

THE "LAMENT OF SAINT DENIS"
IN THE LIGHT OF READ'S CRITICISM

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"..... The famous Grecian fanatic, who gave himself out for Dionysius the Areopagite, disciple of St. Paul, and who, under the protection of this venerable name, gave laws and instructions to those this venerable name, gave laws and instructions to those that were desirous of raising their souls above all human things, in order to unite them to their great source by sublime contemplation....."

From the Institutes of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, translated by Archibald Maclaine (1764).

1.

I, said the moon, who have been a maiden
 worshipp'd of man
am now but a burnish'd emblem
 of the sun's span.

But the old witch in me yet
 is wooing, wooing.
And mine is the light of day
 in this memorial noon.

2.

O hallowed is the moon and holy.
A bowl of languish'd fire. The years are cold
Seventy since the sun shone in midnight ecstasy
Seventy and each year shortening towards the noon
And then leaving this everlasting night
with a fitful symbol in the broken sky.

3.

The path is steep
 Narrowing between rock walls: an uncapp'd cavern
 Where the ledges drip and the anguish'd winds
 Woo hollows of eternal woe.
 And there a rheumy host of men
 Climb burden'd, stumbling in the dark unless
 The clouds are torn to let the light
 Stray raggedly across the land. Straining thongs

Cut their breasts: breasts will break
 And spill their bloody treasure on the rocks
 But still the unbroken with their burdens will climb
 Between the sheer limits of stone
 Into the tempest that gathers
 Like a dark crown above the hill.

4.

Their lips
 Are held in the tension of lust, and lines
 Of unenlighte'd care have cut
 Across the mask upon the bone: the bone is fair in man
 Only the flesh is false, puckering at the influx of light
 In lewd habitual knots of vice.

5.

The bones that dance after death
 are very feat, very nice
 And the empty box has forgotten
 its load of rocking dice.

6.

They have gathered on their backs
 Arranged burdens: seventy years
 Have sorted out a neat set
 Of necessary tools: food for a long march
 A blanket for the night, and a burden of unessential things.

All coming to a sea-level, having met there
And having a common journey to make,
They have formed into ranks
With a leader at their head.

7.

At the summit there will be light, or sleep——
At least some release.

But when the sense of labour in limbs had slackened
And they were aware in the dark of a level
And of a bare reach into the sky,
They were still burdened, and in doubt
Whether to descend or wait for a dawn,

But a dawn might be very long
After the slow declension of light.

8.

And then a faint rumour in the night
An approaching murmur of enemies.
Their hearts were suddenly loud in their still bodies
Fluttering wildly within those livid tunics of flesh.

No radiance of the moon
Came to illustrate their madness,
Only the wind
To incorporate their anguish.

The menace grew louder
And out of the valley rising
Into the night came another host
Clothed in light, with limbs unveiled and free.

Their wan bodies
Contained their light ;
No radiance was shed

On rocks or on the opposed throng.

With whirl pool eyes that were innocent
They searched the night,
Eager to find for their intense thoughts
An habitation in light.

9.

When they came into the presence of the silent standing men
When their guiding fingers that should meet wet rocks
Touched warm flesh,
They halted.
And out of the place where they had expected light
Out of the dark well of night
Came the tired voice of an old man :

We hold the way ; no other host can pass
Save across our broken limbs, our broken breasts.
We have toiled too long : we can entertain no guest
Save death—death who will deliver us to sleep and rest.

The voice mingled with the wind shrilling in the rocks
And rippled across a bent harvest
Of mute appealing hands.

And then the wind fell to fury.
Vacuous chaos sucked air, spewed the waters of the broken cloud
Against flesh and stone.
The old men cowered under the rocks
Waiting for the end.

But the naked children fled together in their fear.
Too many terrors dwelt in the unseen world.
Inward, in the circle of linked arms,
They could imagine calm.

10.

Out of the storm came a figure carrying its sever'd head

Like a lantern in one hand
And stood between the throngs
And waited till the wind had lost
Its melancholy eloquence, and the dark crown of clouds
Had drifted into the pervious earth.

Then on the distraught scene
The stars and the moon shed a fabulous light
And the head began to speak,
Its eyes were covered with deathly lids
And the lips that moved
Were like pale rubber valves
Distended by a wayward pulse.

11.

