

SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND LITERARY DISSENT
IN MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

Medieval English Poetry is not just a mere literary artifact. An increasing interest in the social involvement of literature as a human activity is gradually shown through poetry which reaches its climax in the fourteenth century when it was also believed to be the literary expression of political dissent and social discontent.¹ Thus the poet becomes aware of the social dimensions of his craft which is also a consequence of the social engagement of the poet with the historical situation. He tries to reveal, through the poem, his inner feelings and his critical position against injustice and abuse.

The quantity and the quality of the poetical output of this period might well have been a reaction to the radical crisis of the time. Poetry was intended to have a real effect on society with political implications. It expressed the complaints and shaped the expectations of common people in an age of adversity and controversy. In this way poetry became a radical medium of social propaganda. It was the literary answer to social predominance and political incompetence. Protest and political consciousness conformed to a new understanding of medieval poems, which became weapons in the struggle to reverse contemporary social trends and to encourage the projection of dreams

¹.- So we find that "poetry was a means of expressing such social discontent." Cfr. J. Coleman, *English Literature in History 1300-1400. Medieval Readers and Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p. 64.

and utopias where man could be free from alienation. Poetry presented a new dimension which made it much more real and effective since its purpose was just to serve the “practical needs”¹ of the people. Everyday life and the tragic tone of events were the origin of the poetical experience as well as the possibility of poetical work which tried to reflect the social context, for “The whole range of medieval life -inner and outer- was expressed in poetry”.² It was not only an individual revelation before confronted events but a social reflection through poetical production. The poet spoke on behalf of everybody in order to show social perversion and political manipulation. Thus poetry became an “expression of something peculiarly of its own time”.³

It was the historical milieu that brought about a new concern and a new poetical interest. History, in this case, provoked a radical awareness and created a different poetical attitude in the poet towards his understanding of life and the role he was compelled to play within a society which had to face the tragedy of a time “particularly unhappy, as if it had left behind only the memory of violence, of covetousness and mortal hatred, as if it had known no other enjoyment but that of intemperance, of pride and cruelty”.⁴ Thus Gawain was forced to look for his utopia and Piers was made to dream of the heavenly and everlasting happiness on earth. Confusion⁵ and disorder⁶ were the ruling

¹.- Cfr. E. Salter, *Fourteenth Century English Poetry. Context and Readings* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 1.

².- Ibid.

³.- J. Coleman, op. cit., p. 272.

⁴.- J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1924), rpt. 1976), p. 30.

⁵.- Confusion also reaches the spiritual and intellectual dimension. Cfr. S. Medcalf (ed.), *The Later Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 3.

⁶.- Cfr. R. W. Ackerman, *Background to Medieval English Literature* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 21.

elements of a nation of which *ye gode olde daies* had certainly come to an end.

Pessimism and darkness coloured the daily expression of a hapless fate as the medieval crisis was at hand. Growing social conflict and inadequate persistence of the old-fashioned world picture created the conditions for the agony of the Middle Ages which later would give rise to modern times. It meant destruction and confrontation since “some of the bitter and destructive class warfare to be seen in Europe before the Industrial Revolution”¹ took place in England during the XIV century. Social instability and personal anxiety framed all human activity. People “seldom found the traditional answers adequate to meet the crushing new problems that seemed to arise on all sides”.² Men had to face the challenge of a new social order which exceeded the limits of real understanding and existential adaptation, for it was difficult to know all the factual implications of the new trends.

The tragic experience of uneasiness and restlessness led to an outbreak of unending confrontation and intellectual controversies.³ The Hundred Years’ War, the Black Death and the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 were the outstanding tragic episodes which brought chaos and despair to the layman. The social crisis was felt everywhere. The Church also went through a bad period. The Great Schism was believed to be the beginning of the end of ecclesiastical unity since Rome was no longer the centre of Christendom. The official representatives of the Church were not as holy and exemplary as they were supposed to be, for “Open abuses were comparatively common among the

¹.- J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500* (London: J. M. Dent, 1980), p. 13.

².- R. E. Lerner, *The Age of Adversity* (Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 17.

³.- D. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (London and New York: Longman, 1988, 2nd edition), p. 304.

clergy in the 14th century ...”¹ This state of religious uncertainty and moral looseness favoured the appearance of heresy as the dissident attitudes of Wyclif and the Lollards show. The consequence of such religious degradation was the increase of skepticism² which would shape the spirit of modern man in the Renaissance.

