CHAPTER II

The Poet's Purpose in a Time of Flux

The English poetry of the nineteen thirties is best represented by a young group of socially conscious poets who entered into the literary scene in the ten years before the Second World War. W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, William Empson, William Plomer, Rex Warner, A.J.S. Tessimond, John Lehmann and Julian Bell were the new poets who were often collectively referred to as the 'Auden Group' on the basis of their sharing an interest in social ideas, with Auden as the leading influence. They were all intellectuals, with upper or middle-class backgrounds, educated in public schools, and were contemporaries or near contemporaries at the universities of Oxford or Cambridge. However, despite their own bourgeois upbringing, their sensitivities at a time of social disorder were roused to contempt for the bourgeoisie who, unmindful of what was happening around, were hedged in their own positions of privilege, their 'white collar' snobbishness, and their inane morality. Thus, for a period of time, the poets all held leftist views, although with varying degree of commitment. Though they were hardly known to one another, they were united by common assumptions about the end of the society of the day and of revolutionary changes.

An early indication of a new literary movement was the
publication of W.H. Auden's *Poems* (1930) and Hugh MacDiarmid's 'First Hymn to Lenin' (1931). But it was in an anthology of poems called *New Signatures* (1932), edited by Michael Roberts, who brought the names of the 'Auden Group' of poets together, that readers marked a distinct social awareness. The following year, the poets made their appearance again in a second volume, called *New Country*, containing prose as well as poetry, and formed the 'New Country' school. Both the anthologies were specially influential in relating literature to politics and social change, thus creating the impression of a movement. In the Preface to the second collection, Michael Roberts fervently stated: "It is time that those who would conserve something which is still valuable in England began to see that only a revolution can save their standards". However, he concluded his preface by admitting that what followed was not 'proletariat art', but a sample of sorts of the kind of escape that some of them tried to find from their individual predicaments.

In his two anthologies, Roberts did not include the name of Louis MacNeice, a poet of keen social perception, who was generally considered as one of the four most famous poets of the decade, the other three being Auden, Day Lewis, and Spender. As a group, they were contemptuously dubbed 'MacSpauDay' by the rightist poet, Roy Campbell.

In 1933, the publication of Spender's volume *Poems*, Day Lewis's *The Magnetic Mountain*, and Auden's revision of his *Poems*, revealed the poets' commitment to the left. They were men of varying individual talent, and their volumes accordingly bore striking differ-
ences, but on the basis of their attitude to the social situation of the day, critics linked them together as representing a new movement. However, it was not a literary movement in the strict sense of the term. These poets did not set forth any literary cult or ideal. They never held any meeting, nor did they issue any manifesto as such. It is rather surprising that they never met together as a group till much after the war. As Day Lewis has put it in his autobiography:

"... in the sense of a concerted effort by a group of poets to impress themselves upon the public, to write differently from their predecessors or about different subjects, it was not a movement at all. Though Auden, Spender, MacNeice and I have all known each other personally since the mid-Thirties, each of us had not even met all three others till after the publication of New Signatures in 1932, while it was only in 1947 that Auden, Spender and I found ourselves together for the first time in one room. We did not know we were a Movement until the critics told us we were."

(emphasis added)

It was the common conviction of the poets that they should speak for a whole contemporary situation. As early as 1926, the purpose and direction of these young poets were brought to light in the preface to Oxford Poetry where editors W.H. Auden and Charles Plumb declared:

"Poetry which does not at least attempt to face the circumstances of the time is not poetic at all."

Foreseeing vast social changes, the new poets aimed at writing truly popular poetry, one that would reach out to the public and provide them with a message. The pre-eminently personal views of the poets were to be shared by others - not only by an elitist coterie, but by
the common reader as well. Naturally, such a practice would entail
a radical change in both subject-matter and form of poetry. Accord-
ing to Walter Allen, the revolutionary zeal of the poetry of the thir-
ties was characterized by

... a strong reaction against symbolism,
against private poetry or learned poetry, in
opposition to which it set up the notion of
public poetry, public in the sense that
ideally it could be accessible to all men
and women of good will. It could be topical,
slangy, its imagery derived as required from
the furnishing of the world of common men.

