

陈 嘉 著

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ENGLISH LITERATURE OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

SECTION I INTRODUCTION

a. Historical Background: Political and Social.

While the two Jubilees celebrating respectively the 50th and the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign in 1887 and 1897 testified to the height of political and military power for the British Empire, the Boer War of 1899-1902, between the British colonialists in South Africa and the two independent republics of Dutch settlers, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic, marked the precipitant decline in Britain's prestige and prosperity. The bankruptcy of British rural economy beginning from the 1870s grew more acute in the early years of the 20th century, and England was no longer the most important workshop of the world by 1900, being surpassed or equalled by her rival powers the U.S.A. and Germany in many fields of industrial output. In the meantime, finance capital rose to great prominence and much surplus capital owned by the British financial oligarchy was exported as loans and investments to British colonies and to foreign countries instead of being used to replenish the backward machinery in Britain's domestic factories and plants. Three large-scale strikes in the years 1911-1914, by more than 200,000 railwaymen and three million coal-miners and over 80,000 transport workers in London, came with the formation of the Labour Party and the spread of the theories of socialism among the British workers. On the European scene the newly emerged imperial powers Germany and Italy clamoured for more colonies, and the triple alliance of Germany, Austria and Italy was formed with their cry for the redivision of the world, while the triple entente lining up England and France with Russia was ne-

gotiated in opposition to the Central European powers. The First World War finally broke out in 1914, leading to four years of intense trench warfare in Western Europe and to widespread fighting in colonies and semi-colonies in Africa and Asia.

Britain emerged from World War I in 1918 as a victor, yet she was very much impoverished and weakened. The establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the granting of Dominion status to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa one after another shook the foundations of the British Empire, while the United States began to dominate the world economically, politically and militarily in Britain's place. On the domestic scene, Britain's rural economy grew worse and her industrial equipment became old-fashioned and lagged behind that of the U.S.A. and Germany and even Japan, and large-scale unemployment and general economic depression resulted. The U.S.S.R. emerged in 1917 and the joint efforts of Britain and a dozen other capitalist countries to intervene militarily and politically and to stifle the newborn socialist state ended in failure. Though the general strike of 1926 lasted only a few days, yet in 1929 the great economic depression started in the U.S. and spread quickly to the whole capitalist world in Western Europe, and in 1931 a coalition of the so-called Nationalist Government was formed to meet the financial crisis threatening Britain.

In the Twenties fascism began in Italy under Mussolini and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia was condemned but nothing was done about it. In the early Thirties the rise of Hitler in Germany posed a major threat to all Western Europe as the "Anschluss" of Austria and the occupation first of the Sudetenland and then of the whole of Czechoslovakia showed clearly the Nazis' ambitions for world conquest. Chamberlain had to resign with the failure of his conciliation program, while the Civil War in Spain that provided the testing ground for the conflict between republicanism and fascism resulted in victory for Franco who had the support of Hitler and Mussolini. Preparations for war led to the building of the Maginot Line and the Siegfried Line of defence respectively by France

and Germany. The talks between the British and French Governments with the Soviet Union broke off and Japan allied herself with Germany and Italy to form the Axis. The Second World War became inevitable and the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 triggered off the world-wide conflagration.

The great political, economic and military upheavals in the first four decades that ushered in two big wars of world proportions naturally had their strong and indelible impact upon the general culture in Europe and upon the literary scene in Britain,

b. General Cultural Background

The rapid development of science and technology in the last years of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th led on the one hand to great gains in material wealth and large-scale agricultural and industrial production, but on the other hand it resulted in world-wide economic depression and mass unemployment and particularly wholesale massacre and destruction brought about by World War I. Much skepticism and disillusionment spread among the whole post-World-War-I generation and Oswald Spengler's book "The Decline of the West" voiced the common sentiments of distrust in the modern Western civilization while in the field of literature T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in both title and content echoed the despair and despondency prevalent among the intellectuals in the two decades following 1918. Many educated people turned to conservatism, to traditional Christian religion, to Catholicism, some even to Oswald Mosley's fascist camp, while many others, attracted to Marxism and to the Soviet regime now firmly entrenched in Russia under Lenin and Stalin, turned to the Left, to socialism and communism, with not a few going to Spain to join the International Brigade fighting for republicanism there against Franco. The 1930s, sometimes known as the Red Decade, ended abruptly with the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact between Hitler and Stalin in 1939, on the eve of World War II.

