one age [C] middle [D] sorrow

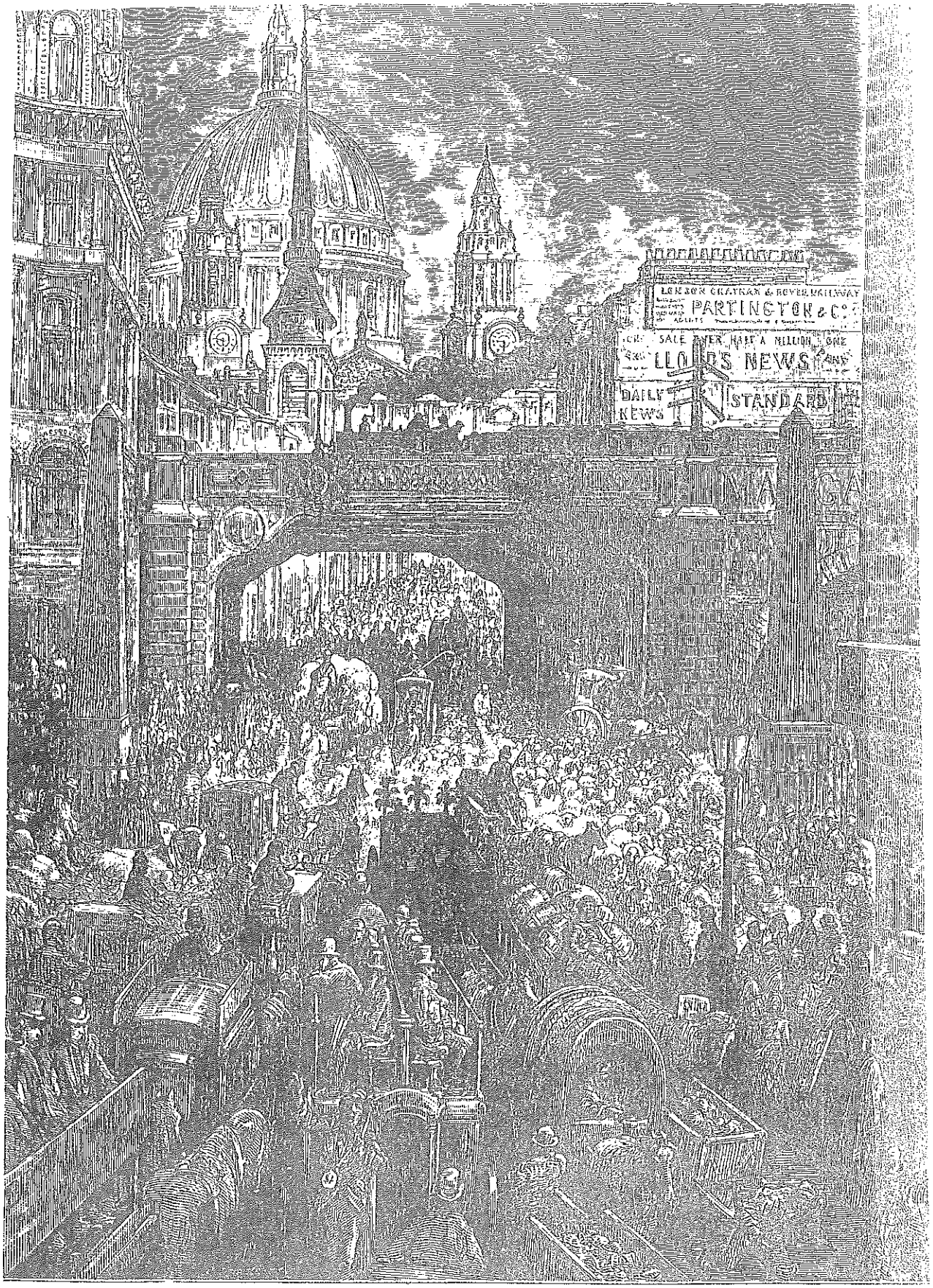
Other great odes written at about the same time are *To a Nightingale* (My heart aches) and *To Autumn* (Season of mists). He wrote more than twenty sonnets. One of the best is *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (Oft have I travelled).

Keats wrote poetry of rich detail and accused Shelley of using language which was too thin. Keats also wrote a good ballad, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*[8], in which a knight dreams of his lady, but wakes alone on a cold hillside, 'where no birds sing.' 'La Belle Dame' is supposed by some to be tuberculosis, a disease which killed Keats at the early age of twenty-six. Shelley, too, died young; he was drowned near Lerici, Italy, at the age of twenty-nine. Byron also died (of fever) before he was forty.

A less important poet of the time was ROBERT SOUTHEY. He wrote an immense amount of prose and verse. His poems often told a story, and were set in far-away lands. Among the shorter poems are *The Inchcape Rock* and *The Battle of Blenheim*. His prose *Life of Nelson* is well known.

THOMAS CAMPBELL produced some battle poems which are full of spirit, such as *Ye Mariners*[9] *of England* and *The Battle of the Baltic.*

[7] *Grecian urn,* a vessel (for liquids or ashes) made by the ancient Greeks.
[8] (French) The beautiful lady without mercy.
[9] *mariners,* sailors.



