"... he hears the voice of Man 'mingling with the distant mitter of guerilla fighting': 'O teach us to outgrow our madness'. That, if any, is the real message of poetry." (R. A. Scott-James).
CHAPTER IV

W.H. AUDEN — A STUDY IN INTEGRITY OF SOCIAL PURPOSE

The poems of Auden written in the twenties sharply depicted the physical, mental, and moral conditions of England and Western Europe in that decade. By direct representation as well as symbolical expression, these poems articulated the anxiety (in all its shades) which was running as an undercurrent in life beset with insecurity that had been mainly brought about by economic inadequacies and political bunglings. It was Auden's genuine concern for humanity that added a tone of great urgency to his poems. Auden as a man was himself anxious because he 'cared' for the fate of man; the greater his concern, the sharper the satire and ridicule directed against Fascism, Nazism and Capitalism. Only a poet of his deep vision could go behind the disintegration of the whole human set-up and reveal how war — the political-cum-economic disaster — had poisoned the life of man. Only a large-hearted modern seer like him could try to succour with Love and Pity the care-worn painful existence of the lonely human soul in this anxiety-ridden twentieth-century.

"I began writing Poetry myself because one Sunday afternoon in March 1922, a friend suggested that I should; the thought had never occurred to me", says W.H. Auden. \footnote{1. Auden, 'Making, Knowing and Judging}, Oxford 1956, p. 5.
that would mislead those who ignore that he had from the beginning been sincerely concerned with (a) Man's social creature at work and play in the contemporary world of inadequacies, and (b) Poetic use of language. It was not just chance impression of his contemporaries at Oxford who considered him a young man of great self-assurance and cut convictions — a conscious master of the situations of his time. For Auden is primarily a purposive poet, who is aware of the vastness of human scene surrounding and magnifying the loneliness of the individual soul — who as an artist feels his responsibility to work through satire, pity and love for the fulfilment of man's destiny in the world of to-day:

"The problem for the modern poet, as for everyone else to-day, is how to find or form a genuine community in which each has a valued place and can feel at home. The old pre-industrial community and culture are gone and cannot be brought back. Nor is it desirable that they should be. They were too unjust, too squalid, and too custard-bound. Virtues which were once nursed unconsciously by the forces of nature must now be recovered and fostered by deliberate

1. p. 7, Ibid., as also p. 208, 'English Studies' Oct. 1939, Amsterdam; the article 'Left-Wing Poetry', F. W. Hausermann (vide a quotation in the foot-note from a article by Auden in the Section 'Writing' from the book in Outline for Boys and Girls', published by Gollancz, 1933).
effort of the will and intelligence .... A democracy in which each citizen is fully conscious and capable of making a rational choice, as in the past has only been possible if the wealthier few, is the only kind of society which in the future is likely to survive for long.

"In such a society, and in such alone, will it be possible for the poet, without sacrificing any of his subtleties of sensibility or his integrity, to write poetry which is simple, clear, and gay". ¹

Even since his university days, Auden had been drawing attention by the brilliant expression and intense liveliness of his poems. These evinced a new type of attitude towards life, a suggestion of profound inner tensions in a soul sensitively reacting to the new meaning of human relationships. Love, his constant pre-occupation, drew him out thus, as early as 1927:

"........ But now,
To interrupt the homely brow,
Thought warmed to evening through and through,
Your letter comes, speaking as you,
Speaking of much but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb
If love not seldom has received
An unjust answer, was deceived.

¹ Auden, from the introduction to 'The Oxford Book of Light Verse' (1938), 1952 reprint, pp. XIX-XX.
I, decent with the seasons, move,
Different or with a different love,
Nor question overmuch the nod,
The stone smile of this content
That never was more reticent,
Always afraid to say more than it needs.

But it was not only this directness and integrity of expression which impressed his readers. In a charade "Paid on Both Sides", published in 1929 in the magazine Criterion, he distinctly set the design for a new realism sharply registering the tension and pressure of sensibility of his times. This Charade had a starkly disturbing vein of observation which compelled the attention of his contemporaries. But besides that, an intensely profounder impression was produced by its urgency of tone and sincere concern for man caught in the web of annihilating forces of self-destruction.

The plot, a blood feud, is quite meaningful. It might symbolize the national rivalry between England and Germany. The tragic emotion of the situation is heightened by the intensity of passion nursed by the two sides as well as the seeming helplessness with which murders are committed. The poet seems to visualize, as it were, the drift of European society towards a blood bath. The anxiety of his generation has become vocal for the first time in poetry:

2. It is interesting to note the comments of a Cambridge man Mr. W. Empson. This contemporary estimate (published in 'Experiment, Spring 1931) is quite significant: "One reason the scheme is so impressive is that it puts psycho-analysis and surrealism and all that, all the irrationalist tendencies which are so essential a part of the machinery of present-
O how shall man live
Whose thought is born, child of one farcical.
To find him old? The body warm but not
By chance, by turns of folk in dancing bunches.
In dust and dust in homemade benches,
Where looms are drawn apart, a secret will
Restore the child but comes thence to a wall.
Outside on frozen soil lie armies killed
Who seem familiar but they are cold.
Now the most solid wish he tries to keep
His hands show through; he never will look up,
Say 'I am good'. On him misfortune falls
More than enough. Better where no one feels,
The out of sight, buried too deep for shafts.