The influence of the theory of evolution advanced by Charles

Darwin in the mid-19th century spread far and wide, and the orthodox Christian belief in God and the Creation of the World was gradually replaced either by complete atheism or by faith in all sorts of myths of Oriental or Occidental origin. In the field of psychology, the influence of Carl Jung and especially of Sigmund Freud, the Austrian physician with his theory of the subconscious mind and dreams, which effected a drastic change in one's understanding of human consciousness in connection with human conduct, was both broad and penetrating to many British authors of the 20th century, particularly those of the 1920s like Joyce and Virginia Woolf with their "stream-of-consciousness" method in prose fiction.

Following the Education Act of 1870 that first rendered elementary education compulsory and universal, the steadily growing rate of literacy among the masses of people not only created in 20th-century Britain a very large public of vastly varying literary standards and personal tastes, but also produced more writers from the ranks of the labouring people and a greater number of literary works depicting the life of the oppressed and exploited multitude. The fight for equality of women with men, which manifested itself early in 1882 with the passage in British Parliament of the Married Women's Property Act, was followed by the admission of women to the British universities and then by the winning of women's suffrage first in 1918 and fully in 1928.

c. English Poetry: 1900-1940

The first four decades of the twentieth century was a great period for English poetry. At the turn of the century there were the imperialist songs of Rudyard Kipling and the pessimistic poems of A. E. Housman. In the first two decades of the new century Thomas Hardy who had been one of the major novelists in the late Victorian age became a distinguished poet with his numerous volumes of verse that dilated more or less on the same themes of chance and irony in human existence that had prevailed in his works of prose fiction. W. B. Yeats who had begun his poetic career in the

1890s by following the French symbolists and Arthur Symonds' aestheticism turned to old Irish myths for inspiration and wrote not only poems but also many verse dramas as he plunged into his self-imposed task of managing and producing plays for the Irish Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The two poet laureates Robert Bridges and John Masefield both produced some few poems of note, but Bridges' major contribution to English poetry lies in his introduction to the world in 1922 of the posthumous poems of Gerard Manly Hopkins whose too fervent religious faith forbade him the publication of his verse in his own lifetime. Hopkins thus curiously resembles Emily Dickinson of America in being a poet of the 19th century whose influence was only felt in the early twentieth, and Hopkins was popular with a number of English poets of the 1920s and 1930s not only for his intense interest in nature and his search for spiritual guerdon in religion, but also for his innovations in verse, with his "sprung rhythm" and alliterative devices. But the numerous poets who wrote and lived and enjoyed minor fame in the first thirty years of the twentieth century were usually known as "Georgian Poets" (more with disapprobation than esteem) and war poets (some of them were also regarded as among the Georgian Poets), and a few were of the school of Imagism. The Georgian Poets were not limited to those whose poems appeared in the five successive anthologies published by Edward March under the title of "Georgian Poetry", nor did they all write verse that contained the characteristics of tameness, imprecision and overornamentation. Some few of them, like Walter de la Mare and W.H. Davies, could occasionally rise to classic succinctness. The war poets were generally of two groups; a few of them (Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell, etc.) sang hymns of patriotism glorifying the heroic sacrifices of war for national defence, while a larger number (Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfrid Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, etc.) detailed the miseries of trench warfare and condemned the barbarity and cruelty of mass massacre. Imagism flourished more in the United States than in England, coming as a sort of reaction to Georgianism by emphasizing hardness, clearness and con-

ciseness and boasting chiefly of the anthology "Des Imagistes" (1914) and "Some Imagist Poets" edited by Ezra Pound and prefaced by Richard Aldington, and of T.E. Hulme as the theorist of the movement. But all these were but minor poets attaining each to his or her own degree of excellence, though their formidable total output calls for our attention and careful anthologizing.

