

HERBERT READ AS A TWENTIETH-CENTURY ROMANTIC POET

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Herbert Read's avowed aim to "rehabilitate" Romanticism resulted in a literary criticism which defended his own practice as a poet. While his poetry was Romantic in its concentration on the imagination and the power of Nature, it demonstrated a serious problem with the Romantic ideal of the expression of the self. His war poetry, as the poetry of a significant shaping experience, can be seen as demonstrating, with a particular clarity, that difficulty in all three phases: the poetry written during the War, the poetic summation of the Great War in The End of a War, and finally the poetry written in reaction to war from 1936 onward. Read's reluctance to confront the matter of confessional expression in poetry is clearly demonstrated in his poems that take as subject the world beyond war. A constant theme in this poetry, free of concern with war, is the conflict between reason and imagination; a conflict which resolves itself into the paradox of a Romantic denial of the self.

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CHAPTER ONE  
READ AND ROMANTICISM

Herbert Read's life spanned the period from the last decade of Victoria's reign to the end of the tumultuous 1960's, and his work as poet and critic reflects the contradictions and uncertainties which identify the twentieth-century. His earliest political and religious affiliations were Conservative and Church of England, but he lived much of his life as a political and social anarchist and an agnostic. He, however, was an anarchist who accepted a knighthood, and an agnostic who confessed at the end of his life that, like Simone Weil, perhaps he was waiting for God. As an art critic he was one of the prime advocates of the Modern Art Movement. He was a professor, lecturer and editor, and his Education Through Art(1943) greatly influenced the British educational system after the Second World War. In his literary criticism he espoused the causes of Imagism, Metaphysical poetry and Romanticism, and in the process of his critical enthusiasms his own poetry often dried up. He never ceased, however, to consider himself primarily a poet, but he could not ignore the problem of the constant tension between the poet and critic within himself:

The critic who is a poet is in special difficulty.  
With a certain objectivity he has elaborated his

system of scientific criticism; but at other moments in his life he has written poetry which owes nothing to his critical theories ... Such a critic-poet ... cannot escape the evidence of his own experience, but must in some way establish an agreement between his theory and his practice. 1

Read's solution to the problem was to take the view that his criticism was fundamentally a defence of his own poetic practice. He was not always aware, however, of the increasing divergences between poet and critic and there always remained the question of whether the unsuspecting poet was being devoured by the philosopher at the banquet of Thyestes.<sup>2</sup>

One of Read's earliest interests in poetic theory was with the ideas of the Imagists, and his first mention of them was in a July, 1916 letter where he suggested that the "essence" of twentieth-century literature was represented by Henry James and the Imagist poets.<sup>3</sup> While he considered that the Imagists did not discriminate adequately between "the vision of purely aesthetic value and the vision of emotional value only",<sup>4</sup> their influence was apparent in his first piece of literary criticism, which appeared in Art and Letters in 1918. Here he laid out three axioms for the understanding of poetry and he gave these axioms the force of dogma:

- i. Form is determined by emotion which requires expression. Corollary: form is not an unchanging mould into which any emotion can be poured.
- ii. The poem is an artistic whole demanding strict unity.
- iii. The criterion of the poem is the quality of the vision expressed, granted the expression is adequate.

Corollary: Rhyme, metre, cadence, alliteration, are various decorative devices to be used as the vision demands, and are not formal qualities preordained. 5

In this essay the poet and the critic are speaking as one and this may explain why Read, in spite of his subsequent enthusiasms for the Metaphysicals and later the Romantics, never did repudiate this first statement of poetic theory. More than twenty years later, when he wrote Annals of Innocence and Experience(1940), he referred to the essay and quoted the axioms because "the essay, differently worded, still represents my views on the theory of poetry."<sup>6</sup>

Although Read wrote poetry during the Great War in the style of the Imagists, his interest in Imagism as a poetic movement declined rapidly. He did, however, continue to value the contribution of the Imagists and he later edited the papers of T.E. Hulme, a militant anti-Romantic and a poet who was credited with formulating Imagist principles and with writing some of the earliest Imagist poems. Long after this early interest had waned, Read still believed that the poetic principles developed by Eliot, Pound and the Imagists between 1906 and 1915 represented the true movement of poetry deriving from the Romantic tradition. It was not just the insistence on the clarity and exactness of image that appealed to Read. He considered that the Imagist experiments in poetry demonstrated an adherence to the tradition of vital and incessant experiment which he viewed as the basic principle of the real modernist

movement.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately following the Great War, Read devoted his efforts more to literary criticism than to poetry. He was an admirer of T.S.Eliot and a member of the literary circle in which anti-Romantic ideas prevailed. Read's critical stance attempted to support those ideas, as he demonstrated in his first collection of essays, Reason and Romanticism, published in 1926. It is here that the full impact of his early critical position is apparent, and it is also from here that one receives the impression that Read "doth protest too much".

This is particularly obvious when he claims that "science and poetry have but one ideal, which is the satisfaction of the reason".<sup>8</sup> He is as extreme, too, in his attempt to marry logic with the imagination:

True imagination is a kind of logic; it is the capacity to deduce from the nature of an experienced reality, the nature of other unexperienced realities. And upon the depth and totality of the original experience will depend the reach and validity of the imaginative process. And if the process is kept to a quasi-logical rigidity, it may be observed that merely one kind of experience, sufficiently realized, will suffice for an almost unlimited progression of imaginative analogies. 9

The irony of this defence of reason is that in the process of it Read arrives at an extremity of Romanticism. What he is trying to argue is the logic of the unity of thought and imagination, but the argument evolves into a Romantic solipsism in which private experience becomes the font of all knowledge and of all art. Not all of his attempts to advocate the

primacy of reason were so contradictory or so extreme, but they often had Romantic overtones, and his concept of reason always involved more than mere scientific rationalism:

Reason should ... connote the widest evidence of the senses, and of all the processes and instincts developed in the long history of man. It is the sum total of awareness, ordained and ordered to some specific end or object of attention. 10

While reason was given pride of place as the sum total of all awareness, the definition of it was so all-encompassing as to endow reason with a Romantic vagueness that defied definition.

Read's advocacy of reason was sincere, if somewhat forced, and it obviously owed much to T.S. Eliot, who encouraged his literary endeavors. Eliot sponsored the publication of his poetry and essays, and Reason and Romanticism was prepared at his behest. Read later acknowledged the influence of his ideas and those of T.E. Hulme on this first collection of essays: "The Reason of it owes something to Hulme and even more to Eliot, the Romanticism was my own."<sup>11</sup> Read made this observation much later in life, but there were few indications that he was prepared to acknowledge himself as a Romantic in the mid-1920's. He echoed Eliot's views on the modern problem of the divorce of thought from human feeling and he emphasized that the probable solution lay in the direction of the general development of human thought:

It is not likely that this development will take the form of a mystical divorce from reason ... We need to create a new unity, or perhaps to recover an old one. But if the critical spirit cannot give us this, no other force will, for that spirit is the highest and most perfect function in man. 12

Even here, though, where he asserted the supremacy of reason as the critical spirit, the question of a mystical solution was not discarded as impossible, it was merely "not likely".

In connection with this concern about the desirability of the unity of thought and feeling, Read turned to discussion of the Metaphysical poets and, like Eliot, he cited Milton as injurious to the true tradition of Metaphysical poetry. He defined Metaphysical poetry 'as the emotional apprehension of thought and in his view the true tradition of Metaphysical poetry was synonymous with the true tradition of English poetry. Since he concluded that Milton "did not think poetically, he merely expounded thought in verse"<sup>13</sup>, he was quite comfortable in excluding him from the true tradition. He did not, however, exclude Wordsworth. Read's quarrel with Romanticism was with the sentimentalism of the late nineteenth-century variety and he never completely discarded the early Romantics. In fact his attachment to Wordsworth was such that he claimed him as the last of the Metaphysicals. In spite of some embarrassment at Wordsworth's discursiveness, he saw in the best of his work a poetry in which emotion was the product of thought, a poetry in which emotion was a joy that came with the triumph of the reason. Unable to discard

either his anti-Romanticism or Wordsworth, he was satisfied to transform the Romantic poet into a Metaphysical one.

That Read was so intent on including Wordsworth in his true tradition of poetry was an indication of where his sympathies lay, and by the end of the 1920's he was beginning to announce himself as a Romantic. In his last published collection of essays, The Cult of Sincerity (1968), he recalled that when Eliot announced in 1928

that he was a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an anglo-catholic in religion, I could only retort that I was a romantic in literature, an anarchist in politics and an agnostic in religion. 14

The very obvious differences apparent between the two men did not destroy the bond of friendship between them, nor did it remove Read's admiration for Eliot. From this time onward, though, he began to move away from the advocacy of the supremacy of reason and his work of the earlier period so plainly contradicted his mature viewpoint that he kept these writings out of the body of his critical work for some time.

One of the key arguments that Read made in support of his changing views of poetry was connected with his ideas on the English poetic tradition. In Phases of English Poetry (1928) he traced that tradition in terms of its development as a progression from objectivity to subjectivity:

Poetry has developed from the widest possible appeal - an appeal commensurate with the community itself - to the narrowest possible appeal - the poet appealing to himself alone. A circle has been completed - completed only within the last generation of two. 15

In his discussion of the development of poetry, Read moved from Spenser, whom he defined as a relatively objective poet, to Crashaw and Wordsworth, whose poetry he viewed as containing a "personal idiom" of a particular intensity.<sup>16</sup> He explained this brand of poetry as being the result of a mystical or ecstatic state of being. The profound intuitions of unity that Crashaw expressed between his world and his God, and those which Wordsworth expressed between himself and nature, were seen as synonymous with the poetic state itself. The basis of the Romanticism that Read was beginning to evolve was that Wordsworth himself was part of a poetic tradition which stretched back to Chaucer and Shakespeare. That tradition had been interrupted, however, with the demise of the Metaphysicals. Read divided this poetic tradition into poetry and non-poetry on the basis of what he saw as genuine sensibility. When he began to establish modern poetry as Romantic his use of terms began to change too: 'Romantic' shifted from bad to good, and 'Classical' shifted from good to bad as it became synonymous with a lack of sincerity. By the mid-1930's the division between Classical and Romantic poetry was for him a matter of kind, not of degree, and as absolute as the division between poetry and prose.<sup>17</sup>

The watershed year in Read's growing commitment to Romanticism was 1932, the year in which he published Form in Modern Poetry. Here he sought to ally the science of

psychology with literary criticism in spite of the critical opposition he knew he would receive:

Nevertheless, this is where I take my stand, even against my best friends in criticism, such as Mr. Eliot himself. I believe that criticism must concern itself, not only with the work of art in itself, but also with the process of writing, and the writer's state of mind when inspired ... not only with the finished work of art, but also with the workman, his mental activity and his tools. 18

Not only did Read advocate psychology as a critical tool, but in Form in Modern Poetry his position was openly Romantic. This impression was reinforced by the concluding sentence that he added when Form in Modern Poetry was reprinted as "The Poetic Experience" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism(1938):

I am aware that I shall be accused of merely dressing up the old romanticism in new phrases: but forced into this academic discussion I might then accept "the rehabilitation of romanticism" as an adequate description of my aims. 19

The "rehabilitation" that he envisaged was certainly more than a matter of old wine in new bottles. He now elaborated his own radical version of Coleridge's principle of organic form, and he sought to establish modern poetry as the completion of the Romantic revolution begun by Wordsworth and modified and corrected by Coleridge. He was beginning at this point to see himself as a critic in the manner of Coleridge, whom he admired greatly and whose Biographia Literaria became a kind of literary bible in his early years as a critic.

Read's appreciation of Coleridge was based on his

understanding of him as a scientific critic and his admiration of his ability to fuse his own experiences and those of his fellow poets into material for his own research. In confronting the problem of the Romantic-Classical split, Read attempted to emulate Coleridge's method and at the same time he resorted to a reliance on Coleridge's organic form as the defining characteristic of true poetry:

In a broad sense my theory of poetic form would have been classical or romantic. Most definitely it would have been classical, but when I stand up squarely to the traditional terms of classical theory, and attempt to relate them to my own experience, I find there is no application - my experience cuts across the classical-romantic categorization.

I find, in fact, that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of form. 20

These two types of form Read defined as 'organic' and 'abstract':

When a work of art has its own inherent laws, originating with its very invention and fusing in one vital unity both structure and content, then the resulting form may be described as organic.

When an organic form is stabilized and repeated as a pattern, and the intention of the artist is no longer related to the inherent dynamism of an inventive act, but seeks to adapt content to predetermined structure, then the resulting form may be described as abstract. 21

The distinction here between organic and abstract form resembled very closely that which Coleridge made between 'organic' and 'mechanic' form:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material ... The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it

develops, itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. 22

Although Read's view and that of Coleridge on the matter of form appeared virtually identical, it became apparent as Read developed his discussion that his views were much more radical than those of the critic he so admired. While Coleridge's idea of the innate principle of form brought all the mind into play in the creation of poetry, with judgement and genius acting as a single force, Read was unable to combine the two. For him judgement belonged to the self-conscious making of art, it had no place in the poetic process. What Read was really talking about in his discussions of form were two different modes of apprehension<sup>23</sup> and what he ended up with on this basis was closer to the classical distinction between nature and art than the organic whole that Coleridge had defined.