In spite of the gloom hanging over the plot, the

drama tenderely unfolds the poet's concern for life:

contd ........

day thought, into their proper place; they are made part of
the normal and rational tragic form, and indeed what constitu-
tutes the tragic situation. One feels as if in the crisis
of many, perhaps better, tragedies, it is just this machinery
which has been covertly employed. Within its scale (twenty-
seven pages) there is the gamut of all the ways we have of
thinking about the matter; it has the completeness that makes
a work seem to define the attitude of a generation."
(Quoted by F.R. Leavis in 'Serutiny', June 1934, p. 78 in connec-
tion with his own remarks entitled 'Auden, Bottral and Others'.

1. From Chorus II, 'Paid on Both Sides', Collected Shorter
Poems, p. 208.
Not from life, not from this life is any
To keep; sleep, day and play would not help there
Dangerous to new ghost; new ghost learns from many
Learns from old terms what death is where.¹

Mark his worried warning:

Though he believe it, no man is strong.
He thinks to be called fortunate,
To bring home a wife, to live long.

But he is defeated; let the son
Sell the farm lest the mountain fall;
His mother and her mother won.

His fields are used up where the moles visit,
The contours worn flat; if there show
Passage for water he will miss it;

Give up his breath, his woman, his team;
No life to touch, though later there be
Big fruit, eagles above the stream.²

The poet, it is clear, does not intend to take recourse to
softening of images or miming of words for portraying a
sharp disillusionment. But he does not stay stuck up into
negative and futile despair of the previous generation.
Rather there is a distinct note of hope too in the last two
lines — "will to live" in words of MacNeice.³

¹ Ibid., page 200.
² Collected Shorter Poem, p. 222-223.
³ Vide Mr. Louis MacNeice's remarks in 'Subject in Modern
Not that it was a random whim or striking pose of a sophisticated university intellectual. On the contrary, it was the considered attitude of a very intelligent wide-awake brain. Auden's approach was clear enough. He seemed to suggest that though the prevailing misery was sorely painful, it need not be taken to be stunning or deadening, that a brighter end could and should be visualized and preached in view of a severe threat ahead, the fear of which loomed large before apparently unseeing eyes:

This is the dragon's day, the devourer's:
Orders are given to the enemy for a time
With underground proliferation of mould,
With constant whisper and casual question,
To haunt the poisoned in his shunned house,
To destroy the efflorescence of the flesh,
The intricate play of the mind, to enforce
Conformity with the orthodox bone,
With organized fear, the articulated skeleton.¹

What a picture! The deadening fear turning the paragon among God's creation into the "articulated skeleton"! But the poet there also saw with unclouded eye how Love could lead man to "independent delight", Love which needed "death of the grain, our death, Death of the old gang".

The remarkable poetical works of W.H. Auden published during the 'Thirties, were Poems (1930), The Orators (1932), The Dance of Death (1933), Look Stranger (1936), Spain (1937),

¹ Collected Shorter Poems, op. cit.: (p. 84) from the poem '1923'
and Another Time (1940). From the very first volume he struck out towards newer depths than till then ever plumbed. He gave fine samples of his intellectual and cultural heritage, university education, intelligent awareness of current climate of ideas (Marx, Freud, Karl Marx, and Kierkegaard), sharp observation of human unrest as a product of unhealthy economic, political and scientific forces, and, lastly, an acute sense of social responsibility. Look at his Petition to the Almighty:

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 imgrown virginity.
Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response
And gradually correct the coward's stance ...

This thought-content appeared to be highly interesting to his contemporaries because, couched as it was in terms of a lively new realism (modern imagery and current slang), it portrayed with an almost effortless artistry a scene which was quite familiar to them.  

2. "Many of us who began our adult reading during the thirties in England will always think of W. H. Auden with a particular warmth; with the family sense we reserve for those writers who place their fingers on the pulse of a crucial period, whose writings are interwoven with our own intellectual and imaginative growing up . . . . at such a time he spoke about our common situation with intelligence and breadth, with urgency and energy and wit; that he spoke — to use a word he would probably find congenial — 'memorably'." Richard Hoggart, in a pamphlet entitled W. H. Auden: Longmans Green, Gr. Britain, 1957.
In 1930, insecurity had seeped deep into the root of things; Depression, Unemployment, Social values gone off the accepted keel, and International tensions — these had become concomitants of Una: and the cosy sun Depression's ravages:

Get there if you can and see the land once you were proud to own. Though the roads have almost vanished and the expresses never run; smokeless chimneys, damaged bridges, rotting wharves and choked canal Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on their side across the rails. Power-stations locked, deserted, since they drew the boiler fires. Pylons falling or subsiding, trailing dead high-tension wires;¹

Or what more pitiable but grim picture than this:

For private reasons I must have the truth, remember
These years have seen a boom in sorrow;
The presses of idleness issued more despair
And it was honoured,
Gross Hunger took on more hands every month,
Erecting here and everywhere his vast
Unnecessary workshops,
Europe grew anxious about her health,
Combines tottered, credits froze,
And business shivered in a banker's winter
While we were kissing.²

The last line administers an unexpected shock by the sharp contrast of ideas. Looked deeper, it reveals great uneasiness. The act of kissing takes little time, and even in that short period political and economic insecurity shot up. Again, those who indulged in kissing were deliberately trying to forget the worry which surrounded

² pp. 69-70, 'Collected Shorter Poems', by Auden; from the poem 'The Malverns'.
them on all sides.

Auden was born in York and brought up in the industrialized Midlands. He knew only too well how unemployment and economic depression had told very adversely upon the trades and people in England—people who due to stinging poverty would choose suicidal jobs than starve on the doles:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
On the wet road between the chafing grass
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors...