Acutely aware of living in a troubled time, the poets tried
to assess their own historical and social position. They were filled
with a terrible sense of isolation, as having been cut off from the
past, and then left in a world of spiritual emptiness and agonising
social stress and turmoil. With their left-wing sympathy, they deeply
desired to be reintegrated to the very stuff of society - the masses,
and to establish an identity with them on issues which seemed to
them to be of serious significance. They blamed the capitalist system
for creating a split between the upper and the lower classes of peo-
ple, and thereby causing a loss of communication between them.
Thus, in their attempt to break up the prevalent capitalist system,
they aimed at simplifying their art in order to bring it nearer to
the people. In their preparation for handling large themes, the poets
developed a broad new sensibility by coming back to the objective
world of history and common experience. As Loius MacNeice observed,

The primary characteristic of these poets is
that they are interested in a subject-matter
outside themselves.  

They rightly realized that in order to be truly representative of the
times, their poetry must alter significantly in matter and form. A new tone and temper were required to respond to the complex socio-political atmosphere. They were determined to "Weave no tracery of pen-ornament" ('In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic' - Spender), and to write a vigorous "living poetry which shall release their inner energy to turn to new ends." They revolted against the notion of 'art for art's sake' or what they called 'luxury poetry', because they believed that the old spirit of poetry was not strong enough for the events with which they had to deal. Their approach was much more concrete, as they were, in MacNeice's words, "working back from luxury-writing and trying once more to become functional." They were considerably influenced by the symbolist idiom of T.S. Eliot, the sprung verse of G.M. Hopkins, as well as the poetic technique of Wilfred Owen. Further, they looked up to D.H. Lawrence's psychological undertones and the apocalyptic ideas of the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. However, much as they admired Eliot, they did not follow him blindly. As stated by MacNeice, the 'New Signatures' poets

... unlike Yeats and Eliot are emotionally partisan. Yeats proposed to turn his back on desire and hatred and Eliot sat back and watched other peoples' emotions with ennui and ironical self-pity ... the whole poetry on the other hand, of Auden, Spender and Day Lewis implies that they have desires and hatreds of their own and, further, that they think some things ought to be desired and others hated. 9

For Eliot, the answer to the human condition lies in personal salvation, in the development of the individual's inner world, which is a turning away from the outside world. For the thirties poets, the
situation of their time was far too critical for such a retreat into the self. They believed rather in a collective change, though Auden, in his early poems, did call for a 'change of heart'. The poets moved away from Eliot's complexity and allusiveness, so that they might communicate with the people at large. To turn to MacNeice again,

These new poets in fact, were boiling down Eliot's 'variety and complexity' and finding that it left them with certain comparatively clear-cut issues. Instead, therefore, of attempting an impressionist survey of the contemporary world - a world which impinges on one but which one cannot deal with, they were deliberately simplifying it, distorting it perhaps ... into a world where one gambles upon practical ideals, a world in which one can take sides.10

They wished to develop a poetic style that would correspond to their sense of protest. Their aim was towards developing a more sharpened conversational tone, and they went for something harsh and unconventional to represent an unprecedented situation. In 1908, J.M. Synge wrote,

It may almost be said that before verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal.11

This statement augured well for the 'Auden Group' of poets who were confronting the post-war world of turmoil and disorder. Deeply affected by the brutal reality, they did not hesitate to express themselves in the most candid manner, about the things that they observed, as well as what they proposed to do. Auden, for instance, wrote the following lines in the form of a dialogue between the capitalist and the poet:

I have a handsome profile
I've been to a great public school
I've a little money invested
Then why do I feel such a fool
As if I owned a world that has had its day?