The medieval tragical picture was intensely felt at the end of the Middle Ages. It created a deep poetical concern with the radical experiences of human life. This negative existential context carried with it a special sensibility towards reality, together with an intense awareness of the helplessness of the people. It forced the poet to discover the ultimate sense of reality and to deal with the daily flux of life which, under these circumstances, was seen as something ephemeral. The ill-fated events and social agitation were finally believed to be the result of mutability which was effectively present everywhere since “This world is brief and all confined:/ When one man comes, another goes”. Everything is changeable. Love is also inconsistent, for “Whom loves adored, now hates oppose.”³ Man was just a puppet in the hands of an outrageous destiny, showing a radical incapacity to improve human conditions on earth. The only possibility he had left is to accept sorrow and decay as the unavoidable factors of the factual situation:

The life of this world
Is governed by wind,
Weeping, darkness

¹.- Gillian Evans, *Chaucer* (London: Blackie, 1977), p. 32.

².- This skepticism was the logical consequence of a time of crisis and contrasts. It gave rise to a profound agnosticism and atheism. This attitude is found in the medieval proverb which asserts that “Where there are three physicians, there are two atheists.”

³.- B. Stone (ed.), “Poems of Adoration”, *Medieval English Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 21, p. 52.

And pangs.
Wind-blown we bloom,
Wind-blown decay;
With weeping we come
And so pass away.
In pangs we start,
In pangs we end;
In dread we stay
And in dread depart.¹

There were not many expectations for man to enjoy in his lifetime but to suffer the consequences of complete alienation. He was the victim of an outrageous destiny. Thus a dark and tragic overtone became the outstanding feature of medieval poetry. The universal instability was also reflected in Old English poetry² and it would be a recurrent element within the poetical material of later English poetry.³ The lament of the poet over man's misfortunes was the explicit manifestation of a deep rebellion against such a state of things. A sense of metaphysical dissent invaded the poetical complaint since human incompetence could not deal with calamity and disgrace, provoking an abiding feeling of collective pessimism and despair. Therefore the poet was engaged in a redemptive and purgative function as he tried to comfort people and to favour the non acceptance of actual impositions coming from contextual negative events. In this way the poet became a literary dissident.

¹.- B. Stone (ed.), "Poems of Sin and Death", op. cit., 25, p. 63.

².- There is a strong consciousness of mutability all through Old English Poetry. The line from *Deor* "That passed away, this also may" expresses this ultimate sense of decay and destruction which conforms to the poetic experience of the bard.

³.- The poetry of John Donne is a clear reflection of the fleeting aspect of life which in "The Anniversaries" and "Satyre II" has a destructive and tragic dimension.

Poetry was not indifferent to political instability, religious abuse and social agitation which we come across in Chaucer's England where "violence and the threat of war were always in the background".¹ This chaotic and tragic situation was precisely what made the birth of a golden literature possible. We should bear in mind the fact that the result of such experience of disaster and confusion was not literary scarcity but the reinforcement of a more meaningful and creative approach to reality which ended in an unprecedented production of poems of a highly literary quality. This might be explained by the profound relationship we find, in this case, between life and literature. Adversity and calamity created the necessary conditions for a poetical revival. The social consciousness of the poet was decisively stimulated by the historical circumstances without which he might not have been able to write such great poetry. Frustration and manipulation provoked the poetical genius which demanded an actual revision of the misuse of power and projected the possibility of a better world where man could get rid of oppression and restraint. Thus the poet was forced to become critical in his art. If he shared the expectations of his audience, he could no longer ignore the suffering and despair of his countrymen. He became aware of the new role he was expected to play through his literary skill. Poetry was thought to be more than an artistic creation. It must have been something else if it wanted to make real sense. In this way the poems became meaningful for they denounced social injustice. Poetry was perhaps the only possible instrument for expressing such an inhuman situation. It meant the great possibility for opposing an unfair order and establishing more human conditions within a new social context. It was also believed to be a practical means in order to change reality. Hence the so called *litera-*

¹.- Gillian Evans, op. cit., p. 24.

ture of social unrest¹ appeared, being characterized by its social protest against political abuse. This peculiar kind of literature developed into a new literary genre known as *The Abuses of the Age Genre*² which was a consequence of the new dimension that literature held at the end of the Middle Ages when poetry was deeply involved in social matters. It was thought to be a radical weapon for social opposition.

