CHAPTER VII

The Idiom of the Political Poetry of the Thirties

The 'New-Country' poets of the nineteen thirties used a poetic idiom that represented the vast complexity of the political turmoil and socio-economic instability then prevailing in the country. The post-war trade boom, the economic slump, and the political sluggishness which came in quick succession, were indeed large issues affecting millions, and necessarily forcing themselves on the poets' attention. The disillusion of the post-war world, therefore, had a profound effect upon the nature and idiom of poetry. The Georgian manner was considered ill-equipped to respond to a large public situation of crisis. As such, a new poetic technique took shape, the rhetorics of which represented the collective sentiment of the afflicted masses and the poets' prophetic purpose. In the words of John Lehmann,

We all represented a reaction against the poetry that had been fashionable hitherto, we were united by a desire to assimilate the imagery of modern life, and even when we wrote ... of country life, we meant something very different from the sentimental country cliches of our predecessors. The precision of thought and expression characteristic of the eighteenth century reappeared in our work ..., and we were trying to make a new intellectual and imaginative synthesis that would be positive, not negative and pessimistic, in its attitude to the problem of living in the twentieth century.¹

The poets' sense of fellow-feeling, their desire to identify themselves
with others in their sorrows and sufferings, led to the difficult task of devising a new manner, which, while retaining the poetic effectiveness of the old, was to speak with conviction and power for a greater mass of people. For them, therefore, a poem's form became fused with their political and social purpose. They felt that if poetry was to be humanely representative, it could not afford to escape into romantic lyricism. And this is precisely the reason for their rejection of the established form of smooth rhythms and lines as being unsuitable to express the predicament of a disconcerted generation. In this respect, the influence upon them of the innovative powers of Hopkins, Owen, Eliot, and Yeats is clearly evident. Their bitter confrontation with reality resulted in their preferment for devices such as assonances, half-rhymes, dissonances, free verse, surrealism, imagery drawn from various spheres of contemporary living, an ironic flatness of tone, and a plainness of diction and lyricism. Auden makes use of the ballad manner to suit the multiplicity of modern life, as in Poem VI, Poems 1936-1939.

Like influenza he walks abroad,
He stands by the bridge, he waits by the ford,
As a goose or a gull he flies overhead,
He hides in the cupboard and under the bed.

Poem XI, Poems 1936-1939,

Let me tell you a little story
About Miss Edith Gee;
She lived in Clevedon Terrace
At Number 83.

and Poem XIV, Poems 1936-1939,

Victor was a little baby,
Into this world he came;
His father took him on his knee and said:
'Don't dishonour the family name.'

Though each of the 'Auden Group' of poets developed his own style, they were bound to each other in a general fondness for colloquial language and urban imagery. In their attempt to address the masses, they used popular language and speech rhythms, and produced a new left-wing jingoistic verse. Their earnestness brought forth an intensity of vision through this very use of commonplace language and rhythm. MacNeice, in his poem, 'Birmingham', portrays his vision of the middle class urban world of the thirties in a manner that is obviously colloquial:

In these houses men as in a dream pursue
the Platonic Forms
With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets
approximating to the fickle norms
And endeavour to find God and score one
over the neighbour
By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built
beauty and sweated labour.

Section 32 of Day Lewis's The Magnetic Mountain, begins in much the same note - "You that love England, who have an ear for her music ...". The same conversational language then brings to the fore the poet's concern for the "cursed towns", the "devastated areas" and the "derelict mills" - all casually destroyed by the unplanned speed of industry to benefit one class. Alongside, his sympathy for the common people is effectively portrayed in lines such as "happy in a small way", "despair has burnt itself out - hearts at a standstill", and "aware of lowered vitality". There is no change in intonation in the final exposure of indignation and determination:

The nerve for action, the spark of indignation-
Need fight in the dark no more, you know
your enemies.
You shall be leaders when zero hour is sig-
nalled,
Wielders of power and welders of a new
world.

In Auden's poetry, too, the use of conversational meters is
apparent. In Poem XLI, Poems 1936-1939, he makes use of this device
to point to the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that is about to
bring the thirties to a close:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

This closely echoes Yeats' 'Easter 1916':

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.

Auden's use of a flat colloquial style for social comment is seen
again in Poem XXX, Poems 1936-1939, titled 'Musee des Beaux Arts':

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how
everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plough-
man may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure;
the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing
into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that
must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the
sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Auden's colloquialism comes out also in his use of imagery that is
somewhat brisk and cool, often with the surrealist shades of
dreams, reflecting various types of neurotic behaviour. Thus, in
Poem XXIII, Poems 1927-1931, one comes across words such as "quinc-
cy", "distortions", "ingrown", "neural itch", and "rehearsed res-
ponse" - all of which focus on man as part of the process of social
degeneration. Another noticeable feature of the Audenesque in this
poem is the use of phrases in opposition, such as "New styles of ar-chitecture, a change of heart". Stephen Spender wrote in his auto-
biography:

Auden was a highly intellectual poet, an
arranger of his world into intellectual pat-
terns, illustrated with the brilliant imagery
of his experience and observation. His spe-
cial achievement was that he seized on the
crude material of the unconscious mind which
has been made bare by psycho-analysts, and
transformed it into a powerful poetic imagery.2

In the following poems, one notices the clinical manner in which
Auden points to the minds of people stagnating in a decadent world,
their weaknesses and superficialities, their lack of what he calls
'Agape':

Love by ambition
Of definition
Suffers partition
And cannot go
From yes to no.

- Poem XIV, Poems 1927-1931.

Touching is shaking hands
On mortgaged lands;
And smiling of
This gracious greeting
'Good day, good luck'
Is no real meeting
But instinctive look
A backward love.

- Poem XV, Poems 1927-1931.