Think not that I am a storm-quelling spirit
And drive before me all the unorder'd forces of nature.
Rather I am the storm, which, sunk in me
For a while evades your senses.
I was of the lambs of the sacred flock
And honour'd for my death.
But now with a doleful symbol
I come to embody this moment of time.

On this mountain top
I stand where a dark stream of old men
Has met an impediment of light—
A dawn breaking on the southern side
Against the blue northern night.
These old men who have come to meet me here
Are sons of old men, and of old men before,
The living point of all the dark forces of the past.

And these children of light
Are the empty forms winding down to earth
There to receive sight
And objects to their senses.

These two streams cross in me,
Past and future are but two lines
Intersecting at a point: in me.

From this point of time I survey eternity,
I am master of all nature and knowledge
And all that exists in time
Moves through me: these fair children
Pass into life, these old bones disintegrate.
And I, in a moment of time,
Include them all;
Yesterday, tomorrow, and today
Are in my single glance
And the embrace of my wither'd arms.
And here in me is the grace of living:
Many changes must I undergo
As these streams give and take
The lanterns of a temporal light.

I am chaos and dark nothingness;
The storm you met on the way
Is now held in me.
In this lightless boody,
Uncrown'd, ungrac'd, devoid,
The tumult reigns.
In a moment,
In any other moment,
The storm will issue,
The chaos will be without—
In the past and in the future,
Yesterday and to-morrow.

And in that moment I shall stand
In ordain'd radiance.
A visible exaltation shall possess my limbs,
My lips shall be rosy and the porch of life,

And my eyes the light of reason.

12.

Rocks

Rain

riven rocks

eroded plains

Pain

anguish'd eyes

hands and lips

entreat in vain

Here is night

fabulous light

of icy stars

owlets screech

Our child is lost

in dream I have seen

a black bat lac'd

to his dead white face.

In an essay on T. S. Eliot's poetry in *The True Voice of Feeling* Read sets up what he regards as the standards of modern poetry. He speaks of Eliot's aim as having been, "a long search for sincerity of utterance: a long disciplined effort to avoid the artificiality of rhetoric," and defines poetry, as distinguished from verse, prose and ordinary speech, as a mode of symbolic communication in which we are dealing with emotional intensity of such a degree that poetry becomes the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all. In such a language, "rhythm's main function is not to underline grammar, nor even

to emphasize meaning; but to give ease of movement to phrases. Read suspects Eliot, even though he has rationalized his poetic technique into a system of rules, "writes verse with a minimum consciousness of rules: that the form of his verse proceeds from the act and condition of its origin."

Read is writing about Eliot's verse, which he admires more than his criticism, but if we examine some of Read's other statements on modern poetry we can find inklings of what to expect from his own poetry and possibly even a philosophical justification of it. Read states in, "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle" that, "all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed...." And from *Form in Modern Poetry*:

Poetry is properly speaking a transcendental quality—a sudden transformation which words assume under a particular influence—and we can no more define this quality than we can define a state of grace. We can only make a number of distinctions, of which the main is the broad but elemental one between poetry and prose. I use the word 'elemental' deliberately, because I believe the difference between poetry and prose to be, not one of surface qualities, not of form in any sense, not even of mode of expression, but absolutely of essence. It is not a case of the mind, in need of expression, choosing between two ways—one poetry, the other prose. There is no choice for the particular state of mind in which Poetry originates. It must either seek poetic expression, or it must simply not be expressed; for an altogether lower tension, involving a different kind of mentality, must be substituted before the activity of prose expression can intervene.

And on page 44 of the same book:

All art originates in an act of intuition, or vision. But such intuition or vision must be identified with knowledge, being fully present only when consciously objectified. This act of vision or intuition is, physically, a state of concentration or tension in the mind. The process of poetry consists firstly in main-

taining this vision in its integrity, and secondly in expressing this vision in words. Words are generally (that is to say, in prose) the analysis of a mental state. But in the process of poetic composition words rise into the conscious mind as objective 'things' with a definite equivalence in the poet's state of mental intensity. They are arranged or composed in a sequence or rhythm which is sustained until the mental state of tension in the poet is exhausted or released by this objective equivalence.