A ramshackle engine
At Cashwell raises water; for ten years
It lay in flooded workings until this,
Its latter office, grudgingly performed,
And further here and there, though many dead
Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen
Taken from recent winters; two there were
Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching
The winch the gale would tear them from; one died
During a storm, the fells impassable,
Not at his village, but in a wooden shape
Through long abandoned levels nosed his way
And in his final valley went to ground.¹

The reader is dazed by the passionate irony in spite of the quiet exposition of a painfully familiar scene; but once the sharp effect and shocking vividness have settled down, he becomes aware of a deeply symbolical suggestiveness. Auden has been very fond of symbols from the very beginning as is quite natural for an alert mind sweltering with ideas.

His images compress and suggest various ideas but the one recurrent form is that of solid fear. For example:

Booms from your 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 unbaffled rises, being spring;
But seldom this. Near you, taller than grass
Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.

The eeriness visualized above suggests Yeats with a difference, which becomes distinct and palpable in a passage like this one:

Then, ready, start your rumour, soft
But horrifying in its capacity to disgust
Which, spreading magnified, shall come to be
A polar peril, a prodigious alarm,
Scattering the people, as torn-up paper
Rags and utensils in a sudden gust,
Seized with immeasurable neurotic dread.

The horror of the panic has been crystallized in the phrase "polar peril" and its unmanning effect has been flashingly lit up with the help of the subsequent simile. We have to mark the expression "sudden gust" — the image visualized being

1. cf. "Mr. Auden's imagery and language have been remarkable for an energy, a felicity, a richness, a resource, a nerve, which have made him conspicuous figure". (Edmund Wilson, 'The Shores of Light', Allen & Co. 1952, p. 670; from Sec. 'Oxford Boys Becalmed', Febry. 24, 1937).

2. Poems (1930), from No XI, quoted above.

3. Poems (1930) from the poem 'Consider' here quoted from the Pocket Book of Modern Verse, p. 481.
that of a sharp squall throwing about torn paper rags and utensils all at once (implying complete unnerving in face of terror. Incidentally it is quite significant in contrastive of a different type of nervous behaviour — the panic panic in the ranks of infantrymen surprised by an unexpected charge of the enemy cavalry. The reader is sharer in a true poetic emotion as his heart feels thrilled at an exciting tune and atmosphere.

It seems as if Auden exults in conjuring up this solid phantom of terror. We quite frequently come across mention of hushed orders, spy rings, battle preparations, marching soldiers, the Adversary's rumblings, threatening mountains and the like. For example, it does not need any special attention to mark the militant setting of the following:

All leave is cancelled to-night; we must say good-bye. We entrain at once for the North; we shall see in the morning

The headland we're doomed to attack; snow down to the tide line;

Though the bunting signals

"Indoors before it's too late; cut peat for your fires", We shall lie out there.¹

These symbols are such as can easily catch and fire the imagination of even the most unadventurous and unsophisticated child. It is to be noted that the poet does not intend to act like a rumour monger gloating over the panic created out of a baseless

¹. Dast St. of 'Ode to My Pupils' 1932); here quoted from The Penguin Poets' W.H. Auden (Selections 1958), p. 22.
report. On the contrary the quick passing from statement to statement, the hushed tone and the seriousness of the crisis vividly underline the poet's own urgent concern. He perceives the severe threat:

*new upon, through the dykes of our content
The rumbling flood will force a rent
And, taller than a tree
Hold sudden death before our eyes
Whose river dreams long hid the size
And vigours of the sea."

It has often been suggested that Auden shows a school-boy's fondness for such description and threats. He had made it known that he cherished to pursue the spy's career (vide Stanza 5 of 'Birthday Poem' to his schoolmate Isherwood), and that he possessed an innocent weakness for showing off. But this need not blind us to his essential purpose. In fact Auden uses his ever favourite symbols not simply because of his so-called 'adolescent mood', but because thus alone can he impress upon the unsophisticated common man the seriousness of the situation in terms intelligible to him.²

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1. p. 111, 'Collected Shorter Poems', from the poem 'A Summer Night 1933'.
2. The statement is psychologically an acceptable fact. Prof. John Bayley analyses the factors behind a typical Auden-sque imagery and finds Auden's reaction ('of a sense of mastery') quite natural. He justifies the striking symbols and thrilling tone used: "What is common to all these cases is the interest of the poet and his readers in the human attitude, the sense of dramatic behaviour which human beings display in moments of crisis, disaster or impending fear. And these attitudes are always instinctive and individual, not schooled by any intellectual process or by theories of what should be done." (vide 'The Romantic Survival' op. cit. p. 131).
The same worry and anxious concern can be detected behind Auden's communistic leanings in the Thirties. It is worthwhile to enquire into the why and wherefore of his widely discussed communistic sympathies. At this distance it is easy to see how one with humanitarian outlook could easily fall under the influence of Communism which had gained special appeal during the Thirties (a decade of slump and unemployment) — an economic cure for economic ills. In Poems (1930) he had angrily depicted the rotten economic condition of England. In Orators (1932) which began with the shocking statement "What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well", he had been inspired by no mere general moral discontent due to prevailing misery but also with the wish for the revitalizing of society through some revolutionary doctrine as implied in Communism. The Dance of Death (1933) presented in the very beginning an announcer declaring: "We present to you this evening a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them". That it all referred to the communistic interpretation of history and death throes of Capitalism, became quite apparent when Marx himself appeared in the last scene to declare that the 'modern society' had been completely liquidated.