You certainly have a good reason
For feeling as you do
No wonder you are anxious
Because it's perfectly true
You own a world that has had its day.

I'll throw my money in the gutter
I'll throw it all away
I'll throw it where the workmen can pick it up
Then nobody can say
I own a world that has had its day.

The workmen will never get it
Though you throw it all over the town
The armament firms will collect it all
And use it for shooting them down
To save a world that has had its day.

(Poem IX, Poems 1931-1936).

The First World War proved to be a major catalyst in bringing about a change in the field of poetry. At the end of the war, poets no longer held the high spirits that were present at the start, and they became rather disillusioned with the deteriorating state of affairs. Ezra Pound reflects with ironical sadness upon the men who died in the war, with their disappointments and frustrations, in the poem titled 'Pour l' election de son sepulcre' :

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth
For a botched civilization.

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,
For two gross of broken statues,
For a few thousand battered books.12

This poem, among others, ushered in new elements into English
poetry - the free verse, the conversational tone and the bracing manner of stating facts. Auden's poem, too, is deliberately flat in tone and pedestrian in the use of the imagery.

The war thus brought about a new outlook and a new mood in the poets of the thirties. They were too young to participate in it, but they realized its implications at a later stage. They became disgusted with the callousness of the 'old men' who sent the young to bear the brunt of the war. Thus, almost everything associated with the older generation appeared to be iniquitous to the younger one. Many of the traditionally accepted values and assumptions of the European middle class were now rejected. The old ideals regarding conscience, discipline, duty, honour, virtue, and patriotism, and the institutions of family, religion and marriage were called in question. The complexity of the contemporary world perplexed the writers. Some of the intellectuals of the time searched for a way out of their predicament in individualism and aestheticism. The total loss of communication between the older and the younger generations resulted in a total sense of isolation for both. However, despite their knowledge of the evils of war, the young felt a strange void in not having experienced the heroism of war. It was an ambivalent attitude - longing for an experience of the horrors of war and hating them at the same breath. Christopher Isherwood has seen it as arising "from a feeling of shame that they hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war". This is a noticeable feature of the post-war literature of the twenties. In Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet On The Western Front* (1929), there is, as Jenni Calder re-
marked, "a deliberate destruction of sensitivity ... a dwelling on appalling facts and the cultivation of their acceptance." Also, Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) are among the several post-war literary works where the mood of disillusionment and the fascination and longing for war are woven together. This is manifest in a much more intense form in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, where the qualities of loyalty, toughness, and stoic heroism are emphasized. They wrote of the truth of 'horror' and 'pity' with a deep awareness of a message considerably influencing the poets of the thirties. The political poetry of Auden, Day Lewis, and Spender had a temporary look which took on the diction and the attitude of Wilfred Owen. As mentioned earlier, the poetry of T.S. Eliot who has captured effectively the post-war mood of disillusionment and weariness in poems such as *The Wasteland* and *The Hollow Men*, has also left its impact upon these poets. In the former poem, Eliot's passionate consideration was engaged by the vast contemporary scene of waste and disorder. As such, the poem portrayed the mental and spiritual barrenness of people living in a world devoid of a sense of purpose and without a sense of values:

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I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?'
The wind under the door.
'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
Nothing, again nothing.

('A Game of Chess')
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It is the decay of Western civilization, consequent upon the decline
of religion, that Eliot portrays in this poem. According to Edmund Wilson, the poem expresses,

The terrible dreariness of the great modern cities ... nameless millions performing barren office routines, wearing down their souls in interminable labours of which the products never bring them profit — people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains. And this Wasteland has another aspect: it is a place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt. In our post-war world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals, life no longer seems serious or coherent.\(^{15}\)

The poets of the thirties also took into serious account the wasteland of their own time, but, unlike Eliot, their social aim was clear from the very beginning. They aimed at representing fully the feelings and sentiments of an oppressed majority in a country of depression, under an outmoded political system which provided no relief. Therefore, they felt that to write only for themselves would be a guilty indulgence. They must strike against bourgeois illusions such as liberty; they must join forces, in the words of Day Lewis, with "the millions of workers who have nothing to lose but their chains."