Read goes on to criticize the "tyranny of wit-writing" of the English Classicists such as Pope and Dryden as being counter to what he calls the art of poetry. He claims theirs is not poetry, but mere elocution and eloquence. To Read, Wordsworth and Coleridge picked up the stream of poetry where Shakespeare left it after it had begun with Chaucer. To Read it is 'Organic form' which is the standard of English poetry rather than strict, formal classical form bound by regular rhyme and rhythm. Good free verse is more difficult to write than lyric verse because it is so difficult to disguise the lack of imagination. The charm of regular rhyme and meter can often hide this lack, but there has to be a tremendous force of inspiration to make free verse come off. To me Blake's free verse is the standard of measurement in English poetry, and it is just possible that the reason Read has published so little poetry lately is he, with his keen aesthetic sensibility, feels his best doesn't come up to Blake's standard. This supposition seems reasonable when we examine a statement from his latest book, *The True Voice of Feeling*:

.....The romantic principle asserts that form is an organic event, proceeding from the intuitive experience of the artist. The form is realized by the artist in the act of intuition: in the moment of his penetration of the veil of appearances that separates man from the realm of essence. Such a spontaneously emergent *form* must be sharply distinguished from a superinduced *shape*. A

shape is something pre-existent, belonging to the realm of existence, and essence can only be deformed by being forced into such a ready-made container.

In conjunction with this, it is interesting to note that in "The Lament" Read goes back to Milton, Dante and Blake for his material and his images. Although in other poems Read does attempt to fuse a scientific vocabulary with a traditional poetic one, he does not in "The Lament."

Thus in Read's poetry, if we follow his own canon for what form in poetry is, we must not look for regular metre and an ordered rhyme scheme. On the contrary we must look for 'organic' form which springs out of the unconscious or pre-conscious. We must look for, "diction, rhyme and metre.... fully emancipated from formal artifice." The poet he admires is "free to act creatively under laws of his own origination." The poet is obliged to originate laws of his own. Speaking of his theory he states, "[it] is not the theory of a particular school; it is the theory of all essential English poetry."

In support of his assertion, Milton writes in his introduction to *Paradise Lost*,

The measure is English heroic verse without rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin—rime being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame metre; graced indeed since by the use of some famous modern poets, carried away by custom, but much to their own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than they would have expressed them..... This neglect then of rime so little to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers; that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and

modern bondage of riming.

In this light it is significant that in "The Lament of Saint Denis," Read should go back to material that inspired Dante, Milton and Blake. When Read speaks of the length of a poem, the first two pieces he cites are the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. He mentions that they are both very long, but then he attempts to set up a qualitative measure for length rather than a linear measure. He infers that he considers *The Ancient Mariner*, *Ode: Intimations Of Immortality*, *Lamia*, Donne's *Progress of the Soul*, and Eliot's *Waste Land* as long poems. He sets up a corollary and calls a long poem, "one which unites by artifice several or many such emotional moods; though here the artifice might imply a single dominating idea which in itself might be an emotional unity."

Ten pages further on Read expands his criteria of what a long poem is :

The story is told, is perhaps invented; the story is the inspiration (and in this case also the motivation) of the poetry. The length of the poem is not motivated by the force of the poetic inspiration; but the poet will be poetically inspired by the narrative to the extent that he visualises the event of the narrative, and is moved by the visualisation. He will be moved so long as, in the famous phrase, he keeps his eye on the objects, on the visualised events."

But the long poem does not become great by virtue of the profundity of expression. What is needed is a, "power of execution which creates, forms, and constitutes; not the profoundness of single thoughts, not the richness of imagery, not the abundance of illustration." He says a page later :

By far the easiest method of securing the necessary emotional tension throughout the length of a 'long' poem is to embody its theme in a dramatic myth, which

is the way of Milton in *Paradise Lost*. The only other method is to secure a consistent and continuous vitality of expression by the operation, in every line of the poem, of a dominant emotion Poetry of any length is visual by virtue of its action, or by virtue of its imagery. It can never, whilst still remaining poetry, be merely informative or conceptual.....It is not enough even to be 'visual'; prose can be 'visual'. Poetry must be visual in a swift, intuitive way. It must also, by its daring, adventure into a world of sense and sound beyond the reach of the mundane instruments of prose.

