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# Expression of the Modern World in the Works of W.H. Auden

Margaret Mary McNulty  
*Loyola University Chicago*

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EXPRESSION OF THE MODERN WORLD IN THE  
WORKS OF W. H. AUDEN

BY  
MARGARET MARY MC NULTY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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## INTRODUCTION

Since the last war our generation has passed through an extreme upheaval in almost every phase of its existence, with the physical universe being made smaller by the most rapid series of changes in history. Due to advancements in the radio, the telegraph, the railroads, and the airplane, the world has been brought to the door of every man. Political systems have been radically changed by theories of socialization and communism; and especially by the economic collapse of the late twenties. Morals and institutions of long and tried values, such as the churches and the family life were questioned to such an extent in literature and in life that eventually nothing was left to believe in. The modern man of sensibility was defined as being in a state of spiritual and intellectual skepticism. The Wasteland of T. S. Eliot gives a picture of the intellectual and spiritual state of this modern man of sensibility. The poetry of a sensitive and gifted poet who writes of the world in which he lives, such as Eliot has done, naturally reflects many of the characteristics of that world. This is true of most of the younger poets today, and is especially true of W. H. Auden.

Auden has come to be one of the most outstanding poets of our time. He has produced some of the most difficult, and at the same time some of the finest verse written during the thirties. Lengthy and minute discussions of his works in the important scholarly journals and magazines give evidence to this fact.

This investigation, which involves a detailed study of all of Auden's works, will point out chiefly the relationship between Auden and his world. The left wing political opinion, the physiological and psychological point of view of the poet will be illustrated as they relate to the social and moral philosophy of the modern scene. The techniques and methods of execution, the use of language, figures of speech, symbols, and verse forms will also be referred to since they are intimately connected with the problem of expression in the contradictory, inconsistent, and complicated world faced by the poet.

Auden came from a substantial English middle-class family. He was born in 1907 and was still a very small boy at the time of the first World War. His father left for the service; so did some of his teachers. It was a bewildering and confusing time for his young mind to comprehend, and the reality of the event did not come to him until later, through literature. Plays, novels, and poetry which told of the horrible experiences of war, in particularly the poetry of Wilfred Owen, the soldier poet, finally made him see the futility of the struggle.

Auden's boyhood and school days, including the years at Oxford, were spent in a conventional Victorian middle-class group. He could have studied medicine, or law, or business administration, or politics, and taken his place among the people who have things in English society. He need never have associated himself with the rest of the world.

The question arises then: Why should he feel, even partially, the

suffering of the lower classes? Why should he feel that the imperialistic, war-breeding tactics of the nation had any emphatic bearing on his personal life?

He felt these things because he has a highly sensitive nature. An excellent education, and traveling experiences combined with keen observation and intellect had made of him a man of the world with an interest and feeling for the events of the day. He saw first the general dissatisfaction—the lack of health in his own class. These people he knew at home and in school were all putting on a show. They were not happy on their estates, in their Bath Chairs, because they were not leading full or even serviceable lives. They had no physical or spiritual aim in view, no God to serve. The jazz age, as it has so appropriately been called, escaping life through drink and sex and ambition for wealth and power, was a picture to the poet, to the man, of sordidness and decay.

For a clear understanding of the poet and his problems it is necessary to have some comprehension of the history of the times and the implications of this history on the thinking and feelings of man. It is, of course, impossible to present even a short account of the twentieth century, from the beginning of the second decade to the years of the Second World War. It would result in a record that would detail wars, the economic fluctuations, the rise of new political theories, the perfection of machinery, the steady progress of industrialism, and many other complicated and complex trends.

Since this thesis has as its major premise, the connection between Auden and his world, more stress will be centered on the various influences rather than on the over-crowded series of historical events. It is the influences that have affected mankind as a whole, fully as much as those intimate ones that may have affected the individual life, that are reflected in Auden's poetry.

When he went to Germany after he was graduated from Oxford more of the distress of the upset world was brought home to him. Persecution in the form of discrimination against the Jews, dictatorship with all its implications was beginning on the march which was to end in bloodshed.

During England's slow recovery from the conflict and America's rise to what proved to be artificial prosperity, immediately followed by her plunge into the depression, the older writers continued to mourn in the tradition of the Georgians. The younger writers stressed the confusion, disorder, and incompleteness that was due to the complexity of the machine age and to economic injustice.

After the war England attempted the business of helping labor to get on its feet and at the same time to keep it in its proper place. She contributed to the support of the unemployed and by watchful waiting more or less won the "sit down strike" led by Ghandi in India.

General depression was extensively prevalent. The world of production was turning out materials to a society without funds to pay for them. Men were out of work and their families became hungry. Things were going very



fast, too fast in fact with the newly found power machines; this was the world Auden grew up in.

In order to reach sound judgment on most of the important problems of the day, he needed to have some knowledge of a dozen highly developed specialisms which seem to have no meeting place; and the intelligent direction of the knowledge was bewildering. The intelligent direction of life—individual and communal—was daily becoming more difficult. Yet it is certainly true that there was never a time so necessary for intelligence to assert itself, if only because machinery of such power had never before been in the hands of so many. If intelligence was to play a part—if it was not to be inhibited by a sense of complexity to which the most intelligent are the most susceptible—it was clear that some synthesis of the problems was necessary.

The problems which today everyone is most sharply aware of, are of course, problems of war and peace and the related problem of economics; their inescapable insistence needs no demonstration. But behind these problems there is another, for the majority less obtrusive, but in the long run even more fundamental; and its importance is seen to increase in exact measure as we believe, or hope, that society may escape from the complete chaos with which it is threatened. This is the problem of the exact nature of what life should be.

Auden was primarily a poet, a man who had the gifts and the skill necessary for the expression of his thoughts and feelings. He had, because

of his education and background, unusual access to the thinking people of his time--people who were interested in the problems of the day and in methods of solving them.

The problem of dissatisfaction in life was being answered during these years by Freud. His theories were being discussed by intellectuals as were the plans laid down by the socialist, Marx, for a utopian economic society. Auden was aware of the problems and interested in seeing them worked out. It is a wonder then that his expression of the modern world is influenced by these philosophies.

To write good and firm poetry in these times is not easy. Auden has been at least partly successful in his efforts to express himself. Because of this, plus the fact that he is so extremely characteristic of his age and its problems, he is an admirable example of the contemporary relationship between the poet and the world. The best way to study the world view, view of the Zeitgeist, as the poet uses it, is by a close study of the poetry itself with some reflections on the life and times of the poet. Auden's uncertainty as to audience, his difficulties with language, and his general shifting of attitude are easily traceable in his poetry and to some degree in his criticism. A list of his published titles will illustrate the fact that there is abundant material for a study of the different aspects of modern poetry. Primarily, this thesis will concern itself with the connection between the ideas of Auden and his difficult mode of expression, and will also endeavor to place him in his proper perspective among the modern poets.

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY LIFE AND POETRY

Auden describes himself by saying, "My passport says I'm five feet and eleven, with hazel eyes and fair [it's tow-like] hair, that I was born in York in 1907, with no distinctive markings anywhere."<sup>1</sup> He was born the third son of an average upper middle-class family living in an England still largely Victorian in its way of life. As a boy he attended school, even during the war years. He says, "The way in which we really were affected was in having such a varied lot to teach us" until "butter and father had come back again."<sup>2</sup>

The schools, however, were a very important influence on Auden's later thinking. The poet points this out in part, in his review of Cyril Connolly's book, The Enemies of Promise. "There is one great psychological division in English society, the division between those who have been educated at a public school and those who have not."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say that it is impossible for a foreigner to realize how profound that division is. Some six per cent of the population of England spend three quarters

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Auden and Louis Mac Neice, Letters from Iceland. London: Faber and Faber, 1937, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>3</sup>W. H. Auden, "Review of Enemies of Promise", The New Republic, April 26, 1939, p. 221.

of their lives from the ages of eight to twenty one in receiving a usually excellent academic education, but chiefly in being inculcated with some three basic beliefs. These are summed up as follows:

1. Intellect is not as important as Character.
2. Intellect is usually found without Character.
3. Best of all is Character plus prettiness. Prettiness alone is suspect, like Intellect alone, but Prettiness that is good at games is safe.<sup>4</sup>

The point is that he and most of his contemporaries are in rebellion against that education. And their rebellion against society has taken the form of insisting that the values of their class, although pleasant, are no longer progressive.

But all this did not come until later. "Until my sixteenth year I read no poetry. Brought up in a family which was more scientific than literary, I had been the sole autocratic inhabitant of a dream country of lead mines, narrow-gauge tramways, and overshot water-wheels."<sup>5</sup> In March, 1922, he decided to become a poet. He "discovered sunsets, passion, God, and Keats," wrote under the influence of Thomas Hardy, and went to Oxford. Then came a change in his outlook:

For gasworks and dried tubers I forsook  
The clock at Granchester, the English rook.

Here Auden satirizes Eliot's typical imagery of an ugly and sterile civilization. The references to the gasworks and the dried tubers are

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>W. H. Auden, "A Literary Transference", Purpose, July, 1940, vol. 12, p. 127. (Also in Southern Review, vol. 6, p. 78)

<sup>6</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Letters from Iceland. pp. cit., p. 209.

obviously from The Waste Land. The English rook and Granchester clock refer to the more traditional poetry.

All youth's intolerant certainty was mine as  
 I faced life in a double-breasted suit;  
 I bought and praised but did not read Aquinas,  
 At Criterion's verdict I was mute,  
 Though Arnold's I was ready to refute;  
 And through the quads dogmatic words rang clear,  
 'Good poetry is classic and austere.'

After teaching for a while at a school near Malvern, Auden spent some time in Germany. He had married Erika Mann, the daughter of the novelist, Thomas Mann. In Germany, he studied and was influenced by such ideas as Homer Lane's theories of the psychological causes of disease, D. H. Lawrence's belief in the return to a primitive life and to love as the basis of emotion, and Andre Gide's impressions concerning the abnormal in sex. His sensitivity to these newer trends in thought and his absorption of them is shown in the way they are reflected in his poetry.

In 1930 his first volume, Poems<sup>8</sup> was published. This collection is an excellent example of poetry showing contemporary influences conflicting with each other. David Daiches in his book, Poetry and the Modern World,<sup>9</sup> describes the point of view as being somewhere between Marx and Freud, discussing the situation at one time as a Marxist observer, at another time as a clinical psychologist. Sometimes he sees the world as being ill with economic disease, and sometimes he diagnoses it as being ill from

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>W. H. Auden, Poems. London: Faber and Faber, 1930.

<sup>9</sup>David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, 1940, pp. 247.

some disease, and sometimes he diagnoses it as being ill from some disease of the mind.<sup>10</sup> This is a typical explanation of the most evident characteristics of the poet.

Living in the midst of an economic, as well as social and moral collapse, the poet has applied himself to a reconstruction of emotional values, personal and social. He does not wish to ignore the motives established by science. Nor, as Zabel points out in his review of the book, does he wish to "lapse into that lethargy of irony and despair which has overtaken most of the realistic novelists and life facers of recent years. He hopes to invest with new moral and ethical necessity the ideals of affection, sympathy, and honor where these have become deflated."<sup>11</sup>

The theme of the volume is the futility of English upper-class existence. He talks in the language of this society, the society into which he was born, but from which he separates himself.

Since you are going to begin today  
 Let us consider what it is you do.  
 You are the one whose part it is to lean,  
 For whom it is not good to be alone.  
 Laugh warmly turning shyly in the hall  
 Or climb with bare knees the volcanic hill,  
 Acquiring that flick of wrist and after strain  
 Relax in your darlings arms like a stone  
 Remembering everything you can confess,  
 Making the most of firelight, of hours of fuss.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> Morton D. Zabel, "Review of Poems", Poetry, vol. xxxviii, Sept., 1931, p. 101.

He states his warning simply:

Others have tried it and will try again  
 To finish that which they did not begin:  
 Their fate must always be the same as yours,  
 To suffer the loss they were afraid of, yes,  
 Holders of one position, wrong for years.

Daiches uses this poem to illustrate the uncertainty of the poet's own standpoint. The swift transition from point to point, the search for a perspective from which to view the situation, indicate that Auden is not yet sure of his own exact meaning or at least not sure of to whom he is speaking. Certain ideas are clear. To the invalids and decadents, the "old gang" death must come. The diseased, socially and morally, must be removed from their Bath chairs. Readjustment must be made.<sup>12</sup>

But with what group is Auden identifying himself? His opposition to the existing state of affairs is clear.

