CHAPTER VIII

Disillusionment with Political Ideology

The later years of the nineteen thirties in England are marked by a gradual abatement of enthusiasm on the part of the writers in general, and the 'New Country' poets in particular, for Marxism as a panacea for the prevalent social malady of those days. The poets' political fervour of the early years of the decade may be attributed to the tremendous wave of radicalism against an effete social system, and growing political unrest in several parts of the continent. Their sensitivity, idealism, and naivete combined to sweep them off their feet, and they took to communism with an ardent hope of bringing about social justice and world peace. Confronted by the question of a rational and moral choice at a time of acute political and economic stress and unease, these poets believed for a period of time that communism was the sole defender of liberty. However, they were soon to realize their disagreement with the party, after being faced with the dishonesty and falsity of left-wing politics. Power-politics and journalistic lying were what they eventually encountered, and came to see that communism could be just as bad as fascism when its theories were carried out to their logical extremes in practical life. The poets realized that the human situation was far more complicated than what their youthful idealism had shown them to be, and that communism, certainly, was not the answer. The communists' role in
Spain during the Civil War proved their doubts.

Communists elsewhere had always been deprecating parliamentary democracy as humbug. But during the Spanish Civil War, they took a reverse stand by allying themselves with the bourgeois parliamentarians, and at the same time, appealing to the European working-class to support Spanish democracy. Whether this was done in good faith or in order to win the war, is a moot point. They were intent more on eliminating as many challenging Trotskyists and Anarchists as possible, than on fighting against the fascists. Such infighting between the rival factions of communists, Trotskyists, and Anarchists, led to a disunification of the Spanish Government.

The Moscow Trials under Stalin's regime could not but cast its dark shadow on the dreadful developments in Spain. Power became the keyword, and as the war continued, more and more people became disillusioned by the lies and confusions. Valentine Cunningham has rightly observed:

The 30's leftist Grails had failed their seekers, and that failure happened most substantively in Spain.¹

The Civil War ceased to be a struggle for democracy, and became the military training ground for the Axis powers, and a pulpit for communist propaganda. Early in 1939, the collapse of the Republican cause and the rising strength of fascist power brought about sure signs of defeat, betrayal, and fear. Indeed, the Civil War marked the beginning of the end of what Auden termed "a low dishonest decade" ('September I, 1939'). It was the point in the history of the decade when people stopped believing that things would get better.
The non-aggression pact of August 1939, between Hitler and Stalin, the agreement to carve up Poland between them, and the subsequent bombing of Poland by Soviet planes, brought about the final betrayal. The world, divided as it stood under the Axis powers, had no alternative but to surrender to the sway of violence. Human values of truth, honesty, integrity, love, and compassion no longer counted. And now, the Second World War was about to begin. Arthur Koestler, who had lost faith in communism in a Franco prison in 1937, and had resigned from the party the following year, stated in The Invisible Writing (1954), that "The Hitler-Stalin pact destroyed the last shred of the torn illusion." Obviously, therefore, the illusion that communist leaders were honest about their ideals of peace and justice, was already on the wane. By the time of the Russo-German pact, the poets had well got over their youthful, simplistic, black and white dogma of class war.

Stephen Spender maintains that the communist stand often called for propaganda, and that it sometimes meant supporting lies, with one side of their nature. In his autobiography, the following admission appears:

... I was sure above all only of one thing: that one must be honest. If we knew of atrocities committed by the Republicans we must admit to them. Here, of course, I found myself disagreeing with the Communists.²

Spender has made it quite clear that in reporting the Spanish Civil War, evidence not in line with the communist faith was suppressed. This was one form of deception. Another was that of developing an argument which apparently carrying much conviction of truth, yet
leads to false conclusions. Spender has pointed out that Auden was one who was caught in this web of typical communist art phenomenon, as witnessed in his poem 'Spain', where he has applied the Marxist view of history to the Spanish Civil War. It has been observed that in the process of developing his dialectical argument, Auden arrives at conclusions that are somewhat disconcerting for him. It was George Orwell, Spender continues, who unsparingly attacked Auden for so callously talking about "necessary murder", in the poem. However, before the appearance of Orwell's attack, Auden had changed the line from "The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder" to "The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder", explaining thereby that the line did not imply an acceptance of murder, but an acceptance of the responsibility for the fact that there were murders.