The above attempts to show the standards Read himself sets for criticizing the best 'long poetry' in the English Language, and it is predominately by Read's standards that I want to deal with "The Lament." I want to examine Read's Poem in light of what he himself states about English poetry. To me he does have "a power of execution which creates, forms, and constitutes" a universe of its own. But for what Read is trying to say, I think his universe lacks the awesome, overall force and the intensity of the minutely visualized imagery of Dante, Milton and Blake. Compared with them Read builds a universe the size of a pea. Read does make his universe visual and he does carry his dominant emotion straight through, but as compactly powerful as "The Lament" is, in sheer violence of description how can he match the intensity of image Dante presents?

No cask without an end stave or a head
 E'er gaped so wide as one shade I beheld,
 Cloven from chin to where the wind is voided.
 Between his legs his entrails hung in coils;
 The vitals were exposed to view, and too
 That sorry paunch which changes food to filth.

Or Blake,

The Cities send to one another saying: 'My sons are Mad
 With wine of cruelty. Let us plait a scourge, O Sister City.'

Children are nourish'd for the Slaughter ; once the Child was fed
With Milk, but wherefore now are Children fed with blood?
The Horse is of more value than the Man The Tyger fierce
Laughs as the Human form ; the Lion mocks and thirsts for blood.
They cry, 'O Spider, spread thy web! Enlarge thy bones & fill'd
With marrow, sinews & flesh, Exalt thyself, attain a voice.

II

The following is one possible explication of Read's poem which I hope will help the reader in finding a coherent paraphrase of his own. The first two stanzas are introductory. The first states the contradiction of the sun and moon. The sun is the real, active element: the moon is the passive, fantastic, mysterious or romantic element. The first part is a statement that at the present the sun has overshadowed the moon and that man has denied the moon in man. But the moon, even though overshadowed, still lies in the under abode. And her light in its realm, the realm of the irrational, of the unconscious, is as strong as the sun's. The moon herself states that in the beginning she and the sun were one and in the end they will again rejoin.

In the second stanza there is a noticeable change in rhythm and in point of view. The chorus takes over from the moon, and the rhythm flows more slowly and solemnly. First it echoes praises to the glory of the moon, but then it picks up a theme which is developed more fully as the poem continues: the theme which depicts man's life on earth in terms of the biblical three score and ten. Here is stated that at the beginning of man's span there is a state of equilibrium. With birth this equilibrium is

broken and the eternal contradictions of life: the sun force and the moon force begin their conflict which can only end with a reunity, but one in which both will be transformed from their original state; "That which is whole, torn asunder, That which is in part, finding its whole again throughout the universe."

Read seems to be dealing with a dialectical process, which, to me, offers a key to the whole poem. I will expand this point at the end of the essay and compare my interpretation of the dialectic in the poem with Read's dialectic as stated in "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle."

In the third stanza a new theme is introduced, while the tone and rhythm are not changed. From the second stanza through the first four lines of the third, the chorus gradually builds to a pitch. From, "and there a rheumy host of men climb burden'd.....", through stanza seven the focus gradually changes. First there was the song of the sun and moon and next the strange Earth which consists of a hemmed in, tortuous path. Then the focus sharpens to men on the path, and we see what kind of men these are. First we see them as a struggling group. Then we see why they are struggling and finally we see how they are affected by the burdens bound to their backs. We see their tortured faces in a focus so clear it makes one tremble. We, who have floated in from the extremities of outer space where we surveyed the entire universe created within the poem, float closer to the earth till by the fourth stanza we hover just overhead the struggling figures with their care riven faces and

lust-tensed lips. We shudder at the sight while our unseen guide chants the dance of the dead bones and begins to explain what these men are doing. Imagistically the poem is related to Dante's, but because his universe is so much more massive, I think it is also more terrifying. Structurally the poem is related to *Paradise Lost*, as both of them are divided into 12 parts. However in Read's poem we are left with no alternative. It is too easy to dismiss the *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* by denying the metaphysics or theology involved, but Read does not allow us that luxury in his poem for he is dealing with epic material in a modern philosophical context.

In the eighth stanza a new force is introduced. It is a force of opposition. But this antithetical form is analogous to the paradox of the sun and the moon which is the first stanza. In the 10th stanza a third force enters. The entire stanza is a monologue in which St. Denis explains who he is. There is a shift in the point of view again. We no longer hear the voice of the chorus or voice of the invisible guide, whichever way one wants to interpret it, but we hear the voice of St. Denis himself who appears as a synthesis between the two forces.

In the final stanza, the chorus takes over, and our focus widens again. We are, just as at the beginning, looking at the total universe created in the poem, only now after our surveillance we are left with the image of the pained and struggling humanity of Read's universe, which is just a heightened and surrealist representation of our own.