The new poetical attitude can be seen in the so called *political poems*³ as their main interest was to make public the political arbitrariness of the people in power and to oppose social disorder. Their appearance might have been the consequence of “the increased interest of the people in politics and social questions”.⁴ Hence poetry was not regarded as something separate from life but a literary expression within a more general social framework. It implies that we need to know the social context of medieval poetry to have a real understanding of its literary implications and to be able to interpret the radical meaning of these poems whose political dimension was not only an essential item of the poetical production but also its *raison d’être*. Undoubtedly it was its most outstanding feature. It meant that the poet

¹.- Cfr. J. Coleman, “The Literature of Social Unrest”, op. cit., ch. 3, p. 58 ff.

².- Ibid., p. 60.

³.- We may include among them the following poems: “Satire on the Consistory Courts”, “Satire on the Retinues of the Great”, “The Simony”, “Piers Plowman”, “Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede” and “Mum and Sothsegger”. For further information and documentation see R. Hope Robbins, “Middle English Poems of Protest”, *Anglia*, 78 (1960), pp. 193-203; Th. L. Kinney, “The Temper of 14th Century English Verse of Complaint”, *Annuaire Mediaevalia*, 7 (1966), pp. 74-89; Th. J. Elliott, “Middle English Complaints against the Times: to condemn the world or to reform it?”, *Annuaire Mediaevalia*, 14 (1973), pp. 22-34; R. Hope Robbins, “Dissent in Middle English Literature: The Spirit of (Thirteen) Seventy-Six”, *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, 9 (1979), pp. 25-51.

⁴.- K. Sisam (ed.), *14th Century Verse and Prose* (Oxford University Press, (1921), rpt. 1985), p. 151.

was no longer the one whose occupation was just to praise power. He changed his social role and became the opposition. The lyric songs and the bard's accounts gave way to a more realistic approach which forced the poet to lash the tyrannic behaviour of powerful lords and landowners. He took sides in the social and political confrontation of the time. Then the poetical apprehension of reality was seen through a different perspective with radical connotations. This poetical movement was of a great importance for it marked the beginning of a new understanding of poetry which again showed its many-sided nature. The critical quality of these poems expressed an intentionality of reversing a concrete state of things where man could not bear such restraint and oppression any more. Poetry had not only an artistic end as far as it was considered to have an instrumental value. It accomplished its literary function because it made political sense.

However we should find out what is meant by the term *political* in order to know the particular meaning of these poetical manifestations. Perhaps the critical interpretation given by G. Kane,¹ who asserts that it must not be understood in a restrictive sense, is correct since the present political background is not the same at all and the modern understanding of the term has different shades. Therefore to believe that they refer to something specifically political is not the right interpretation. The poems are political for they express a growing interest in certain matters related to the management of power and public finance. They are very much concerned with the practical implications of political decisions. They are political although they do not support any particular political system nor fight for the establishment of a concrete form of government. The poet accepted the ruling principles of the medieval world picture where "the general principle of authority

¹.- G. Kane, "Some Fourteenth-Century Political Poems", G. Kratzmann and J. Simpson (eds.), *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature. Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986), p. 82 ff.

as such was never in question”.¹ Poetry did not have the pretension of being considered as the origin of political manifestos since it “was designed not to produce democracy in any sense”.² It only tried to air the precarious human conditions in which people of the lower class lived under unscrupulous rulers. It was just a simple way of sharing the despair and helplessness of the exploited. Then the poet was aware of the social dimension of his poetry. His craft had no real sense without being the expression of the social crisis, for poetry was also engaged in the historical situation. Hence the modernity of these poems which still appeal to us today.

However we should be more accurate in the description of these kinds of poetical manifestations in order to avoid ambiguities in the terminology used. Perhaps it would be better to call them *poems of social unrest*³ as they tried to reflect social discontent. They were intended to be common protests⁴ against “the government which tolerated so many abuses”.⁵ In this way the voice of the poet in the wilderness would denounce the evils of political perversion.

The poetic approach to the social and political situation was varied. Everybody concerned with politics was the target of these provocative poems, even the king himself was subject to literary judgement for his political actions and decisions as we can see in the *Song of the Battle of Lewes*. However the major concern of this type of poetry which began in the XII century and culminated in the XIV was about

¹.- Ibid., p. 83.

².- Ibid.

³.- K. Malone and A. C. Baugh, “The Middle Ages”, A. C. Baugh (ed.), *A Literary History of England* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2nd edition (1967), rpt. 1977), vol. I, p. 240.

⁴.- The term *protest*, in this case, should be understood in a general sense not having its particular meaning as it is defined in *OED*. Cfr. G. Kane, op. cit., p. 84.