MacNeice's 'Sunday Morning' projects a dry, ironical flatness of
tone:
Down the road someone is practising scales,  
The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,  
Man's heart expands to tinker with his car,  
For this is Sunday morning, Fate's great bazaar;  
Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now.

Again, in 'Morning Sun', the poet's ironical colloquialism hints at something sinister ("But when the sun goes out, the streets go cold ...") beneath the morning light. The apprehension sets in even as the poem begins:

Shuttles of trains going north, going south, drawing threads of blue,  
The shining of the lines of trams like swords,  
Thousands of posters asserting a monopoly of the good, the beautiful, the true,  
Crowds of people all in the vocative, you and you,  
The haze of the morning shot with words.

In the poetry of both MacNeice and Auden, the use of the cummulative style is noticeable. They aim at a simple and direct syntax, but often leave the relation between one statement and the other, obscure. In such cases, emphasis is laid on the tone of the voice. Auden's Poem XXII, Poems 1936-1939, is an example:

Lovers are writing letters, sportsmen playing ball;  
One doubts the honour, one the beauty, of his wife;  
A boy's ambitious; perhaps the captain hates us all;

And in his famous poem 'Spain 1937', the cummulative style is indeed the very base of his verse structure:

Yesterday all the past. The language of size Spreading to China along the trade-routes; the diffusion Of the counting-frame and the cromlech;
A similar example is the jocular 'Bagpipe Music' of MacNeice:

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the heather,
Woke to hear a dance record playing of old Vienna.
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the Devil mend the puncture.

In this light and buoyant tone, MacNeice presents the entire paraphernalia of urban civilization through a medley of imagery. They call up the current world of middle-class status symbols - "All we want is a limousine and the ticket for the peepshow", of ruling class incompetence - "John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa, / Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker", of elections - "It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections", of working-class overpopulation - "Mrs. Carmichael had her fifth", and of unemployment - "All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle". The early Eclogues, too, abound in such images of the times: of a sick society - "The excess sugar of a diabetic culture" ('An Eclogue for Christmas'), the "dyspeptic age of ingrown cynics" ('Eclogue from Iceland'), of social facades - "Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh", of ruling-class fetishes - "The flotsam of private property, pekinese and polyanthus", of jazz - "What will happen to us planked and panelled with jazz", of cinema - "Over the randy of the theatre and cinema I hear songs", of factories - "the ancient air / Hazed with factory dust", of buses and cars and petrol pumps - "... bus after tall bus comes", (all from 'An Eclogue for Christmas'), "Driving fast cars" ('Eclogue from Iceland'), "I remember her mostly in the car, stopping by the white / Moons of the pet-
rol pumps" ('Eclogue between the Motherless'), and of telephones - 
"... the thrumming of the telephone wires in an east wind" ('Eclogue 
by a Five-barred Gate'). 'Eclogue from Iceland' presents a further 
cluster of images that point ironically to the superficial life-style of 
the thirties urbanites. Craven, who, along with Ryan is "on the 
run" says,

We shall be back there soon, to stand in
queues
For entertainment and to work at desks,
To browse round counters of dead books, to 
pore
On picture catalogues and Soho menus,
To preen ourselves on the reinterpretation
Of the words of obsolete interpreters,
Collate delete their faded lives like texts,
Admire Flaubert, Cezanne - the tortured
artists -
And leaning forward to knock out our pipes
Into the fire protest that art is good
And gives a meaning and a slant to life.

Auden also puts into practice an extensive range of images, often 
apparently unrelated, to delineate the situation of contemporary Eng­
land in the period of the great depression. Poem XXXI, Poems 1927-
1931 is an instance in point, the poet bringing forth one image after
another in a racy forceful rhythm. The poem opens with images of a
dismantled and wasted industrial life :

   Head-gears gaunt on grass-grown pit-banks,
   seams abandoned years ago.

A perceptive picture of the typical representatives of the decadent 
bourgeoisie comes forth in the following description :

   At the theatre, playing tennis, driving motor-
cars we had,
   In our continental villas, mixing cocktails
   for a cad.

This is followed immediately by an ironic reference to the wealthy
friends who have turned out to be deceivers:

These were boon companions who devised the
legends for our tombs,
These who have betrayed us nicely while we
took them to our rooms.

The imagery of war-time prisoners is effectively used to evoke the
sense of demoralization that reflects upon the dull, uneventful lives
of the bourgeoisie:

Intimate as war-time prisoners in an isolation camp,
Living month by month together, nervous, famished, lousy, damp.

On the sopping esplanade or from our dingy lodgings we
Stare out dully at the rain which falls for miles into the sea.

The final section uses imagery that projects the poet's diagnosis of
the malady that has struck England. The neurotics who require pro-
per psychological treatment are those who must first of all drop
their "priggish ways", "stop behaving like a stone", and must
"Throw the bath-chairs right away."

The hortative tone is frequent in the poetry of the thirties.
Valentine Cunningham has observed that "the dominant images of the
1930s do have a way of turning out to be intimately one with the
events of that time, and vice versa". With the left writers' desire
to preach, it was easy enough for them to assume the role of school-
masters and to express themselves in a school-masterly tone. The
other aspect as explained by Cunningham is that,

... the writers have frequently only just left
school and have then, most promptly, as school-masters, gone back to school again.4

The writers' experience of school is one of personal fantasies as well
as public metaphors. Their associations of school with that of a fascist-like atmosphere is related to the political situation of the thirties. In *The Orators*, the parody of the prize-day, addressed by a distinguished Old Boy, exposes the diseased psychology of individuals. Thus, Auden has made school represent, on a small scale, a decadent society that needs revolutionary change. The following lines from 'The Initiates' of *The Orators* is an illustration of the evocation of the public school atmosphere:

I should like to see you make a beginning
before I go, now, here. Draw up a list of
roters and slackers, of proscribed persons
under headings like this. Committees for
municipal or racial improvement - the head-
master. Disbelievers in the occult - the
school chaplain. The bogusly cheerful - the
games master. The really disgusted - the
teacher of modern languages. All these have
got to die without issue. ... there's a stoke
hole under the floor of this hall, the Black
Hole we called it in my day. New boys were
put in it. ... Well look to it. Quick, guard
that door. Stop that man. Good Now boys
hustle them, ready, steady - go.⁵

This is the kind of schoolboy rag tone that Auden uses for the com-
placent bourgeois mind. He employs it also in Odes II, III, and V of
*The Orators*. In Ode II, the images evoke the schoolboy excitement
over a rugby victory against another team:

Rounding the curve of the drive
Standing up, waving, cheering from car,
  The time of their life:
The fags are flushed, would die at their
  heroes' feet;
Quick, someone, tug at that handle, get
At them shouting, shoulder them high, who won
  by their pluck and their dare.

After this atmosphere of schoolboy hilarity, the image of their loss
and failure in a greater social context, comes as a sudden jolt of
reality:

... he shall find one fine day he is sold.

In Ode III, there are the typical schoolboy activities of "skating and curling at Christmas", "Charades and ragging", and riding. But once again, as in the previous ode, the images of the boys "On track to exile", being victimized by lethargy, have deep social bearings. Unable to face and overcome the crisis of their times, they become victims of "The sad posture", the "slight despair", the "marginal grief", and "The shadow of death", as mentioned in Chapter III.

In Ode V, the imagery evokes a sense of urgency and discipline necessary for the young boys to brace themselves with against the enemy:

You've a very full programme, first aid,
gunnery, tactics,
The technique to master of raids and hand-to-hand fighting;
Are you in training?
Are you taking care of yourself? Are you sure of passing
The endurance test?

G.S. Fraser has commented that, in this ode, there is a strange effect of "insight mounted on fantasy", that is, the urgency of a situation providing a cue to the working of our inner enemies. The workings of such enemies within us are shown through the images of Gluttony living alone, austerer than us,
Big simple Greed, Acedia famed with them all
For her stamina, keeping the outposts, and somewhere Lust
With his sapper's skill,
Muttering to his fuses in a tunnel 'Could I meet here with Love,
I would hug him to death'.

In most of these odes, Auden has employed the method of harmonizing
diagnosis and fantasy to portray an effective picture of a general social malaise. Poem XXVIII, Poems 1927-1931 is another instance of such a synthesis. Here, the abstract life-force directly admonishes the doomed neurotic who is incapable of suffering change:

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,  
Acquire that flick of wrist and after strain  
Relax in your darling's arms like a stone  
Remembering everything you can confess,  
Making the most of firelight, of hours of fuss.

In this way, and through the conversational rhythm of unrhymed pentameter lines, the poet creates an atmosphere of threat for the entire lot of bourgeois hypochondriacs.

'Spain 1937' presents a number of disparate images and hence they are unequal in effect. In the first part of the poem, there are images pointing to the teeming activities and advancement of a past civilization— "The language of size / Spreading to China along the trade-routes"; "the invention / Of cart-wheels and clocks"; "the bustling world of the navigators". There is also the image of warfare— "The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley", and of superstition— "Yesterday the carving of angels and of frightening gargoyles; / The trial of heretics among the columns of stone", and "The miraculous cure at the fountain". Amidst these objective pictures of the past, Auden inserts the politically significant image of "the counting-frame and the cromlech" which symbolizes the conflict that the Spanish war may liquify so that the "Just City" may arise. As mentioned earlier in Chapter III(P.85), the nations combine and cry to the life-force to intervene and resolve the political crisis.
The challenge posed by the life-force is that they themselves must make the necessary choice for the redemption of Spain. And the tremendous sense of urgent movement of swarms of people to the Republic in response to this challenge, is brought forth through the images of the "migrating gulls" and the "seeds of a flower". The images in the following stanza complete the picture:

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

Some of the images in the poem, such as "the assessment of insurance by cards", "theological feuds in the taverns", "the luck of the sailor", and "enormous Jupiter finished", appear rather inept. But there are other images that bear upon the socio-political situation of the period and its effect on an individual. There is the fear of the unknown("Private nocturnal terror"), the social reformer's belief in the future("Liberty's masterful shadow"), sharing of nervous moments ("The shared cigarette"), and male solidarity("the masculine jokes").

In the concluding lines of the poem, "History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help or pardon", although 'History' has obvious Marxist implications, it is also used as a personified abstraction.

According to Dennis Davison,

'Spain' remains in many ways a symbol of the Auden of the Thirties, revealing his technical experimentation of the time(polemical rhetoric, surrealist catalogues, etc.) and his Freudian-Marxist-Existentialist vision at a moment when a critical political problem demanded from him some kind of poetic manifesto.

What also strikes most in this poem is the symbolic significance
given to the geographical aspect of Spain. Described as an "arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot / Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe", it is, in other words, climatically and temperamentally like neighbouring Africa, but the irony lies in its becoming the place for the convergence of the conflicts of the west. Thus, Auden's symbolic use of geography and landscape conveys effectively the complexity and decadence of modern society, of its neurosis and greed culminating in fascist aggression.

In the last sonnet (No. XXVII) of the sequence In Time of War, Auden uses geography and landscape to symbolize the spiritual and mental state of the confused individuals of contemporary society. In Ode I of The Orators, he uses islands to symbolize an escape haunt for the psychologically weak individuals - the "self-regarders". Unable to stand up to the troubles of the times, they send "the body to islands".