Strangely but naturally enough Auden did not become a regular member of the Communist party though in the eyes of his readers he must have its self-appointed poet-propagandist. He
had always ridiculed and threatened the old gang — now he was sure that Communism would break its back forever:

Do not imagine you can abdicate;  
Before you reach the frontier you are caught;  
Others have tried it and will try again  
To finish that which they did not begin;  
Their fate must always be as yours,  
To suffer the loss they were afraid of, yes,  
Holders of one position wrong for years.¹

Auden no doubt exulted in the anti-bourgeois possibilities and threats of Communism, but the vision of hope that he held out was not as much of an orthodox communist as that of a 'romantic radical'² fired with a sincere longing to act for bettering the lot of his brethren:

Work west and northward, set up building.  
Cities and years constricted to your scope,  
All sorrow simplified, though almost all  
Shall be as subtle when you are as tall:  
Yet clearly in that almost all his hope  
That hopeful falsehood cannot stem with love  
The flood on which all move and wish to move.³

As years passed and Auden saw in the Spanish episode how untenable his position was if he was to remain honest to himself, the apparently hardened communistic doctrine gradually

¹ Quoted by Anthony Thwaite in Contemporary English Poetry (Heinemann, 1959), p. 73.  
got lost in a softer pious and spiritual search. It would not at all be far from truth to say, (by way of running up), that his anger in the beginning, satire in the middle, and search of hope through loss in the final stage of his best-known poetry in the Thirties was basically prompted by the worry that he felt for the future of western humanity:

Like his*, our lives have been coeval
With a political upheaval.
Like him, we had luck to see
A rare discontinuity,
Old Russia suddenly mutate
Into a proletarian state,
The old phenomenon, the strange
Event of qualitative change .......

We hoped; we waited for the day
The state would wither clean away,
Expecting the Millenium
That theory promised would come,
It didn't. .......

The rays of Logos take effect,
But not as theory would expect,
For, sterile and diseased by doubt,
The dwarfed mutations are thrown out
From Eros' weaving centrosome. 2

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1. Vide p. 19, W.H. Auden by Richard Hoggart (Longmans Green, 1957); also compare Times Literary Supplement's remarks on p. 991 in the issue dt. Nov. 28, 1938. F.... It is worth noting, however, that facile acceptance of Communism as a solution cannot be read in these poems ... One poem appeared in 1933 with the title "A Communist be Others"; but in the present untitled version the word 'comrades' has been altered to brothers ...." Also compare Auden's own remarks as given in 'I Believe; mentioned before.


*Used for Wordsworth.
The poor human heart beset with doubts and fears in this world 'of war and wastefulness and woe', can hardly gain succour from the refuge of science or academic discussion.

It needs love as the life-giving blessing of Eros:

We must to love all since we are
Each a unique particular
That is no giant, god, or dwarf,
But one odd human isomorph;
We can love each because we know
All, all of us, that this is so:
Can live since we are lived, the powers
That we create with are not ours.¹

W.H. Auden had intellectually accepted Communism because thereby, he hoped, could be averted the tragedy of war (the symptom of economic inadequacies also, besides all other things).

The tragedy of war; the threat, the fear, the desperate anxiety to save man — that is the thread which runs through all his poems in the Thirties. There may be cynicism or bitter satire or angry protest,

It is our culture that with such calm progresses
Over the barren plains of a sea, somewhere ahead
The septic East, a war, new flowers and dresses.

Somewhere a strange and shrewd To-morrow goes to bed
Planning the test for men of Europe; no one guesses
Who will be most ashamed, who richer, who dead.²

² 'Collected Shorte Poems', p. 142: quoted from the poem 'The Ship'.
or there may be happy hoping,

After discharges of alarm
All unpredicted let them calm
The pulse of nervous nations,
Forgive the murderer in his glass,
Tough in their patience to surpass
The tigress her swift motions.¹

but the central note is one and the same.

Auden's attitude has been a consistent one over the years. His poems bear out the desperate urgency of purpose, individual, social and human. Thus the poem "Spain 1937" is an emphatic and eloquent expression of Audensque view of the European malaise that had been gathering threatening seriousness ever since the commencement of the Thirties. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) only rudely corroborated the chaos that had been prevailing in Europe. It wildly agitated all because the drums of war began to rumble at their very doors. Manchuria and Abyssinia had not made any remarkable stir besides damaging the prestige of the League of Nations. But now the intervention and free help by Italy and Germany to General Franco's forces showed the pass Europe was being pushed to by cruel political ambitions. "The year 1936 marks a definite stage in the descent to the abyss. The League had been discredited by its inability to intervene effectively either in the attack of Japan in Manchuria or in that of Italy on

¹ Ibid., p. 112; quoted from the poem "A Summer Night 1933".
Abyssinia. It demonstrated its weakness to all the world by its failure to intervene over the Rhineland. And in summer of this year, four months after Hitler's flouting of the League another event took place which yet a further instance of the unwillingness of the world to take active action in the interests of peace. This event was the outbreak in July 1936 of the Spanish Civil War.\(^1\)

The onslaught on the Republicans shocked all and evoked active support from idealists all over Europe, for whom the call of Spain was the call of their conscience. Auden visualized it as being Life's answer to the helpless common man's economic exploitation ("city state of the sponge") and political fooling ("the vast military empires of the shark and the tiger"). Spain threw a challenge:

What's your proposal? To build the Just City? I will. I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic Death? Very well, I accept, for, I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain.\(^2\)

And it did not go unheeded:

They clung like burrs to the long expresses that lurch Through the unjust lands, through the night, through the alpine tunnel;

They floated over the oceans;

They walked the passes: they came to present their lives.\(^3\)

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3. Ibid., p. 184.
Auden had never ignored the social, economic and political misery that kept on gathering momentum before his very eyes. True poetry in any era reveals, in words of Shakespeare, the "formal beauty of the age and body of the time". To Auden, this was there in a more crystallized form than over in the Spanish Civil War. The idyllic pre-Great War years of scientific progress, sports, arts and literature had all become 'yesterdays' gradually merging up with the unhappy 'to-day':

Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
The fall of curtain upon the death of a hero;
Yesterday the prayer to the sunset,
And the adoration of madmen. But to-day the struggle.
To-day the inevitable increase in the chances of death;
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder.  