A picture of Ludgate Hill by Gustave Doré showing St. Paul's Cathedral in the background

Chapter Ten

Later nineteenth-century poets

The early poems of ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON were much criticized, but in his later books he rewrote some and omitted others altogether. His *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and *Poems* (1833) were an improvement, though they were still the work of a young man. The music is there already, but the thought is not deep. *The Lotos Easters*, a poem on the wanderings of Ulysses and his men, gives a taste of the rhythm of which Tennyson was a master:

> Surely, surely slumber[A] is more sweet than toil[B], the shore
> Than labour[B] on the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar!
> Oh rest ye, brother mariners[C]; we will not wander more.
>
> [A] sleep [B] hard work [C] sailors

Tennyson knew well that more thought was needed in great work, and in 1842 he published two books of poems which are serious and thoughtful as well as musical. The rhythm is still there, and Fitzgerald thought that Tennyson never wrote better poems than these; but today many people prefer *The Idylls*[1] *of the King*.

Tennyson had become a very careful artist, choosing each word and its exact place with close attention. In *Morte D'Arthur* he put Malory's story into blank verse in which the magic voice may clearly be heard:

[1] *idyll*, descriptive poem.

Part of an illustration from Tennyson's poem The Idylls of the King showing Guinevere and Lancelot

So all day long the noise of battle rolled
Among the mountains by the winter sea,
Until King Arthur's table, man by man,
Had fallen in Lyonesse[A] about their lord
King Arthur.

[A] Lyonesse was a land which is now supposed to lie beneath the sea to the south-west of England

The Idylls of the King included this short poem and others on the same story: *Enid, Vivien, Elaine,* and *Guinevere* appeared in 1859, and others in 1869, 1871-2, and 1885. *The Passing of Arthur* describes at the end how Sir Bedivere places the wounded king in the ship which is carrying the queen (see page 19). Sir Bedivere, in sorrow because of the end of the Round Table and the death of the other knights, asks what he can do now:

And slowly answered Arthur from the barge[A],
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils[B] himself in many ways
Lest one good custom should corrupt[C] the world.
Comfort thyself! What comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within himself make pure! But thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul'.

[A] ship [B] reaches his aim [C] ruin

Tennyson used many metres and made experiments with new ones. For example, he tried hexameters,[2] like Clough; and he was fond of the four-line stanza rhyming abba:

Yet waft[A] me from the harbour mouth,
Wild wind, I seek[B] a warmer sky
And I will see before I die
The palms[C] and temples of the south.

[A] blow [B] search for [C] tall trees which grow in hot countries

This is also the metre that he used for his long poem *In Memoriam* (1833-50), an elegy for his friend Hallam, who died in Vienna at the early age of 22. Though the poem has its fine qualities, it is too long for a discussion of death alone, and the sorrow for the loss of a friend gradually changes into an expression of a wider love of God and man.

In general Tennyson's shorter poems are better than the long ones. *Ulysses* (1842) expresses in fine lines the leader's decision to 'sail beyond the sunset and the baths Of all the western stars until I die.' *The Princess* (1847 and 1853) contains fine lyrics; here is a verse of one which has been set to music:

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea.
Low, low, breathe and blow,

[2] *hexameter*, a metre used for heroic verse by the ancient Greek and Latin poets but difficult to write well in English; the line has six feet, strictly controlled in form by old custom.

Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dying moon and blow,
Blow him again to me;
While my little one, while my pretty one, sleeps.

Tennyson's plays are not important. The best is *Becket* (1884) on the subject of the quarrel between King Henry II and Thomas à Becket, who was murdered at Canterbury in 1170. Chaucer's pilgrims were on their way to Becket's grave, and T. S. Eliot has written a play on this murder.

Tennyson's influence in his own time was immense. He reflected the changing ideas of his age in his various poems; but at the beginning of the twentieth century, his popularity fell.

ROBERT BROWNING was unlike Tennyson. For Browning the intellect[3] was, from the beginning, more important than the music. This made him popular in universities after his death. He did not reflect very much the ideas of his time; he did not go to an ancient university. His immense knowledge came from his studies in London, his travels and his own work. He was hopeful by nature and often attempted poems beyond his powers. In 1846 he married Elizabeth Barrett, one of England's greatest poetesses, against her father's wishes and in spite of her bad health. They went to live in Italy at Florence, a place which influenced the work of both.

Browning's *Pauline* (1833), containing more than 1,000 lines, is only part of a much longer poem that he planned but never wrote. He tried writing plays without much success. His tragedy *Strafford* (1837) ran for only a few nights in London. Plays, as we have seen, must have a carefully built structure, and must contain action, but Browning's gift was more in poetry. He had more success with dramatic material for one speaker.

Sordello (1840) is his most difficult poem. It is a story of events in 1200 and its details are complicated. It has been said that neither the first line (Who will, may hear Sordello's story told), nor the last line (Who would, has heard Sordello's story told) is true.

One of his successful dramatic poems is *Pippa Passes* (1841). In this a girl, Pippa, wanders through the town singing, and her song

[3] *intellect*, the power of reasoning and understanding.

influences people who (unknown to her) hear it. Part of it is as cheerful as Browning himself:

> The year's at the spring
> The day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven ...
> All's right with the world.

The poems in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Dramatic Romances* (1845) are a great advance on Browning's dramas. *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, a poem in the second of these books, described the removal of rats from a city by a musician whose music leads them away. There is some difficulty when he goes for his agreed pay, ('A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!') and so he leads the children away like the rats, and they all disappear into a hill.

Robert Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Browning's difficult style is the result of his unusual knowledge of words and his bold ways of building sentences. *Rabbi ben Ezra,* in *Dramatis Personae* (1864), gives something of Browning's philosophy. It contains the line:

> Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

This difficult pair of questions would be written by another author as 'Does care irk (trouble) a bird whose stomach is full? Does doubt fret (trouble, worry) the beast whose stomach is full? No.'