This was the kind of naivete with which the poets of the thirties initially supported the idea of violence, without having had any experience of factual knowledge of what violence really was. They felt that history's call for bloodshed must be met. However, as the course of events took its toll, and the poets truly realized what was happening, apprehensions about the immediate future became pervasive. Valentine Cunningham has made a close analysis of the situation with reference to Spender:

The '30s apocalyptic, like the Christian apocalyptic from which its characteristic language of destruction by fire and standing trial, facing the final test, and so on, is drawn, could be cut in several possible ways. The Liberal judge in Spender's Trial of a Judge (1938) looks forward with a pacifist's, a victim's horror.
The play ends on a note of violence, and the communists proclaim their faith in these terms:

We hold the secret hub of an idea
Whose living sunlit wheel revolves in future years outside.

As for our lives,
When they are killed they fall like seeds
Into the ground to bear the tenfold fruit
Of our purpose.6

The blood-thirsty cries of the Judge's wife point to the triumph of fascism:

And the aerial vultures fly
Over the deserts which were cities.
Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!7

The situation in which the poets found themselves was indeed very difficult. They faced a dilemma which arose out of a realization of the validity of two points of view; that the truth seen by them as individuals represented the perspective of the exploiting bourgeois class to which they belonged, and that literature, which did not take into account the Marxist call for a class struggle, was escapist. This question of truth, and the individual's comprehension and representation of it, was the underlying controversial issue of the decade. In a private letter of March 1940, MacNeice apologizes to a friend for sounding like Auden:

One must keep making things which are not oneself - for example, works of art, even personal relationships - which must be dry and not damp ... Because it seems high time neither to be passive to flux nor to substitute for it, Marxist-like, a mere algebra of captions.8

For realist writers of the time like George Orwell, the very fact that the 'New Country' poets were politically inspired, proved
that they were potentially collectivist, even authoritarian. Not only was Orwell not associated with the communist party, but he also disapproved of the kind of group leanings which he believed the 'New Country' poets to have had. It was this attitude which helped him continue his literary work as a genuine progressive, and to express his approach to politics in no equivocal terms in works such as Animal Farm (1945), and Nineteen Eighty-four (1949). In the later work, Orwell observes that the intellectuals of the thirties suffered from doublethink, meaning a mental block, which prevented them from understanding what they said. In his own case, the question of disillusion did not arise because his Spanish experience had purged his mind of much personal bitterness, which helped him to see the events of the day with a new detachment.

It will be worthwhile at this point to take note of the following passages by writers who have expressed their delusion about communism in the thirties. Howard Fast makes a thought-provoking observation:

If any reader imagines that out of joining the Communist Party there comes either internal peace or happiness, he is mistaken. In all truth, one sells his soul, accepting the proposition that thus will mankind be redeemed - and with it the circumstances of such a process of redemption, that therein neither individual indignity nor hurt is of any importance. The Similes of the Party - and it has many, since they offer a convenient substitute for thought - are neither colourful nor inspiring, for they emerge from the dreariness of the whole. One of these is to the effect that a person comes into the Party carrying 'bourgeois baggage', of which he must divest himself. The pride, passion and independence of the individual
are described as this 'baggage', and it becomes an important, if not the most important, admission of a lack of 'proletarianism' to admit to them. My entire background of the working class, of poverty and hunger, did not help me to make me 'proletarian'. Only the ignominious retreat of my spirit could prove my faith.9

He then points out the basic difference in the necessity of Marxism to the workers and the intellectuals, and that professionals have no need of it.

As a character, Petitjacques, in Arthur Koestler's novel, The Call Girls(1976), observed:

Your generation in the Pink 'Thirties was pathetically naive. You rejected your own society, but you believed in Utopia - five year plans and balalaikas. You had a double motivation: revulsion against the status quo and devotion to an ideal - attraction and repulsion, a negative pole and a positive pole, a magnetic field.11

In The Yogi and the Commissar also Koestler has aired a similar view.

Auden's sense of disillusion with his earlier hopes, rings through in his 'Journey to Iceland'. A despairing irony is seen in the following lines:

For our time has no favourite suburb; no local features
Are those of the young for whom all wish to care;
The promise is only a promise, the fabulous Country impartially far.