Even in the 1910s a new star has risen in English poetry, T. S. Eliot, who came from the United States but settled down in England, and whose eventual naturalization and profession of Anglo-Catholicism turned him into an English poet. Though on account of his great fame he was claimed by many also as an American poet, yet what he wrote about was chiefly of England and his influence was certainly greater in Britain than on the other side of the Atlantic. From his early mild satires on high society in England in his "Prufrock" volume, he sank deep into post-war pessimism in "The Waste Land", though in the latter poem there were already unmistakable signs of his turning to religion for solace. His last poems, especially "The Four Quartets", showed definitely his religious and philosophic bent, though his last efforts at verse drama, written and staged after World War II, demonstrated his great skill in blending with expert care religious themes and comic stage effects, in definite departure from his earlier and soberer "Murder in the Cathedral". Otherwise, Eliot also was an important literary critic. In the meantime, the other giant writing poetry in the English language, W.B. Yeats, turned gradually from Irish mythology and ancient Irish legends to modern political Ireland (in "Easter, 1916", etc.) and finally to the world of art which he specified as the proper haven for the aged (in "Sailing for Byzantium" and "Byzantium"), but he always kept his aristocratic pose and went in for old castles and occultism.

In the 1930s a group of outstanding poets headed for the Left in their protest against the fascism springing up on the Continent, headed by W.H. Auden and flanked by two Irishmen, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis, and by Stephen Spender who once

briefly joined the British Communist Party and went to Spain on the Republican side in the Civil War. However, after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, they lost their radical political enthusiasm and went their several ways. Auden remained a poet of importance though he became naturalized as an American and his later verse dealt almost entirely with American reality, so that he went in the reverse direction of T.S. Eliot and became more an American than a British poet.

Another poet of note who had a long career lasting from the twenties to the sixties was the Scottish singer of humble origins and radical inclinations, Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve). He wrote much of his verse in Scots dialect and some in English, and in his three "Hymns to Lenin" and his poems on Glasgow and Edinburgh, and especially in his early masterpiece "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle", he showed his eulogy of socialism and his condemnation of capitalist Edinburgh and Glasgow, and above all, his patriotism toward Scotland and the Scottish people. His long years of stay in a remote island north of Scotland cultivated his love of wild nature and his philosophical mood toward simple natural objects and simple people living far away from civilization. Another Scottish poet of minor importance who had the same humble family background as MacDiarmid is Edwin Muir whose disillusionment with modern Western civilization such as he witnessed in Glasgow led him back in his poetry to simple country life close to nature and to ancient myths and religious beliefs.

One of the poets of World War I whose remembered war poems are those written long afterwards and who is known now chiefly for his poems on romantic love and on certain philosophical and ironical topics, is Robert Graves. In contrast to Graves' long literary career of several decades, Dylan Thomas of Wales led a short, meteoric existence as he flourished from the mid-Thirties to the early Fifties with his poems dealing chiefly with his experience in boyhood and youth. He had a lyrical gift and was known for the strange

violence of his imagery and for the alliteration and internal rhyming which he learned from Gerard Manly Hopkins.

In the first half of the 20th century, there were a few other minor poets in England who deserve our passing mention here. The most important of the three Sitwells, Edith Sitwell, exerted considerable influence in reacting against the sentimentality of literary "Georgianism" in her serialised anthology of poetry, entitled "Wheels" (1916—1921), displayed her exaggerated rhythmic and metaphorical effects in her volumes of "Facade" and "The Sleeping Beauty" in the 1920s, mimicked the breakdown of Western material civilization in "Gold Coast Customs" in 1929, and ended up in the 1940s with her aristocratic pose of a prophetic commentator after she joined Roman Catholicism. Then there was D.H. Lawrence who was chiefly a novelist yet who turned out a number of brilliant poems many of which had to do with the plant and animal world and the poet's sympathy for it but a few of which dealt with his keen observation of human existence in such poem as "Piano" and "How Beastly the Bourgeois Is."