It's no use raising a shout.  
 No, Honey you can cut that right out.  
 I don't want any more hugs;  
 Make me some fresh tea, fetch me some rugs...

Or in the more personal and dignified verse:

Beams from a car may cross a bedroom wall,  
 They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind  
 Arriving driven from the ignorant sea  
 To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm  
 Where sap un baffled rises, being spring;  
 But seldom this.

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Daiches, op. cit., p. 216.

And again:

We know it, we know that love  
Needs more than the admiring excitement of union,  
More than the abrupt self-confident farewell,  
The heel on the finishing blade of grass,  
The self-confidence of the falling root,  
Needs death, death of the grain, our death,  
Death of the old gang, would leave them  
In sullen valley where is made no friend,  
The old gang to be forgotten in the spring,  
The hard bitch and the riding-master,  
Stiff underground, deep in clear lake  
The lolling bridegroom, beautiful, there.

Auden is not a politician, although his politics influence and color the ideas expressed in the poetry. This will be discussed in more detail later. Here a sufficient answer to the question is the answer given by the novelist in Gide's book, The Counterfeiters. "The subject of this book, if you must have one, is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he desires to make of it."<sup>13</sup> We see the poet as a critic of his generation, expressing his criticism to a shifting audience and in shifting terms.<sup>14</sup>

Zabel has an interesting discussion of Auden's verse in his review of Poems. He is talking about poetry and innovation when he states that, although great poetry has serenity, serenity, which does not mean stupor, or complacent faturity, or static self-esteem, but the momentary stasis, the equilibrium of arrested significance, is never without insurgence. For insurgence is health in art, Zabel points out. "In poetry, however,

<sup>13</sup> André Gide, The Counterfeiters. (Translated by Dorothy Bussy)  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927, p. 172

<sup>14</sup> Daiches, op. cit., p. 219



as in politics, the effort toward it often induces paralysis, a new tyranny."<sup>15</sup> He says that the reason is not obscure. Experiment is often merely a disguise for nervous disorder or mere effontery. Even when arising from honest distress over habitual forms and attitudes it may be betrayed by poverty of conviction, or by failure to penetrate to the vital experience or idea without which heretical violence is futile. Zabel feels that the poet of absolute creative endowment alone escapes enslavement by his innovations, "for he alone knows that with any growth in method there must be coincident growth in perception and control of experience."<sup>16</sup>

This is the reason, Zabel explains, that Rimbaud was a better poet than Mallarme, Hopkins better than Arnold, and Pound better than Eliot. In each of these combinations the greater poet supported invention and subtlety of mechanism by a consistent revitalization of ideas. He realized that elaborate new forms without anything new to say were just as dead as were the older forms.<sup>17</sup>

The tradition of poetry since the first World War had been a story of insurgence, of revolutionary changes in style, structure, imagery. By 1930, however, even this new 'modern poetry' had become something of a dogmatist. There had been too many imitations. As Zabel says, the true tradition of literature cannot be approached through the back door of

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<sup>15</sup>Morton D. Zabel, "Review of Poems", Poetry, vol. xxxviii, April, 1931, p. 35

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

imitation. "It demands projection of the past into the present, with no lessening of the past's impact on the present, or of the present's immediacy to the poet."<sup>18</sup> This is not merely using the stylistic inventions of the immediate generation before. The basic requirement is a vital sensibility in the poet, a grasp of his immediate existence and of the world in which it takes place, "a power to reshape inherited forms and language to fit that existence and to express the sensibility whereby it is comprehended."<sup>19</sup>

In Auden, Zabel believes, this 'primary instinct for authentic poetry' is present. And more than that, he believed that this newer poetry would give direction to the poets of the coming decade.

As it happened Auden did become the center of influence to quite a group of younger poets. Francis Scarfe in his book, Auden and After, explains how Auden broadened into a highway the narrow path left by Eliot, Pound, and some of the other users of new forms.<sup>20</sup> He also became the center of interest to the younger group which includes Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis Mac Neice, because of his subject matter. These men were each interested in the problems of the modern world, psychological and political as well as moral and esthetic.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Scarfe, Auden and After. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1942, p. 31.

The success, the recognition of a poet who attempted these problems, gave to them if not an example, at least a precedent.<sup>21</sup>

While Eliot and Pound were interested primarily in the cultural aspects of the situation, Auden was interested in the social aspects. He enlarged the audience of poetry, broke down the new snobbery of intellectualism which was in danger of creating a minority poetry.<sup>22</sup>

His use of the imagery of modern life is not farced or experimental. The twentieth century has been characterized not only by the persistence of this militaristic spirit, but by the continuous growth and application of machinery. Mechanical developments have reached a stage of perfection hitherto undreamed of; but as realities, not as dreams, they have become part and parcel of life. So radios and moving pictures, aeroplane and power stations are accepted elements in the familiar experiences of Auden. He can write of them not as one who consciously and determinedly sets out to prove that they may be fit subjects for poetry, but as one who takes them for granted as part of existence and as proper material for poetic expression.

In the 1930 volume, however, much had been left to be done before Auden had grown to his full stature. Zabel again gives the best summary of the ideas of the better critics saying that the book's greatest value lies in the certainty of Auden's poetic gifts. Zabel feels that the poet has treated the triditional topics of love, beauty, and delight without the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

spurious sentiment which tears the poet out of his proper mind and his proper age, and has likewise avoided the scientific jargon which has misled too many dissatisfied modern writers. His style is called an instrument subtle enough for greater tasks than have thus far been exacted of it.

"The progressive consonance in rhymes and phrases, the dove-tailing of images, the sometimes solemn and sometimes ironic juxtaposition of sober words with comic and of traditional with 'new'—all of these combine to evoke a music wholly beyond the reason, extraordinarily penetrating and creative in its search for significance behind fact."<sup>23</sup>

Stephen Spender gives an account of Auden's equipment and approach as a poet and explains some of the problems as he sees them. He comments on the poet's capacity for exploiting literary experiences and forms of wide range, and on his ability for enjoying and consuming experiences and transforming it into exact language. The mark the work bears of the landscapes visited is used as an example, as well as the influences of various literatures.<sup>24</sup>

Spender adds to the two approaches most obvious in Auden's poetry, the psychoanalytical and the political, the religious approach. This, he says, is the most important of all because the main impulse of poetry is working out of a philosophy of life based on a religious view of life.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Zabel, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>24</sup>Stephen Spender, "W. H. Auden", London Mercury, vol. 39, April, 1939, p. 613.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 614.

Auden's God is a kind of complicated abstraction of good. He addresses a God, asks for favors, for pity, and for grace or power. The idea is basic in all the early poetry. But it is not a simple belief. The speech of the Abbot in The Ascent of F.6 is illustrative:

You think: This Deamon is only a bogey that nurses use to frighten their children: I have outgrown such nonsense. It is fit only for ignorant monks and peasants. With our factory chimneys and our furnaces and our locomotives we have banished these fairy tales. I shall climb the moutain and see nothing... The peasants, as you surmise rightly, are simple and uneducated; so their vision is simple and uneducated. They see truth as a crude and colored picture...To the complicated and sensitive like yourself his disguises are more subtle.<sup>26</sup>

This is the same quotation given by Spender.<sup>27</sup> It is the pronouncement of a character in the play who is functioning as the mouthpiece of the author.

There is an interesting book on the subject of the spiritual aspects of the new poetry, although it is not so much about Auden, which comments that the lack of dogma is one of the causes for the predicament of the modern poets.<sup>28</sup>

It is not, however, the religious element of the poetry which is the most noticeable or the most important. Most of the critics of the first volume were impressed by the combination of the actual poetry and what

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<sup>26</sup> W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, The Ascent of F.6. New York: Random House, 1937, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Spender, op. cit., p. 617.

<sup>28</sup> Amos N. Wilder, Spiritual Aspects of the New Poetry. New York: Harpers, 1940

almost amounted to plain propoganda. A. M. J. Smith, in his review in Poetry, says that Auden has increased the effectiveness of poetry both by widening its appeal and by striving to make its effectiveness as propoganda grow out of its passionate intensity as poetry. The result of the influence of Eliot and the others is that the plain statement of the dangers that threaten our civilization is enriched and reinforced by "poetic" overtones brought over from Eliot and Eliot's sources. For those who are unaware of the allusion, there is directness, the ironic force, the firm import with real experience.<sup>29</sup>

The last poem in the volume, a sonnet, is a list of the contemporary evils in psychological terms, asking God to

Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch  
 Curing the intolerable neural itch.  
 The exhaustion of weaning, the liar's quinsy,  
 And the distortions of ingrown virginity.  
 Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response  
 And gradually correct the coward's stance;  
 Cover in time with beams those in retreat  
 That, spotted, they turn though in reverse were great;  
 Publish each healer that in city lives  
 Or country houses at the end of drives;  
 Harrow the house of the dead; look shining at  
 New styles of architecture, a change of heart.

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<sup>29</sup> A. M. J. Smith, "Review of Poems", Poetry, vol. xlvii, October, 1935, p. 45.

## CHAPTER II

### TWO LITERARY INFLUENCES

Part of the technique of modern poets such as Auden, is derived obviously from Hopkins. This is the more remarkable, as is pointed out by Babette Deutsch, because of the difference in the problems of the poets. "The contemporary theme is the union of mankind in a new economic set-up, inconclastic in its assumptions and scientific in its bias, while the Jesuit poet, living in the closed circle of the Catholic tradition celebrated tirelessly the single unique individual."<sup>1</sup>

If one turns from the poetry of Hopkins to that of the poets of our day who have learned his packed expressive style, one finds passages which are fairly parallel. Miss Deutsch points out lines in the Choruses of Auden's charade, *Paid on Both Sides*, which echo Hopkins:

Oh watcher in the dark, you woke  
Our dream of working, we feel  
Your finger on the flesh that has been skinned.  
By your bright day  
See clear what we were doing, that we were vile.<sup>2</sup>

Here it is no longer a personal sense of spiritual defeat which is being considered, but the shame of a whole social class which has refused or

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<sup>1</sup>Babette Deutsch, *This Modern Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1935, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183

abused its responsibilities of power. But though the theme widens, it can be handled in a like fashion. There are other lines in the same chorus [Paid on Both Sides] which, for all the difference of imagery, sharply recall Hopkins:

Though heart fears all heart cries for, rebuffs with mortal beat Skyfall,  
the legs sucked under, adder's bite. <sup>3</sup>

Besides this resemblance, there are throughout Auden's work stranger reminiscences than Hopkins affords of the rhythm of Piers Plowman, a poem which Hopkins cited as warrant for his own practice.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of Hopkins was, however, purely technical. He had used the old Anglo-Saxon verse forms instead of writing in the French-Italian tradition which had dominated English poetry since the time of Chaucer. This is particularly noticeable in "The Wreck of the Deutschland".<sup>5</sup> The hardness of it, the austerity, the compressed, compact quality of it as used by Hopkins appeals to the younger generation of English poets who are striving to express complicated and intellectual thoughts in the best possible manner. It should be noted here also that the Metaphysicals who were faced with similar conditions of complexity and intellectualism expressed themselves sometimes in the same type of verse.

The style of Hopkins is not simple or easy to explain, and, as is the case with every consummate poet, the expression and the thought are so

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bridges, editor, Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, (Author's Preface). O.U.P., 1930, p. 11.



intimately connected that they are difficult to identify. There are however a few distinctive marks, easily traceable in his followers, which are worthy of note.

The fundamental principle underlying the use of "sprung rhythm" is the reliance upon the number of stresses rather than upon the number of syllables in a line. It contains regularly from one to four syllables in each foot, and for particular effects any number of weak syllables. The stress falls on the first syllable and gives rise to four variations of the same fundamental movement: monosyllabic feet, Trochaic, Dactylic, and First Paeonic [stress, three un-stresses]. There are also permitted hangers or outriders which are unaccented, uncounted syllables added to a foot to give hesitancy, or swiftness, or airiness, or heaviness.

Hopkins explained this type of rhythm as being the most natural of things. He said it is the rhythm of common speech and of written prose, when rhythm is perceived in them. It is used in all but the most monotonously regular music and occurs in all songs written closely to music. It is used in nursery rimes, weather saws, and so forth and arises in common verse when revised or counterpointed for the same reason.<sup>6</sup>

Hopkins had enough scholarly concern for the technique to be careful not only of his procedure, but also of the language he used to describe it. He rightly insisted on the oral reading of his poetry. It is necessary to the full enjoyment and understanding to recognize the pattern and the

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<sup>6</sup>G. F. Lahey, Gerard Manley Hopkins. O.U.P., 1930, p. 87.

melody or design. This is the inscape as it was called by Hopkins. It is inherent in a thing. The instress, as he calls it, is the stress inside the lines caused by the feeling produced, or brought about by inscape. The pattern or design of a poem gives it its distinctiveness, and often its obscurity.