In the poetry of Stephen Spender, one does not come across this kind of symbolic pattern. Instead, there is an amalgamation of various activities, forming a composite, though imprecise, image of the poet's spiritual experience:

What I expected, was
Thunder, fighting,
Long struggles with men
And climbing.
After continual straining
I should grow strong;
Then the rocks would shake,
And I rest long.

- 'What I expected, was'

Through lines like this, the poet emerges not as a true Marxist, but as a romantic liberal, longing for a new age of heroism.
A much more lyrical and subjective poet than the rest of the group, Spender has a verse technique quite his own. Where the others have used a fairly regular though somewhat roughened and jolting blank verse, or a fairly strict stanza form, Spender has adopted the form of free verse with a varying number of syllables. There is a hesitancy in his rhythmic pattern which comes from his viewing and describing all the things he dislikes - war and death, weakness and fear. Thus his verse structure consists of long, laboured, and rather twisted lines which express a painful groping of the mind. As he put it in his *World Within World*,

> I was an autobiographer restlessly searching for forms in which to express the stages of my development.  

In this restless search for forms, Spender has, in a few poems, endowed his objects with a primordial sense of animism. 'The Landscape near an Aerodrome' begins with this kind of animated vitality:

> More beautiful and soft than any moth  
> With burring furred antennae feeling its huge path  
> Through dusk, the air liner with shut-off engines  
> Glides over suburbs and the sleeves set trailing tall  
> To point the wind.

Similarly, in 'Port Bou', the sea trapped within the harbour walls seems to possess the energy of the pet animal clutchèd in the hands of a child. The sea, thus,

> looks through the gap  
> To outer freedom animal air.

To Louis MacNeice, the images in Spender's poetry "are not so sharp or self-contained as Auden's", but that he "tends to fuse metaphor and subject". MacNeice illustrates this point with the fol-
lowing lines from Spender's poem 'Not palaces, an era's crown':

That programme of the antique Satan
Bristling with guns on the indented page,
With battleship towering from hilly waves.

MacNeice further points out that Spender makes the most effective use of imagery when he allows a single image to dominate a poem. He cites Spender's 'After they have tired of the brilliance of cities' as an example, where the word 'snow', "with its associations of hunger, universality and clarity" holds the rein:

... it is death stalks through life
Grinning white through all faces
Clean and equal like the shine from snow ...

And our strength is now the strength of our bones
Clean and equal like the shine from snow ...

We have come at last to a country
Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes all races ...
Through torn-down portions of fabric let their eyes
Witness the admiring dawn explode like a shell
Around us, dazing us with its light like snow.

For the Auden group of poets, the subject-matter of their poetry includes, among others, a way of life patterned by science and technology and, as such, the images drawn from various spheres of contemporary life, express the causes and the complications that have made England an industrial wasteland. Indeed, it appears that these poets were obsessed with the industrial world, its trappings and machinery. In his 'Letter to Lord Byron' Part II, Auden confesses:

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

In Part IV of the same piece, he says,

... better far than any kings or queens
I liked to see and know about machines:
And from my sixth until my sixteenth year
I thought myself a mining engineer.

In World Within World, Spender has put forth his views on this subject thus:

At Oxford I started writing poems containing references to gas-works, factories and slums. I understood the significance beneath the affectation of Auden's saying that the most beautiful walk in Oxford was that along the canal, past the gas-works, and that the poet must go dressed like 'Mr. Everyman'.

In his autobiography, Day Lewis has explained his fascination for images taken from the modern industrial world:

When I was writing From Feathers to Iron, a sequence of poems whose subject matter was my personal experience during the nine months before the birth of my first child, I found that my own excitements and apprehensions linked up quite spontaneously with a larger issue - the struggle and joy in which our new world should be born - and derived strength from it, so that I could use naturally for metaphors or metaphysical conceits the apparatus of the modern world, the machinery which, made over for the benefit of all, could help this world to rebirth.

The poets of the thirties have brought into their work an obvious polarity of images. On the one hand there are images of solitary mills, closed factories, rusty sidings - all pointing to the collapse of industry in England, and on the other, images of machinery, aeroplanes, pylons, and modern architecture which are associated with progress that the future will bring. 'The Express' of Stephen Spender is a fitting example of a futuristic poem evoking mechanical
speed and power. To the poet, the noise of the train is much more appreciable than the music of nature. In 'The Pylons', Spender talks about electricity as "the quick perspective of the future". Auden in 'Sir, no man's enemy' wrote, "Send to us power and light". The appeal of the machine lay in its significance of technical progress, which in turn would lead to the birth of a new era. In Day Lewis's From Feathers to Iron, the poet's use of industrial images brings to light his hope for a new stable world. In Section 26, for example, he thus enthuses:

Beauty breaks ground, oh, in strange places.  
Seen after cloudburst down the bone-dry watercourses,  
In Texas a great gusher, a grain-Elevator in the Ukraine plain;  
To a new generation turns new faces.

The following stanza from The Magnetic Mountain (Section 16) may be read as justifying the poet's "old business of bringing emotional order out of material and intellectual confusion":

Sky-scrapers put high questions that quench the wind's breath,  
Whose shadow still comes short of truth, but kills the grass:  
Power-house chimneys choke sun, ascetic pylons pass  
Bringing light to the dark-livers, charged to deal death.

In Section 32, the poet's summons for the building of a new world, reaches out to those "who go out alone, on tandem or on pillion / Down arterial roads". Earlier, Section 28 thus concludes:

Out of that dark a new world flowers.  
There in the womb, in the rich veins  
Are tools, dynamos, bridges, towers, Your tractors and travelling-crane. (emphasis added)

Louis MacNeice, the most objective and realistic poet of the Auden
group, has successfully used images drawn from the modern urban scene:

Smoke from the train-gulf hid by hoardings
blunders upward, the brakes of cars
Pipe as the policeman pivoting round raises
his flat hand, bars
With his figure of a monolith Pharaoh the
queue of fidgety machines.

