

Social Protest in Some Minor Poets of the Nineteenth Century

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"To the memory of Shelley who died 8th July 1822 but who liveth for ever in the hearts and minds of poets I inscribe this book not so much in reverence for his perfection in art as in love of the infinite goodness of his nature in which partly for its essential beauty and partly because it was human it has often been given me to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

Ebenezer Jones, Dedication, *Studies of Sensation and Event*.

AMONG the literary heroes of the nineteenth century's minor poets of political and social protest, Shelley ranked high, perhaps the highest; and his "infinite goodness" mattered most to them, not his "perfection in art," though that, in any case, had hardly been exhibited in the few, and small, "revolutionary" poems which — his prose and Mary's notes aside — gave him this eminence in their regard.

Other major poets of the century besides Shelley made their own protests, of course, but these also are not the writings for which they are now first or best remembered: it was — as in the character of art it seems it must be — the main role and achievement of the minor poets to declaim against distress and demand change. For such an immediate subject is inevitably fugitive, however contemporary it remains. The "pity" is all-important, and the "poetry," if any, is in that. Even Thomas Hood, the most widely read of the minor poets of the time, is now generally known for a single entreaty, "The Song of the Shirt," his continuing fame resting on the comic pieces. He was too good a light-versifier for much of his

“serious” poetry to endure. But in contrast with comic verse and the true lyric, the subject-matter of both of which is limitless, very little “serious” minor poetry ever does endure.

Yet it was to Hood that Gerald Massey made, in 1850, the contemporary acknowledgement:

How like a bonny bird of God he came,
 And poured his heart in music for the Poor;
 Who sit in gloom while sunshine floods the land,
 And grope through darkness, for the hand of Help.
 And trampled Manhood heard, and claimed its crown;
 And trampled Womanhood sprang up ennobled!
 The human soul looked radiantly through rags!
 And there was melting of cold hearts, as when
 The ripening sunlight fingers frozen flowers.
 O! blessings on him for the songs he sang!

The nineteenth century was bound to produce minor political and social verse in a new abundance, provoking to composition men who, in earlier times, might not have written anything. For the enthusiasm which the great Romantic poets had felt for the French Revolution, weakened though it became in some of those who, being left, grew old, lived on strongly in their little successors; and as the “two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy” coexisted uneasily, these minor poets championed the cause of the one nation which, affluent in misery and unrest, was poor in hope and without glory.

Most of the poets could not share the broad, liberal view — held by Hood, for example — which motivated so many of the movements towards reform. For them there was a battle against the rich, the employers and The Establishment, and their verses were a challenge. Few of them meant to urge their readers to violence, however. What they did mean was that their poems — their “songs” and “cries” — should stand out clearly above the uncertainties and contradictions of the age, demanding speedier improvements than those in power wished or thought possible. They might, too, be prophetic of what would happen somewhere, somehow, to put right what was so obviously wrong. There was not to be a bloody uprising in England,

but Gerald Massey wrote: "The harvest of the free red-ripenes for the sickle-thrust."

So, the time seeming to be most ripe, these minor poets added their voices of woe and accusation, not only to the mass of anonymous and honourable "folk poetry" and anonymous and dishonourable doggerel that was being spread about the land, but also to the poetic appeals for justice that Burns and Blake had already made, and to that "Song to the Men of England" which, with other less celebrated verses, Shelley had written in 1819:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

We cannot assume, however, that their poems had even the gentle effect which, in 1845, Hood wished for Dickens's *The Chimes*: of circulating "their wholesome lessons of charity and forbearance — reminding wealth of the claims of Want — the feasting of the fasting, and inducing them to spare something for an aching void from their comfortable repletion." Such betterments — and such violence, actual or planned, to effect them — as did occur, are presumably not attributable to any literary influence. The Corn Laws were repealed, but not because of the rhymes of Ebenezer Elliott, well known and often quoted though these were (as in Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*). Nevertheless, the verse was written, and it was read; and if those in lofty places were not swayed by it to action, and their "cold hearts" were not melted, those who read it in humbler places were, perhaps, preparing a way towards a treasure which might, one day, be opened and distributed fairly. Perhaps, too, we should not glibly dismiss as untrue the old saying about the pen and the sword. It may be that the pen of even the minor poet, forgotten though he becomes, contributes something to a mighty morality.