However, as Lahey points out in his study of Hopkin's craftsmanship, every poetic distinctiveness has at first a certain obscurity, and any appreciation commensurate with poetic values will always postulate many second readings and much intellectual meditation—the 'saly of Poetry'.<sup>7</sup>

The Jesuit poet was one of the first in modern times to use the intimate tone that has become such an important factor in the verse of his young admirers. He addresses his readers as close associates and frankly admits his belief that the difficult poems must be analyzed. Since that time it has become accepted among readers that intricate or involved verse once mastered and resolved in the mind often imports a stronger impact on the imagination and intelligence than an easier one which may not be as full of meaning.

The result of this type of expression is a poetry that is extraordinary in its penetration and its compactness. Compound phrases are used, clauses inserted between two parts of a compound word, inessential words are elided or omitted. Hopkins particularly did not use the relative pronoun much. He used his words in order to exact from them significance and maximum meaning which seemed to him more important than any grammatical formula.

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<sup>7</sup>Bridges, op. cit., p. 5.

All of these characteristics are evident in Auden's verse. He lives in an entirely different world from that of his predecessor, a world different not only in physical and social conditions, but in spiritual outlook as well.

As a Jesuit, Hopkins had vowed to serve God. He refused to fight for fame. To Hopkins the world and all the magnificence which he saw in the turmoil of nature were manifestations of the glory and wonder of the divine God. He had no audience problem. Auden nevertheless has been faced with the same problems of complexity and vastness and has found the method of solution used by the poet priest helpful as a guiding influence on his own mastery of the problem of expression.

From Hopkins also he may have learned the value of a specialized vocabulary with which to describe the aspects of the world to which he is particularly sensitive, and the art of packing a line so full of meaning and of music that it comes to the uninitiated reader a perplexing problem to be puzzled out before it can be understood or appreciated.

The influence of Hopkins was not confined to Auden. The whole affiliation of post-war poets in England, including Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis as well as Auden, are influenced by Hopkins. One does not have to read them very closely to recognize the relationship of the techniques, the internal rhyme, and concealed assonance, the concern with craftsmanship. In fact, one might say that Auden has, to some degree, outgrown his influences to the greatest extent of the three. He is more experimental, more original than his contemporaries and is actually, to a

large degree, an influence on the others as much as are the older masters.

The qualities particularly derived are those of concentration and singularity. The moderns, as did Hopkins, wish to reveal the complexity of their [his] experience, to include in the lyric the whole content of the poet's mind his whole response to living. The result has been that words have to work harder than before as an interpretative medium, and that there has been an absorption in the craft of conveying the utmost density of consciousness in the smallest possible compass of language.

One aspect of the tendency toward economy of means is seen in the extreme compression of modern poetic syntax. Here the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins is very strong. In his poetry the omission of the article and relative pronoun, the substitution of one part of speech for another, sentence inversions and elliptical constructions all play a part in communicating his closely woven texture of thought and feeling. It is in this quality of expression that he influences Auden.

The first poet to awaken a passion of imitation, and an affection which no subsequent refinement or sophistication of taste could ever destroy was Thomas Hardy. Auden says, in an article written in the magazine, Purpose, that it started in the summer of 1923, and for more than a year he read no one else. He carried always one volume of the Wessex edition: smuggled it into class, carried it on Sunday walks, and took it up to the dormitory to read in the early morning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> W. H. Auden, "A Literary Transference", Purpose, vol. Xii, July 1940, p. 128.

This situation, however, did not last indefinitely. "In the autumn of 1924, there was a palace revolution, after which he [Hardy] had to share his kingdom with Edward Thomas, until finally they were both defeated by Eliot at the battle of Oxford 1926."<sup>9</sup>

But the time spent reading Hardy was not without effect. Auden says, "Besides serving as the archetype of the Poetic, he was also an expression of the Contemporary Scene. He was both my Keats and My Carl Sandberg."<sup>10</sup>

"To begin with," Auden goes on, "he looked like my father: that broad, unpampered moustache, bald forehead and deeply sympathetic face belonged to the other world of feeling and sensation."<sup>11</sup> The poet, like his mother, believes himself to be what he terms "a thinking-intuitive". Here was a writer whose emotions, if sometimes monotonous and sentimental in expression, would be deeper and more faithful than his own, and whose attachment to the earth would be more secure and observant.<sup>12</sup>

Auden continues, "The many poems on 'The Place Revisited' and 'Time Regained' seemed to be profoundly moving, not only because I could apply them to my own situation—I was unhappily in love—But also because I half suspected that my own nature was both colder and more mercurial, and I envied those who found it easy to feel deeply."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 129

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Further, Auden compares his childhood to the unsophisticated and provincial life of Hardy. Theirs, he explains, was the England of the professional classes—clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and architects. A world still largely Victorian, in which one went to church twice on Sundays and had daily prayers before breakfast, did not know divorced persons or artists, rode on pony traps or on bicycles to collect fossils, and relied for amusement on such family resources as reading aloud, gardening, walks, piano duets, and dumb crambo was Auden's world. Above all, it was a world which had nothing to do with London, the stage, or French literature.<sup>14</sup>

Reading Racine, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the moderns of his youth, would only have encouraged him to pretend a life which had no contact with his experiences. And it was Thomas Hardy, Auden repeats, who helped him in the transition between Tennyson and Eliot. No one who has learned to look at life at a very great height, the way Hardy does in the stage directions of The Dynasts or in the opening chapter of The Return of the Native, could ever accept either an egocentric, over-rational Humanism which fondly imagines that it is willing its own life, nor a pseudo-Marxism which rejects individual free-will, but claims instead that a human society can be autonomus.<sup>15</sup>

Auden admits also that he owes Hardy an important debt for technical instruction for two reasons. In the first place, he says that Hardy's faults as a craftsman, his rhythmical clumsiness, his outlandish vocabulary

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 130

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 131

were obvious even to a school boy, and that the young can learn best from those of whom, because they can criticize them, they are not afraid. Shakespeare or Pope would have dazzled and therefore disheartened. And in the second place, no English poet, not even Donne or Browning, employed so many and so complicated stanza forms.<sup>16</sup> "Anyone who imitates his style will learn at least one thing, how to make words fit into a complicated structure, and also, if he is sensitive to such things, much about the influence of form upon content."<sup>17</sup>

The old struggle between the use of conventional verse forms or free verse was not necessary in a poet who had studied Hardy. The general idea at the time was that the old forms like the sonnet were so associated with a tradition of thoughts and attitudes that the immature writer could do nothing with them. On the other hand free verse appealed to many because it looked easier. Auden found neither to be true. Free verse was not easy. It was in reality, so difficult that it should only be used by those in whom the intention and the power of expression are one. "Those who confine themselves to free verse because they imagine that strict forms of necessity lead to dishonesty, do not understand the nature of art, how little the conscious artist can do, and what large and mysterious beauties are the gift of language, tradition and pure accident."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 133

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 134

### CHAPTER III

#### ATTITUDE AND METHODS OF EXPRESSION

Cleanth Brooks in his Book, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, defines the central impulse of Auden's poetry by quoting the last stanzas from Poem XX:

And all emotion to expression came  
Recovering the archaic imagery:  
The longing for assurance takes the form

Of a hawk's vertical stooping from the sky;  
These tears, salt for a disobedient dream,  
The lunatic agitation of the sea;

While this despair with hardened eyeballs cries  
"A Golden Age, a Silver...rather this,  
Massive and taciturn years, the Age of Ice."<sup>1</sup>

Brooks believes that Auden's surest triumphs represent a recovery of the archaic imagery--fells, scarps overhung by kestrels, the becks with their pot-holes left by the receding glaciers of the age of ice. His most important contrast is often a comparison between this old ice age and the new with its foundries with their fires cold, flooded coal mines, silted harbors, all the debris of the new glacier period. In this poetry the archaic imagery is recovered--not as items of the picturesque but in the service of fine irony.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>

Ibid.



The following passage is used by Brooks as an example of Auden's most dominant theme and his most successful method: the satire is directed at the essential frivolousness of mind—a stodgy, comfortable, unconscious complacency which makes men disguise losses and injuries, or even accept them as part of the natural order of things.

It is later than you think; nearer the day  
 Far other than that distant afternoon  
 Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet  
 They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.  
 You cannot be away, then, no  
 Not though you pack to leave within an hour,  
 Escaping humming down arterial roads...

Brooks points out that the sense of grim understatement native to the tradition of Old English poetry is used to point up mercilessly the desiccation of College Quad and Cathedral Close. "It is later than you think..." Even the ruling class will listen to an indictment in these terms—an English gentlemen is never late for his appointments. "Nearer that day..." This description is ominously vague. It is not at all like that "distant afternoon" which suggests also why the financier and all his friends do not realize the lateness of the hour.<sup>3</sup>

Brooks says further that the phrase, "ruined boys", is also menacingly vague. The primary meaning is that the boys are ruined for living, educated for another, more distant afternoon, not for today. But it suggests the sexually perveted too, literally perhaps and certainly symbolically. These boys have been emasculated, made infertile and incapable of producing any healthy growth.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 127

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

A neat effect of grim humor is achieved in the last three lines where it is suggested that the whirlwind which is descending upon these gentlemen will find them incapable of action, even in a catastrophe, except in terms of their own class. The picture of them leaving, escaping down the highway in their high powered cars is intimately related to the whole experience.<sup>5</sup>

Auden, Brooks explains, represents possibly the sensibility fortified with principles, or perhaps, changing the viewpoint, the sensibility at the mercy of a set of principles—the artist working in the service of a cause. Still much of his poetry reveals what is called the structure of inclusion, with maximum density and firmness and with no glib oversimplifications.<sup>6</sup> He uses these lines to illustrate the larger context of Auden's work, its symbolic character:

Pass on, admire the view of the massif  
Through plate-glass windows of the Sport Hotel;  
Join there the insufficient units  
Dangerous, easy, in furs, in uniform

And constellated at reserved tables  
Supplied with feeling by an efficient band  
Relayed elsewhere to farmers and their dogs  
Sitting in kitchens in the stormy fens.

As representatives of the new ice age it is ironically appropriate that the ruling classes should choose the Alpine, the remnants of Europe's last glacier period, as their playground. It is beautiful and safe through the plate-glass windows. They are frozen—have to be "supplied with feelings..."

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 128

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 125

If one attempts to explain the fullness and solidity, the way in which connections lace together the various parts of the poem, rich symbolism, the detailed analogies and contrasts, then an account becomes undoubtedly overingenious. Take this account by Brooks of the above poem:

The visitors at St. Moritz are contrasted with the farmers in their kitchens. The nexus is superficial; the farmers in their stormy fens have in common with the visitors merely the fact that they are listening to the same music, via radio. But the suggested connection is deeper. We are really dealing with understatement. That which the radios imply—the whole technical—industrial age—binds the two together very tightly indeed. The ruling classes are being foolish in ignoring the other classes. The term "stormy" is applied to the fens, but the suggestion carries over to the farmers too: they represent the storm which will overwhelm the top-heavy civilization. And the term "fens" itself takes place in the irony. The visitors at St. Moritz would do well to look for the new glaciers, not in the Alpine mountains—these do not matter—but in the last place one would think to look—in the stormy fens.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, Brooks does not insist on his account, nor does he intend to apply that each of the sets of contrasts were consciously contrived by the poet. It is not necessary for the reader, in order to understand the poem, to work out such an analysis. But in doing so, Brooks has shown some of the special quality of Auden's verse.

He takes Poem XVI as an illustration of more of Auden's positive virtues. The kind of unity achieved by the poet at his best is well illustrated here:

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 128-9

It is time for the destruction of error.  
 The chairs are being brought in from the garden,  
 The summer talk stopped on that savage coast  
 Before the storm, after the guests and birds:  
 In sanatoria they laugh less and less,  
 Less certain of cure; and the loud madman  
 Sinks now into a more terrible calm.

The falling leaves know it, the children,  
 At play on the fuming alkali-tip  
 Or by the flooded football ground, know it—  
 This is the dragon's day, the devourer's...