⁵.- K. Malone and A. C. Baugh, op. cit., p. 240.

everyday problems since they really affected ordinary people. Thus the *Song of the Husbandman* strongly opposes the overcharging of taxes and the corruption in public finance. *The Simony* points out the immoral behaviour of tax collectors who tried to get as much profit as possible out of common people:

shrewdeliche for sothe hii don the kinges heste;
Whan everi man hath his part, the king hath the leste
Everi man is aboute to fille his owen purs;
And the king hath the leste part, and he hath al the curs,
[with wronge.¹

It is in *Wynnere and Wastoure* where we find “the concern of the poet with a contemporary problem of statecraft and social and moral behaviour”.² His poetical enterprise was not easy at all since he had to face a “delicate social and economic problem that was the concern and responsibility of the king himself”.³ It was the time when the conception of kingship was changing. The French campaigns of Edward III meant a shift in the understanding of what the role of the king was supposed to be in the arrangement of social order and in the management of public decisions as he might also be wrong and be responsible for disaster and chaos through his political incompetence. All the possible qualities ideally embodied in the figure of a king were no longer fully accepted, for he also failed in his divine function. He was not the fittest to carry out the political programme as he was responsible for the confrontation with France. The divine right was not, in this case, interlocked with political success. The presentation of

¹.- In G. Kane, op. cit., p. 85.

².- J. Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry. The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 263.

³.- Ibid., p. 265.

royal failure was the beginning of the end of the myth of kingship which would be wholly accomplished in Renaissance drama, for it should mean more than just having a legitimate right to the throne. Hence disappointment is the prevailing mood of the poem not only because of the political failure but also because of the degeneration of times. The poem begins with the following statement which might well be the ultimate reason of such tragic context: “Thene dredfull domesdaye it draweth neghte aftir”.¹ Doomsday, in this case, reinforces the experience of destruction and nonsense.

The consciousness of decay and the present political conditions forced the poet to change his role. He was no longer the official entertainer. His poetry had to stand for justice and air the demands of common people who suffered the exploitation of the rich time after time. However the new poetical function was not completely accepted since the authentic poets had been substituted for poetasters whose task consisted of flattering their lords through their unskillful poems. The indignation of the former is expressed as follows:

Whylome were lordes in londe that loved in thaire hertis
To here makers of myrthes, that matirs couthe fynde,
Wyse wordes with-inn, that writen were never
Ne redde in no romance that ever renke herde
Bot now a childe appon chere, with-owtten chyn wedys,
That never wroghte thurgh witt three wordes to-gedire,
Fro he can jangle als jaye, and japes can telle,
He schall be levede and lovede and lett of a while
Wele more than the man that makes hym-selven.²

¹.- In *ibid.*, p. 272.

².- In *ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

It does not mean that the other poetical functions such as didacticism and artistic delight were not relevant any more. This new approach to poetry cannot be separated from the other fundamental poetical aspects. Hence English poetry enlarges its literary considerations within a greater and more meaningful scope. Moreover new sources of inspiration and different thematic units stressing the sufferance of mankind extend the possibilities of a radical and decisive poetical experience. Therefore we cannot refer to Middle English poetry without taking into account the political involvement of the poet in the daily flux of the historical situation. From then onwards English poetry would have a critical dimension of literary opposition to social abuse. Protest and dissent shape a new understanding of poetry. And without them you could not fully understand such medieval poetical masterpieces as *Piers Plowman* or *The Canterbury Tales*. It is hard work to think about these two poetical manifestations without the positive engagement of the poet with the surrounding context as the poetical production proper becomes a practical action for criticizing moral slackness and the deterioration of a disorderly arranged social order. This dissident attitude towards reality is not only found in secular poetry but also within the religious poetical framework as “Many of the Middle English religious poems lamenting the sins of the age, although they use the terminology of doctrine, are really political”.¹

However the role of the poet consisted of something else which was much more decisive. It had a wider dimension within this context of social revisions and implications. Poetry was the expression and manifestation of solutions for improving the conditions of mankind. It had a positive aspect. Its social aim was not only to denounce some antisocial practices or abuses but also to project a utopian world where people could live in freedom, justice and peace. In this way po-

¹.- R. Hope Robbins, “Middle English Poems of Protest”, *Anglia*, 18 (1960), p. 193.