Browning had a neat way of expressing ideas. A few examples may be interesting:

> That shall be tomorrow,
> Not tonight.
> I must bury sorrow
> Out of sight. (A WOMAN'S LAST WORD)

> Oh, to be in England
> Now that April's there. (HOME THOUGHTS FROM ABROAD)

> Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the north west died away;
> Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking ^ into Cadiz Bay
> ^ like smoke (HOME THOUGHTS FROM THE SEA)

> Who knows but the world may end tonight?
> (THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER)

> Never the time and the place
> And the loved one all together!
> (NEVER THE TIME AND THE PLACE)

The Ring and the Book (1868-9) is a poem based on a book that he found in Florence. This is the 'Book' of the title. It is an old story of the murder of a wife, Pompilia, by her husband, told in various ways by different people, who do not always have the same view of the details.

On the day of Browning's death a volume, *Asolando,* was published which contained many fine poems including the following lines:

One who never turned his back, but marched breast[A] forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted[B], wrong would
triumph[C],
Held[D] we fall to rise, are baffled[E] to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

[A] chest [B] beaten [C] succeed [D] believed [E] puzzled

Tennyson and Browning were the two greatest poetic figures of their time, but there were other great poets. WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR was chiefly a writer of prose, but some of his verse is important. A few lines that he wrote at the end of a long life easily find room in the memory:

I strove[A] with none, for none was worth my strife;
Nature I loved, and next to nature, art.
I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart[B].

[A] struggled [B] go away

MATTHEW ARNOLD, the son of Dr Arnold, headmaster of Rugby, wrote a poem on the school, *Rugby Chapel* (1867) ('Coldly, sadly descends the autumn evening'). Arnold was weighed down by the problems of his time, and much of his work is sad. *Thyrsis* (1867) is a lament[4] for his friend, Clough. *The Scholar Gipsy*[5] (1853) tells of an Oxford man who joins a band of gipsies and wanders with them. There are good descriptions of the country, but Arnold's anxieties appear once more:

This strange disease of modern life
With its sick hurry and divided aims.

He was unable to find rest, and greatly admired Wordsworth's calmness. He made a fine collection of Wordsworth's poetry; his sad

[4] *lament*, an expression of deep sorrow, usually at the death of a loved person.
[5] *gipsy*, a member of a race of wanderers; they are of Indian origin but have lived in western Europe for 400 years.

Memorial Verses (1850) are a lament for that poet's death, and for the deaths of other poets at home and abroad:

> Goethe[A] in Weimar sleeps, and Greece
> Long since saw Byron's struggle cease[B].
> But one such death remained to come:
> The last poetic voice is dumb[C]
> We stand today by Wordsworth's tomb[D].
>
> [A] German poet, 1749-1832 [B] end [C] silent [D] grave

Arnold wrote a critical sonnet on Shakespeare, whom he praised too much. One of his other poems, *Empedocles on Etna*, has been highly praised, perhaps because it is not altogether sad.

ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH, Arnold's friend, wrote a few important poems. Some of his early work, such as *Easter Day, Naples* (1849) is good. *Say not the struggle naught availeth* [= Do not say the struggle is useless] is a cry of encouragement. You may seem to be failing, he says, but perhaps your unseen friends are winning the battle:

> And not by eastern windows only
> When daylight comes, comes in the light;
> In front, the sun climbs slow – how slowly!
> But westward, look! The land is bright!

Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1849) (= Loves when travelling) is a

Title page drawing by her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Christina Rossetti's collection of poems entitled Goblin Market

taste of more modern poetry before its time. Like another of his poems, it is written in hexameters, common in Latin but not in English; and he writes in a conversational way:

> T'iber is b'eautiful t'oo, and the 'orchard[A] sl'opes and the 'Anio
> F'alling, f'alling y'et, to the 'ancient l'yrical c'adence[B].
> [A] fruit-garden [B] falling sound

The sonnets of DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI are among the most musical in English. Rossetti was a painter as well as a poet, and his poems have been criticized as belonging to the 'Fleshly School' of poetry. But he replied that poetry ought to be based on the senses. Many of his lines are clearly written by a man with a painter's eye:

> She had a mouth made to bring death to life.
>
> (A LAST CONFESSION)

> You have been mine before, –
> How long ago I may not know:
> But just when at the swallow's soar[A]
> Your neck turned so,
> Some veil did fall. I knew it all of yore[B]
> [A] bird's flying up [B] in old times
>
> (SUDDEN LIGHT)

> This is that lady beauty, in whose praise
> Thy voice and hand shake still – long known to thee
> By flying hair and fluttering hem[A] – the beat
> Following her daily of thy heart and feet.
> [A] waving edge
>
> (SOUL'S BEAUTY)

The pictures of the mouth and the neck and of the flying hair and the fluttering hem of the dress are what a painter sees.

Rossetti wrote about nature with his eye on it, but he did not feel it in his bones as Wordsworth does; he studied it. Rossetti was too fond of alliteration; notice 'flying hair and fluttering hem'.

His sister, CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI wrote mostly sad and religious poems and poems for the young. Among her best productions are her excellent sonnets on unhappy love.