The poetry recommends itself at once by its richness of tone, its fullness, and by the organic quality of the rhythm. Brooks shows how the contrasts among the various items serve to build up the quiet but powerful irony. The chairs are brought in. This is the trivial reaction of the class who can afford gardens to the threat of destruction. The summer hotel, situated on a savage coast becomes a sanatorium, the talk of "patients" becomes madmen's ravings.<sup>8</sup>

The summer talk, the asylum laughter, and the cries of madmen are linked together as are the children, the leaves and the dragon. The children playing on the rubbish heap of industry, for which the summer visitors are responsible. The natural contrasted with the unnatural. All these relationships emerge interrelated.<sup>9</sup>

The spiritual decay which the poet sees around him in social life finds a compliment in the glimpses of the decayed industries of the North Country:

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 134

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 135

Below him see dismantled washing-floors,  
 Snatches of tramline running into wood,  
 An industry already comantose,  
 Yet sparsely living. A ramshackle engine  
 At Cashwell raises water; for ten years  
 Its lay in flooded workings until this...

Here is the ice age of Brooks realized in terms of the land itself.

At this point it would be profitable to turn for the present away from the detailed analysis of specific poems and try to see what the position of the poet is, what position he makes for himself in these early poems.

Randall Jarrell, in his article, "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry", says that the poet is unable or unwilling to accept the values and the authority of the society into which he was born. "Being conscious of intellectual, moral, and aesthetic alienation, it is necessary for him to find or make a new order, to create a myth by which he can possess the world."<sup>10</sup> Jarrell finds six sources from which Auden synthesized his world. The following is a summary of these articles:

1. Marx--communism in general. Auden did not accept the doctrine of Marx, but he drew from the theory attitude, energy, and tone of voice.
2. Freud and Groddeck--the fertile and imaginative side of modern psychology. A clinical approach and thinking in terms of vague medical beliefs are a result of this source.

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<sup>10</sup> Randall Jarrell, "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry", The Southern Review, vol. 7, 1941, p. 326

3. A cluster of related sources, the blood, intuition, religion and mysticism, fairy tales and parables. Many of these influence the technique, the manner of presentation.

4. The sciences, particularly biology. Jarnell says because they are incapable of corruption.

5. All sorts of boyish sources of value: flying, polar exploration, sports, public school life, and so forth. Used in the idea of action and life against death and stagnation.

6. Homosexuality: if ordinary sexual values are taken as negative and rejected, this can be accepted as a source of positive revolutionary values. 11

"Auden is able to set up a We whom he identifies himself with—rejection loves company, in opposition to the enemy They; neither We nor They are the relatively distinct or simple entities one finds in political or economic analysis, but are tremendous clusters of elements derived from almost every source.<sup>12</sup> The We has all the qualities that Auden believes to be good; They have all the bad points. Nor, says Jarrell, does he make the political mistake of taking over a clear limited position and leaving to the enemy everything else.<sup>13</sup>

"I think", says Jarrell, "that much as the early poems' strength and goodness—often original enough to seem positively magical—exist because of a special poetic language and the effect of this language on Auden's

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 332

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 333

regular speech. The language fits what he has to say [or generates new and fitting things to say] It is original, not merely odd; it is 'constructive', not merely Transition, breaking-the-rules for breaking-of-rule's sake."<sup>14</sup>

A summary of the characteristics of this language given in a twenty-six item list by Jarrell follows:

1. He frequently omits articles, demonstrative adjectives, pronoun subjects, conjunctions, prepositions, relative pronouns, and auxiliary verbs.
2. He is willing to break most of the rules of grammar; uses constant inversion, unusual punctuation, dangling participles, words widely separated from their modifiers, and also uses one part of speech for another.
3. He uses abrupt appositions, archaic words, long parrell constructions, and ambiguity, often caused by jumps in logic.
4. Repetition, alliteration, assonance, and consonance are usually effective.
5. To denote habitual action verbals and verbs are preferred to nouns. Nouns, however, are more common than the words which can possible be dispensed with such as adverbs and adjectives.<sup>15</sup>

The result is a very strong speech. It is a speech which is intimately connected with the ideas Auden is expressing. Eliot and Pound used the language of the world's great literature to express their synthesis of the cultural background of the modern period. Later Hart Crane invented

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 337-8

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

a special language to express the scientific advancements and the necessity they brought about for men to work together. Auden, who is interested in the power of men to bring about social reform, uses the language of common speech heightened and intensified in this special way.

Auden feels the influence of social and political organization upon culture. In an essay called, "Criticism in a Mass Society"<sup>16</sup> he goes into great detail explaining the difference between an "open" and a "closed" society. The closed society is one that is physically segregation, economically autonomous, without cultural contact with other communities, occupationally undifferentiated, and one in which education ends with puberty. To be mature means to be socially normal. The opposite may be said of an open society. It has no physical, economic, or cultural frontiers.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of working within the limits of one regional or national esthetic tradition, the modern artist works with a consciousness of all the cultural productions, not only of the whole world of his day, but also of the whole historical past. Thus one sculptor may be influenced by the forms of electrical machinery, another by African masks, another by Donatells and so on.<sup>18</sup>

This would be impossible in a closed society.

Auden believes that democracy is the way to a better world. He believes that art must have a larger audience and part of the job of public

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<sup>16</sup>W. H. Auden, "Criticism in a Mass Society", The Intent of the Critic. (Donald Stauffer, editor) New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 129

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 131



enlightenment rests with the critic. In his essay he sets up the two-fold task of the critic in a democracy—in an open society. These are:

1. He must show the individual that though he is unique he has much in common with all other individuals, and then must teach him how to see the relevance to his own experience of works of art which deal with experiences apparently strange to him; so that, for example, the coal miner in Pennsylvania can learn to see himself in terms of the world of Ronald Firbank, and an Anglican bishop find in Grapes of Wrath a parable of his diocesan problems.

2. The critic must attempt to spread a knowledge of past cultures so that his audience may be as aware of them as the artist himself, not only simply in order to appreciate the later, but because the situation of all individuals, artist and audience alike, in an open society is such that the only check on authoritarian control by the few, whether in matters of esthetic taste or political choice, is the knowledge of the many.<sup>19</sup>

B. E. C. Davies, who reviews the essay for English Studies, summarizes the idea. "In a democracy he [the critic] must be prepared to recognize that he is not infallible, that ethics, politics, science, and esthetics are interdependent, and that his position of influence is an accident, an inheritance which he does not deserve and which he is not competent to administer."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 133

<sup>20</sup> B. E. C. Davies, "Review of Intent of the Critic", Review of English Studies, O.U.P., vol. xix, no. 75, p. 318.

CHAPTER IV  
THE ORATORS

In The Orators<sup>1</sup> Auden became more obscure and still more involved in the contemporary scene. Daiches explains the obscurity of this book, which is a collection of related dramatic, lyrical and rhetorical fables, as the obscurity of a poet who does not want to be obscure but who cannot help himself. "He is halfway between the private coterie and the public group in his search for audience; and thus both his attitudes and his symbols will be Janus-faced, looking two ways."<sup>2</sup>

In the "Address for a Prize Day" Auden speaks to the school boys, the educated youth of the country. "What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?" He uses imagery from school life, school sports, and so forth to express what is really an attack, by an individual determined to "cure" himself of the middle-class environment from which he comes. But the idea is to a certain extent ambiguous. The identity of the speaker is not clear; the hero fades into the villain and back again to hero, the point of view is shifting, and there seems to be confusion between personal dislikes and objective indictment of a way of life.<sup>3</sup> The motif is political violence justified by political necessity.

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Auden, The Orators. London: Faber and Faber, 1932.

<sup>2</sup>David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, 1940, p. 220.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

This seems to be, as is pointed out by Spender, out of place in a book concerned with the individual.<sup>4</sup>

Two more prose sections, "Argument" and "Statement", follow. These are made up of the same, even more rapidly changing symbols. Daiches gives what he believes to be the general theme of the first of these as purposive action emerging out of the Waste Land.<sup>5</sup> The second is a list of the symptoms of the psychological disease of modern civilization.

Stephen Spender in his book, The Destructive Element, gives the best explanation of the final section of Book I, "Letter to a Wound", and of "Journal of an Airman", which is the whole of Book II. He compares them to Rilke's Notebook of Malte Laurids Bridge. He shows that Rilke shared Auden's view of the psychological nature of illness. The view of both writers is that illness of the body is the physical expression of a defect of the mind.<sup>6</sup> "...thus to be regarded with relief as a recognizable symptom, or even in some cases with gratitude as an effective cure, or as a means by which, through treatment of the body, a complicated illness of the mind may be relieved."<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to say that the main interest of "The Airman's Journal" is how the airman is able to relate himself to society, and how far he is simply a product of the social life which has produced him. The symbolic

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Spender, "W.H.Auden", London Mercury, vol. 39, April, 1939, p.613.

<sup>5</sup>Daiches, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936, p. 265.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

position of the airman is, as it were, to be on the margin of civilization. Being an airman, it is obvious that he is not tied down in any way; he is up in the air, and in the position of artists like Rilke or Lawrence who travel. And yet, in Spender's words, "he is the man of action, flying, planning Fascist (?) coups, circulating leaflets...His chief danger is in his remarkable irresponsibility which leads him to indulge in Fascist day-dreams of fantastic and murderous practical jokes."<sup>8</sup> The airman, therefore, with his bird's eye view of society sees everywhere the enemy. Spender feels the most brilliant passages in the book to be those in which he classifies the enemy. He further explains that although we are never told exactly who the enemy is, we are told how he behaves and are given symptoms by which we may recognize his influence on individuals and on ourselves.

The personal problem is also given consideration by Spender. "Perhaps the airman is an epileptic: certainly he is a homosexual, and also a kleptomaniac. The 'Journal' leaves no doubt that his uncle was homosexual, and on this fact depends the ancestor relationship."<sup>9</sup> The airman symbolizes the homosexual, because, like him, he is incapable of exploiting the old fixed relationships: he has involuntarily broken away from the mold of the past and is compelled to experiment in new forms; his life, being comparatively disinterested, may result in an experiment of value to society, so long as he does not become obsessed with his own personal

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 268

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

problem.<sup>10</sup>

In summing up this section of The Orators, Spender relates the position of the airman to that of the contemporary writer who hates the social system under which he lives. He is ignored by the greatest part of society, and neither directly nor indirectly does his work penetrate to it. Yet he may represent the most intelligent and critical forces in society. Supposing that he is living in a society that is actively preparing for war, he seems to be completely powerless. His elimination is no loss to society, as some Fascist governments have discovered who have been able to dispose of all the groups representing culture in their countries, because culture had no deep roots in the lives of the people. The airman and the artist is, like Roderick Hudson, just dangerously and acutely himself, apart from the rest of the world, isolated in his sensibility. Yet without him civilization is only a name.<sup>11</sup>

He has, therefore, like the airman, got to defeat the enemy. There are two methods of attack. The first is to become an active political agent, to take part in the immense practical joke of destruction...The second is to learn how he may escape from his own isolation; not to resist the enemy but to absorb him. To make art that is infected by—that is about—society, and which makes it impossible for society to discard, because it is essentially a part of it; and to make it the part of which will transform the whole.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 274

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

This explanation is not altogether clear, but it does give some meaning to what seems to be hopelessly obscure. Spender, who is a personal friend of Auden's, and to whom the book is dedicated, also reveals the presence of references to private jokes. This, he believes plus the inclusion of the observations of Homer Lane and the influence of Anglo-Saxon are responsible for the obscurity.<sup>13</sup>

Auden's statement at the beginning of the book is illuminating:

Private faces in public places  
 Are wiser and nicer  
 Than public faces in private places.

The "Six Odes" at the end of the book are a restatement of the general theme. They discuss, in a more personal way, the psychological illness of modern society. An alternative is offered to the carefully analyzed death wish of the airman:

The few shall be taught who want to understand,  
 Most of the rest shall love upon the land;  
 Living in one place with a satisfied face  
 All of the women and most of the men  
 Shall work with their hands and not think again.

In the English public-school imagery which is so prevalent in the opening sections of the book, it can be seen that Auden has made the decision to fight the public-school spirit which he believes to be the spirit of a dying society. He sees hope for the future embodied in the younger generation. This same idea is expressed in one of the odes to his pupils:

John, son of Warner, shall rescue you.