Of the five poets chosen for illustration here, only Ebenezer Elliott (1781-1849) has any recognition today,

and that is very small. He alone is, for instance, included in W. H. Auden's anthology, *Nineteenth Century Minor Poets* (1967); and certainly only he was commemorated by a statue.

It was on April 23rd 1850 that the Ebenezer Elliott Memorial Committee held its first public meeting, in Sheffield, where he had once had his own business. Then, on May 9th, representatives from all parts of the country attended a full meeting, also in Sheffield, at which it was decided to erect a statue in his honour. Neville Burnard was commissioned to carry out the work, and on August 26th 1854 the bronze figure was set up in the Market Place. In 1875 it was removed to Weston Park, where it still is.

In further commemoration Landor wrote the poem, "On the Statue of Ebenezer Elliott by Neville Burnard, ordered by the Working Men of Sheffield," in which he avowed:

I may not live to hear another voice,
Elliott, of power to penetrate as thine,
Dense multitudes.

Few poets have been acknowledged quite like this; and the event may seem all the more unusual today, when it is so easy cynically to observe the irony of a businessman who blamed his financial failures in the Corn Laws and who broke with the Chartists, writing as he did in the *Corn-Law Rhymes* (1831).

Elliott himself feared no such suspicion of his motives. On the contrary, he said in the Prologue that he expected to be scorned as "The rabble's poet," and his "honest song" to be slandered, his voice hated, by those "Souls whom the lust of gold hath turn'd to clay" and "whose might is based on wrong." But he would lift that voice to "undegrade the human form divine," late though it might now fall on the ears of "The dead-alive, who dread no judgment-day." And the succeeding poems, while sustaining this emotional extravagance, have a transparency of appeal and reference that can leave us in no doubt of their

aim, however complex and ambiguous the origins of human endeavour may be.

What his poems lamented was true. Work did grow scarce "while bread grew dear/And wages lessen'd too"; death did "feast" on the starving poor and many of the poor did starve because their "masters" went bankrupt; children were the "little captives" of industry:

Thousands and thousands — all so white! —
 With eyes so glazed and dull!
 O God! it was indeed a sight
 Too sadly beautiful!
 And, oh, the pang their voices gave
 Refuses to depart!
 This is a wailing for the grave!
 I whisper'd to my heart.
 It was as if, where roses blush'd,
 A sudden blasting gale,
 O'er fields of bloom had rudely rush'd,
 And turn'd the roses pale.¹

These are echoing stanzas, and are endlessly repeatable; yet they have a right to be accepted in separation. Elliott is also in the company of better poets than himself in "British Rural Cottages in 1842," for example:

The scentless rose, train'd by the poor,
 May sometimes grace the peasant's door;
 But when will comfort enter there?
 Beauty without hides death within,
 Like flowers upon the shroud of sin:
 For ev'n the poor man's marriage-joys,
 His wife, his sad-lipp'd girls and boys,
 In mercy or in mockery given,
 But brighten, with their 'hour of heav'n',
 A life of ghastly toil and care:
 His pay is pain, his hope despair,
 Although the cottage-rose is fair.
 Out of his weekly pittance small,
 Three crowns, for children, wife, and all,
 Poor British Slave! how can he save
 A pittance for his evening's close?
 No roses deck the workhouse-grave!
 Where is the aged pauper's rose?

The "people," then, whose "anthem" he wrote, the "dense multitudes," had such a poet to "sing" their cause:

God! save the people! thine they are,
 Thy children, as thy angels fair:
 Save them from bondage and despair!
 God! save the people!
 ("The People's Anthem.")

Of course, he found a solace for them in "the stately temple" of the countryside which they themselves thought all too insufficient; and he was certainly opposed to the use of physical violence to win for them what they needed. But his final appeal was not to them to claim and take their rights, but to those who persecuted or ignored them:

Wrong not the labouring poor by whom ye live!
 Wrong not your humble fellow-worms, ye proud!
 ("Hymn.")