Another great poetess of this time was Elizabeth Barrett, who, on her marriage, became ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING. Some of her poems are too long, but in a sonnet she could not write too much because the form is limited to fourteen lines. Thus much of her best work is contained in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). She pretended at first that these sonnets were translated from the Portuguese; they were really an entirely original expression of her love for Robert Browning:

> How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
> I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach.

Her marriage to Browning is the subject of a play by Besier, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street,* (1930).

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE was a follower of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and misused alliteration more than Rossetti did. He wrote much political verse, but his new rich music was first heard in his drama *Atalanta in Calydon.* Here is an example of its verse:

> Maiden[A] and mistress[B] of the months and stars
> Now folded in the flowerless fields of heaven.
> [A] girl [B] lady

Swinburne's poetry has been criticized for lack of thought; but the singing is splendid. He was much blamed for moral reasons when *Poems and Ballads* appeared in 1866. A later book of *Poems and Ballads* (1878), which gave less offence, shows his interest in French writers, and includes the laments for Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier, and the translations of Villon's *Ballades.*

Tristram of Lyonesse (1882), usually considered to be his best work, tells the undying story of Tristram and Iseult. Tristram went to Ireland to bring the beautiful Iseult to marry King Mark of Cornwall, but fell in love with her himself. Yet he did his duty, and she married the king. Tristram went to Britanny, and there he married the other Iseult, Iseult of the White Hand, daughter of the Duke of Brittany. The story is not always the same. In the version used by Swinburne, Tristram lay dying in Brittany and sent a message to

A painting of Swinburne in 1865 by George Frederick Watts

his old love in Cornwall. Queen Iseult then set out to go to him; but Tristram was told that the ship, when it was seen, had a black sail. This was a sign that she was not on board, and he died of sorrow. Swinburne wrote his poem in couplets, with his usual alliteration:

> Nor shall they feel or fear, whose date is done,
> Aught[A] that made once more dark the living sun
> And bitterer in their breathing lips the breath
> Than the dark dawn[B] and bitter dust of death.
>
> [A] anything [B] break of day

The volume containing *Tristram* also contained his sonnets on the Elizabethan dramatists. Swinburne wrote plays, but they are not of great value.

One of the greatest poetic translators was EDWARD FITZGERALD He translated six of Calderon's plays (1853), the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus (1876) and (most important) the *Rubaiyat* [= Four-line verses] of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam. Most translations lose something and are not as good as the originals; but this book (1859) is considered by some Persian scholars to be better than Omar Khayyam's work. Fitzgerald did not stick too closely to his originals, but gave the general sense. In his translation of the *Rubaiyat,* he entirely omitted the hidden meanings of the original (in which, for example, the wine meant God). The suggestion of the whole poem is, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,' and the effect on the thoughtful mind is therefore that of sad music:

> Ah, make the most of what ye yet may spend
> Before we too into the dust descend;
> Dust into dust, and under dust, to lie
> Sans[A] wine, sans song, sans singer and – sans end!
>
> [A] without

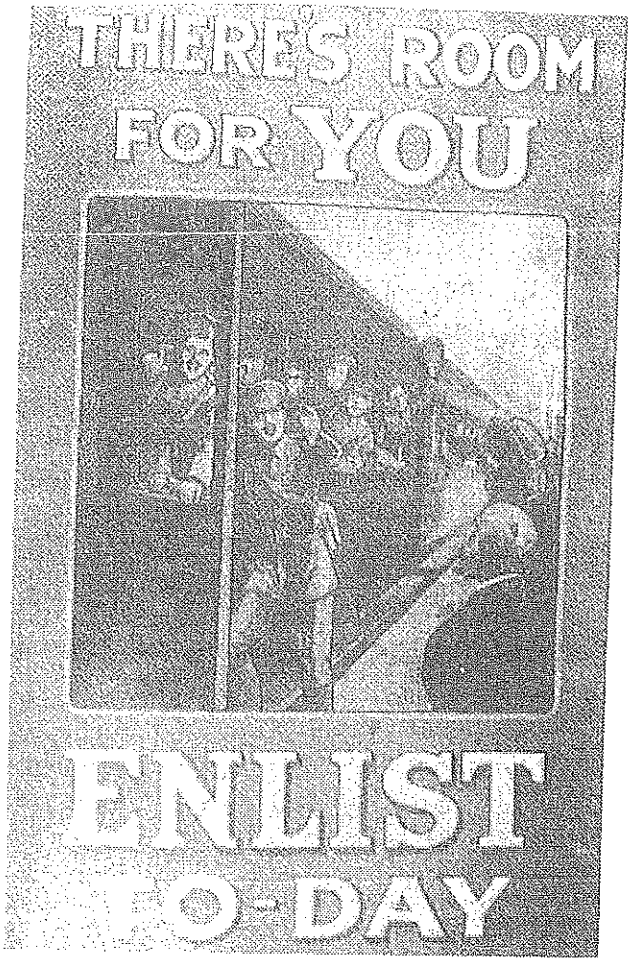
As the nineteenth century drew near its end Meredith the novelist was writing a few good poems. *Juggling Jerry* gives a brave old man's view of the nearness of death. *The Lark Ascending* has a music which reminds the reader very slightly of Milton's *L'Allegro.* RUDYARD KIPLING was another novelist who wrote poems. These are in the

language of ordinary men, strong and free. They concern men who are or were in unusual conditions and strange places. Those who go home still have memories of persons and places far away, and Kipling put their thoughts into words. In *Mandalay* he gives the thoughts of a British soldier who has left the bright East and gone back to London:

> By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking eastward to the sea,
> There's a Burma girl a-sitting, and I know she thinks of me.
> For the wind is in the palm-trees[A], and the temple-bells
> they say:
> 'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to
> Mandalay!' ...
> But that's all shove[B] behind me – long ago and far away,
> And there ain't[C] no buses running from the Bank to
> Mandalay.
>
> [A] tall trees that grow in hot countries [B] pushed [C] aren't

The first book of poems published by FRANCIS THOMPSON appeared in 1893, and included the famous *Hound of Heaven*. Other books of his came out in 1895 and 1897.