Was this 'to-day' to lead to a blank future terrifying in its threat to be horribly severer than mere struggle? Auden's fancy linked up past, present and future as he was moved with a vast pity for man's destiny: "Tomorrow perhaps the future", the poet in him said in trembling accents — ('perhaps' plumbs the depth of helplessness and insecurity):

Tomorrow the rediscovery of romantic love;
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under Liberty's masterful shadow;
Tomorrow the hour of the pageant-master and the musician.  

The inherent grief of the situation could not have been expressed so intensely had it only prompted an "occasional" mood; it could not fulfill complete poetic consciousness of a state of civil war several years before the historical fact of it .... This is the ring of the last stanza,

The stars are dead; the animals will not look:
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon. 2

The urgency of the expression 'time is short' is poignantly eloquent and the threat, that History would not leave it at that, is ominous.

W.H. Auden looked at the Spanish war as a symbolic conflict between (a) The forces of the just and the unjust (b) Evil present and freedom-loving future, and (c) Threatening fear and elusive hope. It is to be noted that in the seventh stanza he made his poet whisper: "O my vision, O send me the luck of the sailor", and the poet certainly enough was Auden himself. The theme was political but for Auden it had various levels of appeal. The frame of reference through the symbol of Spanish civil war was the universal theme of 'threat of war and destiny of man' — the poet subjected it to a sharp private scrutiny because he was in

1. Writers of to-day (Sidgwick & Jackson, London 1948: from the article on W.H. Auden, by R. Mason.
the grip of the attitude of his age i.e. he had identified himself with the anxiety being felt by western humanity.¹

'Spain 1937' is a long poem simmering with a deep poetic emotion of which Auden's songs, charades, and ballads had ever given a significant foretaste. Herein we discover him bringing his usual poetic logic to a sustained effort. The basic myth upon which he has built his poetic vision here is the sharp premonition of another war which is being precipitated by political policies gone amuck and economic forces running out of human control. No one else had so sharply read the scene in Spain, the table-land where, as

¹ cf. Ronald Mason op. cit. in 'Writers of To-day': p. 106;

"The Spanish Civil War, performing for our own generation a precisely similar service to that effected by the French Revolution for the English Romantics, was itself a sufficiently concrete symbol of the abstract struggle for power that had for so many years been the burden of the intellectual diagnoses of the modern discontent. Auden, always fascinated by symbols, was one of the first to realise not only the political but the cultural and imaginative importance of this symbolic conflict."

Mr. Stephen Spender also feels that Auden looked at the Spanish war as a "hypothesis for his poetic logic": (vide 'Creative Element', p. 152, Hamish Hamilton, London 1953).
Auden put it "Our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive".1

W.H. Auden had grasped the real shape of his age. He could distinctly distil into his poems the basic crisis of the then society. In his own words: "We have the misfortune or the good luck to be living in one of the great critical historical periods, when the whole structure of our society and its cultural and metaphysical values are undergoing a radical change .... In periods of steady evolution, it is possible for the common man to pursue his private life without bothering his head very much over the principles and assumptions by which he lives and to leave politics in the hands of professionals.

1. The dramatic urgency of these ideas in the Thirites has lost none of its terror since. Auden's earnest anxiety rang sharply in his Age of Anxiety (1946):

Lies and lethargies police the world
In its periods of peace. What pain taught
Is soon forgotten; we celebrate
What ought to happen as if it were done,
Are blinded by our boasts. Then back they come,
The fears that we fear ...
..... We are warm, our active
Universe is young; yet we shiver:
For athwart our thinking the threat looms,
Huge and awful as the hump of Saturn
Our modes Mimas, of more deaths
And worse wars, a winter of distaste
To last a life-time ........

(pp. 20-21, The Age of Anxiety, Random House, 5th printing 1947). What in the 'Sixties now, when Auden is back from America?

"No study of your public re-appearance
Will show, as judgement on a cure demands,
A sudden change in love, ideas or diet."

The unchanged ideas are there for others to interpret for this generation. Unfortunately we are quite likely to ignore the seriousness of the crisis of this nuclear-hostility-era, simply because we become frantic when someone speaks of a War which would obliterate all traces of the human race from this planet. Patriotism is taboo in the name of 'peace'...
But ours is not such an age. And again: "The division of which we are aware is not between Reason and Imagination but between the good and evil will, not between objectivity and subjectivity and their dissociation, between the individual and the masses but between the social person and the impersonal state."  

Thus in the conflicts of his time he persistently saw fear building:

'enormous ranges casting shadows,
Heavy, 'bird-silencing, upon the outer world',
and earnestly wished to hear the voice of man echo the sentiments of his heart:

O teach us to outgrow our madness.
Ruffle the perfect manners of a frozen heart,
Clear from the head the masses of impressive rubbish;
Rally the lost and trembling forces of will,
Gather them up and let them loose upon the earth
Till, as the contribution of our star, we follow

contd...........