Read differed from Coleridge, too, on the matter of the imagination even though, like him, he defined poetry in terms of imagination. For Coleridge the imaginative process was a broad one in which the whole mind was engaged and it seemed able to include even the creative aspects of science and philosophy as well as poetry. In English Prose Style(1928) Read suggested that Coleridge's definition of imagination smacked of an out-of-date transcendentalism. He attempted to remove the dimension of idealism from the definition and to

adapt it to his own, narrowly aesthetic purpose:

The [ie., Coleridge's] primary imagination is apparently identified with the general principle of creative thought, and the secondary imagination is that same creative principle in the degree that it becomes conscious activity. Later on in the Biographia Litteraria it appears that imagination as defined here is largely identified with the poetic principle. With this identification I should agree in so far as imagination is a "creative" activity. In the moment of its origination the word is poetry. Let this be the primary sense of imagination. But then I think that in its secondary sense the word must be held to cover more factors than are implied in Coleridge's definition. Or rather, I think that some of the factors which Coleridge would describe as secondary are really primary, in that they are moments of origination or creativity; the secondary process is really the conscious arrangements of these moments into an expressive pattern. 24

Once again Read made a radical transformation of Coleridge's ideas - he made the primary and the secondary imaginations differ in kind, rather than in degree, just as he had done with the ideas of mechanic and organic form. Read's idea of poetry as a process that closely resembled imaging precluded the element of the conscious will, and his removal of that will from the poetic process closed the route from 'poetry' to 'poems' - a route which Coleridge had attempted to keep open by including the conscious will in the creative process. 25

Once Read had defined his organic and abstract form he could resort to the rational intellect as the principle for the production of abstract form, but for the principle of organic form he had to look elsewhere to a less conscious level of the mind. It was to answer this problem that he put

forth his idea of personality:

Before we can see how organic form takes shape, we must first consider the nature of the poet's personality: for upon the nature of his personality depends the form of his poetry. 26

Read related his ideas of personality to Freud's ideas of the ego and the id, and he defined personality as the union of the two. The companion psychological structure that Read set up with personality was that of character, and just as he was prepared to use Freudian psychology as a tool to illuminate the poetic personality, so he was prepared to apply it to his own theory of the differences between personality and character. He defined character as

A disposition in the individual due to the repression of certain impulses which would otherwise be present in the personality. 27

By this definition personality signified coherence, completeness, and character signified repression. Read went on to place the two structures in opposition to each other:

Character is ... an impersonal ideal which the individual selects and to which he sacrifices all other claims, especially those of the sentiments or emotions. It follows that character must be placed in opposition to personality, which is the general-common-denominator of our sentiments and emotions. 28

The opposition that he set up in this scheme was not merely fortuitous, it was to become one of the cornerstones of his literary theory:

That is, indeed, the opposition I wish to emphasise; and when I have said further that all poetry, in which I include all lyrical impulses whatsoever, is the

product of personality, and therefore inhibited in a character, I have stated the main theme of my essay. 29

The debt he owed to Freud was not the only one that Read acknowledged in the formation of his own ideas on the poetic personality and the differences between personality and character. There was a Romantic association as well. He explained that he was elaborating on certain statements of Keats and he referred to Keats's letter of 22nd November, 1817 to Bailey on "Men of Genius and Men of Power" in which Keats claimed that the former had no "determined character":

Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect - but they have not any individuality, any determined character - I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power. 30

Keats does not use the term "personality", nor does Read claim to be explaining Keats, but the connection between their ideas is readily apparent. Read as always, though, went further in separating the poetic personality from the realm of rational thought than the nineteenth-century Romantics were prepared to go. Read used Keats's idea of "Negative Capability" too. He took the meaning to be concerned with the "mobility" of the poetic personality and, while this interpretation was compatible with his own views, it perhaps placed emphasis on the mobile personality at the expense of the idea of a fixed personality maintaining an open and speculative mind.

Not only did Read use the Romantics as a springboard for his critical theory, but he also applied that theory to

them as well. One of the earliest pieces of criticism in which he used psychoanalytic theory and the ideas of personality and character was his Wordsworth of 1930. Even at the peak of his anti-Romanticism he had never abandoned his admiration for the best of Wordsworth's poetry, and in this work he explained variations in the quality of Wordsworth's poetic output in psychoanalytic terms. Wordsworth's childhood had been disrupted by death and his creative maturity had been undermined by the sexual anxieties of his relationships with women. His public life in later years was conducted under a mask of extreme conventionality which put him out of touch with his unconscious, and hence with his poetic personality. He became one of Keats's "Men of Power", and character stifled his creative abilities:

If we say that there is a fundamental opposition between the artist and the man of action, the statement is acceptable enough ... It would explain the sudden withering of Wordsworth's genius: he acquired a character. 31

The later poetry of Wordsworth was defined by Read as the poetry emanating from these forces of "character" and as such it was of a lesser quality than The Prelude, for example, which was the product of the true force of his personality.

Read's insistence on the central role of personality as the source of the poetic state of mind brought him into direct and open conflict with T.S. Eliot. Eliot insisted that poetry was not an expression of personality, but rather an escape from it. So great was the disagreement, in fact,

that Eliot, at the end of After Strange Gods, pointed to Read's statements on personality, character and poetry as one of four examples of modern heresy.<sup>32</sup> Eliot's basic objection to Read's idea of personality was that it introduced a type of determinism into literature. It forbade any attempt to remake the poet according to an ideal, on the grounds that to do so would damage the poetry, and it recommended to the poet that he should do what was natural and easy for him instead of what was right.

In Form in Modern Poetry Read sought to clarify his position for Eliot and hopefully to convince him of the rightness of it:

The point of Mr. Eliot is a very exceptional one, and in fact a protest against a universal reliance on a vague concept. Mr. Eliot might hold that the notion of personality is inevitably vague; at least he does not attempt to define it. I think, however, that the attempt will be worth while. 33

While at this point Read sought to place the emphasis of Eliot's disagreement on the vagueness of the concept of personality, the true nature of the disagreement soon became very apparent when Eliot charged Shelley with "intellectual incoherence". In doing so he attacked the ideas and thus through them the poetry and the man. Read's response was to defend the poetry and the ideas by defending Shelley's personality. His essay "In Defence of Shelley" (1936) described Shelley's personality in terms of the horror of incest and a repressed homosexuality. He defended the poet's

personality on the basis of his "super-normal neuroticism" which gave him access to a superior knowledge and a superior reality. Read insisted that it could not be assumed that what was not normal was not valuable, and he estimated the value of such a type as Shelley on the basis of his worth to the social and intellectual life of the community as a whole. He saw himself and Shelley as having similar aims. Both he and the Romantic poet wanted to "strip the veil of familiarity from the world and to penetrate to a realm of absolute truth and beauty."<sup>34</sup> So emphatic was Read in relating the style of Shelley's verse and his social and political anarchism to his psychological type, that he felt the discussion was closed. More than twenty years later he had not changed his mind on the matter: "The chain of evidence is complete: it does not, as far as I can see, leave any room for argument".<sup>35</sup> While Read continued to admire Eliot, his friend's refusal to be involved with the use of psychoanalysis in literary criticism seemed to him an avoidance of the essential issue for modern criticism. The essay in defence of Shelley was a practical application, albeit an extreme one, of the critical theory which Read had expressed in Form in Modern Poetry. It was apparent from this essay that what he had evolved was a theory of criticism which emphasized the 'sincerity' of the poet's expression: poems were not to be analyzed for technique, but judgement

was to be made on the basis of the authenticity of the expression.<sup>36</sup>

In 1936 the Surrealist Exhibition in London caused a mild scandal in artistic circles. Read helped organize the events, and edited and wrote the introduction to Surrealism which was published in association with the exhibition. This introduction was probably the most extreme of Read's statements on Romanticism. In it he not only abolished Classicism completely, but he identified Surrealism as the logical extension of Romanticism. He saw Surrealism as the answer to more than the problems of a literary tradition: it was the reaffirmation of the Romantic principle of "life, of creation, of liberation", and as such it would lead to the rehabilitation of Romanticism. Read claimed too that Surrealism had resolved the conflict between Romanticism and Classicism, not by establishing a synthesis between them as he had earlier hoped, but by showing the complete irrelevance of Classicism, its total contradiction of the creative impulse:

There is a principle of life, of creation, of liberation, and that is the romantic spirit: there is a principle of order, of control and of repression, and that is the classical spirit. 37

He went on in the same vein to separate the artist from society: "It would be much nearer the truth to identify romanticism with the artist and classicism with society."<sup>38</sup> The task of the artist, however, was to seek a reconciliation with society. He must offer to it the permanent truths which

were not his own personal possession but largely made up of elements from a collective unconscious. This body of common sentiments and thoughts may have appeared similar to the universal truths of classicism but it was, according to Read, radically different:

Whereas the universal truths of classicism may be merely the temporal prejudices of our epoch, the universal truths of romanticism are coeval with the evolving consciousness of mankind. 39

Read's grandiose claims for Surrealism were sensational for more than the total dismissal of Classicism and the support of the Surrealist opposition to traditional morality. He opted for their views on the dialectical and ever-changing nature of art and society, and his enchantment with communism was obvious. That the enchantment was not permanent, however, was attested to by his 'silent' revision, for the 1953 reprint, of the Surrealism introduction. Here the sentence "Surrealism, like Communism, does not call upon artists to surrender their individuality" was altered to read "Surrealism does not, like Communism, call upon artists to surrender their individuality."<sup>40</sup> Read, in common with many of his day, had become disenchanted over the treatment of artists in the Soviet Union. The 1953 reprint recognized the polemical nature of his introduction as well, but he still felt that

It would be dishonest to disguise the fact that I am sometimes led away (I do not say led astray) by my sympathies. These sympathies proceed from my "cult of sincerity" as a poet; and no doubt this is not

the only occasion ... when the critic abdicates and the poet takes over. 41

While Read was the critical champion of the idea of automatism in art in his introduction to Surrealism, the poet took over when he reported his personal experiments on automatism in poetry in "Myth, Dream and Poem" (1938). By 'automatism' he meant a state of mind in which expression was immediate and instinctive, and he linked automatism with dream activity. He concluded that the gulf between experience and expression could only be bridged in a state of trance or automatism "in which state the images of the dream draw words from the memory ... as a magnet might draw needles from a haystack".<sup>42</sup> While Read was quite aware that Coleridge rejected automatism in art, he regretted that distrust and he used "Kubla Khan" as proof of his own conviction that words drawn from memory in trance were necessarily truly poetic. He made an emphatic claim for his own experience of the poetic trance:

I can aver that all the poetry I have written which I can continue to regard as authentic poetry was written immediately, instantaneously, in a condition of trance. 43

These ideas of the poetic trance owed something to Freud and something to Jung as well for Read concluded that the poet, in trance, was in touch with a force akin to Jung's 'collective unconscious' out of which he was able to create his own myth, but a myth which had significance for a whole people. The scientific critic had evolved a scientific explanation for

the Romantic poet as legislator to humanity.

By the end of the 1930's it was clear that, while Read called himself a Romantic, he had worked out his own individual brand of Romanticism. Collected Essays in Literary Criticism(1938), summed up the literary theory based on this Romanticism. The work was a collection of essays written over the course of fifteen years and it represented a critical stance which he would support, with few alterations, to the end of his life. Poetry and Anarchism, published in the same year, completed the outline of Read's "rehabilitation of romanticism" . He had shown an early interest in Anarchism during and after the Great War, and by the end of the thirties he had come to see Anarchism as the real-life counterpart of Romanticism in poetry. Throughout his criticism he had attempted to separate the poetic and the rational processes, but even the poet had to exercise his rational faculties in the process of living. Just as poetry must be ordered by its own natural and inherent laws, so must everyday life be ordered by its own natural law. In real life, then, the poet became Anarchist: he discovered the order implicit in the universe and ordered his own life according to that law. It was on this philosophical basis that Read attempted to order his own life, and by 1938 he had openly adopted Anarchism. The natural law that the Anarchist sought was no more compatible with the modern industrial age than Romantic poetry was, however,

and his solution to the problems of the modern world took the form of a Romantic retreat:

Spiritually the world is now one desert ... But physically it still has a beautiful face, and if we could once more learn to live with nature, if we could return like prodigal children to the contemplation of its beauty, there might be an end to our alienation and fear, a return to those virtues of delight which Blake called Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love. 44

Just as the logical solution for the Anarchist seemed Romantic retreat, so the logical solution for the poet seemed to be a retreat from life into a state of total contemplation. Read, however, did not intend such a retreat because for him the very essence of poetry was its celebration of life. The celebration of life had limits, though, and he erected barriers to the kind of poetry that could be produced. One-to-one correspondence with the instant was 'ideal' or 'absolute' poetry and not real or actual poetry. Ideal poetry was so rare as to be

an essence which we have to dilute with grosser elements to make it viable or practicable. A poem that is pure imagery would be like a statue of crystal - something too cold and transparent for our animal senses. 45

There is an interesting element of fear in Read's drawing back here, a recognition perhaps that the unconscious contained images of horror as well as of absolute beauty, and that the crystal of absolute art is so far removed from life that it denotes death. Read's only novel, The Green Child (1935), is suggestive of this theme as well. The elusive charm

of the Green People in the novel is based on their rejection of life's vitality. Their sole desire is to take the form of the perfect structure of crystal and so to achieve a state of final immortality. Olivero, the hero, also welcomes death through his hatred of life. When he does not return from the underworld and he is reborn into death, not into life eternal, it becomes apparent that Olivero's error has been his rejection of life.<sup>46</sup> He has opted for order over freedom.

The tension between freedom and order was a constant in Read's criticism and it led to constant contradictions. The paradox of Read was that he saw form and discipline as necessary for the writing of poetry, but he saw imaginative freedom as essential to the process as well. Discrepancies were not a problem for him because he believed that it was possible, even normal, to live a life of contradictions. It was not surprising, then, that even though he rejected Classicism completely, his Romanticism always had Classical overtones. The order he insisted on, however, was never imposed from the outside, it was the product of the law inherent in poetic knowledge. It was on this basis it was never necessary to abandon order, and it was also on this basis that he refused to equate sincerity with spontaneity:

Such an identification of the real self with the Moment ... is really a losing of the self, a dissolution of the self in animal sensation. If we are to identify such carnality with sincerity, sincerity loses all moral value ... Art, in my view

... is precisely the search for the infinite and the eternal. If the self is by definition fluid, inconsistent, incandescent, it follows that the self can never be a fit subject for a work of art. The more spontaneous (and in this sense sincere) the expression of the pulsating, carnal self, the less aesthetic (artistic). The dilemma seems to be inescapable. 47

Read was self-contradictory. He had not abandoned his belief in the relationship between personality and poetry but, just as 'pure poetry' had to be disguised and controlled, so must the 'self' not be allowed the indulgence of free reign. The freedom he allowed the poetic personality was not license, it was the use of the gift of a special knowledge. His criticism had come full circle. He ended where he had begun, with the doctrine of poetry as knowledge, but that knowledge was unattainable without discipline and order.

## Notes to Chapter One

1. Herbert Read, "The Nature of Poetry" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.17.
2. Allen Tate, Foreword to Herbert Read, Selected Writings of Herbert Read, p.11.
3. Herbert Read, The Contrary Experience, p.73.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, "Definitions Toward a Modern Theory of Poetry", Art and Letters I, 3(1918),78.
5. Ibid., p.73.
6. \_\_\_\_\_, Annals of Innocence and Experience, p.98 in W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.31.
7. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.86.
8. Herbert Read, Reason and Romanticism, pp.57-8.
9. Ibid., p.171.
10. Ibid., p.27.
11. \_\_\_\_\_, The Cult of Sincerity, p.107.
12. \_\_\_\_\_, Reason and Romanticism, p.20.
13. Ibid., p.34.
14. \_\_\_\_\_, The Cult of Sincerity, p.112.
15. \_\_\_\_\_, Phases of English Poetry, p.10.
16. Ibid., p.102.
17. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.104.
18. Herbert Read, Form in Modern Poetry, p.14.

19. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.123.
20. \_\_\_\_\_, Form in Modern Poetry, p.8.
21. Ibid., p.9.
22. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Shakespearean Criticism, ed. T.M. Raysor, (London,1960), Vol.I, p.98 in W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.76.
23. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.76 passim.
24. Herbert Read, English Prose Style, p.155.
25. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.144
26. Herbert Read, Form in Modern Poetry, p.11.
- Coleridge is present too in the discussion of the relationship of personality to poetry. The echo of his "So he is: so he writes" is unmistakable.
27. \_\_\_\_\_, "The Personality of the Poet" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.24.
28. Ibid., pp.29-30.
29. Ibid., p.30.
30. John Keats, letter to Bailey, 22nd November, 1817, quoted in Herbert Read, Collected Essays, p.59. I am indebted to Dr. Don Goellnicht for discussion of Keats's Letters as they relate to Read's views of Personality and Character.
31. Herbert Read, "The Personality of the Poet" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.39.
32. Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason, pp.485-6.
33. Herbert Read, Form in Modern Poetry, p.14.

34. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.107.
35. Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling, p.259.
36. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.113.
37. Herbert Read, "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle", in Selected Writings of Herbert Read, p.249.
38. Ibid., p.250.
39. Ibid..
40. W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.117.
41. Herbert Read, "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle" in The Philosophy of Modern Art(1953), p.105, quoted in W.T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.117.
42. \_\_\_\_\_, "Myth, Dream and Poem" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.108.
43. Ibid., p.110.
44. \_\_\_\_\_, The Contrary Experience, p.69.
45. \_\_\_\_\_, "Myth, Dream and Poem" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.110.
46. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.77.
47. Herbert Read, The Cult of Sincerity, p.29.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE POET AND WAR

I

Herbert Read established himself as a poet during the Great War. His experience of warfare was, like the abrupt dislocation of his childhood upon the death of his father, one of the most significant events of his life. The War not only became the dominant subject of his early poetry, but it also influenced the manner of his poetic expression thereafter: he began writing as a detached observer to survive the psychological battering of warfare and he was later seldom able to lose that detachment. War taught him to seek refuge in the perfection of the self, but it also taught him to avoid or suppress the emotions, a repression which made the poetry of experience difficult to accomplish. Read wrote about war first as a soldier and later as a non-combatant, but all that he wrote on the subject was coloured by the experiences of 1914-1918. The certain knowledge of the horror of war never left him and it ultimately played a crucial role in his retreat into the poetry of the mind. To consider Read's war poetry separately from his other poetry does not imply a difference in kind; rather it facilitates the consideration of how a formative experience was dealt with in

a lifetime of poetry.

## II

On the title page of Herbert Read's Naked Warriors (1919) was printed the following epigraph:

And there were some that went into battle naked and unarmed, fighting only with the fervor of their spirit, dying and getting many wounds. 1

The young men of Read's generation who went to war were in a sense "naked and unarmed". Inadequately as they were protected against physical peril, they were less well protected against the emotional and intellectual wounds that the Great War would inflict upon them. Read was as unarmed as any of his generation. At the outbreak of war he was a naïve young man with literary pretensions and he was swept into the war almost by accident:

I was caught in the war like a young animal that had sprung some trap, and I stepped into it without the least trace of patriotic sentiment, without enthusiasm of any kind, except a vague desire for adventure, for an ordeal that would test my courage. 2

The war did test Read's courage: he won the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order. He also gained some reputation as a poet during the war. In 1915 his first collection of poems, Songs of Chaos, appeared and others of his poems were published in the Egoist. Life had a strange duality for him during the Great War: he was at one and the same time an aspiring poet and an efficient soldier. To

survive under these circumstances necessitated the donning of an intellectual armour against the emotional impact of war, an armour which he later found difficult to discard. The effectiveness of this emotional 'insulation' had an impact on Read's life and on his art, and in the latter case it influenced his poetry to the degree that the aesthetic ideal often took precedence over the emotional one.

Read's interest in the Imagists and their theories of poetry is apparent in his earliest war poems, which were written in 1915 and 1916, before he had felt the full impact of the war. He did not include these poems in his Collected Poems until the 1966 edition when, presumably, the passage of time had insulated him from any embarrassment at the intellectual naiveté of these early efforts. The Imagism in these poems is based on an almost total dissociation between the spectator and the actions of those he observes. In "Aeroplane"<sup>3</sup>, for example, the aeroplane becomes a dragonfly darting among the shells which burst, their fumes

burgeoning to blooms  
 smoke-like lilies that float  
 along the sky.

The detachment is complete here: the poet has captured the image but he is uninvolved and the image is merely a pretty photograph. In the poem war is neither condemned nor condoned, it is simply described. "Ypres"<sup>4</sup>, too, is spare and detached. The noon sun is cold and the scene is suffused "with a chill

and hazy light". The ruins of Ypres are referred to as "thy ruins", the archaic formality of which contributes to the distancing effect. There is no account of human habitation and the only creatures mentioned are mythical: the broken wires are "tossed like the rat-locks of Maenades".

The other poem of this early group that Read chose to publish in 1966 was "The Autumn of the World".<sup>5</sup> This work is more discursive than the previous two, but the poet is still totally detached and the references to war are oblique: "A host of blood-flecked clouds/skim the golden sky" and "from the infinite womb of chaos/ the dark wafture of decay" is borne on the wind. Read is still concentrating on the depiction of an image, but in doing so he is attempting to deal with an abstraction as well - with the idea of a world at war. There is the impression of a disembodied intellect at work, the poem floats above the ground and does not confront the real war or human suffering. Nature is left to demonstrate the state of war: the waters of the sea weep, vultures sing gloomy songs, and "Summer voices are forever still".

Read's January, 1918 article on modern poetry in Art and Letters evidenced his dissatisfaction with Imagism as a means of expressing the experience of the war, and the changes in his own poetry attest to his feelings about those inadequacies. He never did, though, abandon his liking for

the sharp and clear image, and he seldom wrote poetry that was totally devoid of detachment. Even the death in action of his brother Charles in 1918 did not provoke an emotional poetic outburst. "Auguries of Life and Death"<sup>6</sup> was written as an immediate reaction to the news of the death of his brother, and Read's grief is contained in a formality that has elements of the pastoral elegy. The poem opens with a premonition of death and, although the classical allusions of the traditional elegy are not present, there is a certain artificiality in the notion of all nature mourning, and autumn leaves which augur death and fall to the earth "with a faint sad sigh". The death of Charles loses significance when the very real emotions associated with it are buried in the falling leaves used by Read as portents of death. The 'sincerity' that he demanded of poetry seems remote in these passages, but it is present in the simple plea he makes for frankness and an end to "foisted platitudes" which "cannot console sick hearts". The description of Charles is eulogistic, but it is quite simple and direct:

He was a delightful youth  
irradiating joy, peculiarly loved  
by hundreds of his fellows.  
The impulse of his living  
left a wake of laughter  
and happiness in the hearts of sad men.

This directness disappears in the final consolation when the poet sees that nature counsels acceptance and that death is part of the natural cycle:

So we might make his short delightful life  
 an instance of those beauties that adorn  
 tragically the earth with flowers  
 heroes and valiant hearts.

A final distancing comes in the third section where

All the world is wet with tears  
 and droops its languid life  
 in sympathy,

and the leaves' acceptance of fate is an example to men:

Their golden lances imperceptibly fade  
 into the sleep of winter, their victory made  
 in the hearts of men.

The problems that Read had in expressing emotion are exemplified in "Auguries of Life and Death". His desire to make poetry about those things which he felt most mattered so often seems to have been hampered by what amounted to almost a fear of confronting powerful emotion directly.

In spite of his need to insulate himself from the emotional impact of war, Read was concerned with portraying what war did to men, and he used his poetry to that end.

Eclogues and Naked Warriors are collections of poems published in 1919 but composed of poems written in 1916 and 1917.

Eclogues contains some war poems but is mainly a collection of poems of rural nostalgia. Naked Warriors, on the other hand, is the work of a poet who is angered by the war and by the society which allows it to happen. He is here less frequently coolly objective, but he is still very often detached. In these two collections Read describes many of the scenes of war, and though there are remnants of Imagism

in many of the poems, he tries to go beyond the mere capturing of the image to make a series of more general statements about the war.

The few war poems in Eclogues are personal: they centre on "I" and "We", and Nature is an overwhelming presence. Only the title of "Champ de Manoeuvres"<sup>7</sup> suggests that it is a war poem. Here the body of the poet and the ground of the hill are one. In sleep his soul roams free and "The empty body broods/ one with the inanimate rocks"; but his awakening is harsh in the setting sun:

The last rays are fierce and irritant.  
Then on the lonely hill my body wakes  
and gathers to its shell my startled soul.

The title has announced that the field is the site of battle, and the final reference to the body's shell reminds the reader of the shells of war. The suggestion is perhaps that the site of the poet's reveries will become the field of battle and he will become one with the earth again, but this time in death, not in meditation.

"Promenade Solonnelle"<sup>8</sup> opens with an evocative description suggestive of the Yorkshire moors: "black moors/ where gray walls crawl sinuously into still horizons". But the poem is obscure and the opening could be equally descriptive of the trenches of the Western Front. It is also difficult to determine whom the poet is addressing, and whether it is Christ or a loved companion who calls upon the elements:

I was mute -  
 a sticky bud  
 only to unfurl  
 in the germination of your mood.

But you called gray rain  
 to slake my heart:  
 you called gray mist  
 over the black moors.

We passed black altars of rock:  
 two mute processional docile Christs  
 amid the unheeding  
 bleakness.

For Read to invoke a religious presence in his poetry was unusual, for he had already abandoned belief in an external God. In the place of traditional religion he professed a belief in fate and in the innate goodness of man. He was conscious, however, of the formal obligation of the poet, and the image of soldiers as Christ figures was a widely evocative one and not uncommon in war poetry.

He used the religious motif on at least one other occasion - this time in one of six poems of "The Scene of War" segment of Naked Warriors. "The Crucifix"<sup>9</sup> is one of his shortest poems and it focuses on the religious emblem, destroyed by war:

His body is smashed  
 through the belly and chest  
 the head hangs lopsided  
 from one nail'd hand.

Emblem of agony  
 we have smashed you!

The implication is that war has destroyed religious belief, and that the agony of war goes beyond even the suffering of

Christ. The image conjures up other allusions as well, of man's inhumanity to man and the whole nature of Christian belief. That Read had not completely discarded the Imagist influence is evidenced in the style of this poem and also in the epigraph to "The Scene of War", which was taken from the Imagist poet, H.D.. He was not, however, prepared to let the image stand alone here and the last two lines quoted above are an outburst that moves the poem away from the strict confines of the image.

Read experimented with his poetry during the Great War just as he would continue to do throughout his lifetime, and he was interested in a variety of poetic and philosophic theories at the same time. His War Diary indicates his enthusiasms for Coleridge, Nietzsche, Hulme and a number of other thinkers. His poetry was often a reflection of those enthusiasms. There is some suggestion, for example, that the name of the Kneeshaw figure which appears in both "Kneeshaw Goes to War"<sup>10</sup> and Read's novel, The Green Child, is derived, significantly, from the name of Nietzsche: both in the poem and in the novel the figure is that of a Nietzschean, natural, physical man. The Kneeshaw of the novel, however, is cast as rather a villain and he gives in to his animal senses to a greater degree than does the figure in the poem. In the poem Kneeshaw begins as an innocent, very much like the Kneeshaw of the novel. He is isolated "In the forest of his dreams/ Like a woodland flower" and he is receptive of neither emotional

nor intellectual influence: "he never, even vaguely tried to  
 pirece/ The gloom about him" and he ignored his awakening  
 sexual urges;

even when his body burned and urged  
 Like the buds and roots around him  
 Abash'd by the will-less promptings of his flesh,  
 he continued to contemplate his feet.

Kneeshaw went to war, "But still his mind reflected things/  
 Like a cold steel mirror - emotionless". The journey to  
 Europe begins his mental awakening, but when the war becomes  
 intense, Kneeshaw feels he is "a cog in some great evil engine"  
 and he plunges "with listless mind/ into the black horror".  
 His response to the gruesome discovery of the skull of a  
 buried man clinging to his pick results in a complete loss of  
 will. He is mercifully saved from total submission to his  
 senses by a bomb blast which hurls his mangled body "into the  
 beautiful peace of coma". The final section of the poem  
 returns Kneeshaw, minus a leg, to the hills of his homeland,  
 where he sings his war song. In that song he recognizes the  
 error of being ruled either by his emotions or by other humans.  
 He sees that even Judas was less bloody than he, for Judas  
 betrayed Christ out of free will and not out of the fear that  
 had motivated Kneeshaw in war. The poem begins with an epigraph  
 from Chaucer and it ends with Kneeshaw's understanding of that  
 epigraph:

... These essentials there be:  
 To speak truth and so rule oneself  
 That other folk may rede.

Read has dealt with the effect of outside forces on an individual, and with the effect of war on the mind of a participant, but the summing up at the end into a tidy maxim is rather forced. War is presented ambiguously in the poem, a problem which is related to the Nietzschean ideal of the mind overcoming the physical state. War is ghastly, it has taken the vital physical man and mutilated him; yet at the same time it has freed him intellectually. The implication seems to be that intellectual freedom is worth the price of the physical wound since that wound was Kneeshaw's salvation - it prevented him from becoming totally the victim of his senses. The Kneeshaw who exists prior to the war is less than a whole person because he has no sensual or intellectual awareness. The Kneeshaw we see after the war is fully developed in both these aspects. War is a "black Horror" but it is also the agent of liberation: the man who returns on crutches and sings his war-song from the hill has been tempered by fire and is strong. Out of the evil of the war has come a better man.

"The Execution of Cornelius Vane"<sup>11</sup> is another exploration of the effect of war on the individual. It tells of a soldier who is separated from his fellows by cowardice: by shooting off his finger he escapes battle, until in an emergency situation he is forced to fight. Once forced into battle Cornelius is powerless, however:

He willed nothing, saw nothing, only before him  
 Were the free open fields:  
 To the fields he ran.

Once he has escaped from battle again he is lulled into tranquility by the beauty of the woods that are his refuge. He is ultimately arrested and shot for desertion.

Through Cornelius, Read explores the nature of fear, the all-consuming force of it as it takes over a man when terror becomes "the strength of his will". He does not suggest here, as he does in the short story, "The Raid", that the antidote to fear is intellectual strength. Cornelius feels, he does not think, so the intellectual line of defense is not available to him. He does not understand what has happened to him and his lack of understanding exposes the harsh and inhuman nature of the demands of war on the individual. Cornelius's last question is bitter about those demands:

What wrong have I done that I should leave these:  
 The bright sun rising  
 And the birds that sing?