<sup>13</sup> Spender, *op. cit.*, p. 614

John Gould Fletcher called Auden "a poet of courage" for writing such a book as The Orators. He excuses the ambiguity on the grounds that the merging of the two levels of experience must result in complexity. "He is trying to find some way of living and of expressing himself that is not cluttered with stale conventions and that is at once intellectually valid and emotionally satisfying. In order to do so, he is obliged to back his way in zigzag fashion through a stiffling jungle of outworn notions which obstruct progress."<sup>14</sup>

The book is a plea for individual courage. It is obscure to be sure, but nevertheless a success in its own way, and it is a step forward in the development of the poet.

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<sup>14</sup>John Gould Fletcher, "A Poet of Courage", Poetry, vol. XLII, April, 1933, p. 110.

## CHAPTER V

### POLITICS AND DRAMA

In 1933 Auden's first verse play, The Dance of Death<sup>1</sup> was published. It is an allegory, again on the ills of the modern capitalism, but much less ambiguous than The Orators. It is more public, less personal. The psychological approach is used to a lesser degree because the emphasis is political. And, it is pointed out by David Daiches, the poet is now addressing a larger audience.<sup>2</sup> Even though it is not an explicit or particular group as yet, the fact that he is no longer just communicating with a few friends makes the verse less complicated. But the idea to be expressed is not clear. It is a play denouncing capitalism and all its weaknesses, still at the end of the play, Karl Marx is made to appear as a joke.

At this point some discussion of Auden's politics is in order. Edgar Foxall, in an article in The London Bookman, "The Politics of W. H. Auden", says that the poet apart from regular communists, is the chief propagandist for the party. He goes on to explain that the politics of Shelley and Wordsworth were "forgiven" because they were vague. Freedom is the battlecry of many creeds. "But Auden's politics invite the disgust of

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<sup>1</sup>W.H.Auden, The Dance of Death. New York: Random House, 1933.

<sup>2</sup>David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, 1940, p. 227.



the comfortable and the laughter of the secure."<sup>3</sup>

Foxall cannot see how an admitted lack of knowledge of international politics and working class conditions, combined with a general disinterestedness in both, could interfere with the protest of the poet. He believes this adds weight to the plea, especially as far as the working conditions are concerned. He accuses critics of trying to draw attention away from the political ideas expressed to the expression, that is the manner in which the ideas are presented.<sup>4</sup>

This separation of the thing said from the way of saying it is never done with success. It is seldom attempted by the better critics. Nor is it probable that these men are wasting their time deliberately covering up the supposedly objectionable. Foxall is certainly on the defensive.

Stephen Spender, Auden's friend, in his analysis of the poet's problems stresses the interconnection between the psychological and the political problem. He says, and it is very obvious, that the poet is sincerely interested in the political scene. But he points out he is not consistent. The ending of The Dance of Death is an example of this. The play is intended to be a statement of a situation, not to make a propagandist assertion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Edgar Foxall, "The Politics of W.H.Auden", Bookman, (London) vol. 85, March 1934, pp. 474-5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element. Boston: Houghton Mufflin and Company, 1936, p. 275.

Spender goes on to say that the Dance of Death is complementary, but not contradictory, to The Orators.<sup>6</sup> The idea behind them both is that personal regeneration, revitalization is necessary. Individual courage is essential prior to any political action, which although it is important too, becomes useless without the more basic, more revelant reform.

Auden's politics are surely to the left of even a liberal point of view, but it is also overstatement to call him a propagandist or even a poet politician. He has been referred to by Communist papers as a Facist, liberal papers as a Communist, and even by certain critics as an anarchist. The fact is he is none of these, at least not for a very long time. He is dissatisfied with the system as it is and is expressing that dissatisfaction.

A Dog Beneath the Skin or Where is Francis?,<sup>7</sup> Auden's next attempt in the theater, was more of a success. At least a success in demonstrating, as Zabel tells us in his review, how far the theater tests the poetic invention, the validity of the poet's speech and thought, and his ability to bring modern verse to grips with active forces in thought and action.<sup>8</sup>

It is in the nature of a revue, a satirical parody of the post War German cabaret type. Kenneth Allott, who reviewed the presentation of the play as given at the Group Theater, January 12, 1936, said that the whole "imaginative Irish stew" was "thrown on the stage."<sup>9</sup> This sounds probable.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>W.H.Auden and Christopher Isherwood, The Dog Beneath the Skin. New York: Random House, 1935.

<sup>8</sup>M.D.Zabel, "Two Years of Poetry", Southern Review, vol. 5, 1939, p. 568.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Allott, "Review of Dog Beneath the Skin", New Verse, no. 19, February 1936, p. 15.

There is too much fun in the thing to have it be taken seriously. The very idea of hiding Francis in the skin of a dog and sending him on a trip with Alan who is supposed to be looking for him is so preposterous that the implications of the play are lost, or nearly so. Westland, Auden's name for Hitler's Germany, is depicted as a lunatic asylum. Here, as always, is present the psychological point of view joined with the political. But the dog with its human characteristics, [he sings, dances with Alan, drinks whiskey, gets jealous and so forth,] is so ridiculous that the thing becomes a farce.

The poet in Auden, however, outdoes the dramatist. Horace Gregory, in commenting on the use of sprung rhythm and Middle English verse says that the play should be an answer to the question as to whether common speech can be successfully put into verse. Gregory feels certain that Auden has accomplished this.<sup>10</sup>

In December 1935, New Verse, the magazine then being used as an organ for this new poetry, put out an issue called the "Theater" number. The editorial written by Geoffrey Grigson, dealt with the lack of good production at the Old Vic, the only theater then producing the new verse drama. It said that having the plays produced here was just one step better than not having them produced at all.

Humphrey Jennings wrote an article in which he used a comparison between Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare. He showed that the new works were over

<sup>10</sup> Horace Gregory, "Poets in the Theater", Poetry, vol. XLVII, April 1936, p. 226.

systematized, that life was not reflected in them the way it is in the master because they try to illustrate an idea by presenting only certain facets of characters doing and saying things that prove a point. Shakespeare presented the characters and the action without preconceived moral, or at least without obvious preconception as to just what the moral would be. He says Auden puts "his horrid self into his horrid works."<sup>11</sup>

There is also an interesting piece written by Rupert Doone, the director of the Old Vic, who says that since the poets are lonely and unread and the theater is impoverished of good writing the idea to co-operate should be successful.<sup>12</sup>

With *The Ascent of F.6.*,<sup>13</sup> in 1937, Auden and Isherwood reached a new height. The tragedy in two acts, as they called it, is a complicated story of destruction brought about by the failure of the hero and some of the others to realize that man's responsibility must begin and end with his own soul. C. Day Lewis tells us that this is logic of Oxford implications, a negative philosophy, the moral of which is questionable.<sup>14</sup>

The plot evolves around F.6., a mountain in one of the British colonies. Sir James Ranson, successful politician tries to persuade his twin brother, Michael, the scholar-man of action, T. E. Lawrence type to

<sup>11</sup>Humphrey Jennings, "Eliot Auden and Shakespeare", New Verse, no. 18, December 1935, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Rupert Doone, "What About the Theater", New Verse, no. 18, December 1935, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup>W.H.Auden and Christopher Isherwood, The Ascent of F.6. New York: Random House, 1937.

<sup>14</sup>C. Day Lewis, "Paging Mankind", Poetry, vol. 49, October 1936, p. 225.

climb F.6 and thereby save the colony for the English. The natives believe that the first race of white men to reach the peak will rule for generations. There is a Deamon guarding the top, real to the peasants, symbolic to Michael. He consents to go, against his better judgment and is thereby defeated by his deamon. His mother is the determining factor of influence. This mother-fixation, or oedipus complex, is a weak point in the play. Francis Scarfe even refers to it as ridiculous, far from the sublime heights one might expect.<sup>15</sup>

The play is admirably suited to the theater. Auden's technical skill never seems to fail him. Mr. & Mrs. A., the middle class couple who sit at home and listen to the adventures via radio, are examples of the frustration of the average citizen who leads a dull, normal life. Their conversations in jaunty prosaic verse is full of the boredom they feel in the inadequacy of their existence. It is a contrast to the poetic prose spoken by the climbing party. A quotation has already been given in the discussion of Auden's spiritual outlook.

In this play, unlike The Dance of Death, we again have a combination of the psychological and political theme. It is a protest against imperialism, picturing with satirical force the evils of the system. It is also a study of the character's spiritual and moral entity. Continuous and repeated manifestations of the deficiency of the individual and of the society itself are portrayed.

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<sup>15</sup>Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After*. London: Routledge and Sons, 1942, p. 33.

G. W. Stonier, who reviewed the performance at the Old Vic, said it was well done and well received by the spectators.<sup>16</sup> This must have pleased the authors who were intent on enlarging the audience of modern poetry.

The Group Theater rented the Old Vic during its close season and were giving consistently good plays well acted. In spite of large audiences and full houses, every word was heard and understood. Stonier was astonished at how quickly the jokes were taken up by the gallery.

The stage was divided into two parts. On the left, they had the scenes in Wastdale, Whitehall, Osnialand; on the right the breakfast parlour of the little couple who listen in. One set of curtains draws, the other opens; thus, there is no wasted time for scene shifting. Much is done with the lights and the curtains.

The character of Ransame, as acted by Alec Guinness, was in itself remarkable. The man was portrayed as a dramatic, but not a ranting figure. The scenes, especially with his brother, with the Abbot, and those with the climbing party in the last act, were extraordinarily effective.

F.6 is the tragedy of a man who gets his own way. Louis MacNiece has an interesting comment on Auden's thought. "While regarding so many of our neuroses as tragic, so many of our actions as self-deception, yet he believes, that neuroses is the cause of individual development. Such a psychological dialectic reflects itself in the paradoxes and the tension of his poems."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>G. W. Stonier, "Review of Ascent of F.6", New Statesman and Nation, vol. 18, July 1939, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup>Louis MacNiece, Modern Poetry, O.U.P., 1938, p. 173.

On the Frontier<sup>18</sup> is Auden's latest attempt at the theater. Again collaborating with Isherwood, this time in a play dealing with the problems which dictatorship and war have set up for every member of the audience. A bourgeoisie family of Osnia, a democracy, and of Westland, a dictatorship, are shown on the stage. The frontier, symbolic because the homes are not actually on the border line between the two countries, separates them. Neither is aware of the other. Both families pass through the same war, with the same emotions of patriotism, of fear, of agony, and of despair. The other parts of the play show the big business man, Varerian, in his office dealing with the rather insane Leader. He does not want war either, but the snowball he has started rolling gets too big even for him. The scene in which the dictator is discovered to be a persecuted and miserable man in an agony of indecision, in which he purely subjectively decides to declare war, is one of the best in the play. The theme is expressed in the mystical love between Eric of Westland and Ann of Osnia; love is the only thing which is strong enough to break down the barrier, the frontier between the two sides—the barrier which "blood and a thousand years of history" has made so strong.

The play has received some deserved adverse criticism. The characters are too typical and inhuman, the dialogue too oratorical, the warnings too unintegrated with the rest of the play. Zabel points to the Irish drama to attract attention to the poorer quality of this work. In the former there

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<sup>18</sup>W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, On the Frontier.  
London: Faber and Faber, 1938.

was recognizable humanity, solid organic motivation, more trenchant writing.<sup>19</sup> On the Frontier the characters are cardboard. The whole truth is hidden behind a screen of propagandist devices. "I know", says Kenneth Allott in his review, "that simplification of truth is justifiable in art or political oratory to make an argument or point of view clear, but no further than is consonant with a real representation of the truth."<sup>20</sup> He thought the play dull.