The great figures in English poetry in the early decades of the 20th century were then, Thomas Hardy and W.B. Yeats in the early years, and T.S. Eliot flourished from the 1920s to the 1940s, with Yeats sharing the honours and W.B. Auden and Hugh MacDiarmid making their important contributions. The host of minor poets were legion, and as they vied with one another in distinction and merit in some special way or other, they enriched the field of poetry in the modern period at least to compete on equal terms with the Victorian Age.

d. English Drama: 1900—1940

After the flowering of English comedy in the last decades of the 19th century, which boasted of the brilliant comedies of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, George Bernard Shaw started his long dramatic career of nearly half a century with his "Unpleasant Plays" which included two powerful pieces "Wi-

dowers' Houses" (1892) and "Mrs. Warren's Profession" (1892) trumpeting their indictment of terrible economic exploitation through landlordism and prostitution. Though both plays were banned after a few performances, they remained Shaw's most radical dramas as he followed in the path of Ibsenism with these problem plays. The series that followed, the "Pleasant Plays", including chiefly "Arms and the Man" and "Candida", contained much more diluted satire. "Major Barbara" was the only piece of the playwright's later dramas that touched on the theme of economic exploitation but the clever ending of awry humour took the edge off the reprimand of the gunpowder king that was noticeably suggested at the beginning. Shaw's growing popularity that came with his many striking plays through the first four decades of the new century, from "John Bull's Other Island" (comment on the English exploitation of Ireland) to "Man and Superman" (the life-force theory), from "Pygmalion" (on the wonders of speech changes upon a Cockney flower-girl) to "Back to Methusalem" (a fantasy from 4004 B. C. through the 1920s all the way to 21920 A.D.) and from "St. Joan" (on Jeanne d'Arc) to "The Apple Cart" (on modern British politics), showed the clever dramatist to be a consistent master of wit and paradoxes but his influence waned with the passage of time.

At about the same time as Shaw, John Galsworthy and James Matthew Barrie also flourished with their dramas. Galsworthy was better known as a novelist but his realistic plays on legal problems and on industrial strikes ("The Silver Box", 1906; "Strife", 1910) brought him great fame as he showed much sympathy for the industrial workers, ordinary clerks and domestic servants who suffered under the unjust laws and low wages of the time. Barrie, on the other hand, excelled in fantasy, starting his successful career with "Peter Pan" about "the boy who wouldn't grow up", (1904) and reaching his height of fame with "The Admirable Crichton" (1902) and "What Every Woman Knows" (1908), both filled with humour and common sense. But Barrie's popularity ended with the First World War and he was all but forgotten after the 1930s.

In Ireland the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904 brought much lustre to a whole series of Irish playwrights including W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson, St. John Ervine, and Sean O'Casey but especially starring John Millington Synge whose "Riders to the Sea" (1904), "The Playboy of the Western World" (1907) and the unfinished "Deirdre of the Sorrows" (published in 1910), attained to heights of lyric comedy or depths of ironic tragedy. Yeats and Lady Gregory, as the earlier participants of the Irish Literary Renaissance, introduced Irish myths and folk legends with much adroitness while Sean O'Casey's early plays "Juno and the Paycock" (1924) and "The Plough and the Stars" (1926), took us to the miseries of the Irish lower classes in Dublin during their fight for national independence.

In the meantime, in the London theatres, Harley Granville-Barker as actor-dramatist-producer distinguished himself with his brand new problem-plays, especially "The Voysey Inheritance" (1905) and "The Madras House" (1910), as he also was a producer of modern dramas of Continental dramatists Ibsen, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann as well as a critic of Shakespearean drama ("Prefaces to Shakespeare", 1927—1947). Granville-Barker's plays are often formless in plot but they usually achieve skilful characterization and brilliant dialogue. In contrast to Granville-Barker's plays of artistic finesse, there were the popular comedies of W. Somerset Maugham who followed the tradition of comedies of manners of the Restoration and the eighteenth century by providing cleverly-manipulated situations and witty dialogue, but the themes were generally conventional and insignificant and except in one or two of his later comedies (e.g. "The Circle") the characters were tame and not well drawn. He too flourished as a dramatist chiefly in the first twenty years of the century.