Military law has sentenced him to death for an act of human desperation over which he had no control, and in war there is no justice. The epigraph from Rimbaud which opens the poem sums up this question of justice and the nature of fear:

Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la  
 bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la  
 justice est le plaisir de Dieu seul.

"The Scene of War" segment of Naked Warriors is concerned with accounts of the physical realities of war

rather than with spiritual ones. Of the six poems in the section, two deal with events that Read had been personally involved in, and which he used in several different works. The subject matter of "Liedholz"<sup>12</sup>, for example, first appeared as an incident in the "War Diary" and it was later reworked into the short story "The Raid". The diary entry is dated 1st September, 1917, and the poem was written in that year as well. The short story did not appear until 1930. Except for the fact that the diary describes the prisoner as "an ex-schoolmaster of some sort" and the poem depicts him as "a professor/ Living at Spandau", the account of the capture and transportation of the German officer in the diary is, on all points of fact, reproduced in the poem. In the diary, as in the poem, the German officer and the English one discover a mutual liking for Beethoven and Nietzsche, they become friendly and show some reluctance to part. The German officer of "The Raid", however, is indifferent to philosophical discussion and, even though the narrator admits a "vicarious affection"<sup>13</sup> for him, he confesses he would not know him if he saw him again. Thirteen years separate the poem and the short story, but they both lack the idealistic enthusiasm for the camaraderie of enemies that exists in the diary. In "Liedholz" the two soldiers do converse, but lasting friendship is out of the question. The poem is rather laconic in tone and the events of the capture are bracketed by reminders

of the commando disguise of the English officer: he has "black face and nigger's teeth". The captive German is amused by the black face and the echo of the music hall evoked by the repetition of the description makes a macabre and ironic comment on the events of war which sets the poem apart from both the diary and the short story.

"The Refugees"<sup>14</sup> presents no such complications of a variety of versions. Read's prose account in "In Retreat" of villagers fleeing behind the retreating army is rendered in poetry as a scene of war. The prose vignette and the poem are virtually identical in content, perhaps because in both these incidents the poet is merely an observer and not a participant. The image is what he has recorded, not the personal ramifications of it.

Read is very much a participant in "My Company".<sup>15</sup> This is one of the few occasions in his war poetry where he concentrates on personal relationships, and the attempt is not altogether successful. The poem opens simply enough with the poet's expression of oneness with his men: "your life became mine". When he mourns the inevitable passing of that comradeship, however, the poem sinks into the maudlin sentimentality that Read so disliked in the poetry of others: "O beautiful man, O man I loved/ O whither are you gone, my company?". Sentimentality is again rampant when the poet comes to the end of the description of the weary march of

his men: "My men, my modern Christs/ your bloody agony confronts the world". The portrayal of a young officer surrounded by his men is grandiose too:

In many acts and quiet observances  
 you absorbed me:  
 Until one day I stood eminent  
 and I saw you gather'd round me  
 uplooking  
 and about you a radiance that seemed to beat  
 with variant glow and to give  
 grace to our unity.

The sincerity of the opening lines of this passage is diminished by the self-conscious poeticism of the image of the religious figure surrounded by his disciples. Read is more effective, later in the poem, in portraying the nature of the difference between the friendship the men have for each other and that which the young officer shares with his men. The officer feels the pride of leadership, but he feels the loneliness of it too. That the men have emotional ties to each other which are denied the officer-poet is apparent in the description of the man lying dead on the wire:

And he will rot  
 and first his lips  
 the worms will eat.  
 It is not thus I would have him kiss'd  
 but with the warm passionate lips  
 of his comrade here.

If it is the poet who would embrace the soldier the reference is oblique. The immediate and obvious sense is that it is another comrade who is being referred to. The necessity of the formal distance between officer and men probably accounts for this, but, that notwithstanding, there is a note of longing

in the sensuous description of the imagined kiss of comrades. The homo-erotic element of this passage should probably not be discounted, but more importantly this is a poignant description of an emotional relationship which lies outside the poet's experience.

There is an abrupt shift away from sentiment in the last section. Here the poet assumes "a giant attitude and a godlike mood". He can "detachedly regard/ all riots, conflicts and collisions" and his men "lurch suddenly into a far perspective", they are as distant as "a dark cloud of birds/ in the autumn sky". There is an ominous ring to these words, there is the implication that the comradeship has been all an illusion. Nothing that men do matters:

Urged by some unanimous  
volition or fate  
Clouds clash in opposition:  
The sky quivers, the dead descend;  
earth yawns.

They are all of one species.

The men are of one species, but the poet is apart, and from his godlike perspective he laughs with "hellish merriment". Read does not end the poem with fiendish laughter, however. The poet reassumes his "human docility" - he bows his head and shares the common doom. In the poet's detachment there is the suggestion that he sees what his men do not see, that an uncaring fate governs their lives and that comradeship will not save them from the peril of war. The final return to

docility is an admission of defeat at the hand of fate, but it is also a quite powerful acceptance of the necessity of human companionship.

Read's longest, and probably his best, poem of the Great War, "The End of A War",<sup>16</sup> first appeared in The Criterion at the end of 1932. The prose argument at the beginning provides the narrative background of an actual incident on which the poem was based, while the poem itself deals with the philosophical implications of the events of war. It is divided into three parts: two parallel meditations - one of a German officer, the other of an English one - which bracket a dialogue between the body and the soul of a murdered French girl. The epigraph helps set the format:

In former days we used to look at life, and sometimes from a distance, at death, and still further removed from us, at eternity. Today it is from afar that we look at life, death is near us, and perhaps nearer still is eternity.

(Jean Bouvier, a French subaltern, February, 1916)

The German officer confronts death and the dialogue between the body and the soul of the French girl implies the existence of some kind of eternity. The only one who will continue to live is the English officer. He contemplates life, but he does so from the distance created by his experience of war.

The German officer resembles the officer in "The Raid"- he believes in the fatherland and he fights for that cause. He remembers his Christian friend, Heinrich, with whom he debated the existence of God, and he cannot understand this

friend who puts faith in ideals which are outside himself.

The officer finds strength, not in God, but in his own argument that God is created out of human endeavor:

Faith in self comes first, from self we build  
the web of friendship, from friends to confederates  
and so to the state.

Once this good has been achieved!

... then to God we turn  
for a crown on our perfection: God we create  
in the end of action, not in dreams.

The God he creates, though, dies with him in the dying light - there is no eternity, no afterlife. "Mind triumphs over flesh", however, and there is no fear. Faith in man's goodness remains:

Courage is not born in men, but born of love  
love of life and love of giving, love  
of this hour of death, which all love seeks.

This affirmation of life is set against the final descent into nihilism. As the body becomes rigid the mind becomes a perfect crystal, reminiscent of the immortal ideal of the Green People.<sup>17</sup> Mind is the "Last light above the world, wavering in the darkest/void of Nothing" and it disappears with a sigh;

so finite  
so small  
Nichts.

The "Dialogue Between the Body and the Soul of the Murdered Girl" contrasts with the opening monologue of the German officer both in form and in content. The body and the soul are those of a French girl whose rural innocence has been abused by war. Hatred of the enemy and love of God grow together in her in a soil that "was tilled for visionary hate".

In spite of the body's insistence that it died for France and for love of God, it becomes apparent that ~~this hatred~~ was a factor in the girl's death. She has not died solely for love of country or for love of God. The staccato exchange between body and soul moves from the admission of hate: "My wild flesh was caught/ in the cog and gear of hate" to the point where the body believes it died for a cause: "Mary Aegyptiaca/ is the pattern of my greatest loss". The falsity of the position is emphasized in the final rhyming couplet, spoken by the soul: "Those who die for the cause die comforted and coy;/ believing their cause God's cause they die with joy." We are reminded of the German officer who died for a cause, but did not die with joy, and the 'coy/joy' rhyme further convinces us that the soul recognizes the irony of the statement.

In the "Meditation of the Waking English Officer", the officer awakens to bells pealing the Armistice. He feels reborn out of a world of madness in which his individuality was lost and he was helpless:

I myself a twig  
torn from its mother soil  
and to the chaos rendered.

We are reminded, too, of the German officer and the French girl: "there was no fair joy/ no glory in the strife, no blessed wrath". The English officer, however, is not permitted retreat into the perfect crystal of the mind:

Man's mind cannot excel  
 mechanic might except in savage sin.  
 Our broken bodies oiled the engines: mind was grit.

The intellectual processes were, for him, an impediment to his participation in war. It is only after the fact that the English officer relives his experience of the war and his questioning of his "life's inconstant drift". The debates about nihilism, faith in humanity and love of God that are engaged in in the first two parts of the poem are repeated here. For the English officer, war made it impossible to have faith in God: "Fate is in facts: the only hope/ and unknown chance". The officer does question, however, whether faith "will rise triumphant from the wreck" of war:

despair once more evaded in a bold  
 assertion of the self: self to God related  
 self in God attain'd.

The faith that is envisaged here is reminiscent of the faith in the self that was expressed earlier by the German officer. The Englishman remembers the dying German and out of that remembrance is born the conviction of a faith in humanity. His enemy had faith in mankind too, in the proud Fatherland, but here it is not the proud patriots who are victors: "once again/ the meek inherit the kingdom of God". The death of the German officer convinces the English one of the rightness of his position: "You die, in all your power and pride:/ I live, in my meekness justified". The idea of "meekness justified" is at odds with the earlier "bold assertion of the self".

The contradiction is not immediately resolved and the rhyming couplet seems to end the poem. The poet goes on, however, to explore the nature of the faith that is born out of war and he is forced to the conclusion that war was "a fire to burn our dross/ to temper us to finer stock". This "finer stock" echoes the post-war Kneeshaw of "Kneeshaw Goes to War", as does the conclusion regarding the good that war does. To surrender to the love of God does not imply passive belief, however. It is the fate of man to doubt:

... till the final grace a dove  
 from Heaven descends and wakes the mind  
 in light above the light of human kind  
 in light celestial  
 infinite and small  
 eternal  
 bright.

Just as the German officer retreated into mind so does the English one, but the light of God brings the latter into light eternal instead of into nothingness.

Read added a note at the end of all printings of "The End of A War" which explained his purpose and included the statement that:

It is not my business as a poet to condemn war (or, to be more exact, modern warfare). I only wish to present the universal aspects of a particular event. Judgement may follow, but should never precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry. 18

In the poem he went outside the narrative framework to explore the issues of belief and doubt - issues which went far beyond the mere fact of the war itself, but which were

brought to the fore because of the conflict. The poems that Read wrote during the war sometimes touched on these issues, but they did not develop them fully. The passage of fourteen years provided the possibility of "recollection in tranquility" and it gave a perspective to events that seemed impossible to achieve during the conflict or immediately following it.

Read no longer seemed to need metaphysical abstractions to deal with war, and there is a concreteness of vision in "The End of A War" that was only hinted at in the earlier war poems. The poet was apparently aware of this too, for, on the eve of publishing the poem, he wrote:

Poetry of any length is visual or it is tedious; it may be visual by virtue of its action, or by virtue of its imagery. It can never, whilst still remaining poetry, be merely informative or conceptual. 19

George Woodcock suggests that the writing of "The End of A War" was a kind of "emotional immunization" for Read. Finally he had come to some kind of resolution of his war experience and during the Second World War he was able "to regard events with that combination of feeling and detachment which is conducive to good poetry".<sup>20</sup> The idea of an "emotional immunization" is an appealing one, but it would only be fully applicable if applied to a situation in which Read was an actual participant in war for a second time and wrote poetry born of that experience. There is no question, though, that, with "The End of A War", Read did come to some kind of accommodation

with his war experience. It would have been unreasonable, though to expect that the issue would ever be fully resolved for him. The experience of war was a dominant theme for his generation - two world conflicts, the rise of Nazi Germany, the Spanish Civil War, Korea and Vietnam were repeated reminders that war could neither be forgotten nor the knowledge of it avoided.

### III

There was to be only a short respite between "The End of A War" and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and when Read began to write about war again all that he wrote was filtered through the prism of his experience of the Great War:

Those who have not experienced war at first hand may perhaps entertain illusions about its comparative evil; they may entertain the idea, that is to say, that even its modern intensity of horror is sanctioned by some nobler effects of heroism, of national awakening, of personal regeneration. Such a belief is a pestilential idiocy. There is in modern war neither grace nor dignity. It is mad and inconsequential in its inception, beyond the scope of human control in its conduct - a dreary shattering of human flesh in conditions of physical and mental disgust, a long agony which can only be ended in exhaustion. 21

His earlier view that good could come out of war had been changed by the new war. He is now in reality a detached observer, and the anguish of the observer is apparent in "Bombing Casualties in Spain"<sup>22</sup>, which was occasioned by a newspaper photograph of

children killed in the Civil War. The message is that of the wrong and the waste of the innocent deaths, and it is conveyed by means of a series of surrealist images. Read was at the peak of his interest in the Surrealists in 1936 and he uses their method of incongruous juxtaposition to heighten the horror of the scene. Doll's faces are contrasted with children's, whose eyes are "gleaming gristle/ dark lenses in whose quick-silvery glances the sunlight quivered". The faces of the children are:

... dead faces.  
Wasps are not so wanly waxen  
wood embers not so greyly ashen.

Only the title explains the cause of the children's deaths, and the image of their deaths acts as a simple but powerful comment on the waste of war.

"A Song for the Spanish Anarchists"<sup>23</sup> extols life, life lived in an Anarchist commune in accordance with the natural law:

The golden lemon is not made  
but grows on a green tree:  
A strong man and his crystal eyes  
is a man born free.

...  
Fifty men own the lemon grove  
and no man is a slave.

War is not mentioned in the poem, but in the context of the Civil War, the support of the leftist forces and the plea for the right to live in peace is implicit.

"Herschel Grynszpan"<sup>24</sup> was written out of an incident in which a Polish Jew, aged seventeen, assassinated Ernst von

Rath, a diplomat at the German Embassy in Paris on November 7, 1938. The event was apparently followed by violent pogroms in central Europe.<sup>25</sup> The poem opens with the affirmation that "This beautiful assassin is your friend". Grynspan's action is the "delivery of Love" and not an act of violence, for by the assassination he may prompt an indifferent world to listen to the "secrets in the night" and to react in anger at the magnitude of the revealed crimes of the Nazis. The poem ends with the revelation that "This beautiful assassin is my friend/ because my heart is filled with the same fire". In spite of the misery of the comrade's experience and the violence to which it has led, there is a note of optimism in the poem. There is the hope that the enormity of the events that have followed the assassination will break the false calm and incite the world to action.

Read was seldom this optimistic. In "To a Conscript of 1940"<sup>26</sup> he is reminded of

the shrouded days when I too was one  
Of an army of young men marching  
Into the unknown.