- 'Birmingham'

And Auden, in his anticipation of a better world, calls out to men to
dance "Round goal-post, wind-gauge, pylon or bobbing buoy". (Poem V
Poems 1931-1936).

Auden looked at the industrial chaos of the times as the
failure of the social order brought about by false social attitudes
and irresponsibilities. In Poem XXXI, Poems 1927-1931, he depicts the
collapse of the social order through a fund of imagery drawn from
an urban wasteland of abandoned and rusting machinery, with a
unique compactness:

Power-stations locked, deserted, since they
drew the boiler fires;
Pylons fallen or subsiding, trailing dead
high-tension wires.

In this poem we get a sufficiently long list of industrial objects -
chimneys, bridges, wharves, tramlines, trucks, canals, rails, and,
as seen in the quoted lines, of power-stations, pylons, and high-
tension wires. They are indeed the poet's illustration of how a so-
cial and political view-point being emphasized in poetry can bring
about a change in the whole trend of writing. Auden's desolate
landscape full of abandoned and defunct machinery, upturned rail-
way tracks, and clogged chimneys, are all symbolic of the malaise
in the human psyche, as well as of the decay and corruption of the contemporary industrial-urban society. In Poem III, *Poems 1927-1931*, the picture of a decayed landscape symbolizes the spiritual desolation of society:

Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
Snatches of tramline running to the wood,
*An industry already comatose,*
*Yet sparsely living.* (emphasis added)

The following are a few more examples of Auden's delineation of the industrial waste:

Sharers of our day, thought smiling of, but nothing known,
What industries decline.

*(Poem XIII, Poems 1927-1931)*

Metals run
Burnished or rusty in the sun
From town to town,
And signals all along are down:
Yet nothing passes.

*(Poem XXXV, Poems 1927-1931)*

And all this year
Work has been stopped on the power-house;
the wind whistles under
The half-built culverts.

*(Ode V of The Orators)*

Section 22 of Day Lewis's *From Feathers to Iron* shows that the poet is sad because the youth of tomorrow will only inherit

... a bankrupt firm
Worn-out machinery, an exhausted farm.

Spender also communicates the social degeneration of an industrialized urban society, but in his typically hushed and lyrical manner, through evocative images of the romantic. In 'The Landscape near an Aerodrome', the images of the industrial landscape evoke
only a sense of mystery. The poet describes the chimneys as "lank black fingers / Or figures, frightening and mad". The "squat buildings" by themselves bring in an association of the squalor of an urban setting, but there is an ambiguity in the relation of these buildings to "their strange air behind trees". A note of sadness is evoked by the comparison of these houses to the heavy lines of grief on an old woman's face. The dimness and gloom of urban living comes forth in the following lines:

Here where few houses
Moan with faint light behind their blinds,
They remark the unhomely sense of complaint.

This note of despair at the ugliness of urban life runs through the entire section. However, the aeroplane itself is a futuristic image.

Another image often made use of by the poets of the thirties, was that of the cinema. In Britain during the decade, even amidst the severe crisis of depression and unemployment, cinemas were spreading an illusion of luxury and resplendence. Thus, Day Lewis wrote about those who visited the cinema, to be in a dream-world of luxury:

Fish in their tank electrically heated
Nose without envy the glass wall: for them
Clerk, spy, nurse, killer, prince, the great and the defeated,
Move in a mute day-dream.

- 'Newsreel'

Referring to the temporary sensations of ease and comfort that the audience derives from the cinema, MacNeice wrote in 'Eclogue from Iceland':

G. What is that music in the air--
Organ-music coming from far?
R. Honeyed music--it sounds to me
   Like the Wurlitzer in the Gaiety.
G. I do not hear anything at all.
C. Imagine the purple light on the stage
R. The melting moment of a stunted age
C. The pause before the film again
   Bursts in a shower of golden rain.

His Autumn Journal brings into cynical juxtaposition the superstars
of the tinsel world and the major intellectual influences of the time:

   Sleep quietly, Marx and Freud,
      The figure-heads of our transition.
   Cagney, Lombard, Bing and Garbo,
      Sleep in your world of celluloid.

Images of 'frontier' and 'journey' were fundamental to the
poets' conception of social regeneration. As Valentine Cunningham
has put it,

The writers turn out to be continually travelling, and what's more, across a world whose
frontiers, recently realigned after the First
World War ('Ostnia and Westland; Products of
the peace which that old man provided', as
a Chorus of Auden and Isherwood's The Dog
Beneath the Skin put it in 1935, referring to
Clemenceau), were almost all under threat of
eeny invasion. 14

Day Lewis's early work, From Feathers to Iron has reference to jour-
neys towards the new world:

   Hull is finished. Now must the foraging eye
      Take in provisions for a long journey.
      - Section 8

we journey
Beyond the bays of peace.
      - Section 8

Like Jesuits in jungle we journey.
      - Section 12

I have come so far upon my journey.
This is the frontier, this is where I change.

- Section 15

Auden also makes use of the frontier-journey images. The necessity to cross frontiers is noticed in Poem XV, Poems 1927-1931. Ode V of The Orators presents the "frontier-conscious" gang of boy-scouts. There is a suggestion of an undeclared war with guerilla operation:

They speak of things done on the frontier we were never told,
The hidden path to their squat Pictish tower They will never reveal though kept without
sleep, for their code is 'Death to the squealer'.

In the section titled 'Argument' of The Orators, the secret gang of schoolboys delves into fantasies of indulging in various activities, one of them being "getting down" at the frontier.

In Part Four of The Magnetic Mountain, Day Lewis talks of "The other side" where there is "Eternity". This is the concept of crossing the frontier towards health.