III

In "The Lament" Read uses a free verse that has a rationale of its own. If the reader will search he will find he can scan the lines and find a structure of traditional metric lines and feet and that their choice is not arbitrary. I do not intend analyzing the entire poem and relating the structure to the contents for that would make another paper of a very different kind than the one I want to write now, but I will pick out several passages and demonstrate for the reader who feels so inclined, what sort of structure he can expect to find and how he may relate it to the content of the work.

In the first stanza there are many technical overtones worked into eight lines. The first that comes into mind is the traditional ballad stanza of iambic tetrameter lines alternated with iambic trimeter and a rhyme scheme of 'ABCB'. Here is an example from Coleridge's "Love" which, interestingly enough, also has parallel imagery, the paradox of beauty and witchery from which probably came the English word 'bewitching' which is a complimentary term for an attractive woman:

There came and looked him in the face
An angel beautiful and bright;
And that he knew it was a Fiend,
This miserable Knight.

It is interesting that Read should open a poem like this with a rhythm reminiscent of the ballad, because the ballad in English literature has traditionally been used for expressing the grotesque, fantastic or supernatural.

But Read has varied the stanza, and I think wisely so, for it would be too sharp a break between a regular ballad stanza and the Greek-like chorus of the next stanza. Read's variation consists of using a counterpointed rhythm, as defined by Hopkins, in which the natural reading of the first line has four beats and the counterpoint echo of five beats. The second line has two beats, the natural reading being one choriamb (a trochee plus an iamb) and the counterpoint two iambic feet. The third line has three beats with the counterpoint an iambic trimeter line such as you find in regular ballad stanza. The last line again has two beats. The rhyme scheme of the first four lines is 'ABCB', but in the second four lines he gradually eases away from rhyme by using 'woeing' and 'noon' which partly prepares the way for further irregularities.

Throughout the poem Read uses lines varying from one beat to seven but combines them so they often echo each other and give different rhythmic effects according to the context. For example see the first and second quatrains of stanza eight. The last two lines of the first quatrains have 6 and 7 beats respectively and the next quatrain echos the beat in reverse by a couplet of three and four beats, echoing the seven and a couplet of two and four beats echoing the six. I can only try to assure the reader that the finger counting came after feeling the similarity of rhythm and hope that though the process may be reversed for him, the outcome will be the same.

Then notice how the last three segments of stanza nine all

end in trimeter lines which echo each other and help give the overall rhythmic effect. You can also find a complex juxtaposition of meters and line length in the first sextet of stanza ten. Notice, too, the change of rhythm in the lines, "The stars and the moon shed a fabulous light / And the head began to speak." After the skip and the hop that anapest gives helps express the light of the moon and the stars better than probably another rhythmic foot could, there is a definite slow down when, "The head began to speak."

And last, in stanza eleven slow spondee gives ponderous emphasis to "dark stream of old men." To me a revision of this to, "I stand and watch a marching file of dying men / Imprisoned by the light in mountain den," and an attempt to express the poem in heroic couplets would only pervert the poem into a dull, monotonous cadence. Thus I think Read is aesthetically correct in using his various rhythms to express different states of emotion. This is also Eliot's technique in *The Waste Land*, certainly at least technically a modern masterpiece.

It might be helpful to the reader to know who St. Denis was. In early Christian history there were two Denises, St. Denis, the patron saint of France, and Denis (Dionysus) the Areopagite. St. Denis was the first bishop of Paris and was sent to Gaul at the time of the emperor Decius, where he suffered martyrdom at the village of Catulliacus. He was entombed there and in the fifth century a basilica was built over the tomb. In the first half of the ninth century, Hilduin, abbot of St Denis wrongly identi-

fied the two. It is Saint Denis who is generally represented as carrying his head in his hands because he is supposed to have been tortured and beheaded by the Roman governor of that part of Gaul.

Denis (Dionysius) the Areopagite was the first bishop of Athens and the Greek Church takes the two men to have been the same person. In the 6th century a body of Christian neoplatonist work was attributed to him:

The first of these works, entitled, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, deals with the three triads of orders of angelic beings, the second, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, with their three triads of orders of angelic beings. Heaven and Earth are thus woven together into one grand structure of correspondencies, suggesting the later system worked out by Swedenborg. Through these graded hierarchies God communicates himself to man.....In the *Mystic Theology* the author explains the significance of the system of symbols which he has hitherto employed and sets forth an intuitive mysticism, the soul's rapture to the divine.