Convinced of the urgency of a struggle against the existing social order, several young intellectuals declared that capitalism had no further use of culture.

Auden made his views clear in 'Letter to Lord Byron' (Part IV), where he stated that he had learnt from his masters

... to express [his] deep abhorrence
If [he] caught anyone preferring Art
To Life

A loud note of commitment like this runs through the poetry of the
thirties.

The poets of the decade were indignant at the increasing horrors of Nazism with its prisons and concentration camps; indignant also with the government and the members of the ruling class for their indifference to the political events of the day which were of far-reaching consequence. They also suffered from a sense of being isolated into a small group with a terribly real perception of an impending catastrophe - another World War. Thus, they felt that it was imperative for society to understand the brutal facts of the day and to confront the growing international threat. It is against this background of approaching ruin and real horror that Auden talks about "the external disorder, the extravagant lies, / The baroque frontiers and the surrealist police." To the poets it was a time when the enemy was winning on all sides against a weak and dying opponent. Indeed, the world situation then obtaining was so grave that sensitive intellectuals felt the urgent need to take political sides. Their ideological perspective focussed on a world where all men would be equal and free from capitalist exploitation. But that would involve their participation in a struggle between the forces of capitalist imperialism and socialist revolution. Overwhelmed with feelings of impotence, shame, and bitterness at the prolonged spectacle of deprivation and unemployment of the masses, the writers looked upon communism as the defender of freedom, as a panacea for the prevalent political and social evils. Geronwy Rees, in his observation on Arthur Koestler's conversion to communism, points to the various factors that lie behind the British intellectual's attraction for communism:
... the reasons would include the breakdown of the capitalist system under the strain of the world economic depression; the threat of war and dictatorship implicit in the rise of Fascism in Germany, and the inability of the democratic parties to offer any effective resistance to National Socialism. But commitment to Communism also involved ... a deep sympathy with the downtrodden and oppressed, the 'wretched of the earth' ... a desire for self-sacrifice and self-abnegation which could assuage their sense of guilt ...

But in addition there was also the attraction of Communism as a closed and all-inclusive intellectual system which not only offered a complete answer to all the problems of human existence but claimed to show that the answer could be applied in practice. Communist policy had the same relation to Marxist theory as applied science to pure science ... Communism reconciled Science with Faith, Thought with Action, The Individual with the Community, and in each of these aspects it made a profound appeal to their deepest instincts.18

The communists, although afraid of a final crisis, were yet comforted that it would destroy capitalism rather than civilization. Thus, considered as an apocalyptic vision, the communist view nearly corresponds with that of Yeats as reflected in 'The Second Coming' :

Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

However, the fact remains that the intellectuals were attracted to communism more as a faith than as a practical politico-economic theory, because it seemed to make up for the void created by the loss of tradition, religion, and faith.

Virginia Woolf designated the rebel writers of the thirties tower-dwellers like their predecessors. But the tower of the young poets had an inclination to the left, which made the poets acutely conscious of their middle-class birth and expensive education. They
were supposed to be addressing the masses, but how could they do so from their high position in society? To quote Virginia Woolf,

... when we come to the top of the tower how strange the view looks - not altogether upside down, but slanting, sidelong. That ...

... is characteristic of the leaning-tower writers; they do not look any class straight in the face; they look either up or down, or sidelong. There is no class so settled that they can explore it unconsciously.19

The communist ideology which provided them with a complete analysis of the contemporary crisis, became a kind of conscience, pricking them because of their exalted position in society. The poets were aware that their purpose, which was to view and describe the events from the perspective of the working-class, was not quite fulfilled. This consciousness made them feel rather ill at ease. In the words of the same critic, what was generated in them, first, was "discomfort; next self-pity for that discomfort, which pity soon turns to anger against the builder, against society, for making them uncomfortable." But another tendency prevailed. How could they altogether condemn a society as long as they were beneficiaries of its prevailing system? And so they abused parts of the society of smug respectability - the "retired admiral or spinster or armament manufacturer," with vehemence caused by self-confessed guilt. They found, in other words, a scapegoat in the bourgeoisie who symbolized that society.