In Auden's Ode III of The Orators, the following lines appear:

In Spring we shall spade the soil on the border
For blooming of bulbs;
...
We are here for our health, we have not to fear
The fiend in the furze or the face at the manse.

In 'The Journal of an Airman'(The Orators), Auden refers to a dream where somebody whom he calls E was tied to the rails of a railway track, to be executed on a charge of sabotage. But as the engine reached E, everything disappeared, and the poet received a news-
Bernard Bergonzi's observation that, in the poetry of the thirties, the frontier stood for "a metaphorical division between states of feeling, between known and unknown, present and future, the small group and society", helps us understand the complexity with which Auden handles such images. In his poetry, the frontier which bridges the two allegorical sides of the healthy and the sick, is associated with the 'Mortmere' world of private fantasy, holding some kind of curiosity and fascination for young questers. Many of Auden's early poems have young travellers heading for the border - Dick departs for the border in Paid on Both Sides; so does the doomed exile in Poem XXXVII, Poems 1927-1931, despite the lures of home and family:

Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle.
Upon what man it fall
... No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint
by women;
But ever that man goes
Through place-keepers, through forest trees,
A stranger to strangers over undried sea.

Poem XIII, Poems 1931-1936 presents whole generations crossing mountain frontiers for rejuvenation:

We honour founders of these starving cities,
Whose honour is the image of our sorrow.

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.

Sometimes, the border proves to be a little beyond the reach of sick individuals, who eventually meet with destruction:

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:

(Poem XXVIII, Poems 1927-1931)

At other times, the border appears as a sanctuary of fear to the hesitant neurotic:

Saying goodbye but coming back, for fear  
is over there  
And the centre of anger  
is out of danger.

(Poem XI, Poems 1927-1931)

In Day Lewis's From Feathers to Iron, the fear of the frontier has a more concrete basis. In Section 27, the poet recalls the crisis of the First World War:

Crisis afar deadens the nerve, it cools  
The blood and hoods imagination's eye,  
Whether we apprehend it or remember,  
Is fighting on the frontier: little leaks through  
Of possible disaster, but one morning  
Shells begin to drop on the capital.

In Part Two of The Magnetic Mountain, the frontier is used by Day Lewis to indicate a change of conscience:

Simply one day  
He crossed the frontier and I did not follow:  
Returning, spoke another language.

In Auden's poetry, the frontier sometimes appears as the edge of the woods, symbol of health and vitality, where "gaitered gamekeeper with dog and gun / Will shout 'Turn back!'", at sick
questers (Poem XXXV, Poems 1927-1931). In 'The Journal of an Air-
man', the sick and corrupt advise their young never to go to the
good side of the border - "But whatever you do don't go to the
wood."

Associated with borders and the journey towards them, is the
mode of travel which finds recurrent mention in the poetry of the
thirties. Railroads, for example, are symbols of potential health. In
Auden's Ode IV of The Orators, Rex Warner's son John, travels
across the frontier by train. John, the saviour of an afflicted Eng-

land, himself becomes the symbol of the train, "our hush-hush engine
our wonder liner". The poet says that it is "Spring again" every-
where with "the arrival of his special train". Ode III of The Orators
narrates the schoolboys' return to school by train:

With labelled luggage we alight at last
Joining joking at the junction on the moor.

In Ode V of the same work, the young boys who are in enemy camps
prepare to go towards the headlands by train:

We entrain at once for the north.

Sometimes, branch lines appear in order to divert the weak from
proceeding towards the border. These lines cut off from the main
route to become decoys, thus luring the weak away to the serene
beauty of the countryside:

Lines branch to peace, iron up valleys to a
hidden village.

(Poem XIII, Poems 1927-1931)

In 'The Journal of an Airman', the neurotics who are unable to go
through the entire journey, are "stopped by heart failure at a
branch-line station".
Trains appear in Day Lewis's poetry as well. For the poet who has decided on a new determined course,

the rails thrum
For night express is due.

- Section 4, From Feathers to Iron

In Section 12, he describes the enthusiasm with which the journey to the new world is undertaken:

Generated we run, are ruled by rails.
Trains shall spring from tunnel to terminus.

In Section 4 of The Magnetic Mountain, the poet points to the terminus and tells the travelers,

You can't go further along these lines;
Positively this is the end of the track;
It's rather late and there's no train back.

Before beginning the climb up the mountain, the poet talks of "taking a light engine back along the line / For a last excursion".

Travel by waterways, symbolizing a way to health, also finds frequent mention in this poetry. In Auden's Paid on Both Sides, Dick sails for the border. In Poem XXXVII, Poems 1927-1931, the sick exile sails across the "undried sea" of "suffocating water". In Day Lewis's From Feathers to Iron, the journey to the new world will be made on "a stout boat / Provisioned for some years"(Section 8). Section 29 of The Magnetic Mountain describes the urgent need of the 'Argo', the 'Ark', to brave the floods. The poet says,

... tomorrow we must board her,
Cast off unto chaos and shape a course.

Bicycles, too, appear in a few poems. In The Magnetic Mountain, the poet makes mention of "Cyclists and hikers in company, day-excursionists"(Section 32). In Auden's Ode V of The Orators, we
hear of the "girl who rode off on her bycycle one fine summer evening". In Ode IV, the poet exposes the weaker section of youth as dummies who bolt for their mothers "In Rolls or on bycycles".

Images of farms abound in the poetry of the thirties, as sanctuaries of peace and good health. The following are a few examples from Auden's poetry:

But happy now, though no nearer each other,  
We see the farms lighted all along the valley.

(Poem IX, Poems 1927-1931)

We made all possible preparations,  
Drew up a list of firms,  
Constantly revised our calculations  
And allotted the farms.

(Poem X, Poems 1927-1931)

Look there! The sunk road winding  
To the fortified farm.