It was not the most tactful of approaches, but it was sincerely angry.

Above all, at the heart of Elliott's message, was what we can now see more clearly than he could as the main crime of nineteenth-century capitalism: the degradation of the working class, the fostering of their ignorance, and the exploitation of their crude pleasures. So he wrote in "The Home of Taste":

O lift the workman's heart and mind
 Above low sensual sin!
 Give him a home! the home of taste!
 Outbid the house of gin!

That has not happened yet. Nor is there any poet in our time, major or minor, campaigning that it should happen. It is the business of the politician and the social worker, possibly of the novelist; the poet minds his own. Elliott, however, was not "concerned with poetry"; and so his verse is as forgotten as his message. How many passers through Weston Park, seeing the statue, wonder who was the man whose single name — "ELLIOTT" — stands out in bold capitals on the plinth?

Ebenezer Jones (1820-60) was a typical "post-Romantic," even suffering the familiar miseries of a broken marriage and consumption. But he also knew what it meant to work six days a week, twelve hours a day, as a clerk in a London tea-firm from 1837 to 1843. It is not surprising, therefore, that the poems in *Studies of Sensation and Event*² have a more explicitly subjective concern

than Elliott's with the "thousands" who "toiling moan" to fold "gorgeous robes" for "the haughty forms alone" of "the Kings of Gold." They are more directly "romantic" too in their sentiment and diction, both heavy with despair. Thus the "Song of the Kings of Gold," though bearing the message of his young hero, Shelley, goes into areas where his Calvinist upbringing led him:

The father writhes a smile,
As we seize his red-lipp'd girl,
His white-loined wife; aye, while
Fierce millions burn, to hurl
Rocks on our regal brows,
Knives in our hearts to hold —
They pale, prepare them bows
At the steps of the Kings of Gold.

Shelley's ambivalent puritanism did not include such an acceptance of defeat.

Yet the pessimism contains the challenge, and was intended to. And this stanza demonstrates the quality of Jones's verse, a stronger and less sentimental tone than Elliott's has even in its most angry mood. It came, no doubt, from a conception of his subject which we may ascribe to his personal experience; and it was this more realistic stance that also tempted him towards the attempted mockery of such poems as the "Song of the Gold-Getters":

Truth now starves in garrets, or rots in a gaol,
Whate'er may have been in the times gone by;
And supremacy national, 'cakes and ale',
Honour and station reward the lie;
Let us lie then like statesmen, like fathers, and gold
We shall heap and keep; — the world is war,
And out of war's articles none will uphold
The virtue of truth when a falsehood gains more.
Lie! let us lie! we'll make the lies fit;
It's the only way mortals their fortunes can knit.

Such verse is, nevertheless, struggling towards that "light" popular utterance — as distinct from the intellectual "lightness" of, say, Clough — which was to be perfected by Kipling. The short lines and simple metres of the traditional "song" are being stretched into complexi-

ties and subtleties which Jones was not gifted enough to manipulate. We can see the same lack of certainty and control in "A Coming Cry" where the rhythm is given its immature feet at the caprice of the subject:

The few to whom the law hath given the earth God gives
to all

Do tell us that for them alone its fruits increase and fall;
They tell us that by labour we may earn our daily bread.
But they take the labour for their engines that work on
unfed;

And so we starve; and now the few have publish'd a
decree, —

Starve on, or eat in workhouses the crumbs of charity;
Perhaps it's better than starvation, — once we'll pray,
and then

We'll all go building workhouses, million, million men!

We'll all go building workhouses, — million, million hands,
So jointed wondrously by God, to work love's wise com-
mands;

We'll all go building workhouses, — million, million minds,
By great God charter'd to condemn whatever harms or
binds;

The God-given mind shall image, the God-given hand shall
build

The prisons for God's children by the earth-lords will'd;
Perhaps it's better than starvation, — once we'll pray
and then

We'll all go building workhouses, million, million men.

What'll we do with the workhouses? million, million men!

Shall we all lie down, and madden, each in his lonely den?

What! we whose sires made Cressy! we, men of Nelson's
mould!

We, of the Russells' country, — God's Englishmen the bold!