He recalls with the soldier the death and despair of his own war and concludes that the effort he made so long ago was a futile one: "We think we gave in vain. The world was not renewed". The lesson that is learned in war is that there is "no glory in the deed". The young soldier is counselled that if he can go, knowing there is neither reward nor use in his

sacrifice, "then honour is reprieved": "To fight without hope is to fight with grace,/ The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired". The image of the old soldier counselling the younger is overlaid with a sadness and a fatalism which are highlighted by a surrealist final image:

Then I turned with a smile, and he answered my salute  
as he stood against the fretted hedge, which was like white  
lace.

A World Within a War was published in 1944 and it contains poems written from 1940 onward. "Ode"<sup>27</sup> is a long poem written during the Battle of Dunkirk, May, 1940. It creates an idyllic spring scene into which an awareness of the storm of war intrudes. The war is analogous to a natural process: it is inexplicable. Distant sounds of guns prompt memories of the Great War and of the resolve of the survivor to tell "the truth about war and about men/ involved in the indignities of war". The resolve came to naught, however: the world was tired and forgot the suffering and death. It was right, though, to forget sights that the mind could not accommodate, but that forgetting brought complacency. The sound of the new guns reminds the poet that he is an observer, that he is "no longer apt in war". In spite of his anguish at the onset of the war, he sounds a note of regret that he is so isolated from it: "Unreal war! No single friend/ links me with its immediacy". This lack of involvement is a reminder of the onset of old age and Read extends his separation from the war to include the

final oblivion of death: "Presently I shall sleep/ and sink into deeper oblivion". Death was seldom the dominant theme in the poetry that Read wrote while he was involved in war; fear, courage and the nature of war itself were his main concerns. Now, the greater his distance from the conflict, the more death becomes a preoccupation in his poetry about the war.

Section three of "Ode" describes the happy nature of the years between the wars, with home and family as the "centre to the circle/of all our wanderings". These peaceful years were also years of "Belief without action/ action without thought", and that which was loved was not well guarded. The war is "the hour of retribution" for that neglect. There is an ominous ring to section four where the retribution is for all, young and old, soldier and civilian. War is "the hour of doom, the hour of extreme unction/ the hour of death", and the poet asks where those like him, who have not faith in God, but in "the goodness of man", turn for consolation now that they see "man's image debas'd/lower than the wolf or the hog".

The consolation begins in section six, but only after the picture becomes one of total defeat. That defeat is overcome, however, by the hope that lies in the generations of the future: "The people will rise again/ like water living water rising through the sand". The perseverance of the human spirit is invincible and it will rise "to reign in aeons that

are ageless in worlds without end". The source of this triumph is the invincible self and it grows and develops with all the strength of a natural force:

The self, passively receiving  
 illusion and despair  
 excluding  
 the unreal power of symbols  
 the false shelter of institutions  
 returns reluctantly upon itself  
 grows like a bud  
 petal by petal  
 exfoliated from an infinite centre  
 the outer layers bursting and withering  
 the inner pressure increasing  
 seeking the light  
 and the flush of colour born of light.

The self is perfected into a flower and the poem ends on an optimistic note: reason and love act on "time's contrary flow" with

Poetry like a pennon  
 rippling above  
 in the fabulous wind.

Read's growing preoccupation with death did not prevent him from extravagant outbursts of Romantic optimism.

"A World Within A War"<sup>28</sup> begins as "Ode" does, in the tranquil milieu of Broom House, Read's home outside London. The poem is highly personal and life at Broom House is recreated in strong visual images as a haven in the midst of war. The rhyming couplets of section two add to the impression of a remote and archaic life, and the image of Read, as poet, re-inditing a Book of Hours, confirms the impression. Section three reminds one that the medieval idyll

Read has described was an imaginative reality only. The life he was leading at this time was a busily active one of publishing duties and public responsibilities, and in the poem he regrets the lack of time for contemplation and observation of his natural haven:

The busy routine kills the flowers  
 That blossom only on the casual path.  
 The gift is sacrificed to gain: the gain  
 Is ploughed into the hungry ground  
 The best of life is sparely spent  
 In contemplation of those laws  
 Illustrious in leaves, in tiny webs  
 Spun by the ground-spider.

The Romantic in Read here comes forward to make a church of the wood and a deity of Nature. Mere worship of the natural world is not an end in itself, though, for out of his contemplation of the myriad of natural wonders comes knowledge of man:

His nature is God's nature: but torn  
 How torn and fretted by vain energies  
 ...  
 But the pattern once perceiv'd and held  
 Is then viable.

The picture of a haven in which the poet works and contemplates, and in which his family is sheltered, is completed with the realization that man is "God's festival of perfect form".

That security is marred, however, by the awareness of war:

"But well we know there is a world without/ Of alarm and horror and extreme distress". The surrounding woods threaten and teem with the unseen enemy, and fear intrudes upon the natural peace:

The wood is dark: a chancel where the mind  
Sways in terror of the formal foe.

Their feet upon the peat and sand  
Make no sound. But sounds are everywhere around.

Again Read evokes a medieval atmosphere and both the remoteness  
of war and the menace of it are enhanced by this device:

... See now  
The falchion falls: the martyr's limbs  
Lie like trimm'd branches on the ground

The ancient path winds through the wood  
A path obscure and frail

The martyr takes it and the man  
Who makes the martyr by his deed.

The idea of death permeates the final sections of the  
poem, and that idea is dealt with in a remote and Romantic  
fashion: "Death waits on evil and on holiness/ Death waits in  
the leafy labyrinth". There is an appeal to a remote ideal  
too - "the hand/Must seize the hovering grail". The section  
ends in an optimistic Shelleyan outburst:

... We shall act  
We shall build  
A crystal city in the age of peace  
Setting out from an island of calm  
A limpid source of love.

The final section returns to the forest, to the hidden  
haven into which "The beaters/ Are moving". The poet and his  
loved ones are like hunted animals, and "should the ravening  
death descend" they will be calm, they will "die like the  
mouse/ Terrified but tender". Just as at the end of "The End  
of A War", the meek are an antidote to war; but here they win

and, even though they die

... The Claw  
 Will meet no satisfaction in our sweet flesh  
 And we shall have known peace.

Robin Skelton has dismissed "A World Within A War" as a poem that is "marred by sententiousness"<sup>29</sup> and there is a great deal in the poem that is grandly and irritatingly self-conscious. What the poem does try to do is to convey the sense of powerlessness and fear that a sensitive civilian felt in the midst of a twentieth-century war. More importantly though, the poem demonstrates the plight of a Romantic poet who has put his faith in the goodness of humanity: when that goodness fails the only possibility is retreat. The grand hope for the future is the emblem of that retreat - it rests on the seizure of the "hovering grail". In spite of the grail symbol, the retreat is not really into some golden past, it is rather into some mystical state of oneness with a particular place in the natural world. At the end of "A World Within A War" Read and his "houblings" attempt to blend with the earth so perfectly that the enemy will not see them. Finally all that remains is the place - "a House beneath a beechwood/ In a wild acre of land".

There is neither hope for the future nor optimism expressed in "1945"<sup>30</sup>, which was written after the bombing of Hiroshima. The scene is a beach with "Children with their

golden eyes/ Crying: "Look! we have found samphire"". The sands, however, are perilous and the children have "Bone-ridden hands". The tone is ominous and the scene of the happy children is threatened by "the waves behind them/ cold, salt and disastrous". In this last war poem we are reminded of the scepticism of the English officer in "The End of A War", only this time there is no relief, the scepticism is complete. The knowledge of the possibility of total nuclear destruction has removed all hope for the survival of the human spirit, the waves of destruction "lift their banners and break/ Endlessly, without resurrection".

#### IV

Not even the personal experience of the carnage of the Great War had inspired in Read the kind of pessimism that he expressed in "1945". After the end of the Second World War he produced no sequel to "The End of A War", and at the end of his life he confessed he was never completely at ease about war as a subject for art. In connection with the visual arts, he suggested that, while war paintings might witness to the reality of war, "we cannot contemplate them as works of art. They inspire feelings of anger and disgust and we hide them away".<sup>31</sup> He had reservations, too, about war poetry and he criticized the poetry of Wilfred Owen:

Owen sacrificed felicity and harmony (the proper ingredients of poetry) for Truth, the truth about war. It may be argued that the sacrifice was worth while, that Truth is more important than Beauty. But Arnold's point is that Truth and Beauty must be reconciled in poetry - to give man 'a satisfying sense of reality'; to reconcile man with himself and the universe. 32

In rejecting the war poetry of Owen, Read implicitly rejected much of his own war poetry as well. He felt that, while poets from Homer to Tennyson had found fit subject for poetry in war, the nature of warfare had changed to such a degree that this was no longer possible, and he cited his own poem "War and Peace" as evidence of that contention:

The kind of war is chang'd: the crusade heart  
out-shatter'd: flesh a stain on broken earth  
and death an unresisted rain.

The horror loos'd all honour lost.  
Peace has pride and passion: but no evil  
to equal the indignity of war, whose ringing anvil  
wins only anguish. The weighted hammer  
breaks the stretch'd tendons at the wrist.

And leaves the soul a twisted nail  
tearing the flesh that still would live  
and give to words the brutal edge of truth.

Read waited thirty years to make his views known about war poetry, but in Poetry and Experience (1967) he supported W.B. Yeats's charge, based on Matthew Arnold, that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry".<sup>34</sup> Yeats had concluded also that the poetry written during the war lacked a "significant distance" between the mind and the event<sup>35</sup>, and it was for this reason that he excluded the poetry of the

actual experience of war from his 1936 edition of The Oxford Book of Modern Poetry. The only war poem that he did include was Read's "The End of A War", and he did so on the basis that it alone was sufficiently distanced.

In supporting Yeats's view, Read rejected a great deal of his own poetry, and his final discussion of the war suggests that the rejection was based on more than matters of poetic theory:

I have never written about the real horror of fighting, which is not death nor the fear of mutilation, discomfort or filth, but a psychopathic state of hallucination in which the world becomes unreal and you no longer know whether your experience is valid - in other words whether you are any longer sane. 36

The final admission is that the poet was unable to tell the whole truth about war in his poetry. To do so would have produced a poetry of madness that was too horrible to contemplate. Just as in the translation of pure poetry into actual poetry, the war experience had to be cloaked in the "grosser elements" of simile and metaphor to make it acceptable. If, in the process, the truth of the actual experience was obscured, then beauty had not been sacrificed for the truth of war, but for an illusion which represented only the semblance of war. The necessity of concealing the real effect of war on the self meant that neither truth nor beauty had been served in most of the war poetry.

## Notes to Chapter Two

1. Herbert Read, Collected Poems(1966), p.277. All references to the poems will be from this edition.
2. \_\_\_\_\_, Cult of Sincerity, p.38.
3. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.47.
4. Ibid., p.47.
5. Ibid., p.49.
6. Ibid., pp.49-52.
7. Ibid., p.22.
8. Ibid., p.23.
9. Ibid., p.34.
10. Ibid., p.29.
11. Ibid., pp.40-4.
12. Ibid., p.36.
13. \_\_\_\_\_, "The Raid", in Ambush, p.39.
14. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.37.
15. Ibid., pp.37-40.
16. Ibid., pp.99-113.
17. \_\_\_\_\_, The Green Child, p.140.
18. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.280.
19. Quoted in George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.96.
20. Woodcock, p.110.
21. Herbert Read, "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle" in Selected Writings, p.254. (fn.2, p. 254 adds this comment by

Read: "This paragraph was written in 1936, before the Second World War. There is, alas, no reason to alter it now").

22. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.149.
23. Ibid..
24. Ibid., p.150.
25. Ibid., p.280.
26. Ibid., p.152.
27. Ibid., pp.157-164.
28. Ibid., pp.167-176.
29. Robin Skelton, "The Poetry of Herbert Read",

Malahat Review, IX(Jan.,1969),167.

30. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.183.
31. \_\_\_\_\_, Poetry and Experience, p.111.
32. Ibid., p.112.
33. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.165.
34. \_\_\_\_\_, Poetry and Experience, p.109.
35. Ibid., p.107.
36. \_\_\_\_\_, The Cult of Sincerity, p.54.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A VEILED ACTIVITY

Inwardly I feel that his life of the intelligence is the only reality, and that the art of poetry is the difficult art of defining the nature of mind and emotion - a veiled activity, leading the poet deep into the obscurities of the human heart. 1

Herbert Read concluded Phases of English Poetry(1928) with these lines, and he spent the next forty years experimenting with and perfecting a poetry that became progressively more and more devoted to the life of the mind. By the end of his life his poetry had abandoned the present to delve into the mythic past and the memories of his own childhood. His shorter poems were the most successful in bringing together the worlds of mind and emotion, but he made repeated attempts to write long, contemplative poems because he believed it was this type of poetry which defined the true poet. The irony of this insistence, however, was that his best poems were his short ones, and his most experimental poetry was at the farthest extreme from his philosophical ideal of the long poem.

Read's earliest published poems were written before the War and published as Songs of Chaos in 1915.<sup>2</sup> He paid for publication himself because he disagreed with the publisher's selection of poems and when, six months later, only twenty-two copies had been sold, he regretted his inexperienced venture

and ordered the remainder of the copies pulped. Four of the poems were published in Collected Poems (1926), but in the 1935 edition even those were repressed. Years later Read wondered whether he had been too harsh on his early efforts:

The intensity with which I wrote some of these poems is still a vivid memory - it was not an intensity of emotion leading to expression, but an emotion generated by the act of creation. The intensity was due to the discovery that an image could be matched with exact words. The triviality of the image did not seem to matter. Even now, with all my literary and critical experience, I cannot be sure it matters. I cannot be sure, for example, that a poem which now costs me a qualm to quote is not nevertheless a valid poem and therefore a good poem. It was called "A Little Girl":

I pluck a daisy here and there-  
 ... O many a daisy do I take!  
 And I string them together in a ring,  
 But it's seldom the ring doesn't break.

O daisies rosy, daisies white!  
 If I could string them in a ring  
 They'd make a bonny daisy chain -  
 O why is a daisy a delicate thing? 3

The poem is so obviously sentimental, and not the genuine expression of a child's sensibility, that by any objective criteria it would be difficult to insist it is a good poem. Read's attitude that sincerity of expression was the key to good poetry was often at odds with his aesthetic judgement. He recognized the problem, but he was never able to completely resolve it. Seldom, however, did he record such discussions of his own poetry. He avoided discussions of his contemporaries as well, and most of his criticism dealt with the Romantics and poets who came before them. The key to his attitude in this regard lay in advice he gave to young poets in 1955:

Never write reviews of contemporary poetry - it makes you too conscious of being a poet yourself, and perhaps an inferior one. <sup>4</sup>

Read was always conscious of being a poet, but from the 1930's onward he was conscious that he was progressively more and more outside the mainstream of modern poetry. In his view English poetry's Golden Age in the twentieth-century had ended by the end of the 1920's, and his view of poetry as an essence, as an "abstract quality" rather than an art, led him to see actual poetry as more or less corrupt.<sup>5</sup> While he remained involved in contemporary movements in the visual arts, he became progressively less involved with movements in contemporary poetry. He was active in the Surrealist movement, but he rejected the idea of art as propaganda and he did not succumb to varieties of conservatism as Eliot, Pound and C. Day Lewis did, nor did he follow James Joyce into an "aesthetic cul-de-sac".<sup>6</sup> Read's separation from what was going on in contemporary poetry was directly related to his Romanticism. In his view that tradition demanded of the poet that he be involved in vital and incessant experiment and he saw himself as one of the few poets truly fulfilling those tenets.

