

- Modern English Poetry -
From Hardy to Hughes

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A CRITICAL SURVEY

John Lucas

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*for various Greek friends and especially for
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Prefatory Note

This study of modern English poetry grows out of years of reading, teaching, talking and writing about the subject. Over so long a period I have inevitably discussed and argued about the problem of English poetry with numerous friends, colleagues and students, and, equally inevitably, they have helped to sharpen my sense of just how problematic the idea of English poetry is. I suspect that the following book owes far more to them than I can readily assess, which isn't to say that they are to be blamed for what it contains.

To speak of a 'problem' may seem unduly contentious. Yet I hope that in what follows I have made a case for regarding the idea of Englishness as decidedly problematic. This is why I begin with a prologue in which I discuss some of the work of a great and still disgracefully neglected or misunderstood poet, John Clare. Clare of course is not a modern poet. How could he be? He died in 1864. Nevertheless, he seems to me to raise or embody most of the difficulties to do with being English that later poets have either to confront or try to resolve, in ways that bring up further difficulties.

This is why I put the word English in quotation marks when discussing T. S. Eliot. For it isn't merely the fact that Eliot was American by birth and only chose to take out British citizenship in 1927 that leads me to regard him with a certain quizzicality. There is also the fact that his English identity – royalist, Anglo-Catholic – can hardly be thought of as exhausting the possibilities of Englishness, no matter how orthodox his decision might seem, or be so regarded by the majority of his commentators.

As it happens, I think Eliot's choice cuts him off from certain critical ways of thinking about Englishness, and one reason for devoting a long chapter to Yeats is that Yeats's forging of his identity seems, by contrast, both more committed and more liberating. Another reason is that Yeats's greatness has much to do with his readiness to intervene in the large cultural, social and political issues

to do with Irish consciousness. By comparison, the inability of nearly all English poets – with the exception of W. H. Auden – to make comparable interventions is instructive and revelatory about English poetry in the twentieth century.

To say this is, of course, to say that I think poetry ought to be an act of intervention, which is probably to say that I write as a socialist. Those who claim to uphold the Arnoldian tradition of sweetness and light will no doubt claim that in what follows ideological considerations cloud my perceptions. The truth is that the Arnoldian tradition is both ideological and deeply debilitating. It has had far too much influence over the ways we are supposed to discuss poetry, and I believe it to have had far too much influence over English poets themselves. The world of platonic ideas, pure and undefiled by 'the smoke of the market place', or by the 'corruptions' of idiomatic language, produces a poetry drained of any worthwhile life.

The charge that the following book is ideologically conditioned does not worry me. I am, however, alert to another possible charge – which is that my concern with Englishness is exclusively male. It is so. In Chapter Five I try to explain why I think that during the modern period there has been very little good work by English women poets, but I should perhaps add that it does seem that the best women writers chose not to commit themselves to poetry (or not primarily), probably because 'poetry' had become identified with 'maleness' (obviously matters are very different in America, where Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop are among the greatest of modern poets), and also – in the context of this book – because 'Englishness' turns out to be a largely, or even exclusively, male affair. To say this is not merely tautologous, but it does reveal that women have been pushed to the margins of, or have been made invisible to, the areas of concern which the following book takes up. This is a fact of history. It is also a fact of history that matters are now changing and that if in twenty years' time I were to up-date my study I would need to find space to consider the achievements of women poets from the 1960s onwards, although the best of them – Sylvia Plath, Anne Stevenson and Fleur Adcock – are, significantly enough, not English-born.

John Lucas

SEPTEMBER 1985

- I -

Prologue: Poetry and Possession

'Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own.' I begin with the opening line of poem no. XXII of Auden's *Poems* 1930, because it prompts two important questions that will concern me for much of the book that follows. Who is or are 'you'? And what does Auden mean by 'own'? His poem takes for granted a knowledge of Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', which it knowingly parodies; and it also takes for granted an England in which 'nobody is well', as he has someone say at the beginning of *The Orators*. It is thus both knowing about a tradition of Victorian poetry and mockingly disenchanted with what has happened to the England over which Tennyson had, in a sense, presided as Poet Laureate. Not that Tennyson was Laureate when he published 'Locksley Hall' in 1842, but it was precisely the kind of poem to gain him the Laureateship.

At first glance Auden's 'you' may seem to be the common reader. But on reflection this will hardly do. The common reader in 1930 could hardly be thought of as owning England. 'You' is therefore more likely to be the 'owners' of England, rentier capitalists, appropriators of land, possessors of culture, wealth, social status, and so on. Such persons, the poem suggests, were once proud to own an England whose values and beliefs were the orthodoxies of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. They would include the splendours of Empire, material riches derived from industry and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. They would also include various institutions such as the public schools, the civil service, an enfranchised male middle-class, Church, Army, Monarchy, all of which could be cited as official evidence and cause of England's greatness, and a fit reason for pride. Tennyson's spokesman had looked towards the future with bland confidence: 'Yet I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,/And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns.' And the poem had allowed for a vision of lasting peace: 'Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the

battle-flags were furled/In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the World.'