Will we, at earth's lords' bidding, build ourselves
dishonour'd graves?

Will we who've made this England, endure to be its slaves?

Thrones totter before the answer! — once we'll pray,
and then

We'll all go building workhouses, million, million men.

Though he knew how to make a better poem than that, Kipling would have approved of the technique in at least avoiding a maudlin indulgence in the despondency. The "lightness" is, indeed, a welcome change. For our poets protested too much; and they protested too sombrely; Ebenezer Jones was the only one to experiment with that other method which Shelley had already used and whose

efficacy Byron had so powerfully shown. Hood too used it, of course, but only to gain an eventual reputation which he did not want. Otherwise, it was mainly the method of the crude and scurrilous verses of the chapbooks and broad-sheets.

Ernest Jones (1819-69) did not have any of the young experiences, economic or religious, of Ebenezer Elliott and Ebenezer Jones, for he was born, in Berlin, into an upper-middle-class family, his father being a major in the 15th Hussars. Unlike Elliott and Ebenezer Jones again, he did advocate violent revolution, having, as he says in "The Better Hope," "a passionate thought,/The brightest or darkest to span." He was "A child of the hard-hearted world"; his father's house was "cold in its solemn state"; and as he grew he became aware of the "giant" breathing "his steam-breath through long channels of death":

Then I bound on my armour to face the rough world,
And I'm going to march with the rest,
Against tyrants to fight — for the sake of the right,
And, if baffled, to fall with the best.³

So he joined the Chartists in 1846, edited, among other publications, *The People's Paper*, and went on public-speaking crusades to deliver the working poor "from the oppression of irresponsible capital."

His extremism alienated him from some of the other Chartist leaders, however, notably Feargus O'Connor, and at last led to his arrest, in 1848 in Manchester, and to imprisonment for two years. Later, understanding better the nature of revolution, and anticipating the development of the Labour movement, he came to realise that a union of the working and middle classes was essential if the aims in which he believed were ever to be achieved; and, ironically, this change of attitude alienated him still further from the same Chartist leaders. But by then Chartism was already dying, and when he ceased to edit his papers in 1860 the National Charter Association also ceased.

His poems are often written in the ancient quatrain, continuous variations of it, or the heroic couplet, and they

follow faithfully the tradition of the iambic or anapaestic line and uncompromising, facile, "poetic" diction. And, like many of his contemporaries, he could not resist the internal rhyme. The result is that his verses are in tune with the warlike jingles not only of earlier times but also of 1914-18.

Obviously, his chief descriptions are of the factory towns — "bleak," "cheerless," "grey," "blackened" — where men, women and children toil "Locked in dungeons close and black," and of the countryside, where "Freshness through the forest ran" but from which the people were being driven to fester "in the fetid street." And, with the hysterical nostalgia common to all who make the present, which is so bad, even worse because the past was so good, he contrasts the England of his day with the "merry" land of old when there were no temples to "The demon god of factory and loom."

This division of England into mechanics and peasants thus seduced him no less than his fellow-poets into an idolisation of nature and an acceptance of the comparative happiness of the country-dweller:

His the glad labour, that but strengthens more,
Braces the frame and bids the spirit soar;
His the pure life, gives loftier feeling scope,
The harvest gratitude, the seed-time hope!
For him the orchards bloom, the corn-fields nod,
And these are altars where he worships God.

("The Peasant.")

But he knew little about the countryside, and had the conventional, dreaming, pastoral view of its merely apparent difference from the town. He did know that the peasant was being taken from the land to be enslaved in the mill and the factory, returning to his cottage at night, "care-worn and thin"; and he did know, as Ebenezer Elliott knew, that this man was being debased:

His heart a prison, with a chaos fraught,
His hearth neglected, and his brain untaught.

("The Peasant.")