Read was not immune to contemporary movements when he first began writing poetry, and it was the vitality of the experiment which first attracted him to Imagism. Eclogues (1919) contains the record of his Imagist experiments and

"The Pond"<sup>7</sup> is perhaps the best known of these:

Shrill green weeds  
float on the black pond.

A rising fish  
ripples the still water.

And disturbs my soul.

This is a model example of what the Imagists were trying to do: a discrete episode is recorded and hints by analogy at a deeper and wider meaning. The vivid surface of the water, broken by the rising fish, is suggestive of the uneasy connection between the world of the senses and the world of the inner life. Read's ability to make a precise equation of word to image produces a poem of jewel-like clarity. The Imagist insistence on concentration as the essence of poetry implied the statement of an idea, not the development of it, and this leads to some dissatisfaction with this kind of poetry. There is no denying, however, the effectiveness of the image that Read makes in "The Pond".

The "Childhood"<sup>8</sup> poem in Eclogues is vivid in the description of the natural world of Read's childhood. The poem was later developed into prose in "The Innocent Eye", and the two versions are alike in that they concentrate on the presentation of things rather than of people. They are alike, too, in their portrayal of the dramatic isolation of the country childhood and in the description of remembered scenes. In "Childhood" the first recollection of the pond

echoes the description in "The Pond" - "it is full of/water, green with weeds". In the summer, however

... the pond is dry, and its bed is glassy and baked by the sun, a beautiful colour like the skins of the moles they catch and crucify on the stable doors.

The scene of the pond in "The Innocent Eye" is remarkably similar:

I remember it best in a hot summer when the water dried up and left a surface of shining mud, as smooth as moleskin, from which projected the rusty wrecks of old cans and discarded implements. 9

As in the Imagist poem about the pond, the surface here is disturbed. In "Childhood" the beautiful image of the moles is disturbed by the manner of their dying, and in "The Innocent Eye" the shiny smooth surface of the pond bottom is disturbed by the exposure of the ugly debris that would ordinarily lie unseen beneath the smooth water of the pond. Both these images suggest the correspondence between that which is seen on the surface and the deeper meaning which lies hidden. In all three of these recollections of the pond a similar technique is at work: a visual image is used to provoke a wider and deeper meaning which is only suggested, never revealed.

Read was not always content with brevity or with allowing the visual image to speak for itself. Mutations of the Phoenix, published in 1923, contained some of his early long poems in which he tried to set out a philosophical system in verse. Read's philosophy was not an Empiricist one

it was an Idealist one, born of his belief that nature was ruled by the same laws as art - rhythm, balance, proportion, and that individual perception was a sufficient basis for knowledge.<sup>10</sup> These beliefs were closely connected with his profound intuition of man's intimate relationship with Nature. It was this conviction about the central role of the natural world that, along with his belief in the power of the imagination, most clearly defined him as a Romantic. The knowledge that Read derived from this certainty of man's unity with the natural world resulted in a philosophy in which the ultimate goodness of man was connected with a belief in the future brotherhood of man. This brotherhood would both result from the prolonged observation of the harmony of Nature and reproduce itself in the image of that harmony. There is an apparent contradiction between Read's acceptance of the impersonal laws of Nature and his emphasis on the independent self, but for him there was no need to resolve that contradiction. In his view society was always a matter of balance, of counter-play between opposites and the strength of the social fabric depended on that counter-play.<sup>11</sup> The issue for Read was never a battle between fate and the free will of the self - the two concepts could live side by side, with one or the other of them in ascendancy at any given time.

While this acceptance of contradictions made for a practical view of life, it sometimes made for a rather incoherent expression of philosophy in the longer poems. It

is for this reason that both Robin Skelton and George Woodcock conclude that these poems do not represent Read at his best, and both critics contend that the poems are marred by abstractions. Skelton claims that the success of Read's poems "is usually in inverse proportion to their length and degree of explicit intellectualism"<sup>12</sup> and Woodcock says of the bulk of "Meditations of the Phoenix" that it is "neither thought eminently well expressed, nor feeling poetically conceived."<sup>13</sup> The fault here seems to lie in the mind of the poet. If one applies Read's own ideas of Personality and Character and their relationship to poetry, the conclusion to be drawn is that the exposition of a philosophical system requires an intellectual rigor that is more in tune with the forces of Character than with those of Personality. Since true poetry is, by Read's definition, the product of Personality, this would seem to preclude the elaboration of philosophical thought in poetry.

While the long poems in The Mutations of the Phoenix may not be particularly interesting as poetry, they are interesting in terms of Read's expression of his ideas. For the contemplative poems he uses the impersonal voice rather than the personal one, and his debt to Browning and the technique of the dramatic monologue is readily apparent. The speaker in "Mutations of the Phoenix"<sup>14</sup> begins:

We have rested our limbs  
in some forsaken cove

where wide black horns of rock  
 Weigh on the subdued waters  
 the waters  
 menaced to quiet.

We are reminded here of the wandering sailors of Ulysses in another monologue, Tennyson's "The Lotos Eaters". As the poem progresses it becomes apparent that the protagonist is a philosopher, not a sailor, and his concern is not with personal immortality, but with the immortality of the mind. The argument is based on the idea of perfect Nature, governed by the spirit of harmony, and into which the mind is assimilated beyond death.<sup>15</sup> The "Mutations" are an allusion to the temporal shapes taken by the spirit which is alternately burnt away and replaced by the flames of the Phoenix. The human mind lives and sees these shapes, but never the eternal light which only reveals itself after death. The perception is that, since beauty is ideal, ashes are the best emblem we can find for it on earth. Hence the epigram:<sup>16</sup>

Beauty, truth and rarity  
 Grace in all simplicity  
 Here enclosed in cinders lie.<sup>17</sup>

There is a tension in the poem between visionary knowledge and the search for order and system. The knowledge that:

Impulse alone is immutable sap  
 and flowing continuance  
 extending life to leafy men,

is confronted with the problem of how to:

persuade a mind that the thing seen  
 is habitant of the cerebral cave  
 and has elsewhere no materiality.

There is also the sense that for the human mind there is no escape: "You can't escape: don't escape/ poor easeless human mind".

Section eight, the final and most successful segment of the poem, records the movement into death and ends where it began in a cave. Here Read is not discursive; the images are visual and aural:

This is the holy phoenix time.  
The sun is sunken in a deep abyss  
her dying life transpires.

Each bar and boss  
of rallied cloud the fire receives.

Till the ashen sky dissolves.

...

No sound now.  
No colour: all black: a cave.

In the cavern's mouth  
the moon is hidden.

Yet still the stars -  
intense remnants of time.

It is here that the symbol and the philosophy are most successfully brought together. There is also movement in this part of the poem - a retreat into the cave. In the last light of life, the mind still struggles and makes a final plea for the phoenix to extinguish the flames and cease the never-ending vision of change and imperfection.

In "John Donne Declines a Benefice"<sup>18</sup> Read attempts to strike a balance between spiritualism and materialism.

The speaker is, ostensibly, John Donne, and he engages in a logical deliberation over the taking of Anglican orders. Read, however, takes advantage of these deliberations to deliver his own ideas about the self and the balance of Nature. In the process he creates a disjunction in the personality of the speaker that undermines the effectiveness of the poem. There is a reminder in the poem, too, of the phoenix - souls leave their bodies and depart to the "outer rim"

Where elements clash and the gloom  
Of matter is consumed in the glare  
Of a timeless radiance, an intangible fire.

Visionary knowledge and logical systems are put in opposition here too:

The mind can uproot  
The earth these numb feet stand upon  
And make it spin about the sun.  
Thus is the symmetry of God's world destroyed  
To make a logic on a scroll.  
What folly's there - to reflect  
on perfect mirrors the imperfect all!

The image of the mind uprooting the earth and hurling it off to spin around the sun is a vivid evocation of the power of the mind.

The subject of John Donne's deliberations is the debate between spiritualism and materialism: whether he will take Anglican orders or accept the offer of the Reverend Thomas Morton to be his literary agent, and to write for him the controversial pieces Donne so enjoyed doing. The speaker in the poem is more Read than Donne, however. His love of

controversy is akin to Read's views of the conflict necessary for a healthy society, and his view of the self is similar to that of Read as well:

The ego sings an individual praise,  
Graceful enough to God - whose mind is mine;  
Who is the supple flesh and bone  
Aggrandised in aeriness, eaten by no worms  
Of dutiful doubt.

Read's favorite symbol was the tree of life:<sup>19</sup>

The human race is the trunk and branches of this tree, and individual men are the leaves which appear one season, flourish for a summer and then die. I am like a leaf of this tree, and one day I shall be torn off by a storm or simply decay and fall ... but meanwhile I am conscious of the tree's flowing sap and steadfast strength ... Millions of leaves have preceded me and millions will follow me; the tree itself grows and endures. 20

John Donne uses a similar metaphor in the poem and he extends the neglect of the tree into a version of hell:

Budded emotions swell and show green sheaths  
Piercing to their wanted light.  
From these I must gently cultivate  
Ingenious trees, threading their laths  
Of leaves and twigs into the air of heaven.  
Such monuments will wane  
Many men's lives; or even  
Petrify to indestructible stone.  
To build such monuments is the test  
O life's worth to the will: to fail  
Is to burn flesh and spirit in the fast  
Flames of the dissolute self -  
To acknowledge this vessel an empty drum  
Beaten by chance; and vision the whim  
Of heated brains. Thus is hell entail'd.

The hell that Read creates is not the everlasting bonfire of the Christian hell, but the "Flames of the dissolute self".

The Christian belief which was the basis of Donne's spiritualism

has been replaced by Read's own brand of nature worship and belief in the self. When, at the end of the poem, Donne chooses Morton over religion, Christianity is reduced to an institutional function, to the "chaunting" of prayers and the mechanical shriving of "melancholy sinners fearful of their fate". Donne rejects the choice to

Vent manhood in a carping rave  
 Against the hoofed devil? Fade into age  
 Full of dissembling sanctity, a palsied doge.

He opts instead for life, experiment, controversy - Read's own choice of route to spiritual awareness. The effect of the poem is to imply that Donne, in denying Anglican orders, has taken the spiritual path. This attitude is so clearly more Read's than Donne's that it undermines the effectiveness of the poem.

Read was attracted to the Metaphysical poets, and particularly to Donne, whom he saw as having made the best attempt to bridge the separate worlds of intellect and feeling. "The Analysis of Love"<sup>21</sup> begins with an epigraph from Donne and the poem is a debate on love which owes something to Donne as well. As in the previous long poems we are presented with alternatives which the poet attempts to work into a synthesis. Love, with lust as a motive, is imperfect, but perfect love is impossible because reason and emotion are in constant struggle:

The teas'd fibrils of reason  
 Weave vainly to dam

Some bank against the giant flood  
Of this emotion.

Emotion overcomes reason for a time:

Waves' and winds' erosion  
Crumbles granitic cliffs  
Aeonly obliterating  
The earth's known visage.

The victory of emotion, however, is temporary and reality intervenes with the prospect of old age and death and the knowledge that perfect unity is unattainable in this life:

This mental ecstasy all spent  
In disuniting death  
And the years that spread  
Oblivion on our zest.

While in "Mutations of the Phoenix" Read was able to conceive of the mind in eternity, here love is allowed no such eternity. It is a human passion and in the "scheme of things" it must die with death.

Love may die with death, but Nature in its "unity and perfection is transcendental".<sup>22</sup> In "Beata l'Alma"<sup>23</sup> Michael Angelo is the protagonist and the intuition that there is a beauty which lies beyond immediate perception overpowers his reason.<sup>24</sup> In the first section of the poem the verse is disjointed and life is tempestuous and ugly: "all is foul and fit to/screech in" and there is .

no distilling  
of song for the woeful  
scenes of agony.

There is an abrupt shift in the second section. The verse begins to flow with the realization that the soul must reproduce,

it must create a new perfect beauty:

New children must be born of gods in  
 a deathless land, where the  
 uneroded rocks bound clear  
 from cool  
 glassy tarns, and no flaw in a mind of flesh.

Sense and image they must refashion -  
 they will not recreate  
 love: love ends in hate; ...

...

Art ends;  
 the individual world alone is valid.

The world that Read envisages is a "superreal" world, one in which worn-out images are discarded and new ones are created out of individual perceptions. This idea is reminiscent of those of the Surrealists and their technique of violent contrast is used in some images in the poem as well: "the hissing darkness healed the wide wound of light" and "In the sky the sullied sun lake".

At the end of Mutations of the Phoenix there are three shorter poems which are united in that each refers to the impossibility of belief in an external God. In "The Falcon and the Dove"<sup>26</sup> there is a juxtaposition of the values of reason and imagination - a recurring theme in Read's poetry. The Dove (imagination) is hunted and overcome by the Falcon (reason). Read held that there was a need for a synthesis between reason and imagination, and at the end of the poem, even though the Falcon is the victor, it is "hooded and comforted away". Beauty has been caught in a "wild foray" and

fallen with "wounded wings", but the Falcon's victory is transient: "Will the plain eye echo with that loud "hullallo"!/  
Or retain an impress of our passage?". The Dove as a symbol is suggestive not only of beauty and emotion, but of Christian belief as well. There will be other Doves and the victory of the now "hooded and comforted" Falcon is not final. The contest between reason and imagination is endless.

In "Equation  $a+b+c=x$ "<sup>27</sup> the first three stanzas are three statements of the essential identity of (a) the world and God, (b) man and woman and (c) mind and body.<sup>28</sup> These three in total equal the assumption (x) that "Earth is machine and works to plan,/ Winnowing space and time". This assumption is juxtaposed with the idea that "The ethic mind is engine too,/ Accelerating in the void." In the light of what has gone before, the question is asked how it is possible for the mind to manufacture an ethical system which has its base outside the universe. The answer is that it is clearly impossible, for "All knowledge and ideality/ Are borne in the lapse of the menstrual sea".