Thus, donning this communist garb, the poets developed a serious concern for the engagement of literature to politics and social conditions. The decade emerged as one of revolutionary consciousness and writing. The ideals of leftist politics prevailed in the
minds of most intellectuals, and poetry began to be written with a markedly left-wing political undertone. As Arthur Marwick put it:

In the arts, a concern with the abstract and the universal gave way to an emphasis on social problems and political commitment: in the classic phrase of Hugh Gordon Porteous, written in 1933, 'Verse will be worn longer this year and rather red'.

Thoughtful and sensitive people began to adopt new ideas and a new stance with regard to politics, society, the individual, and morality. There emerged a change in the cultural ethos of the intellectual elite with inner conflicts conducive to such a situation - already existing by 1914 - now exacerbated by the reactions against nationalism which had followed the war. The great French literary figure, André Gide, adopted the ideals of communism; so did his compatriots Sartre and Cocteau. The dark and sordid realism of Emile Zola which was out of date in the twenties, gave fresh impetus in the thirties to 'proletarian' writings. Soon after the war, Kurt Weill's Threepenny Opera (1928), and Alban Berg's Wozzeck (1922) appeared in Germany, though their audiences had been unmistakably bourgeois. In the thirties, under the impact of the world economic slump, the proletarian form of writing was like the rise of the phoenix with revived vigour and zest, as writers showed a growing awareness of the social malady all around.

George Orwell, who had opined that "the literary history of the thirties seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics", later felt that for writers whose whole scheme of values was threatened during a turbulent time, detachment was impossible:
You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from ... Any thinking person had to take sides, and his feelings had to find their way not only into his writing but into his judgements on literature. Literature had to become political because anything else would have entailed mental dishonesty ... What books were about seemed so urgently important that the way they were written seemed almost insignificant.  

Social and political evil was so rampant in the day, that to the poets, political commitment was a must. In the words of Stephen Spender,

The sense of political doom, pending in unemployment, Fascism, and the overwhelming threat of war, was by now so universal that even to ignore these things was in itself a political attitude. Just as the pacifist is political in refusing to participate in war, so the writer who refuses to recognize the political nature of our age must to some extent be refusing to deal with an experience in which he himself is involved. ... A pastoral poem in 1936 was not just a pastoral poem: it was also a non-political poem.

Auden used 'repent', 'unite', 'act' as the burden of a chorus in The Dog Beneath the Skin (1935), a verse play written in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. In another verse play The Dance of Death (1933) he celebrated in a masque the collapse of the capitalist civilization and introduced Karl Marx as the Great Liquidator. Many were of the opinion that not only was it a socialist writer's duty to produce revolutionary literature, but that good literature had also to be revolutionary. In his essay 'A Marxist Interpretation of Literature', Edward Upward wrote:

A writer today who wishes to produce the best work that he is capable of producing, must first of all become a socialist ...
conflict. Having become a socialist, however, he will not necessarily become a good writer. The quality of his writing will depend upon his individual talent, his ability to observe the complex detail of the real world. But unless he has in his everyday life taken the side of the workers, he cannot, no matter how talented he may be, write a good book, cannot tell the truth about reality.

During the thirties, the sense of personal commitment to society was so intense that poets were left wondering whether they should be men of letters or men of action. Stephen Spender observed:

The impulse to act was not mistaken. But the action we took may not have been of the right kind. It was, for the most part, the half-and-half action of people divided between their artistic and their public conscience, and unable to fuse the two. I now think that what I should have done was either throw myself entirely into political action; or, refusing to waste my energies on half-politics, made within my solitary creative work an organized, violent, bitter statement of the anti-Fascist passion.