He understood also what Hood had taken for the subject of his "Lay of the Labourer," that there was no longer enough work on the land to go round as the "demon god" of capitalism writhed "his thin lip" and "waved his yellow hand" over the fields no less than over the towns. But the real extent of the "agricultural distress," the suffering in the countryside of which Clare and Hood had written, he did not realise. The lot of the peasant had, of course, never been as "merry" as the pastoral dream had fancied it, but now it could be even worse than the lot of the mechanic. So Hood's labourer cried:

To a flaming barn or farm
 My fancies never roam;
 The fire I yearn to kindle and burn
 Is on the hearth of Home;
 Where children huddle and crouch
 Through dark long winter days,
 Where starving children huddle and crouch,
 To see the cheerful rays,
 A-glowing on the haggard cheek,
 And not in the haggard's blaze!

We are arrogant, however, if we allow this ingrained haze of unreality to obscure the protest which Ernest Jones was making. What was happening to human beings in the mills and factories was so appalling that some contrast to it had to be found, and, if necessary, invented; and there was far more unspoilt countryside then than there is today.

The violence which he sought to champion, and the vehemence which he sought to express, were derived from both his inheritance and his repudiation of it. He had, he says, the "sullen pride" of his forebears, and he had the "Byronic" fire of the well-born youth who turns imaginatively towards "the homes of men." He called one of his collections *The Battle-Day; and Other Poems*. If there had been anything like a modern grouping in his time, therefore, he might well have been the "leader" of these particular minor nineteenth-century poets; and, being, in our jargon, the most "militant" of them, his was the pen

which might have stirred the poor to the sword. It was what he wanted it to do.

Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903) was among the many self-taught, working-class men whose eagerness for knowledge was in keeping with the better aspirations of the age.

He was the son of a Northumberland miner, and himself worked in the mines and on the railways until he was fifty. Between 1889 and 1891 he was custodian of Shakespeare's "birthplace" in Stratford, and later he received a civil-list pension — two attainments which were some public recognition of his abilities.

It was not a misplaced recognition; for if Ernest Jones was the most "militant" of these poets, Joseph Skipsey was the most "poetic" in the true sense of the word. Some of his contemporaries certainly thought so, including Rossetti and Oscar Wilde, who compared his *Carols from the Coal-Fields: and Other Songs and Ballads*⁴ with the shorter poems of Blake. And in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1941) George Sampson placed "the old man's lyrics of the coalfields" with *A Shropshire Lad*.

Gold and its kings were, as we have seen, one of the constant subjects of Ebenezer and Ernest Jones, and Skipsey joined the miner's protest against their "reign" to those of the peasant and the mechanic:

The mountain is riven asunder,
The days of the valley are told;
And sinew, and glory, and grandeur,
Are sapped for a smile of King Gold.
(*"The Reign of Gold."*)

And to nature he added other victims: honour, duty, chastity, devotion, affection.

But it is his poems about the especial plight of the miners and their families which matter most and are the best. "There's not," the Chorus of "The Collier Lad" proclaims,

. . . his match in smoky Shields;
Newcastle never had
A lad more tight, nor trim, nor bright
Than is my Collier Lad.

Loved by Nell, a joker and a hearty drinker, good at bowls, cricket " 'gainst the wall" and quoits, star performer at the local dance, kind to everyone, not devout but perhaps tameable after marriage, he is the idealised young hero of song and ballad in a new setting, spending his day "Where daylight never breaks" and, it is implied throughout, probably doomed to an early and unheroic death. Only too real to Skipsey, however romanticised, he could have been among Hardy's, no less than Housman's, characters.

The unheroic death came to "the Hartley men" in 1862, a disaster which became Skipsey's "tale of woe" in "The Hartley Calamity." Although written in the ballad metre, the poem does not wholly avoid the bathos of McGonagall's Tay Bridge verses:

Their rescue nigh? The sounds of joy
 And hope have ceased, and ere
 A breath is drawn a rumble's heard
 Re-drives them to despair.

Yet the shortness of the lines does not allow even such a stanza to topple into memorable absurdity, and in the total structure it is acceptable as no more than the occasional weakness of inexperience and innocence, compensated for by other stanzas which defy us to bring to them any pejorative comparisons:

"O, father, till the shaft is cleared,
 Close, close beside me keep;
 My eye-lids are together glued,
 And I — and I — must sleep."

"Sleep, darling, sleep, and I will keep
 Close by — heigh-ho!" — To keep
 Himself awake the father strives —
 But he — he too — must sleep.