"The Devil for a joke
Might carve his own initial on our desk,
And yet we'd miss the point because he spoke
An idiom too dated, Audensque."

1. p. 31, 'I Believe' by Auden and others: Allen Unwin, 1941.
The clear instructions of that Justice, in the shadow of whose uplifting, loving, and constraining power all human reasons do rejoice and operate.  

...  

The almost chronological order of the poems quoted in the foregoing pages implies that the mood grew intenser with the years. And as the ill-omened decade drew to its critical climax it found the poet's mood shorn of its angry trappings but yet more pathetically frantic in view of the steady onrush of global war. In short lyrics or in longer flights the same unmistakable voice is heard:

And over the talkative city like any other  
Weep the non-attached angels, Here too knowledge of death is a consuming love. And the natural heart refuses  
The low flattering voice  
That rests not till it find a hearing.  

The expression 'like any other' adds a special poignance to the all too clear imagery, because it reflects the poet's helpless acceptance of an inevitable state of affairs. The time is gone for attempting to lay the blame at the door of the culprits:

Ten thousand miles from home and What's-her-name,  
The bugle on the late Victorian hill  
Puts out the soldiers' light; off stage, a war  
Thuds like the slamming of a distant door;  
We cannot postulate a General Will;  
For what we are, we have ourselves to blame.  

1. p. 341, 'The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden': from the Verse Commentary upon "In Time of War".  
3. p. 79, Ibid., from the poem 'Hongkong', 1938,
How miserable and degrading is the state of things! The poet is filled with a fine disgust as he had tried without avail to withstand the march of the Adversary:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in his hate.

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

When W.H. Auden moved over to America, he did not cause much amazement to those who had read his poems as being expressive of the integrity of his soul. The maturer poet turns a bold face of concern when the inevitable is almost upon his generation:

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.2

The New Year Letter now could not but be bitter reminder of crimes committed in an ever-extending area, making the whole

---
1. p. 476, *The Pocket Book of Modern Verse*; from the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats".  
2. P. 491, Ibid. (from the poem "September 1, 1939")
world wallow in vast spiritual disorder under 'one impoverishing sky'. We had been silly enough to invite the Thirst and there it was:

All formulas were tried to still
The scratching on the window-sill,
All bolts of custom made secure
Against the pressure of the door,
But up the staircase of events
Carrying his special instruments,
To every bedside all the same
The dreadful figure swifly came.

That the poet could yet hope for and advocate the starting of 'the healing fountain' in the 'deserts of the heart' and proclaim that 'We must love one another or die', showed that he had resolved honestly the inner conflicts or allegiances, and that his poetic vision had become permanently one with his conscious thought processes:

In this alone are all the same,
All are so weak that none dare claim
"I have the right to govern", or
"Behold in me the Moral Law",
And all real unity commences
In consciousness of differences,
That all needs to satisfy
And each a power to supply.
We need to love all since we are
Each a unique particular
That is no giant, god, or dwarf,
But odd human isomorph;

We can love each because we know
All, all of us, that this is so:
Can live, since we are lived, the powers
That we create, are not our.

We have quoted at some length from W.H. Auden's so-called political and social-reporting poems to prove our contention that he was urgently aware of, and concerned with, the worsening fate of his fellow-beings. But he has been called a man of many moods and styles and his poems play upon all of these and sometimes upon several simultaneously. Thus he has written with equal gusto cleverly intellectual poems, purely lyrical songs, and sharply satirical pieces. That there is the same informing idea behind this apparently variegated facade, also needs being looked into.

Mr. Auden has always commanded an artless artistry that dazzles the reader by its brilliance of execution. But this is likely to divert the attention of casual readers or irritate the impatient ones. Since Auden does not outwardly cast off his (writer's) prerogative of superior detachment, he indulges frequently in cheeky unconventionality or bantering playfulness making many miss his sincerely serious intent. In fact even in his cleverly intellectual and metaphysically dazzling pieces he tantalizes us on to deeper admonishings. What a deft scene of quiet and duck-like ducks, but by contrast how very jolting and startling its import in the given

context.

Coming out of me living is always thinking,
Thinking changing and changing living,
Am feeling as it was seeing —
To city farming on Harbour parapet
To watch a colony of duck below
Sit, preen, and doze on buttresses
Or upright padile on flickering stream,
Casually fishing at a passing straw.
Those find sun's luxury enough,
Shadow know not of homesick foreigner
Nor restlessness of intercepted growth.¹

Man's economic inadequacy and psychological frustration hinted in the last three lines serve only to enhance and underline the 'insecurity-fear' complex implied in the lines immediately following:

All this time was anxiety at night,
Shooting and barricade in street.²

Auden's manner appears clever to others though it should be accepted as natural for a man who was aware of the cultural disintegration, social corruption, and intellectual defeat of the generation of the Twenties. Auden was no neurotic but his age was, and so he quite deftly plunged into psychology, sociology and the like to depict the current worry and its threatening consequence. But he could be straightforwardly suggestive enough:

The sky is darkening like a stain;
Something is going to fall like rain,
And it won't be flowers.

1. p. 80, 'Collected Shoter Poems'; from the poem "1929".
2. Ibid.
When the green field comes off like a lid,
Revealing what was much better hid —
Unpleasant:
And look, behind you without a sound
The woods have come up and are standing round
In deadly crescent,
The bolt is sliding in its groove;
Outside the window is the black remover's wan;
And now with sudden swift emergence
Come, the hooded women, the humped backed surgeons,
And the Scissor Man.... 1

Here as we can see the phantoms of solid fear are raised by the horrors of neurotic fantasy. At other times, the sense of terror is suggested but the terms of reference are fluid and obscure:

Being alone, the frightened soul
Returns to this life of sheep and hay
No longer his; he every hour
Moves further from this and must move,
As child is weaned from his mother and leaves home
But taking the first step falters, is vexed....