I know there will be those who say that to make Tennyson the spokesman for this windily empty optimism is to be less than fair to him, and they have some right on their side. But my concern for the moment is with what was made of Tennyson in the 1920s, and the fact is that after the Great War had all but ruined Europe, had wiped out much of its industrial base, and had been at least the partial causes of the Russian and Irish revolutions, it is not surprising that Auden should invite those who had identified with the vision of England that 'Locksley Hall' endorses to look again: to look and see 'Smokeless chimneys, damaged bridges, rotting wharves and choked canals,/Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on their side across the rails.' My point is this: that among those who read Auden's poem the only appropriate response would be to say, 'But you can't mean us. We never did own this land. It wasn't ours to possess, even if we wanted to acknowledge our commitment to it.' And this of course is Auden's point also. 'You' can't mean everybody.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'to own' as follows: *to have as one's possession. To confess, or admit; to acknowledge.* The ambiguities are crucial. In the period with which this book is concerned some people, poets among them, might feel that they possessed England; but many more were bound to recognize that although they wished to own 'the land' – and while Auden's 'land' isn't literally England it is certainly a phantasmagoric version of it – they could not do so. Dispossession is therefore my theme, quite as much as possession. Or, to put the matter differently, I might say that my interests are often centred on the questions: who owns England? who speaks for it? can England be seen in terms of a unifying meaning, a single coherent image? can 'you' ever come to mean 'all'?

The questions are prompted by my strong sense that in the period 1880–1914 a number of writers, politicians and intellectuals show an extraordinary degree of self-consciousness in their desire to identify England, to speak of 'inherent' English traits, in other words to stabilise an image, to make it clear to themselves and each other just what England, the English and Englishness are and are not; and to promote this identity wherever possible. (Which must mean that they are worried about whether it makes sense.) It is these promoters who are addressed as 'you' in Auden's poem, together with others who, looking back to the utter disaster of the Great War, tried to build a bridge between pre- and post-war society and so speak for

continuity. And I should say here that the Great War will feature in much of what follows, simply because when you read the poetry that came out of it and after it you can be left in no doubt as to its traumatizing effect on English society. 'Get there if you can' is partly about that effect. It says, 'look at the detritus of a wrecked society. Whose fault is it and what is to be done?'

The second question must be left. It will occupy me when I come to write about Auden in more detail. As to the first, the fault surely has something to do with 'you'. For the detritus of this society isn't merely a matter of industrial wreckage. There is human wreckage, also. If there are possessors then there will also be the dispossessed, those who cannot speak for England or who are excluded from its orthodox modes of utterance. Such people are non-'you'. But how can we know of their existence? One way of answering this question is by looking back into the nineteenth century and attending to the voice of one of the dispossessed, John Clare.

I want to say a little about Clare, because to do so will help to bring the concerns of this book into focus. Whatever I say must be brief, in the first place because he died in 1864, so that in a strict sense he can hardly belong in a book on modern poetry; and in the second place because although he mattered to Edward Thomas, and others knew of his work I cannot pretend that he is an overt influence on much modern English writing. On the other hand, his example seems to me very important; and I also think that what he writes about and the way he writes about it makes him representative and, in some senses, an important reproof to those who come after and who lack his heroism, toughness, and clear-sighted understanding of how 'you' are capturing England. In Clare's own case the capturing was literal. He was the victim of enclosure. He was also the victim of patrons and editors, who conspired not to let him publish some lines about the evils of enclosure on the grounds that they smacked of 'radical slang'. The lines in question appeared in 'Helpston', one of the poems of his first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, 1820:

Oh who could see my dear green willows fall
What feeling heart but dropt a tear for all
Accursed wealth o'er bounding human laws
Of every evil thou remainst the cause
Victims of want those wretches such as me
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee
Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed

And thine our loss of labour and of bread
Thou art the cause that levels every tree
And woods bow down to clear a way for thee¹

It is hardly surprising that Clare's self-appointed patron, Lord Radstock, should insist that these lines be cut out. But this was not the only way he suffered.

There are occasions when Clare's editors so alter his lines, his punctuation and his language, that he comes across as a tame 'peasant' poet. And there are other occasions when he conspires with this and produces trivial drawing-room ballads and pieces of nature observation that you can find ten-a-penny in the literary journals of Regency and Victorian England. This is not to be wondered at. Clare seems to me in this sense symptomatic of many later writers. For whom is he writing? Is he a literary man among equals, a natural genius who aspires to higher things, a poet content to waste his sweetness on the desert air, or a champion of the people? He can be all these things by turn and in this, and especially when in certain of his poems he upbraids the 'vulgar' talk of 'humble hinds', we catch a glimpse of that cultural divide which Dickens explored in *Great Expectations*, and which is in some senses perhaps the most central of all modern experiences. In short, there are occasions when Clare seems to identify with precisely that culture which is 'owned' by those who are in a position to destroy his sense of himself. For these are the enclosers, of language as well as of land;² and when Clare speaks of humble hinds he is using their language, trying to slip inside and become one of them.

I do not mean to suggest by this that Clare shared Pip's great expectations. On the other hand, he undoubtedly had *some* expectations, and it seems that they are at least partly responsible for elements in his poetry that betray or reveal his sense of unease with his possible and very different audiences. For whom is he writing? It is a question that haunts later poets, and the fact that many of them appear to be most secure when talking to themselves or to the dead again suggests that Clare's experiences and problems are a great deal more representative than have usually been allowed.

The psychological unity of many selves in one community is bound up . . . with the consciousness of some lengthy social process which has occurred, or is at least supposed to have occurred. And the wealthier the memory of a community is, and the vaster the historical processes which it regards as belonging