"O, brother, till the shaft is cleared,
 Close, close beside me keep;
 My eye-lids are together glued,
 And I — and I — must sleep."

"Sleep, brother, sleep, and I will keep
 Close by — heigh-ho!" — To keep
 Himself awake the brother strives —
 But he — he too — must sleep.

The shaft was not cleared, and

They, slept — still sleep — in silence dread,
 Two hundred old and young,
 To awake when heaven and earth have sped,
 And the last dread trumpet rung.

Gerald Massey (1828-1907) was another self-educated, working-class poet, having been born in a canal hut, the son of a boatman. At the age of eight he worked in a silk-mill in Tring, from five o'clock in the morning until six in the evening, and at fifteen he was an errand-boy in London. But by twenty-three he had joined the Chartists and become editor of the working men's paper, *The Spirit of Freedom*. Political journalism then remained one of his chief occupations, along, later, with spiritualism, Egyptology, Christian Science and the rights of women. We should not, indeed, forget that none of these poets was what we know as a "full-time" or "professional" writer.

In 1889 his main book of poems, *My Lyrical Life: Poems New and Old*,⁵ was published, a collection which Ruskin called his "helpful and precious gift to the working-classes."

In the preface Massey wrote: "We are beginning to see the worst evils now afflicting the human race are man-made and do not come into the world by Fate or fiat of God; and that which is man-made is also remediable by man." So the remedies he advocated, like the tone of his language, are comparable with those of Ernest Jones, as some of his titles indicate: *The Battle-Call*, *Song of the Red Republican*, *The Men of 'Forty-Eight*.' He could not go all the way with Ernest Jones, but if mischief was afoot he would let it take its course:

Let my Songs be cited
 As breakers of the peace,
 Till the wrongs are righted;
 The man-made miseries cease:
 Till Earth's Disinherited
 Beg no more to earn their bread;
 Till the consuming darts of burning Day
 Shall fire the midnight Foxes; scare away
 From Labour's fruits the parasites of prey.
 Let them die when all is done,
 Now Victoriously begun!
 ("Cries of 'Forty-Eight.'")

Like Ernest Jones again — and the others — he contrasted the England of his time with the “merry” land of the past:

Call ye this ‘merry England,’ — once the place
 Of souls self-deified and glory-crowned?
 Where smiles made sunshine in the Peasant’s face,
 And Justice reigned — Her awful eyes close-bound?
 Where Toil with open brow went on light-hearted,
 And twain in love Law never thrust apart?
 How is the glory of our life departed
 From us, who sit and nurse our bleeding smart;
 And slink, afraid to break the laws that break the
 heart!

(“The Battle-Call.”)

But most glorious to Massey in that past was “the spirit of our Stalwart Sires” who opposed, as he did in his writings, the “tyrannies” of priestcraft and the monarchy:

Vampires have drained Humanity’s best blood,
 Kings robbed, and Priests have cursed us in
 God’s name;
 Out in the midnight of the Past we stood,
 While these have darkly plied their devilish game.
 (“The Battle-Call.”)

Such is the general manner of his verse. “Red” is among his favourite adjectives, “iron” his favourite weapon against the “gold” of the enemy, his metaphors militaristic, his note bugling:

Be stirring, O people, your Flag is unfolden,
 And brave be the battles ye blazon therein.
 (“Merry Christmas-Eve.”)

And he seems to have believed — more than the majority of the poets — that the battles could be won. “Never despair,” he cries like an English Whitman:

Never despair! O, my Comrades in sorrow!
 I know that our mourning is ended not. Yet,
 Shall the vanquished today be the Victors tomorrow,
 Our Star shall shine on in the Tyrant’s Sunset.
 Hold on! though they spurn thee, for whom thou art living
 A life only cheered by the lamp of its love:
 Hold on! Freedom’s hope to the bounden ones giving:
 Green spots in the waste wait the worn spirit-dove.
 Hold on, — still hold on, — in the world’s despite,
 Nurse the faith in thy heart, keep the lamp of Truth bright,
 And, my life for thine! it shall end in the Right.
 (“It Will End In The Right.”)