So, insecure, he loves and love
Is insecure, gives less than he expects.
He knows not if it be seed in time to display
Luxuriantly in wonderful fructification
Or whether it be but a degenerate remnant
Of something immense in the past but now
Surviving only as the infectiousness of disease ... 2

Such seeming obscurity and clever handling may be detected in many poems included in Poems (1930), Paid on Both Sides, "1929",

2. pp. 82-83, 'Collected Shorter Poetry of W. H. Auden': from the poem "1929".
A Bride in the Thirties, The Orators, Look Stranger, Ascent of F6 and others.

W. H. Auden's imagination constructed a retrospective
He reads History as the gradual breakdown of traditions as well
as superstition, the rise of science and industry, the
ascendancy of the impersonal State and the
individual, man's will to love and live and the threatened
extinction of the race. Such a vision naturally could
appreciate the importance of Freud's ideas:

He wasn't clever at all; he merely told
The unhappy Present to recite the Past
Like a poetry lesson till sooner
Or later it faltered at the line where

Long ago the accusations had begun,
And suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
How rich life had been and how silly,
And was life-forgiven and more humble.

Able to approach the Future as a friend
Without a wardrobe of excuses, without
A set mask of rectitude or an
Embarrassing over-familiar gesture.¹

Auden uses symbols which convey the fullness of his
personal anxiety at the public catastrophe:

Fleeing the shorthaired mad executives
The sad and useless faces round my home,
Upon the mountains of my fear I climb:²

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1. p. 69, W.H. Auden (Penguin Poets) : from the poem 'In Memo:
of S. Freud'.
2. 'The Climbers', 1936.
The clever sexual imagery of the subsequent lines also expresses the disquieting fear or felt by the poet. He realizes the 'fatal flaw' in - which is making for tragedy:

Maud: 'Shadow-life, Anxiety
Remains just like a grand hotel. 1

Such was that generation and Auden's cleverness was but the outer cloak for the ever insistent uneasiness that he felt for it. He knew the hopelessness of the situation and prayed for strength and courage:

Then remember me that I may remember
The test we have to learn to shudder for is not
An historical event,
That neither the low democracy of a nightmare nor
An army's primitive tidiness may deceive me
About our predicament.

That catastrophic situation which neither
Victory nor defeat can annul; to be
Deaf yet determined to sing,
To be lame and blind yet burning for the Great Good Place,
To be radically corrupt yet mournfully attracted
By the Real Distinguished thing. 2

Let us now turn to the songs and musical pieces of W.H. Auden. Many in the Thirties would have first become acquainted with him as a lyrical poet, a happy songster. They must have been impressed by the verbal felicity in

1. Sonnet No. XXI, from 'In Time of War', 1939.
2. p. 140p 'Collected Shorter Poems'; from the poem "At the Grave of Henry James".
which were couched the tenderest emotions and sweetest images. There were remarkable heights of lyricism attained without personal wails but with a significant amount of fullness of heart and truly human pity. But the shaping factor behind these lyrical flights too was the underlying tension of human predicament as it unfolded itself before the poet. Auden felt in his heart of hearts that Man faced a doom that was 'dark and deeper than any sea-dingle'. What a feverish wishing this!

Save him from hostile capture,
From sudden tiger's spring at corner;
Protect his house,
His anxious house where days are counted
From thunderbolt protect,
From gradual ruin spreading like a stain;¹

Even such a pure lyric as "Look Stranger" (Seascape), one of the finest pieces in English poetry, does not simply aim at implanting the sweet scene permanently on our imagination. It shakes us by its powerful urgency. The sweet natural beauty described is silhouetted within a larger canvas:

Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands;²

This suggests causes of fear and anxiety. The tragedy of the poor unlucky dove in the following lines might as well be the sad fate of the common man befooled and betrayed by tub-thumping leaders who are mere agents of the scheming politi-

¹. p. 17, 'W.H. Auden', (Penguin Poets); from Chorus (also entitled "Something is bound to happen" 1934).
². p. 29, Penguin Poets op. cit. from 'Look Stranger', (also entitled "Seascape").
Clans and States:

There are some birds in these valleys
Who flutter round the careless
With intimate appeal,
By seeming kindness trained to snaring,
They feel no falseness

And in the tricky light
The masked hill has a purer greenness.
Their flight looks fleeter.

Alas the signal given,
Fingers on trigger tighten.
The real unlucky dove
Must smarting fall away from brightness
Its: love from living.

Similarly the eeriness of the song* "The Three Companions" ('O where are you going? said reader to rider'), or the pathos of the 'Autumn Song'** (Now the leaves are falling fast), points to the misery felt by the poet.

Dreamers and drunkards may indulge in wishful ignoring of the actuality but the situation is bitter all the same:

So dreamer and drunkard sing
Till day a sobriety bring;
Parrot-wise with death's reply
From whelping fear and nestling lie
Woods and their echoes ring:
The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews
Not to be born is the best for man.