(Poem XXXIX, Poems 1927-1931)

The privates are now returning to the farms.

(Ode IV, The Orators)

In Section 12 of Day Lewis's The Magnetic Mountain, the poet reproaches the clergy for ruining "farm and factory".

Birds and airmen also figure in the poetry of Auden and Day Lewis. In Auden's poetry they are often used as symbols of an objective, dispassionate view of human society. Poem XXX, Poems 1927-1931 begins with a panoramic view of modern bourgeois society presented through such images:

Consider this and in our time  
As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:  
The clouds rift suddenly—look there  
At cigarette-end smouldering on a border.
At the first garden party of the year.
Pass on, admire the view of the massif
Through plate-glass windows of the Sport Hotel.

Auden has adopted Hardy's hawk's vision - his way of looking at life from a great height. According to J.A. Morris,

... this fusion of technique and symbol was popular with other poets of the group and is apparent in, for example, Day Lewis's The Magnetic Mountain and Spender's 'Landscape near an Aerodrome'. The airman-hawk image seems to have symbolized a militant, omni-
cient, Christ-like saviour, whose aesthetic and moral beauty has been anticipated by the group by Hopkins' 'Windover'.

In 'The Journal of an Airman', the airman is the symbol of the central awareness of friend and enemy. And among the three counter-attacks upon the enemy, one is "complete mastery of the air". The airman also appears in Day Lewis's From Feathers to Iron (Section 29), to chalk out the programme for the new-born child:

Now shall the airman vertically banking
Out of the blue write a new sky-sign.

Hovering kestrels appear in Auden's Poem XII, Poems 1927-1931,

From scars where kestrels hover,
The leader looking over
Into the happy valley.

In Day Lewis's The Magnetic Mountain, it is the symbol of joy for the "beginning of good":

Now to be with you, elate, unshared,
My kestrel joy, O hoverer in wind.

- Section I

In Section 26, the kestrel is the poet's lucky star whom man shall heed and "learn where joy is". And in Section 28, it appears as the true guide of the travellers. Thus the poet exhorts:
Follow the kestrel, south or north,
Strict eye, spontaneous wing can tell
A secret.

Section 34 of Day Lewis's *Transitional Poem* presents the hawk as symbolizing the poet's perspective:

The hawk comes down from the air.
Sharpening his eye upon
A wheeling horizon
Turned scrutiny to prayer.

In the title poem of *A Time to Dance*, "the hawk goes up for reconnaissance". In 'Johnny-Head-In-Air', the route that the travellers are to take is compared to "an eagle's route".

In *Transitional Poem*, the image of the dove is a symbol of hope. It

... emerges and flies back again
With a messiah sprig of certitude—
Promise of ground below the sprawling flood.

In Auden's 'Spain 1937', the robin is endowed with a "plucky canton". Auden sometimes brings in images of birds to symbolize misfortune and doom. In the poem beginning "There are some birds in these valleys"(*The Orators*), the image of the "unlucky dove" delineates the climate of ill-luck of a whole generation in general, and the miserable plight of an impassive and insecure individual in particular:

The real unlucky dove
Must smarting fall away from brightness
Its love from living.

In 'Dover'(*Poem XV, Poems 1936-1939*), the gull symbolizes doom ushered in by the war:

And the cry of the gulls at dawn
is sad like work.
In Auden's poetry of the thirties, there are images of the enemy of the individual and society, generally taken from the nightmare material of the subconscious mind. It has already been mentioned in Chapter III, that the enemy appears as the "dragon" — the devourer (Poem XXIV, Poems 1931-1936); the hump-backed surgeons / and the scissor-man" (Poem XI, Poems 1931-1936). It also appears as the "women in dark glasses" in the same poem, and as the "ogre" and the "dragon", "whose many shapes and names all turn us pale" in 'Letter to Lord Byron', Part II.

There are various other images of fear and threat in Auden's poetry. In Poem V, Poems 1927-1931, "The crowing of the cock" shall "summon up / The pointed crocus top, / Which smelling of the mould / Breathes of the underworld". In Poem XVIII, Poems 1927-1931, the poet says,

Forward or back are menaces
On either side let foot slip over
Invading Always, exploring Never,
For this is hate and this is fear.

In the Epilogue to the 'Six Odes' of The Orators, one encounters the fatal valley "where furnaces burn"; "shape in the twisted trees"; "the figure that swiftly comes behind one"; the "spot on [the] skin" [which] is a "shocking disease". Again, in Poem V, Poems 1931-1936, the speaker says that "Strolling in the valley [they] are uncertain of the trees"; the shadow of the trees falling upon them seems sinister.

In Poem XXXIX, Poems 1927-1931, images of "The cock's alarm / In the strange valley": "The horns of the dark squadron / Con-
verging to attack", and the "bitter smoke" rising "From bonfires lit", point to the lurking menace of doom. These images do not bring in any concrete references, but they seem to constitute the ideological struggle for social revolution. The sense of warning and urgency for the necessary destruction of the decadent order is effectively brought forth through the short trimeter lines of the quatrains:

Bitter the blue smoke rises
From garden bonfires lit,
To where we burning sit:
Good, if it's thorough. (emphasis added)

In 'The Witnesses'(Poem XI, Poems 1931-1936), the note of fear and threat is introduced through the use of horrific images of landscape. Stanza 8 of Part 3 begins with a shocking juxtaposition of unlikely objects -

When the green field comes off like a lid
Revealing what were much better hid,
unpleasant:
And look! behind you without a sound
The woods have come up and are standing round
in deadly crescent.