A fair number of other poets wrote at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, but these are best considered in a later chapter.



A patriotic poster of the First World War

As the fighting continued, however, and men came to know more of the realities of war, their understanding and feelings towards it changed.

SIEGFRIED SASSOON fought in France, and much of his anger is directed against the pointlessness of war, and against the senior officers who do not seem to realize the death and destruction – which could often have been avoided – that their orders will cause to the men they command. He also hated the patriotic satisfaction of the people at home who believed the heroic stories that the government told them about the war and did not want to know about the misery and suffering of the men who fought. In a poem to the women of England, he criticizes them because:

> You love us when we're heroes, home on leave[A],
> Or wounded in a mentionable place,
>
> [A] holiday

and says that they will not listen to accounts of what the war is really like, nor feel any human sympathy for those whose lives are broken and ruined by it:

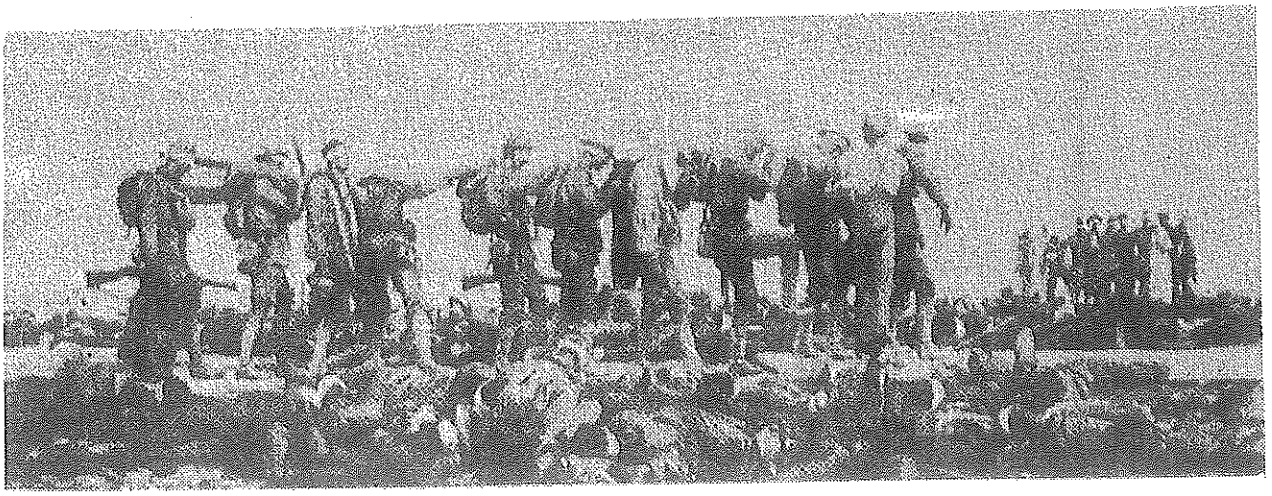
> You can't believe that British troops 'retire'[A],
> When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
> Trampling[B] the terrible corpses[C] – blind with blood.
> O German mother dreaming by the fire
> While you are making socks to send your son
> His face is trodden[D] deeper in the mud.

[A] run away [B] stepping on [C] dead bodies [D] pressed down by feet

WILFRED OWEN is possibly the best-known English poet of the First World War. He shares with Sassoon the wish to describe what the war was really like to the people at home in order for them to understand its horror and the suffering of the soldiers. He refuses to accept the romantic patriotism of Rupert Brooke – the war, he points out, is fought by real men who bleed and die, not by heroes who are more than human – and he describes the idea that it is noble and right to die for one's country as 'the old lie'. His poems show very powerfully the discomfort, danger and pain of the soldiers, and the permanent damage which the war did to their minds and happiness. At the time when the official attitude of the British Army suggested that their enemies were hardly human beings, he wrote one of his most famous poems, *Strange Meeting*, in which he imagines a meeting in hell with an enemy soldier he has killed who reminds him of their common humanity:

> Whatever hope is yours
> Was my life also.

'Gassed' – a painting by J. S. Sargent



Owen also wrote of the men whose bodies would carry the marks of war for the rest of their lives, in his poem *Disabled*[1]:

> Now he will spend a few sick years in institutes[A],
> And do what things the rules consider wise,
> And take whatever pity they may dole[B].
> Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
> Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
> How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?
>
> [A] hospitals [B] give out

ISAAC ROSENBERG's experience of life both before and during the war was different from that of the other poets mentioned here; they were from the middle or upper classes (and were officers in the war) while he came from a working-class family and served as an ordinary soldier. For this reason he had much less of a formal education than they did, and this is reflected in the language of his poetry as well as the events it described. His language has great life and energy; it does not look back to the models and traditions that had been developed over the years, but gives the feeling that it had been forced into new forms to communicate a new experience. In one of his poems he describes how a soldier, at the moment of death, hears the sound made by the wheels of the cart in which Rosenberg is riding:

> His dark hearing caught our far wheels
> And the choked[A] soul stretched weak hands
> To reach the living word the far wheels said....
> So we crashed round the bend,
> We heard his weak scream,
> We heard his very last sound,
> And our wheels grazed[B] his dead face.
>
> [A] fighting for breath [B] touched

Brooke, Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg all fought in the First World War and all were killed except Sassoon, who was badly wounded.