By 1939, the time had indeed arrived for Auden to give up his left- ist fervour, with feelings of uncertainty, anger, and fear. In 'September I, 1939', a poem which he was later to suppress, Auden
exposes the dishonesty and corruption of the political world. It is significant that the note of resistance felt in his poems of the earlier years of the decade, is now a somewhat silent protest. Dis­illusionment is already beginning to show:

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream:
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong. (emphasis added)

The political rage of the intellectuals in the early thirties became rather inept in later years, not only to the reader, but to the writers themselves. To Auden, some of his communist poems of the thirties appeared to be absolute trash. He allowed them to be reprinted in an anthology in the nineteen-sixties, only if accompanied by his confession that he was ashamed to have written them. The poems so deprecated include, 'Sir, No Man's Enemy', 'A Communist to Others', 'To a Writer on His Birthday', 'Spain 1937', and 'September I, 1939'.

However, looking at them retrospectively, and taking into account the fact that those poems were written during a troubled period, it cannot be denied that they represent the dedication of a radical spirit. In the course of time, the rigidity of both the Left and the Right relaxed, though both the sides had been allowing wil­ful ignorance to determine their attitude. The intelligent conservative who admired the dictators, Mussolini and Hitler, could not do so
without self-deception. Similarly, even a staunch radical was quite aware of the deep conservatism—political and artistic—of Stalin's Russia. One arrives at the conclusion that at any time of political turmoil, with its attendant wars and the pressures to conform, dedicated political creeds themselves become the cause of much inconsistency.

In the late nineteen thirties, the writers' disillusioned move, away from political commitment, resulted in a diversification of literary form, where authors were concerned more with their inner discourse than with questions of literary patterns. Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*, and *On the Frontier* (1938), Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937), *The Professor* (1938) and *The Aerodrome* (1937), Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border* (1938), and Spender's *Trial of a Judge*, are all works of this new direction of soul-searching. In *On the Frontier*, the reader admires the politically uncommitted Eric and Anna who "find their peace / Only in dreams."

Like many other disillusioned communists, Auden, too, turned away from political commitment to the Catholic Church, and came to believe more earnestly in Christian theology as the only way towards perfection of society, the famous line projecting this new outlook being, "We must love one another or die" ('September 1, 1939'). Here, one may recall Eliot's declaration in 1928 that he was a Roman Catholic by religion. Auden felt intensely that though the world would continue to witness disturbances, hope for all must be maintained, and life must be lived. Thus, in Auden's new phase of poetic development, one sees hope in love and faith, and finds the poet
turning away from Marxism to problems of more lasting values. Behind the decadent social set-up is the fact of man's maladjustments and inadequacies. Hence what is required is an admission of humility and a prayer for hope. The recognition that man's sins are responsible for his fate, makes Auden thoroughly disillusioned with intellect and the traditional concept of world progress:

The situation of our time
Surrounds us like a baffling crime
There lies the body half-undressed,
We all had reasons to detest
And all are suspect and involved
Until the mystery is solved
And under lock and key the cause
That makes a nonsense of our laws.13

Auden's conclusion in this new phase is that for the atonement of his sins, man must move in privacy and isolation, and seek the sanctuary of his soul. Thus alone, will he discover the necessity of love and faith in God. Auden averred that it was not force and violence, but love and integrity, that would be the instrument for social change.

Spender's poetry has always been characterized by a note of despair and the poet's wish to preserve individualism. The later years of the thirties do not bring forth any radical change in his poetry, but the languor and despair born of disillusionment, becomes more marked. His contribution to The God that Failed, The Creative Element, and World Within World, all point to the clear stance that he developed. His new poetic output reveals his Auden-like desire to make a voyage into the private world of isolated experience. He came to believe that the artist must renounce his preoccupation with the Marxist materialistic world and develop his individuality through
faith in the Christian concept of charity and justice. This attitude of probing into the self, and trying to arrive at 'the still centre' is indeed the inherent quality of Spender's poetry.