The "sweetest" of *Three Voices* is *The Future*. We may "walk the Wilderness Today," but we shall walk in "The Promised Land Tomorrow."

All this anger and challenge, this condemnation and optimism, combined with the evangelical, hymnodic style, ought, we may feel, to have put Gerald Massey, with Ernest Jones, among the poetic heroes of the international revolutionary movements. They did not.

On the assumption, however, that poetry, major and minor, is, in and of itself, politically and socially ineffectual — that, like all art, it is even morally useless — the poems of Gerald Massey would not have made him such a hero if they had been better than they were. Indeed, if they had been better, the literary reputation that he might have had would have been won at the expense of the cause in which they were written.

The truth is that his poems, and those of his fellows, were no better than, for their immediate purpose, they needed to be. They had a job to do outside literature; and though we may think that there was never any likelihood of that job being done successfully — though we may disagree with Ruskin and Landor — we know that nothing could have stopped the poets from believing in the power of their words, whatever the outcome of the struggle might be. No matter what the odds against them, silence was impossible.

Our five poets, we must also grant, would not have put any desire for literary fame before their cause. We can be sure, too, if they had been as conscientious in their art as they were in their protest, they would have written very differently, probably worse, and much less. It is because Wilfred Owen was so much concerned with poetry, and had great talent, that his warning is not now — if it ever was — as valuable as his artistic achievement. And though Shelley meant so much to Ebenezer Jones and other writers, and did have some vague "angelic" role in the background of the nineteenth-century working-class move-

ment, there is no evidence — and presumably cannot be any — that a single reform was due to what he wrote. The Establishment had another view of him. And so did the critics. Moreover, we must wonder whether, if he had been altogether a minor poet, he would have written the short political poems and fragments of 1819 as we know them, and, if he had, whether they would have been noticed. As it is, they are among his own minor compositions. “They are,” Mary said, “not among the best of his productions, a writer being always shackled when he endeavours to write down to the comprehension of those who could not understand or feel a highly imaginative style.”

Our poets had no such style to abandon; but they did have what Mary called Shelley’s “earnestness” and the “heartfelt compassion” which “went home to the direct point of injury — that oppression is detestable as being the parent of starvation, nakedness, and ignorance.” Their art had none of Shelley’s “perfection,” but their nature had his “goodness.” Blake and Hood also had the goodness, but their poetic reputations do not rest on, say, “The Chimney-Sweeper,” “Holy Thursday,” “The Workhouse Clock” and “A Drop of Gin.” “The Song of the Shirt” is now primarily memorable as a technical *tour de force*, and that is why it is still “popular.” Our poets did write other things, in verse and prose, than the poems at which we have been looking, but these poems were their best writing and it is on them alone that they have been judged.

There are, of course, degrees of minor-ness, and they are not calculable by the nature of the subject-matter of the works. We cannot say that what our poets wrote about was unimportant, but we have only their expression of it to tell us why they wrote about it and what they felt; and by this they have been found wanting.

As we have seen, Ebenezer Elliott is in Auden’s anthology. The selection is one man’s, however, and is therefore controversial; for if Charles Lamb can accompany John Clare, William Bell Scott accompany William Morris, and

Margaret Veley accompany Dante Gabriel Rossetti, why, we may ask, cannot Ebenezer Jones, Ernest Jones, Joseph Skipsey and Gerald Massey accompany Emily Bronte, Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson and A. E. Housman?

The answer cannot be because they alone used verse merely as the more appropriate medium than prose for their mission, so that we should speak of their "minor verse" and not of their "minor poetry." Nor can it be because they alone had a subject so urgent that it could find its way only into lowly art and die there. But it may be because they have become so forgotten that Auden himself had never heard of them. He does write of "the poets of the nineteenth century": "only one, Ebenezer Elliott, had any first-hand acquaintance with the industrial cities of the Midlands and the North."

If he had read them, however, their exclusion from his book was, we can assume, not due to a dislike of their work; for he rightly states in his introduction that our assessment of the major-ness or minor-ness of a poet does not depend on the pleasure which he gives. Auden must therefore have decided that they were too minor to be included.