In these works neoplatonic and Christian mystics are brought into one line of historical development. The writings were probably produced in the East, possibly Egypt or Syria. They had a great influence on Christian European thought throughout the middle ages and furnished inspiration to Hughes de Saint-Victor and Thomas Aquinas, the 15th century Florintine Platonists, the English humanists, Colet and Gracyn and William Blake. "Their influence is plainly traceable in Dante's Divine Comedy and even in Milton." And from a Jesuit History of Philosophy:

The works entitled *De Divinis Nominibus*, *Theologia Mystica*, and *De Coelisti Et Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, which were at one time attributed to st. Dionysius the Areopagite, of whom mention is made in the Acts of the Apostles, are now universally acknowledged to belong to the end of the fifth

century. They contain the last exposition of Christian Neo-Platonism. The ineffable superiority of God with respect to the world, the emanations of creatures from God, the arrangement of all created beings in a scale of gradual descent from God, the final return of all things to their first source, the return of man to God by means of contemplative ecstasy—all these Neo-Platonic elements are present in the philosophy of Dionysius. There can, however, be no doubt that Dionysius understood these doctrines in a sense perfectly compatible with the teaching of the Church. (p.223, *History of Philosophy*, William Turner, Ginn and Company, (New York), 1929.

From these sources we can see that Saint Denis was first of all not Dionysius the Areopagite and second, that the works the inspiration for this poem came from were not written by Saint Denis, but by an unknown neoplatonist. But the point is that, within a framework of modern philosophy, Read is trying to reinterpret for modern man and a modern world, through the character of Saint Denis, Dante, Milton and the neoplatonic works mentioned. Saint Denis's lament today is still, oh man, look at yourself and at your world and see where you really are and where you are really going.

Contrary to Dante, Read has no divine God. After all did not Zarathustra murmur to himself after he left the saint in the woods, "Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that *God is dead?*"

To Dante the path will not always be forbidding, but when the Lion is killed by the hound who feeds, not, ".....upon the land / Or riches, but on wisdom, love, and valor," then the mountain the Lion guards the path to will be, "that happy mountain, the origin and cause of every joy." But it is the same

mountain in both poems :

When I had come before a mountain base—
 The ending of that steep and rugged valley
 That lately had so struck my heart with fear—
 I raised my eyes, and saw the mountain's shoulder
 Already covered by the planet's rays
 That safely guide the steps of other men.

To Read the mountain base also rises from the valley where,

The path is steep
 Narrowing between rock walls: an uncapp'd cavern
 Where the ledges drip and the anguish'd winds
 Woo Hollows of eternal woe.

In Read's poem the light is also there, but it does not "safely guide the steps of other men." Rather the light only shines when, "The clouds are torn to let the light// Stray raggedly across the land" This mountain can never be the ideal for Read that it was for Dante, for Read there is no, ".....Lady most compassionate in heaven," who, "Takes so much pity on this man's sad plight// That she assails the cruel degree on high."

The image of, "and there a rheumy host of men// Climb burden'd, stumbling in the dark.....", is also in *Purgatorio*, Canto 11:

Praying good speed, both for themselves and us,
 Round about the cornice moved those shades,
 Unequally tormented; but they each
 Were wearied with a burden—such a load
 As one might fancy in an evil dream—
 To purge away the sullies of the world.

Indeed, we ought to help them wash away
 The marks which they bore hence, pure and light

They may go forth to reach the stárry spheres.

Again Read makes different use of the imagery. Dante's souls still have hope of shedding their burdens and reaching heaven. Read's souls, as they near the summit, can only face St. Denis, the storm himself, and the spirits decending to be born. For his souls there is only struggle until the final freeze. One possible reason for the brevity of Read's poem might be that for Read the problem of existence is much simpler: After the first upsetting of the equilibrium there is only struggle until the final destruction.