Louis MacNiece was disappointed in the play also.<sup>21</sup> He is a friend of Auden and of Isherwood, and he says he believes them to be the best of the younger writers in the theater today. But his review of the performance given at the Arts Theater on November 14, 1938, has praise only for the production. The direction, stage handling of the difficult scenes, and acting, were alive, intelligent, and convincing. In fact, he says that it was as fine a production of the play as could be expected by a critic. Still, compared with The Ascent of F.6, there is less sparkle, less poetry, less thought, and even more embarrassment. During the mystical love scene between Eric and Ann he longed to put his head in a sack.<sup>22</sup>

However, he does not regard On the Frontier as all lost. "Its theme—the horrible complex of international rivalries, crooked big business, Fascism, self-deceiving heroes, and hysterical publicity—is a theme which

<sup>19</sup>M. D. Zabel, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth Allott, "Review of On the Frontier", New Verse, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1939, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup>Louis MacNiece, "Review of On the Frontier", Spectator, vol. 161, November 18, 1938, p. 858.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



cries out to be dramatised."<sup>23</sup> These authors have tried to do it by a series of melodramatic cartoons, easy to understand, and with admirable sentiments. "Occasionally we are excited or moved but the play lacks cohesion; it does not hit like a wedge but like a number of escaped posters and photographs blown by the wind into one's face."<sup>24</sup>

"Both Auden and Isherwood believe in literature as a criticism of life. In a narrower sense the play is excellent criticism, for it is difficult not to agree with the moral of it. But a play cannot live by morals alone."<sup>25</sup>

Tom Paine differs with MacNiece in his estimate of the play.<sup>26</sup> He says that it is dramatically more mature than The Ascent of F.6. There are limits to this expressionist drama which Toller and others developed so successfully in Germany. It may be that great drama can only be achieved through the full and intimate characterization of individuals. In this technique, so much influenced by the cinema, the forces of the world are presented to us through types and choruses, not through the conflict they cause in particular individuals, and because no problem is completely resolved in any one personality, such plays leave one imperfectly and incompletely satisfied.<sup>27</sup>

Paine suggests that these plays should be judged as pamphlets are judged, as expressions of troubled times. In this play, he points out, the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Tom Paine, "Review of On the Frontier", The New Statesman and Nation, vol. 16, November 19, 1938, p. 827.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

problems of the idealist at war are worked out intellectually by Eric Thorvald, but that in this type of drama the wider implications of the struggle, its more universal aspects, such as those depicted in the choral interludes and dances are the most important.

At the end of the play Eric recites a notable poem. The man has striven as a pacifist to hold aloof from the dark forces of the world. He has been to prison and reached a new decision. He declares that he was wrong to hope to maintain his independence "as the sane and innocent student aloof among practical and violent madmen."

Yet we must kill and suffer and know why.  
 All errors are not equal. The hatred of our enemies  
 Is the destructive self-love of the dying,  
 Our hatred is the price of the world's freedom.  
 This much I learned in prison. This struggle  
 Was not my struggle. Even if I would  
 I could not stand apart.

Auden in a review of Herbert Read's In Defense of Shelley, tells us he expects "plenty of news" in literature. He does not like abstractions, "symbols, yes, but also a report of the world, a breaking down of the characters."<sup>28</sup> In On the Frontier he has given an example of this idea of reporting."

Nothing has been said so far about Auden's, Paid on Both Sides. This charade first appeared in Criterion in 1930.<sup>29</sup> Like his earlier lyrics it is comparatively obscure. He is even then, expressing dissatisfaction with

<sup>28</sup>W. H. Auden, "Review of In Defense of Shelley", New Verse, no. 20, April 1936, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup>W. H. Auden, Paid on Both Sides. Criterion, vol. IX, January, 1930, pp. 275-283.

the present state of society. But he has not thought through the ideas he wishes to express. David Daiches, in his oversimplified generalizations concerning the poet's "growth", tells us that this is because the author is searching for his own standpoint. He objects to the fact that added to the protest there are not more than vague and conflicting hints about what is to be done about it.<sup>30</sup> It is not the job of a poet, however, to offer a solution for all the ills of the world.

Zabel says that the saving vision behind the bleak industrial civilization pictured in the charade has enabled the poet to reconstruct his "ruins" without making specious glamour out of his memories, and without resorting to remote and unlikely faiths.<sup>31</sup> His gift of poetry is proven in such admirable verse as this:

Always the folling wind of history  
 Of other's wisdom makes a buoyant air  
 Till we come suddenly on pockets where  
 Is nothing loud but us; where voices seem  
 Abrupt, untrained, competing with no lie  
 Our fathers shouted once. They taught us war,  
 To scamper after darlings, to climb hills,  
 To emigrate from weakness, find ourselves  
 The easy conquerors of empty bays:  
 But never told us this, left each to learn,  
 Hear something of that soon arriving day  
 When to gaze longer and delighted on  
 A face or idea be impossible.

Here is another example of the verse from the same chorus:

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<sup>30</sup>Daiches, op. cit., p. 215

<sup>31</sup>Zabel, op. cit., p. 104

All pasts

Are single old past now, although some pasts  
 Are forwarded, held looking on a new view;  
 The future shall fulfill a surer vow  
 Not smiling at queen over the glass rim  
 Nor making gunpower in the top room,  
 But with prolonged drowning shall develop gills.

Let us return once again to the question of politics, which are shown more clearly in these four plays than in the other poetry. Francis Scarfe gives a true statement when he says that pacifism is the only consistent poetic belief of the poet. From the charade, Paid on Both Sides, to the melodrama of On the Frontier, this is the one definite sentiment which does not come to variance with any of his other ideas.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Scarfe, op. cit., p. 21

## CHAPTER VI

### TRAVEL

Auden has written three books about foreign countries he has visited, Letters from Iceland<sup>1</sup> with Louis MacNiece, Journey to a War<sup>2</sup> with Christopher Isherwood, and Spain,<sup>3</sup> a long poem written out of his experiences during the civil war there. The books illustrate in a special way the world outlook of the poet. He is not so much the introspective soul anxious to lay bare the inner world of his own emotions as he is the liberal-thinker who looks with pity and terror upon the world of men and women in times that are harsh and cruel, and that have been made so by perverted human wills. He looks upon a civilization destined to collapse for lack of personal and mass regeneration. The most important thing to him is not the question of her personal ability or inability to fit into a heartless world, but of making that world a less heartless place for people generally.

He incorporates his world into his poetry, as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Dante, and most of the other outstanding writers did in their day. It has been shown how he absorbed and utilized the experiences gained through literature, through contact with political philosophy and with the

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Auden and Louis MacNiece, Letters from Iceland. London: Faber and Faber, 1936.

<sup>2</sup>\_\_\_\_\_ and Christopher Isherwood, Journey to a War. London: Faber and Faber, 1938.

<sup>3</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Spain. London: Faber and Faber, 1938.

new ideas of psychology. He employs the paraphernalia of modern science and industry, of education, no doubt the result of time spend teaching, and of his own personal life.

In 1936, Auden's publishing house commissioned him to go with Louis MacNiece to Iceland for the purpose of writing a travel book. Letters from Iceland was the result, a collaboration of the two men. The volume is made up of letters written home, notes on their travels, photographs taken by Auden, the jointly written, "Last Will and Testament", a satiric verse criticism of the times, and Auden's long poem, "Letter to Lord Byron".

The trip was for Auden a fulfillment of a childhood interest in Norse countries. This was a result of his reading of Norse history and literature from his father's wellstocked library. Anything pertaining to the Scandinavian folk lore or mythology was of interest to him. The influence of Icelandic verse forms has already been mentioned.

The book itself, Letters from Iceland, could hardly be said to be serious poetry. James Southworth called it, "nothing more than the fulfillment of a contract with publishers."<sup>4</sup> This is an exaggeration. Auden tells us himself that he realizes that travel books are often boring because they are all so much like each other; meals, sleeping accomodations, fleas, danger, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> He does not consider himself clever enough nor sensitive enough to do the usual alternative, which is the writing of essays on life prompted by something seen, the kind of thing Lawrence and

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<sup>4</sup>James Southworth, "Wystan Hugh Auden", Sewanee Review, vol.46, April 1938, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup>Auden, Letters from Iceland. op. cit., p. 142.

Aldous Huxley do. Instead he writes to his wife, E.M.A.:

In the bus today I had a bright idea about this travel book. I brought a Byron with me to Iceland, and I suddenly thought I might write him a letter in light verse about anything I could think of, Europe, literature, myself.<sup>6</sup>

He picked out Byron because he was a "townee, a European, and disliked Wordsworth and that kind of approach to nature." Auden found that very sympathetic. He also said that the letter would have very little to do with Iceland, but would rather be a description of an effect of traveling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one's past and one's culture from the outside.<sup>7</sup>

T. C. Wilson, in his review, praises the book by saying that it combines the major issues of the day with the more personal concerns of ordinary existence and is entertaining about the whole business. It is useful poetry too, incisive commentary that reflects and illuminates the most pertinent and urgent problems of our time.<sup>8</sup>

The clever phrasing, rime, and general flippant tone of the "Letter to Lord Byron" do not prevent Auden from including some pertinent opinions on literature and life. For example, his declaration of interest in people rather than in nature:

To me Art's subject is the human clay,  
And landscape but a background to a torso;  
All Cezanne's apples I would give away  
For one small Goya or a Daumier.

[p.103]

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 143

<sup>8</sup>T. C. Wilson, "Poetry of News", Poetry, vol. LII, April 1938, p. 39

Here is his impression of the lack of heroism in modern man:

Turn to the work of Disney or of Srube,  
There stands our hero in his threadbare seams;  
The bowler hat who straphangs in the tube,  
And kicks the tyrant only in his dreams.

[p.55]

And again, on the subject of man's place in present day war:

In modern warfare though it's just as gory,  
There isn't any individual glory.

[p.57]

He speaks of his own use of imagery in poetry:

Tram lines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,  
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.

[p.51]

His satirical allusion to the patronized artists:

Because some names are loved by the superior,  
It does not follow that they're the least inferior:  
For all I know the Beautific Vision's  
On view at all Surrealist Exhibitions.

[p.54]

Following the use of non-English words Auden writes:

... what this may mean  
I do not know, but rather like the sound  
Of foreign languages like Ezra Pound.

[p.18]

Auden tries to show the position of the poet in the modern world by contrasting the present situation with that of other times. The lack of specified audience, strong influence of intellectual snobs, and so forth, are important factors because:



Art, if it doesn't start there at least ends,  
 Weather aesthetics like the thought or not,  
 In an attempt to entertain our friends;  
 And our first problem is to realize what  
 Peculiar friends the modern artist's got.

p.103

Auden feels that the poet has a definite function in helping to create the world of the future and a place in the future world. In the witty, "Last Will and Testament", written with MacNiece, is willed,

Our minor talents to assist in the defense  
 Of the European tradition and to carry on  
 The human heritage.

The desire to create a world safe for the poets is the desire to make a world safe for all. The world which he sees as ideal is the one permitting the individual the greatest unconflicting freedom of action, the one allowing the individual the greatest opportunity for development. Auden has been compared to Byron, who fought for the freedom of Greece and who as an ardent individualist demanded freedom for himself and consequently for others.

Certainly the comparison is justified. Auden's admiration for the Romantic poet becomes more significant in the light of many similarities. They have the same cynical wit, the same hatred of shams, the same patches of genuine feeling and enthusiasms. They are both strong personalities and prolific writers; and they both present the same streaks of bad taste and lack of depth or unity of power.

In 1937, Auden was led by the poet laureate, John Masefield, to be presented to George VI and to receive the King's Gold Medal for the best

poetry of the year. This same year he received the Guarantors Prize of the magazine Poetry, for two poems that appeared in the January number, "Journey to Iceland" and

Oh who can ever praise enough  
The world of his belief?

The civil war broke out in Spain the summer Auden was in Iceland. He asks in his book how "things were really going in Spain". This is a typical example of the alertness of the man to the world he lives in. Even being so far removed from the center of the fight could not slacken his interest in what he believed to be part of the struggle of mankind to better itself. When he returned to England, he immediately got ready and left for Spain where he drove ambulances for the Loyalists.

A short journalistic report called "Impressions of Valencia" appeared in New Statesman and Nation, which told some of the sights he saw there, but this was quite usual describing merely the common ordinary reporters view of the much written up situation.<sup>9</sup>

The poem which came out of the experience, entitled simply, Spain, is called by Francis Scarfe, "an extremely ingenious application of psychology to a political problem." He also, only now with more basis for his statement, blames the author for casual writing at critical moments.<sup>10</sup>

The poem is, however, much the same type of thing Auden had been doing all along. He saw in Spain, as he sees everywhere, the need for strength

<sup>9</sup> W. H. Auden, "Impressions of Valencia", New Statesman and Nation, vol. 13, January 1937, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Scarfe, Auden and After. London: Routledge and Sons, 1942, p. 26.

and courage and freedom, for personal regeneration and personal virtue, as well as political reform. In fact, prior to the reformation of governments, the reformation of the individual is of interest. Scarfe calls him an anarchist.

At this time Auden shows a certain lack of integration in his poetry. David Daiches explains this as being due to a renewed lack of a definite point from which to view the world, and a renewed loss of specified audience. He says that beginning with the trips to Iceland and to Spain the poet's old status as a British citizen began to be cast off for a larger status as a world citizen.<sup>11</sup>

In 1938 he was commissioned with Christopher Isherwood, his friend, with whom he had collaborated on the plays, to write a book about the East. The publishers left the choice of itinerary to their own discretion, and so, because of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War they decided to go to China.