But so mysterious a word as "pleasure" cannot be left unqualified. Our assessment of the major-ness or minor-ness of poetry, of its importance, must be based on its *aesthetic* qualities and the *aesthetic* pleasure which these create. The endurance of a poem is ultimately dependent on its value as a work of art, and where there is artistic value there is artistic pleasure. No merely subjective liking or disliking, being limited by conditions, is valid as literary criticism. Comprehension, being free, is an objective exercise.

Thus we can only conclude that if there is any aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the work of our five poets, it is small in comparison with the personal liking of them which an individual reader may feel. We no doubt approve of their subject-matter, but we cannot find much to

comprehend and assess in a treatment of it which does not stretch into the general future, long past the political and social developments which have occurred since their time, long past contemporary concerns, and into an era — for it may be coming yet for a' that — when there is nothing to protest against.

In this treatment lies the essential failure of our poets to endure. Their verse was just not good enough to last; any more than it was bad enough to continue in the anthologies of curious verse or *The Stuffed Owl*. It was all of a very ordinary piece, large in quantity but not containing a single small masterpiece, one unforgettable miniature. And the result of this lack of variety and surprise, this monotony, is that the songs and instances which were meant to grieve, denounce and excite, are effete; at their most vehement they are most placid; for the passions of the poets there were no lasting voices in the half-heartedness of the metres and the staleness of the diction. The technique is always trite. And just as none of these poets could write a single small masterpiece, so there was not among them — or any of their kind — a single eccentric who had to go his own, centrifugal way, a way which later poets would either imitate at their peril or avoid. As Auden wrote: "Every genuine poet, however minor, is unique, a member of a class of one, and any trait that two poets may have in common is almost certain to be the least interesting aspect of their poetry."

Our five minor poets, and their fellows, do share the same traits. They are all members of one class, a class of centripetal writers who are obsessed by their subject-matter, its prisoners, and have neither the will nor the ability to shape it into "genuine" art. Thus their writing lacks the power to sustain our interest in that subject within the poetic form. The interest may continue elsewhere, but not in the poems. If the poems were ever a wonder, it was only for nine days, and only because of the strong subject and in spite of the weak verse. The "palpable design" of even major poetry must grow weaker with

time, until eventually its first cause may not be known; and as it grows weaker, so the force of the original art increases. The true meaning of the poetry, its enduring relevance, gradually becomes established. The local subject of the minor poet's verse, however, and the feebleness of his art are soon forgotten together. Shelley is of constant significance in literature, not because he was a perfectibility-merchant, but because he was a major poet; but if our poets are of any concern today it is for the part they played either in nineteenth-century political history or in the tradition of English minor poetry. If they are read as poets it is only because they are being studied to determine why they were so minor.

But there is always one acknowledgement we can make to them and all like them, whether we study them or not: that they do have their place in the tradition, not just of English minor poetry but of English verse-writing as a whole. It is a tradition which we have often been assured is already dead or fast dying, yet one which the evidence suggests has a long life to come. Poets, major and minor, may come and go with varying speeds, but the tradition itself persists. The major poets must batter at it and move far beyond its confines, but, so far at least, they have not fundamentally weakened it; and as long as the minor poets remain loyal — and because they cannot stray outside — it may well preserve sufficient energy to meet the mild demands of the multitude of time-bound minor poets who have nothing else with which to light their way. Better such faint illumination than total darkness.

NOTES

¹Quoted from "Preston Mills" in *The Poetical Works of Ebenezer Elliott*, ed. Edwin Elliott (London: H. S. King & Co., 1876). Subsequent poems from this edition are given in parentheses.

²Ebenezer Jones, *Studies of Sensation and Event* (London: Pickering & Co., 1879).

- ³Quoted from "The Better Hope" in Ernest Jones, *The Battle Day; and Other Poems* (London and New York: Routledge, 1855). Subsequent poems from this edition are given in parentheses.
- ⁴Joseph Skipsey, *Carols from the Coal-Fields; and Other Songs and Ballads* (London: Walter Scott, 1886). Subsequent poems from this edition are given in parentheses.
- ⁵Gerald Massey, *My Lyrical Life: Poems New and Old* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1889). Subsequent poems from this edition are given in parentheses.