Louis MacNeice's poetry is also copious with images of fear and threat. MacNeice, who was miserably aware of the indecision of action, as well as of the appalling consequence of wrong action, was hounded by private fears of an unimaginable cataclysm. It is this consciousness which gives the impetus to the lurking menace of the absolute in his images. It is of the realm of nothingness, non-being, non-reality, the unknown, against which is staked the material world of men. MacNeice's reference to this realm is through the images of wind, bell, and sea. In his early poem, 'Homage to Cliches', the huge tenor bell, the black panther, the Egyptian Pharaoh - all of
which are linked to form a composite image of horror, are preceded strongly by the word "Never", to bespeak as it were, of the realm of the absolute. Together with the granite Sphinxes, they threaten to destroy the fragile world of men:

Never is the Bell, Never is the Panther,
Never is Rameses
Oh the cold stone panic of Never--
The ringers are taking off their coats, the panther crouches
The granite sceptre is slightly inclining.

MacNeice has provided an explanation to this in these words:

Sometimes, ... I take several images and ring the changes on them. Thus in a philosophical poem, 'Homage to Cliches', I think of the brute other, the fate which we cannot influence: (a) as an Egyptian Rameses, (b) as a tenor bell (which we cannot peal but can only play chimes upon), (c) as a black panther (black because unknown and because the panther is said to be untameable). The movement of each of these three will be the movement of Fate.17

In his 'An Eclogue for Christmas', the characters A and B meet in an "evil time", and the "evil bells", as B says, "Put out of our heads ... the thought of everything else". Here, all the stock associations of Christmas are dismissed at once. The poem ends thus:

Goodbye to you, this day remember is Christmas, this morn
They say, interpret it your own way, Christ is born.

Indeed, MacNeice has explicitly stated that he "felt hampered by this lack of [unifying] belief". In his 'Evening in Connecticut', behind the tranquility of trees which is like "a dome of kindness", there is the strange "scissory noise of the grasshoppers", and the lingering on of shadows. The trees which turn to "brocaded autumn" is a
beautiful picture, but autumn is associated with the "fall of dynas-
ties; the emergence / Of sleeping kings from caves". All these images 
of noise, shadows, death, and caves, conjure up a picture of some 
unreal menace from the world of the absolute:

Unreal but still can strike. 
And in defence we cannot call on the evening
Or the seeming-friendly woods—
Nature is not to be trusted.

In many of his poems, MacNeice makes use of wind imagery to por-
tray the turbulent relationship between the two worlds of the tem-
poral and the absolute. In 'Nocturne', the personified wind is a 
threatening agent of the absolute, blowing through the night in 
strange ways. One wonders what to make of the wind "fingering / 
His lantern", and of it in its "glistening oil-cape". But certainly, 
the sinister note is distinct, through the description of the wind 
going about "Knocking at the windows, / Slouching round the land-
scape". This part is reminiscent of the hideous sphinx in Yeats' 
'The Second Coming', slouching towards Bethlehem to destroy the 
age-old cycle of Christianity. In MacNeice's poem, fear of the un-
known creeps in as the wind is seen to

Sinisterly bend and dip
Those hulks of cloud canvas,
Probing through the elm-trees,
Past the house; and then pass
To a larger emptiness.

In 'June Thunder', the poet talks of the "impending thunder / With 
an indigo sky and the garden hushed except for / The treetops 
moving". The premonitory note is carried along in the next few lines 
as well:
Then the curtains in my room blow suddenly inward.
The shrubbery rustles, birds fly heavily homeward.

Once again, the fearful agent is the wind from somewhere beyond time and space, to snuff out all the delights of a summer's day:

The white flowers fade to nothing on the trees and rain comes Down like a dropscene.

The wind plays the same role in 'Eclogue from Iceland'. For those who "paused in sunlight for a moment's fusion / With friends or nature" were disturbed by the "cynical wind" which "Blew the trees pale". The wind imagery, as something to fear, has its genesis in MacNeice's childhood experience. He says in his autobiography:

And Annie the cook had a riddle which began: "What is it that goes round and round the house?" And the answer was the wind but, though I knew the answer to the riddle, I had a clumsy suspicion that in fact it might be something else. Going round and round the house, evil, waiting to get me.\(^{19}\)

It should be obvious that the idiom of the poetry of the thirties developed along the poets' consciousness of the disturbed world in which they were living. Faced by the dangers of fascism and the near possibility of another war, there was for them, menace and death lurking everywhere. This explains the prevalence of the images of horror in their poetry.

Like Eliot in the preceding decade, the Auden group of poets also realized that England was becoming a wasteland as a consequence of the economic slump and unemployment. Coupled with the political evils, the atmosphere was one of moral and psychological degeneration. The poets' aim, therefore, was to reach out to the
masses and bring them closer to the English and European political scene, for their contribution in bringing about a change of the established order. In their attempt to address the masses, they made their poetry public, though their own bourgeois upbringing and expensive public school education always came in their way of trying to make it truly popular. However, they maintained the note of colloquialism and speech rhythms to make their poetry appeal to the common people to an extent.

Keenly conscious of the possibility of power in their time, the machine became for them the symbol of progress, and they developed a new poetic sensibility and language that was in agreement with the industrial society and its technology. Indeed, they were fascinated by the image of machinery, and wrote freely of pylons, railway engines, cars, tractors, bridges, factories, towers, etc., all signifying power and progress in a drifting period. In Spender's 'Not palaces, an era's crown', the line—"Drink here of energy and only energy", speaks of the tremendous appeal of power. It is in keeping with this concept of power that the poets maintained a masculine tone in their poetry. What generally surfaces is a balance of emotion and intellect, a deep meditative power, and a novelty of language and perspective.
Notes and References


4. ibid., P.2

5. The English Auden. P.64


8. op.cit., P.138


10. ibid., P.109
11. op.cit., P.95


14. op.cit., P.2


17. op.cit., P.112

18. ibid., P.63

19. The Strings are False. (Faber And Faber, London, 1965) P.38