"Formal Incantation"<sup>29</sup> depicts the mind's desire to avoid the anguish attendant upon acceptance of the conclusions of the equation,  $a+b+c=x$ . The poet asks for night and sleep lest he should "unlock the casket laid/ Beneath the crumbling stairs". The consequences of the knowledge of the equation are unavoidable, however, and the poem ends on a note of

defiance of religious belief:

O triune grace, I will not miss  
Thee at the closure of night.

"The White Isle of Leuce"<sup>30</sup> was included in Collected Poems(1926) and it was written shortly after the long philosophical poems. Here Read abandons the attempt at an intellectual formula. The poem borrows images from Greek mythology and uses them to explicate the now familiar theme of the tension between reason and emotion. Gone is the contemplative style and the poem is filled with movement and action. The scene opens with sailors being warned to retreat in haste from the danger of sensual involvement: "Leave Helen to her lover. Draw away/ before the sea is dark". The focus of the poem moves away from the island - "The oars beat off" and the oarsmen see and hear what they have left behind: Achilles, who does not see that retreat is possible; the "revelry" of Helen; and a voice "singing of battle and love". The rowers are safe, but they "tremble for the limbs of Helen and the secrets of the/ sacred isle" and their escape is tinged with regret for the sensual pleasures left behind. The poem records the echoes of Romantic feeling,<sup>31</sup> but it does so with an economy and sparseness which are the virtues reminiscent more of Classical poetry than of Romantic poetry.

1933 marked a turning point for Read, both in his poetry and in his personal life. In 1931 he had left his post at the Victoria and Albert Museum to take the Chair of Fine Arts at

the University of Edinburgh. He found the academic schedule demanded of him too onerous and two years later he was back in London as editor of the Burlington Magazine. His first marriage had undergone a painful dissolution and he remarried in 1933, this time happily. The happiness seems to have provoked an outburst of creativity for in the same year he published The End of A War, was writing poetry, and was at work on what was to be his only novel, The Green Child.

Collected Poems(1935) records the extent and variety of the output of those years. The poems deal with aspects of the poet's own personal and intellectual life as well as with the greater concerns of the world at large. In the personal poems Read is able to express the tension between mind and emotion with a directness and honesty that has eluded him previously. At the beginning of "Time Regained"<sup>32</sup>, for example, "The limbs remember blood and fire" but "a Hurt that's done is forgotten":

for the mind has reasons of its own  
for covering with an eyeless mask  
marks of mortality.

The mind may bear the scars of war and personal pain, but it protects itself from the memories associated with the hurt - they "sink and lose identity". Sensual pleasures are not so aided by the mind, however:

The limbs remember fire and joy  
and flesh to flesh is benison  
of entity;

but the mind has reasons of its own  
for circumventing life and love's  
sodality.

The hurt of earlier experience may be suppressed by the mind,  
but experience has forever impaired the poet. Time has been  
regained, but the ability to love fully has been forever  
"circumvented".

"Aubade"<sup>33</sup> is another short, passionate poem:

Early light  
beats down

my body is a beaten  
silver leaf

If I rise  
it will wrinkle  
a tinsel pod

a wither'd caul  
from the womb of night.

Here images of autumn, of birth, of death and of human  
sexuality are "fused into a simple classically economic whole".<sup>34</sup>  
This reference to physical passion is a rarity in Read's poetry.  
In spite of whatever personal happiness he may have achieved,  
he seldom chose to, or was seldom able to, produce poetry that  
dealt with the intensity of human emotion.

The emotion that Read seldom expressed for human kind  
was frequently channelled into expressions of concern for the  
public issues of the day. "A Northern Legion"<sup>35</sup> tells of a  
Roman war party "marching into a northern darkness" but the  
incident, ostensibly out of the distant past, is related to a  
contemporary concern, the rise of Fascism: "an outrage is done

on anguish'd men/ now men die and death is no deedful glory".  
 The Legion moves into darkness, "endless" is their anxiety.  
 Europe menaced by Fascism in analogous to the Legion menaced  
 by the northern darkness:

... the waters falling fearfully  
 the clotting menace of shadows and all the multiple  
 instruments of death in ambush against them.

It is not an army they encounter but an unseen shadowy menace:  
 all nature is in concert against them. The Legion, in spite  
 of "endless" anxiety, neither defends nor protects itself, it  
 marches into the inevitable ambush. Just as in "The White Isle  
 of Leuce" there is movement and action in the poem. A dramatic  
 incident is captured in vivid visual images, and these images  
 combine with the noise of bugle calls and eagle's cries to  
 produce the sights and sounds of a marching army. The  
 impression of familiar movement is heightened by Read's use  
 of the sonnet form, but that the sonnet is unrhymed suggests  
 that the order is apparent and not real. The ominous dread  
 is heightened as the men move across the landscape - the sights  
 and sounds diminish and the Legion disappears: "The last of the  
 vanguard sounds his doleful note./ The legion now is lost.  
 None will follow". The implication is that Fascism is the  
 unseen enemy and the brave few who resist vanish into the  
 "narrow defile" and their effort is lost.

While the tone of "A Northern Legion" is somber, not  
 all of Read's public poems of this period share that same  
 mood. "The Nuncio"<sup>36</sup> is a long poem of wit and satire about

the stagnation that Read saw as characteristic of his own time. It is a time when reason is moribund and untutored emotions must be appealed to: "We must design with brighter colour,/ borrowing harmonies from children at school". The scene of the poem is a gathering of modern functionaries or intellectuals listening to a modern prophet, Starr. In his plans Starr fulfills the ambiguous precepts of the opening epigraph from Coriolanus: "So our virtues/ Lie in the interpretation of the time". He exhibits attributes which will please the people of his own time, but he also recognizes the present for what it is and plans accordingly. For those who do not think, for example, the appeal must be to the emotion:

Rays of light and yards of bunting  
take the place of verbal ranting  
Never to the eye deny  
What the mind can amplify.

The plodding mind is analogous to plodding feet and, just as the mind avoids intuitive leaps, so the feet demand stairs:

The lift that shoots from first to fourth  
Will only be a cause of wrath  
to those long accustomed to creep  
from first to second step by step.

Such ascending and descending spirals  
will serve eventually as treadmills  
or as a substitute for war.  
The lift can thread the spiral core.

While there is an obviously sinister element in the hard satiric appraisal of the present, Raymond Tschumi suggests that Starr's vision holds evidence of a belief in a brighter future:<sup>37</sup>

the evil and the ill  
tamed and all  
spiritual corruption  
given absolution.

Reason like a lily  
fed by sense and feeling  
blooming eternally  
ruling  
all the flowers of the field.

To view this speech as evidence of an optimistic view seems a misconception. The lines have an air of menace about them - all is too cool and too classically perfect. In this brave new world the flame of reason is "served by a few priests/ the world obeying their behests". This more a dictatorship than the world of the Romantic ideal where man and Nature are in harmony and obey mutual laws. Starr, like Read, makes the individual central, but his credibility is undermined when he admonishes his listeners to retreat and pray:

Each to his cell:  
the individual  
is the pivot of our plan.  
God only speaks to those who pray.  
Action without grace can never win.

Grace without action is helpless too and the recognition that the cloistered recluse is without power reveals Starr's speeches as the mouthing of platitudes. The tone of the poem becomes sinister when

... in single floes and flakes  
we broke apart, each mind full  
of plans, prognostications and strategics.

The functionaries have been caught in the same net as the plodding masses - they have been seduced by the semblance of truth in a time in which "Any demagogue can raise a wind/ to break the logic of the mind". Starr is revealed as the demagogue he himself describes, but his listeners are so blinded by the emotional appeal of the performance that none can see. In the light of events in Europe after 1933, the satire of demagogues and tyrants needed no elaboration. This may have been one occasion, too, when Read was laughing at himself: he wrote of "plans, prognostications and strategics" for a better world. His mind was full, but he did not act.

Read was not so naïve as to suggest that demagoguery was the recourse of all political leaders. "The Death of a Statesman"<sup>38</sup> paints quite a different picture. Here there is compassion and understanding for the man who bears the burdens of state:

Despise him? No! We have not read  
 The meter of his pain; nor know  
 The path drilled through a fevered brain  
 By anguish, shame and sorrow.

There are no plans for the future here, no pictures of the ideal society - only recognition that even those with the highest of ideals succumb under the pressures of circumstance:

A soul sinks to the level of its load  
 Which we who watch refuse to weigh;  
 If pressed too far we too might hear  
 Death sirens calling, and obey.

The final impression is that the title refers not to the

physical death of the Statesman, but to the spiritual death which comes with the end of his efforts for peace.

While Read was aware of, and on occasion involved in, the political concerns of the day, these topics were not his sole concern. He supported the Surrealist belief in automatism and he conducted investigations into the matter with himself as subject. These investigations were reported in "Myth, Dream and Poem" (1938). In "A Dream"<sup>39</sup> Read attempted to convert a dream of striking imagery into a poem. He considered the poem a failure, however, because it did "not really express the peculiar vividness and significance of the dream". Hence it could not "possibly convey the quality of the dream to other people".<sup>40</sup> More importantly, though, he saw the failure as the result of words and phrases which were the additions of his conscious mind. The underlined portions following are a sample of what Read considered to be conscious additions:

Her angel flight from cliff to lake  
sustains its poise upon the sheet of silk  
she holds above her head.

The air is still in dreams  
a clear and plasmic element  
No ripples dim the surface as she falls  
the cold distress  
of days unknown of days to be.

Read recognized that these were spontaneous associations, but he insisted that in their origin they were "distinct from the basic symbolism of the dream itself".<sup>41</sup> He acknowledged, too, that only the poet himself could be precise about such distinctions,

but he went on to conclude that the degree to which this primary kind of symbolic imagery was present was

the basis of a very important distinction between types of poet ... I would like to suggest that the imagistic poet like Shakespeare, Shelley, and Blake is more essentially poetic than the metaphorical poet like Dryden, Pope and Wordsworth. 42

Though he admitted that this was, of course, only one of the criteria for judgement about poetry, the acceptance of the premise about the unconscious nature of symbolic imagery meant that the crossing of the gulf between experience and expression had to be done in a state of trance or automatism.

Not all poetry, according to Read, need involve a precedent experience such as the dream he tried to capture in "A Dream". He cited "Love and Death"<sup>43</sup> as a poem which was itself the experience:

When I began to write, my mind and my pencil worked slowly and haltingly, and there are evidences of this in the first paragraph of the poem, which I find a little too conscious or deliberate. But the rest of the poem was written automatically, without hesitation or revision, in a state of trance.

After the fact Read realized that he had invented a myth which exactly expressed Freud's theory of the instincts of Eros and Death.<sup>44</sup>

The scene of the poem is a room in an unknown inn, where the poet dreams of an encounter with a lovely young woman who represents love and with whom he records a union so complete that

The more she gleams and grows intense

The less I know myself - until  
 I am not there, except that in her mind  
 I dwell.

Upon wakening from this first dream the poet sees

Another figure, this time a boy  
 Dressed in rags, so thin  
 His shadow seems a blade.

The physical encounter with the woman is repeated with the boy:

He puts his bony hands against my breast.  
 I do not shrink - indeed, I feel  
 His still appeal and in his mind  
 Find a cool retreat.

Both encounters include a vision of nature which identifies the differences between the two visitors. In the case of the woman, the scene is sunlit, the waves swell and the fields are an even endless green. With the boy, however, the shore is "icy", the waves "sullen" and the landscape an arctic waste. In the last scene of the poem the poet awakens with a shudder and turns to discover that "The lovely girl and the destitute lad/ Are lying enlaced. And I know they are dead."

Read considered that "Love and Death" was not very significant as poetry, but that it did give "in visual imagery an equivalent of Freud's theory".<sup>45</sup> While the poem was included in the essay, "Myth, Dream and Poem", it was not included in his Collected Poems until 1966. Aside from the comment about its significance as poetry, it is tempting to conclude that the poem told more about the poet than he was prepared to reveal until some thirty years after the fact. When Read wrote about Wordsworth and Shelley, he did so in terms of their sexual

repressions and, particularly in the essay on Shelley, there is the strong impression that he was discussing himself as much as he was discussing the Romantic poets. In "Love and Death" the union with the woman is warm and life-giving and the experience ends in sleep. With the boy, however, the attraction is cool and still: the poet is attracted both to the boy and to death, and the meeting is interrupted by "breaking floes" which "boom like a muffled gun". The image of the male encounter interrupted by the noise of the gun is suggestive both of death in war and of homoerotic experience in war. The choice of the boy as the symbol of death reminds one that homosexual encounter, though it may be emotionally satisfying, is not life-giving. The final image of the boy and the girl entwined in death implies that all love ends in death, but also perhaps that the tension between love of the boy and love of the girl results in emotional death as well.

The revelations of "Love and Death" were intensely personal and Read seldom revealed this much of himself. The personal pessimism that was apparent in the poem, however, did not affect his optimism about society; well into the 1940's he persisted in a simple faith in the natural goodness of man. Events at the end of the Second World War deprived him of that faith, however:

A faith of that kind was perhaps never simple and is

certainly no longer tenable. The death wish that was once an intellectual fiction has now become a hideous reality and mankind drifts indifferently to self-destruction. To arrest that drift is beyond our capacities: to establish one's individuality is perhaps the only possible protest. 46

Read added two new poems to his Collected Poems of 1946, "Exile's Lament" and "1945". While the latter registered his despair and disillusionment as a result of Hiroshima, "Exile's Lament"<sup>47</sup> pointed the direction for the future:

Here where I labour hour by hour  
The folk are mean and the land is sour

God grant I may return to die  
Between the Riccall and the Rye.

In 1949 Read, like Olivero in The Green Child, returned to the Yorkshire of his childhood. There was a similar retreat in his poetry - he turned from the horrors of the present and the broken hopes for the future toward a concern with the personal and historic past.<sup>48</sup> "Kirkdale"<sup>49</sup> tells of Orm, the Saxon who rebuilt the first monk's church at Kirkdale, and "The Ivy and the Ash"<sup>50</sup> presents an exile's memory of his land:

Descend into the valley  
explore the plain  
even the salt sea  
but keep the heart  
cool in the memory  
of ivy, ash  
and the glistening beck  
running swiftly through the black rocks.

As always in Read's poetry, memory is associated with scenes of the world of Nature, not with people - the vivid images of landscape that he conjures up are seldom populated. This is

the single most significant characteristic which separates Read from the Romantics. He is in constant search for the self, but seldom is that self revealed in his poetry.