Most of the book, *Journey to a War*, is made up of a "Travel-Diary" which is an account of their experiences on their trip, their meeting of important persons, and their visit to the war front. It is an interesting story, well written in the most part by Isherwood. But a detailed history of their stay in China would be out of place here. It is more to the purpose to note a few of the effective results of the trip on Auden as a sensitive man and as a poet.

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<sup>11</sup>David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, 1940, p. 232.

To say that it enlarged his view point and broadened his field of imagery is almost too obvious. He always hated wars, considering them one of the chief horrors of modern civilization. He learned to hate them through literature which he read, such as Wilfred Owen, the young war poet of World War One, and through novelists and playwrights of the twenties. He learned to hate it through the literature of the Waste Land which in its picture of cultural and moral desolation showed the effect of wars. He learned to hate it in Spain. After the China experience Auden's conception had come to this:

War is bombing an already disused arsenal,  
missing it and killing a few old women. War is  
lying in a stable with a gangrenous leg. War  
is drinking hot water in a barn and worrying  
about one's wife. War is a handful of lost and  
terrified men in the mountains shooting at something  
moving in the undergrowth. War is waiting for days  
with nothing to do: shouting down a dead telephone;  
going without sleep, or sex, or a wash. War is  
untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter  
of chance. 12

He uses such war terms as these to express himself:

In my spine there was a base:  
And I knew the general's face:  
But they've severed all the wires,  
And I can't tell what the general desires.

This is poetry written by a man closely connected with the events of the world around him, closely observant of the things he sees, and acutely aware of the implications of the incidents as they happen. The latter

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Auden, Journey to a War. op. cit., p. 202.

quality is seen more clearly in the poems included in the volume. He saw the event in China not as an isolated war, but as a local outbreak of a gigantic struggle in which all the people of the earth "in all their living are profoundly implicated."

This is one sector and one movement of the  
 general war  
 Between the dead and the unborn, the Real  
 and the Pretended.

The sonnet sequence at the end of the book contains some of the poet's best verse. Spender calls them a real contribution to the technique of modern poetry. "For example he has introduced the remarkable variations on the sonnet form of Rilke's, Sonnets to Orpheus, into the English language far more effectively than a translator could have done."<sup>13</sup> Spender points to the Sonnet XXIII in which Auden acknowledges his debt to Rilke by giving an account of him when he had completed the Duinese Elegies.<sup>14</sup>

Tonight in China let me think on one

Who through ten years of silence worked and waited,  
 Until in Muzot all his power spoke,  
 And everything was given, once for all:

And with the gratitude of the Completed  
 He went out in the winter night to stroke  
 That little tower like a great animal.

He writes of the poor, the dull, the illiterate Chinese soldier who died, although he did not know the reason, to make the world a place that is fit to live in. Auden is a pacifist, but he does not find it hard to

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element. London: Cape, 1938, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

take sides.

But ideas can be true although men die  
And we can watch a thousand faces  
Made active by one lie:

And maps can really point to places  
Where evil is now:  
Nanking: Dachau.

To make a summary of the results of Auden's travels to Iceland, to Spain, and to China, would only result in oversimplifications. It would be making statements that in their very grossness would lose meaning. The fact that he went to these center-of-interest places, the abiding curiosity and concern of the man illustrate emphatically how wide his view of the world has become. He is interested not only in himself and his inner responses and problems, but in the major activities of much of the whole world in which he lives.

## CHAPTER VII

### LATER WORKS

During the years Auden was experimenting with verse in the theater and going on jaunts to various parts of the world, his output in other fields of literature did not stop. He reviewed books, edited the famous Oxford Book of Light Verse,<sup>1</sup> and compiled an anthology with John Garrett, The Poet's Tongue.<sup>2</sup> He published short lyrics, narratives, and other poetry in the magazines, New Verse, Harpers, and Poetry. These were later printed in the volumes Look Stranger,<sup>3</sup> called On This Island<sup>4</sup> in America, and in Another Time.<sup>5</sup> He translated and adapted the lyrics to Ernest Toller's, No More Peace.<sup>6</sup>

The reviews which are too numerous to mention warrant some attention. The books are usually written by other critics, or by educators of sociologists. Some generalities may be made concerning these. Again and again Auden puts forth his belief that the society he lives in is unsatisfactory; it does not meet the requirements of freedom, or moral

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Auden (editor), Oxford Book of Light Verse. O.U.P., 1938

<sup>2</sup>\_\_\_\_\_ and John Garrett (compilers), The Poet's Tongue.  
London: Bell, 1935

<sup>3</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Look Stranger. London: Faber and Faber, 1936

<sup>4</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, On This Island. New York: Random House, 1937

<sup>5</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Another Time. New York: Random House, 1940

<sup>6</sup>Ernest Toller, No More Peace. (Translated by Edward Crankshaw)  
Farrar and Rinehart: New York, 1937

justice he expects it to. In 1932, in Scrutiny, he reviewed three education books, Year Book of Education for 1932, The Triumph of the Dalton Plan, by Ivor, Nicholson, and Watson, and Reminiscences of a Public Schoolboy, by Elkin Matthews. He does not feel that the subject matter of any of these is worth serious comment. After poking fun at the author's concern over "methods" of teaching, he goes on to say that the first concern of the man of intelligence should be to solve the problems facing the world of today, not in conditioning youth to live in the rotting society.<sup>7</sup> He does the same type of reviewing of A Choice of Kipling's Verse, made by T. S. Eliot.<sup>8</sup> He explains that Kipling as a poet stood in the center of a circle fighting off vague visible and invisible demons who were endangering civilization. This is a contrast to the position of the modern poet who has to fight evils from within. These two reviews are examples of many of the same type which appeared in the periodicals mentioned.

The anthology of verse which Auden compiled with John Garrett is notable as is the collection in the Oxford Book of Light Verse, because of the selections included. It is intended probably to be used as a supplement to the ordinary book of this type. The lack of author's name is notable; Auden believed that they would distract the reader. According to his definition of poetry as being memorable speech, many different types are included, even limericks and caberet songs. "Those who in Mr. Spender's

<sup>7</sup>W. H. Auden, "Review of Three Education Books", Scrutiny, vol. 1, no. 2, September 1932, p. 191

<sup>8</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, "The Poet of Encirclement", The New Republic, vol. 109, October 25, 1943, p. 579



words", Auden says in the introduction, "try to put poetry on a pedestal only succeed in putting it on the shelf."

He might have used the same words in the preface to the Oxford Book of Light Verse. Instead he goes into detail about the kind of society in which light verse can be written. Beginning with the premise that it can only be written when a poet has ideas and language in common with his audience, Auden goes on to explain the difference between an "open" and a "closed" society. This idea has already been discussed. He says that today this common bond can only come on trivial things.

The anthology is an example of the rebellion of the poet against the pretty little playful vers de société, which "tinctured with well-bred philosophy" have been considered the whole of light verse to the exclusion of popular songs, carols, epigrams and nonsense of the people.<sup>9</sup>

The selections are again inconsistent and unusual. He mixes Pope and Byron, Herrick and Bridges, with the authors of "The Man on the Flying Trapeze", "Hey Diddle Diddle", and "Honey Take a Whiff of Me".

In 1936 Auden published a collection of poems called Look Stranger. It was entitled On This Island in its American edition. It is this collection for which the poet received the most praise.

David Daiches, who defined the chief problems of the poet as lack of definite point of view and lack of specified audience, finds here the conflict to a large degree solved. The simple and highly effective strain

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<sup>9</sup>Anonymous, "Review of Oxford Book of Light Verse", T.L.S., November 5, 1938, p. 712

of the meditation and description which runs through the subtle clarity of these poems, the plastic handling of language which he displays, seem to indicate that at last he has found a public, that he knows to whom he is speaking. As a result both his attitude and his expression are clarified.<sup>10</sup>

His audience is what might be called the ideal schoolboy. He is demonstrating, illustrating, and warning those who will make the future, the alert yet dissatisfied youngsters who will have to do the rebuilding.<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean that all the poems are actually addressed to schoolboys, or even worded for that kind of an audience; it means simply that by envisaging that kind of audience he has been able to clarify both his own attitude and his use of symbols.<sup>12</sup> Having attained that clarification he can write to whom he wishes. Words like "we" and "they" acquire both intellectual and emotive meanings. The whole texture of the poetry is clarified as a result of Auden's having translated that vague feeling of being involved in transition into concrete terms: the poet fixing his attitude by addressing his younger contemporaries in the light of what the past was and what the future must be made to be.<sup>13</sup>

The poems are a varied assortment of different forms of verse.

Oh what is that sound which so thrille the ear  
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?  
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,  
The soldiers coming.

<sup>10</sup>David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, 1940, p. 228

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 230

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

This ballad tells a tale of woe caused by lack of realization that a neighbor's danger is a personal danger to everyone.

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,  
 Seeing at end of streets the barren mountains,  
 Round corners coming suddenly on water,  
 Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,  
 We honour founders of these starving cities,  
 Whose honour is the image of our sorrows.

Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow  
 That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys;  
 Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities,  
 They reined their violent horses on the mountains,  
 Those fields like ships to castaways on the islands,  
 Visions of green to them that craved for water.

This use of sestina, six lines to a stanza instead of rime employs the same terminal words throughout the stanzas in varied order, is one of Auden's special accomplishments. He is the only modern poet who uses the form effectively.

The poem beginning, "The earth turns over, our side feels cold", seems to give a feeling of powerlessness, but as one reads through the volume there appears a ray of hope. The poet has reached a stage where he is reconciled with the past, he is living in a very particular moment of history. In his poem to Isherwood, he says:

This then is my birthday wish for you, as now  
 From the narrow window of my fourth floor room  
 I smoke into the night, and watch reflections  
 Stretch into the harbor. In the houses  
 The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.  
 And all sway forward on the dangerous flood  
 Of history, that never sleeps or dies,  
 And, held for one moment, burns the hand.

Here he shows the confidence won in fixing his attitude and audience. The Orators has proved to be a training ground.<sup>14</sup>

Daiches also believes that here the problem of the necessary link with the past, the so-called "heir and ancestor" problem has been solved. The poet has reached a position from which he can praise or blame, accept or reject; and from which the desirable from the past can be carried forward into the future.<sup>15</sup>

Language of moderation cannot hide;  
 My sea is empty and the waves are rough;  
 Gone from the maps the shore where childhood played  
 Tight-Fisted as a peasant, eating love;  
 Lost in my wake the archipelago,  
 Islands of self through which I sailed all day,  
 Planting a pirate's flag, a generous boy;  
 And lost the way to action and to you.

Lost if I steer. Gale of desire may blow  
 Sailor and ship past the illusive reef  
 And yet I land to celebrate with you  
 Birth of a natural order and of love;  
 With you enjoy the untransfigured scene,  
 My father down the garden in his gaiters,  
 My mother at her bureau writing letters,  
 Free to our favours, all titles gone.

Southworth uses this poem as an example of a personal problem of the poet's. He says that it describes a special kind of relationship and emotion which can only happen in the case of a homosexual, and that the the reference to the "heir-ancestor" is to an uncle of Auden's to whom

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>David Daiches, "Into the World", Poetry, vol. LVI, September, 1940, p. 40

he has a special affinity because they were alike in this respect.<sup>16</sup>

In February of 1940, there appeared Another Time, which also contains poems which had been written and published during the past four years. By this time Auden had come to live in America. His poetry on the whole is weaker, less serious than before. Even the language seems to have lost some of its tension. He uses more personification, more abstractions, becomes more didactic than ever when he attempts gravity. Daiches says this is due to the fact that being in a new location he must wait for a new synthesis before he can again write impressive poetry. He builds an analogy on one of Auden's verses in which he points out that the "you" of the poem might stand for the vantage point that the poet is waiting for. This would be a unified view of the world.<sup>17</sup>

All mankind, I fancy,  
When anticipating  
Anything exciting  
Like a rendez-vous,

Occupy the time in  
Purely random thinking,  
For when love is waiting  
Logic will not do....

So I pass the time dear,  
Till I see you, writing  
Down whatever nonsense  
Comes into my head.

The poem does not really have the meaning given it by Daiches, but his idea is valid.