1. p. 23, 'Penguin Poets', op. cit. (from the poem 'The Decoys').
2. p. 81, 'New Statesman and Nation', Jan. 16, 1937: from 'Song'.
* page 24, Penguin Poets, op. cit.
** page 32, Ibid.
But most touching of all are the sustained lyrical flights of the poems composed near the end of the decade. We come across very harmonious things in Auden's poems and intense urgency of the emotions entering in the poet's imagination. One needs only to look into the elegies in Leaves, or the poem "September 1, 1939", or "New Year Letter" (Jany. 1, 1940). The poet listens to the harsh bark of the 'dogs of Europe' and realises that all the hope (through the belief in the power of love) to which he had been clinging is about to vanish. Fear is taking nations in its actual strides and he cannot now afford not to remind them, though it be for the last time, that 'We must love one another or die'

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the just
Exchange their messages;
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleagured by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.¹

The poor poet had at least the integrity of purpose in wishing to sing of the constructive power of Love which might in the end rid our world of Hunger, Fear, and Anxiety.

¹ p. 493, 'The Pocket Book of Modern Verse'; from "September 1, 1939".
vein is at Auden's command. His witticisms, humour, rollicking fun and pungent satires have distinguished him from the earliest days. He has a playful fancy matched by an equally subtle irony of expression:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm; ....
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.¹

This suggests mutual unease if we know that:

The power that corrupts, that power to excess
The beautiful quite naturally possess.²

Or mark the sharply ironical contrast of the two pictures
in the embassy where two Ambassadors are shaping the fates of
their peoples:

Two gardeners watched them pass and priced their shoes,
A chauffeur waited, reading in the drive,
For them to finish their exchange of views ...
Far off, no matter what good they intended,
The armies waited for a verbal error
With all the instruments for causing pain:

¹. pp. 476-477, Ibid., from 'Lay Your Sleeping Head my Love'.
². p. 38, 'Collected Poetry of Auden'; from "A Bride in the Thirties".
And on the issue of their charm depended
A land laid waste, with all its young men slain,
Its women weeping, and its towns in terror.

Auden is bantering, cynical, or even boisterous as
the case may be. The aim is to administer Eliot-like 'shock
treatment'. The breath-taking under statements are in the
nature of tragic gaiety of a bird, perching precariously on
the mast of a ship far out in the sea, adding its notes to
the raging storm. Unhappy worry is tugging at the reins of
his fancy; what will happen to these of the defeated, aimless
and frivolous generation?

"Embassy". Let it be noted that there is no sensation
mongering here. Also it is hard to agree with those who
think that this is evasive satire trying to avoid external
conflict: (for example the remarks by Margaret Schlauch
vide p. 112, 'Modern English and American Poetry', Watts,
London, 1956). The poet's imagery is too ominous to invite
such criticism. The grim bitterness of the situation, hits
the imagination of the reader with a bang: "... there
is a kind of wit — adult, sophisticated, sometimes
obscure; a wit that relies on statements of epigrammatic
conciseness and on metaphors and similes where ideas,
yoked by violence together', amaze one with their
audacity (or, sometimes annoy one with their irrelevance).
And the strange thing is that Auden manages to combine this
witty tone, very often, with a note of urgent warning or
impending doom. The message is more telling by the hint of
a sardonic smile in the background." (Anthony Thwaite,
Seekers after happiness, all who follow
The convolutions of your simple wish
It is later than you think ....
You cannot be away, then, no,
Not though you pack to leave within ...
Escaping humming down arterial roads :–

They are lost — they won't look to the threat. Auden
his wit to attack the legacy of the unhappy Twenties, but
in spite of all apparent confidence his voice has a catch
here and a tremor there. He realises that his irony is not
a match for the gathering storm:

Behind each sociable home-loving eye
The private massacres are taking place;
All women, Jew!, the Rich, the Human race.
The mountains cannot judge us when we lie;
We dwell upon the earth; the earth obeys
The intelligent and evil till they die.2

but he flashes out because at least he is not complacent, or
passive.

1. From the poem 'Consider' already quoted. Also compare:
"..... the satire is directed at an essential frivolous-
ness of mind — a stodgy, comfortable, unconscious com-
placency .... The sense of grim understatement native
to the tradition of Old English is used to point up
mercilessly the dessication of College Quad and Cathedral
Close .... the final sardonic picture of the financier ....
is intimately related to the whole texture of experience ... "
(vide pp. 128, 129 'Modern Poetry and Tradition' by C.

2. p. 319, et seq. 'Collected Poetry of Auden': from the
poem 'In Time of War (1939)', Sonnet No. XIV.
Summing up

In the Thirties, then, the poetry of W.H. Auden unfolds a long vista of consistent vision. The factor behind this uniformity, however, was an acute sense of social responsibility. Auden as an artist had from the very beginning considered what active part to play in a situation, the seriousness of which was not being realised by all. Humanity, especially the English and European part of it, was heading for destruction and it had to be stopped. So the poet attacked the old through his Satires, depicted the new through his Lyrics, tried to be optimistic in face of impending fear through his Political pieces, and prayed for himself to be blessed with the writer's strength of vision and poetic logic of the power of Love or Eros in almost Everything that he wrote. We shall take leave of Mr. Auden by noting his sincere and chastened tone and purpose evinced still more firmly at the end of that fateful decade:

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1. Louis MacNeice makes an interesting remark about an ideal poet in his "Modern Poetry" (1938): "I should have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions."


K. Alott in the introductory note to Penguin's Contemporary Verse.
Though language may be useless, for
No words men write can stop the war
Or measure up to the relief
Of its immeasurable grief,
Yet truth, like love and sleep, resents
Approaches that are too intense,
And often when the searcher stood
Before the Oracle, it would
Ignore his grown-up earnestness
But not the child of his distress,
For through the Jams of a joke
The candid psychopompos spoke. 1