Stanza seven has an interesting twist to it. Man, climbing with his burdens thinks, "At the summit there will be light, or sleep—// At least some release." But it is paradoxical that although he makes the journey of full seventy years, in a struggle for both personal and mass equilibrium, as he nears the top he again finds only struggle in the "temptest that gathers // Like a dark crown above the hill." Then he is in a dilemma. He does not know, "whether to decend or wait for a dawn." This is both the dilemma of modern man, and in a sense, a universal dilemma: Beings struggle simultaneously with all their internal contradictions and with external forces. Specifically I think of the medieval feudal lords of Japan fighting rivals to their front and to their rear fighting typhoons, famines and insurrections. I also think of my neurotic army captain, poor beast, who to his front fought his men, to his rear fought the colonel and stood helplessly and confusedly inbetween gnashing his teeth. This, to

me, is the reality of the "uncapped cavern// Where the ledges drip and the anguished winds// Woo hollows of eternal woe." In his trap the captain becomes irritable and impotent. For he is blind and cannot see the beauty and horror of his trap.

Then the host came upon him and all those behind them, and there was, "no radiance of the moon//... ..To illustrate their madness." The captain is blind, just as are all those who follow :

On the wide level of a mountain's head,
 (I knew not where, but 'twas some faery place)
 Their pinions, ostrich-like, for sails out-spread,
 Two lovely children run an endless race,
 A sister and a brother!
 This far outstripp'd the other ;
 Yet ever runs she with reverted face,
 And looks and listens for the boy behind :
 For he, alas! is blind!
 O'er rough and smooth with even step he passed,
 And knows not whether he be first or last.

The old men's host was, "clothed in light, with limbs unveiled and free." They are still unrepressed; they are not bound and veiled by reality. But when they emerge and touch warm flesh, they find out for the first time that there is only "dark well of night." They find out that they must struggle. First they must even struggle to reach the valley floor, and after they get there, they must just struggle to get back up to the top. It is there that, "these two streams cross in me,// Past and future are but two lines// Intersecting at a point: in me." Upon hearing this truth the old men cower, "under the rocks// Waiting for the end," and the young flee with only the memory of "the circle of

linked arms," where, "they could imagine calm."

In Read's poem everything comes together in stanza 11. Saint Denis informs us that the old men who are climbing out of the cavern of sensuous life into the higher realms of peace, incessantly struggle against the yet formless, feelingless youth of the new age who descend at the same time the old men are climbing. The old can climb if they want to, in fact they must climb, but if they expect to find peace at the top, they are mistaken. Even on this divine mountain top there is struggle. Only after disintegration will the struggle cease. The struggle starts with conception, at which time an equilibrium is reached for only a fleeting instant, but then it is immediately destroyed by the first mitosis. From this time on it is only struggle, struggle till the last rotten cell erodes into dust. And even then it goes on, force against force, each struggling to attain the frigid state of equilibrium of a cold meteorite. The struggle starts with the fragmentation of the sun and continues until the last matter turns to black, cold, meteoric rock. The poem ends on this note. The sun and the moon come together, and so do the dying and the not-yet-born. The poem tells us that the final synthesis is really quite simple: Riding on the last chip of frozen star will be only the memory, nothing more, of a screeching owlet and a child Adam with "a black bat lac'd// to his dead white face."

In the beginning the sun and the moon were one. They both shone day and night as part of the same fiery glob of mass. Then they separated, and the irreversible process of the growth,

maturity and decline of the universe set in. This is mirrored in every bit of mass, organic or inorganic. The human span of seventy years is just one of a myriad reflections of this same repetition. In the micro-cosmos of human existence, we see only an image of what happens in the macro-cosmos: All matter and spirit struggles to attain a lost equilibrium, an equilibrium that will only be found in final destruction and frigidity: Surely man is the most splendid blob of matter in the universe. For what other creature would have the heavenly intelligence to solve the one, final problem of his universe?

V

In "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle" Read is much more optimistic than in his poem, "The Lament." In the essay he says, "Only the fact that history shows that the goad may be driven too deep, that out of extreme suffering will come general revolt—only this melancholy thought saves us from complete despair." In another passage he writes, "Surrealism is anti-rational, but it is equally anti-emotional. If you wish to reduce surrealism to its foundations you will find the only basic elements on which any useful structure can be built—the basic elements of natural science and psychology. The surrealist builds on that materialistic basis. But he builds. He creates. And he has his method of building, his craft of logic, his dialectic." These two passages taken together, on first sight, seem to fly in the face of the message of the poem, as I understand it. They imply that a rational, "scientific humanitarian" synthesis of internal and external reality is conceivable: an artist's synthetic creation that can

lead to a freer, more humanitarian world. The poem implies that in the long run such a synthesis is futile. According to it in the end there is only:

Rocks
rain
river rocks
eroded plains

Pain
anguish'd eyes
hands and lips
entreat in vain

Here is night
fabulous light
of icy stars
owlets screech

Our child is lost
in dream I have seen
a black bat lac'd
to his dead white face.