[1] *disabled*, someone whose body has been permanently hurt.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS wrote his poems between 1875 and 1889 (the year of his death), but they were not published until 1918. They became increasingly well known in the 1920s and 1930s and had great influence on many poets writing then. Hopkins was a priest, and the themes of his poetry concern the relationship of man to God and the problem of suffering in a world created by God, as well as delight in God's creation of the natural world. After his first poems he did not use traditional forms of rhyme and rhythm but developed his own, known as 'sprung rhythm', which depended on the counting of syllables[2] and the sound-patterns of the words, in a way which reflects the patterns of Old English poetry and of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. One of his early, and simpler, poems presents a woman giving her reasons for becoming a nun[3] as her wish to find a safe place in a religious life, away from the noise and confusion of the rest of the world:

I have desired to go
  Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail[A],
  And a few lilies blow.[B]

And I have asked to be
  Where no storms come,
Where the green swell[C] is in the havens[D] dumb,
  And out of the swing of the sea.

[A] frozen rain [B] flower [C] movement of water [D] safe place

One of the best-known figures in the second quarter of this century was T. S. ELIOT, who was born in America but spent most of his adult life in England. He writes as a man living through the years after the First World War in which men's lives had been lost or damaged, their hopes destroyed and promises broken, and he sees poetry and ceremony as forces that can give meaning to the emptiness and confusion of the modern world. Some of the references to ceremony in his poetry come from the Christian church, but others are taken from much earlier beliefs in ceremonies that brought life and therefore hope back to a dry,

[2] *syllable*, part of a word said as one unit, *e.g.* the word *syllable* has three syllables.
[3] *nun*, a woman member of a group who lives apart from the world to follow a religious life.

dead, hopeless world. He gives great importance to the forces that make it possible for spiritual, as well as physical, life to continue.

The Waste Land (published in 1922) is a long, highly complex poem which brings together a group of characters as different in kind and time as a modern typist and a blind priest of ancient Greece who can see the future. It brings together the ancient beliefs in the circularity of the natural world's movement through life and death to new life, with the Christian belief in spiritual life after physical death. Much of the picture of human unhappiness in the poem comes from the fact that the characters cannot understand the meaning of their own experiences. Eliot sees the root of the modern world's unhappiness and confusion as the fact that people today cannot bring together the different areas of their experience – cultural, sexual and religious as well as the everyday physical world – to make a complete and healthy whole. Since Eliot's aim is to bring together a great variety of human voices and experiences, the different parts of his poem use many different styles – here, for example, is the everyday voice of one woman advising another to get herself a set of false teeth before her husband comes home from the war:

> Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart[A].
> He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
> To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there:
> You have them all out, Lill, and get a nice set,
> He said, I swear I can't bear to look at you.
>
> [A] attractive

In contrast with this is the picture of the emptiness of spirit and feelings when Eliot considers the condition of man:

> What are the roots that clutch[A], what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images[B], where the sun beats
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket[C] no relief
> And the dry stone no sound of water.
>
> [A] hold tightly [B] pictures or objects [C] small insect

The aim of his other great work, *Four Quartets* (1944), is to show different ways of experiencing God and reality in different times, so that here the force that will give wholeness and purpose to man's life and mind is that of religion. By showing different kinds of time (through the lives of different people, through universal history and through sudden moments when truth about life and God is made clear) the poem is saying strongly that in the middle of the confusion and suffering of the modern world, timeless values still exist and can still be touched.

The years during which Eliot was writing saw many new writers making experiments with language in trying to communicate the reality of the new world. EDITH SITWELL, one of the most interesting of these writers, puts great importance on the patterns of sound in her poems. Her picture of life is one in which the forces of darkness and light are fighting for the world; true Christian feeling can bring light, but man more often chooses the darkness, as in her poem after the atomic bomb was dropped:

> The living blind and seeing Dead together lie
> As if in love . . . There was no more hating then,
> And no more love: Gone is the heart of Man.

Of the group of English poets whose work became well known in the 1930s, W. H. AUDEN is the most famous and in many ways the most typical. His early work shows a concern for the important political and social events, and (in contrast with the distance that a poet like Eliot puts between himself and the age) a wish to become part of them. He saw changes in the forms and subjects of literature as a way of helping political and social change, and in some poems he writes directly about political events and their effect on private lives, as in poems on the Spanish Civil War (in the middle of the 1930s) and on the beginning of the Second World War in 1939:

> I sit in one of the dives[A]
> On Fifty-Second Street,
> Uncertain and afraid,
> As the clever hopes expire[B]
> Of a low dishonest decade[C];
> Waves of anger and fear

Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives.
[A] bars [B] die [C] ten years

During the Second World War he went to live in America, and by the end of the war he had lost much of his earlier hope that the world could be changed and made better by decisive human action (political action influenced by literature). After this time his poetry became in many ways more personal and, increasingly, looking for spiritual qualities in the life around him.