"Moon's Farm" (1955)<sup>51</sup> is a further elaboration on the theme of memory and the self. It is a dramatic dialogue, written as a radio play, and set on the site of a vanished farm in Muscoates. In the poem the farm has vanished and the ground is bare and ragged. The movement is leisurely and three voices speak: 'Place' in the guise of a female tramp, 'Self' as a returning native and 'Time' as a male tramp. The poem raises questions about return to the scenes of childhood and the whole nature of time and space. The Green Child had dealt with the theme of return too. In the novel, the river that Olivero follows to his childhood home runs upstream to its source and the reversal of the river's natural flow poses a question about the nature of time that the poem answers - "the way up and the way down are the same". To go backward in time is only to discover that the past is as much a part of the self as is the present, and the recognition of place and time is simply the recognition of the self. The poem, with the theme of finding oneself through returning on oneself is, in effect, the personal, poetic counterpart of the novel written twenty years earlier.

The greater part of the dialogue in the poem takes place between the Second and Third voices, 'Self' and 'Time'. The 'Self' returns to the scene of his childhood and gradually recognizes the place, in a process that gives the impression

of a symbiotic relationship between the man and his environment. This environment is the landscape of Read's childhood recollected in "Childhood" and "The Innocent Eye", but to this landscape is added the awareness of time, which in childhood was absent. The return to Moon's Farm and this recognition of time evolve into a reckoning with the experience of life and finally into an acceptance of death. The poem is at one and the same time philosophical and religious; it is the testament of a devout man whose natural fatalism prevents him from believing in an external God.

When the Second Voice wonders what he would have become if he had stayed at Moon's Farm, the conclusion he comes to is that the going away made no difference: "We can only be what we are". To the query: "And what did experience teach you?", the 'Self' can only reply: "To discover myself/ perhaps only that". The poet admits that experience did not lead to the discovery of others - "They remained mysteries". They remained mysteries because interest in others was another form of self interest; he defined himself by exploring others:

I didn't discover that I was male  
 until I had known a female  
 I did not discover that I was an Englishman  
 until I fought with a German

...  
 I did not discover that I was a liar  
 until I met a man who never lied  
 even to save his pride

...  
 I did not discover that I was strong  
 until God had forsaken me.

God has forsaken the 'Self' because the 'Self' has

discovered that man cannot know God. All that hé can know is what his senses tell him. The lack of knowing, however, does not inspire fear, it inspires wonder:

Our very consciousness expands when we discover  
some corner of the pattern of the universe  
realize its endless implications  
and know ourselves  
to be part of that intricate design.

Death, in this scheme, "is the greatest wonder of all". The chance that any one of us should be born is an infinite one, and the knowledge of that chance allows the acceptance of death:

...It is  
    simply  
our fate.

It is at this point that the First Voice, 'Place', interrupts to remind that;

Man is more than his fate.  
Man is moulded in a womb  
    and dissolved in earth  
His foundations are two tombs  
He is like earth uprisen.

The image of man as earth-born is continued when the 'Self' suggests that, though characters "can be uprooted", men carry them with them, it "is their destiny" - character clings to men as clods of earth cling to uprooted plants.<sup>52</sup> As in "A World Within A War", this sense of belonging to the earth is related to belonging to a particular place:

... man's fate is not like a seed  
carried hither and thither by the wind

...  
But it is the creation of generations of men  
men who have lived in one place  
and absorbed its mysteries.

The mysteries that are absorbed are the mysteries of life:

It is life  
not God  
that is mysterious.

Life plays hide and seek with man, but hiding implies a hiding place. The 'Self' sees that the modern world has lost this sense of place, and without that sense there are no myths:

Our beliefs  
are like untethered balloons  
they drift into the clouds  
into the transcendental inane.  
I would sooner men worshipped a tree or a rock.

The 'Self', however worships nothing:

The truth is  
I have never been able to worship anything  
not even myself.

He does not live without illusion, but the illusions that he does have all relate to the goodness of man and the prospect of his betterment. The final illusion is that he "shall die a happy man", and that state would be ensured if, at "the last moment", he could see "some bright image". The final image in the poem, and that which the 'Self' is granted at the moment of death, is the image of Moon's Farm - of "wild daffodils", "clean crystal water" and an old clock with fingers that never move: "It was always 12.25 at Moon's Farm/ 12.25 is God's time." Place endures, and in death the 'Self' becomes one with the generations of men who have gone before and who are part of time.

"The End of A War" ended in the light of a belief in an external God. In "Moon's Farm" God is present, not in the

external sense, but as a vital concept that the poet is unable to dispense with. The time at Moon's Farm is God's time and in the poem God resides in place and time and not in the realm of the transcendental. In a sense "Moon's Farm" is a continuation of "The End of A War". In both poems Read has used the format of debate in three parts - the parts may contradict one another, but the format is such that these contradictions need not be resolved, they simply exist. The young English officer has aged twenty years and he is now summing up his life instead of his war, but the philosophical concerns remain the same. Nihilism, faith in God and faith in the self are still the issues, and the absolute identity of the self with the world of Nature is still the firm belief that underlies all discussion. The 'Self' that is found in both poems, however, is an intellectual one, not an emotional one.

The "Poems Mostly Elegiac" that are included with "Moon's Farm" carry on the debate about faith in an abbreviated fashion, but often in a very effective one. "Carol"<sup>53</sup> tells of the poet's gathering experience and the awareness that to doubt and question is an age-old preoccupation of men. He imagines the scene of the nativity and the explanations of the radiance surrounding the birth: "Some said because a child was born/ And some said because of snow". These few lines are as evocative of the debate about the existence of God as any segment of the longer poems. Here the poetry speaks for itself, often in the long poems the philosophy gets in the way of the

poetry.

Many of Read's later poems are grave and melancholy, and they take as their subjects the legendary past. "Lu Yün's Lament"<sup>54</sup> is based on the story of Lu Yün who was the younger brother of a famous fourth-century Chinese poet. "To be born in the shadow of a mighty oak" is his fate and all his accomplishments are overshadowed by those of his brother. What the world will know of his achievements, as a result of this overshadowing, is still uncertain:

One day the oak will fall  
           but whether towards me to bury me  
           or away from me to expose me  
 is still unknown.

The younger man recognizes the greatness and does not disturb the relationship: "I have learned to play my flute softly/ as I lean against the bole of this mighty oak". The poem speaks quite eloquently of both the joy and the pain of living in the shadow of greatness, and it is interesting what Read had to say about the poem and its equivalence to his own relationship with T.S. Eliot:

I once wrote a poem which, after I had written it,  
 I realized had perfectly described our relationship  
 as poets. 55

In spite of his apparent Romantic retreat, Read still led a very busy public life. He was active as an art critic, in great demand as a lecturer, a busy publisher and sporadically involved with British Anarchist organizations. He received a knighthood in 1953, the acceptance of which alienated the Anarchists.

Seldom, however, does his later poetry deal with public concerns, and when he does deal with an event in the present he tends to mythologize it and detach it from its current context. In "The Death of Kropotkin"<sup>56</sup> Read asserts his Anarchist faith, but Kropotkin emerges as a myth, he is no longer an activist symbol:

No more mountains to cross  
 dear comrade and pioneer  
 You have crossed the Great Khinghân  
 travelling eastward into rich lands  
 where many will follow you.

Read was at his best when presenting a single situation or an isolated incident. His eye for detail and his ability to combine precise description with a richness of allusion<sup>58</sup> led to some very satisfying poetry. In "Death of a Greek Mercenary"<sup>59</sup> he tells us how "The startled goat left footprints/ pointed like the olive leaves". The speed of the scurrying goats is indicated by the shape of their tracks and even the locale is reaffirmed for us by the simile of the olive leaves.<sup>60</sup> The goats and their pointed tracks call to mind the mythological satyrs as well. Read was never able to sustain this clarity of vision in the longer poems.

Although he continued to believe that the long poem was the hallmark of the true poet, his most experimental poems, "Vocal Avowels", were his shortest ones. These poems appeared at the end of the 1966 edition of Collected Poems, but Stephen Spender had earlier seen merit in them and had published some

in Encounter in 1959. When Read first sent the poems to his editor, T.S. Eliot, he explained that "they are like abstract paintings in that one either sees the point of them or they are altogether meaningless".<sup>61</sup> Eliot did not see the point, but he finally consented to publish them in 1966, even though he still had great misgivings about them as poetry. "Vocal Avowels" grew out of Read's dissatisfaction with a language that was "worn and debased by centuries of prosaic usage".<sup>62</sup> In his view poetry depended on the sound of words, but even more on their mental reverberations, and he felt the poet's problem was to try and detach the poem from the language of daily discourse. He concluded that poetry had no essential need for grammatical structure and that "true poetry was never speech, but always "song".<sup>63</sup> It was from this background of ideas that he evolved his definition of the poem:

A poem is ... to be defined as a structure of words whose sounds constitute a rhythmical unity, complete in itself, irrefragable, unanalyzable, completing its symbolic references within the ambit of its sound-effect. <sup>64</sup>

A typical example of a "Vocal Avowels" poem is "Petals":<sup>65</sup>

liquid wild black lance  
 levret dapple drencht  
 all orchid mast  
 But glance  
 thy sense thy dog thy  
 black lips fastuous immortal  
 fell ochre ice ink  
 white dust dog dam  
 welling metals

Read's definition of "poem" is elastic enough to include the above, particularly since it must be noted that he does not include meaning, per se, as one of his criteria. For him language was always more important than meaning:

I am indifferent to the meaning or significance of a poet's story so long as the language is genuinely poetic. 66

The point of these poems may be that they have not point, but the problem with them is that they represent an utter retreat into Romantic privacy, and as such they do not properly fulfill Read's own requirement for poetry - that it be first and foremost a celebration of life.

It was this commitment to the celebration of life that kept Read from pursuing further the venture into total Romantic isolation that "Vocal Avowels" represented. These were his last experiments. His support of the avant-garde in the visual arts and his essays in literary criticism gave him the semblance of a radicalism which he did not fulfil in his poetry. His mode of thought tended always to be visual and though he admired the Metaphysical poets he had neither the religious nor philosophical experience to emulate them. He replaced belief in the transcendental with a kind of relative absolute, the vital principle, and this vitalism accounted for many of his inconsistencies and changes. As much as he admired the ideas of the Metaphysicals, he admired the ideas of his own century more and he was almost naively uncritical

of new ideas. In the search for a synthesis of reason and imagination he gathered those ideas in with the force of a magnet and assimilated them into a form of Romanticism that had as its final aim "neither to believe, nor suffer, nor renounce; but to accept, to enjoy, to realize the anarchy of life in the midst of the order of living".<sup>67</sup>

The Romanticism that Read evolved was both highly individualistic and very much of the twentieth-century. While he clearly followed the Romantic tradition in his stress on the creative power of the imagination, and Nature as the route to the revelation of truth, he broke from that tradition in his recoil from the expression of the self in his poetry. It was during the Great War that he established his reputation as a poet, and he was seldom able to discard the detachment he adopted to express the experience of that war. Only for a brief period in the early 1930's did he write poetry that was expressive of human emotion. The recurring theme in his poetry, of the conflict between reason and imagination, was played out in his criticism as well, where he sought scientific explanation for poetic inspiration. He found that explanation in the twentieth-century science of psychology. What evolved from his efforts was an understanding of the self as fluid and incandescent, and the conviction that the identification of the self with the moment was, in reality, the losing of the self in "animal sensations". In the light

of all this, Read could not find in the self a fit subject for poetry. The poet who set out to "rehabilitate" Romanticism was forced into the position of denying one of the central facets of that creed.

## Notes to Chapter Three

1. Herbert Read, Phases of English Poetry, p.158.

2. \_\_\_\_\_, "The Discovery of Poetry" in

The Contrary Experience, p.162.

3. Ibid., p.163.

4. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the

Source, p.83.

5. Worth T. Harder, A Certain Order, p.154.

6. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the

Source, p.106.

7. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.16.

8. Ibid., p.18.

9. \_\_\_\_\_, The Contrary Experience, p.22.

10. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century

English Poetry, p.158.

11. Herbert Read, "The Discovery of Poetry" in

The Contrary Experience, p.170.

12. Robin Skelton, "The Poetry of Herbert Read",

Malahat Review, IX(Jan.,1969),161.

13. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the

Source, p.98.

14. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, pp.55-60.

15. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century

English Poetry, p.186.

16. Ibid., pp.186-7 passim.
17. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.55.
18. Ibid., pp.61-6.
19. \_\_\_\_\_, "The Tree of Life" in The Contrary Experience, p.184.
20. Ibid., p.185.
21. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, pp.69-74.
22. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry, p.183.
23. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, pp.75-7.
24. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry, p.183.
25. Ibid.
26. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.77.
27. Ibid., p.78
28. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry, p.175.
29. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.79.
30. Ibid., p.89
31. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.100.
32. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.121.
33. Ibid., p.123.
34. Robin Skelton, "The Poetry of Herbert Read", Malahat Review, IX(Jan.,1969),168.

35. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.130.

36. Ibid., pp.130-6.

37. Raymond Tschumi, Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry, p.174.

38. Ibid., p.145.

39. Ibid., p.144.

40. \_\_\_\_\_, "Myth, Dream and Poem" in Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, p.106.

41. Ibid., p.107.

42. Ibid.

43. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, pp.141-3.

44. \_\_\_\_\_, "Myth, Dream and Poem" in Collected Essays In Literary Criticism, p.114. Here Read quotes the theory from Freud's Autobiographical Study as follows:

I have combined the instincts for self-preservation and for the preservation of the species under the concepts of Eros and have contrasted with it an instinct of death or destruction which works in silence. Instinct in general is regarded as a kind of elasticity of living things, an impulsion towards the restoration of a situation which once existed but was brought to an end by some external disturbance. This essentially conservative character of instincts is exemplified by the phenomena of the 'compulsion to repeat'. The picture which life presents to us is the result of the working of Eros and the death-instinct together and against each other.

45. Ibid., p.115.

46. \_\_\_\_\_, The Contrary Experience, p.11.

47. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.183.

48. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.112.
49. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.177.
50. Ibid., p.176.
51. Ibid., pp.187-225.
52. Read is at his self-contradictory best here. The use of 'character' is logical in the context of the poem, but it presents a problem in the context of the way he chose to define the difference between 'personality' and 'character' in "The Personality of the Poet". What has gone before in the poem suggests that, by that definition, he means 'personality', but he uses 'character' instead.
53. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.228.
54. Ibid., p.238.
55. \_\_\_\_\_, The Cult of Sincerity, p.112.
56. \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Poems, p.226.
57. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.112.
58. Robin Skelton, "The Poetry of Herbert Read", Malahat Review, IX(Jan.,1969),169.
59. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.233.
60. Robin Skelton, "The Poetry of Herbert Read", Malahat Review, IX(Jan.,1969),169.
61. George Woodcock, Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source, p.119.

62. Herbert Read, Collected Poems, p.273.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., p.267.
66. \_\_\_\_\_, The True Voice of Feeling, p.62.
67. \_\_\_\_\_, Anarchy and Order, p.125.

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