etry fulfilled a particular constructive social function as it showed that a different social order was possible where man could enjoy life and fully accomplish all his potential. It had the intention of suggesting alternative options to the radical contradictions of contemporary events. Man had not been condemned to endure suffering for ever. He had the possibility of overcoming daily tragedy and personal alienation,¹ for there was nothing permanent and irreversible. Thus poetry tried to overcome common hardships, projecting a better future in agreement with human expectations. It became a way out relieving pain and despair. This was precisely the appropriate context where medieval dreams and visions should be placed. The great popularity enjoyed by dream-poems² should be viewed from this perspective. They were an adequate answer to anxiety and frustration. At least the poet, together with his audience, could dream of illusions and utopias as dreams, like symbols, have “the connotation natural to us of an escape from reality”.³ Bearing in mind the purgative effect of dreams it is difficult to maintain that they are only “spiritual adventure”.⁴ Undoubtedly they were much more than that since their point of departure was a particular historical situation. They were characterized by their engagement with reality which was the origin of the projection of such illusion. Moreover they had the intention of transforming factual conditions. They exhibited a radical realistic involvement with life. They were not abstract entities which tried to keep man away from adversity and misfortune through a process of human alienation. We

¹.- *The Canterbury Tales* may be the possibility of overcoming adversity through the projection of a utopian reality. Cfr. José Manuel González Fernández de Sevilla, *Lo utópico como dinamismo referencial significativo en “The Canterbury Tales.”* (Alicante: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, 1988), ch. 3.

².- Cfr. A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 1.

³.- S. Medcalf (ed.), op. cit., p. 153.

⁴.- Cfr. A. C. Spearing, op. cit., p. 6.

learn from the presentation of such visions that the most ideal, in this case, became the most real, for they represented the actual possibility for the complete fulfilment of human expectations. They were not mere fancy but the expression and manifestation of contemporary interests very much concerned with the establishment of a different social order where man could enjoy a better existence without political impositions and tragic implications.

Piers Plowman is one of the poems in which the twofold aspect of Medieval English poetry is best shown. It exemplifies a positive critical protest against moral perversion and social manipulation on the one hand and an allegorical presentation of an earthly paradise on the other. Both features should be viewed as mutually connected for one is the possibility of the other. The strong attitude of opposition against injustice and abuse is clearly expressed in the poem which shows “those ingredients of the social and religious condition of England in his day which he wishes to see reformed.”¹ Moreover Langland stands for social transformation and moral regeneration. The utopian intention of the poet is reflected in the sustained visionary projection all through the poem and in the description of heavenly places as the one where you find:

There the gryse was grene growen with floures -
The primrose, the pervynke, and piliolle the riche -
The dewe appon dayeses donkede fall faire,
Burgons and blossoms and braunches full swete,
And the mery mystes full myldely gane falle:
The cuckowe, the cowschote, kene were thay bothen,
And the throstills full throly threpen in the bankes,

¹.- J. B. Trapp, Medieval English Literature. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 349.

And iche foule in that frythe faynere than other
That the derke was done and the daye lightenede.¹

This fanciful lanscape is the appropriate context for a new life full of beauty. Moreover the utopian approach to this poetry is reinforced by Christian doctrine whose creed postulates faith in a supernatural order where man can achieve complete happiness since pain and death will no longer be the tragic and irreversible episodes of human life. Thus Christ becomes a heroic figure, for He is the Chosen one to help mankind in its fight against destruction and evil. He is the Saviour who leads the way to regeneration. However His redemptive role has not only religious connotations but also a social dimension with political implications. He is presented as a young knight “that cometh to be dubbed,/ To geten hym gilte spores ow galoches ycouped ...² His surprising purpose is to destroy “the fend and fals doom to deye”.³ He is just a very peculiar warrior since “humility and passivity”⁴ are his only weapons. It seems that Langland intends, in this case, to set up a parallelism between “the feudal society which will highlight the theological issues of the atonement and the redemption of mankind”.⁵ In this way *Piers Plowman* shows that the poetry of this period is not only a literary craft but also an effective instrument of social awareness which tries to oppose the political conditions of the time through the projection of a utopian world. It becomes *consolatio peccatorum* in their everlasting confrontation with adversity and sin.

¹.- In J. Speirs, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

².- W. Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman. A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, A. V. C. Schmidt (ed.), (London: J. M. Dent, (1978), rpt. 1984), p. 220.

³.- *Ibid.*

⁴.- A. Finley, “The Warrior Christ and the Unarmed Hero”, G. Kratzmann and J. Simpson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁵.- R. A. Waldron, “Langland’s Originality: The Christ-Knight and the Harrowing of Hell”, *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Social Consciousness and Literary Dissent ...

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