<sup>16</sup>James Southworth, "Wystan Hugh Auden", Sewanee Review, vol. 46, April 1938, p. 201

<sup>17</sup>Daiches, op. cit., p. 232

The book also contains a number of ballads, of which "Miss. Gee" and "John Honeyman" are the most famous. C. Day Lewis picks the most serious defect of these two when he uses the word unsympathetic.<sup>18</sup> They are character sketches, bitter and cruel in their sharpness of line. John is a man who experiments with munitions, invents an explosive, and is blown up by it when it is used by an enemy in the war. This is a situation full of pity, the poor man only tried to make a living the way he knew how--and Auden laughs.. So with Miss. Gee, an old maid who lives a prim and strict life, never really doing or thinking, or feeling, at least not obviously in the poem. In the last stanza she is a cadaver in a medical school being used in the study of cancer. This disease according to Auden's consistent belief is a growth due to frustration. Here, again instead of tears, there is a loud, boisterous laugh.

There are, however, some very excellent poems in the volume. "Law, Say the Gardeners, Is the Sun" and the three elegiac verses in memory of W. B. Yeats, Ernest Toller, and Sigmund Freud are beautifully and sensitively handled.

The faults of Auden's verse are faults implicit in the term contemporary; the cheapness, the jazz, the slang, the very easy thrills, the disrespect and slovenliness of a muddled age. His psychology is too often based on sweeping generalizations. He is not consistent. For instance, his lack of sympathy with neurotics which is a contradiction to

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<sup>18</sup>C. Day Lewis, "Look Stranger", Poetry, vol. XLIX, March 1937, p. 225

the Freudian concept on which the poetry is written. He insists that psychic evil produces social evil, which is definitely at odds with the Marx notion often utilized.<sup>19</sup>

The pitfalls into which it would be easiest for Auden to fall are those which would be a result of overdoing the things he does best. Brooks<sup>20</sup> and Jarrell<sup>21</sup> agree on what these would be. He has already on occasion made these mistakes. The use of sharp contrasts which gave validity and goodness to some of his verse could become stereotyped. It should not be used for its own sake but to say something. The poetry when Auden has erred in this direction has become coarser, easier. Sometimes, too, the satire becomes too broad, as in certain sections of The Dance of Death. The use of heterogeneity, ambivalence, and even of personification, have resulted in some of the poet's best work. But these are devices which if not cautiously handled can ruin poetry. The use of more than one level of expression as it is done in the play, A Dog Beneath the Skin, is bad enough to spoil the whole idea of the play. Auden's special gift of being able to bring together the dissimilar sometimes, in his later works, degenerates almost to a heterogeneous list making reminiscent of Whitman when he became thin and diluted.

Auden has been trying to make his poetry more accessible to the masses.

<sup>19</sup>Francis Scarfe, Auden and After. London: Routledge and Sons, 1942, pp. 16-17.

<sup>20</sup>Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition. University of North Carolina Press, 1939, pp. 130-131

<sup>21</sup>Randall Jarrell, "Changes in Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry", Southern Review, vol. 7, no. 2, 1941, p. 332

To do this he has been taking the teacher attitude which involves talking down to his audience. In connection with this problem, Jarrell asks the question: "Realizing that the best poetry of the twenties is too inaccessible, we can will our poetry into accessibility--but how much poetry will be left when we finish?" Jarrell's idea is to attempt to make the masses accessible to the poetry instead of visa versa.<sup>22</sup>

The mention of these faults and possible pitfalls, however, is not meant to give the impression that the young and very promising poet is already past his prime. The poem, The Double Man, which was published in 1941 makes it more apparent than ever that Auden is the most provocative as well as the most unpredictable poets of his generation.

This poem in which Auden again uses the epistolary form, is directed by the poet's preoccupation with man's divided mind. Auden wrote once before about this idea of his in reviewing a book by George Binney Dibblee. He said that dual conceptions, of a higher and lower self, of reason and instinct, are only apt to lead to the inhibition rather than to the development of desires, to their underground survival in immature forms, the causes of disease, crime, and permanent fatigue. Auden continues in the following words: "The only duality is that between the whole self at different stages of development--e.g., a man before and after a religious conversion. The old life must die in giving birth to the new. That which desires life to itself, be it individual, habit, or reason, casts itself, like lucifer, out of heaven."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jarrell, op. cit., p. 348

<sup>23</sup> W.H.Auden, "Review of Instinct and Intuition", Criterion, vol.IX, April 1930, p. 567.



The Double Man is basically an analysis of man's divided soul, and a statement of Auden's belief that the acknowledgment and acceptance of individual weaknesses is a basis of salvation.

...true democracy begins  
 With free confession of our sins...  
 And all real unity commences  
 With consciousness of differences.

This work, while it is not a sample of the poet's best verse, is of value to a study of the author's sensitivity to the world around him. He states his personal plight by observing:

...language may be useless, for  
 No words men write can stop the war  
 Or measure up to the relief  
 Of its immeasurable grief.

Part of the poem is an essay on the forces of evil in the world today. This is the half truths educated into the minds of individuals and groups of individuals which must be made whole if order is to come to this chaotic world.

There is a bibliography of modern sources and a long series of notes connected with the text. These notes distract the reader of the poem, but also illustrate the complicated thought stream of the author. Had the most pertinent of the material been incorporated into the body of the selection it would have added to its value.

The final section contains the expression of one of the essential characteristics of Auden's philosophy, hope for the better future through the advancement of mankind.

Oh once again let us set out,  
Our faith well balanced by our doubt,  
Admitting every step we make  
Will certainly be a mistake,  
But still believing we can climb  
A little higher every time,  
And keep in order that we may  
Ascend the penitential way  
That forces our will to be free.

## CONCLUSION

When the "war to end all wars" suspended hostilities on November 11, 1918, it was hoped by most people that the armistice would result in a lasting peace. This, however, was not the case. The peace was a protracted armistice as far as the major armies of the world were concerned, but it did not prove that effective on the social or economic fronts. The battle for social and economic adjustment continued, and it was not many years after the first peace that the second war was beginning to cast its shadows.

The war, nevertheless, did not kill those English writers who had come to separate life from literature. Many of them were beyond the age of conscription, and most of them went on singing about Beauty while their "ivory towers" were subject to air raids. These middle-aged or old men were merely recalling memories. And if these beautiful memories had led only to this hideous present that was the war, if spiritual research of an individualistic nature had been ended by national hatreds, upon what then, was the imagination to dwell? The war had indeed left a deadly mark on the belief that the values of civilization, tradition, and high intelligence or the ability to suffer and love greatly would lead us into any Utopia where man's intelligence had greater or freer play.

The chorus of disillusionment in literature had been growing for some time—since the nineties, in fact. Unlike America, optimism had faded slowly and fairly gracefully in England and the tide of romantic enthusiasm ended.

The early twenties in both England and America were years of free money. The problem then to men of thinking and learning was that of emotional and cultural stabilization. The artificial laughter of the "jazz age", the excessive drinking, emphasized sex life, off beat popular music, and other forces, were acting counter balance to the morbid disillusionment, which in reality formulated the backdrop of the scene.

The thirties, though they have not yet been given a standard descriptive adjective like the "gay" nineties, or the "roaring" twenties, might well be called something more alliterative, meaning the chaotic thirties. The actual historical occasions, the wars in China, Ethiopia, Spain, Finland, Poland, and France are all connected in a chain of events which tell the story of the rise to power of militaristic governments, which in their lust for economic power had been duped into thinking that they could own the world.

Primarily, among the war poets, Wilfred Owen saw the tragedy clearly. He knew that men would behave with magnificent bravery, but he also realized that they would act on false idealism. He takes the tragic view of the young men, whose lives, like his own, were to be lost. Writing in a fairly traditional literary form, he stressed the dignity of the human spirit, victimized by causes it cannot justify and cannot end. Siegfried Sasson laid his emphasis on the ugliness and filth of war, that is the degradation that war inflicted. Some of his earlier works are noteworthy but his post-war poems are nothing but an unsuccessful attempt to keep his name popular. As has been witnessed in the past, saterizing one's own people, in poetry

or prose, is not the proper procedure for attaining popularity with the majority of readers.

Speaking in general terms, though, the war had for the first time in nearly ten years put the poets in contact with people from all walks of life. By the time the conflict had ended the foundations of the old ivory tower were in shambles. The war poets were either dead or not writing. A period of grasping, of pessimism occurred. Eliot with his famous Waste Land, the title of which has given a name to the entire decade, epitomised the plight of the modern man of sensibility. Many writers followed in his footsteps, used him as an example, and complained with him in wailing words:

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.

But the world was not at an end; nor were the troubles of the people in it. Economic collapse was ordained to be its next trial. The worst and most terrifying depression known to the modern world ushered in the thirties. The way out of the waste land, out of the moral, cultural, economic aridity of nearly fifteen years of lack of ability or will to emerge, had to be found. Was the answer in political action? Was it in psychiatry? Neither of these two, nor did any of the other numerous suggested remedies prove to be effective solutions to the major problems of the day.

This chaotic world was the world of W. H. Auden, England's most promising poet in 1930. The young man is, above all others, typical of his poetic age and of his contemporaries. He is not the leader of a school of poets, but if importance is determined according to power of radiation, then

he is an important poet of the group including Stephen Spender, Louis MacNiece, and Cecil Day Lewis. His position might be compared to that of Donne and the Metaphysicals.

The picture of Auden coming from a professional family, going to the public school, to Oxford, teaching, traveling, meeting interesting people, and so on, could without much alteration be the story of many of his contemporaries. Spender did not go to the public school; MacNiece was born in Northern Ireland; otherwise an outline biography would be the same.

But as MacNiece points out, however much is known about a poet, the poem remains a thing distinct from him.<sup>1</sup> This much is granted. Nevertheless poetry being firstly communication, a certain knowledge of the poet's personal background will help us understand him, for his language is to some extent personal. It may be true that any contemporary poet is a mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist, but, it is helpful to consider the shape of the mouthpiece itself.<sup>2</sup> MacNiece goes on to say that he believes that the determinist critics whose determinism merely takes account of general conditions—a period of social history, a movement of literary history or economic factors in their purity—do not get a true picture. Neither do, those who base their explanations on a poet's psychological biography. Psychology and economics must both be taken into account.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Louis MacNiece, Modern Poetry. O.U.P., 1938 p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

No critic making a study of Auden's poetry could fail to see these two factors. It has been shown over and over again how each of his volumes from the 1930 Poems, to the 1941 Double Man, has included ideas expressed in terms of each of these phases of existence.

It has been shown that while Auden is concerned with economic problems, he does not speak as a working man. He does not really know poverty except as an observer. His world view is a view through the window of literature as much as it is through actual experience. It is not meant by this that the poet's ideas or feelings are unreal. But there is a difference between the view point of a young middle-class university graduate and others on most subjects—a soldier on war, a politician on state affairs, a religious on moral values, a doctor or a scientific man on physical illness.

The old question of greatness in literature is involved in the question of the poet's world view. He is undoubtedly one of the better of the young poets of the day. His literature does not fail to attract the attention of men of learning and discrimination. What the future may hold for him or what may be expected of him in years to come is impossible to predict. His view of the world, his sensitivity to the events and philosophy current in his times has made his poetry a reflection of the major trends of the day. The old intellectual war we inherit is still going on—each side busy exposing, dissecting, refuting as persistently as ever with little chance of anything resembling a victory or defeat. However, it is certain that even if a satisfactory solution of our economic problems could be reached, a solution of moral and aesthetic difficulties would by no means follow as

a simple consequence.

All the really great literature of the world, namely, Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, have been written on more basic problems. When Milton saw that politics had a more immediate pressing necessity he left poetry and wrote for "the public".

Poets are not, unfortunately, as they have been said to be, the unacknowledged legislators of the world. But, as Babette Deutsch says, they have always been propagandists. They have always spoken, however ambiguously, however indirectly, for values with which the economists do not reckon—for justice, for truth, for love.<sup>4</sup> In so far as Auden has done this, in so far as he has been able to write honestly in his extraordinary style, he has put himself in the position of being one of the really good poets on the modern scene.

Tracing his ideas and outlook through a survey of his life and works has enabled one to see how very close the problems of the whole world come to the modern man who is sensitive and intelligent and the effect of modern philosophies on a thinking man and a poet.

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<sup>4</sup>Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry. New York: Norton and Company, 1935, p. 260.



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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Miss Margaret Mary McNulty has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

May 8, 1945  
Date

S. M. Steward  
Signature of Adviser