A passing mention should be made of William Archer as a famous dramatic critic who was known for his efforts in introducing Ibsen to the English audience and at popularizing Shaw and whose services as a dramatist historian and critic were outstanding in the early

decades of the 20th century.

Provincial drama in England flourished in Birmingham and Manchester chiefly in the years before 1920. In the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester there were memorable performances of "Hindle Wakes" (1912) by Stanley Houghton and "Hobson's Choice" (1916) by Harold Brighouse, whereas in Birmingham Repertory Theatre there were "Abraham Lincoln" (1918) and "Birdin Hand" (1918) by its manager John Drinkwater, "The Farmer's Wife" (1924) by Eden Phillpotts that won the record run of 1300 performances, and the successful romantic love drama about the Brownings, "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" (1930) by Rudolf Besier.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a rival to W. Somerset Maugham in the field of popular comedies of witty dialogue and ingenious situations was Noel Coward (1899—1973) who won great theatrical successes with "The Vortex" (1923), "Hay Fever" (1925), "Private Lives" (1930) and "Design for Living" (1933) in amorous comedies but who also distinguished himself in other genres such as the operetta ("Bitter Sweet", 1929), the chronicle-pageant ("Cavalcade", 1931) and the farce ("Blithe Spirit", 1941) and showed his versatile talent in acting, singing and composing of songs besides playwriting. However, like Maugham's comedies, Coward's light dramas of sophistication and amorality appealed only to the decadent fashionable society of the inter-war years and they failed to achieve true and lasting artistic excellence.

A Scottish medical doctor and director of the Scottish National Theatre Society as well as founder of Glasgow Citizen's Theatre, James Bridie (pseudonym of Osborne Henry Mavor, 1888—1951), wrote in the 1930s and 1940s some forty plays which included chiefly biblical themes in modern dress and a few of which scored stage successes. His best known play "Tobias and the Angel" (1930) tells a fantastic tale set in ancient times in the Middle East and involving the outwitting of a demon with a charm and the actual disguise of Archangel Raphael as a Porter, while another supernatural drama, "Mr. Bolfray" (1943), unfolds the hair-raising story of a con-

juramentation of the devil who appears as Mr. Bolfry and whose umbrella that has been left behind him "gets up and walks by itself out of the room" in the morning following the dreadful nightmare of all present at a minister's manse in the Scottish Highlands. A third play of note is "The Anatomist" (1930) which was based on an actual Burke and Hare murder case in Edinburgh in 1828, and here an atmosphere of horror and mystery is well blended with the everyday scenes of lectures on the anatomy of human bodies and of practice in surgical dissection. Bridie's strong sense of the theatre was the saving grace that in these better plays of his mends the flaws in his technical craftsmanship and gains credence from the audience for his apparently unbelievable stories of supernatural presence.

A minor novelist in his own right, Christopher Isherwood (1904—) collaborated in the 1930s with W.H. Auden in the writing of three plays, among which the tragedy "The Ascent of H6" (1937) is the better known and deals with the struggle for far-away colonial possessions between two imperialist nations that ends in destruction of an expeditionary mountain party by an avalanche. Another playwright who flourished in the 1930s and 1940s was Christopher Fry (pseudonym of Christopher Harris, 1907—), whose plays in verse and prose deal frequently with medieval, religious themes. His early one-acter, "The Boy with a Cart" (produced in 1937 and published in 1939), deals with a local saint who eventually builds a church with miraculous aid. But he is chiefly known for his verse comedy "The Lady's Not for Burning" (performed in 1948, published in 1949). The year is supposed to be near 1400 A.D., and the story starts with a discharged soldier Thomas Mendip who accuses himself of murder, and with a woman Jennet Jourdemayne who is accused of being a witch for having turned into a dog a poor trader of rags and bones. As the Mayor decides to burn Jennet but hesitates to hang Mendip, the poor trader Matthew Skipp appears, neither murdered by Mendip nor turned into a dog by Jennet. So Jennet is set free and Mendip leaves the town with her. The play is further enriched by a comic underplot involving the two sons of the ma-