But the long run and the short term are two different aspects. Even if Read's poetic insight steers him correctly, that is no reason not to make the most of the knowledge modern man possesses to comfort man on his downhill treak. If I am correct, Read's poetic insight, as shown in detail in "The Lament", says man and the universe is doomed; but in his prose work he implies that to sit back and wait for the coming disaster, content with the political, social, and economic status quo, is to default in man's duty to man in much the same way as did the medieval churchman.

Read expresses his dialectic as follows in "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle:"

If we consider the natural world, we soon become aware that its most striking characteristic is not permanency, solidity or stability, but *continuous change* or development. Physicists now affirm that not only the organic world, not merely this earth we live on, but the whole universe is undergoing a process of change. Dialectics is nothing more than a logical explanation of how such a change takes place. It does not suffice to say that 'it grows', or 'it decays', 'it runs down', 'it expands': these phases are vague abstractions. I spaces here. The change must take place in a definite way. Between one phase and another of that development there must intervene an active principle, and Hegel suggested that this principle was actually one of opposition and interaction. That is to say, to produce any new situation (i. e., any departure from an existing condition of equilibrium) there must previously exist two elements so opposed to each other and yet so related to each other that a solution or resolution is demanded; such a solution being in effect a new phase of development (temporary state of equilibrium) which preserves some of elements of the interacting phases, eliminates others, but is qualitatively different from the previously existing state of opposition.....

The eventual result of the dialectic is a state of equilibrium, but the more complex a system is the longer it takes to reach the equilibrium. Thus when a complex system changes, even the new product itself is dynamic and changing. A completely closed system is practically impossible, even in a physical laboratory. For all practical purposes, then, observable reality is not a matter of change versus no change, but rather of the degree of change. Taking specific human societies as a case in point, we can compare English society of the early 19th century with Japanese society of the same period.

Most Englishmen in 1815 still worked on the land or in trades connected with agriculture, though within the next generation most Englishmen became townsmen engaged in industry: sixteen years after Waterloo the

country was almost exactly half-agricultural, half-industrial. Large urban populations were gathering in the north-west of England,.....During the first thirty years of the century Birmingham and Sheffield doubled in size, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and Glasgow more than doubled. London in 1815, was above the million mark, and five years later numbered 1, 274, 000." (pp. 11—12, *England In Nineteenth Century*, David Thomson, Pelican Books.)

We have seen how...the feudal rulers of Japan attempted to arrest the processes of change by legislating in perpetuity and by fostering a morality that seemed to them to fix an order in which they were supreme. Ieyasu and his immediate successors pursued this fardoomed policy in a most thorough-going manner; but the signs of failure are visible from the very outset and the history of the Tokugawa may be read as a lesson in the futility of all such attempts to resist powerful and uncomprehended forces. (p. 441, *Japan, A Short Cultural History*, G. B. Sansom, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. (New York) 1943.)

In both societies there was constant change, although early students of the Tokugowa period thought they saw a completely stable society that only began to change after contact with the West. The difference in rate of change in England and Japan was only one of degree. I have dwelt in this much detail on what I look upon as the emperical fact of constant, irrevocable change, because there are critics and creative writers who would deny the fact. I am refering specifically to an article in *Sewanne Review*, Spring 1952, by Russell Kirk, "Burke and the Principle of Oder," in which Kirk is advocating an ordered, hierarchial society founded on a recognition of providential design with unavoidable differences between man and man and God and man. To him, for example, the French Revolution was a tremendous moral convulsion from which society would not recover until

the disease, the disorder of revolt against Providence, had run its course.

At the very center of Read's poem, "The Lament," is the idea of change through a dialectic process. As I interpret the poem, it is the very change, and the constant opposition of forces that accompanies it, which causes man's misery in the world. As long as he and his environment are constantly changing, as long as there are forces in the universe pitted one against the other, man cannot know peace.

He can only know peace in his own destruction, just as change in the universe will only cease when all is cold, and just as radioactivity will only cease when the active elements become lead.