To the left-wing writers of the thirties, whoever lacked commitment to the proletarian cause, was against it. More, it amounted to a pro-fascist attitude.

In their search for a cure for the social maladjustments of their time, the poets tried to incorporate Marx's revolutionary ideas of materialistic socialism and Freud's doctrine of the role of physical instincts as well as his psychology of bringing the unconscious to the forefront. However, their effort to bring about the Marxian-Freudian synthesis, their attempt to make both the voyages 'within' and 'without' was to a great extent frustrated. Day Lewis has pointed out in The Poetic Image (1947) that the ideals of Marx and Freud were not generally accepted, and that the attempt of the poets of the
thirties for this synthesis resulted in a kind of hollowness and "emotional thinness". Moreover, their poetry appears to have been intended to cater to a small group. However, these poets had the distinction of introducing a new punch and a new sense of contemporaneity into their poetry.

The English poetry of the thirties, because it attempted to face the circumstances of the times, presented to the reader political truths, but it also made him feel political emotions. In a poem, 'Our Hunting Fathers' (Poem XX, Poems 1931-1936), for instance, Auden quoted Lenin to the effect that poets would give up their individualism and make it their "mature ambition"

To hunger, work illegally,
And be anonymous.

The poets representing this disturbed decade were young and sensitive, and could not turn their backs on the British landscape of waste and futility, of the sad deprivation and moral degradation of the hungry and desperate multitude. An acute sense of this dismal situation is an important element of the poetry of the Auden group.

Day Lewis's 'Two Songs' (A Time to Dance) (1935), brings out the dreariness and sadness that took hold of the youth of England of the time:

There was laughter and loving in the lanes at evening:
Handsome were the boys then, and girls were gay.
But lost in Flanders by medalled commanders
The lads of the village are vanished away.

(First Song)

Care on thy maiden brow shall put
A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
Be shod with pain: not silken dress
But toil shall tire thy loveliness.

(Second Song)

The cry of frustration and despair arising out of an uncertain situation is heard in the following poem of Spender:

... There is
Your city, with railways, money, words,
words, words.
Meals, papers, exchanges, debates,
Cinema, wireless: then there is Marriage.
I cannot sleep. At night I watch
A clear voice speak with words like drawing.

('Polar Exploration')

A deep sense of gloom and helplessness is a characteristic feature of the poetry of the thirties, the gloom being more often tragic than defeatist. Day Lewis's 'A Carol' (A Time to Dance) is a pathetic lullaby, focusing on the intense suffering of the victims of the economic depression of the thirties:

Oh hush thee, my baby,  
Thy cradle's in pawn:  
No blankets to cover thee  
Cold and forlorn.  
The stars in the bright sky  
Look down and are dumb  
At the heir of the ages  
Asleep in a slum.

The hooters are blowing,  
No heed let him take;  
When baby is hungry  
'Tis best not to wake.  
Thy mother is crying,  
Thy dad's on the dole:  
Two shillings a week is  
The price of a soul.

It is with poems like this, simple yet poignant, that the reader gets the feel of the thirties, of the miserable plight of thousands reeling under the exploits of capitalism.
In the feverish thirties, the voice of the working-class anger and the commitment to a socialist revolution is heard from many. Spender in *Forward from Liberalism* (1937) declared that the poets could fight on the side of the workers. His aim was action: "To will this Time's change" ('Not palaces, an era's crown'). Day Lewis also points emphatically to the likely remedy:

> It is now or never, the hour of the knife,
> To break with the past, the major operation.