His poems often communicate a strong sense of the realities of everyday life; he writes, for example, of how suffering and death can happen for one man while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along, and how a party that seems to the staff of an Embassy to be boring and ordinary can mean war and death for the countries whose fate depends on them:

And on the issue[A] of their charm depended
A land laid waste, with all its young men slain,[B]
The women weeping and its towns in terror.
[A] result [B] killed

Auden also wrote many lyric poems, of which this early example is one of the best known:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual[A] beauty from
Thoughtless children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral[B]:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal[C], guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.
[A] special [B] living only for a short time [C] certain to die

Two other poets who became known in the 1930s were LOUIS MACNEICE

and CECIL DAY LEWIS. The poems of MacNeice deal with personal experiences as well as with political events and their results, while Day Lewis's best work is related to social themes, as in his song for the child of poor parents:

> The stars in the bright sky
> Look down and are dumb
> At the heir[A] of the ages
> Asleep in a slum.[B]
>
> Thy[C] mother is crying,
> Thy dad's on the dole[D],
> Two shillings a week is
> The price of a soul.

[A] person who will receive something [B] poor, dirty house [C] your [D] money given by the State

The poets of the Second World War (1939–45) were very different from those of the First World War. In the years between the wars, the world had become a sadder and darker place for many people, and the poets of the Second World War did not go to fight with the same hopes as those of the First World War. Neither did they feel that their job was to warn and inform the people at home, since in this war people who were not fighting knew what the war was like and many of them suffered as much as the men and women who fought it: the time for heroic patriotism was over for ever. ROY FULLER, watching the old systems being destroyed in the war (he described it: 'The ridiculous empires break like biscuits') envied the poets of the past, whose choice of moral positions he felt to be greater than his:

> I envy not only their talents[A]
> And fertile[B] lack of balance,
> But in the appearance of choice
> In their sad and fatal voice.

[A] ability [B] producing good things

Among the poets of this time there is often a sense of tiredness, of things being worn out, and of helplessness in the face of world events which they had no power to change or influence, so that the strongest poems

are often those which describe personal experiences rather than world events. One of the best poems of KEITH DOUGLAS, for example, describes how he found the picture of a girl and a book with the message *Vergissmeinicht* (do not forget me) on the body of a dead German soldier:

> For here the lover and the killer are mingled[A]
> Who had one body and one heart,
> And death, who had the soldier singled[B],
> Has done the lover mortal hurt.
> [A] joined [B] chosen

The language of most poets of the Second World War is often plain and simple, seeming almost dull in a way that reflects their dulled acceptance of world events they were powerless to change. The language of DYLAN THOMAS (whose first poems were published in 1934) is completely different: full of life, energy and feeling, with great strength and power. He was born and brought up in Wales, and Welsh traditions of the power of the spoken word, especially in matters of religion, are reflected strongly in his poetry. His work praises and delights in natural forces: the life of nature and the countryside, the forces of birth, sex and death, and the powerful feelings that they create. One of his most famous poems was written to his father as he lay dying; his father had been very powerful in the expression of his ideas and feelings, and it hurt Thomas to see that the old man could not use that power to fight his coming death:

> Do not go gentle into that good night:
> Old age should burn and rave[A] at close of day;
> Rage[B], rage against the dying of the light.
>
> And you, my father, there on that sad height,
> Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray;
> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
> [A] talk wildly [B] fight angrily

He wrote, he said, not for fame or money or influence, but to touch and

show people their own human feelings. Yet he knew well that the forces of life are stronger than the forces of art, and many of those he wrote for might not listen. He wrote, he said,

> For the lovers, their arms
> Round the griefs of the ages,
> Who pay no praise or wages
> Nor heed[A] my craft[B] or art.
> [A] pay attention to [B] skill

Thomas also wrote a play, *Under Milk Wood* (finished in 1953 shortly before his death) which was first performed on radio but has since been also acted on stage. It shows a day in the life of a small Welsh village, with its secrets, ironies, goodness, wickedness, foolishness and humour. Its approach is best described in the words of the character who is weakest in respect of traditional morals but strongest in her love of life: 'Isn't life a terrible thing, thank God!'

TED HUGHES, whose work was first published in 1957, is also concerned with strong and sometimes violent forces of nature, but he writes with great powers of imagination as if from inside the birds and animals who are the subjects of many of his poems. He uses the qualities connected with them in traditional stories as well as observation of how they act in real life to build up a picture of the essential character of the bird or animal and the part it plays in the natural world. He has written several times about the hawk, a powerful bird which catches and eats birds and animals smaller than itself, and one of these poems in particular catches the strength and violence of the bird:

> I kill where I please because it is all mine.
> My manners are tearing off heads, the allotment[A] of death.
>
> The sun is behind me.
> Nothing has changed since I began;
> My eye has permitted no change.
> I am going to keep things like this.
> [A] share

Throughout twentieth-century English poetry there has also been, in addition to the violence, bitterness and emptiness that are the

themes of many writers, a line of poems expressing gentleness, peace and a love of quietness and things remaining as they are. ROBERT GRAVES has had a long poetic career – his first book of poetry was published in 1917 when he was twenty-two – and he is also well known as a prose writer, particularly on historical subjects. Many of his poems are love poems, and many more have as their central subject the relationship between men and women, and how the lost sense of innocence and wonder can be brought back to human relationships. These poems see physical love between men and women as representing the emotion that brings life to the world:

She tells her love while half asleep
  In the dark hours,
    With half words whispered low;
As earth stirs in her winter sleep
  And puts out grass and flowers,
    Despite[A] the snow
    Despite the falling snow.