Poems written in the early nineteen-forties show Spender retreating further into his inner world, so much so that it is like an escape into another illusory world of vague dreams. His credence to intuition, combined with his sense of frustration, have led him to fall at fate's mercy. In 'Poems about War', we see this change best reflected:

The walls fall, tearing down
The mother-of-pearl inlaid interior,
The cultivated fire leaps from the grate
Consumes the house, the cat reverts to tiger
Leaping out of a world changed back to jungle
To claw her master.14

Day Lewis, too, was disillusioned with Marxism. Therefore, in his later poetry, his faith in life and hope for a better world does not admit any political radicalism. A change of attitude is noticeable in him also, but it is unlike that of Auden and Spender. His approach has been to make a synthesis between the outer and the inner world.

His personality having been rudely affected by the war, Day Lewis expresses a note of helplessness in 'Word Over All', unable, as he is, to give any message of hope to the people. One discovers in the following lines a rather low-keyed expression of disappointment, and a more humanistic touch:

... what can I say
To cheer the abysmal gulfs, the crests that lift not
To any land in sight?15
The poet who sweated "to feel a whole town wince / And thump, a terrified heart, / Under the bomb-strokes", has no words of consolation for "the roofless old, the child beneath the debris." The poet's political cause has faded, but he now places his hopes on the greater moral strength of man:

The Cause shales off, the Humankind stands forth
A mightier presence,
Flooded by dawn's pale courage, rapt in eve's
Rich acquiescence. (emphasis added)

Like Auden, Day Lewis also advocates love that will be the weapon against the dark forces of life, and bring all men together. This note is best reflected in a poem like 'The Assertion'.

Day Lewis's later poetry shows him reverting to the Georgian mood, and giving lyric expression to images from the world of nature. He tells us in The Buried Day that he quietly left the Communist Party in 1938 as he "wished to retire into a private life and write poetry." The 'Dedicator Stanzas to Stephen Spender', prefixed to his version of Virgil's Georgics (1946), is a piece of work which reveals the poet's disillusionment with political events, and a new quest of the inner being, of pastoral joy, and the delights of the art of poetry:

Spain was a death to us, Munich a mourning.
No wonder then if, like the pelican,
We have turned inward for our iron ration,
Tapping the vein and sole reserve of passion,
Drawing from poetry's capital what we can.20

Coming to MacNeice, disillusionment with any political creed does not strike through, as he was never attached to any. But certainly, the later years of the thirties saw the general disillusion in
him setting deeper into his personality. The years also reveal a
growing awareness of the coming catastrophe. Like Day Lewis, Mac-
Neice, too, does not seek refuge in escape. His is a passionate call
to man to face the contemporary situation boldly. The realist in him
thus proclaims:

... hearing the bugle
That blows tomorrow morning, blows for a
hard routine,
Blows for the life automatic, for spit and
polish and jargon
And deference to fools, but blows also for
 comrades,
Blows for a gay and a brave unforced soli-
darity,
Blows for the elemental community.21

One arrives at the conclusion that the 'New Country' poets'
disillusionment with the political ideology led them to their concep-
tion of the basic problem of evil in man and to their predilection for
Christian morals for the humanizing process of atonement. This line
of argument has been adopted by Cunningham in analysing the
failure of the thirties to find a material solution to the many be-
setting social problems of the day. He has concluded his long assess-
ment in these words:

... confronted by manifest human intransi-
gency, all that old ambitious loftiness
came to feel simply no longer tenable.22

No one acquainted with the situation of the thirties will hesitate to
endorse this judgement of this critic.
Notes and References


2. The Invisible Writing. (Collins with Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1954) P.389

3. World Within World (1951) (Faber And Faber, London, 1977) P.226


5. op.cit., P.42

6. Trial of a Judge. (Faber And Faber Ltd., London, 1938) P.107

7. ibid., P.115


10. ibid., P.37


13. *New Year Letter.* (Faber And Faber, London, 1941) PP.24-5


16. ibid., P.221

17. ibid., P.222

18. ibid., P.225 The poem reads as follows :

Love's the big boss at whose side for ever slouches
The shadow of the gunman: he's mortar and dynamite;
Antelope, drinking pool, but the tiger too that crouches.
Therefore be wise in the dark hour to admit
The logic of the gunman's trigger,
Embrace the explosive element, learn the need
Of tiger for antelope and antelope for tiger.


22. op.cit., P.468