*(The Magnetic Mountain)*

Auden's consciousness of a period in crisis, his indignation at the impoverished bourgeoisie whom he held responsible for the social disintegration, and his call for social redress, find apt expression in 'Song for the New Year' (*Poem VI, Poems 1936-1939*). Capitalism degenerated and allowed fascism to hold the reins of an unstable world. The speaker announces that

> ... the Devil has broken parole and arisen,
> He has dynamited his way out of prison,
to threaten mankind with hate and destruction. Therefore, if man wishes to be saved from the evil clutches of totalitarianism, he must bid goodbye to bourgeois culture.

The poets had a certain shared basis of thought, a feeling of impersonality that sprung from a desire for solidarity with others. As Day Lewis has put it,

> The New World some of us envisaged was one
> where the ties should be of flesh and blood, not of money and paper, and where the social system should have reintegrated the individual personality.

It is precisely this feeling of solidarity that instilled in them a tremendous sense of urgency to do something, and save the world.
from social decay. Spender wrote:

I was 'political' not just because I was involved, but in feeling I must choose to defend a good cause against a bad one. Auden remarked to me at the end of the war that he was political in the 1930s just because he thought something could and should be done.30

Although the best form of action might be hard to come by, the poets desired some positive action:

For men are changed by what they do;
And through loss and anger the hands of the unlucky
Love one another.

(Poem XVI, Poems 1931-1936)

Auden's sense of urgency drove him to assert that "no policy of isolation is possible." The poets realized that the outbreak of civil war in Spain was the centre and symbol of another Great War. Hence, they lay open their conscience and declared their allegiance. With profound belief in the urgent need for action, Auden drives home the point in the theatrical refrain to his 'Spain 1937', "But Today the Struggle".

Thus the pulse for political action is clearly felt in the social content of the poetry of the thirties. However, despite this obvious feature, it cannot be said to be merely propagandist. It is not to be denied that poetry based on the disorder of contemporary life is bound to have political implications. But, at the same time, the poet's depth of feeling reveals his concern for the true creative instinct, which he is not prepared to sacrifice for a revolutionary ideal. In the Introduction to New Signatures, Michael Roberts says:

Poetry is here turned to propaganda, but it is propaganda for a theory of life which
may release the poet's energies for the writing of pure poetry.\textsuperscript{32}

Roberts has further observed:

The poet is not arguing for one party against another: he is remodelling the basis upon which political creeds are founded, though sometimes immediate implications may appear in his poems.\textsuperscript{33}

Stephen Spender asserts that "The greatest art is moral even when the artist has no particular axe to grind."

Louis MacNeice felt that, at that crucial hour, the poet would tend to be a moralist rather than an aesthete:

But his morality must be honest; he must not merely retail other people's dogma. The world no doubt needs propaganda, but propaganda (unless you use the term as many do, very, very loosely indeed) is not a poet's job. He is not the loud speaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice.\textsuperscript{35}

Judging by the poetry itself, as well as by the statements of their intentions, it is quite clear that the purpose of the poets of the thirties was not merely to voice the revolutionary doctrine, but to maintain a balance between indoctrination and poetry.

The poets of the decade were middle-class liberals, and their Marxism was always conditioned; they believed that their virtues of liberal culture would be carried forward in a new society. "I am a Communist because I am a Liberal", said Spender. Thus their communism was based on the premise that man must feel love for his fellows.

Auden, too, was attracted by this idea of love, having been influenced by his mentor, Homer Lane:

We cannot put on airs with you
The fears that hurt you hurt us too
Only we say
That like all nightmares these are fake
If you would help us we could make
Our eyes to open, and awake
    Shall find night day.

(Poem VIII, Poems 1931-1936)

In The Buried Day (1969), Day Lewis made this pertinent observation:

We lived too much in the future and its abstractions ... We did not accept the values of our society, and in that respect we were romantic rebels: but, so far as we were imagining through our poetry a society whose values the poet could identify himself with, we were classical by intention. Our poetic response to the world we lived in was rendered ambiguous by this contradiction. Nevertheless, I cannot regret that desire to be committed, that positive sense of engagement, which our upbringing and the weather of the times combined to produce. This was a period when it seemed possible to hope, to choose, to act as individuals but for a common end.37 added

He explains that political action and political verse were felt by them to be "temporary necessities", but that they were skeptical towards the rigid stance of the extreme left. His poem 'Where are the War Poets', expressly delineates their attitude of honestly defending "the bad against the worse". Thus, the best poems of these poets are those in which they perfectly maintain this attitude: an attitude of ambiguity towards the actual fact of a destructive civilization. Spender says in 'The Uncreating Chaos', - "At night I am flooded by a sense of future."