[A] in spite of

R. S. THOMAS, whose poems first attracted attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s, falls in some ways into the tradition of British poets who have written about the country, but his attention is often directed to the hardships of country life. He writes of the traditional country landscapes – the sheep on a hill, the cottages, the farmer in the fields – and points out that the scene is delightful only from a distance; when you get closer you realize that the sheep are diseased, the cottages are falling into ruins and the hardness and discomfort of his life has given the farmer an illness which will kill him. R. S. Thomas is a minister of religion and behind his poems is a sense that the hardness of life can only be made bearable by love of man and love of God, since qualities of mind alone are not enough. He writes of the

Emptiness of the bare mind
Without knowledge, and the frost[A] of
Knowledge where there is no love.

[A] frozen condition

PHILIP LARKIN is probably the best-known poet writing today in this tradition of quietness. He is strongly influenced by Hardy and, like him, looks back to the past with a sense of what has been lost. Larkin represents a group of poets who turned away, in the 1950s and 60s, from the influence of Dylan Thomas and the idea that the aim of poetry should be to express high emotion and the deepest feelings and forces of nature. Their subjects tend to be smaller and their language more clearly controlled; in much of this poetry there is a sense that reality is dull and unattractive but that living through a dream is equally impossible. Real happiness seems only to have happened in the past, as in Larkin's poem on hearing a bird of spring sing outside his window at the end of winter:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon –
And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adults reconciling[A]
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter
And starts to be happy.

[A] becoming friendly again after a quarrel

PETER PORTER is an Australian who went to England in the early 1950s and whose first poems were published in the 1960s. His work is often sharply satirical, full of realistic details of material objects and the appearance of things and people, but also has a deeper and more universal quality since he is always conscious of the presence of death, a force that man cannot fight against:

and if we shout
at the gods, they send us the god of death
who is immortal[A] and who cannot read.

[A] living for ever

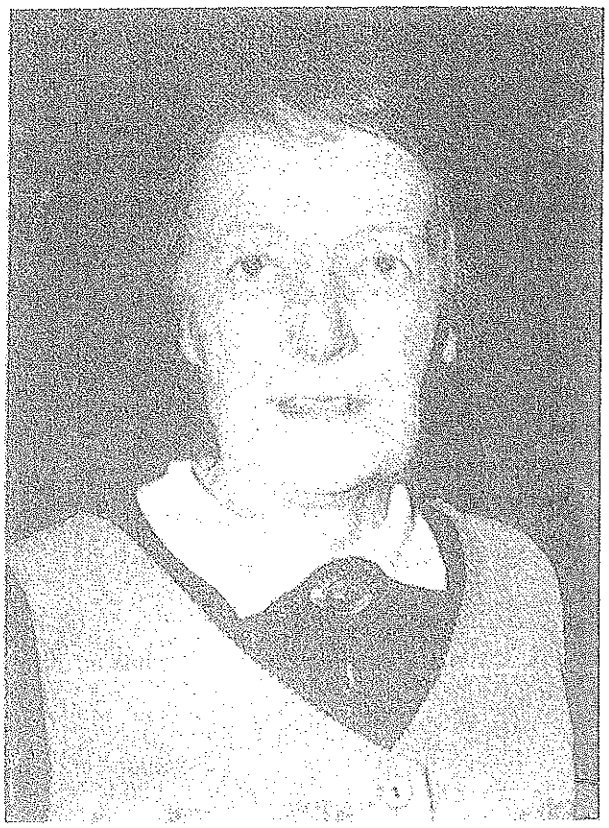
STEVIE SMITH's voice as a poet is clear and unmistakeable; from her first work (published in 1937) to the last poems written just before her death in 1971 her style and subjects are completely her own. The poems seem simple, almost as if written by a child, on the surface; they argue with God, are rude about people she dislikes (especially those who act cruelly, either to other people or animals), and give sharp and critical descriptions of how people behave to each other. They are often very funny, but there is also sadness at the loneliness and unhappiness of some lives, as in her poem on the man drowning at sea who waved his arms to the people on land to show them that he needed help – but they thought he was only waving to say hello:

Poor chap[A], he always loved larking[B]
And now he's dead.
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way
They said.

Oh no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life,
And not waving but drowning.

[A] man [B] joking

Stevie Smith



Some of the most interesting poetry published since 1970 has been written by poets from Northern Ireland and some of the best poems have been written by SEAMUS HEANEY. In his early poems he writes of the countryside and of the natural world in a way that suggests he has been influenced by R. S. Thomas and Ted Hughes when he writes of his childhood in the country and its history. His later poems move from private history to the public events of the past and how they have influenced the present political and military situation in Northern Ireland. In one of his early poems he writes of his father and grandfather, and the skill they showed in using a spade when they were working in the fields; he is a writer and so his trade is different from theirs, but he would like to show as much skill with his pen as they did with their spades. Even here, however, there is a sense of threat: he describes his pen as fitting between his fingers and thumb as smoothly and tightly as a gun. In his later poems he describes a life where the use of guns, and the suffering they cause, is part of everyday reality, and where the humour of the remarks written on walls has a bitter edge:

> Is there a life before death? That's chalked up
> In Ballymurphy. Competence[A] with pain,
> Coherent[B] miseries, a bite and sup[C],
> We hug our little destiny[D] again.
> [A] managing [B] understandable [C] drink [D] fate

Here the ironic change to the usual question 'Is there life after death?' gives a point to his description of a life where pain and misery have become part of the ordinary quality of life. Heaney is attempting to go beyond the daily events of the life around him, hard and painful as they often are, and to discover the forces below his country's history that can bring back life and hope.