In Day Lewis's Noah and the Waters (1936), Noah faces the dilemma of making a choice between clinging to his old life and trusting himself to the flood. And Auden wrote,

And all sway forward on the dangerous flood
Of history, that never sleeps or dies,
And, held one moment, burns the hand.

(Poem XXIV, Poems 1931-1936)

also,

Soon through the dykes of our content
The crumpling 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.

(Poem XIV, Poems 1931-1936)

A characteristic outcome of this attitude is the recurrent image of
the flood in the poetry of the period.

For the 'New Country' poets, with their high degree of so-
phistication, it was rather difficult to achieve a total identification
with their new subjects, and hence they failed to find a new medium
that could be easily intelligible to the common man. The technical
innovations borrowed from Eliot and Hopkins were not quite suitable
for poetry that was meant to be public, and despite their best ef-
torts, a touch of aridity lingers in their verse.

However, their poetry reveals an attempt to effect a balance
of emotion and intellect, deep meditative power, skepticism, rejection
of the old absolutes, and a novelty of language and perspective.
Virginia Woolf attributes to them the quality of humaneness, a quality
born out of their struggle to compromise between two worlds, one dy-
ing, the other struggling to be born:

And so we come to what is perhaps the most
marked tendency of leaning-tower literature
- the desire to be whole; to be human. "All
that I would like to be is human" - that cry
rings through their books - the longing to be
closer to their kind, to write the common
speech of their kind, to share the emotions of their kind, no longer to be isolated and exalted in solitary state upon their tower, but to be down on the ground with the mass of human kind.\textsuperscript{38}

They may not have been fully equipped to address a working-class audience, but they truly deserve their share of praise for having so sincerely represented the middle-class crise de conscience. Their growing concern for the restructuring of a disintegrated society, their preoccupation with the sufferings of the poor, the personal frustrations and the social hardship, their attempt at building up public awareness to the dangers of the time, above all, to save English poetry from becoming the possession of a handful of intellectual elites, and to broaden its reading public, are all testimonials to their sensitivity and sincerity. Poetry of a socially chaotic decade could seldom be soft and lyrical. The poets took upon the task of speaking out to the masses about the ugly and the horrifying facts of their time. They represented, and gave shape and style, to a mass sentiment. What truly engages our attention is the fact that they have made clear not only the cause of their frustration, but also their belief in the world's capacity for achieving the good.
Notes and References


2. *ibid.*, P.14


4. 'Preface' to *Oxford Poetry* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1926) P.V


6. *ibid.*, P.17


8. *op.cit.*, P.3

9. *ibid.*, P.25

10. *ibid.*, P.15

12. Selected Poems. (Faber And Faber, London, 1947) P.124

13. Lions and Shadows. (Hogarth Press, London, 1938) PP.74-75


16. 'Introduction' to The Mind in Chains: Socialism and Cultural Revolution. (Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1937) P.16

17. Look Stranger! (Faber And Faber, London, 1935) P.7


20. ibid.

21. ibid.

23. 'Inside the Whale' (1940), Inside the Whale and Other Essays. (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962) P.39


27. op.cit., P.202


30. op.cit., P.250


33. The Faber Book of Modern Verse. (Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1965) P.9

34. The Destructive Element. (Jonathan Cape, London, 1935) P.19


38. 'The Leaning Tower', as included in Modern Essays, First Series, ed. A.F. Scott. (Macmillan and Co., London, 1950) P.96,